

FICTION

Charles Neville Buck

The Tempering

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE TEMPERING

BY CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

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RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

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"I've never seen the evening star rise up over the Kaintuck Ridges that I haven't ... thought of it as your own star."

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THE TEMPERING

CHAPTER I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Countless other times Boone had sat here on this top-rail in his hodden-gray clothes and his slate-gray despair, making the same plaint, and knowing that only a miracle would ever bring around the road's turning anything less commonplace than a yoke of oxen or a native as drab as the mule he straddled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Boone did not immediately reply. He merely poured out of his wide and innocent blue eyes a scrutiny as inquisitorial as though he had been stationed here on picket duty and were vested with full authority to halt whomsoever approached.

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

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

"Boone Wellver. What's yourn?"

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

"Hain't got no daddy."

"Your mother, then?"

"Hain't got no mammy nuther."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, I've heard of him."

Then as the traveller gathered up his reins to start onward, a tall young man came, with the swing of an elastic stride, around the next turn and, nodding to the boy, halted at the mule's head. He was an upstanding fellow, of commanding height, and the tapering staunchness of a timber wedge. He carried a rifle upon his shoulder and his clear-chiselled face bore the pleasant recommendation of straight-gazing candour. His clothing was rough, yet escaped the seeming of roughness, because it sat upon his splendid body and limbs as if a part of them--like a hawk's plumage. But it was the

eyes under a broad forehead that were most notable. They were unusually fine and frank; dark and full of an almost gentle meditateness. Here was a native, thought the man on the mule, whose gaze, unlike that of many of his fellows, was neither sinister nor furtive. Here was one who seemed to have escaped the baleful heritage of grudge-bearing.

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

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

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

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

"I reckon whatever ye heered tell of me war either right favourable or right scandalous--dependin' on whether ye hed speech with my friends--or my enemies. I've got a lavish of both sorts."

McCalloway also stiffened at the note of challenge.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This here man," went on Asa Gregory, jerking his head backward, as if in answer to an unuttered query, "gives ther name of McCalloway. I hain't never seed him afore this day, but he's farin' over ter Spradling's an' I proffered ter kindly sot him on his way. I couldn't skeercely do no less fer him."

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

stiffening of posture, and the lips moved in low speech--almost drawlingly soft of cadence.

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

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

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

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

The traveller's question came a little incredulously.

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

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

"And you--?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The hatred in his veins pulsed and simmered. Here he lay behind them and above them, while they lurked in ambush waiting for him to pass in front and below. One shot from his rifle and Jett Blair would never rise. His face would sag forward--that was all--and as his companion scrambled up in dismay, he too would fall back. Asa could picture the expression of astonished panic that would gleam in his eyes for the one brief moment before he too crumpled. Asa's finger tingled with an itch which only trigger-pressure could cool and appease.

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

CHAPTER II

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

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

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

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

"Ef so be he's a king," opined Asa Gregory drily, "he's shore done picked him out a God-fersaken place ter go a'travellin' in." The dark eyes riffled for a moment into a hint of covert raillery. "Ye didn't chanst ter discarn no crown, did ye, Booney, pokin' a gold prong or two up outen them saddle pockets?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A brass band had come with the candidate's special train and blared out its stirring message. There was a fluttering of

flags and a brave showing of transparencies, and to Boone Wellver, aged fifteen, as he hung shadow-close at Asa Gregory's elbow, it all seemed the splendour of panoply and the height of pageantry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But this disconcerting stillness was abruptly ripped asunder by a pistol shot and a commotion of confused voices, rising where figures began to eddy and mill at the outskirts. The reception committee closed hastily and protectingly

about the candidate, whose challenge seemed to have been accepted by some irresponsible gun-fighter, but he thrust them back with a face of unaltered and stony calmness. Though he had finished, he continued to stand at the front with hands idly resting on the platform rail as if meaning to demonstrate his contempt for anything like retreat.

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

Victor McCalloway had come to Cyrus Spradling's house to remain until he could arrange a more permanent residence. The purpose that lay behind his coming was one which he had not felt called upon to explain, and though he had much to learn of this new place of abode, still he had come forearmed with some of the cardinals of a necessary understanding.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The strenuous pair rolled in a mad embrace, and as he approached, one of the boys--whose back alone he could see--came to the top of the writhing heap. While this one gouged, left handed, at eyes which the other attempted to cover, his right hand whipped out a jack-knife which he sought to open with his teeth. Out of the commotion came an animal-like incoherence of snarls and panting profanity, and Victor McCalloway caught the top boy by his shoulder and dragged him forcibly away from what threatened to be maiming or worse.

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

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

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

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

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

"Surrender--knock under--ter *him!*" He spat out the words with a venomous disgust. "Thet feller war a *Blair!* Did ye ever heer of a Gregory hollerin' 'enough!' ter a Blair, yit!"

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

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

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

"Are you a fighter by habit, Boone?"

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

McCalloway held the angelic blue eyes, so paradoxically set in that wrath-enflamed face, with his own steady gray ones, and spoke quietly:

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

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

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

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

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

That was a doctrine, Boone felt, which savoured of sacrilege. If it were categorically true then his own people were cowards--and to his ardent hero worship the Gregories and the Wellvers were exemplars of high bravery, yet this man was no ordinary individual, and he spoke from a wisdom and experience based on a lifetime of soldiering. A seed of dilemma had fallen into the fallow soil of the lad's questioning mind, and as he stood there in a swirl of perplexity he heard the other voice explaining with a sort of comforting reassurance, "As I said, notions of right and wrong vary with locality and custom--but it's good for a man to know more than one standard--one set of ideas. If you ever go out in the world you'll need that knowledge."

After a period of reflection the boy demanded bluntly,

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

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

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

popular."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What books have you read?"

"Every single damn one thet I could git my hands on--but thet hain't been no lavish plenty." With a manner of groping for some point of contact with the outer world, he added, "I've got a cousin thet's in ther army, though. He's in ther Philippines right now. Did you soldier in ther Philippines?" Abruptly Boone broke off, and then hastily he prompted as he raised a hand in a gesture of caution, "Don't answer thet thar question ef ye hain't got a mind ter! I jest axed hit heedless-like without studyin' what I war a'doin'."

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

CHAPTER III

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

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

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

"He ain't come in yit." A suggestion of anxiety sounded through the voice of Araminta Gregory. It was an apprehension which experience failed to mitigate. She had married Asa while he stood charged with homicide. The threat of lurking enemies had shadowed the celebration of wedding and infare. She had borne his child while he sat in the prisoner's dock. Now she was weaning it while he went abroad under bond. One at least knew when the High Court sat, but one could neither gauge nor calculate the less formal menace that lurked always in the laurel--so one could only wait and endeavour to remain clear eyed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hit hain't jist p'intedly what nobody's been a'tellin' me. I ... I seed in a book whar hit said somethin' ter thet amount." Suddenly with an inspirational light of augmented authority, he added, "The Circuit-rider hisself read outen ther Scriptures suthin' 'bout not doin' no murder."

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

sincerity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who's out thar?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

After the mountain fashion the host and Boone had kicked off their heavy shoes and spread their bare toes to the warmth of the blaze. Saul, as a man of the world, refrained from this gaucherie.

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

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

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

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

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

"But I'm a'tellin' ye this time thet hain't agoin' ter be enough ter do!" The visitor leaned forward and spoke with impassioned tenseness. "I've been dwellin' down thar amongst rich folks in ther flat Bluegrass country an' I *knows* what I'm sayin'. Ther Democrat air es smart es Satan's circuit-rider. Yars back he jammed a crooked law through ther legislater jest a'lookin' forward ter this time an' day. Now he's cocked an' primed ter steal ther office, like he stole ther nomination, an' human freedom will be dead an' buried for all time in ther State of old Kaintuck."

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

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

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

"Down thar ther purse-proud Demmycrats calls us folks blood-thirsty barbarians. Ter th'ar high-falutin' fashion o' thinkin' we're meaner than ther very dirt under th'ar feet. Even ther niggers scorns us an' calls us 'pore white trash.' When this man once gits in power he aims ter make us feel ther weight of his disgust an' ter rule us henceforth with bayonets an' milishy muskets. Afore this matter ends up thar's liable ter be some shovellin' of graveyard dirt."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We hain't askin' no odds of nobody," she flared in a panting transport of fury. "Asa kin safeguard his own so long es he hain't misled with lyin' an' false pledges."

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

Somewhat dubiously Fulton shook his head in negation.

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

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

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

The messenger from the outer world shook a dubious head. "Votin' ther ticket hain't enough. Thar's ergoin' ter be a heap of fancy mathematics in tallyin' thet vote all over ther State. Up hyar we've got ter make up fer any deefault down below. We kain't do thet without we all stands solid. Ef thar's any bickerin' them crooks'll turn hit ter account, but ef we elects our man he hain't ergoin' ter fergit us."

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

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

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

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

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

"Thar'll be es many of our folks thar es his'n. They'll be consortin' tergither plum peaceable--twell ye walks inter ther room. Them Gregories an' them Carrs air all armed. Hit's jest you an' Tom thet hain't. When we comes inter ther place, Tom'll start down ther aisle to'rds ye--an' you'll start up to'rds Tom." The speaker paused, and Asa prompted in a low, restrained voice, though his face was chalky pale with smothered emotion:

"Go on! I'm hearkenin'."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



CHAPTER IV

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

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

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

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

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

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

Towards this goal Boone was hurrying, forgetful now of any divided standards of thought, thinking only of the kinsman whom his boyhood had exalted with ardent hero-worship--and of that kinsman's danger. A rowelling pressure of haste drove him, while snares of trailing creepers, pitfalls blotted into darkness and the thickness of jungle-like undergrowth handicapped him with many stubborn difficulties.

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

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

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

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

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

He was noting how every fresh arrival hesitated near the door and glanced about him. In that brief pause and scrutiny he recognized the purport of a division, for as each newcomer stepped to the left or the right of the centre aisle he thereby proclaimed himself a Carr or a Gregory--taking shrewd thought of clan-mobilization. Then as a low drone of talk went up from the body of the house and a restless shuffling of feet, the speaker and his reception committee could not

escape the realization of an ugly tension; of an undertow of anxiety moving deep beneath the surface affectation of calm. A precarious spirit brooded there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Boone paused only for a little, testing the condition of his rifle's breech and bolt, recovering his spent breath. Then he slipped nearer and peered through the slit where a board had been broken away in the wall itself. Within he saw figures bending forward and intent--and his brow knit into furrows as he took in at a glance the division of the clans, each to its separate side of the house. They had come, Saul said, to bring peace out of dissension, but they had paradoxically arranged themselves in readiness for conflict.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the door stood Asa Gregory, his hands hanging at his sides with a studied inertness as his eyes travelled slowly, appraisingly, about the place. His attitude and expression alike were schooled into passiveness, but as he saw another figure rise from just in front of the stage and stand in momentary irresolution, the muscles of his jaw hardened and into his eyes flashed a defiant gleam. His lids contracted to the narrowness of slits, as though struggling to shut out some sudden and insufferable glare. His chest heaved in a gasp-like breath and the hands which he sought to keep hanging, slowly closed and clenched as muscles tauten under an electric shock. Then, as if in obedience to impulses beyond volition, the right hand came upward toward the left armpit--where his pistol holster should have been.

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

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

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

In that same instant Asa Gregory and Tom Carr were brought back to themselves by the feel of emptiness where there should have been the bulge of concealed weapons--and by all the resolution for which that disarmament stood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Since the coming of McCalloway Boone had been living in a world of fantasy. He had been seeing himself as no longer an ignorant lad, sleeping on a husk-pallet, in the cock-loft of a cabin, but as a personality of greater majesty and spaciousness of being. Tonight he had heard General Prince speak and under the fanning of oratory his dream-fires were hotly aglow. As he sat on the rock with the soft minstrelsy of the wind crooning overhead, a score of hearth-stone recitals came back to memory; all saga-like stories of the prowess of Morgan's men. It seemed that he could almost hear the strain of stirrup leathers and the creak of cavalry-gear; the drum-beat of many hoofs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When the roar of General Prince's laughter subsided--a laughter for which Boone could see no reason, the boy drew a chair to the corner of the hearth and sat as one may sit in the wings of a theatre, his breath coming with the palpitation of simmering excitement. Soon the elders seemed to have forgotten him in the heated absorption of their debate. They were threshing over the campaigns of the war between the States and measuring the calibre of commanders as a backwoods man might estimate the girth and footage of timber.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V

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

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

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

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

But because McCalloway sat unmoving, making no comment of any sort, the Kentuckian continued. It was as though he must have his argument acknowledged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Victor McCalloway nodded gravely, and his companion went on.

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

McCalloway swept out his hands in a comprehensive gesture.

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

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

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

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

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

"Now," he reflected, "we hear the younger generation speak with a pitying indulgence of the archaic stodginess of mid-Victorian ideas--and, my God, sir, that was all only yesterday, and this mid-Victorian thought was revolutionary in its newness and its advancement! I can remember when it startled the world: when Tennyson was accounted a wild radical, and Darwin a voice savouring strongly of heresy."

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

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

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

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

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

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

On General Prince's lips flickered a quiet smile.

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

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

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

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

The Scot nodded energetically.

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

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

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

Half diffidently, half stubbornly, McCalloway shook his head.

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

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

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

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

Strange indeed would have seemed to any prying eye the occurrences within the walls of McCalloway's cabin on those many evenings which Boone Wellver spent there. But of what took place the boy breathed no word, despite the almost feverish eagerness that glowed constantly in his blue eyes. His natural taciturnity would have sealed his lips had he given the "furriner" no pledge of confidence, and even McCalloway never guessed how strict was the censorship of that promise as Boone construed its meaning. Inasmuch as he could not be sure just what details, out of the summary of their conversations, fell under the restrictive ban, he set upon the whole association a seal of Masonic silence. And Victor McCalloway, recognizing that dependable discretion, talked with a freedom which he would have permitted himself with few other companions.

Sometimes he read aloud from books whose pages were, to the young listener, gates swinging open upon gilded glimpses of chivalry, heroism and those thoughts which are not groundling but winged and splendid. Sometimes

through the hills where the distances shimmered with an ashen ghost of brilliance, they tramped together, a peripatetic philosopher and his devoted disciple.

But strangest and most fantastical of all, were the hours they spent before McCalloway's hearth when the man threw off his coat and rolled his sleeves high over scarred forearms while the boy's eyes sparkled with anticipation. And at outside mention of these sessions, McCalloway himself might have reddened to the cheekbones, for then it was that the man produced improvised wooden swords and placed himself, feet wide apart and left hand elevated in the attitude of the fencer's salute. Facing him was a solemn, burning-eyed pupil and adversary of fifteen in a linsey-woolsey shirt and jeans overalls. The lad with his freckled face and his red-brown shock of hair made an absurd contrast with the gentleman whose sword play possessed the exquisite grace and deft elegance of a Parisian fencing master--but Boone had the astonishing swiftness of a panther cub, and a lightning play of wrist and agility of limb. How rapidly he was gaining mastery over his foil he could not, himself, realize because standing over against him was one of the best swords of Europe, but this enthusiasm, which was a very passion to learn, was also a thing of which he never spoke outside.



CHAPTER VI

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

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

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

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

As Saul Fulton had predicted, the gaze of the State turned anxiously to the hills. There, remote and slow to give its election returns, lay the Eleventh Congressional District with all its counties solidly Republican. Already the margin was recognized as narrow enough, perhaps, to hinge on the "Bloody Eleventh." While the State waited, the Democrats asseverated that the "Bloody Eleventh" was marking time, awaiting a response to the query it had wired to its state headquarters:

"How much do you need?"

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

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

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

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

When Saul Fulton returned to his birthplace in December, his face was sinister with forebodings. But his object in coming was not ostensibly political. He meant to drive down, from the creeks and valleys of Marlin County, a herd of cattle collected from scattered sources for marketing in the bluegrass. It was an undertaking that a man could hardly manage single handed, and since a boy would work for small wages he offered to make Boone his assistant. To Boone, who had never seen a metalled road, it meant adventuring forth into the world of his dreams.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But while he still mulled over his wonderment in silence, Saul led him by a detour around the mansion and its ivory-white out-buildings, and continued through back pastures and fields, disfigured by black and sharp tobacco stubble. Boone followed past fodder-racks and pig-sties, until they brought up at a square, two-roomed house with blank, unpainted walls, set in a small yard as barren as those of the hills, but unrelieved by any background of laurel or forest. About this untempered starkness of habitation stretched empty fields, snow-patched and desolate, and the boy's face dropped as he heard his kinsman's announcement, "This hyar's whar I dwells at."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The young mountaineer was trudging along one day through a gracious woodland, which even, in the starkness of winter, hinted at the nobility that summer leafage must give to its parklike spaces. His way carried him close to the paddocks flanking the ample barns, and he could see that the house windows were ruddy from inner hearth fires, and decked with holly wreaths.

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII

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

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

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

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

Gazing down upon the broad hall, with the parquetry of its floors cleared for dancing, Basil Prince warmed to a glow of pride in these people who were his people. Aristocracies had risen and tottered since history had kept its score, but here, surviving all change, remained a simple graciousness, and a stamina of great heartedness like that which royal breeding had instilled into those satin-coated horses out there in their barns; steadfastness of courage and a high spirit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a boy, whose long mop of red-brown hair was untrimmed and whose eyes were just now dazzled by the unaccustomed light and sparkle upon which they looked. His shirt was of blue cotton, his clothes patched and shoddy, but under a battery of amused glances he sensed a spirit of ridicule and stiffened like a ramrod. A drifting peal of laughter from somewhere brought his chin up, and a red tide flooded into his cheeks. The soft and dusty hat which he clasped in his hand was crumpled under the pressure of his tightening fingers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"General," he exclaimed, "I have disobeyed orders and opened one Christmas gift before tomorrow. I suspected what it was, sir--and I couldn't wait."

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

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

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

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

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

The boy in hoddens slipped from his chair.

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

For an instant Morgan gazed at him in silence. Without discourtesy, it was difficult to reply to such an absurd invitation, and even the older men felt their reserve of dignity taxed with the repression of mirth as they contemplated the volunteer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

went the lad in broadcloth and the boy in homespun.

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

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

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

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

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

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



CHAPTER VIII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, it was, Anne," he announced. "The word is like the dances. It has a different significance in the hills. For instance when you go to visit your father in Marlin County, Boone will be charitable to you too--or, as we would say, courteous."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"All right. It's agreed then that you take Marlin and Mr. Hollins takes Clay. I have representatives in the other counties arranged for. These men who come will be fed and housed all right. There'll be special trains to bring them, and ahead of

each section will be a pilot engine, in case the news leaks out and anybody tries to use dynamite."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hyar's a letter of introduction from ther Jedge ter ther Governor, an' another one from ther Commonwealth's attorney. They both commends ye ter his clemency."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IX

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

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

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

He would not be immediately needed on the farm, and Frankfort was only fifteen miles away. If he set out at once and walked most of the night, he could reach the Mecca of his pilgrimage by tomorrow morning, and in his pocket was the sum of "two-bits" to defray the expenses of "snacks an' sich-like needcessities." For the avoidance of possible discussion, he slipped quietly out of the back door with no announcement to Saul's wife. With soft snowflakes drifting into his face and melting on his eyelashes, he began his march, and for four hours swung along at a steady three-and-a-half mile gait. At last he stole into a barn and huddled down upon a straw pile, but before dawn he was on the way again, and in the early light he turned into the main street of the state capital. His purpose was to view one day of life in a city and then to slip back to his uneventful duties.

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

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

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

The gentleman in the rear froze in his tracks, glancing this way and that in a bewildered effort to locate the sound. The senator halted too, but after a moment he wavered a little, lifted one hand with a gesture rather of weariness than of pain, and, buckling at the knees, sagged down slowly until he lay on the flag-stoned walk, with one hand pressed to the bosom of his buttoned overcoat.

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

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

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

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

Asa was tranquilly studying a theatrical poster displayed on a wall. His face was composed and lit with a smile of quiet

amusement, but before Boone reached his side, or accosted him, another figure rounded the corner, walking with agitated haste, and the boy ducked hastily back, recognizing Saul Fulton, who might tax him with truancy.

Yet when he saw Saul's almost insanely excited gaze meet Asa's quiet eyes, curiosity overcame caution and he came boldly forward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Asa raised his brows, and smiled indulgently upon his kinsman. "Why, ginrally, I've got a few ca'tridges and pistol hulls in my pockets," he drawled. "Why shouldn't I?"

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

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

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

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

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

It appeared certain that the rifle had barked from a window of the executive building itself--and when police and posses hastily summoned had hurried to its doors, a grimly unyielding cordon of mountaineers had spelled, in human type, the words "no admission."

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

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

To the aid of those first caught in the drag-net of vengeful accusation, came a handful of volunteer defence attorneys,

and among them was Colonel Wallifarro.

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

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

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

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

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

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



CHAPTER X

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

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

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

Very slowly Victor McCalloway made response. "You have witnessed a tragedy--a crime for which the guilty parties should pay with their lives. Even then a scar will be left on the honour of your State."

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

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

"Fellows like Saul Fulton!"

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

The boy's pupils widened interrogatively, and held those older eyes with an unfaltering steadiness. In their frank and engaging depths of blue, as open as the sky, Victor McCalloway read the answer to his question, and something like a sigh of relief shook him; something spasmodic that clutched at his throat and his well-seasoned reserve. He had dreaded that Boone might, in that fanatically bitter association, have brushed shoulders with some guilty knowledge. He had refused that fear lodgment in his thoughts as an ungenerous suspicion, but a lurking realization had persisted. It might need only a short lapse from a new concept to an inherited and ancient code to make heroes of "killers" for this stripling.

Slowly and candidly the boy spoke.

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

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

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

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

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

"I hain't talkin' much erbout thet, son. Ther Governor war hevin' a right stressful time, an' any favours he showed ter

mountain men war bein' held up ergainst him by his enemies. But I reckon I kin trust both of ye.... Yes, I got ther pardon."

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

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

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

That winter spent its dreary monotony, and through its months Boone Wellver was growing in mind and character, as well as in bone and muscle. McCalloway began to see the blossoming of his Quixotically fantastic idea into some hope and semblance of reality. The boy's brain was acquisitive and flaming with ambition, and Victor McCalloway was no routine schoolmaster but an experimenter in the laboratory of human elements. He was working with a character which he sought to bring by forced marches from the America of a quaint, broad-hearted past to the America of the present--and future. Under his hand the pupil was responding.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

of justice.

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

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

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

"What does ye think, Mr. McCalloway? I was thar on thet day. I kin hide out hyar an' resist arrest, like ther boy says, an' I misdoubts ef I could git any lavish of justice down thar."

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER XI

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

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

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

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

Masters rose abruptly from his chair. He tossed down half the contents of his glass and paced the floor with a restless stride, gnawing at his close-cropped and sandy moustache. His tall, well-knit figure moved with a certain athletic vitality, and his florid face was tanned like a pig-skin saddle-skirt. But his brow was corrugated in a frown of discontent, and his pale blue eyes were almost truculent.

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

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

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

Colonel Wallifarro studied the darkened scowl of his companion for a moment before he replied, and when he spoke his own manner retained its imperturbability.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You think I might have come back, do you?" The voice of the Englishman had hardened. "I don't want to be nasty or say disagreeable things. You've been a staunch friend to me--even when Anne found herself growing bitter against me. Well, I don't blame her. Her people had been leaders always. She had the divine right to an assured place in society, and I had failed. I suppose it was natural enough for her to feel that she'd been done in--but it happened to be the finish of me. I'd sweated blood to make Middlesboro--and I didn't have the grit left to commence over."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's no use, of course," admitted Masters with a dead intonation. "Only remember that down here where I'm chained to my little job, life ain't so damned gay and sunny at best--and don't begrudge me my liquor."

CHAPTER XII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Asa's face, as he was led through the side door, was less bronzed than formerly, but his carriage was no less erect or confident. In a new suit of dark colour, with fresh linen instead of his hickory shirt, clean shaven and immaculately combed, the defendant was a transformed person, and if there remained any semblance of the highland desperado, it was to be found only in the catlike softness of his tread and the falcon alertness of his fine eyes. Pencils at the press table began their light scratching chorus--the reporters were writing their description of the accused.

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

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

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

Into the press dispatches began to steal mention of a boy in a cheap but new suit of store clothes, whose eyes held those of the prisoner with a rapt and unwavering constancy. It was even said that the amazingly steady courage of the defendant seemed at times of unusual stress to lean on that supporting confidence, and that whenever they brought him from jail to courtroom, he looked first of all for the boy, as a pilot might look for a reef-light.

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

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

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

Upon the faces of the attorneys for the prisoner quivered a dubious expression of apprehension--as they waited the promised assault of the masked batteries. The son of the man who had walked at Senator Goebel's side, when he fell, took the stand and told with straightforward directness the story of the five minutes after the shot had sounded. He and a policeman had sought entrance to the building, which presumably harboured the assassin--and mountain men had halted him at the door, under the leadership of one to whom the rest deferred. He described that commander with fulness of detail, and it was as if he were painting in words a portrait of the man in the prisoner's dock.

"I was there as a volunteer--to see that no one who might be guilty escaped from the building," testified the witness with convincing candour. "I noticed one man in particular--because he seemed to be the unofficial leader of the rest. Some one called him Asa."

The man's voice was responsibly, almost hesitantly, grave, and on the faces in the jury box one could read the telling impression of his words.

Then the bearded attorney, whose fame was secure as a heckler of witnesses, rose dramatically from his chair.

"Do you see that man in the courtroom now?"

For a matter of seconds testifier and prisoner gazed with level directness into each other's eyes, while over the crowded

courtroom hung a tense pall of stillness.

Then the witness spoke in a tone of bewilderment--his words coming slowly--as though they surprised himself.

"No. I don't think I see him here."

The poised figure of the lawyer, drawn statuesquely upright, winced as painfully as though a trusted hand had smitten him, and in his abrupt change of expression was betrayal of dismay and chagrin.

"You say--you can't--identify him!" he echoed incredulously.

Stubbornly the man who was testifying shook his head.

"May I explain in my own way?" he inquired, and as the lawyer barked raspingly back at him, the Court intervened:

"This is your own witness--You must understand the impropriety of attempting to force him."

"While I was looking at the defendant there, just now," went on the man in the chair, "I was seeing only his side face, and I was positive that he was the person I was describing. Feature for feature and line for line ... the likeness seemed exact. I was willing to swear to it.... But when he turned and faced me ... I saw something else ... and now I don't think he *is* the man."

The words came in a puzzled and dumfounded confession, and the witness paused, then went resolutely on again: "This man has a fine pair of clear and well-matched eyes, when one sees them both at once.... That one at the door had something ... I can't say just what it was ... that marred one eye. I shouldn't call it a cast exactly ... but they didn't match."

Abruptly the State dismissed that witness, and about the defence tables went quiet but triumphant smiles--which the jury did not miss, as the pencils of the press writers raced. But over Boone Wellver's face passed a shadow, and Asa, catching his eye across the heads of the crowd, read the motion of the boy's moving lips, as, without sound, they shaped the words, "Keep cool now, Asa! Keep cool."



CHAPTER XIII

The prosecution had other trumps yet to play. It called a name, which brought into the courtroom, with shambling and uncertain step, a man whose face was pasty with prison pallour. His thin body was garbed in the zebra-stripes of the penitentiary's livery, and the hand that he raised to take oath trembled. His voice, too, carried a quaver of weakness in its first syllable.

Here at length was the promised sensation. The stenographer who had accepted his life-term had become star witness for the State. Now, enlisted from the ranks of the accused, he had undertaken to tell what purported to be the inside story of the plot.

To hear his words, one had to bend attentively, yet, when he had talked for an hour, the scratching of pencils at the press table sounded, through his pauses, almost clamorous, and there was no other sound.

Boone sat, tight of muscle, with his eyes steadfastly fixed on Asa. He thought that just now he was needed, but at the pit of his stomach gnawed a sickness of dread, and it seemed to him that already he could see the gallows rising from its ugly platform.

The bearded lawyer who had once battered down this man's own defence now stood before him, shepherding his words on toward their climax. Faint response followed sharp interrogation with a deadly effectiveness.

"When did you first meet the defendant--Asa Gregory?"

"On the thirtieth of January--in the forenoon."

"Where?"

"At my office in the state house."

"Did your office adjoin that of the Secretary of State?"

"It did."

"What occurred at that time and place?"

"Mr. Gregory rapped.... I let him in.... He handed me a letter from the Governor, and we went into the Secretary's room.... Then he went over to the window and looked out--and drew the blind part of the way down. For a while he just studied the room ... taking in its details."

The man in convict garb paused and fell into a fit of broken coughing.

"Did you have any conversation with him?"

"I did, sir."

"What was it, in substance?"

"I explained to him that the plan was to kill Senator Goebel, when he came to the senate that morning. I showed him two rifles in the corner.... They were of different makes."

"What did he do then?"

"He had me explain the way to get to the basement. He kneeled down by the window and sighted one of the guns.... He piled up several law books to rest it on ... and then he said that he was ready...."

McCalloway's teeth were tight-clamped as he listened.

"Yes, go on."

"He said he had come to get a pardon for 'blowing down old man Carr'--and was ready to give back favour for favour. Presently I saw Senator Goebel turning in at the gate, and I said, 'That's him,' and he said, 'I see him,' and I turned and slipped out of the room. As I was on the stairs, I heard a rifle shot--and then several pistol shots."

Boone Wellver groaned, and the current of his arteries seemed to run in icy trickles through his body, but he kept his eyes steadfastly fixed on Asa, whose life, he felt sure, this man was swearing away in perjury. Asa gazed back. He even inclined his head with just the ghost of a nod, and the boy knew that he meant that for encouragement.

Through hours of that day the ghastly story unwound itself, and its tremendous impact, gaining rather than losing impressiveness from the faltering style of its telling, left the defence staggered and numbed. McCalloway, glancing down at the boy's drawn face, felt his own heart sicken.

But when at last the man with the gray face and the gray, striped livery had gone, the Commonwealth's attorney rose and said in the full-throated voice of master of the show, "Now, we will call Saul Fulton."

Saul, who had been indicted but never tried! Saul, too, had taken the enemy's pay! Neither McCalloway nor Boone doubted that all this drama of alleged revelation was fathered in falsity out of the reward fund and its workings, yet one realized out of mature experience, and the other out of instinct, that to the jury it must all seem irrefutable demonstration.

In marked contrast with the sorry drabness of that last witness was the swagger of the next, who came twirling his moustache with the gusto of pure bravado.

Saul went back of the other's story and ramified its details. He told of the mountain army which he had helped to recruit, and swore that that force had come with a full understanding of its mission.

"We went to ther legislature every day, expectin' trouble," he declared, with a full-voiced boastfulness. "And we were ready to weed out the Democratic leaders when it started."

"To what purpose was all that planned?" purred the examining lawyer, and the response capped it with prompt assurance:

"The object was to have a Republican majority before we got through shooting."

"And you were willing to do your part?"

Virtuously boomed the reply: "If it was in fair battle, I was willin', yes, sir."

Saul particularized. He recounted that he had himself nominated Asa as a dependable gun-fighter, and that on the day of the tragedy he had met Asa on the streets of Frankfort. Asa, he asserted, had brazenly displayed a pocketful of cartridges.

"He said to me," proceeded the witness; "Them ca'tridges comes out of a lot thet's done made hist'ry. Whenever I looks over ther sights of a rifle-gun, I gits me either money or meat, an' this time I've done got me both."

Boone Wellver had been leaning tensely forward in his seat as he listened. Here at last, to his own knowledge, the words that were cementing his kinsman's doom were utterly and viciously false. He had been a witness to that meeting, and it had been Saul and not Asa who had seen danger in the possession of cartridges. It had been Saul, too, who had excitedly instructed him to destroy the evidence.

But Saul continued glibly: "Asa had done named ter me, back thar in ther mountains, thet he reckoned him an' ther Governor could swap favours. So when we met up that day in Frankfort, he said, 'Me an' ther Big Man, we got tergether an' done a leetle business.'"

The courtroom was tensely, electrically silent, when a boy rose out of his chair, and with the suddenness of a bursting shell shrilled out in defiance:

"Thet's a damn lie, Saul, an' ye knows hit! I was right thar an--!" The instant clatter of the Judge's gavel and the staccato outbreak of the Judge's voice interrupted the interruption. "Silence! Mr. Sheriff, bring that disturber before the Court."

Still trembling with white-hot indignation, Boone was led forward with the sheriff's hand on his shoulder, until he stood under the stern questioning of eyes looking down from the bench.

But instantly, too, Colonel Wallifarro's smoothly controlled voice was addressing the Court: "May it please your Honour, before you punish this boy I should like to offer a word or two of explanation."

So Boone did not go to jail, but, after a sharp reprimand, he was sworn as a witness for the defence, and excluded from the courtroom.

When he took the witness-stand later, it was with a recovered composure--and his straightforward story went far toward shaking the impression Saul had left behind him--yet not far enough.

He realized, with black chagrin, that as long as he had sat there steadfastly calm, he had been to Asa a tower of strength--but that when he had broken out he had forfeited that privilege--and left his kinsman unsuccoured.

At last the Commonwealth closed, and Asa himself came to the stand. Had he been possessed of a lawyer's experience he could hardly have evaded more skilfully the snares set in his path, as with imperturbable gallantry he met his skilled hecklers. The even calmness of his velvety eyes became a matter of newspaper report, and when he had finished his direct testimony and had been turned over to the enemy, the fashion in which he cared for himself also found its way into the news columns.

Asa kept before him the realization that he had been advertised as a "bad man" and an assassin. Just now he was intent upon impressing the jury with his urbane proof against exasperation, even when the invective of insinuation mounted to ferocity,

"You have known the witness, Saul Fulton, for years, have you not?" demanded the cross-examiner.

"I've known him all my life."

"Can you state any motive he should have for offering malicious and false evidence against you?"

"Any reason for his lyin'?"

The prisoner gazed at the barking attorney with a calm seriousness and replied suavely:

"No, sir, only that he's swearin' to save his own neck from the rope--an' that's a right pithy reason, I reckon."

Yet all the while that he was making his steep, uphill fight, Asa was feeling a secret disquiet growing to an obsession within him. He could not forget that some one upon whose reassurance he had leaned had been banished from that place where his enemies were bent upon his undoing. He felt as if the red lantern had been quenched on a dangerous crossing--and the psychology of the thing gnawed at his overtried nerves.

Boone's freckled face and wide blue eyes had seemed to stand for serenity, where all else was hectic and fevered.

To Asa, that intangible yet tranquillizing support had meant what the spider meant to Bruce, and now it had been taken from him.

The bearded attorney who had destroyed defendant after defendant was battering at him, with the massed artillery of vindictive and unremitting aggressiveness.

For a long while Asa fenced warily--coolly, remembering that to slip the curb upon his temper meant ruin, but as assault followed assault, through hours, his senses began to reel, his surety began to weaken, and his eyes began to see red.

The attorney who was scourging him with the whips of law saw the first break in his armour and bored into it, with ever-increasing vindictiveness.

Into Asa's mind flashed a picture of the cabin back home, of the wife suffering an agony of anxiety; of the baby whom he might never again see. He seemed groping with his gaze for the steadying eyes of the boy, who was no longer there--whom he desperately needed.

"Asa's gittin' right mad," whispered one mountaineer to another. "I'd hate ter encounter him, right now, in a highway--an' be an enemy of his'n."

But the bearded attorney, who was not in the highway, only badgered and heckled him with a more calculating precision and, as he slowly shook the witness out of self-restraint into madness, he was himself deliberately circling from his place at the Commonwealth's table to a position directly back of the jury box.

Now, having achieved that vantage point, he watched the prisoner's face grow sombre and furious as the prisoner's head lowered like that of a charging bull.

One more question he put--a question of deliberate insult, which brought an admonitory rap of the Judge's gavel; then he thrust out an accusing finger which pointed straight into the defendant's face.

"Look at him now, gentlemen of the jury," he dramatically thundered. "Look at those mismated eyes and determine whether or not this is the man who blocked the state-house doorway--the assassin who laid low a governor!"

Gazing from their seats in the jury-box, the men of the venire saw before them and facing them a prisoner whose two fine, calm eyes had been transfigured and mismated by passion--whose pupils were marked by some puzzling phenomenon of rabid anger that seemed to leave them no longer twins.

It was much later that the panel came in from the room where it had wrangled all night, but that had been the decisive moment. Three or four reporters detached themselves from their places at the press table and stood close to the

windows.

Then the foreman spoke, for in Kentucky the jury not only decides guilt but fixes the penalty, and the reporters raised one finger each--It meant that the verdict was death.



CHAPTER XIV

As Victor McCalloway and Boone went to the railroad station on the afternoon of the day that brought the trial to its end, they found the platform crowded with others who, like themselves, were turning away from a finished chapter.

The boy stared ahead now with a glassy misery, and the eyes and ears, usually so keenly awake to new sights and sounds, seemed too stunned for service.

Had it been the boy himself, instead of his kinsman, who stood condemned to die, he could hardly have suffered more. Indeed, had it been his own tragedy, Boone would not have allowed himself this surrender of bearing under the common gaze, but would have held his chin more defiantly high.

Back in the hills for the first time he was listless over his studies, and even when he stood, sword in hand, before McCalloway, the spirit of swift enthusiasm seemed departed from him. He had moved away from the cabin where the "granny folks" dwelt to help Araminta Gregory run the farm which had been bereft of its man, and his eyes followed her grief-stricken movements with a wordless sympathy.

McCalloway realized that now, even more than formerly, the flame of the convicted man's influence was operating on the raw materials of this impressionable mind, welding to vindictiveness the feudal elements of its metal. But McCalloway had learned patience in a hard school, and now he was applying the results of his experience. Slowly under his sagacious guidance the stamp of hatred which had latterly marred the face of his youthful protg began to lighten. Boone was as yet too young to go under the yoke of unbroken pessimism. The very buoyancy of his years and splendid health argued that somehow the clouds must break. Meanwhile his task was clean cut--and dual. Asa's "woman" must have, from the stony farm, every stalk and ear of corn that could be wrung from its stunted productivity--and he must put behind him that ignorance which had so long victimized his kind. So once more he turned to his books when he was not busy with hoe or plough.

One day, while the boy and the man sat together in McCalloway's house, knuckles rapped sharply on the door. It is contrary to the custom of frontier caution for one to come so far as the threshold without first raising his voice in announcement from a greater distance.

But the door opened upon a grizzled man at the sight of whose face McCalloway bent forward as though confronted by a spectre--and indeed the newcomer belonged to a world which he had renounced as finally as though it had been of another incarnation.

This visitor was lean and weather-beaten. His face was long and somewhat dour, but tanned brown, and instead of speaking he brought his hand to his temple with a smart salute. It was such a salute as bespoke a long life of soldiering and the second nature of military habit. The voice in which McCalloway greeted him was almost unrecognizable as his own, because it was both far away and strained.

"Sergeant!" he exclaimed; "what has brought you here?"

"The lad, sor'r," the other gravely reminded him. "I must speak with ye alone. 'Tis a verra private and a verra serious matter that brings me."

Boone had never heard so hard a note in his benefactor's voice as that which crept into his curt reply:

"It must needs be--to warrant your coming without permission, MacTavish."

They were just finishing their daylight supper, and the boy rose, pushing back his chair. Faithfully he regarded his pledge of respecting the other's privacy whenever he was not invited to share it, and instinctively he felt that this was no moment for his intrusion.

"I reckon I'll hev ter be farin' over thar ter see how Asa's woman's comin' on," he remarked casually, as he reached for the hat that lay at his feet. "Like es not she needs a gittin' of firewood erginst nightfall."

But the matter-of-fact tone and manner were on the surface. Boone secretly distrusted the few messages that came to his preceptor from the outside world. By such voices he might be called back again and hearken to the summons. Boone could not contemplate existence with both his idols ravished from his temple.

Now he closed the door behind him in so preoccupied a mood that he left his rifle standing against the wall forgotten and McCalloway remained standing by the table rather inflexible of posture and sternly inquisitorial of countenance.

"MacTavish," he said in sharply clipped syllables, "you are one of few--a very few--who know of my incognito and

address. I have relied upon you implicitly to guard those secrets. I trust you can explain following me into what you must know was a retirement not to be trespassed upon without incurring my anger--my very serious anger."

Respectfully, but with a face full of eager resoluteness, the other saluted again.

"General," he said, "it's China--they need you there."

"Sergeant"--an angry light leaped in the steel-gray eyes--"if they want me in China some one whom I have trusted has betrayed my identity. No living soul there ever heard of Victor McCalloway, *Mister* McCalloway, not General Anything, mind you!"

The newcomer crossed to the centre of the room, and his movements were quick and precise, as are those of the drill-ground.

"To every other man on earth ye may be *Mister* McCalloway--but to me ye are my general. Before I'd betray any trust ye might place in me, sor'r, I'd cut off that hand at the wrist, as ye ken, sor'r, full well. I've told nae soul where ye wor'r. I've only said that I'd seek for ye."

"But in God's name how--?"

"If I may interrupt ye, sor'r, I am no longer Sergeant Major MacTavish; I'm a time-retired man at home, but when I wear a uniform now it's that of the army of the Manchu Emperor. They seek to reorganize their army along western lines. They want genius. They ken nothin' of ye save that one Victor McCalloway was once a British officer of high rank who served so close to Dinwiddie, that Dinwiddie's strategy is known to him.--Read this, sor'r, and ye'll understand more of the matter."

The General took the large, official-looking missive and stood for a moment with a drawn and concentrated brow before he slit its linen-lined covering.

The feel of the thing in his fingers brought to him a certain stirring and quickening of the pulses: such a restiveness as may come to the retired thoroughbred at the far-off sound of the paddock bugle, or to the spent war horse at the rolling of drums.

The heavy blue paper and the thick seal set into disquieting momentum an avalanche of memories. Active days which he had resolved to forget were conjured into rebirth as he handled this bulky envelope which proclaimed its officialdom. Even the daily papers came to him here with desultory lack of sequence. He knew in disjointed fashion how that same summer an anti-foreign revolt had broken out in Shantung and spread to Pechili. He had read that the Japanese Government had dispatched twenty thousand men to China. Later he had followed the all too meagre accounts of how the Allies had raced for Peking to relieve the besieged legations. The young Emperor's ambition to impress upon his realm the stamp of western civilization had made him, for two years, a virtual prisoner to the Empress Dowager and her reactionaries. Now in turn the Empress Dowager was in flight and, presumably, the Japanese, working in concert with agents of the captive Emperor and Prince Ching, were looking toward the future.--It would seem that they divined once more the opportunity to Occidentalize army and government. If so, it was the rising of a world tide which might well run to flood, and it offered him a man's work. At all events, this letter which caused his fingers to itch and tremble as they held it, came from high Japanese sources and it was addressed only "Excellency," without a name. The envelope itself was directed to "The Honourable Victor McCalloway."

For a long time he stood there immovable, looking at the paper, as great dreams marched before him. Organization, upbuilding--that was his *metier*!

Seeing the rapt concentration of his brow and the hunger of his eyes, the former British sergeant spoke again with persuasive fervour:

"Go under any name ye like, sor'r; ye'll be prompt to give it glory! For many years I served under ye, General. For God's sake, let me take my commands from ye once again! Come out to China, sor'r, where they need a great soldier--and can keep silent!"

The hermit strode over and laid a hand on the shoulder of his visitor. Their eyes met and held. "Old comrade," said McCalloway, as the rust of huskiness creaked in his voice, "I know you for the truest steel that ever God put into the blade of a man's soul--but I must have time to think."

He crossed the room slowly and took up Dinwiddie's sword. Tenderly he drew the blade from the scabbard, and as he looked at it his eyes first glowed with fires of longing, then grew misty with the sadness of remembrance.

After that he laid the scabbard down and handled once more the sheets that had been in the envelope. He did not re-

read the written sentences, but let his fingers move slowly along the smooth surface of the paper, while his pupils held as far-away a look as though they were seeing the land from which the communication had come.

But, after a little, McCalloway came out of that half-hypnotized absorption, and his eyes wandered about the room until finally they fell on the rifle that the mountain boy had forgotten to take away with him.

He knew Boone well enough to feel sure that he had not gone far without remembering. He was certain, too, that his young protg would have returned for it before now had he not been inhibited by his deference for the elder's privacy.

Over there across the world was an army to be shaped, disciplined--but an army of alien blood, of yellow skins. Here was the less conspicuous task to which he had set his hand; the shaping of a single life, beset with hereditary dangers, into a worthy edifice of which the timbers and masonry were Anglo-Saxon and the pattern Americanism. He had too far committed himself to that architecture to turn back.

Slowly he shook his head. The struggle had been sharp, but the decision was final.

"No, MacTavish, old comrade and old friend," he said very seriously; "no; I've withdrawn from all that. I'll not deny that my hand sometimes aches for a grip on a sabre-hilt, and my ears are hungry for a bugle--but that's all past. Go out and make an army there, if you can, but I stay here. I needs must stay."



CHAPTER XV

One day McCalloway received a paper, several days old, that contained a piece of news which he was anxious for Boone to see at once, and he straightway set out to find the boy.

Araminta greeted him at the door of the Gregory cabin with apathetic eyes. "Booney's done gone out with his rifle-gun atter squirrels," she said. "I heered him shoot up on ther mountainside thar, not five minutes back."

Before he followed the boy, McCalloway read to her and construed the item in the paper, and for the first time in many weeks the hard wretchedness of her heart softened to tears and a faint ray of hope stole through her misery.

McCalloway began climbing the hillside, searching the thickets for the boy, and at last he saw him while he himself remained unseen. Boone was standing with his gaze turned toward Louisville--and its jail--two hundred and more miles distant. His face was like that of a fanatic in a religious trance, and his right hand gripped his rifle so tightly that the knuckles showed out white splotched against the tanned flesh.

"I failed ye, Asa," came the self-accusing voice in a tight-throated strain. "I bust out and got sent outen ther co'te room, when ye needed me in thar ter give ye countenance, but God knows I hain't fergot ye." He paused there, and his chest heaved convulsively. "An' God, He knows, too, I aims ter avenge ye," he ended up, with a dedication of savage sincerity, while his gaze still seemed to be piercing the hills toward the city where his kinsman lay condemned.

McCalloway came forward then, and while he talked, Boone listened with attentive patience, but an obdurate face.

The man sought to exact a promise that until he was twenty-one, Boone should "hold his hand" so far as Saul Fulton was concerned. Given those plastic years, he could hope to wean the lad gradually away from the tigerish and unforgiving ferocity of his blood, but Boone could only shake his head, unable either to argue or to yield.

Then McCalloway sketched the seemingly irrelevant narrative of what had occurred in China; of the peril of the legations. He talked of an emperor, captive to court intrigue, and slowly the lad's eyes, which had been until now too preoccupied with his own wormwood to think of other matters, began to liven into interest.

"But that's all plumb acrost ther world from hyar, though," he asserted in a pause, as though he begrudged the arresting of his attention. "What's hit got ter do with me--an' Asa?"

General McCalloway cleared his throat. It came hard for him to talk of himself and of a sacrifice made for another.

"It has this to do with you, my boy," he announced bluntly: "I have been offered a soldier's job over there. I have been invited to aid in work that would help to stabilize China--and I have refused."

Boone Wellver's lips parted in amazement.

"Refused," he gasped. "Fer God's sake, what made ye do hit!"

"Because of you," was the sober response. "I thought you needed me, and I thought you were worth standing by."

"Fer me!" The lad was trembling again, but this time not with anger. "I reckon I'll be powerful beholden ter ye, all my life, fer thet--but ye hedn't ought ter hev done hit. They needs ye over thar, too--an' thar's monstrous numbers of 'em, from what ye narrates."

"I know it, Boone," McCalloway spoke earnestly. "I've centred some very ambitious dreams about your future. The time is hardly ripe to explain them--but you have a great opportunity--unless you throw it away in vengeful fury. If you won't trust me to guide you--until you come of age, at least--I had much better have gone to China."

The boy turned away, and in his set face McCalloway could read that for him this was an actual moment of Gethsemane. Through his nature as over a hotly embattled field surged contrary and warring emotions--and between them he was cruelly buffeted.

"God knows I'm wishful," he broke out at length. "An' God knows, atter what ye've jest told me, I hain't got no license ter deny ye nothin' ye asks--but--" The end of his sentence came like a sob. "But ye wouldn't ask me ter be disloyal ter my own kith an' kin, would ye?"

"No--but I would ask you to have a higher loyalty."

Boone stood trembling like an ague victim. It was no light matter for him to give so binding a pledge.

"No Gregory ner no Wellver hain't niver died on ther gallows tree yit," he faltered. "Thar's two things I'd done swore

ter do. One of 'em was ter git Saul. I reckon, though, thet could wait."

"What is the other thing?"

"Thet afore they hangs him--some fashion or other--I've got ter git a gun in thar ter Asa ... so he kin kill hisself. Hit hain't fitten thet he should die by a rope like a common feller!"

The emotion-laden voice became almost shrill. "Even ther Carrs an' Blairs don't *hang*. They come nigh ter hangin' one oncet, but a kinsman saved him."

"How?" inquired McCalloway, and the boy responded gravely:

"He lay up on ther hillside an' shot his uncle ter death as they was takin' him from the jail-house ter ther gallows."

Truly, reflected the soldier, he was modelling with grim and stiff clay, but he only said:

"Promise me that, as to Saul, you will wait--until you are twenty-one."

Boone did not reply for five full minutes, but at the end of that time he nodded his head. "I kain't deny ye nothin', atter what ye've done fer me," he assented briefly.

Then McCalloway read from the paper his scrap of encouragement. The Court of Appeals had granted the Secretary of State a rehearing.

"But thet hain't Asa," objected the boy. "I don't keer nothin' erbout thet feller."

McCalloway smiled.

"It's a similar case, tried by the same court, and involving the same principles. It indicates that Asa will have a new trial, too."

"Ef he comes cl'ar," announced Boone, with the suddenly rocketing spirits of boyhood, "I reckon Asa kin handle his own affairs."

McCalloway had set himself to preparing Boone within a year from that fall for entrance into the state university. There was but a faint background of prior attainment against which to paint many things, but there was an avidly acquisitive pupil, a tireless teacher, and an intensive plan of education.

Gregory was still in the Louisville jail--where, indeed, a half dozen other years were yet to find him. The Secretary of State had come through his second trial with a second conviction, and had once more been granted a rehearing.

Saul Fulton, the star witness in Asa's trial, had disappeared, and report had it that he had gone to South America--but the record of his former testimony remained fixed in the stenographer's notes and was fully available for later use--so that his going lifted no shadow from Asa's future.

"I reckon they squashed ther indictment ergin him," Boone commented bitterly to McCalloway, "an' paid him off with some of thet thar blood money."

He paused and then went on, holding his finger between the pages of the book he was studying. "He's done fared a long way off--but, some day he'll fare back again. I stands full pledged--twell I comes of age, an' I aims ter keep my word. Atter thet, I hain't makin' no brash promises. Ther hate in my heart, hit don't seem ter slacken none. I mistrusts hit won't--never."

But if the festering grievance did not "slacken," at least it seemed just now partly submerged in the great adventure of going down to the world below and becoming a collegian.

He went early in the autumn when he was seventeen, and McCalloway, who accompanied and matriculated him, came away smiling. He had felt as though he were leading a wolf-cub into a kennel of blooded hounds. But when he had watched the self-poise with which his registrant bore himself and how quickly amused smiles faded away under his level gaze, he left with a reassured confidence.

When the days began to grow crisp the uncouth scholar saw for the first time the lads in leather and moleskin tackling and punting out on the campus--in the early try-outs of the season's football practice. He looked on at first with a somewhat satirical detachment, but when the scrimmages took on the guise of actual ferocity his interest altered from tepid disapproval for "sich foolery" to a realization that it was "no gal's play-party."

Several afternoons later Boone shyly intercepted the coach as he led out the practice squads.

"Does thet thar football business belong ter a club--er somethin'," he inquired, "er kin any feller git inter hit?"

The coach looked at the roughly dressed lad with the unruly hair, who talked in barbaric phrases--and his practised eye took in the sinewy strength of the well-muscled body. He appraised the power of the broad shoulders, and the slim, agile lines of waist and legs, and gave him a chance.

From the beginning it was evident that Boone Wellver would make the scrub team. He was a tornado from the instant the ball was snapped--"an injia rubber idjit on a spree," and yet this mystifying wolf-cub from the hills came back to the coach in less than a week with an almost sullen face and announced shortly:

"I hain't goin' ter play no more football, I aims ter quit hit."

"Quit it! Why?"

"I've been studyin' hit over," the retiring candidate explained gloomily. "A man thet hain't no blood kin ter me is payin' what hit costs ter send me hyar. I hain't hardly nothin' but a charity feller, nohow--an' until he says hit's all right, I don't aim ter spend ther time he's payin' fer out hyar playin' fool games--albeit I likes hit."

At the solemnness and the unconscious self-righteousness of the tone, a laugh went up, and Boone turned with a straight-lined mouth to meet the derisive outburst.

"But I'm out here now, though," he added pointedly, lowering his head as does a bull about to charge, "an' I kin stay a leetle longer. If any of you fellers, or ther whole damn passel of ye, thinks I'm quittin' because I'm timorous, I'd be right glad ter take ye on hyar an' now--fist an' skull."

There was no acceptance of the invitation, and Boone, turning, with his shoulders straight, marched away.

But when McCalloway read his letter, he promptly responded:

"A razor is made to shave with--. Its purpose is work and only work. Still, if it isn't honed and stropped it loses its edge. It's hardly fair to regard as wasted the time spent on keeping that edge keen. I want you to get the most out of college, and that doesn't mean only what you get out of the books. If I were you, I'd play football and play it hard."

Boone went down the stairs, four steps at a time. He could hear the coach's whistle out on the campus and he came like a hound to the chase. "Hi, thar!" he yelled, "kin I git back in thet outfit? *He* 'lows hit's all right fer me ter play."

Back in the hills Victor McCalloway was more than a little lonely. He began to realize how deeply this boy--at first almost a waif--had stolen into the affections of his detached life. Once or twice he went to Lexington to see how his protg progressed, and he had several brief visits from General Prince and more than several from Larry Masters. After what seemed a very long while indeed, Boone came home for his first summer vacation.

Araminta Gregory had a brother at her farm now, so the boy went direct to the house of Victor McCalloway, which was henceforth to be his home.

CHAPTER XVI

Happy Spradling, whose father had overseen the raising of Victor McCalloway's house, was only two years younger than Boone. When he had gone away, a lad of seventeen, he had been untroubled by thoughts of girls, and she had certainly wasted no meditation upon him.

But the Boone who came back was not quite the same boy who had gone away. He was still roughly dressed, judged by exacting standards, but corduroy had supplanted his old jeans, and he returned with a much developed figure and an improved bearing.

Now one afternoon Happy Spradling stood with a pail, by a "spring-branch" of crystal water, as Boone came by and halted. She, too, had been to one of those settlement schools that were just beginning to introduce new standards in the hills, and her homecoming to unrelieved crudities was not an unmixed pleasure. Certain it is that the slim girl in her calico gown was blessed with a fresh and vigorous beauty. Her sloe-brown eyes were heavy lashed, and her skin was blossom clear. Dark hair crowned her well-poised head in heavy masses--and the boy was surprised because he had not remembered her as so lovely.

"Ye look right sensibly like a picture outen ther Bible of Rebekkah at the well," he banteringly announced, and the girl flushed.

"Ye ain't quite so uncurried of guise as ye used to be your own self, Boone," she generously acceded, and they both laughed.

They talked on for a while, and before Boone started away the girl invited shyly, with lids that drooped, "Come over sometime, Boone, an' tell me all about the college."

But it happened that the next day he went, with a note from McCalloway, to the home of Larry Masters, the "mine boss," at the edge of Marlin Town, and there fate ambushed him in the person of the girl who had asked him to dance at the Christmas party.

Anne Masters came to the door in response to the boy's knock, and when he had seen her he stood hesitant with his eyes fixed upon her until her cheeks flushed, while he forgot the note he had brought for her father.

Anne herself did not recognize him at first, for Boone stood close to six feet now, and although he would always be, in a fashion, careless of dress, he would never again be the sloven, as were the kinsmen about him. His corduroy breeches, flannel shirt and boots that laced halfway up the calf, all seemed a part of himself, like a falcon's plumage. But what the girl noticed first, since she was both young and impressionable, was the crisp curl of his red brown hair and the direct fearlessness of his sky-blue eyes.

"I reckon ye don't remember me," he hazarded, by way of introduction; and she shook her head.

"Have I seen you before?" she inquired, and Boone found it difficult to talk to her because he was so busy looking at her. There had been girls as well as boys at the state university, but among them had been none like Anne Masters. Boone was to learn from a broader experience that there were few like her--anywhere. Even now when she was a bud not yet blossomed, she had that indescribable fairy god-mother's gift to which no analyst can fit a formula--the charm which lays its spell upon others and the gift of individuality.

"You've seed me--seen me, I mean--before. But it's right natcher'l fer ye to fergit it, because it was a long spell back. You gave me the first Christmas gift I ever got in my life--a piece of plum cake. Do you remember me now?"

The light of recollection broke over her face, illuminating it--and Anne Masters had those eyes that actually sparkle within--the dancing eyes that are much rarer than the phrase.

"Of course I remember you! I've thought about you--lots. I've always called you the 'fruit-cake boy.'" Suddenly her laugh rippled out in a lilting merriment. "Don't you remember when you challenged Morgan with the fencing foils?"

"Oh," exclaimed Boone, flushing, "I'd plumb disremembered that."

It was June, with days of diamond weather and the bloom still upon wild rose and rhododendron. Anne looked away beyond the boy's head to the tallest crest of the many that ringed the town. Suddenly she demanded: "Have you ever been up there--at the tip-top of that mountain?"

He nodded his head, and she at once commanded: "I want you to show me the way up there--I want to go up and climb to the top of that tree that you can see from here, the one that stands up higher than all the others."

Boone shook his head soberly. "It's a right hazardous undertakin' fer anybody thet isn't used to scalin' cliffs," he objected. "Why do you want to go up there to the top of old Slag-face?"

Her expression had clouded to autocratic displeasure at his failure of immediate assent, but only for an instant; then her eyes altered again from coercive frown to irresistible smile.

"Why?" she exclaimed. "Why does a bird want to fly? Up there at the top of that tree you'd be almost in the sky. You'd be looking down on everything but the clouds themselves. When I was a little girl--" she announced suddenly, "they had a hard time persuading me that I *couldn't* fly. They had to keep watching me, because I'd climb up on things and try to fly down."

"Have you plumb outgrown that idee?" he inquired, somewhat drily. "Because I'm not cravin' to help you fly offen that mountain top."

Her laugh rippled out like bird notes as she replied with large scorn of fourteen years: "*That* was when I was a child."

After a moment she added appealingly: "The last time I saw you, General Prince said that when I came to these hills, you'd be 'charitable' to me."

"I aims to be," he asserted stoutly, "but it wouldn't skeercely be charitable to be the cause of your breakin' an arm or"--he paused an instant before adding with sedateness--"or a limb."

But Anne had her way. She always had her way, and some days later they looked down on an outspread world from the crest of Slag-face. Boone had not been long in discovering that this slender girl was driven by a dauntless spirit that made of physical courage a positive fetish, so he had pretended weariness himself from time to time and demanded a breathing spell.

The sky overhead was splendidly soft and blue, broken by tumbling cloud masses, which, it seemed, one could almost reach out and touch.

From the foreground where they sat flushed and resting, with moss and rock and woodland about them, the prospect went off into distances where mountain shadows fell across valleys, and other ridges were ranked row on row. Still more remote was the vagueness of the horizon whose misty violet merged with the robin's-egg blue of the sky.

The girl stood, leaning against the tree, and her violet eyes were full of imaginative light.

Through lids half closed the boy looked at her. She was an exponent of that world of which he had dreamed. He thought of the hall where he had first seen her; of the silk and broadcloth, of the mahogany and silver; of the whole setting which was home to her, and to him a place into which he had come as a trespasser in homespun.

Into the tempering of the crude ore came a new element. Asa Gregory had been the fire, and so far Victor McCalloway had been the water. Now, came the third factor of life's process--the oil; for there and then on the hilltop he had fallen in love, and it was not until he was riding home in the starlight that he stopped to consider the chances of disaster.

It had been a wonderful day, accepted without questioning; but now he drew his horse suddenly to a stop and took his hat from his head. For a time he sat there in his saddle, as unmoving as though he and the beast he rode were inanimate parts of an equestrian group; the statue of a pioneer lad rough-mounted.

His face stiffened painfully, and he licked his lips. Finally he said to the dark woods where the whippoorwills were calling and the fireflies flickering:

"Great God! I mout jest as well fall in love with a star up thar in heaven." Something like a groan escaped him, and after a while he gathered up his reins. Again he spoke, but in a dull voice:

"I'll quit afore I get in too far. Tomorrow night I'll go over thar and 'set up' with Happy Spradling."

He remembered how they had laughed at him at college when, quite naturally, he had used that term, "settin' up with a gal," to express the idea of courtship. Now he laughed himself, but bitterly. That was what his own people called it, and, after all, it was better to remember that he was of his own people.

The next night Boone kept his word. He brushed his clothes and did what he could with the unruly crispness of his hair, and then he set out for the log house of Cyrus Spradling on the headwaters of Snag Ridge.

He was not going on this, his first formal visit to a girl, with such leaping pulses as might have been expected. He was following out an almost grim determination quite devoid of eagerness. Having lost his heart to royalty, he was now bent on forcing himself back into a society where he had a right to be.

He had not slept much that night after the excursion to Slag-face, and what sleep he had had, had been troubled by dreams in which Anne had stood smiling down on him from the mountain top, while he looked up from a deep gorge where the shadows lay black. He was driven by a mad sense of necessity to climb up and stand beside her--but always he slid back, or fell from narrow ledges, until he was bruised, bleeding--and unsuccessful. He woke up panting, and afterward dreamed the same thing over. And every time he fell he found Happy waiting in the gorge and saying, "Why don't ye stay here with me? You don't have to climb after me--and I'm a right pretty gal." Always too he answered, in the words that Anne had used, "Why do I want to go up there? Up there you'd be looking down on everything but the clouds themselves"--and he would begin climbing once more, clutching with raw fingers upon frail and slippery supports.

All day he had argued with himself, and being young and unversed in such problems he told himself that the only way to halt this runaway thing within himself that led to no hope was to set his heart upon something which lay in reach. His inexperience told him that Happy liked him; that she was a nice girl trying to better her condition in life as he was himself trying, and he meant to commandeer his own heart and lay it at her feet. It was, of course, an absurd and impossible thing to undertake, but this he must learn for himself.

As Boone reached the house, old man Spradling sat on his porch in the twilight with his cob pipe between his teeth. Cyrus remained what his "fore-parents" had been before him, a rough-hewn man of undeviating honesty and of an innate kindness that showed out only in deeds and not at all in demonstrativeness.

Just now he wore an expression of countenance that was somewhat glum as he watched the lingering afterglow which edged the western crests of the "Kaintuck' Ridges" with pale amber.

"Set ye a cheer, Booney," he invited, with a brief nod. "I reckon ye didn't skeercely fare over hyar ter set an' talk with me, but ther gal hain't quite through holpin' her mammy with the dish-washin' yit--an' I wants ter put some questions ter ye afore she comes out."

The lad drew a hickory-withed chair forward and sat down, laying his hat on the floor at his feet.

"Ye've done been off ter college, son," began old Cyrus reflectively, as he bit on his pipe stem and judicially nodded his head.

"I've always countenanced book-lore myself, even when folks hes faulted me fer hit. I've contended thet ther times change an' what was good enough fer ther parents hain't, of needcessity, good enough fer ther young ones. 'Peared like, ter me, a body kinderly hes a better chanst ter be godly ef he hain't benighted."

"I reckon there ain't no two ways about that proposition," agreed the boy eagerly. "Hit just stands ter reason."

"An yit, hyar latterly," suggested the mountaineer dubiously, "I've done commenced ter misdoubt ef I've been right, atter all. Thet's what I wanted ter question ye about. My woman an' me, we sent Happy off ter thet new school in Leslie--an' since she's come home I misdoubts ef her name fits her es well es hit did afore she went over thar. She used ter sing like a bird all day--an' now she don't."

"I don't see how knowin' something can make a body unhappy," protested Boone.

Cyrus Spradling studied him with a keen, but not unkindly, fixedness of gaze.

"Ye don't, don't ye? Wa'al, let me norrate ye a leetle parable. Suppose you an' me hes done been pore folks livin' in a small dwellin'-house. We've done been plum content, because we hain't never knowed nothing better. But suppose one of us goes a'visitin' ter rich kin-folks--an' t'other one stays home." He paused there to rekindle his pipe, and the voice of his resumed "parable" was troubled.

"Ther one thet's been away hes done took up notions of wealth that he kain't nuver hope ter satisfy. The mean cabin seems a heap meaner when he comes back ter hit--but ther other pore damn fool--he's still happy an' contented because he don't know no better."

"I reckon," laughed the young visitor, "if the feller that had gone away was anything but the disablest body in the world, he'd set about improving the house he had to dwell in."

"I hope ter God ye're right, Booney. Hit's been a mighty sober thing fer me ter ponder over, though--whether I was helpin' my gal or hurtin' her."

Boone was smitten with a sense of guilt. He felt that he ought to make confession that he had come here tonight because he had already recognized a new flame in his heart, and a flame which the voice of sanity and wisdom told him he must quench: that he was here because discontent had driven him. But his voice was firm as he made some commonplace reply, and Cyrus nodded his satisfaction. "Mebby if thar's a few boys like thet, growin' up hyarabouts, ther few gals thet gits larin' won't be foredoomed ter lead lonesome lives, atter all."

The moonlight was beginning to convert the dulness of twilight into a nocturne of soft and tempered beauty.

Boone felt suddenly appalled, as if the father had given him parental recognition and approval, and laid upon him an obligation. He wanted to rise and frame some excuse for immediate flight, but it was of course too late for that.

The evening star came up over the dark contours of the ridge. It shone soft and lustrous in the sky, where other stars would soon add their myriad points of light, but however many others might fill the heavens there would still be only one evening star--and Boone, as he waited for one girl, fell to thinking of the other with whom he had climbed Slag-face yesterday; the girl who had set fire to his young imagination.

Then Happy came out of the door and soon after the father went in. "Thar hain't no place fer an ign'rant old feller like me, out hyar amongst ther young an' wise," he chuckled as he left them. "I reckon ye aims ter talk algebray an' sich-like."

The mountains were great upward sweeps of velvet darkness. Down in the slopes, where the moonlight fell, was a bath of silver and shadows, not dead and inky but blue and living, but Happy Spradling, keyed to the emotional influences of that June evening, found herself labouring with a distraught and unresponsive visitor, who made an early excuse for departure.



CHAPTER XVII

Beyond the goal of getting through college in three years, Boone had planned his future but vaguely. He might seek election to the Legislature, when he came of qualifying age, and strive upwards from that beginning toward Congress and the larger rewards of a political life. For such a career the law was a necessary preparation, so while he was still in college he began its reading.

Whenever he went home from the university he saw Happy, and in the tacit fashion of simple souls their neighbourhood fell to speaking of "Boone and Happy," as though the linking of their names was natural and logical, and in local gossip it was almost as though they were betrothed.

Happy had other suitors, more than a few of them indeed, drawn to the Spradling house by her beauty. Along those neighbourhood creeks, from the trickles where they "headed up" to the mouths where they emptied, there were few girls who could hope to compete with her loveliness of sloe-eyes, dusky hair and slender grace of body. But the old wives shook their heads, saying, "Happy Spradling wouldn't hurt a fly--but jest ther same she's breakin' hearts right an' left because she's mortgaged ter Boone Wellver--an' she's jest a'waitin' fer him."

Old Cyrus already looked on him as a son--and Boone spoke as little of Anne Masters as he would have spoken of the things sealed in Masonic secrecy.

Happy's school was one which arranged its terms and vacations in accordance with local exigencies. Crop planting and gathering had the right of way over text-books, and so it happened that when Anne was at Marlin Town, Happy was usually at school--and their ways did not cross.

Yet each summer, too, as a man may go from the provinces to court and yet not delude himself with the hallucination that he is a courtier, Boone went over to Marlin Town. For every summer Anne Masters came for a few weeks to visit the father, who held his position there, remote from the things that, to his thinking, made up the values of life.

During these periods Boone found life a strange and paradoxical pattern, woven of a web of ecstasy and a woof of torture. Since that night when he had dragged suddenly at his bridle curb and had told himself, "I might as well fall in love with a star up there in heaven," he had never departed from his resolute conviction that it would be sheer insanity for him to entertain any thought of Anne, save that of the willing and faithful slave who would joyously have laid his life down for her.

She dominated his world of boyhood dreams, and since he was not deaf to the talk about himself and "Cyrus Spradling's gal," he wondered if he ought not to tell Happy the whole truth. But after long reflection he shook his head.

"It would only hurt Happy, like telling her about dreams that come at night--of some sort of heaven where I don't see her, herself." And so he did not tell her.

One day in the spring of the year when Anne was sixteen, Mrs. Larry Masters dropped into the office of her kinsman, Tom Wallifarro, to talk over some small matter of business. It was one of the regrets of the lady's life--a life somewhat touched and frost-bitten by bitterness--that all of her business was small. It was, however, one of her compensations that this gentleman gave to her petty affairs as much care and consideration as to the major features of his large practice.

"My dear," observed the Colonel irrelevantly as he looked at the weary eyes of the woman who had in her day been an almost famous beauty, "you seem worried. You are altogether too young to let lines creep into your face."

Mrs. Masters laughed mirthlessly.

"I have a daughter growing up. I am ambitious for her. She has charm, grace, breeding--and she's the poor member of a rich family. Such things bring wrinkles around maternal eyes, Cousin Tom."

"Happily she lives in Kentucky," the lawyer reminded his visitor. "We are yet provincial enough to think something of blood, even when it's not gilded with money."

"Yes, thank God--and thanks to you, she has had educational advantages. If Larry had only had business sense--but I can't talk patiently about Larry."

"No--I wish you could bring yourself to think of him more indulgently, but--" Colonel Tom knew the fruitlessness of

that line of counsel, so he brushed lightly by to other topics. "But that isn't what I wanted to talk about. I think Morgan ought to travel abroad for several months, don't you?"

Mrs. Masters sighed. There was a thought in her mind which had long been there. If Morgan and Anne could be brought to a fancy for each other, her problem in life would be settled. The girl would no longer be a charity child. But what she said was an amendment to the original thought. "Isn't he a bit inexperienced--and headstrong yet, to be turned loose alone in Europe?"

The Colonel's eyes twinkled. "I mean to have a check-rein on him."

"What fashion of check-rein, Cousin Tom?"

"I thought," said the lawyer off-handedly, since he always surrounded his beneficences with a show of the casual, "that it would be a good thing for Anne too. Now if you and she and Morgan made a European trip together, the responsibility of two ladies on his hands would steady the young scapegrace."

Mrs. Masters almost gasped in her effort to control her delighted astonishment. Morgan had always thought of Anne as a "kid" to be teased and badgered, and of himself as a very finished and mature young gentleman. Now they would see each other in a new guise. Their eyes might be opened. In short, the possibilities were immense.

"Your goodness to us--" she began feelingly, but the Colonel cleared his throat and raised a hand in defence against the embarrassment of verbal gratitude.

A month later the three sat in the *salle-a-manger* of the Elyse Palace Hotel, by a window that commanded a view of the Arc de Triomphe, and many things had happened. Among them was the surprising discovery by the young man, that while few eyes seemed concerned with him, many turned toward Anne, and having turned, lingered.

Only last night they had been to a dance, and Anne had been so occupied with uniforms that she had found no time to waltz with him--though he was sure that he danced circles about these stiff-kneed gentry with petty titles.

Now over the *petit djeuner* he took his young and inconsiderate cousin to task.

"Last night, Anne, I camped on your trail all evening, and you couldn't manage to slip me in one dance. Nothing would do but goggling Britishers and smirking frog-eaters. I'm getting jolly well fed up with these foreigners."

Anne lifted her brows, but her eyes sparkled mischief.

"Oh, Morgan, I can dance with you any time," she assured him. "You're just kin-folks. Is it because you're 'jolly well fed up' with foreigners that you like to ape English slang?"

The young man blushed hotly, but he chose to ignore the question with which she had capped her response. Inasmuch as it was a fair hit, he had need to ignore it, but his eyes snapped with furious indignation. "Anne, I don't understand you," he announced in a carefully schooled voice. "You can play with absurd little dignitaries, or with mountain illiterates--anything abnormal--but for your own blood--" He paused there a moment, searching his abundant and sophomoric vocabulary for the exact combination of withering words; and, while he hesitated, she interrupted in a tone which was both quiet and ominous:

"Let's take up one thing at a time, Morgan. Just who is the illiterate in the mountains?"

"You know as well as I do--Boone Wellver."

"Boone Wellver. I thought so. At all events, he's a man, even if he's not quite twenty-one yet."

"A man: that is to say, a specimen of the *genus homo*. So is the fellow that brought in the eggs just now. So is the chap that drives the taxi." The young aristocrat shrugged his shoulders and snapped his fingers in excellent imitation of Gallic expressiveness; then as Anne's twinkle reminded him of his being "jolly well fed up with foreigners," the change in his tone became as abrupt as the break in a boy's altering voice, and he added: "The point is that he's hardly a gentleman. I commend his ambition--but there's something in birth as well. Unless you attach some importance to the elegances and nuances of life, you are only a member of the mob."

"The elegances of life--as, for instance"--the dancing sparkle stole mischievously back into the blue eyes and the voice took on a purring softness--"as, for instance, the handling of the small sword--or fencing foil?"

Morgan rose petulantly from the table and pushed back his chair. "If you ladies will excuse me," he announced with superdignity, "I will leave you for a while to your own devices."

Anne's laughter pursued him in exit with an echo of musical mockery.

But that evening Mrs. Larry Masters posted a letter to Colonel Tom Wallifarro.

"Morgan has discovered Anne!" she said in part. "He has been too close to her until now to realize her attractiveness; but she has been noticed by other men, and at last Morgan is awake. They have quarrelled, and next to making love that's the most significant of developments. My dear kinsman and benefactor, you know what our mutual hope has been, and I think its fulfilment is not so far away! Tonight when I sipped my claret at dinner I drank a silent toast, 'To my girl and your boy.'"

While Mrs. Masters was writing that note, her daughter was sitting at another desk in the same room, and her letter was addressed to a post-office back of Cedar Mountain.

When Boone received that second missive, he turned the envelope over in his hand and gazed at it for a long while. Even then he did not open it until he sat alone in a place where the forests were silent, save for the call of a blue-jay and the diligent rapping of a "cock of the woods" who was sapping and mining for grubs.

The boy held between thumb and forefinger an envelope of a sort he had never seen before, of thin outer paper over a dark coloured lining. In one corner was a stamp of the French Republic, and there in writing that had crossed the sea was his name and address.

"She found time to write to me," he said rapturously to himself, and then dropping intentionally and whimsically into his old, childhood speech he added, nodding his head sagely to a pert squirrel that frisked its tail near by, "She's done writ me a letter c'lar from t'other world."

It was that same summer, when Anne had gone to Europe, that Boone came back from college, very serious and taciturn, and McCalloway was prompt to guess the reason.

"You went down to Louisville, didn't you?" he inquired, as the two sat by the doorstep on the day of the boy's return, and Boone nodded.

The man did not nag him with questions. His seasoned wisdom contented itself with smoking on in silence, and after a little the lad jerked his head.

"I reckon you know what took me there--sir."

The final word came in afterthought. No mountaineer says "sir," by habit.

A part of that stubborn independence which is at once the virtue and the fault of the race balks at even such small measure of implied deference, but Boone had noticed that "down below," where courtesy flowers into graciousness, the form of address was general.

McCalloway responded slowly.

"Yes, I can guess your errand there. How is he?"

The boy's eyes gazed off across the slopes through contracted lids, and his voice came in deliberate but repressed tenseness.

"I hunted up Colonel Wallifarro's office and he went over there with me.... I reckon, except for that, they wouldn't have let me see him."

He paused, and the man thoughtfully observed, "No, I fancy not."

"You go into that jail-house through a stone door, and there's a rough-lookin' feller settin'--I mean sitting--there in front of another door made of iron gratin's as thick as crowbars.... The place don't smell good."

"Isn't it well kept?" inquired McCalloway in some surprise, and the boy hastily explained.

"I don't mean that it plum stinks. I reckon it's as clean as a jail can be, but the air is stale--even out on the street that lowland air is flat.... It don't taste right in a man's throat.... Asa was reared up here in these free hills. He's like a caged hawk down there."

The soldier nodded sympathetically.

"Did he--seem well?"

"He hasn't sickened none ... but his face used to be right colourful.... Now it's pale ... and sort of gray-like.... Of course a tumkey went along with us, and we didn't talk with him by himself.... I reckon he didn't say none of the things he craved most to say.... He was right silent-like."

The boy broke off, and for a while the two sat in silence. When Boone took up the thread of his narrative again, there was something like a catch in his throat.

"They were pretty polite to us there.... They showed us all over the place ... they even took us to the death row.... There was a nigger in there that was goin' ter be hung next morning at daybreak.... I reckon he's dead now.... A feller kept walkin' back and forth in front of that cell ... and an electric light was burnin' there full bright.... That nigger, neither night ner day ... could ever git away from that light.... They were afraid he might seek ter kill hisself.... He come ter the bars an' said, 'Howdy, white folks,' ... an' then he went back an' sat down on the ledge that he sleeps on."

The recital, painfully punctuated with its frequent pauses, halted there. It was a matter of several minutes before it began again. Now the voice was laboured, as if the speaker were panting for breath, and the careful pronunciation relapsed wildly into the older and ruder forms of solecism.

"They tuck us out an' ... showed us the cement yard ... whar the gallows stood.... It was painted a sort of brownish red.... It put me in mind of dried blood. The nigger could hear the hammers whilest they set the thing up.... Asa could hear 'em too.... Asa hed done seed ther scaffold hisself ... through the winder-bars when ... he exercised ... in the corridor.... But when I looked at the nigger thet's dead by now ... seemed like it was Asa I saw ... with thet lamp glarin' in on him, daylight and night time alike...." The voice leaped into a soblike vehemence. "Thet's what Judas money dogged him to! Seemed like ... I couldn't endure it!"



CHAPTER XVIII

So if the time ever came when Boone stood face to face with Saul Fulton, it would, for all the amendment of his new life, be a moment of desperate crisis. The pig iron of his half-savage beginning had been made malleable and held promise of tempered and flexible steel—but the metal was still feudist ore. McCalloway comforted himself with the reflection that Saul was not likely to return, but did not delude himself into forgetting that strange perversity which seems to draw the mountaineer inevitably back to his crags and woods, even in the face of innumerable perils. Some day Saul might attempt to slip back, and Boone would almost inevitably hear of his coming. Then for a day or an hour, the lad might relapse into his old self, even to the forgetting of his pledge. Such an inconsidered day or an hour would be enough to wreck his life.

Carefully and adroitly, therefore, McCalloway played upon the softer strings of life, and sometimes, to that end, he opened a hitherto closed door upon the events of his own life, and let his protégé look in on glimpses that were sacredly guarded from other eyes.

One summer night, for example, Boone laid down a book and said suddenly, "It tells here about a fellow winning the Star of India and the Victoria Cross. I'd love to see one of those medals."

Silently McCalloway rose and went over to the folding desk, to come back with his battered dispatch box. He unlocked it and laid out before the boy not one decoration, but several. The ribbons were somewhat faded now, and the metal tarnished; but Boone bent forward, and his face glowed with the exaltation of one admitted to precincts that are sacrosanct. For a long while he studied the maltese cross with its lion-surmounted crown and its supporting bar chased with rose leaves; the cross that bears the Queen's name, for which men brave death. Beside it lay the oval, showing Victoria's profile, and the gilt inscription on a blue enamelled margin: "Heaven's Light Our Guide." A star caught it to its white-edged blue riband—and that was the coveted Star of India.

Here before his eyes—eyes that burned eagerly—were the priceless trifles that he had never hoped to see. The modest gentleman who had, for his sake, relinquished fresh honours in China, had won them, and until now had never spoken of them, but Boone knew that they are not lightly gained—and that in no way can they be bought.

A sudden and unaccountable mistiness blurred his sight.

"I'm obliged to you, sir," he said seriously. "I know you don't often show them."

He had meant to say nothing more than that, but youth's questioning urge mastered his resolution, so that he put an interrogation very slowly, half fearing it might seem an impertinence.

"You told me once, sir, that I might ask whatever questions I liked—and that you would refuse to answer when *you* felt like it. I'm going to ask one now—but I reckon I oughtn't to." Again there was a diffident pause, but the sincere blue eyes were unwaveringly steady as they met the gray ones.

"Do you reckon, sir, the day will ever come—when I can know the real name—of the man I owe—pretty nigh everything to?"

McCalloway blinked his eyes, which this cub of a boy had a way of tricking into unsoldierly emotion, and resolutely set his features into immobility.

"No, sir, I'm afraid not," he answered with a gruffness that in no way deceived his questioner. "McCalloway is as good a name as any—I'm afraid, at all events, it will have to serve to the end."

Slowly and gravely the lad nodded his head. "All right, sir," he declared. "It was just curiosity, anyhow. The name I know you by is good enough for me."

But McCalloway was disquietingly moved. He rose and replaced the dispatch box on its shelf, and after that paced the room for a few moments with quick, restive strides. Then his voice came with an impulsive suddenness. "There's a paper in that dispatch box ... that would answer your question, Boone," he said. "I tell you because I want you to realize how entirely I trust you. It's the secret chamber of my Bluebeard establishment. While I live it must remain locked."

After a moment he added, "If I should die ... and you still want to know—then you may open the box ... but even then what you learn is for yourself alone, and I want that you shall destroy all those documents and whisper no word whatever of their contents to any living soul."

"I promise, sir," declared the boy, "on my honour."

When August had brought the yellow masses of the golden-rod and the rusty purple of the ironweed; when the thistles were no longer a sting to the touch but down drifting along the lightest breeze, two horses stopped at McCalloway's fence, and a girl's voice called out, "Can we come in?"

Boone had not known that Anne Masters was back on this side of the Atlantic, nor had he ventured to hope that she would find time to come up here into the hills before the summer ended, but the voice had brought him out to the stile, as swiftly as a cry for help could have done. Now he stood, looking up at her as she sat in her saddle, with a blaze of worship in his blue eyes that went far to undo all the self-restraint with which he had so studiously hedged about his speech and manner. Surprise has undone many wary generals. So his eyes made love to her, even while his lips remained guarded of utterance.

"I didn't have any idea that you were on this side of the world," he declared. "It's just plum taken my breath away from me to see you sitting right there on that horse."

Larry Masters had dismounted and was hitching his mule. Now he turned to inquire, "Where's Mr. McCalloway?"

The boy had momentarily forgotten the existence of his patron. He had forgotten all things but one, and now he laughed with guilty realization.

"I reckon I'll have to ask your pardon, sir. I was so astonished that I forgot to tell you he wasn't here. He's gone fishing--and I'm afraid he won't be back before sundown."

"Well, we've ridden across the mountain and we're tired. If you don't mind we'll wait for him."

Anne reached down into her saddle bags and produced a small, neatly wrapped package.

"I brought you a present," she announced with a sudden diffidence, and Boone remembered how once before, as he stood by a fence, she had spoken almost the same words. Then, too, she had been looking down on him from the superior position of one mounted. He wondered if she remembered, and in excellent mimicry of his old boyish awkwardness he said, "Thet war right charitable of ye.... Hit's ther fust present I ever got--from acrost ther ocean-sea."

Anne's laugh rippled out, and she followed suit--quoting herself from the memory of other years:

"Oh, no, it isn't that at all. Please don't think it's charity." Then she slid down and watched him as he unwrapped and investigated his gift; a miniature bust of Bonaparte, the Conqueror, in Parian marble. The light August breeze stirred the curls against her cheeks with a delicate play--but they stirred against the boy's heart with the power of lightning and tornado.

Anne was at her father's house for several weeks, and scarcely a day of that time did her vassal fail to ride across the mountain, but those hours squandered together were fleet of wing. McCalloway smiled observantly and held his counsel. The charm and gaiety of Anne's bright personality would do more to dispel the menace of gloom from the dark corners of the boy's nature, where tendencies of melancholy lurked, than all his own efforts and wisdom. Later there would come an aftermath of bitter heartache, for between them lay the fortified frontier which separates red blood and blue; the demarcation of the contrary codes of Jubal and Tubal Cain, but at that thought the soldier shrugged his shoulders with a ripe philosophy. Just now the girl's influence was precisely what the lad needed. Later, when perhaps he needed something else, he would take his punishment with decent courage, and even the punishment would do him good. A blade is not forged and tempered without being pounded between anvil and sledge--and if Boone could not stand it--then Boone could not realize the dreams which McCalloway built for his future.

The wisdom of middle-age can treat, as ephemeral, disasters in which first love can contemplate only incurable scars. Boone himself regarded the golden present as an era for which the whole future must pay with unrelieved levies of black despair.

It was chiefly as he rode home at night that he faced this death's-head future with young lips stiffening and eyes narrowed. In the morning sunlight, or through woods that sobbed with rain, he went buoyant, because then he was going toward her, and whatever the indefinite future held in store, he had that day assured with all its richness.

None-the-less, Boone played the game as he saw it, with the guiding instincts of a gentleman. Because it was all a wonderful dream, doomed to an eventual awakening, he sealed his lips against love-making.

Anne was taking him for granted, he reasoned. He had simply become a local necessity to a bright nature, overflowing with vital and companionable impulses.

As vassal he gladly and proudly offered himself, and as vassal she frankly and without analysis accepted him. Should he let slip the check upon his control, and go to mooning about love, instead of meeting her laughter with his laughter and her jest with his jest, she would send him away into a deserved exile.

On the day before Anne was to leave they were on the great pinnacle rock above Slag-face, and by now Boone had come to regard that as the lofty shrine where he had discovered love. Afterwards it would stand through the years as a spot of hallowed memories.

Anne had been talking with vivacious enthusiasm of the things she had seen abroad, and Boone had followed her with rapt attentiveness. She had a natural gift for vivid description, and he had seemed to stand with her, by moonlight in the ruins of the Coliseum, and to look out with her from the top of Cheops' pyramid over the sands of Ghizeh and the ribbon of the Nile.

But at last they had fallen silent, and with something like a sigh the girl said, "Tomorrow I go back to Louisville."

He had forgotten that for the moment, and he flinched at the reminder, but his only reply was, "And in a few days I've got to go back to Lexington. I always miss the hills down there."

Her violet eyes challenged him with full directness, "Won't you miss--anything else?"

Boone, who was looking at her, closed his eyes. He was sure that they would betray him, and when he ventured to open them again he had prudently averted his gaze. But though he looked elsewhere, he still saw her. He saw the hair that had enmeshed his heart like a snare, saw the eyes that held an inner sparkle--which was for him an altar fire.

"I'm not the sort of feller that can help missing his friends," he guardedly said, but his tongue felt dry and unwieldy.

Usually people were not so niggardly as that with their compliments to Anne, and as she held a half-piqued silence Boone knew that she was offended, so his next question came with a stammering incertitude.

"You *are* a friend of mine, aren't you?"

She rose then from the rock where she had been sitting and stood there lance-like, with her chin high and her glance averted. To his question she offered no response save a short laugh, until the pulses in his temples began to throb, and once more he closed his eyes as one instinctively closes them under a wave of physical pain.

Boone had made valiant and chivalrous resolves of silence, but he had heard a laugh touched with bitterness from lips upon which bitterness was by nature alien.

"Anne!" he exclaimed in a frightened tone, "what made you laugh like that?"

Then she wheeled, and her words came torrentially. There was anger and perplexity and a little scorn in her voice but also a dominant disappointment.

"I mean, Boone Wellver, that I don't know how to take you. Sometimes I think you really like me--lots. Not just lumped in with everybody that you can manage to call a friend. I have no use for lukewarm friendships--I'd rather have none at all. You seem to be in deadly fear of spoiling me with your lordly favour."

The boy stood before her with a face that had grown ashen. It seemed incredible to him that she could so misconstrue his attitude; an attitude based on hard and studied self-control.

"You think that, do you?" he inquired in a low voice, almost fierce in its intensity. "Do you think I'm fool enough not to take thankfully what I can get, without crying for the moon?"

"What has the moon to do with it?" she demanded.

But the vow of silence which Boone had taken with the grave solemnity of a Trappist monk was no longer a dependable bulwark. The dam had broken.

"Just this," he said soberly. "You're as far out of my reach as the moon itself. You say I seem afraid to tell you that I really like you. I *am* afraid. I'm so mortally afraid that I'd sworn I'd never tell you.... God knows that I couldn't start talking about that without saying the whole of it. I can't say I like you because I don't like you--I love you--I love you like--" The rapid flood of words broke off in abrupt silence. Then the boy raised his hands and let them fall again in a gesture of despair. "There isn't anything in the world to liken it to," he declared.

Anne's eyes had widened in astonishment. She said nothing at all, and Boone waited, steeling himself against the expected sentence of exile. Nothing less than banishment, he had always told himself, could be the penalty of such an outburst.

"Now," he continued in a bitter desperation, "I've done what I said I'd never do. I've foresworn myself and told you that I love you. I might as well finish ... because I reckon I can guess what *you'll* say presently. From the first day when you came here, I've been in love with you.... I've never seen the evening star rise up over the Kaintuck' Ridges that I haven't looked at it ... and thought of it as your own star... I've never seen it either that I haven't said to myself, 'You might as well love that star,' and I've tried just to live from hour to hour when I was with you and not think about the day when you'd be gone away."

Anne still stood with wide and questioning eyes, but no anger had come into them yet. Her voice shook a little as she asked, "Just why do you think of me that way, Boone? Why am I--so far--out of reach?"

"Why!"--his question was an exclamation of amazement. "You've seen that cabin where I was born, haven't you? You know what your people call my people, don't you?... 'Poor white trash!' Between you and me there's a gorge two hundred years wide. Your folks are those that won the West, and mine are those that fell by the roadside and petered out and dry rotted."

As he finished the speech which had been such a long one for him, he stood waiting. Into the unsteady voice with which she put her last question he had read the reserve of controlled anger--such as a just judge would seek to hold in abeyance until everything was said. So he braced himself and tried not to look at her--but he felt that the length of time she held him in that tight-drawn suspense was a shade cruel--unintentionally so, of course.

The girl's face told him nothing either, at first, but slowly into the eyes came that scornful gleam that he had sometimes seen there when he sought to modify the risk involved in some reckless caprice of her own suggesting: a disdain for all things calculatedly cautious.

At last she spoke.

"You could say every one of those things about Lincoln," was her surprising pronunciamento. "You could say most of them about Napoleon or any big man that won out on his own. When I brought you that little bust, I thought you'd like it. I thought you had that same kind of a spirit--and courage."

"But, Anne--"

"I didn't interrupt you," she reminded him. "My idea of a real man is one who doesn't talk timidly about gorges--whether they're two hundred years wide, as you call it, or not. Napoleon wouldn't have been let into a kitchen door at court--so he came in through the front way with a triumphal arch built over it. *He* knocked down barriers, and got what he wanted."

"Then--" his voice rang out suddenly--"then if I can ever get up to where you stand I won't be 'poor white trash' to you?"

She shook her head and her eyes glowed with invincible spirit. "You'll be a man--that wasn't fainthearted," she told him honestly. "One that was brave enough to live his own life as I mean to live my own."

"Anne," he said fervently, "you asked me if I'd miss anything but the hills. I'll miss *you*--like--all hell--because I love you like that."

They were on a mountain top, with no one to see them. They were almost children and inexperienced. They thought that they could lay down their plans and build their lives in accordance, with no deflection of time or circumstance. A few moments later they stood flushed with the intoxication of that miracle that makes other miracles pallid. The girl's breath came fast and her cheeks were pinkly flushed. The boy's heart hammered, and the leagues of outspread landscape seemed a reeling, whirling but ecstatically beautiful confusion. Their eyes held in a silent caress, and for them both all subsequent things were to be dated from that moment when he had impulsively taken her in his arms and she had returned his first kiss.

CHAPTER XIX

General Basil Prince sat in his law office one murky December morning of the year 1903. It was an office which bespoke the attorney of the older generation, and about it hung the air of an unadorned workshop. If one compared it with the room in the same building where young Morgan Wallifarro worked at a flat-topped mahogany table, one found the difference between Spartan simplicity and sybarite elegance. But over one book case hung an ancient and battered cavalry sword, a relic of the days when the General had ridden with the "wizards of the saddle and the sabre."

Just now he was, for the second time, reading a letter which seemed to hold for him a peculiar interest.

"Dear General," it ran:

"Your invitation to come to Louisville and meet at your table that coterie of intimates of whom you have so often spoken is one that tempts me strongly--and yet I must decline.

"You know that my name is not McCalloway--and you do not know what it is. I think I made myself clear on that subject when you waived the circumstance that I am a person living in hermitage, because my life has not escaped clouding. You generously accepted my unsupported statement that no actual guilt tarnishes the name which I no longer use--yet despite my eagerness to know those friends of yours, those gentlemen who appeal so strongly to my imagination and admiration, I could not, in justice to you or to myself, permit you to foist me on them under an assumed name. I have resolved upon retirement and must stand to my resolution. The discovery of my actual identity would be painful to me and social life might endanger that.

"I'll not deny that in the loneliness here, particularly when the boy is absent, there are times when, for the dinner conversation of gentlemen and ladies, I would almost pawn my hope of salvation. There are other times, and many, when for the feel of a sabre hilt in my hand, for the command of a brigade, or even a regiment, I would almost offer my blade for hire--almost but not quite.

"I must, however, content myself with my experiment; my wolf-cub.

"You write of my kindness to him, but my dear General, it is the other way about. It is he who has made my hermitage endurable, and filled in the empty spaces of my life. My fantastic idea of making him the American who starts the pioneer and ends the modern, begins to assume the colour of plausibility.

"I now look forward with something like dread to the time when he must go out into a wider world. For then I cannot follow him. I shall have reached the end of my tutorship. I do not think I can then endure this place without him--but there are others as secluded.

"But my dear General, the very cordial tone of your letters emboldens me to ask a favour (and it is a large one), in this connection. When he has finished his course at college I should like to have him read law in Louisville. That will take him into a new phase of the development I have planned. He will need strong counsel and true friends there, for he will still be the pioneer with the rough bark on him, coming into a land of culture, and, though he will never confess it, he will feel the sting of class distinctions and financial contrasts.

"There he will see what rapid transitions have left of the old South, and despite the many changes, there still survives much of its spirit. Its fragrant bouquet, its fine traditions, are not yet gone. God willing, I hope he will even go further than that, and later know the national phases as well as the sectional--but that, of course, lies on the knees of the gods."

General Prince laid down the letter and sat gazing thoughtfully at the scabbarded sabre on the wall. Then he rose from his chair and went along the corridors to a suite legended, "Wallifarro, Banks and Wallifarro." The General paused to smile, for the last name had been freshly lettered there, and he knew that it meant a hope fulfilled to his old friend the Colonel. His son's name was on the door, and his son was in the firm. But it was to the private office of Colonel Tom that he went, and the Colonel shoved back a volume of decisions to smile his welcome.

"Tom," began the General, "I have a letter here that I want you to read. I may be violating a confidence--but I think the writer would trust my judgment in such a matter."

Tom Wallifarro read the sheets of evenly penned chirography, and as he handed them back he said musingly:

"Under the circumstances, of course, it would not be fair to ask if you have any guess as to who McCalloway is--or was. He struck me as a gentleman of extraordinary interest--He is a man who has known distinction."

"That's why I came in this morning, Tom. I want you to know him better--and to co-operate with me, if you will, about the boy. Since the mountain can't come to Mahomet--"

"We are to go there?" came the understanding response, and Basil Prince nodded.

"Precisely. I wanted you and one or two others of our friends to go down there. I had in mind an idea that may be foolish--fantastic, even, for a lot of old fellows like ourselves--but none the less interesting. I want to give the chap a dinner in his own house."

Colonel Wallifarro smiled delightedly as he gave his ready sanction to the plan. "Count me in, General, and call on me whenever you need me."

It was not until January that the surprise party came to pass, and Basil Prince and Tom Wallifarro had entered into their arrangements with all the zest of college boys sharing a secret. Out of an idea of simple beginnings grew elaborations as the matter developed, until there was indeed a dash of the fantastic in the whole matter, and a touch, too, of pathos. Because of McCalloway's admission that at times his hunger for the refinements of life became a positive nostalgia, the plotters resolved to stage, for that one evening, within the walls of hewn logs, an environment full of paradox.

Results followed fast. A hamper was filled from the cellars of the Pendennis Club. Old hams appeared, cured by private recipes that had become traditions. Napery and silver--even glass--came out of sideboards to be packed for a strange journey. All these things were consigned long in advance to Larry Masters at Marlin Town, where railway traffic ended and "jolt wagon" transportation began. Aunt Judy Fugate, celebrated in her day and generation as a cook, became an accessory before the fact. In her house only a "whoop and a holler" distant from that of McCalloway's, she received, with a bursting importance and a vast secrecy, a store of supplies smuggled hither far more cautiously than it had ever been needful to smuggle "blockade licker."

Upon one pivotal point hinged the success of the entire conspiracy.

Larry Masters must persuade McCalloway to visit him for a full day before the date set, and must go back with him at the proper time. The transformation of a log house into a banquet hall demands time and non-interference. But there was no default in Masters's co-operation, and on the appointed evening McCalloway and Larry rode up to the door of the house and dismounted. Then the soldier halted by his fence-line and spoke in a puzzled tone:

"Strange--very strange--that there should be lights burning inside. I've been away forty-eight hours and more. I dare say Aunt Judy has happened in. She has a key to the place."

Larry Masters hazarded no explanatory suggestion. The vacuous expression upon his countenance was, perhaps, a shade overdone, but he followed his host across the small yard to his door.

On the threshold McCalloway halted again in a paralysed bewilderment. Perhaps he doubted his own sanity for a moment, because of what he saw within.

The centre of the room was filled with a table, not rough, as was his own, but snowy with damask, and asparkle with glass and silver, under the softened light of many candles. So the householder stood bewildered, pressing a hand against his forehead, and as he did so several gentlemen rose from chairs before his own blazing hearth. When they turned to greet him, he noticed, with bewilderment, that they were all in evening dress.

Basil Prince came smilingly around the table with an outstretched hand, and an enlightening voice. "Since I am the original conspirator, sir, I think I ought to explain. We are a few Mahomets who have come to the mountain. Our designs upon you embrace nothing more hostile than a dinner party."

For a moment Victor McCalloway, for years now a recluse with itching memories of a life that had been athrob with action and vivid with colour, stood seeking to command his voice. His throat worked spasmodically, and into the eyes that had on occasion been flint-hard with sternness came a mist that he could not deny. He sought to welcome them--and failed. Rarely had he been so profoundly touched, and all he succeeded in putting into words, and that in an unnatural voice, was: "Gentlemen--you must pardon me--if I fail to receive you properly--I have no evening clothes."

But their laughter broke the tension, and while he shook hands around, thinking what difficulties must of necessity have been met in this gracious display of cordiality, Moses, the negro butler from the Wallifarro household, appeared from the kitchen door, bearing a tray of cocktails.

It was not until after two keenly effervescent hours of talk, laughter and dining, when the cigars had been lighted, that Prince came to his feet.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am not going to pledge the man who is both our host and guest of honour, because I prefer to propose a sentiment we can all drink, standing, including himself--I give you the success of his gallant experiment--the Boy--Boone Wellver--'A toast to the native-born!'"

They rose amid the sound of chairs scraping back, and once more McCalloway felt the contraction of his throat and the dimness in his eyes.

"Gentlemen," he stammered, "I am grateful.... I think the boy is going to be an American--not only a hillsman--not even only a Kentuckian or a Southerner--though God knows either would be a proud enough title--but an American who blends and fuses these fine elements. That, at all events, is my hope and effort."

He sat down hurriedly--and yet in other days he had spoken with polished ease at tables where distinguished men and women were his fellow diners--and it was then that Tom Wallifarro rose.

"This was not to be a formal affair of set speeches," he announced in a conversational tone, "but there is one more sentiment without which we would rise leaving the essential thing unsaid. Some one has called these mountain folk our 'contemporary ancestors'--men of the past living in our day. This lad is, in that sense, of an older age. When he goes into the world, he will need such advisors of the newer age as he has had here in Mr. McCalloway--or at least pale imitations of Mr. McCalloway, whose place no one can fill. We are here this evening for two pleasant purposes. To dine with our friend, who could not come to us, and to found an informal order. The Boone who actually lived two centuries ago was the godfather of Kentucky.

"Gentlemen, I give you the order of our own founding tonight: The Godfathers of Boone."

It was of course by coincidence, only, that the climax of that evening's gathering should have been capped as it was. Probability would have brought the last guests, whom no one there had expected, at any other time, but perhaps the threads of destiny do not after all run haphazard. Possibly it could only be into such a fantastic pattern that they could ever have been woven.

At all events it was that night they came: the two short men, with narrow eyes, set in swarthy Oriental faces--such as those hills had not before seen.

There was a shout from the night; the customary mountain voice raised from afar as the guide who had brought these visitors halloed from the roadway: "I'm Omer Maggard ... an' I'm guidin' a couple of outlanders, thet wants ter see ye."

McCalloway went to the door and opened it, and because it was late the guide turned back without crossing the threshold.

But the two men who had employed his services to conduct them through the night and along the thicketed roads entered gravely, and though they too must have felt the irrational contrasts of the picture there, their inscrutable almond eyes manifested no surprise.

They were Japanese, and, as both bowed from the hips, one inquired in unimpeachable English, "You are the Honourable Victor McCalloway?"

If the former soldier had found it impossible to keep the mists of emotion out of his pupils a little while ago, such was no longer the case. His glance was now as stern in its inquisitorial questioning as steel. It was not necessary that these gentlemen should state their mission, to inform him that their coming carried a threat for his incognito, but he answered evenly:

"I am so called."

"I have the honour to present the Count Oku ... and myself Itokai."

CHAPTER XX

When general introductions had followed, the Count Itokai smiled, with a flash of white and strong teeth.

"We have come to present a certain matter to you--but we find you entertaining guests--so the business can wait."

The courtesy of manner and the precision of inflection had the perfection of Japanese officialdom, but McCalloway's response succeeded in blending with an equal politeness a note of unmistakable aloofness.

"As you wish, gentlemen, though there is no matter concerning myself which might not be discussed in the presence of these friends."

"Assuredly!" This time it was Oku who spoke. "It is unfortunate that we are not at liberty to be more outspoken. The matter is one of certain ... information ... which we hope you can give us ... and which is official: not personal with ourselves."

Masters made the move. "I'll pop out and see that your horses are stabled. Gentlemen--" he turned to the others--"it's a fine frosty night ... shall we finish our cigars in the open air?"

With deprecating apology the two newcomers watched them go, and when the place had been vacated save for the three, McCalloway turned and bowed his guests to chairs before the hearth.

It had been a strange picture before. It was stranger now, augmented by these two squat figures with dark faces, high cheek bones, and wiry black hair: Japanese diplomats sitting before a Cumberland mountain hearth-stone.

"Excellency," began the Count Oku promptly, "I am authorized by my government to proffer you a commission upon the staff of the army of Nippon."

McCalloway's eyes narrowed. He had not seated himself but had preferred to remain non-committally standing, and now his figure stiffened and his lips set themselves.

"Count," he said almost curtly, "before we talk at all, you must be candid with me. If I choose to live in solitude, any intrusion upon that privacy should be with my consent. May I inquire how the name of Victor McCalloway has chanced to become known and of interest to the Government of Japan?"

The diplomatic agent bowed.

"The question is in point, Excellency. Unhappily I am unable to answer it. What is known to my government I cannot say. I can only relate what has been delegated to me."

"I take it you can, at least, do that."

"We have been told that a gentleman who for reasons of his own prefers to use the name of Victor McCalloway, had formerly a title more widely known."

This time McCalloway's voice was sharply edged.

"However that may be, I have now only one name, Victor McCalloway."

"That we entirely understand. Some few years back my government, in an effort to encourage Europeanizing the Chinese army, attempted to enlist your honourable services. Is that not true?"

McCalloway nodded but, as he did so, anger blazed hotly in his eyes.

"To know more about a gentleman, in private life, than he cares to state, constitutes a grave discourtesy, sirs. Whatever activities my soldiering has included, I have never been a mercenary. I have fought only under my own flag and my sword is not for hire!"

The Orientals rose and again they bowed, but this time the voice of the Count Oku dropped away its soft sheath of diplomatic suavity and, though it remained low of pitch, it carried now a ring of purpose and positiveness.

"The officer who fights for a cause is not a soldier of fortune, Excellency. The flag of the Rising Sun has a cause."

"Japan is at peace with the world. Military service can be for a cause only when it is active."

"Yes, Japan is at peace with the world--now!" The voice came sharply, almost sibilantly, with the aspirates of the race. "I am authorized to state to you that service with our high command will none the less be active--and before many

months have passed. I am further authorized to state to you that the foe will be a traditional enemy of Great Britain: that our interests will run parallel with those of the British Empire--If you take service under the Sun flag, Excellency, it will be against foes of the Cross of St. George."

The two Japanese stood very erect, their beady eyes keenly agleam. Slowly, and subconsciously, Victor McCalloway too drew his shoulders back, as though he were reviewing a division. He was hearing the Russo-Japanese War forecast weeks before it burst like shrapnel on an astonished world.

"Gentlemen," he said gravely, "you must grant me leisure for thought. This is a most serious matter."

A half hour later, with cigars glowing, the guests from Japan and the guests from Louisville sat about the hearth, but on none of the faces was there any trace of the unusual or of a knowledge of great secrets.

In all truth, Mahomet had come to the mountain.

Boone had not long returned from his Christmas vacation. So when he came into his dormitory room from his classes one afternoon and found his patron awaiting him there with a grave face, he was somewhat mystified, until with a soldier's precision McCalloway came to his point.

"My boy," he said, "I have come here to have a very serious talk with you."

Boone's face, which had flushed into pleasurable surprise at the sight of his visitor, fell at the gravity of the voice. He guessed at once that this was the preface to such an announcement as he always dreaded in secret, and his own words came heavily.

"I reckon you mean--that you aim to--go away."

"I aim to talk to you about going away."

Boone rallied his sinking spirits as he announced with a creditable counterfeit of cheerfulness, "All right, sir; I'm listening."

For a while the older man talked on. He was sitting in the plain room of the dormitory--and his gaze was fixed off across the snow-patched grounds, and the scattered buildings of the university.

He did not often look at the boy, who had grown into his heart so deeply that the idea of a parting carried a barb for both. He thought that Boone could discuss this matter with greater ease if the eyes of another did not lay upon him the necessity of maintaining a stoical self-repression.

McCalloway for the first time traced out in full detail the plan that he had conceived for Boone: the fantastic dream of his pilgrimage in one generation along the transitional road his youthful nation had travelled since its birth. As he listened, the young man's eyes kindled with imagination and gratitude difficult to express. He had been, he thought, ambitious to a fault, but for him his preceptor had been far more ambitious. The horizons of his aspiration widened under such confidence, but he could only say brokenly, "You're setting me a mighty big task, sir. If I can do any part of it, I'll owe it all to you."

"We aren't here to compliment each other, my boy," replied McCalloway bluntly. "But if I've made a mistake in my judgment, I am not yet prepared to admit it. You owe me nothing. I was alone, without family, without ties. I was here with a broken life--and you gave me renewed interest. But that couldn't have gone on, I think, if you hadn't been in the main what I thought you--if you hadn't had in you the makings of a man and a gentleman."

He broke off and cleared his throat loudly.

Boone, too, found the moment a trying one, and he thrust his hands deep in his trousers pockets and said nothing. The uprights that supported his life's structure seemed, just then, withdrawn without warning.

"You know, when I was offered service in China, I declined--and you know why," McCalloway reminded him. "I should do the same thing today, except that now I think you can stand on your own legs. I take it you no longer need me in the same sense that you did then--and the call that comes to me is not an unworthy one."

"I reckon, sir--it's military?"

"It's at least advisory, in the military sense. My boy, it pains me not to be able to take you into my full confidence--but I

can't. I can't even tell you where I am going."

"You--" the question hung a moment on the next words--"you aim to come back--sometime?"

"God granting me a safe conclusion, I shall come back ... and the thought of you will be with me in my absence ... the confidence in you ... the hope for you."

There was again a long silence, then McCalloway said:

"I came here to discuss it with you. I have declined to give a positive answer until we could do that."

Boone wheeled, and his head came up. He felt suddenly promoted to the responsible status of a counsellor. There was now no tremor in his voice, except the thrill of his young and straightforward courage.

"You say it's not unworthy work, sir. There can't be any question. You've *got* to go. If you hesitated, I'd know full well I was spoiling your life."

Later, side by side, they tramped the muddy turnpikes between the rich acres of farms where thoroughbreds were foaled and trained.

"I have talked with Colonel Wallifarro," announced the soldier at length. "Next fall he wants you to come to Louisville and finish reading law in his office."

But the boy shook his head. Here, confronting a great loneliness, he was feeling the contrast between the land, whose children called it God's country, and his own meagre hills, where the creeks bore such names as Pestilence and Hell-fer-sartain.

"I *couldn't* go to Louisville, sir. I couldn't pay my board or buy decent clothes there. I've got that little patch of ground up there and the cabin on it, though. I'd aimed to go back there--I'll soon be of age, now--and seek to get elected clerk of the court."

"Why clerk of the court? Why not the legislature?"

The boy grinned.

"The legislature was what I aimed at--until I read the constitution. About the only job I'm not too young for is the clerkship."

McCalloway nodded.

"I see no reason why you shouldn't make that race, but you'll be a fitter servant of your people for knowing a bit more of the world. As to the money, I've arranged that--though you'll have to live frugally. There will be to your credit, in bank, enough to keep you for a year or two--and if I shouldn't get back--Colonel Wallifarro has my will. I want you to live at my house when you're in the mountains--and look after things--my small personal effects."

But for that plan of financing his future, Boone had a stout refusal, until the soldier stopped in the road and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I have never had a son," he said simply. "I have always wanted one. Will you refuse me?"

It was a very painful day for both of them, but when at last Boone stood under the railroad shed and saw the man who was his idol wave his hat from the rear platform, he waved his own in return, and smiled the twisted smile of stiff lips.

On the ninth of February, as the boy glanced at the morning paper before he started for his first class, he saw headlines that brought a creep to his scalp, and the hand that held the paper trembled.

Admiral Togo's fleet was steaming, with decks cleared for action, off Port Arthur--already a Japanese torpedo-boat flotilla had attacked and battered the Russian cruisers that crouched like grim watchdogs at the harbour's entrance--already the gray sea-monsters flying the sun-flag had ripped out their cannonading challenge to the guns of the coast batteries!

There had yet been no declaration of war--and the world, which had wearied of the old story of unsuccessful treaty negotiations, rubbed astonished eyes to learn that overnight a volcano of war had burst into eruption--that lava-spilling for which the Empire of Nippon had been building for a silent but determined decade.

Boone was late for his classes that day--and so distraught and inattentive that his instructors thought he must be ill. To himself he was saying, with that ardour that martial tidings bring to young pulses, "Why couldn't he have taken me along with him?"

CHAPTER XXI

For Boone the approaching summer was no longer a period of zestful anticipation. During that whole term he had looked eagerly ahead to those coming months back in the hills, when with the guidance of his wise friend he should plunge into the wholesome excitement of canvassing his district.

Now McCalloway was gone. And just before commencement a letter from Anne brought news that made his heart sink.

"Father is going home to England for the summer," she said, "and that means that I won't get to the hills. I'm heartbroken over it, and it isn't just that 'I always miss the hills,' either. I do miss them. Every dogwood that I see blooming alone in somebody's front yard, every violet in the grass, makes me homesick for the places where beauty isn't only sampled but runs riot--but there's a more personal note than that."

"You must climb old Slag-face for me, Boone, and write me all about it. If a single tree has blown down, don't fail to tell me, dear."

There was also another thing which would cloud his return to Marlin County. He could, in decency, no longer defer a painful confession to Happy. So far, chance had fended it off, but now she was back from the settlement school for good, and he was through college. In justice to her further silence could not be maintained.

Then May brought the Battle of the Yalu.

First there were only meagre newspaper reports--all that Boone saw before commencement--and later when the filtration of time brought the fuller discussions in the magazines, and the world had discovered General Kuroki, he was in the hills where magazines rarely came.

Upon the wall of General Prince's law office hung a map of the Manchurian terrain, and each day that devotee of military affairs took it down, and, with black ink and red ink, marked and remarked its surface.

On one occasion, when Colonel Wallifarro found him so employed, the two leaned over, with their heads close, in study of the situation.

"This Kuroki seems to be a man of mystery, General," began Wallifarro. "And it has set me to speculating. The correspondents hint that he's not a native Japanese. They tell us that he towers in physical as well as mental stature above his colleagues."

"I can guess your thought, Tom," smiled General Prince. "And the same idea occurred to me. You are thinking of the two Japanese agents who came to the hills--and of McCalloway's sudden departure on a secret journey. But it's only a romantic assumption. I followed the Chinese-Japanese War with a close fidelity of detail--and Kuroki, though less conspicuous than nowadays, was even then prominent."

Tom Wallifarro bit the end from a cigar and lighted it.

"It is none the less to be assumed that McCalloway is over there," he observed. "Emperors don't send personal messengers half way round the world to call unimportant men to the colours."

"My own guess is this, Tom," admitted the cavalryman. "McCalloway is on Kuroki's staff. Presumably he learned all he knew under Dinwiddie--and this campaign shows the earmarks of a similar scheme of generalship. Kuropatkin sought to delay the issue of combat, until over the restricted artery of the Siberian Railway he could augment his numbers and assume the offensive with a superior force."

"And at the Yalu, Kuroki struck and forced the fight."

"Precisely. He had three divisions lying about Wiju. It was necessary to cross the Yalu under the guns of Makau, and there we see the first manifestation of such an audacious stroke as Dinwiddie himself might have attempted."

Prince was pacing the floor now, talking rapidly, as he had done that night when, with McCalloway, he discussed Dinwiddie, his military idol.

"Kuroki--I say Kuroki, whether he was the actual impulse or the figurehead using the genius of a subordinate--threw the Twelfth Division forward a day in advance of his full force. The feint of a mock attack was aimed at Antung--and the enemy rose to the bait. One week in advance the command was given that at daybreak on the first of May the attack should develop. At many points, shifting currents had altered the channel and wiped out former possible fords. pontoons and bridges had to be built on the spot--anchors even must be forged from scrap-iron--yet at the precise

moment designated in the orders, the Mikado's forces struck their blow. But wait just a moment, Tom."

General Prince opened a drawer and took out a magazine.

"Let me read you what one correspondent writes: 'At ten-thirty on the morning of April thirtieth, the duel of the opposing heights began, with roaring skies and smoking hills. The slopes north of Chinlien-Cheng were generously timbered that morning. Night found them shrapnel-torn and naked of verdure.

"To visualize the field, one must picture a tawny river, island-dotted and sweeping through a broken country which lifts gradually to the Manchurian ridges. Behind Tiger Hill and Conical Hill, quiet and chill in the morning mists, lay the Czar's Third Army.

"Then were the judgments loosened.' The attack is on now, and the thin brown lines are moving forward--slowly at first, as they approach the shallows of the river beyond the bridges and the islands. Those wreaths of smoke are Zassolich's welcome--from studiously emplaced pieces raking the challengers--but the challengers are closing their gaps and gaining momentum--carrying their wounded with them, as they wade forward. There are those, of course, whom it is impossible to assist--those who stumble in the shallow water to be snuffed out, candle-fashion."

The General paused to readjust his glasses, and Colonel Wallifarro mused with eyes fixed on the violet spirals of smoke twisting up from his cigar end. "Our friend would seem to be playing a man's game, after his long hermitage."

Prince took up the magazine again.

"The farther shore is reached under a withering fire. Annihilation threatens the yellow men--they waver--then comes the order to charge. For an instant the brown lines shiver and hang hesitant under the sting of the death-hail--but after that moment they leap forward and sweep upward. Their momentum gathers to an irresistible onrush, and under it the defence breaks down. The noises that have raved from earth to heaven, from horizon to horizon, are dropping from crescendo to diminuendo. The field pieces of the Czar are being choked into the muffled growl of despair. Doggedly the Russian is giving back."

"Do you suppose, General," inquired Colonel Wallifarro suddenly, "that McCalloway confided the purpose of his journey to the boy?"

Prince shook his head positively. "I am quite sure that he has confided it to no one--but I am equally sure that Boone has guessed it by now."

"In that event I think it would tremendously interest him to read that article."

In the log house, where he had now no companionship, Boone received the narrative.

The place was very empty. Twilight had come on with its dispiriting shadows, and Boone lighted a lamp, and since the night was cool he had also kindled a few logs on the hearth.

For a long while he sat there after reading and rereading the description of the fight along the Manchurian River. His hands rested on his knees, and his fingers held the clipping.

On the table a forgotten law book lay open at a chapter on torts, but the young man's eyes were fixed on the blaze, in whose fitful leapings he was picturing, "the thunders through the foothills; tufts of fleecy shrapnel spread along the empty plain"--and in the picture he always saw one face, dominated by a pair of eyes that could be granite-stern or soft as mossy waters.

Finally he rose and unlocked a closet from which he reverently took out a scabbarded sword. Dinwiddie had entrusted that blade to McCalloway, and McCalloway had in turn entrusted it to him. Out there he was using a less ornate sabre!

The young mountaineer slipped the blade out of the sheath and once more read the engraved inscription.

Something rose in his throat, and he gulped it down. He spoke aloud, and his words sounded unnatural in the empty room.

"The Emperor of China sent for him--and he wouldn't go," said the boy. "The Emperor of Japan sent for him--and he couldn't refuse. That's the character of gentleman that's spent years trying to make a man of me."

Suddenly Boone laid the sword on the table and dropped on his knees beside it, with his hands clasped over the hilt.

"Almighty God," he prayed, "give me the strength to make good--and not disappoint him."

It was a heavy hearted young man who presented himself the next night at the house of Cyrus Spradling, and one who went as a penitent to the confessional.

Once more the father sat on the porch alone with his twilight pipe, and once more the skies behind the ridges were high curtains of pale amber.

"Ye're a sight fer sore eyes, boy," declared the old mountaineer heartily. "An' folks 'lows thet ye aims ter run fer office, too. Wa'al, I reckon betwixt me an' you, we kin contrive ter make shore of yore gettin' two votes anyhow. I pledges ye mine fer sartain."

Boone laughed though tears would better have fitted his mood, and the old fellow chuckled at his own pleasantry.

"I reckon my gal will be out presently," Cyrus went on. "I've done concluded thet ye war p'int-blank right in arguing that schoolin' wouldn't harm her none."

But when the girl came out, the man went in and left them, as he always did, and though the plucking of banjos within told of the family full gathered, none of the other members interrupted the presumed courtship which was so cordially approved.

Happy stood for a moment in the doorway against a lamplit background, and Boone acknowledged to himself that she had an undeniable beauty and that she carried herself with the simple grace of a slender poplar. She was, he told himself with unsparing self-accusation, in every way worthier than he, for she had fought her battles without aid, and now she stood there smiling on him confidently out of dark eyes that made no effort to render their welcome coy with provocative concealment.

"Howdy, Boone," she said in a voice of soft and musical cadences. "It's been a long time since I've seen you."

"Yes," he answered with a painful sort of slowness, "but now that we're both through school and back home to stay, I reckon we'll see each other oftener. Are you glad to come back, Happy?"

For a few moments the girl looked at him in the faint glow that came through the door, without response. It was as though her answer must depend on what she read in his face, and there was not light enough for its reading.

"I don't quite know, myself, Boone," she said hesitantly at last. "I've sort of been studying over it. How about you?"

When she had settled into a chair, he took a seat at her feet with his back against one of the posts of the porch, and replied with an assumption of certainty that he did not feel, "A feller's bound to be glad to get back to his own folks."

"After I'd been down there the first time and came back here again, *I* wasn't glad," was her candid rejoinder. "I felt like I just couldn't bear it. Over there things were all clean, and folks paid some attention to qualities--only they didn't call 'em that. They say 'manners' at the school. Here it seemed like I'd come home to a human pig-sty--and I was plumb ashamed of my own folks. When I looked ahead and saw a lifetime of that--it seemed to me that I'd rather kill myself than go on with it."

"You say"--Boone made the inquiry gravely--"that you felt like that at first. How do you feel now?"

"Later on I got to feelin' ashamed of myself, instead of my people," she replied. "I got to seein' that I was faultin' them for not having had the chance they were slavin' to give me."

Boone bent attentively forward but he said nothing, and she went on.

"You know as well as I do that, so far, there aren't many people here that have much use for changes, but there are some few. The ground that the school sets on was given by an old man that didn't have much else to give. I remember right well what he said in the letter he wrote. It's printed in their catalogue: 'I don't look after wealth for them, but I want all young-uns taught to live right. I have heart and cravin' that our people may grow better, and I deed my land to a school as long as the Constitution of the United States stands.' I reckon that's the right spirit, Boone."

CHAPTER XXII

Still the boy sat silent, with his chin in his hand, as sits the self-torturing figure of Rodin's bronze "Penseur"--the attitude of thought which kills peace. Boone understood that unless Happy found a man who shared with her that idea of keeping the torch lit in the midst of darkness, her life might benefit others, but for herself it would be a distressing failure.

Happy had fancied him, that he realized, but he had thought of it as a phase through which she would pass with only such a scar as ephemeral affairs leave--one of quick healing.

Now the fuller significance was clear. He knew that she faced a life which her very efforts at betterment would make unspeakably bleak, unless she found companionship. He saw that to him she looked for release from that wretched alternative--and he had come to tell her that, beyond a deep and sincere friendship, he had nothing to offer her. Such an announcement, though truthfulness requires it, is harder for being deferred.

Words seemed elusive and unmanageable as he made his beginning. "I'm right glad that we are neighbours again, Happy," he told her. "I'm not much to brag on--but I set a value on the same things you do--and I reckon that means a good deal to--" He paused a moment, and added clumsily, "to friendships."

Perhaps it was the word itself, or perhaps, and that is likelier, it was the light and unconscious stress with which Boone spoke it that told her without fuller explanation what he had come to confess. Two syllables brought her face to face with revelation, and all else he might say would be only redundancy. Already she had feared it at times when she lay wakeful in her bed.

From that day when he had called her "Rebekkah at the Well," she had been in love with him. She had not awakened to any hot ambition until she had been fired with the incentive of paralleling his own educational course. Now if he were not to be in her life she had only developed herself out of her natural setting into a doom of miserable discontent.

It had always seemed as rational an assumption that their futures should merge as that the only pair of falcons in a forest full of jack-daws should mate.

Now he spoke of friendships!

Yet the girl, though stunned with bitter disappointment, was not wholly astonished.

Topics of gossip are rare enough to be made much of in the hills, and the neighbours had not failed to intimate in her hearing that when she was away her "beau" had been sitting devotedly at other feet; but Happy had smiled tranquilly upon her informants. "Boone would be right apt to be charitable to a stranger," she had said, giving them none of the satisfaction of seeing the thorn rankle, which is not to say that she did not feel the sting. She had found false security in the thought that Boone, even if he felt Anne's allurements, would be too sensible to raise his eyes to her as a possibility since their worlds were not only different but veritable antipodes of circumstance. What she had failed to consider was that the Romeos and Juliets of the world have never taken thought of what the houses of Montague and Capulet might say.

For a while now she sat very silent, her hands in her lap tightly clasped and unmoving, but when she spoke her voice was even and soft.

"Thank you, Boone," she said; then after a moment, "Boone, is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

The young man looked suddenly up at her, and his reply was a question, too--an awkward and startled one: "What about, Happy--what do you mean?"

"The best thing friends can do--is to listen to what interests--each other. Sometimes there are things we keep right silent about--in general, I mean--and yet we get lonesome--for somebody to talk to--about those things."

There was a pause, and then as Happy explained, the seeming serenity of her manner was a supreme test of self-effacement which deserved an accolade for bravery.

"I'd heard it hinted--that you thought a heap of a girl--down below--I thought maybe you'd like to tell me about her."

How should he know that words so simply spoken in the timbre of calm naturalness came from a heart that was agonized?

How could he guess that the quiet figure sitting in the low chair was suffering inexpressible pain, or that the eyes that

looked out through half-closed lids seemed to see a world of rocking hills, black under clouds of an unrelieved hopelessness?

One who has come braced for an ordeal and finds that he has reared for himself a fictitious trouble, can realize in the moment of reaction only the vast elation of relief.

Had her acting been less perfect, he might have caught a shadowing forth of the truth--but, as it was, he only felt that shackles had been knocked from him, and that he stood a free man.

So he made a clean breast of how Anne had become his ideal; how he had fought that discovery as an absurdly impossible love, and how for that reason he had never before spoken of his feelings. But he did not, of course, intimate that it had been Anne herself who had finally given him a right to hope.

Happy listened in sympathetic silence, and when he was through she said, still softly:

"Boone, I reckon you've got a right hopeful life-span stretching out ahead of you--but are you sure you aren't fixing to break your heart, boy? Don't those folks down there--hold themselves mighty high? Don't they--sort of--look down on us mountain people?"

It was a fair question, yet one which he could not answer without betraying Anne's stout assertion of reciprocated feeling. He could only nod his head and declare, "A feller must take his chances, I reckon."

From the dark forests the whippoorwills called in those plaintive notes that reach the heart. Down by the creek the frogs boomed out, and platinum mists lay dreamily between their soft emphases of shadow. Boone was thinking of the girl whose star hung there in the sky. His heart was singing in elation, "She loves me and, thank God, Happy understands, too. My way lies clear!" He was not reflecting just then that princesses have often spoken as boldly as Anne had done, at sixteen, and have been forced to submit to other destinies at twenty. The girl was thinking--but that was her secret, and if she was bravely masking a tortured heart it should be left inviolate in its secrecy.

The young man in his abstraction did not mark how long the silence held, and when at last Happy rose he came out of his reverie with a start.

"Boone, I'm mighty glad you felt that you could talk to me this way," she said. "I want to be a *real* friend. But I've been working hard today--and if it won't hurt your feelings, I wish you'd go home now. I'm dog-tired, and I'd like to go to bed."

He had started away, but the evening had brought such surprises--and such a lifting of heavy anxiety--that he wanted to mull matters over out there in the soothing moonlight and the clean sweetness of the air.

So he sat down on a boulder where the shadow blotted him into the night, and when he had been there for a while he looked up in a fresh astonishment. Happy had not gone to bed. She was coming now across the stile, with movements like those of a sleep-walker. Outside on the road she stood for a while, pallid and wraith-like in the moonlight, looking in the direction she supposed he had taken, while her fingers plucked at her dress with distressed little gestures. Then with unsteady steps she went on to the edge of the highway and leaned against the boll of a tall poplar. He could see that her eyes were wide and her lips moving. Then she wheeled and threw her hands, with outspread fingers, against the cool bark above her head, leaning there as a child might lean on a mother's bosom, and the sobs that shook her slender body came to him across the short interval of distance.

Boone went over to her with hurried strides, and when she felt his hands on her shoulders she wheeled. Then only did her brave disguise fail her, and she demanded almost angrily, forgetting her school-taught diction, "Why didn't ye go home like I told ye? Why does ye hev ter dog me this fashion, atter I'd done sent ye away?"

"What's the matter, Happy?" he demanded; but he knew now, well enough, and he was too honest to dissimulate. "I didn't know, Happy," he pleaded. "I thought you meant it all."

"I did mean hit all--I means thet I wants thet ye should be happy--only--" Her voice broke there as she added, "--only I've done always thought of myself as yore gal."

She broke away from him with those words and fled back into the house, and most of that night Boone tramped the woods.

On the morning after Happy had fled from him, under the spurring of her discovered secret, she had not been able with all her bravery of effort to hide from the family about the daybreak breakfast table the traces of a sleepless and tearful night. To Happy, this morning the murky room which was both kitchen and dining hall seemed the epitome of sordidness, with its newspaper-plastered walls and creaking puncheon floor. Yesterday each depressing detail had

been alleviated by the thought that the future held a promise of release. Contemplating delivery, one can laugh gaily in a cell, but now the dungeon doors seemed to have been permanently closed and the key thrown away.

"Happy's done been cryin'," shrilled one of the youngest of the brother and sister brood--for that was a typical mountain family to which, for years, each spring had brought its fresh item of humanity. As Cyrus pithily expressed it, "Thar hain't but only fo'teen of us settin' down ter eat when everybody's home."

Old Cyrus put a stern quietus on the chorus of questioning elicited by the proclaiming of his daughter's grief.

"Ef she's been cryin', that's her own business," he announced. "I reckon she don't need ter name what hit's erbout every time she laughs or weeps."

And, such is the value of the patriarchal edict, the tumult was promptly stilled.

Yet the head of the house, himself, could not so readily dismiss a realization of the unwonted pallor on cheeks normally soft and rosily colourful. The eyes were undeniably wretched and deeply ringed. To himself Cyrus said, "They've jest only done had a lovers' quarrel. Young folks is bound ter foller fallin' out as well as fallin' in, I reckon."

Neither that day nor the next, however, did the girl "live right up to her name," and on the following night Boone did not come over to sue for peace, as a lover should, under such April conditions of sun and storm.

"What does ye reckon's done come over 'em, Maw?" the father eventually inquired, and the mother shook her perplexed head.

The two of them were alone on the porch just then, save for one of the youngest children, who was deeply absorbed with the feeding of a small and crippled lamb from a nursing bottle improvised out of a whiskey flask.

Slowly the old man's face clouded, until it wore so forebodingly sombre a look as the wife had not seen upon it since years before when life had run black. Then, despite all his efforts to "consort peaceful with mankind," he had been drawn into an enmity with a fatal termination. Cyrus had on that occasion been warned that he was to be "lay-wayed" and, as he had taken down his rifle from the wall, his eyes had held just the same hard and obdurate glint that lingered in them now. The woman, remembering that time long gone, when her husband had refused to turn a step aside from his contemplated journey, shuddered a little. She could not forget how he had been shot out of his saddle and how he had, while lying wounded in the creek-bed road, punished his assailant with death. He was wounded now, though not with a bullet this time, and his scowl said that he would hit back.

"What air hit, Paw?" she demanded, and his reply came in slow but implacable evenness:

"I've done set a heap of store by Boone Wellver. I've done thought of him like a son of my own--but ef he's broke my gal's heart--an's she's got ther look of hit in her eyes--him an' me kain't both go on dwellin' along ther same creek." He paused a moment there, and in his final words sounded an even more inflexible ring: "We kain't both go on livin' hyar--an' I don't aim ter move."

"Paw"--the plea came solicitously from a fear-burdened heart--"we've just got ter wait an' see."

"I don't aim ter be over-hasty," he reassured her, with a rude sort of gentleness, "but nuther does I aim ter endure hit--ef so be hit's true."

But that evening at twilight when Boone crossed the stile, if the nod which greeted him was less cordial than custom had led him to expect, at least Cyrus spoke no hostile word. The old man was "biding his time," and as he rose and knocked the nub of ash out of his pipe-bowl, he announced curtly, "I'll tell Happy ye're hyar."

CHAPTER XXIII

Boone had stood for a moment in the lighted door, and in that interval the shrewd old eyes of Cyrus Spradling had told him that the boy too had known sleeplessness and that the clear-chiselled features bore unaccustomed lines of misery.

If they had both suffered equally, reasoned the rude philosopher, it augured a quarrel not wholly or guiltily one-sided.

So a few minutes later he watched them walking away together toward the creek bed, where the voice of the water trickled and the moonlight lay in a dreamy lake of silver.

"I reckon," he reassured himself, "they'll fix matters up ternight. Hit's a right happy moon for lovers ter mend th'ar quarrels by."

"Happy," began Boone, with moisture-beaded temples, when they had reached a spot remote enough to assure their being undisturbed, "I reckon I don't need to tell you that I haven't slept much since I saw you. I haven't been able to do anything at all except--just think about it."

"I've thought about it--a good deal--too," was her simple response, and Boone forced himself on, rowelling his lagging speech with a determined will power.

"I see now--that I didn't act like a man. I ought to have told you long ago--that I--that my heart was just burning up--about Anne."

"I reckon I ought to have guessed it.... I'd heard hints."

"It seemed a slavish hard thing to write," he confessed heavily. "I tried it--more than once--but when I read it over it sounded so different from what I meant to say that--" There he paused, and even had she been inclined to visit upon him the maximum instead of the minimum of blame, there was no escaping his sincerity or the depth of his contrition. "That, until I saw you--night before last--I didn't have any true idea--how much you cared."

"I didn't aim that you ever should--have any idea."

"Happy," he rose and with the blood receding from his skin looked down at her, as she sat there in the moonlight, "Happy, it seems like I never knew you--really--until now."

She was, in her quietly borne distress, an appealing picture, and the hands that lay in her lap had the unmoving stillness of wax--or death.

It had to be said, so he went on. "I never realized before now how fine you are--or how much too good you are for me. I've come over here tonight to ask you to marry me--if it ain't too late."

The girl flinched as if she had been struck. Not even for a moment did her eagerness betray her into the delusion that this proposal was anything other than a merciful effort to soothe a hurt for which he felt himself blamable.

Just as she had meant to keep from him the extent of her heart's bruising, so he was seeking now to make amends at the cost of all his future happiness. Having blundered, he was tendering what payment lay in possibility.

"No, Boone," she said firmly. "We'd both live in hell for always--unless we loved each other--so much that nothin' else counted."

"I've got to be honest," he miserably admitted. "It wouldn't be fair to you not to be. I've got to go on loving her--while there's life in me, I reckon--loving her above all the world. But she's young--and there'll be lots of men of her own kind courtin' her. I reckon"--those were hard words to say, but he said them--"I reckon you had the right of it when you said I was fixin' to break my heart anyhow. They won't ever let her marry me."

It did not seem to him that it would help matters to explain that even now he felt disloyal to his whole religion of love, and that he had asked her only because he realized that no other man here could bring Happy's life to fulfilment, while Anne could only step down to him in condescension.

The decision which he had reached after tossing in a fevered delirium of spirit lacked sanity. From no point of view would it conform to the gauge of soundness. In giving up Anne, when Anne had told him he might hope, he had construed all the sacrifice as his own. As to Anne's rights in the matter, he was blinded by the over-modest conviction that she was giving all and he taking all and that she could never *need* him.

He would in later years have reasoned differently--but he had been absorbing too fast to digest thoroughly, and the

concepts of his new-found chivalry had become a distorted quixoticism. He meant it only for self-effacing fairness--and it was of course unfairness to himself, to Anne, and even to Happy. But she divined his unconfessed thought with the certitude of intuition.

"Boone," she told him, as she rose and laid a tremulous hand on his arm, "you've done tried as hard as a man can to make the best of a bad business. It wasn't anybody's fault that things fell out this way. It just came to pass. I'm going to try to teach some of the right young children over at the school next autumn--so what little I've learned won't be wasted, after all. I want that we shall go on being good friends--but just for a little while we'd better not see very much of each other. It hurts too bad."

That was an unshakeable determination, and when, in obedience to the edict, Boone had not come back for a week, Cyrus asked his daughter briefly:

"When do you an' Boone aim ter be wedded?"

The girl flinched again, but her voice was steady as she replied:

"We--don't--never aim to be."

The old fellow's features stiffened into the stern indignation of an affronted Indian chief. He took the pipe from between his teeth as he set his shoulders, and that baleful light, that had come rarely in a life-span, returned to his eyes.

"Ef he don't aim ter wed with ye," came the slow pronouncement, "thar hain't no fashion he kin escape an accountin' with me."

For a moment Happy did not speak. It seemed to her that the raising of such an issue was the one thing which she lacked present strength to face; but after a little she replied, with a resolution no less iron-strong because the voice was gentle:

"Unless ye wants ter break my heart fer all time--ye must give me your pledge to--keep hands off."

After a moment she added, almost in a whisper:

"He's asked me--and I've refused to marry him."

"You--refused him?" The voice was incredulous. "Why, gal, everybody knows ye've always thought he was a piece of the moon."

"I still think so," she made gallant response. "But I wants ye to--jest trust me--an' not ask any more questions."

The father sat there stiffly gazing off to the far ridges, and his eyes were those of a man grief-stricken. Once or twice his raggedly bearded lips stirred in inarticulate movements, but finally he rose and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Little gal," he said in a broken voice, "I reckon I've got ter suffer ye ter decide fer yoreself--hit's yore business most of all--but I don't never want him ter speak ter me ergin."

So Boone went out upon the hustings with none of the eager zest of his anticipations. That district was so solidly one-sided in political complexion that the November elections were nothing more than formalities, and the real conflict came to issue in the August primaries.

But with Boone's announcement as candidate for circuit clerk, old animosities that had lain long dormant stirred into restive mutterings. The personnel of the "high court" had been to a considerable extent dominated by the power of the Carrs and Blairs.

Now with the news that Boone Wellver, a young and "wishful" member of the Gregory house, meant to seek a place under the teetering clock tower of the court house, anxieties began to simmer. Into his candidacy the Carrs read an effort to enhance Gregory power--and they rose in resistance. Jim Blair, a cousin of Tom Carr, threw down his gauntlet of challenge and announced himself as a contestant, so that the race began to assume the old-time cleavage of the feud.

On muleback and on foot, Boone followed up many a narrowing creek bed to sources where dwelt the "branch-water folk." Here, in animal-like want and squalor, the crudest of all the uncouth race lived and begot offspring and died. Here where vacuous-eyed children of an inbred strain stared out from the doors of crumbling and windowless shacks, or fled from a strange face, he campaigned among the illiterate elders and oftentimes he sickened at what he saw.

Yet these people of yesterday were his people--and they offered him of their pitiful best even when their ignorance was

so incredible that the name of the divinity was to them only "somethin' a feller cusses with"--and he felt that his campaign was prospering.

One day, however, when he returned to his own neighbourhood after an absence across the mountain, he seemed to discover an insidious and discouraging change in the tide--a shifting of sentiment to an almost sullen reserve. An intangible resentment against him was in the air.

It was Araminta Gregory who construed the mystery for him. She had heard all the gossip of the "grannies," which naturally did not come to his own ears.

"I'm atellin' ye this, Boone, because *somebody* ought ter forewarn ye," she explained. "Thar's a story goin' round about, an' I reckon hit's hurtin' ye. Somebody hes done spread ther narration that ye hain't loyal ter yore own blood no more.--They're tellin' hit abroad that ye've done turned yore back on a mountain gal--atter lettin' her 'low ye aimed ter wed with her." She paused there, but added a moment later: "I reckon ye wouldn't thank me ter name no names--an', anyhow, ye knows who I means."

"I know," he said, in a very quiet and deliberate voice. "Please go on--and, as you say, it ain't needful to call no names."

"These witch-tongued busybodies," concluded the woman, her eyes flaring into indignation, "is spreadin' hit broadcast that ye plumb abandoned the gal fer a furrin' woman--thet wouldn't skeercely wipe her feet on ye--ef ye laid down in ther road in front of her!"

Boone's posture grew taut as he listened, and it remained so during the long-ensuing silence. He could feel a furious hammering in his temples, and for a little time blood-red spots swam before his eyes. But when at length he spoke, it was to say only, "I'm beholden to you, Araminty. A man has need to know what his enemies are sayin'."

It was one of those sub-surface attacks, which Boone could not discuss--or even seem to recognize without bringing into his political forensics the names of two women--so he must face the ambushed accusation of disloyalty without striking back.

In Marlin Town, one court day, Jim Blair was addressing a crowd from the steps of the court house, and at his side stood Tom Carr, his kinsman. Boone was there, too, and when that speech ended he meant to take his place where his rival now stood, and to give back blow for blow. At first Jim Blair addressed himself to the merits of his own candidacy, but gradually he swung into criticism of his opponent, while the opponent himself listened with an amused smile.

"Ther feller that's runnin' erginst me," confessed the orator, "kin talk ter ye in finer phrases then I kin ever contrive ter git my tongue around. I reckon when he steps up hyar he'll kinderly dazzle ye with his almighty gift of speech. I've spent my days right hyar amongst ye in slavish toil--like ther balance of you boys--hev done. My breeches air patched--like some o' yourn be. He's done been off ter college, l'amin' all manner of fothed-on lore. He's done been consortin' with ther kind of folks thet don't think no lavish good of us. He's done been gettin' every sort of notion savin' them notions thet's come down in our blood from our fore-parents--but when he gits through spell-bindin' I wants ye all ter remember jest one thing: I'll be plumb satisfied if I gits ther vote of every man thet w'ars a raggedy shirt tail and hes a patch on the seat of his pants. *He's* right welcome ter ther balance."

Boone joined in the salvo of laughter that went up at that sally, but the mirth died suddenly from his face the next moment, for the applause had gone to Blair's head like liquor and fired him to a more philippic vein of oratory.

"I reckon I might counsel this young feller ter heed ther words of Scripture an' 'tarry a while in Jericho fer his beard ter grow.' Mebby by thet day an' time he mout l'arn more loyalty fer ther men--yea, an' fer ther *women*, too--of his own blood and breed!"

Once more the red spots swam before Boone Wellver's eyes, but for a hard-held moment he kept his lips tight drawn. There was a tense silence as men held their breath, waiting to see if the old Gregory spirit had become so tamed as to endure in silence that damning implication; but before Blair had begun again Boone was confronting him with dangerously narrow eyes, and their faces inches apart.

Blair was a short, powerfully built man with sandy hair and a red jowl swelling from a bull-like neck. Standing on the step below, Boone's eyes were level with his own.

"Either tell these men what you mean," commanded the younger candidate in a voice that carried its ominous level to the farthest fringe of the small crowd, "or else tell 'em you lied! Wherein have I been disloyal to my blood?"

"You'll hav yore chancet ter talk when I gits through here," bellowed Blair. "Meanwhile, don't break in on me."

"Tell 'em what you mean--or take it back--or fight," repeated Boone, with the same fierce quietness.

It was no longer possible to ignore the peremptory challenge, and the speaker was forced into the open. But he was also enraged beyond sanity and he shouted out to the crowd over the shoulders of the figure that confronted him, "Ef he fo'ces me ter name ther woman I'll do hit. Hit's--"

But the name was never uttered. With a lashing out that employed every ounce of his weight and strength, Boone literally mashed the voice to silence, and sent the speaker bloody-mouthed down the several steps into the dust of the square.

Despite his middle-aged bulk, Jim Blair had lost none of his catlike activity, and while the more timid members of the crowd, in anticipation of gunplay, hastily sought cover or threw themselves prone to the ground, he came to his feet with a revolver ready-drawn and fired point-blank. But, just as of two lightning bolts, one may have a shade more speed than the other, so Boone was quicker than Jim. He struck up the murderous hand, and the two candidates grappled. An instant later, Boone stood once more over a prostrate figure, that was this time slower in recovering its feet. Wellver broke the pistol and emptied it of its cartridges, then contemptuously he threw it down beside its owner in the dust of the court house yard.

But as he turned, Tom Carr was standing motionless at arm's length away, and Boone was looking into Tom's levelled revolver.

"Ye hain't quite done with this matter yet," snarled that partisan, as his eyes snapped malignantly. "Ye've still got me ter reckon with. Throw up them hands, afore I kills ye!"

Boone did not throw them up. Instead, he crossed them on his breast and remained looking steadily into the passionate face of the black-haired leader of Asa's enemies.

"Shoot when you get ready, Tom; I haven't got a gun on me," he said calmly. "But if you shoot--you'll be breaking the truce--that you pledged your men to, when you and Asa shook hands. If the war breaks out afresh, today, it will be your doing." Other hands now were fondling weapons out there in front of the two; men who were mixed between Gregory and Carr sympathies and who were rapidly filtering themselves out of a conglomerate mass into two sharply defined groups.

"Hain't ye a'ready done bust thet truce--jest now?" demanded Tom, and Boone shook his head.

Again there was a purposeful ring in his voice.

"No, by God--I handled a liar--like he ought to be handled--and if there are any Gregories out there that wouldn't do the same--I hope they'll line up with *you*!"



CHAPTER XXIV

Slowly and grudgingly Tom sheathed his weapon. He knew that to fire on an unarmed man in the tensely overwrought gathering would mean wholesale blood-letting. Black looks told of a tempest brewing; so, with a surly nod, he stepped back and helped Jim Blair to his place again. Blair, dust covered and bruised, with a dribble of blood still trickling from his mashed lip, made an effort to complete his speech which ended in anticlimax. To Boone he said nothing more, and to the interrupted subject he gave no further mention.

That episode had rather strengthened than hurt Wellver's prospects, and he would have gone away somewhat appeased of temper had he not met Cyrus Spradling face-to-face in the court house yard, and halted, with a mistaken impulse of courtesy, to speak to him.

But the old friend, who had become the new enemy, looked him balefully in the eye and to the words of civil greeting gave back a bitter response: "I don't want ye ter speak ter me--never ergin," he declared. "But I'm glad I met up with ye this oncet, though. I promised ye my vote one day--an' I'm not a man thet breaks a pledge. I kain't vote fer ye, now, with a clean conscience, though, and I wants ye ter give me back thet promise."

Boone knew without delusion that this public repudiation of him by the neighbour who had expected to be his father-in-law had sealed his doom. He knew that all men would reason, as he had done, that Cyrus would give no corroboration to belittling gossip concerning his daughter, unless the wound were deep beyond healing and the resentment righteous beyond concealment.

"Of course," responded the young candidate gravely, "I give back your promise. I don't want any vote that isn't a willing one." But he mounted his horse with a sickened heart, and it was no surprise to him, when the results of the primaries were tallied, to find that he was not only a beaten man but so badly beaten that, as one commiserating friend mournfully observed to him, "Ye mout jest as well hev run on ther demmycrat ticket."

Boone went back to McCalloway's house that afternoon and sat uncomforted for hours before the dead hearth.

His eyes went to the closet wherein was locked the sword which Victor McCalloway had entrusted to his keeping, but he did not take it out. In the black dejection of his mood he seemed to himself to have no business with a blade that gallant hands had wielded. He could see only that he had messed things and proven recreant to the strong faith of a chivalrous gentleman and the love of two girls.

On the mantle-shelf was a small bust of Napoleon Bonaparte in marble--the trifle that Anne had brought across the "ocean-sea" to be an altar-effigy in his conquest of life! Boone looked at it, and laughed bitterly.

"That's my pattern--Napoleon!" he said, under his breath. "I'm a right fine and handsome imitation of *him*. The first fight I get into is my Waterloo!"

He met Happy in the road a few days later, and she stopped to say that she was sorry. She had heard, of course, of how decisively he had been beaten, but he drew a tepid solace from reading in her eyes that she did not know the part her father had played in his undoing. He hoped that she would never learn of it.

It was early in September when Boone set the log house in order, nailed up its windows and put a padlock on the door. He carried the key over to Aunt Judy's, and then on his return he sat silently on the fence gazing at its square front for a long while in the twilight.

Before him lay new battles in the first large city he had yet seen--a city which until now he had seen only once when he went there to visit its jail. But his preternaturally solemn face at length brightened. Anne was there, and Colonel Wallifarro had said, "A warm welcome awaits you."

In due course Boone presented himself at the office door in Louisville with the three names etched upon its frosted glass, and was conducted by a somewhat supercilious attendant to the Colonel's sanctum.

The Colonel came promptly from his chair with an outstretched hand.

"Well, my boy," he exclaimed heartily, "I'm right glad to see you."

Morgan sat across the desk from his father. Some matter of consultation had brought him there, and the fact that the Colonel had permitted young Wellver's arrival to interrupt it annoyed him.

"So you lost your race up there, didn't you?" Colonel Wallifarro laughed. "I wouldn't take it too seriously if I were you. After all, it's not the only campaign you'll ever make."

But the eyes of the young mountaineer held the sombreness of his humourless race. "Mr. McCalloway was right ambitious for me, sir," he said. "I hate to have to tell him--that the first fight I ever went into was a--Waterloo."

"Still, my boy, it's better to have your Waterloo first and your Austerlitz later--but I know General Prince will want to see you." The lawyer rang a bell and said to the answering boy: "Tell General Prince that Mr. Boone Wellver is in my office."

As they sat waiting, Boone inquired: "How is Anne--Miss Masters?"

At the mention of the name, Morgan bridled a little, and cast upon him a glance of disapproving scrutiny, but the Colonel, still glancing at the memorandum which he held, replied with no such taint of manner, "Anne's taking a year at college by way of finishing up. I guess you'll miss her after being her guide, counsellor and friend down there in Marlin."

"Yes, sir, I'll miss her."

So he wouldn't even see Anne! Suddenly the city seemed to Boone Wellver a very stifling, unfriendly and inhuman sort of place in which to live.

The new law student could have found no more gracious sponsor or learned savant than was Colonel Tom Wallifarro. He could have found no finer example of the Old South--which was now the New South as well; but one friend, though he be a peerless one, does not rob a new and strange world of its loneliness.

At college, if a boy had sneered, Boone could resent the slur and offer battle; but here there was no discourtesy upon which to seize--only the bleaker and more intangible thing of difference between himself and others--that he himself felt and which he knew others were seeking to conceal--until politeness became a more trying punishment than affront.

He began to feel with a secret sensitiveness contrasts of clothes and manners.

Morgan was consistently polite--but it was a detached politeness which often made Boone's blood quicken to the impulse of belligerent heat. Morgan palpably meant to ignore him with a disdain masked in the habiliments of courtesy. When Boone went reluctantly to dine at Colonel Wallifarro's home he felt himself a barbarian among cultivated people--though that feeling sprang entirely from the new sensitiveness. As a matter of fact, he bore himself with a self-possessed dignity which Colonel Wallifarro later characterized as "the conduct of a gentleman reduced to its simplest and most natural terms."

But for the most part of that first winter in town his life, outside the office, was the life of the boarding house in downtown Third Street; the life of slovenly but highly respectable women with a penchant for cheap gossip; of bickerings overheard through division walls; of disappointed men who should, they were assured, if life stood on all fours with justice, be dwelling in their own houses. In short, it was the dreary existence of unalleviated obscurity.

But to Boone it was something else. In his third-floor room was a window and a gas jet.

The window looked across to another world where, behind a fine old sycamore that took on alluring colour of bole and bark and leaf, stood a club through whose colonial doors men like Morgan Wallifarro went in and out.

At night too that mean room was to him sanctuary, for then there was the gas jet, and the gas jet stood, to a cabin-bred boy, for adventuring into all the world of literature of which McCalloway had talked.

Boone had the list written down, and the public library had the books.

So while the couple in the next room debated the question of separation and divorce, their voices carrying stridently through lath and plaster, Boone was ranging the world with Darwin, with Suetonius and his "Lives of the Caesars," with the whole bright-panoplied crew: Plutarch, Thackeray, Dumas, Stevenson, Macaulay, and Kipling.

Then, too, there were visits to the jail where a kinsman lay in durance. But when summer came he heaved a sigh of vast relief.

As the train took him back through flat beargrass and swelling bluegrass, through the beginnings of the hills, where he saw the first log booms in the rivers--his heart seemed to expand and his lungs to broaden out and drink deep where they had been only sipping before.

Dutifully and promptly upon his arrival at the McCalloway cabin, Boone went over to see Happy, and as he drew near,

for all the assurance of a courage, by no means brittle, he halted in the road and braced himself before he crossed the stile.

To go there was something of an ordeal. To stay away, without making the effort, would leave him guiltily recreant to an old friendship which, on one side, had been love.

"It's Boone Wellver. Can I come in?" he shouted from the road, and Cyrus, who looked aged and hunched his shoulders more dejectedly than of old, rose slowly from his hickory-withered chair on the porch and stood upright.

At first he did not speak. Indeed, he did not speak at all until he had come with deliberate steps down to the stile, where he faced the visitor across the boundary fence, as a defending force might parley over a frontier. Then raising a long arm and a pointed finger down the road, he spoke the one word, "Begone!"

"I came to see Happy," said the visitor steadily. "I don't think she is nursing any grudge."

"No," the old fellow's eyes flashed dangerously; "women folks kin be too damn fergivin', I reckon. Hit war because she exacted a pledge from me to keep hands off thet I ever let matters slide in ther first place. I don't know what come ter pass. She hain't nuver told me--but I knows you broke her heart some fashion. Many a mountain war has done been started fer less."

Boone straightened a little and his chin came up, but still there was no resentment in his voice:

"Then I can't see your daughter--at your house? Will you tell her that I sought to?"

In a hard voice Cyrus answered: "No--ef she war hyar I wouldn't give her no message from ye whatsoever--but since she ain't hyar thet don't make no great differ."

"Where is she?"

"Thet's her business--and mine. Hit hain't none o' yourn--. An' now, begone!"

Boone turned on his heel and strode away, but it was only from other neighbours that he learned that a second school, similar to the one which the girl herself had attended, was being started some forty miles away in a district that had heard of the first, and had sent out the cry, "Come over into Macedonia and help us!"

To that school Happy had gone--this time as a teacher of the younger children.

But before the summer ended Anne came to Marlin Town, and though she had been at an Eastern college Boone found no change in her save that her beauty seemed more radiant and her graciousness more winning. He had been a trifle afraid of meeting her, this time, because he felt more keenly than in the past how many allowances her indulgence must make for his crudities.

But Anne knew many men who had the superficial qualities that Boone coveted--and little else. What she did see in her old playmate was a fellow superbly fitted for companionship out under the broad skies, and, above all, she loved the open places and the freedom of the hills where the eagles nested in their high eyries.

"I love it all," she exclaimed one day, with an outswEEP of her arms. "I believe that somewhere back in my family tree there must have been an unaccounted-for gipsy. I've not been here so very much, and yet I always think of coming here as of going home."

"God never made any other country just like it, I reckon," Boone answered gravely. "It's fierce and lawless, but it's honest and generous, too. Men kill here, but they don't steal. They are poor, but they never turn the stranger away. It's strange, though, that you should love it so. It's very different from all you've known down there."

"I guess there's a wild streak in me, too," she laughed. "Those virtues you speak of are the ones I like best. When I go home I feel like a canary hopping back into its cage, after a little freedom."



CHAPTER XXV

When he went back to Louisville, early in September, Boone found the office of Colonel Wallifarro humming with a suppressed excitement, tintured with indignation. A municipal campaign was on, and on the day of his arrival General Prince and Colonel Wallifarro were deep in its discussion. Seeing the earnest gleam in their eyes, Boone wondered a little at the contrasting indifference in Morgan's manner whenever the political topic was broached. He fancied that the Colonel himself was disappointed, and one morning that gentleman said with a tone as nearly bordering on rebuke as Boone had ever heard him employ with his son, "Morgan, I don't understand how you can remain so unmoved by a situation which makes an imperative demand upon a man's sense of citizenship."

Morgan laughed. "Father," he said easily, "it is law that interests me--not politics. Take it all in all, I don't think it's a very clean business."

The elder man studied his son thoughtfully for a space, and then he said quietly, "General Prince and myself take a different view. We think that at certain times--like the present--citizenship may mean a call to the colours.... A failure to respond to such a summons seems to me a surrender of civil affairs into the hands of avowed despoilers--it seems almost desertion."

"And yet, sir," smiled the unruffled Morgan, "we rarely see permanent reforms result from crusading patriots. The ward heelers are usually the victors, because professionals have the advantage of amateurs."

That same evening Boone stood in a small downtown hall, crowded to the doors, and heard Colonel Wallifarro lay the stinging lash of denunciation across the shoulders of the city hall oligarchy. He heard him charge the police and the fire departments with fostering a perpetuation of machine abuses in the hands of machine hirelings--of maintaining a government by intimidation and force, and he too wondered how, if these charges were tintured with any colour of truth, a free-hearted man could stand aside from the combat. He knew too that Colonel Wallifarro did not indulge in unconsidered libels.

At the door, when the sweltering meeting ended, he noticed close behind him a man talking to a policeman.

"These here silk-stocking guys buttin' in gives me a pain," announced that heated critic. "They spill out an earful of this Sunday-school guff before election day, but when the strong-arm boys get busy they fade away--believe me, the poor boobs fade out!"

"They ain't practical," agreed the patrolman judicially, and Boone made a mental note of his badge number. "They think one and one make two--but we know that if you fix a couple of ones right it's just as easy to make an eleven with 'em."

Boone and Anne had gone horseback riding one afternoon that September, and it was a different sort of excursion from those that they had taken together in the mountains.

The boy was mounted on Colonel Wallifarro's saddle mare, and the girl on a high-headed four-year-old from the same stable. They were not picking their way now through tangled trails that led upward, but were cantering along the level speedway toward the park set on a hill five miles south of the city. There, at the fringe of a line of knobs, was the only approach to be found in this table-flat land to the heights which they both loved.

These hills were only little brothers to the loftier peaks of the Cumberland--but the air was full of Indian summer softness, and the horses under them were full of mettle--and they themselves were in love.

"Boone," demanded the girl, drawing down to a sedate pace, after a brisk gallop that had lathered the flanks and withers of their mounts, "what is it that interests you so in this campaign? You can't even vote here, can you?"

The young man shook his head, and now the smile of humour which had once been rare upon his face flashed there--because he had reached a point where his development was beginning to take some account of perspectives and balances.

"No, I can't vote here--but I can get as bitter over their fights as if they were my own. I couldn't explain why I'm interested any more than a hound could tell why he wants to run with the pack. It's just that the game calls a man."

"Morgan calls politics the sport of the great unwashed," observed Anne. "He says it gives the lower class a substitute for mental activity and demagogues a chance to exploit them."

"Does he?" inquired Boone drily.

"Boone"--Anne's eyes filled suddenly with a grave anxiety--"aren't you really working so hard about all this business--"

because Uncle Tom is so deeply involved in it and because you think he's in some danger?"

Boone leaned forward to right a twisted martingale, and when he straightened up he answered slowly: "I suppose any prominent man in a hard fight may be in--some danger, but he doesn't seem to take it very seriously."

"Why," she demanded, "can't men oppose each other in politics without getting rabid about it?"

"They can--when it's just politics. This is more than that, according to the way we feel about it."

"Why?"

"Because we charge that the city hall is in the hands of plunderers and that for tribute they give criminals a free hand in preying on the citizens."

"And yet," demurred the girl, with puzzled brow, "men like Judge McCabe laugh at all this 'reform hysteria,' as they call it. They aren't criminals."

Boone nodded. "There are good men in the city hall, too, but they belong to the old system that puts the party label above everything else."

They reached the brow of the hill and stood, their horses breathing heavily from the climb, looking off across the country where on the far side other knobs went trooping away to meet the sky.

The bridles hung loose, and the girl sat looking off over leagues of landscape with grave eyes, while Boone of course looked at her. The beauty of the green earth and blue sky was to his adoration only a background for her nearer beauty.

The boy, as he gazed at the delicate modelling of her brow and chin, wondered what was going on in her thoughts, for there was a wistful droop at the corner of her lips; yet presently, even while it lingered there, a twinkle riffled in her eyes.

"I ought to be all wrought up, I suppose, over this crusade on wickedness," she announced, though with no sense of guilt in her voice, "and yet if it weren't for my friends being in it, I doubt whether it would mean much to me--. I've got too much politics of my own to worry about."

"Politics of your own?" he questioned. "Why, Anne, your monarchy is absolute; there isn't a voice of anarchy or rebellion anywhere in your gracious majesty's realm--and your realm is your whole world."

Boone, the bluntly direct of speech, was coming on in the less straitened domain of the figurative. Anne was teaching him the bright lessons of gaiety.

She laughed and drew back her shoulders with a mock hauteur. "Our Viceroy from the Mountain Dominions flatters us. We have, however, the Mother Dowager--and we approach the age for a suitable alliance."

The two horses were standing so close together that the riders were almost knee to knee, and just then they had the hilltop to themselves. The humorous smile that had been on the lips of the young mountaineer vanished as characters on a slate are obliterated under a sponge. His cheeks, still bronzed from a mountain summer, went suddenly pale--and he found nothing to say. What was there to say, he reflected? When the mentor of a man's common sense has forewarned him that he is being shadowed by an inevitable spectre, and when that spectre steps suddenly out into his path, he should not be astonished. Boone only sat there with features branded under the shock of suffering. His fine young shoulders, all at once, seemed to lose something of their straight vigour and to grow tired. His palms rested inertly on his saddle pommel.

But the girl leaned impulsively forward and laid one of her gloved hands over his. Her voice was a caress--touched with only a pardonable trace of reproach.

"Do you doubt me, dear?" she asked. "In those politics that you are playing, I don't see anybody giving up--because there is opposition ahead."

Then the momentary despair altered in his manner to a grim expression of determination.

"Forgive me, Anne," he begged. "It's not that I doubt you--or ever could doubt you; but I know right well what a big word 'suitable' is in your mother's whole plan of life."

"I know it, too," was her grave response. "Mother's life has been an unhappy one, and she has given it all to me. That's why I say I have enough politics of my own. I couldn't bear to break her heart--and her heart is set on Morgan. So you see it's going to take some doing."

"Anne," he spoke firmly, but a tremour of feeling crept into his voice, "Mrs. Masters loves you with such a big and single love that it can't reason. Her own sufferings have come from knowing poverty, after she'd taken wealth for granted--so that is the one danger she'll guard against for you. It's an obsession with her. All the other things that might wreck your life--such as marrying a man you didn't love, for instance--she merely waves aside. If a man's been scarred with a knife, he's apt to forget that others have not only been hurt but killed by bullets. My God, dearest, she'll mean to be kind--but she'll put you on the rack--she'll take you straight through the torture-chamber, in her well-meant and cocksure certainty that she can choose for you better than you can choose for yourself."

"I think, Boone," said Anne, with more than a little pride in the rich softness of her voice, "you wouldn't hang back, because you had to come to me through things like that. I'm not afraid of the torture-chamber--it's just that I want to make it as easy for mother as I can."

On the night before the first day of registration Boone was dining at Colonel Wallifarro's house. Mrs. Masters found it difficult to maintain a total concealment of her distrust of the mountain boy. In her own heart she always thought of him as "that young upstart," but her worldly wisdom safeguarded her against the mistaken attitude of open hostility or even of too patronizing a tolerance. That course, she knew, had driven many high-spirited daughters into open revolt. "Make a martyr of him," she told herself with philosophically shrugged shoulders, "and you can convert an ape into a hero."

So after dinner Boone and the girl sat uninterrupted in the fine old drawing-room where the age-ripened Jouett portraits hung, while Morgan and his father went over some papers in the Colonel's study on the second floor.

"Boone," demanded the girl, "what is all this talk about camera squads and inspection parties? I'm afraid Uncle Tom--and you, too--are going to be running greater risks tomorrow than you admit."

He had risen to say good night, but it is not on record that lovers resent delays in their leave-takings.

"At the registration every qualified voter must be enrolled," he told her. "The camera squads have been formed to make rounds of the precincts and take certain pictures."

"Why?"

"Because we have fairly reliable information that the town will be overrun with flying squadrons of imported repeaters--and that the police who should lock them up mean to protect them."

"What are repeaters?" she navelly inquired, and he enlightened her out of the treasury of his newly acquired wisdom.

"We believe that hundreds of floating and disreputable fellows have been brought in from other towns and will be registered here as voters. After registering they will disappear as unostentatiously as they came. But meanwhile they will not satisfy themselves with being enrolled once, as the decent citizens must do. They will go from precinct to precinct, using fake addresses and changing names."

He smiled grimly, and then added with inelegant directness:

"We aim to get pictures of some of those birds--for use in court later."

"And the police will hamper you?"

"We don't expect much help from them."

Anne's eyes clouded with apprehension. She laid her hands on the boy's arms. "Boone," she exclaimed, "you know Uncle Tom. In spite of his gentleness, indignation makes him reckless. Will he be armed tomorrow?"

Boone shook his head. His eyes narrowed a little, and his tone indicated personal disagreement with the decision which he repeated:

"No. They've decided that since they're seeking reform they must keep inside both the letter and the spirit of the law. They've advised every one to go unarmed except for heavy walking sticks. Even that has brought a howl of 'attempted intimidation' from the city hall crowd--but I reckon their gangs won't be unheeled."

"Are you going to be armed?"

Boone hesitated, but finally he answered with a trace of the ironic: "I haven't quite made up my mind yet. You see, I

learned my politics in the bloody hills--though I never carried a gun when I was campaigning there. Here, where it's civilized--I'm not so sure."

"Will you be with Uncle Tom, all the time tomorrow? Will you go everywhere that he goes?" The question was put as an interrogation, but it was an earnest plea as well, and Boone took both her hands in his. They stood framed in the hall door, he holding her hands close pressed, and her eyes giving him back look for look.

"I'll be with him every minute he'll let me," he declared. "Of course a soldier must obey orders, and he can't choose his station."

It was standing like that with Boone holding Anne's hands, and their faces close together, that Morgan, whose footsteps were soundless on the carpeted stairway, saw them, and it was not a picture to reassure a rival or to assuage the disdainful anger of a man of Morgan's temperament for one whom he considered an ingrate and a presumptuous upstart.



CHAPTER XXVI

Morgan's teeth closed with a slight click. The sinews of his chest and arms tightened. Such insolence rightfully called for the chastisement of cane or dog-whip, he thought, but that was impossible. He might undertake to rebuke Boone openly but could hardly assume so high-handed a course with Anne--or in her presence. He would nevertheless conduct his own affairs in his own way; so, quietly and with no intimation that he had been a witness to what he construed as an actual embrace, he turned and went back to the stairhead.

From there his voice, raised in a conversational tone to reach his father in the study, carried with equal clarity to the room below.

"Father," he called, "I'll see you in the morning. I have to run down to the office for an hour or so now. I didn't quite finish looking over those latest depositions in the Sweeney case."

After having served that notice of his coming, he strolled casually down the stairs--to overhear nothing more incriminating than Anne's earnest exhortation: "Promise me not to take any foolish chances tomorrow," and Boone's laugh, deprecating the apprehension. Boone held only one hand now.

But Morgan ground his teeth. The young cub had doubtless been trying to capitalize his petty part in the petty political game, he reflected. That was about the thing one might expect from a youth pitchforked into polite society out of a vermin-infested log cabin, where the women smoked pipes and dipped snuff! But his own bearing was outwardly unruffled as he took down his hat from the old mahogany hall stand.

"Mr. Wellver," he suggested--(he always called Boone Mr. Wellver, because that was his way of indicating his line of aloofness against distasteful intimacy)--"could you come to the office this evening for a while? There's a matter I'd like to talk about."

Boone repressed the flash of surprise which the request brought into his eyes. He knew of no business at the office in which he and Morgan had shared responsibility, and heretofore Morgan had rather resented his participation in any work more responsible or dignified than that of an office boy or clerk.

"Why, yes," he answered. "I was going home, but of course if it's important, I'll be there."

"I regard it as important."

Boone caught the intimation of threat, but Anne, knowing little of law-office procedure, recognized only what she resentfully considered a peremptory and supercilious note.

Morgan nodded to Anne, and let himself out of the door, and less than an hour later Boone entered the office building, deserted now save for the night watchman, and for scattered suites, here and there, where window lights told of belated clerks toiling over ledgers, or lawyers over briefs.

As the young man from the mountains let himself in through the door that bore the name of his employer's firm, the other man was standing with his back turned and his eyes fixed on some trifle on his desk. The back of a standing figure, no less than its front, may be eloquent of its feelings, and had the shoulder blades of Colonel Wallifarro's gifted son been those of a hairy caveman, instead of an impeccably tailored modern, there would perhaps have been bristles standing erect along his spine. Wellver saw that warning of ugly mood in the instant before Morgan wheeled, and he wheeled with a military quickness and precision.

"I was a little bit puzzled," said the younger man, meeting the glaring eyes with a coldly steady glance, "at your asking me to come here tonight. I couldn't think of any work we'd been doing together."

"I won't leave you in perplexity long," the wrathful voice of the other assured him. "I asked you to come because I couldn't well say what needed to be said under my father's roof--while you were a guest there."

"I take it, then, that it's something uncomplimentary?"

"I mean to go further than that."

Boone nodded, but he came a step nearer, and the lids narrowed over his eyes. "Whatever you might feel like saying to me, Mr. Wallifarro," he announced evenly, "would be a thing I reckon I could answer in a like spirit. But because I owe your father so much--that I've got to be mighty guarded--I hope you won't push me too far."

"I haven't the right to say whom my father shall permit in his house," declared Morgan with, as yet, a certain remnant of

restraint upon his anger, "but I do assert plainly and categorically that I shan't remain silent under the abuse of that hospitality."

"I'm afraid you're still leaving me in considerable perplexity. I believe you promised not to do that long."

"I'd rather not go into details--and I think you know what I mean. I came down the stairs there a short while ago. You were with Anne--and I didn't like the picture I saw."

"What picture?"

"For God's sake, at least be honest!" retorted Morgan passionately. "Whatever barbarities mountain men have, they are presumed to be outspoken and direct of speech."

"We generally aim to be. I'm asking *you* to be the same."

"Very well. I mean to marry Anne, who is my cousin--and whose social equal I am. It doesn't please me to have you confuse my father's welcome with the idea of free and easy liberty. Is that clear?"

Morgan was glaring up into Boone's eyes, since Boone stood several inches the taller, and Boone's fingers ached to take him by the neck and shake him as a terrier does a rat. The need of remembering whose son he was became a trying obligation.

"Does Anne--whose social equal you are--know--that you're going to marry her?" he inquired, with a quiet which should have warned Morgan had he just then been able to recognize warnings.

"Perhaps," was the curt rejoinder, and Boone laughed.

"No, Mr. Wallifarro," he said. "No--even that 'perhaps' is a lie. She doesn't so much as suspect it. As for me, I know you are *not* going to marry her."

Morgan had turned and walked around behind his desk, and as Boone added his paralyzing announcement, he threw open the drawer. "I aim to marry her myself--when I've made good--if she'll have me."

Morgan halted, half bent over, and his eyes burned madly.

"You!" he exclaimed, with a boiling over of contemptuous rage. "You damned baboon!"

The words had sent Wellver, like the force of uncoiled springs, vaulting over the table, and his face had gone paste-white. Yet as he landed on the far side he halted and drew himself rigidly straight, though to keep his arms inactive at his sides he had to tense every sinew from wrist to shoulder, until each fibre ached with the cramp of repression. He had caught himself on the brink of murder lust, with the murder fog in his eyes. He had caught himself and now he held himself with a desperate sense of need, though he saw Morgan's fingers close over the stock of a heavy revolver. He even smiled briefly as he noted that it was a gun with an elegant pearl grip.

"If any other man of God's earth had fathered you," he said, each word coming separately like the drippings from an icicle, "I'd prove that I wasn't only a baboon but a gorilla--and I'd prove it by pulling the snobbish head off of your damned, tailor-made shoulders. People don't generally say things like that to me and go free."

Morgan too was pallid with anger, and in neither of them was any tragedy-averting possibility of faltering courage. Wallifarro held the pistol before him, and gave back a step--only one, and that one not in retreat but in order that he might have a chance to speak before he was forced to fire.

"I realize perfectly," he said, "that physically I'd be helpless in your hands. I'm as much your inferior in brute strength as--as mentally and socially--you are--mine. I don't want to take any advantage of you--it seems that we have to fight.--I'm waiting for you to draw."

He paused there, breathing heavily, and Boone stood unmoving, his hands still at his sides.

"I'm not armed," he said, and now he had recovered a less strained composure. "Why should I come with a gun on me when a gentleman of high social standing invites me to his office?"

"You're quibbling," Morgan burst out with a fresh access of fury. "You've given me the right to demand satisfaction. You've got a pistol in your desk there, haven't you?"

"Maybe so. Why do you ask? Isn't one gun enough for you when your man's unarmed?"

"Great God," shouted the Colonel's son, "are you trying to goad me into insanity? *You* are going to need one sorely in

a moment. I give you fair warning. I'm tired of waiting. Will you arm yourself?"

Boone shook his head.

"I told you when I came in here why I wouldn't fight you. I can't fight your father's son. You know as damned well as you know you're living that no other man on earth could say the things you've said and go unpunished--and you know just that damned well, too, why I'm holding my hand."

As he paused, both were breathing as heavily as though their battle had been violently physical instead of only verbal, and it was Boone who spoke next.

"Put away that gun," he ordered curtly. "Unless you're still bent on doing murder."

He stepped forward until his chest came in contact with the muzzle, his own hands still unlifted.

"Get back!" barked Morgan, who stood with his back against the desk. "If you crowd me I *will* shoot."

There was a swift panther-like sweep of Boone's right arm and Morgan felt fingers closing about his wrist. Then reason left him and he pressed the trigger.

But no report started echoes in the empty building. Morgan felt only the bone-crushing pressure that made his wrist ache as it was forced up, and then he saw that the hand which had closed vice-like on it had one finger thrust between the hammer and firing pin of his weapon.

The reaction left him dizzy, as he reflected that he had done all that man could do toward homicide and had been halted only by his unarmed adversary's quicker thought and action. Boone uncocked the firearm and laid it on the table, under the other's hand.

"I guess you see now," said Morgan in a low voice, "that after this the two of us can't stay in this office."

Boone nodded. "I know, too, that I've got to get out. You're his son, but"--his voice leaped--"but I know that having held myself in this long I can last a little longer. You're too sanctified for politics and dirty work like that. But your father's in it--and until this election is over I'm going to stay right with him--I'm going to do it because he's in actual danger. After that I'll quit--I'm not afraid of cooling off too much in the meantime, are you?"

"By God, NO!"

CHAPTER XXVII

Boone rose by gas-light the next morning and from the bureau of his hall bedroom, after removing a slender pile of shirts and underwear, he extracted a heavy-calibred revolver in a battered holster of the mountain type--the kind that fits under the left armpit, supported by a shoulder strap.

He took the thing out of its case and scrupulously examined into the smoothness of its working after long disuse, debating the while whether to take it or leave it. He knew that though the "pure in heart"--as an administration speaker had humorously characterized the myrmidons of the city hall--might, with impunity, carry--and even use--concealed weapons, he and his like need expect no leniency in the courts for similar conduct. The advice at headquarters had been emphatic on that point: "Keep well within the law. There may be court sequels."

But Boone meant to be Colonel Wallifarro's bodyguard that day. He felt designated and made responsible for the Colonel's safety by Anne, and he knew that before nightfall contingencies might arise which would overshadow lesser and technical considerations. So he strapped the holster under his waistcoat, and went out into the autumn morning, which was gray and still save for the rumbling of occasional milk wagons.

At Fusion headquarters few others had yet arrived, but shortly he was joined by Colonel Wallifarro and General Prince, and within the hour the barren suite of rooms was close thronged and thick with the smoke of many cigars. Telephones were ajangle, and outside in the street a dozen motors were parked.

Nor was there any suspense of long waiting before events broke into racing stride, as a field of horses breaks from the upflung barrier.

From a half dozen sources came hurried complaints of flagrant violations and of police violence or police blindness.

When the polling places had been open an hour the wires grew feverish. "A crowd of fifteen men came here and registered at opening time," announced one herald. "Forty-five minutes later the same gang came back and registered again. The protest of our challenger was ignored."

There were not enough telephones to carry the traffic of lamentation and complaint. "Our camera men are being assaulted and their instruments smashed...." "The Chief of Police has just been here and left instructions that snapshotting is an invasion of private rights. He has ordered his men to lock up all photographers...." "Our judge in this precinct challenged a man when he tried to register, the second time, and a crowd of thugs with blackjacks rushed the place and beat him unconscious. The police said they saw no difficulty."

So came the burden of chorused indignation, and the automobiles began cruising outward on tours of investigation and protest. The "boys" had been assured that they were to have "all the protection in the world," and they were "going to it."

From this and that section of the city arrived news of men who had been blackjacked, crowd-handled and arrested, but out of the whole rapidly developing reign of terror certain precincts stood forth conspicuous. Seated beside Colonel Wallifarro in the dust-covered car that raced from ward to ward, while the Colonel's face streamed sweat from the hurried tempo of his exertions, Boone marvelled at the fashion in which these men combined indomitable perseverance with self-contained patience. Often he himself burned with an angry impulse to jump down from his seat and punish the insolent effrontery of some ruffian in uniform.

"I reckon you don't know who these gentlemen are," he protested at one time to a police sergeant, whose manner had passed beyond impertinence and become abuse.

"No and I don't give a damn who they are," retorted the guardian of peace. "I know what this business means to me. It's four years with a job or four years without one."

Twice during the morning they were called to a building that had once been a shoemaker's shop. The erstwhile showcase was dimmed by the dust of a dry summer and the grimy smears of a rainy autumn. There the tide of bulldozing had run to flood, and the Fusion judge of registration, an undersized chap with an oversized courage, had wrangled and fought against overweening odds until they took him away with both eyes closed beyond usefulness. A challenger with less stomach for punishment had borne the brunt as long as he could--and weakened. Colonel Wallifarro's car stood before the place and, with a weary gesture, he turned to Boone.

"My boy," he said shortly, "we've got to put a man in there. I don't like to ask it--but you'll have to take that challenger's place."

Boone had seen enough that morning to make him extremely reluctant to leave the Colonel's side, and he answered evasively, "I'm not a citizen of this town, Colonel."

"You don't have to be to challenge." So Boone went in. The place was foul with the stench of bad tobacco. The registration officers, who had so far had their way, were openly truculent.

"Here comes a new Sunday-school guy," sneered a clerk with a debauched face, looking up from the broad page of the enrolment book. "I wonder how long *he'll* last."

For a time it seemed that Boone was to enjoy immunity from the heckling under which his predecessors had fallen, but the word had gone out that a "bad guy" had come in for the Fusionists who needed handling, and his apparent acceptance was nothing more than the quiet that goes before the bursting of a thunder head.

His place was inside, so he could make no move when news drifted in that one of the outside watchers had been assaulted and perhaps seriously hurt, though he guessed that the car, in which he had been riding that day, would again roll up, and that perhaps Colonel Wallifarro would once more be the target of gutter insult. Indeed, he fancied he recognized the toot of that particular horn a few minutes later, but as he strained his ears to make something of the confusion outside the door burst open and a group of a dozen or so ruffians forced their way into the cramped space, brandishing sticks and pistols.

"Where's this here fly guy at?" demanded the truculent leader of the invasion, and others used fouler expletives. Boone should perhaps have felt complimented that such a handsome number should have been told off to deal with his case, but as he rose to his feet he caught a glimpse over their heads of Colonel Wallifarro standing in his car outside and of confused disorder eddying about it.

Boone drew so quickly that there was no opportunity to halt him, and he fired as unhesitatingly as he had drawn. With a threat unfinished on his lips the leader of the "flying squadron" crumpled to the floor, and with swift transition from bravos to fugitives his tatterdemalion gang left on the run.

Boone, with the pistol still in his hand, hurried out to the sidewalk, and at the picture which met his eyes halted on the dirty threshold.

Colonel Wallifarro still stood in the car, but on the sidewalk was General Prince, and the chivalric old gentleman was wiping blood from his face, while the dust on his clothes told clearly enough that he had been knocked down. Boone's veins were channels of liquid fire.

But that was not all. Morgan Wallifarro, still as immaculate as usual, was standing two paces away, and a burly policeman with a club raised over his head was abusing him with vicious obscenities.

So Morgan was no longer sulking in his tent! Morgan had belatedly taken his place at the Colonel's side, and as he stood there, threatened with a night-stick, Boone heard his declaration of war.

"I've never been in politics before," he declared in a voice of white-hot fury, "but I'm in now to stay until every damned jackal of you is whipped out of office--and whipped into the penitentiary. Now hit me with that stick--I dare you--hit me!"

Still brandishing the club above the young lawyer's head with his right hand, the patrolman shoved him roughly in the chest with his left. He was obviously seeking to force Morgan into striking at him so that, given a specious plea of self-defence, he might crack his skull.

It was then the voice of Boone sounded from the rear:

"Yes, hit him--I dare you, too!"

The officer wheeled, to see the tall and physically impressive figure of the mountain man standing the width of the sidewalk away. He held a pistol, not levelled but swinging at his side, and as if in silent testimony that it was not a mere plaything a thin wisp of smoke still eddied about its mouth and the acrid smell of burnt powder came insidiously out through the door.

Boone strolled forward.

"Mr. Wallifarro, get back in that car," he directed. "This blue-belly isn't going to trouble you."

"What the hell have you got to do with this?" bellowed the officer, but the club came down. "You are under arrest."

"Show me your warrant."

"I don't need no warrant."

The crowd, including those who had fled from the registration room, hung back in a yapping but hesitant circle. Blackjacking non-combatants had proven keen sport, but this fellow with the revolver in a hand that seemed used to revolvers, and a gleam in the eye that seemed to relish the situation, gave them pause.

Somewhat blankly the officer reiterated his pronouncement. "I don't need no warrant."

"This gun says you need one," came the calm rejoinder. "You've got one yourself, and you can whistle up plenty of other harness bulls--all armed, but if you do I'll get you first. My name is Boone Wellver. Now, are you going to get that warrant or not?"

For an instant the policeman hesitated; then he conceded as though he had never contested the point.

"I ain't got no objection in the world to swearing out a warrant for you--since you've told me what your name is. But don't try to make no get-away till I come back."

"I'll be right here--when you come back."

The patrolman turned and walked away, and Boone wheeled briskly to the car.

"Now you gentlemen get out of this--and do a little warrant-swearing yourselves. Be over at Central Station in about forty-five minutes fixed to give bond for me. I reckon I'll be needing it."

Ten minutes later, with a spectacular clanging of gongs, a police patrol clattered up, scattering the crowd and disgorging a wagonload of officers headed by a lieutenant with a drawn pistol.

They handled Boone with unnecessary roughness as they nipped the handcuffs on his wrists and bundled him into the wagon, but he had expected that. It was their cheap revenge, and he gave them no satisfaction of complaint.

In the cage at Central Station into which they thrust him, with more violence, his companions were a drunken negro and one or two other "election offenders" like himself.

It was through the grating that he looked out a half hour later, to see Morgan Wallifarro standing outside.

"Father and the General are arranging bond," announced the visitor. "I wanted a word with you alone."

Boone's only response was an acquiescent nod.

"I lost my head last night, Wellver," Morgan went on shamefacedly. "I was a damned fool, of course, to imagine that I could bully you, and a cad as well. I lied when I intimated that you were--not anybody's equal. If I were you, I'd refuse to accept an apology, but at all events I've got to offer it--abjectly and humbly."

There was no place in the close-netted grating of that door through which a hand could be thrust, and Boone grinned boyishly as he said, "I accept your advice and refuse to shake hands with you--Wallifarro--until the door's opened."

Boone's pistol was held, of course, as evidence, but without it he went back to the registration booth, and as he took his seat the man of the debauched face looked up, with surprised eyes, from his book; but this time he volunteered no comment.

In the police court on the following morning both Boone and his arresting officer were presented, as defendants, and the officer's case was called first on the docket. Taking the stand in his own defence, the officer glibly testified that he had struck General Prince, of whose identity he had been unfortunately ignorant, because that gentleman had seemed to make a motion toward his hip pocket, but that he had, under much goading, refrained from striking Morgan Wallifarro.

"Why," purred the shyster who defended him, "did you so govern your temper under serious provocation?" And the unctuous reply was promptly and virtuously forthcoming: "Because police officers are ordered not to use no more force than what they have to."

General Prince smiled quietly, but Morgan fidgeted in his chair.

The police judge cleared his throat. "It appears obvious to the Court," he ruled, "that a man of General Prince's high character did not intend to threaten or hamper an officer in the proper performance of his sworn duty. But these gentlemen in the heat and passion of political fervour seem to have assumed--unintentionally, perhaps--a somewhat high-handed and domineering attitude. It would be manifestly unjust to exact of a mere patrolman a superior temperateness of judgment. Let the case be dismissed."

But when Boone was called to the dock, the magistrate eyed him severely not through, but over, his glasses, putting into that silent scrutiny the stern disapproval of a man looking down his nose.

"I find three charges against this defendant," he announced. "The first is shooting and wounding; the second, carrying concealed a deadly weapon, and the third, interference with an officer in the discharge of his duty."

The wounding of the flying squadron's leader was a matter for the future, since the victim of the bullet lay in a hospital, and that case had already been continued under a heavy bond. After hearing the evidence on the other accusations, the judge again cleared his throat.

"The 'pistol-toter' is a constant menace to the peace of the community, and there seems to be no doubt of guilt in the present case--but since the defendant has recently come from a section of the State which condones that offence, the Court is inclined to be lenient. The resistance to the officer was also a grave and inexcusable matter, but because of the character testimony given by General Prince and Colonel Wallifarro, I am going to give him the benefit of the doubt. I will, on my own motion, amend these charges to disorderly conduct. Mr. Clerk, enter a fine of \$19 and a bond of \$1,000 for a year."

Morgan Wallifarro was, at once, on his feet.

"May it please your Honour, such a punishment is either much too severe or much too lenient. I move, your Honour, to increase the fine."

"Motion overruled," came the laconic judgment. "Mr. Clerk, call the next case."

"Your Honour has fixed a punishment," protested Colonel Wallifarro's son with a deliberately challenging note in his voice, "which is the highest fine in your power to inflict without opening to us the door of appeal. Had you added one dollar, we could have carried it to the Circuit Court--and we believe that it was only for the purpose of denying us that right that you amended the charges. In the court of public opinion, before which even judges must stand judgment, I shall endeavour to make that unequivocally clear."

"Fine Mr. Wallifarro twenty dollars for contempt of Court!" This time the voice from the bench rasped truculently, forgetting its suavity. "And commit him to jail for twenty-four hours."

That evening Boone Wellver paid two calls behind the barred doors of the city prison. One was to Asa Gregory, who still languished there, and the other to the lawyer who had been willing to pay for his last word.

"I'm sorry you lashed out, Wallifarro," said Boone. "But I'd be willing to change places with you, for the satisfaction of having said it."

Morgan grinned with a strong show of white teeth.

"It's cheap at the price," he declared, "and as for lashing out, I haven't begun yet. From now on I'm going to work regularly at this contempt of court job, unless I can put some of these gentry behind bars or make them swim the river. I've hung back for a long while but now I've enlisted for the war."

As Judge McCabe had said, Morgan lacked the diplomatic touch.

CHAPTER XXVIII

One morning of frosty tang, that touched the pulses with its livening, found Boone's eyes and thoughts wandering discursively from the papers massed on his desk. His customary concentration had become a slack force, though these were days of pressing hours and insistent minutes in the Wallifarro offices. The reception room was crowded with waiting figures that savoured of the motley, and this was one of the new things brought to pass by the strange bedfellowship of politics. Yonder in a corner sat with fidgeting restiveness a young man whose eyes, despite his obvious youth, were mature in guile and pouched with that pasty ugliness with which unwholesome night life trade-marks its own.

He was one of that crew imported from elsewhere to register, re-register and vanish, but he had lingered, and now a grievance had sent him skulking to the enemy's camp with vengeance in his heart. In an interval of political inaction he had picked a pocket and had been locked up by a "harness bull" who had never liked him and who chose to disregard his present and special prerogative. In court he had been dismissed with an admonition, it is true, but his dignity was affronted. This morning he sat in the anteroom of Morgan Wallifarro, ready, in the inelegant but candid parlance of his ilk, to "spit up his guts."

Not far from him sat a woman whose profession was one of the most ancient and least revered. The vivid colouring of her lips and cheeks shone out through thickly laid powder in ghastly simulation of a coarse beauty long fled. "I lodged a good half-dozen of those beer-drinking loafers, though they roistered and drove away my respectable trade--and then the cops had the nerve to raid me," she inwardly lamented. Now she, too, sat among the informers.

Morgan had complained that reformers always failed through their dreamy impracticability. Now he was being as practical as the foes he sought to overthrow. From the dribble of small leaks come the breaks that wreck dams, and Morgan was neglecting none of them.

To Boone, whom he no longer quarantined behind a manner of aloofness, he had confided, "We have no illusions about the courts. Their judgments will bear the label of party, not justice; but when they turn us down I mean to make them do it in the face of a record that will damn them before the public."

So, together with gentlemen like General Prince and ministers of the Gospel bearing sworn narratives of police browbeating, came the backwash of the discontented riffraff: deserters who were willing to disclose their secrets to appease their various resentments.

Boone, who had played simple and direct politics in the backwoods, found himself in the midst of a more intricate version of the game--and into it he had thrown all the weight of his energies--until this morning.

Now, as he sat gazing out over roofs and chimney-pots, a messenger boy, impatient of anteroom delays, burst officiously into his office.

"Are you Mr. Morgan Wallifarro?" he demanded, scanning a label on the package he bore, and, as Boone shook his head, he heard Morgan's voice behind him: "I'm the man you're looking for."

Then as the younger Wallifarro took the package from the snub-nosed Mercury, he opened it, revealing a gold-knobbed riding crop. Once before that morning the young attorney had halted the all-but-congested tide of business to telephone to a florist, and through the open door Boone had heard the order given. Then Morgan had directed that violets and orchids be sent that evening to Miss Anne Masters. Presumably the riding crop was bound for the same destination.

"Anne's riding some of those Canadian hunters tonight at the Horse Show," was Morgan's casually put remark as he felt Boone's eyes upon him. "I thought she might like this."

It was the first time that Anne's name had passed conversationally between them since the evening when, in that same office, Morgan's pistol had clicked harmlessly, and upon each face fell a faint shadow of embarrassment. Then Wellver admitted, "It's a very handsome one," and the other passed on into his own office.

Already Boone had been thinking of those Canadian hunters. It was that which had lured his mind away from his littered desk and filled him with the spirit of truancy.

Tonight would see the opening of the Horse Show with the fanfare of its brass bands and the spreading of its peacock plumes of finery.

Following upon it, as musical numbers follow an overture, would come the dances for the debutantes, and Anne would

be a debutante. In that far, tonight would be a sort of door closing against himself as one holding no membership in that circle whose edicts were written by Fashion. It was, however, of another phase of the matter that his present restiveness was born. Yesterday afternoon he had slipped into the emptiness of the Horse Show building for an inquisitive half hour, and had seen a hard bitten stable boy trying to rehearse a stubborn roan over the jumps.

The heavy white bars stretching between the wings of the hurdle had looked to him--thinking then, as now, of Anne--disquietingly formidable and full of bone-breaking possibilities. This morning she was to acquaint herself with her mounts. She might even now be at the hazardous business. Suddenly Boone pushed back his papers, locked the drawer of his desk, and took down his hat and overcoat. He was playing hookey.

Steps hurried by anxiety carried him to the building, where the great roof was festively draped with bunting and where the smell of tanbark came up fresh to the nostrils. A stretch of empty galleries and vacant tiers of boxes gave an impression of roofed vastness, and he searched the spacious arena, dotted here and there with knots of stable boys and blanketed horses, until he caught sight of Anne.

The mount to whose saddle she was at the moment being lifted was not reassuring to his mood. To its bit rings hung a stable boy by both hands, and the boy's dogged set of countenance bespoke hostile distrust for his charge, whose nostrils were distended and ember red. Boone noted, too, as he hurried across the tanbark, that one of the animal's eyes showed that wicked patch of white which bespeaks, for a horse, a lawless predilection. As the girl settled herself, the beast flinched and shivered, and the stable boy seemed about to be lifted clear of the earth where he hung, anchoring the splendidly shaped but vicious head.

Just then Boone came up and heard a fellow, whom he took to be a trainer, speaking near his elbow.

"There ain't no jump that will stop him. He can skim six foot like a swallow and cop every ribbon at the show--if he's a mind to. And if he *ain't* got a mind to, he'll just raise merry hell and tear up the place."

Then the groom cast loose, and the horse launched himself upward, plunging violently and lashing out with his forefeet.

Boone halted and caught his breath with a nervous intake. He knew that Anne rarely and most reluctantly used a whip on a horse, and as he saw her lash fall twice, three times, with resolute sweeps that brought out welts upon the satin flanks, he realized that she had been warned upon what manner of horse she was to mount. It was a brief conflict of wills, then the red-nostrilled gelding came down to all fours and answered amenably to rein and bit. Round the arena he swept with the rhythm of his rapid gallop, breaking to a speedy dash as he neared the obstacles, rising upon a flawless and seemingly winged arc that skimmed the fences with swallow-like ease. Anne rode back flushed and triumphant, and as Boone came up, with breathing that was still quick, he heard the trainer voicing his commendation:

"You handled him like a professional, Miss Masters, and he takes a bit of handling, too. There ain't many ladies I'd be willin' to put up on him." Then the practical Canadian added, as Anne slid down and laid her gloved hand on the steaming neck: "He's a classy-looking individual, ain't he now? You'd never guess that I took him out of a plough, would you?"

"Out of a plough!" echoed the girl. "Why, he's a picture horse! His lines are almost perfect!"

The horseman nodded and grinned. "He's all of that, ma'am, but just the same when I first saw him he was pulling a plough--or, rather, he was trying to run away with one. Of course he must of had the breeding somewhere way off. I reckon he's a throw-back, but if I hadn't come along and seen him he'd still be drudging away on a rocky farm in the hills. As it is, he's took blues and reds all through Canada and the East--and I've a notion you're going to ride him out the gate with a championship tie on his brow-band tonight."

As Boone turned away with Anne, the words seemed to ring in his ears: "If I hadn't come along and seen him, he'd still be drudging away on a rocky farm in the hills." It fitted his own case precisely, but it made him think, too. He wondered if the time would ever come when people would look at him in public places and find it hard to realize that his youth had been like that magnificent show horse's colthood--a life close to the clods.

Nothing could have kept Boone Wellver away from the Horse Show that evening, but he went with a self-confessed trepidation hard to conceal. In the wide, barnlike foyer of the building, a vertigo of stage fright obsessed him. Never had he seen such a massed and bewilderingly colourful display of evening dress, nor heard such a confused chorus of bright laughter, light talk and blaring orchestration. In the first dizziness of the impression he had the sense of intruding on Fashion vaunting itself unabashed to the trumpetings of heralds, and there swept back over him the positive pain of diffidence which he had felt that other time, when he stood in the open doorway of Colonel Wallifarro's house and announced that he had come to the party.

Inside, as he forced himself onward, his disquiet increased as the blaze of colour heightened and bloomed in the flower-like tiers of the boxes. The glistening shoulders of women in filmy gowns, the sparkle of jewellery, the flash of silk hats and the nodding of pretty faces, all confused him as dry land things might confuse a fish, and he felt unintentionally impertinent when his sleeve of decent black brushed a soft arm white gloved to the shoulder.

Boone Wellver would have fled incontinently from that place had he not been held there by his anxiety for Anne, which would not be allayed until the ladies' hunters had been judged, the ribbons pinned on the fortunate head-stalls and the exit gates swung open and closed. And the jumping class, with its spectacular dash of danger, was held for the last, as the climax is held for the curtain of the act.



CHAPTER XXIX

But while Boone waited for Anne to come into the ring he made no assiduous search for her in the boxes, because, like many other men whose outward seeming is one of boldness, he was fettered by an inordinate shyness in this heavy atmosphere of the unaccustomed. Later Anne accused him of snubbing her. "You passed right by me a half dozen times," she teased with violet mischief shimmering in her eyes. "You wouldn't even look at me."

"I was plain scared," he made candid admission; "but when you went into the ring I looked at you every minute."

"You're jolly well right you did," she laughed. "You were glued to the rail, tramping down women and small children. Every time I came round I saw you there and your face haunted me like a spirit in purgatory. Your eyes were positively bulging with terror."

"That's what you get," Boone retorted calmly, "for making a chicken-hearted fellow fall in love with you. I had to hang 'round and wait. I could no more pursue you through the roses and diamonds than a cat could follow you into water."

The girl shook her head with a bewildered indulgence. "I can't understand it," she protested. "There is nothing to be frightened about."

The young mountaineer grinned sheepishly. "I reckon a lion-tamer would say the same thing," he asserted, "about going into the cage. He's used to it."

Anne sat silent for a few moments, and between her eyes came a tiny pucker, as if a thought tinged with pain had pricked, thornlike, into her reflections.

At last she spoke slowly: "Suppose you couldn't swim, and I had to spend a lot of time in deep water. Wouldn't you learn?"

"That's different," he assured her. "You might need me in that event."

"You say society frightens you, and it's a thing I can't understand. I could understand its boring you. It bores me. I love informal things. I love my friends and the door that stands open as it always does here, but I hate the dress parades. There's some sense in the Horse Show. It makes a market for expensively bred and trained animals, and it's a sort of fancy advertising; but I don't care for a human application of the same idea."

"I feel that way, too," he responded quickly, "and not being expensively bred or trained, I can't escape feeling like a cart horse would feel in that ring."

"I'm going to make my dbut, Boone," she said quietly. "I'm going to do it because both mother and Uncle Tom have their hearts set on it and there's no graciousness in stubborn resistance. There are times coming when I've got to stand out against them, and I don't want to multiply them needlessly. But there's something more than just ordinary dislike back of my feeling as I do about it all, and I think it's a thing you'd be the first to understand."

"I guess I ought to understand, Anne, but I've got so much to learn. Please make allowances for me and explain." His tone was humble and self-accusing.

"This dbut ball is just their way of putting me on the marriage market--duly labelled and proclaimed. I don't fancy being put up at auction, and it doesn't even seem quite honest. It's not a genuine offer of sale, because it's all fixed in their own minds. Morgan is to bid me in when the time comes."

Boone's face grew sombre, and his strong mouth line stiffened over his resolute chin.

"God knows that arrangement is going to come to grief," he said in a low voice that shook with feeling.

"Not if Lochinvar doesn't come to the party," she retorted with a swift change to the rattle of laughing eyes. "I'm letting sleeping dogs lie for the present, Boone, because it's the best way. There isn't any doubt of you in my heart. You know that, but it will be a long time before you can marry me. Meantime,--" the battle light shone for a flashing instant in her pupils--"I'm standing out for one thing. They've got to give you full acknowledgment. Everybody that accepts me must accept you--and unless you claim recognition, they won't do it."

Boone rose and came over. He took her hands in his own and looked down at her, and, though he smiled, his voice was full of worship.

"Lochinvar will come, dearest," he declared. "He'll come in full war-paint, and nobody but himself will know how stiff he's scared."

It was the morning after that that Boone sat again as a defendant in the police court, flanked by Morgan and the Colonel. He was on trial for shooting and wounding, and there had been broadly circulated hints that his prosecution would be gruelling enough to dissuade bold and adverse spirits on election day. Yet when the case was reached on the docket, Henry Simpson, whose finger was in every pie as a master pastry cook for the entrenched element, arose from his place at the right hand of the court's prosecutor and sonorously cleared his throat.

"May it please your Honour," he announced, with the rhetorical dignity of a Roman senator--or a criminal lawyer's idea of a Roman senator--"the prosecuting witness harbours no feeling of rancour in this affair, despite the injuries which he sustained. The defendant seems to have been led astray in the hot enthusiasm of his youth by older heads. Having no wish to punish a cat's-paw for the responsibility of his mentors, we move the dismissal of the accused."

"And we, your Honour," came the uptake of Morgan Wallifarro so swiftly as to leave no margin of pause between statement and retort, "insist upon a trial and a full vindication. This prosecuting witness who would now spread the benign mantle of charity over the conduct of his assailant, fell face foremost while leading an armed raid on a registration booth. I am prepared to prove that the wounded man who now sits there, an exemplar of Christian forgiveness, was spirited away, after his gang fled, and cared for in a private room at the City Hospital under the tender auspices of certain officials. I am further prepared to prove that the name which this municipal favourite now wears is, for him, a new one and that until recently he was known as Kid Repetto whose likeness and Bertillon measurements are preserved in the local rogues' gallery. The profession which he ornamented until the city hall cried out for his skilled aid was burglary and second-story work--"

The judicial gavel fell with an admonitory slam, and the magisterial jaws came warningly together.

"Mr. Wallifarro," declared the judge, "the court sustains the prosecution's motion of dismissal. Your unproven statements are highly improper in their innuendo of collusion by an officer of this court. You are seeking to try this case in the newspapers, sir," and Morgan, closing his portfolio, smiled his mocking admission of the charge. He had watched the busy pencils at the press table, and knew that some of them would blossom in flaring headlines. He had seen the cartoonist who had come to make a pencil sketch of Boone himself finish his task, and he enjoyed the judge's resentment. Now he turned away with the irritating jauntiness of one who has scored.

But that evening, at the Horse Show, Boone suffered the embarrassment of that flare-up of publicity which he felt was purely adventitious. Chance had made him a scrap in a pattern of ephemeral interest, and to him it seemed that one man in three carried an afternoon paper in his pocket with his own hasty albeit recognizable portrait starkly displayed to the public gaze. On faces which he did not know he caught smiles of amused recognition, and on one which he did know a glower of hate. That was the face of the policeman who had arrested him.

Some of the women in the boxes had him dragged before them for introduction, and he responded with a shyness that was cloaked under the reserve of his half-barbaric dignity.

Anne smiled, and a proprietary pride lurked in her expression.

"Anne looks as docile and amiable as a sweet child," sighed Mrs. Masters to Colonel Wallifarro, as he bade her good night that same evening, "but she's got Larry's British stubbornness in every fibre."

"Added," suggested the Colonel with a truant twinkle, "to the admirable resoluteness of our own family."

"She's absolutely set on having this young protg of yours at her debut ball, and I suppose you know what that signifies. It means that through her whole social career he'll be dangling along frightening off really eligible men!" The lady gave a well-bred little snort of disdain. "He's about as possible as a pet toad!"

The Colonel laughed.

"I'm afraid, my dear, that I like Anne the better for it. We've agreed that Morgan is your choice, and mine--and I don't think Morgan is going to be scared off. Besides, this young man is in my office."

"So is your office cat--if you have one," sniffed the anxious mother. "We're not sending the cat an invitation, you know."

"I have no cat," observed the lawyer with perfect gravity, and Mrs. Masters shrugged her shoulders with unconvinced resignation.

When the telephone on Boone's desk rang one afternoon he was quite alone there, and he took up the receiver, to hear Anne's voice. The conversation at first indicated no definite objective, but after a little the girl demanded:

"Boone, you *are* coming to my party--aren't you?"

For a moment the young man hung hesitantly on the question; then he said: "Anne, I'd go anywhere for the chance of seeing you, but you know I hain't niver run a set in my life. My folks they don't hold hit ter be godly."

Her laughter tinkled back to him, but he had caught the underlying insistence of her tone, and he remembered what she had said about this ball: what it meant to her, and what his being there meant too.

"Take young Lochinvar for instance," he went on banteringly yet with a dubious touch in his voice. "It wasn't the first party of the season that he came to, was it? And even at the finish he was a little late. Maybe there was some delay in getting his coat of mail ready."

"Oh," the girl's exclamation was one of quick understanding. She knew something of Boone's financial pinch, and how he felt it a point of honour to stretch as far as possible the fund his patron had left him. "You mean--" she broke off, and the young mountaineer spoke bluntly,

"I mean I haven't a dress suit, and short of stealing one--"

"I understand," she declared, and began talking animatedly of other things, but when she had rung off Boone sat staring at an open law book and making nothing of its text. Then he heard a movement at his back and swung around in his swivel chair, but the next instant he was on his feet with an exclamation that was an outburst of joy.

There, standing just inside the door, tanned like saddle leather, somewhat grayer about the temples and sparer of figure than of old, but with the strong vigour of active months, stood Victor McCalloway.

"I think, my boy," he said, as though he had never been away at all, "we can run to a dress suit."



CHAPTER XXX

A moment later the two men stood with their hands clasped, and the face of the younger was aglow with such delight as can come only from a happy windfall out of the unexpected.

Never had that other face and figure been far from his thoughts. Never had his ardent hero-worship waned or tarnished. His speculations and dreams had been haunted by misgivings bred of the fierce chances of war, chances which might make of the features, into which he now looked again, only a memory.

New and varied activities in his life had bulwarked him against actual brooding, and youth is too brightly hopeful to accept grim possibilities, unproven; but the mists of denied fear had hung undissolved, and there had been moments when they had thickened and congealed on the crystal of his thoughts to dark foreboding.

He had not known with what name or rank his beloved preceptor had been serving over there beyond the Pacific. Many officers had fallen, and McCalloway was not one to turn half aside from any danger. If he had been among the lost, Boone might never have known. Even his torture of mind over Asa had been free of this intolerable character of suspense. Now it was lifted, and without a forerunner of hint the man stood there before him in the flesh, smiling and talking of a dress suit!

"I can't believe it, sir," Boone stammered, and McCalloway's ruddy face became quizzical.

"Had you made up your mind to lose me, then?" he inquired.

Much they had in common at that moment of reunion, and one thing in antithesis. Boone thought of his lost race and was smitten with a pang of failure to report, but McCalloway was reading the clarity of bold and honest eyes: of a face to which it was given to wear the karat-mark of dauntlessness and integrity, and at the end of his gaze he gave an unuttered summary of what he had read: "Clean as a hound's tooth--and as strong."

"They beat me to a pulp down there, sir," Boone made prompt and rueful confession, "but there's time to tell about that later. I guess for a while I'm going to keep you busy declining to answer questions about yourself."

"There may be some uncensored passages," smiled the Scot. "I sha'n't have to walk in total darkness."

"The important question is already answered, sir. You are safely back. You were with Kuroki, weren't you?" There Boone halted and grinned as he added: "Don't answer that thar question onlessen ye've a mind ter."

"I was with him for a time. Why do you ask?"

"Because," came the instant and confident response, "where he went there were the signs of genius."

"Genius went with Kuroki quite independently of his subordinates," McCalloway assured him gravely, "but a few moments back I heard you tell some one over the telephone that you couldn't come to her party because you had no evening clothes. The Russian war is over, but the matter of that dress suit retains the force of present crisis."

A half hour later, while the elder man displayed a sartorial knowledge which surprised him, Boone was being measured for his first evening clothes.

"For the Lord's sake, sir," he besought with sudden realization as they left the tailor's shop, "don't ever breathe a word about that spade-tail coat back there in Marlin. I'm going to run for the legislature next time, you know. The man that licked me before had patches on his pants."

McCalloway nodded his head. "I'll tell it not in Gath, speak it not in Ascalon," he promised. "That suit of clothes might prove your political shroud."

Boone saw Anne that evening and with a thrilling voice told her of McCalloway's return--but of the visit to the tailor he said nothing, and she refrained from reverting to the topic of the party.

Anne was sensitive on the point of an invitation urgently given and not eagerly accepted. That is what her consciousness registered, and she told herself that it was petulant and unworthy to attach so much importance to a minor disappointment. But without full realization, other and graver thought elements hung with ponderous weight from the peg of that lesser circumstance. Boone's inability to buy a dress suit was a measure of his poverty and of the great undertaking which lay ahead of him; of the length and steepness of the road he must travel before he could come to her and say, "I have made a home for you."

She herself was to be presented to society with expensive display, and her pride shivered fastidiously at the realization

that all this outlay came from a purse not their own, and entailed an undeclared obligation. She had never been told just how far she and her mother depended on the Colonel's bounty. That had been carefully left enveloped in a hazy indefiniteness that revealed no sharp or embarrassing angle of detail. Had she known it all, her shiver of distaste would have been a shudder of chagrin. But Anne was enough in love with Boone to feel that by his absence from her social launching the sparkle of her little personal triumph would be dulled.

But when at last she stood in her receiving line, radiant in her young loveliness, she glanced up and her violet eyes took on a sudden sparkle, while her cheeks flushed with surprised pleasure, for there, making his way through the door, came Boone.

He came with his stage fright as invisible as the secrets of Bluebeard's closet, so that even Mrs. Masters, looking up with equal surprise though not an equal delight, admitted that in appearance, at least, he was no liability to her company of guests.

The clothes that Victor McCalloway had supervised were tailored as they should have been, with every requisite of conservative elegance, and they set off a figure of a man well sculptured of line and proportion.

As he took Anne's hand he said in a lowered voice and with a twinkle in his eyes, "I came in through the front door--but there wasn't any arch. My legs are shaking."

Anne glanced down. "They are doing it very quietly," she reassured. "No fuss at all."

Because of a straight-eyed sincerity and a candid vigour which endowed him with a forcefulness beyond his years, and because a certain deliberate humour played in his eyes and flashed occasionally into his ungarrulous speech, he found himself smiled upon with the tolerant approval of the older ladies and the point-blank delight of the younger.

Back at his desk the next morning he was again the grave-eyed and industrious young utility man, but in his breast pocket was a crumpled rosebud which to him still had fragrant life. In his mind were certain rich memories and in his veins raced hot currents of love--pitched to a new exhilaration.

Victor McCalloway had become again the lone man of the mountains, and Boone burned with anxiety to go to him there, but the soldier had prohibited that just now. The boy had put his hand to the plough of a virulent city campaign, and until the furrow was turned he must stay there with the men who were making the fight.

"For you, my boy," he had declared, with a live interest that ran to emphasis, "this is an opportunity not to be missed. It is a phase of transition, not only in your own development but in that of your State and your country. Through all of it sounds the insistent message of the future: whoever takes into his hands public affairs must give to the public a conscientious accounting. This is a declaration of war on the old, slothfully accepted dogma that to the victor belongs the spoils. It is Humanity's plea for a place in government."

When McCalloway had gone, Boone carried into the steps and developments of that autumn's activities a freshly galvanized sense of romance and of high adventure. Through the labour of each day thrilled the thought of Anne, and the quiet triumph of being no longer "poor white trash."

In the forces of the political enemy clinging doggedly to the spoils of long possession and sticking at no desperate effort, the boy discovered much that was not mean--rather was it picturesque with a sort of Robin Hood flavour and the drama of a passing order. Here were the twentieth-century counterparts of the gentlemen-gamblers of the old Mississippi steamboat days, a gentry bold and mendacious, unable to perceive that what had been must not for that reason continue to be.

Often Boone went to hear Morgan delivering his philippics to street corner audiences, and often too he dropped around inconspicuously to listen as that administration orator popularly called "The Bull" exhorted "the pure in heart." He liked the extremes between the edged satire and nervous force of the young lawyer whose dress and appearance was always point-device, and whose message was always "*Carthago delenda est*," and the great sonorous voice of the rougher man who knew the hearts of the mob and how to reach them.

At the end of a white-hot campaign came an election day that eclipsed in violence the period of registration, and out of its confusion emerged, as bruised victors, the forces of the city hall.

But the town was aflame, and the call ran to clamour for a contest in court. Lawyers volunteered their services without charge, citizens attended mass meetings to pledge financial support, and the lines drew for fresh battles. In the interval between events Boone doffed his city clothing and donned again the corduroys and flannel shirt of the hills that were now viscid with winter mud and patched with snow between the gray starkness of the timber. He had gone back to the house of Victor McCalloway. There, while the hearth roared, they sat long of evenings, the young man delighting in the

narratives of his elder and glowing with the confidence reposed in him--and the older with a quiet light of satisfaction in his eyes, born of seeing the rugged cub that he had taken to his heart developing into a man of whom he was not ashamed.

"How far, my boy," inquired McCalloway on one of these occasions, when the pipe-smoke wreathed up like altar fires of comradeship, "do you feel you've progressed along the trend of development that your young country has followed?"

Boone shook a self-deprecating head. "I should say, sir, that I've about caught up with the Mexican War."

After a long study of the pictures which fantastically shaped and refashioned themselves in the glowing embers, the veteran went reflectively on again:

"Since coming back this time, I've felt it more than ever like a prophet's dream. Great transitions lie ahead of us--in your own time. You will live to see the day when men in this country will no longer talk of this as a land separated by oceans from the eastern hemisphere; as a land that can continue to live its own untrammelled life. A man, like myself for instance, may be a hermit, but a great nation cannot--and I still feel that when that message of merging and common cause comes, it will come not on the wings of the peace dove but belched from the mouths of guns--riding the gales of war."



CHAPTER XXXI

Boone Wellver walked into the office of the police chief one spring morning when the trees along the streets were youthfully green. Somewhere outside a band, parading with transparencies, was summoning all horse-lovers and devotees of chance to the track and paddocks of Churchill Downs.

Inside the office of the chief sat Morgan Wallifarro, point-device as ever, and over his desk the chief bent, listening with an attitude of deference to what he said. It was a new department head who occupied that swivel chair. New officials occupied every office under that clock-towered roof, and behind each placarded door the suggestions of Morgan Wallifarro held some degree of authoritative force and sanction.

For almost two years the courts had laboured to the grind of the contest cases. Again, shoulder to shoulder with the Nestors of the bar and their younger assistants, Boone had played his minor but far from trivial part. Almost a year before he had listened in the joint sessions room as the decisive utterances of the two chancellors fell upon a taut and expectant stillness. Those arbiters had read long and learned disquisitions as befitted the final chapter to months of hearings. That day had been a Waterloo for attempted Reform. With dignity of manner and legalistic verbiage Boone had heard it adjudged that behind the physical results of the elections the interference of the courts might not penetrate, and he had turned away disheartened but not surprised.

Then had come a new beginning; the final issue in the Court of Appeals, and finally out of that ultimate mill had been ground a reversal and a decision that upon a government seated by such devious and fraudulent methods the cloak of responsibility rested "like the mantle of a giant upon the withered shoulders of a pigmy."

Now as Boone shook hands with the new chief, a patrolman entered the place and stood silently on the threshold. In his eyes was the sullen but unaggressive resentment of the whipped bully. This was the officer who had brandished a club over Morgan Wallifarro's head and who had dragged Boone out of the registration booth under arrest. Gone now was his domineering truculence, gone all but the smouldering of his old, self-confident ferocity. Morgan glanced up without comment, and the chief recognized the new arrival with a curt nod.

"Keefe," he said shortly, "you were under grave charges and failed to appear before the Board of Safety at the designated time."

The uniformed man glowered around the room. One vestige of satisfaction remained to him; that of a truculent exit and of it he meant to avail himself.

"What the hell was the use, Chief. I knew they'd railroad me. I quit right now."

"It's too late. You can't quit!" The words were sharp and incisive, and under the chief's forefinger an electric buzzer rasped. As an orderly appeared, his direction was snapped out: "Call in the lieutenants and captains from the officers' room."

Keefe took a step forward as if in protest, then realizing his helplessness, he halted and stood on braced legs, breathing heavily.

He foresaw what was coming, yet there was no escape, for the hour had struck. He listened stolidly to the ticking clock until several officers in shoulder straps trooped in and lined up, also waiting, then his superior's voice again sounded:

"Keefe, your club!"

The officer laid it on the desk.

"Your revolver." The weapon followed the night-stick. Then the chief rose from his seat.

"You have failed to meet the charges preferred against you. You have used the city's uniform as a protection for law-breaking and violence. Now in the presence of these officers I publicly break you." He ripped the shield from the patrolman's breast and the disgraced man stood a moment unsteadily--almost rocking on his feet as his lips stirred without articulate sound. Then he turned away. His lowering eyes fell upon Morgan Wallifarro, who sat without a word or a change of expression in his chair against the wainscoted wall. For an instant the patrolman seemed on the point of bursting into a valedictory of abuse--even of attack--but he thought better of it, and as he went out there was a shamble in the step that had swaggered.



Colonel Wallifarro's country place had been opened for the summer, and a series of house parties were to follow in Anne's honour, but as yet the season was young and, except for Boone, Victor McCalloway was the family's only guest.

One evening near to sunset the soldier was sitting alone with Anne under the spread of tall pines that swayed and whispered in the light breeze. Before them, graciously undulating to the white turnpike a quarter of a mile distant, went the woodland pasture where the bluegrass lay dappled with the shadows of oak and walnut. It was a land of richness and tranquil charm: the first reward of the pioneers in their great nation-building adventure beyond the unknown ranges. McCalloway's eyes were full of appreciation. They dwelt lingeringly on blooded mares nibbling at rich pasturage, with royally sired foals nuzzling at their sleek flanks. Filling in the distance of a picture that seemed to sing under a singing sky, were acres of wheat waving greenly and of the young hemp's plumed billowing: of woodland stretches free of rock or underbrush. In the branches of the pines a red cardinal flitted, and from a maple flashed the orange and black gorgeousness of a Baltimore oriole. Then the man's eyes came back to the girl.

The figure in its simple summer dress was gracefully lissome. The features, chiseled to a pattern of high-bred delicacy, were yet instinct with strength. As Boone was the exponent of the hills of hardship, which had been the barriers the pioneers had to conquer, so, he thought, was she the flower of that nurture that had bloomed in the places of their victory.

Just now the violet eyes were brimming with grave thoughtfulness, like the shadow of a cloud upon living colour. When McCalloway looked at those eyes he recalled the water in the Blue Grotto, whose scrap of vividness transcends all the other high-keyed colour of Naples Bay--Naples Bay, which is itself a saturnalia of colour!

Without doubt his protg had set his heart on a patrician--but at the moment there was more wistfulness than joyousness in her face, causing the subtle curvature of her lips to droop where so often a smile flashed its brightness.

"Anne," he slowly asked, "would it be impertinence for an old fellow to question that look of dream--almost of anxiety--that seems an alien expression on your face?"

The preoccupation vanished, and she turned her smile upon him.

"Was I looking as dismal as all that?" she demanded. "I guess it was the unaccustomed strain of thinking."

"You remind me," he went on thoughtfully, "of a woman I once thought--and I have never changed my mind--the most charming in Europe. Of course that means no more nor less than that I loved her."

Anne flushed at the compliment and, quickly searching the gray eyes for a quizzical twinkle, found them entirely grave.

"How do I remind you of her, Mr. McCalloway?" The question was put gently.

"I've been asking myself that question, and an exact answer eludes me." He paused a moment, then went soberly on: "Your hair is a disputed frontier, where brown and gold contend for dominion, and hers is midnight black. Your eyes are violet and hers are dark, flecked, in certain lights, with amber. Your colour is that of an old-fashioned rose garden--and hers that of a poppy field."

"It must be only by contrast, then, that I make you think of her," mused the girl. "We are absolute opposites."

"In detail, yes; in essentials, no," protested the man who was old enough to compliment boldly and directly. "You share the quality of goodness, but in itself that's as requisite to character and as externally uninteresting as bones in a body. You share a rarer gift, too. It's not so essential, but it crowns and enthrones its possessor and is life's rarest gift: pure charm. Relative charm we find now and again, but sheer, unalloyed charm is a flower that blooms only under the blue moon of magic."

The pinkness of Anne's cheeks grew deeper.

"Where is she now, sir?"

"For many years she has been where magic is the common law: in Paradise."

"Oh, forgive me. You spoke of her--"

"In the present tense," interrupted the soldier. "Yes, I always do. It is so that I think of her." He broke off, then went on in a changed voice, "But the gravity in eyes that laugh by divine right calls for explanation."

For an instant a tiny line of trouble showed between her brows, and the seriousness returned.

"I think perhaps, Mr. McCalloway, you are the one person I can tell." She paused as though trying to marshal the

sequences of a difficult subject, then spoke impulsively:

"Boone doesn't realize it," she said slowly. "I don't want him to know, because there's nothing he can do about it--yet. Since I made my debut--and that was almost three years ago--I've been under a pressure that's never relaxed. It hasn't been the sort of coercion one can openly fight, but the harder, more insidious thing. It's in mother's eyes--in everything--the unspoken accusation that I'm an ingrate: that I'm selfishly thinking only of myself and not at all of my family."

"You mean in not marrying Morgan?"

The girl nodded. "And in refusing to give Boone up. When he was in Louisville all the time, it was easier. I had his courage to lean on--but since he went back to plan his race for the legislature, I've felt very much alone and outnumbered. They are all so gently immovable. It's terrible to feel that your family are your enemies."

"And your heart refuses the thought of surrender?"

Anne looked at him quickly, and for her eyes he could no longer employ the Blue Grotto as a simile. The waters there are shallow, and in that moment of soul-unmasking he looked through her irises into depths of feeling, sincere and unalterable, and far down under fathoms of sligher things into the basic pools of passion.

"You can hardly call it refusal," she said in a low voice, shaded with a ghost-touch of indignation. "I have never considered it."

"So I had hoped," he responded gravely, "but I owe you the frankness of admitting that I wasn't sure. On such subjects the boy has naturally been reticent. I could be sure only of how *he* felt. I wanted to see him get on, and I knew what your influence would mean to him. It has been what sunlight is to a place where the shadows lie too thick. In the mountains, my dear, cows that browse where the sun doesn't penetrate get 'dew poisoning.' Human beings get it from the milk. To both it is often fatal. There's dew poisoning in Boone's blood, too, from generations of brooding shadows. He needed you."

He paused, and she bent forward. "Yes," she prompted softly.

"So I was glad for every moment he had with you--glad enough, even, to endure the thought of what it might ultimately cost him in the usury of heartache."

"And you were willing to let him undergo the heartache?" Her voice perceptibly hardened. "I'm afraid that's a loyalty I can't understand."

"It's the loyalty of a soldier's faith in him," he responded briefly. "I believed that if he must go through the fire he would come out of it not slag, but good metal."

"If his heart has to ache,"--the girl's eyes were tender again--"it won't be because I fail him."

"And, for the present, it is you who are paying the assessments of heartache?"

"I guess it's not quite that bad,"--but her smile was forced. "I'm merely being gloomed on by melancholy in the family circle as a life-hope going to wreck. By a nod of my head--an acquiescent one to Morgan--I could set the broken family fortunes up again beyond danger and make everybody happy--except myself and Boone. They can't see anything but sheer perversity in my refusal. They see me, as they think, drifting on a sea of poverty and spinsterhood when the port lies open; they see me as a bridesmaid to my friends getting married--even as a godmother to their children--and they shake gloomy heads because the water is all running by the mill!"

"And you are--how old?"--McCalloway's eyes were twinkling with the question, "--in your hopeless celibacy?"

"Twenty-one," came the exact answer. "But it's not just that. Boone still has his way to make. This fall the legislature--two years hence a race for Congress. It's all a very long road."

The soldier nodded his head in understanding. "Yes, it's the waiting game that strains the staunchest morale," he admitted. "And you realize that it won't grow easier. But what of Morgan himself?"

"I guess if there were no Boone," she made candid admission, "Morgan would have won. He has force and power--and I am a worshipper of those things in a man. I thought at first he was a prig, but he's developed. It may be generosity or it may be calculation, but he will neither consent to give me up--nor try to hurry me. He plays the game hard, but he plays it fair."

McCalloway rekindled the pipe that had died, and his next words followed a meditative cloud of smoke from his lips.

"It's not hard to understand any man's loving you. I happen to know that more than a few have. Yet if any one might escape, I'd pick Morgan. For him social values and externals are ruling passions. For you they are incidental only."

Anne nodded, but her answer went arrow-straight to the core of the truth. "Morgan fancies me because he thinks I'm popular and well-born. It would make no difference to Boone if I were friendless."

Her confidant laughed. "Here comes Boone himself," he said, rising. "Of late he's been building his political fences and hasn't seen enough of you. I am going to leave you, but at any time that the counsel of an old fellow can help you, call on me, my dear. I'm always at your command--yours and his."

As he turned his steps toward the house, McCalloway saw the Colonel rouse himself from his afternoon nap in his verandah chair. That morning's *Courier-Journal* slipped down from the forehead it had been screening against the sun, and the Colonel became aware of a presence at his side. Moses, his butler, stood there with juleps on a tray.

As McCalloway arrived on the verandah and took his glass from the negro, his host rose with a yawning and apologetic smile. "If you'll pardon me, sir," he said, "I'll leave you long enough to dip my sleepy face into a basin of cold water." But when the master had gone the servant lingered until, with an inquisitive impulse, McCalloway put a question.

"Moses, what is your other name? I've never heard it, have I?"

The darkey smiled. "I reckon not, sir. Most everybody calls me Colonel Wallifarro's Mose."

The guest reflectively sipped his julep. Moses had always interested him by virtue of his decorous address, which escaped the usual negro pomposity as entirely as his speech escaped the negro dialect. Moses was endowed, not with manners but with a manner--to himself, McCalloway had almost said "the grand manner." It was as if his life, close to fine and sincere things, had made him, despite his blackness of skin, also a gentleman.

"But you have a surname, I dare say."

"Yes, sir. Wallver."

"The same as the Colonel's?"

The butler smiled with an infectious good humour and bowed his head.

"Yes, sir. In slave times we servants took our names from our masters. I reckon my parents did like the rest. But the coloured people spell it the shortest way."

"I see. And you have always been in his service?"

"Whenever he kept house, sir. When Mrs. Wallifarro died and Mr. Morgan was at boarding school, the Colonel lived at the Club. I was assistant steward there during that time, sir."

"Ah, that accounts for a number of things," hazarded the guest with a smile. "For your *ex cathedra* knowledge of serving wines, for example."

"No, sir, I hardly think so." There was a respectful trace of negation and hauteur in the disclaimer. "I learned in the Colonel's house. That was why they wanted me at the Club."

"Of course; I beg your pardon."

When the coloured man had withdrawn, the smile lingered on the weathered face of the soldier, drawing pleasing little wrinkles about his eyes. Here indeed was that traditional and charming flavour of ingredients which the South has given to the diverse table of the nation.

Colonel Wallifarro was a gentleman in whom the definition of aristocracy found justification; the negro, a survivor of that form of slavery in which the master held his chattel, was a human soul in trust--they were Wallifarros white and black!

Then McCalloway's eyes fell on Boone as he greeted Anne, and a new thought flashed into his mind.

"Wallifarro--Wallver--Wellver," he exclaimed to himself under his breath. "Boone said his old grandfather spoke of his people being lords and ladies once!"

His mind, tempted into a speculative train of ideas, began weaving a pattern of genealogical surmise--a pattern involving not only the blood-lines of a single family, but also the warp and woof of national beginnings. In his

imagination he completed the trinity. The Colonel and his servant were exponents of the Old South and its gracious oligarchy. Boone sprang from the hills that bred a race which some one had called "The Roundheads of the South." Yet at the start Boone's blood and that of the Colonel's had perhaps been one blood: the sap of a single and identical tap-root. Two brothers, setting out together in that hegira of empire seekers that turned their faces west, had perhaps been separated by the chances of the wilderness trail. One had won through, and his sons and daughters had dwelt in ease. One had fallen by the hard road, and the mould of decay had taken him root and branch. The name of the stranded one had lapsed into its phonetic equivalent--as had the negro's--and yet--

"No matter. He does not seem to have guessed it," murmured McCalloway. "Perhaps after all it's as well so. He'll make the name as he wears it one that men will come to know."

CHAPTER XXXII

Summer, before it has freckled into hot fulness and forgotten the fresh scent and colour of blossoms! June heralding blitheness from the golden throats of troubadour field larks, rustling and crooning her message in green branches under a sky whose blue is proclamation of her love motif!

Certainly to Boone Wellver and Anne Masters picking strawberries together in a little arbour-walled, orchard-bounded world of garden, the centre of life lay within themselves, and the letters of life spelled "You and I."

On the girl's uncovered hair the stir of a light breeze and the sparkle of a clear sun awoke that dispute of dominion of which McCalloway had spoken; contention along the borderland between brown and gold. On her cheek the crystal brightness threw its searching question and revealed no flaw.

Boone, looking up from the place where he knelt among the vines, found in his own heart the echo to all the day's minstrelsy. He rose to his feet with his bronzed face paled under a sudden wave of emotion, which broke out of his surcharged feeling as a whitecap breaks on the crest of a high running swell. His eyes, devouringly fixed on the girl, blazed into a wordless adoration, and he felt, at once, giant-strong and water-weak in the surge of the great paradox. It would just then have been as easy for him to construe the fourth dimension as to put his lover's thoughts into a lover's words, but her woman's eyes read what he could not say and became bafflingly deep as she turned them away across the gold and blue and green of the morning.

Boone's arms twitched at his sides under the fret of his inarticulate fulness of spirit. The only language left in him was that primitive language of action. His, under the superimposed structure of acquired things, was a heritage which could know no love that was not a soul-stirring passion; no hate that was not a withering fire.

Now it seemed to him that under the hurricane power of his love for Anne Masters the pillars of the world shook. He caught her in his arms and pressed her to him until her hair brushed his cheek and her heart-beat could be felt against his breast.

His voice, at last regained, was broken like that of a man sobbing.

"I can't say it--there aren't any words--for it!"

All his previous love-making had made Anne remember that first agitated confession, "I think of you like the evening star--you're as far out of reach as if you were up there in heaven." Always there had been something almost humble in his deference, as if he had admitted himself a vassal lifting eyes to royalty. Now he was seizing her with the fierce proprietary embrace of one who claims his own and who will not be denied. The arms that held her pressed her till they hurt in the embrace of the untamed man for his own woman, and, since for her too, love was the great paradox, the fierce and ardent flood that had swept him lifted her on its tide and rang through her with a sort of wild triumph.

"You--you don't have to say anything--now," she told him somewhat faintly. If it had been up yonder, with the jutting escarpments of the hills about them, this wild moment would have shaped itself in more orthodox fashion with the eternal fitnesses. But the moment left them with something of tumultuous exaltation, as though they had burst together through the shell of a superficial world and touched the essentials.

After a little, when again they could realize the more tranquil voices of the birds and the little winds, Anne, with a hand on each of his shoulders, spoke slowly and very thoughtfully:

"I don't need to be told, Boone. If I didn't know, life wouldn't be worth much to me."

"When I'm away from you," he answered still in a shaken voice, "I always hear your voice. I always see you, yet when I come back to you, you're always a surprise to me--I find that my memory hasn't been able to do you justice."

She was silent for a little, and then into the serene contentment of her eyes crept a tiny shadow of trouble.

"Boone, dear," she said soberly, "we have a long time to wait--and we can't afford to--let ourselves--be tempest-tossed this way--until we can see the end. We can't be patient and--like this--at the same time."

"How can I be patient?" he demanded.

"You know," she reminded him. "I'm not wearing an engagement ring yet and--"

His face shadowed ruefully, but he forced a confident smile and pitched his tone to the manner of jest.

"The ring that's fit for you to wear ought to cost a king's ransom, Anne," he declared, "and I haven't any monarchs in

the 'jail-house' just yet."

"It isn't that, dear, and you know it. If I were to wear your ring now--with years perhaps of waiting--it would only mean endless war at home. There'll be unavoidable battles enough when the time comes. It hardly seems worth while to court them in advance."

"I knew,"--he spoke with a heavy heart--"that they'd take you through the torture chamber before they let you marry me. Are you sure, dearest, that I'm worth it to you?"

The girl's head came up with the tilt of pride which he loved, and with the violet blaze in its eyes.

"Have I complained?" she asked.

"Anne,"--the man bent forward and spoke with the fervent earnestness of invincible resolve--"I have a long way to go. I'm still down on the ground level and you are still the evening star! Stars and groundlings, dear heart! They're very far apart, but there's a beacon burning before me and there's a magic in your love!" His expression had grown as tender as it had a little while before been elemental, yet it was not less purposeful. "In time, by God's grace I shall climb up to you, but it's a steep journey, and it's asking a good deal of you to mark time while I travel it."

"It's asking so much," declared the girl, "that I wouldn't do it if it wasn't the one thing in the world I want to do--if my heart wasn't set on that and nothing else."

"Thank God!" he breathed, "and thank *you!*"

After a little Anne spoke speculatively:

"I've missed you rather terribly this time. You've seemed to be away so long."

"I've been building political fences, but to me it's been exile," he told her. "This race for the legislature seems a trivial thing to keep me away from you. If I win it--and God knows I've *got* to win--it's still a petty victory. But it's the first stage of the journey, and after the legislature comes Congress. You see, small as it is, it's vital."

Anne studied the gossamer building about which a spider was busying itself, and Boone knew that in her mind some matter was demanding discussion. He waited for her to broach it and soon she began.

"Morgan held politics in contempt until he went too far into the game to abandon it, but even now he's seeking to make it lead to something else."

"What?" inquired Boone, wondering what topic Anne was approaching by this path of indirection.

"I can tell you without abusing a confidence," she laughed, "because he's never told me. I've only guessed it, but I'm sure I'm right. His goal is a European embassy with a life near the trappings of a throne. And since Morgan is Morgan, he'll get it. He never fails."

"In one thing," announced Boone shortly, "he's going to fail."

Anne nodded, "In one thing he is," she agreed. "But if he goes into the diplomatic service, Boone, there'll be a place left vacant in the firm. Have you thought of that? Wouldn't your own future lie smoother that way? You could take your place here at the bar instead of struggling to herd wild sheep, and in the end you'd be Uncle Tom's logical successor."

Boone's face became sober, almost, Anne thought, distressed. The easy swing of his shoulders stiffened, and Anne intuitively knew that instead of suggesting a new thought she had broached a subject of painful deliberation, already mulled over with a heavy heart.

Into the young lover's mind flashed the picture of a rough hill evangelist exhorting rougher hearers, and of scriptural words: ... "taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them."

Finally he spoke: "I *have* thought of it, Anne.... The Colonel has even suggested it.... Of course he hasn't said anything about Morgan's going away; he only intimated that there might be a place for me in the practice."

"You didn't refuse? It's a good law firm, you know--old and honoured."

Suddenly he spread his hands in a gesture almost of appeal, as though he hoped she might understand and yet hardly dared to expect it.

"Anne, those wild sheep you just spoke of are my people. Perhaps with all their faults they have a few virtues too, and,

if they have, loyalty to their own blood is chief of them. The world knows most about their murders, their moonshining and their abysmal ignorance, but you know that their blood is the most undiluted and purest American blood in America. You know that their children grow up illiterate only because they have no alternative. You know that those people are wild, lawless, but, thank God, generous to a fault, and as honest as the sun is bright. You know that even in their law-breaking they don't follow a base criminality so much as a perverted code of ethics. I was one of them. I inherited their blood-hatreds and their squalor, and because of generous friends I was rescued. If I am worth the effort spent on me at all, I owe it to those men, who saved me from what I might have been, to do my utmost for my 'wild sheep.'"

The girl was counting the iridescent threads of the spider's web, but her eyes caught the fixity with which his hand had unconsciously clenched itself. All that he said was undoubtedly true and creditable. She would not, in theory, have had him feel or speak otherwise, yet, since it is as impossible to eliminate one's ego from thought as to see through one's reflection in a mirror, she felt suddenly sick at heart.

If the effect of his liberation from the squalid things of his origin meant, after all, only to bind him the more strongly to them; if a quixotic sense of obligation barred him from the broader world he had won to, wherein lay the virtue of salvation? She loved the majestic wildness of the hills and the sweep of their free winds, but of the people in general she had thought as one gently bred and nurtured might naturally think of the less fortunate and more vulgar of the world.

Then she heard his words going on again but seeming to sound from a distance:

"Except for what generous friends did for me, I might—I would in all probability have grown as rank and wild as many other boys up there. The feud would perhaps have claimed me. For human life and human rights, I might have had the same contempt, and instead of standing here free and fortunate I might even now be wearing stripes in the penitentiary. If I've escaped, I think my people are entitled to what little I can offer them."

Anne felt a weight of foreboding on her heart, but she laid her hands on his shoulders. "Of course, dear," she said softly, "it's not just getting to the place, after all, is it? One must travel the right road, too."

On the deck-rail of a coast-wise fruit steamer beating down from equatorial waters leaned two men, whose ages were seemingly about forty. Off the starboard bow lay the island of San Lorenzo, yellow in the sun, with its battered crown of broken fortress. Ahead lay Callao, yellow, too, with its adobe walls, and rust-red where its corrugated iron roofs caught and husbanded the heat which needed no husbanding. Far off, between terraces of sand and the slopes of San Cristobal, one could make out the church towers of Lima.

The two travellers looked idly, somewhat contemptuously, on a shore line that had fired the imagination of Pizarro and his conquistadores. They were not of those to whom historic associations lend glamour, neither were they themselves precisely objects of romantic interest. One was dark of hair and skin and saturnine of expression. The other was blond, floridly blond, and unmistakably Teutonic.

"Know anything about oil, mein friendt?" inquired the fair-haired traveller, and the other laughed.

"Oil? My middle name's oil. I've drilled it in Mexico and—" abruptly the speaker became less expansive as he added, "and elsewhere."

The German smiled. "Elsewhere?" he observed. "It is a large place--nein? Has oil been always your business?"

From Guayaquil they had been travelling companions, but they had shared no personal confidences. The reply came non-committally.

"I've followed some several things."

The Teuton did not press his interrogations, and a silence fell between the two. While it lasted, the face of Saul Fulton settled into a frown of discontent.

At Lima there would perhaps be mail, and upon the answer to a letter written long ago his future plans depended.

"Shall we dine together in Lima?" The suggestion came at last from the German. "So perhaps we shall be less bored."

Saul Fulton nodded. "Why not? I'll meet you at the American caf at six, but the dinner'll be on me."

Fulton could afford to entertain if the spirit moved him, and if his news was good he would have the wish to celebrate.

These years of his wanderings since he had left home with an indictment hanging above his head had not all been lean, but prosperity in exile had of late become bitter on his tongue with the ashiness of dead-sea fruit. Saul was homesick. He wanted to shake from his feet for ever this dry dust of the rainless west coast. He wanted to see the stars come up out of a paling lemon afterglow, across peaks ragged with hardwood and fringed with pine.

He had tasted the bread and wine of many latitudes, and perhaps in all of them life had been more kindly than in the mountains of his birth, yet no child could be more homesick. He wanted to parade before the pinch of his neighbour's poverty the little prizes of his ignoble success--and, more than that, he wanted something else.

But when the sun was dropping back of San Cristobal's cone he stood on a cobble-stoned street on the outskirts of Lima, cursing under his breath with a torn envelope in his hand. His letter had not brought him good news.

The communication, in the first place, had not come from the man to whom he had written, though he grudgingly admitted that perhaps this vicarious reply was essential to caution.

"To come back here now would be the most heedless thing in the world, he says." That had been the hateful gist culled from the detail. The "he says" must refer to the unnamed attorney, to whom Saul had made the confession which gave value to his evidence against Asa Gregory.

If Asa were free, of course he knew that to return to Marlin County would be to ask insistently for death--and not to ask in vain. But Asa lay securely immured behind jail walls which would not be apt to open for him unless to let him pass into the still safer walls of the penitentiary or out into the cemented yard where the gallows stood.

The forces of the prosecution owed him something. They owed him so much that he had walked in no terror of extradition, or even, after a prudent absence, molestation at home. Technically of course he still stood charged as an accomplice to murder who had forfeited his bond, but there may be divergences between a technical and an actual status. The attorney who preferred now not to be quoted had doubtless discussed the matter with the Commonwealth, and that the Commonwealth had no wish to hound him was indicated by this passing on of the advice "ride wide."

Who then stood between him and a safe return to the State he had served with vital testimony? This letter told him in the none too elegant phrasing of a friend from the hills.

"Asa himself won't bother you unless the Governor pardons him out--and the Governor ain't likely to do that. He's the man that went in when Goebel died. I say he ain't likely to pardon Asa--but still there has been some changes here. The Democrat party has had some quarrels inside itself. The Louisville crowd has been kicked out by this same governor, and the lawyers that helped get it done were the Wallifarro crowd. You may not remember much about Boone Wellver, because he was a kid when you left, but he thinks Asa's a piece of the moon, and he's a lawyer now hisself in Wallifarro's offices. Those men stand close to the Governor, and this Boone Wellver has wore out the carpet at Frankfort, tramping in to argue for Asa's pardon. But that ain't all. He's talked hisself blue in the face trying to have you brought back and hung. Back in Marlin he's aimin' to go to the legislature and he's buildin' up influence. If he wins out he's goin' to be a power there, and, if he gets to be, you can't never come home."

At that point Saul lowered the pages of the letter and cursed again under his breath. Then he read on again though by now he knew the contents by heart.

"It was heedless for you to write to Jim Beverly. Wellver heard of that through some tattle-talk and went to the Commonwealth attorney and told where you was at. He'll hound you as long as he lives, and if you come back here you'll walk into his trap--unless you can contrive to get him out of the way. He stands across your path, and you've got either to lay low or get rid of him. If you came back here, one of you would have to die as sure as God sits on high."

Saul thrust the letter back into his pocket. A string of pack llamas swung grunting by under their loads, driven by ponchoed cholos. Overhead a vulture lumbered by. From the stand of a street vendor drifted the odours of skewered fowl-livers and black olives. Over the whole Spanish-American panorama brooded the treeless foothills of the Cordilleras that went back to the Andes. Everything that came to eye and nostril of Saul Fulton carried the hateful aspect and savour of the alien.

"I disgust the whole damn land," he declared as he rose, for though he no longer felt in a mood of celebration it was time to meet the "Dutchman" for dinner.

Reticence was second nature to the plotter who had just heard of the growing power of a new enemy, but there was wine for dinner and a sympathetic listener, and under the ache of nostalgia and the need of outpouring, his discretion

for once weakened.

It was late when over their coffee cups and cigarettes Saul realized that he had been talking too freely, but the German leaned forward and nodded a sympathetic head.

"I am discreet," he reassured. "I understand."

After a moment he added, "It may surprise you, mein friendt, to learn that I, too, have been in your Kentucky mountains. It was when they first talked of oil there some years back.... I did not remain long.... Oil there was but not in gushers ... at the price of the markets it did not pay. It only tantalized with false hope."

Saul looked up. A crafty gleam shot into his eyes as he started to speak, then he repressed the words on his lips and remained silent.

After a long while, however, he began hesitantly:

"There's oil there still--and there's places where it would pay. That's why I'm itchin' to go back. With what I know now and those fools there don't know, I could get rich; big rich, and this damned young Wellver stands barrin' my way."

"Perhaps,"--the German spoke tentatively--"we could do business together. I go to the States shortly mein-self."

"Business, hell!" Saul Fulton's hand smote the table. "A stranger couldn't swing things. Folks would jump prices on you. They suspicion strangers, there."

He sat silent for a time, and the German puffed contemplatively at his cigarette. Outside somewhere a band was playing. Above the patio where they sat at table the stars were large and tranquil. A fountain plashed in silvery tinkles.

Saul Fulton's face grew sinister with its thoughts, and when at last he spoke again it was with the air of a man who has debated to a conclusion the problem that besets him and who, having decided, sets his foot into the Rubicon of action.

"I'm goin' back there, myself. There's ways an' means of gettin' rid of brash trouble-makers, an' if any man knows 'em in an' out, an' back an' forth, it's me."

Otto Gehr shrugged his white-coated shoulders.

"The fit should survive," he made answer.

Saul raised his almost empty glass. "Here's Luck," he said. "This Wellver lad is marked down for what's comin' to him."



CHAPTER XXXIII

Morgan's car was making the most rapid progress through the downtown traffic that the law allowed, and his electric energies were fretting for greater speed. The days were all too short for him with their present demands, and he forced himself with the merciless rigour of a man who is both overseer and slave. Now he was allowing himself just forty-five minutes for luncheon at the club, and back at the office men and matters were waiting.

He found gratification in the deference with which policemen saluted, and in the glances that turned toward him as his chauffeur slowed down at the corners. He knew that his fellow townsmen were saying, "That's Morgan Wallifarro!" It was enough to say that, for the name bore its own significance. It meant, "That is the man who has just carried a Democratic town for a Republican mayor, and who had much to do with carrying a Democratic State for a Republican governor. Even in national councils his voice begins to bear weight."

These things were incense in the nostrils of the hurrying young lawyer, but suddenly his attention was arrested from them, and he rapped on the glass front of the closed car. He had seen Anne on the sidewalk, and at his signal the machine swung in to the curb and halted.

"I'm on my way home," she told him, "and you're far too rushed to cavalier me during business hours," but he waved aside her remonstrances and helped her in.

"I'm so busy," he declared, "that I can't waste a moment--and every possible moment lost from you is wasted."

The November sun was clear and sparkling, and the girl settled back with an amused smile as she looked into the self-confident, audacious eyes of the man at her side.

"It gives me a feeling of exaggerated importance to ride in your machine, Morgan," she teased. "It's a triumphal progress through the bowing multitude."

Her companion grinned. "When are you going to make my car your car and my homage your homage, Anne?" he brazenly demanded.

The girl's laugh rippled out, and in her violet eyes the twinkle sparkled. She liked him best when he was content to clothe his words in the easy garb of jest, so she countered in paraphrase.

"When are you going to let my answer be your answer, and my decision your decision?"

"It's no trouble to ask," he impudently assured her. "You remember the man who

"Proposed forty thousand and ninety-six times,
--And each time, but the last, she said, 'No.'"

You see the whole virtue of that man lay in his pertinacity."

After a moment's silence he added, in a voice out of which had gone all facetiousness even while it lingered in the words themselves, "There are a thousand reasons, Anne, why I can't give you up. I've forgotten nine hundred and ninety-nine of them but I remember one. I love you utterly."

Her eyes met his with direct gravity.

"But why, Morgan?" she demanded with a candid directness. "I'm the opposite in type of every one else you cultivate or care for. I'm really not your sort of person at all, you know."

"Perhaps," he said, "it's because you are the most thoroughbred woman I know, and I want to be proud of my wife. Perhaps it's merely that you're you."

"Thank you," she said simply. "It's a pity, Morgan dear, that I can love you in every way except the one way. I wish you'd pick out a girl really suited to you."

"By the 'every way except the one way,'" he interposed, "you mean platonically?"

Anne nodded, and the man said, "Of course I know the reason. It's Boone."

"Yes." The admission was disarmingly frank. "It's Boone. I've just had a letter from him. He won his race for the legislature and now he's laying down his lines of campaign for the bigger prize of the congressional race next time."

Morgan's smile was innocent of grudge-bearing. "I know. I wired congratulations this morning. Of course his race was

really won when he came out of the primaries victorious."

Anne reflected that in the old days Morgan would have spoken differently, and in a less generous spirit. To him a contest for a legislative seat from a rough hill district must appear almost trivial, and for the victor his personal rancour might have left no room for congratulation. He himself had, in a larger battle, just won more conspicuous prizes of reputation and power, and yet the heartiness of his tone as he spoke of Boone's little success was sincere and in no sense marred by any taint of the perfunctory.

"It was rather handsome of Boone to go back there and throw his hat into the ring," he continued gravely. "He might have harvested quicker and showier results here, but he wanted to be identified with his own people. God knows they need a Progressive, in that benighted hinterland."

Anne's eyes mirrored her gratification, but before she could give it expression the car stopped.

"What!" exclaimed Morgan; "are we here already?" He opened the door and helped her out, but as he stood on the sidewalk with his hat raised he added in a note of unalterable resolve:

"I don't want to persecute and pursue you, Anne, but the day will come--perhaps the forty thousand and ninety-sixth time of asking--when you'll say 'Yes.' Meanwhile I can wait--since I must. One thing I cannot and will not do; give you up."

"Good-bye," she smiled. "And thank you for the lift."

Morgan turned to the car again and said crisply to the driver: "Straight to the office. I sha'n't stop for lunch now."

Colonel Wallifarro stepped from the train at Marlin Town and turned up the collar of his heavy coat, while an edged and searching wind carried its chill through clothing and flesh and seemed to strike at the marrow of a man's bones.

The Colonel felt the dismal and bleak oppressiveness of a picture blotted from visual record by the reeking blackness of a winter dawn. A railway schedule apparently devised for purposes of human torture had deposited him in a sleeping town gloomed down on by sleeping mountains at the hour when mortal spirits are at their zero of vitality, and the train that had marooned him there wailed on its way like a strident banshee.

In his pocket was the telegram that had brought him. It had come from Larry Masters and had succeeded only in bewildering and alarming its recipient with words that explained nothing except that the sender stood in some desperate need of instant help. The words had startled Tom Wallifarro like a scream heard in a dark street.

He had responded in person and at once. Now Larry was not even at the station to meet him, so the Colonel turned and trudged forebodingly through the viscid slop of unpaved streets, churned by yesterday's feet of men and mules and oxen, toward that edge of the town where the mine superintendent had his bungalow.

Through the windows of the house when he drew near he caught the pallid glimmer of lamplight, but to his first rapping on the door there was no response. A vigorous repetition, which started echoes up and down the empty dark, brought at length a dull voice of summons, "Come in," and on turning the knob the visitor looked upon a man who sat at the centre of his room in apathetic collapse.

A kerosene lamp, guttering now to the inanition of spent fuel and wick, revealed a face of pasty pallor and eyes deep sunk in dark sockets. It was cold in the room, for on the hearth, where the fire had been long unmended, only a few expiring embers glinted in the gray of the ash bed.

Colonel Wallifarro's first impression was that the man who had called on him for help had turned meantime to the more immediate solace of alcohol, and that now he was whiskey sodden, but a second glance dispelled that conjecture. This torpidity was not born of drunkenness but despair.

"I'm here, Larry," said Colonel Wallifarro, as he fumbled with chilled fingers into a breast pocket and fished out a telegraph envelope. "I took it the case was urgent."

Aroused a little out of his stupefaction by the matter-of-fact steadiness of the voice, Masters came wearily to his feet. Through an open door which gave upon the sleeping-room, Colonel Wallifarro caught a glimpse of an untouched bed and knew that the other must have spent the night sitting here, wakeful yet forgetful of the hearth-fire that had sputtered to its death.

"I'm ruined, Tom," announced Larry Masters in an intonation which ran level and unmodulated, as though even the

voice of the man had lost all flexibility, and having made that startling assertion the speaker sank again into his chair and his former inertness of posture.

To press with questions at the moment seemed useless, so the lawyer threw off his overcoat and knelt down to rekindle and replenish the fire.

When at last it was again blazing he found and poured whiskey, and at the end of ten minutes he prompted again, "I've come in answer to your summons, Larry. Hadn't you better try to tell me about it?"

The man nodded, and with an effort pulled himself somewhat together. "This time it's not only ruin but disgrace--prison, I expect."

"What have you done?"

"The fund. All of it. It's gone."

"The fund--gone? I don't understand." Colonel Wallifarro spoke with a forehead corrugated in bewilderment. "Begin at the start of the story. You forget that I haven't the remotest idea of what this is all about."

"The fund, I tell you," reiterated Masters stupidly. "Gone!"

"Gather yourself together, man. Drink that whiskey."

For once the glass had stood unregarded at the Englishman's elbow. Now he lifted it abstractedly to his lips, but this time he only sipped it and set it down. Then with an effort he rose and went to the hearth, where he stood with trembling hands outspread and limbs shivering before the rekindled blaze.

"I met Cantwell in Lexington.... We talked the matter over as to the final details.... The rest had been arranged, you see.... Finally he gave me the money ... in cash ... \$20,000 it was."

"Twenty thousand--gone? Whose money?"

"The company's."

Colonel Wallifarro braced himself as he had braced himself against many other shocks. Patiently his legal capacity for bringing coherence out of obscurity led his dazed companion through the mazes of his torpor. Direct questioning found a trail of broken narrative and followed it with a hound's pertinacity, until the story rounded into some sort of shape.

Larry the visionary, with the plunger's mirage always teasing him through the arid conditions of a low salaried exile, had, it seemed, caught at the fringes of success--and slipped into disaster. Through years he had hoarded small savings out of his frugal income with the gambler's eagerness to have a "stake" against the swift passing of the golden opportunity. Finally he had thought that it had not all been in vain. His eye had appraised other fields where the coal ran out in sparse and attenuated veins but where the "sand blossom" spoke of oil. His hoardings had gone straightway into options, at prices based on farming valuations where farms were cheap.

It had remained then to enlist the interest of capital in taking up these many options and securing others, and that required a large sort of sum. Larry had gone to the directors of the company that employed him. He had haunted their offices and they had endured his obdurate besieging only because he was an efficient man cheaply employed, and, as such, entitled to one hare-brained eccentricity.

Columbus striving to raise money from a world convinced of the earth's flatness, with which to sail round a sphere, encountered a scepticism no more stolid, and yet in the end Masters had convinced them. The persuasion was accomplished only when other adventurers were beginning to clip coupons from just such enterprises in adjacent fields. When, to the monied men, "Masters' folly" became "Masters' discovery," the native landowners were growing as wary as ducks that have been decoyed, and dealing with them at a tempting profit required subterfuge. Besides the options already held there were more to be secured before the proposition was rounded into unity. Masters had therefore lined up, as his purchasing agents, men of native blood and apparently of no organized unity. Employing cash instead of checks bearing tell-tale signatures, they could still acquire at a song, and a poor song, too, large oil-bearing tracts virgin to the drill.

So, with his plan patiently built, like a house of cards that had often tumbled but which at last seemed steady, Masters had turned away from the Lexington interview with a black bag containing treasure enough to awaken all the old, long-prostrate dreams. A life tarnished with futility seemed on the bright verge of redemption. A share in the Eldorado would be his own, and after years of eating the bread of discontent his crushed pride could rise and stand erect, fuller

nourished.

These grandiose prospects of the altered future called for celebration, very moderate, of course, because now above all other times he needed a dependable and clear brain. With the tingling of the alcohol in his arteries his dreams expanded--and he drank more.

Then he had been robbed.

"But how in God's name could it happen?" demanded the Colonel. "You were stopping overnight at the Phoenix. Didn't you put your money in the safe?"

Masters raised a pair of nerveless hands in a deprecatory gesture.

"I was drinking. I had certain memoranda in the same bag and I took it up to my room to run over some details--then he came and knocked at the door."

"Who came?"

"I don't know. He called me by name and seemed to be a man of means and cultivation. We drank and chatted together. It was in my bedroom in a city hotel, mind you. I didn't drink much.... The bag was locked ... the key was on the table by my hand.... Of course in some fashion he had learned of the money being turned over to me. How?"

The response was dry.

"I don't know. What happened?"

"God knows. I suppose it was some variation of the old device of knock-out drops or some sort of drug. I awoke sitting in my chair--very sick at my stomach--and had just time to make my train by rushing off without breakfast. I had been there all night. I glanced in the bag and seeing the packet there with the rubber bands around it right as rain, I failed to suspect. It was when I got here that I found it had been rifled."

"And the man?"

"I talked with the hotel by long distance. No one by the name he gave me had been registered there. The description meant nothing to them."

"Why," inquired the Colonel presently, "didn't you tell me of this plan of yours in advance--this enterprise?"

Masters shook his head. "You'd only have laughed at me like the rest. I was getting fed up on being laughed at. It gets on a man's nerves in time. For just once in my life I wanted to be the one who could say 'I told you so!'"

"What steps have you taken--toward catching the thief?"

The victim groaned. "Don't you see that I couldn't take any? To report to the police would be an admission to the company. The whole thing was trusted to my hands after much reluctance. Can't you see that my story would seem a bit thin?"

Masters' words ended with a gulp, and in his eyes was the stark terror of panic reacting after the comatose silence of lethargy.

Colonel Wallifarro's face, too, had become drawn and distraught. For a time he paced the floor up and down without a word, his hands tight held at his back and his head bowed low on his breast. As he walked, Masters, from his chair by the table, followed his movements with eyes that held no light except that of fear and wretchedness.

Finally the lawyer halted before the chair. His brow was drawn, but in face and attitude was the pronouncement of a decision reached. Tom Wallifarro had been wrestling with complex and intermingled elements of the problem as he walked. When he halted, the shifting perplexities had resolved and settled into determination.

"I've got to see you through this, Larry, and it's going to be a hard scratch. I suppose you think of me as wealthy. Most people do, but it's necessary to be frank with you. I have a very handsome practice, and I have for many years lived well up to that income--at times I've overstepped the boundary. I have my farm in Woodford and my house in town. I have a considerable insurance, and that about sums up my resources. I draw from the running channel of my law fees and it's a generous flow, but one I've never dammed providently into a reservoir of surplus. If I have to raise twenty thousand dollars off-hand, I shall have to borrow. Thank God my credit will stand it."

"But, Tom"--Masters broke chokingly off.

"Please don't try to thank me."

"Not perhaps for myself, but I happen to know that your means have supported not only your own family but my family as well."

"Larry,"--Colonel Wallifarro spoke in a harder tone than was customary with him--"your folly has been almost criminal ... but if it meant stripping myself to beggary I couldn't see Anne's father accused of a breach of trust. Even if I cared nothing for you, my boy, it would come to the same thing. I fancy I shall sell the farm."

"My God!" groaned Masters. "It's the apple of your eye, Tom."

Colonel Wallifarro fumbled for a cigar and lighted it, saying nothing for a time. When he spoke it was with an irrelevant change of topic.

"Not quite, Larry. The apple of my eye is a dream. If, before I die, I can trot a grandchild on my knee--a child with Morgan's will and Anne's fine-fibred sweetness--" he paused a moment and then gave a short laugh--"then I could contentedly strike my tent for the beyond."

"I'm afraid her heart--"

Colonel Wallifarro raised a hand in interruption.

"I know, Larry. Don't misunderstand me. It would have to be along the way of her happiness or not at all. I feel almost a paternal interest in Boone Wellver. But I've always believed that they'd grow apart with the years and she and Morgan would grow together. Anyhow it's my dream, and for a time yet I sha'n't let go my hold upon it." His tone changed and again he spoke as a lawyer weighing the inelastic force of facts. "But time is vital to you. These options must be taken up. There must be no suspicious delay. I'll catch the next train back to town and arrange to get money in your hands at once."



CHAPTER XXXIV

Boone had written to Anne after the election in a vein of satisfaction for a race won. "It is a small thing," he candidly confessed; "nothing more than a corporal's stripe to the man who covets the baton of a field marshal, but you know the light that leads me, dear Evening Star. You'll find me scrambling up the hillside toward you at least, even if, as they would say hereabouts, 'hit's a right-smart slavish upgoin'!"

But with McCalloway, to whom he need not soften the edges of disclosure, he spoke of something else. His victory in primary and election seemed to demonstrate an augmented popularity, and yet he had become instinctively cognizant of a covert but bitter undertow of hatred against him: something unspoken and indefinable but existent and malign.

McCalloway paused with his supper coffee cup half way to his lips when Boone announced that conviction one evening, and eyed the other intently before he made an answer.

"I dare say," he hazarded at length, "that the old scars of the Carr-Gregory war have never entirely healed. The rancour may begin to smart afresh as your former enemies see your influence mounting."

But Boone shook his head.

"Of course, I've thought of that--but this is something else."

"Then, my boy, what is your conjecture?"

Boone's reply came slowly and thoughtfully.

"To you, sir, I can speak bluntly and without fear of being charged with timidity. Frankly, sir, I'm more than half expecting to be 'lay-wayed' some fine day as I ride along a tangled trail."

"I've had to take some chances in my time," asserted the soldier modestly, while his brows gathered in a frown, "but that is one form of danger that always sends a shiver down my spine; the attack that comes without warning." He broke off, then energetically added: "If *you* give credence to such a possibility, it's not to be lightly dismissed. You must not ride alone, hereafter."

Boone laughed. "For five years old Parson Fletcher never went abroad without the escort of an armed bodyguard. He even built a stockade around his house, but they got him. Jim Garrard was shot to death while militiamen stood in a hollow square about him. Precautions of that sort don't succeed. They are only a public confession of fear, and in politics a man can't afford such an admission. All I can do is to be watchful."

"Have you a guess as to who the man is behind this enmity?"

Boone nodded as he rose and went to the mantel where the pipes and tobacco lay.

"Here and there of late I've heard a name mentioned that hasn't been much discussed for years--the name of a man who has been away."

McCalloway shot a keenly searching glance at his companion as he interrogatively prompted,

"You mean--?"

"I mean Saul Fulton. Yes."

Victor McCalloway went to the hearth and kicked a smoking log into the flame. He turned then with the sternly knit brows of deep abstraction and weighed his words before giving them utterance.

"You have need to remember, my boy," he began gravely at last, "how deep the tap-root of heredity strikes down even when the tree top stretches far up into the sky."

"Meaning--?"

"Meaning, my dear boy, that I can't forget the black hatred in your eyes one day in the woods when I wrestled with that vengeance fire smouldering deep in your nature. You haven't forgotten that afternoon, have you? The day when you promised that until you came of age you would put aside the conviction that Saul Fulton was your man to kill?"

"I haven't forgotten it, sir."

As Boone answered, the older man thought that, if something in the blue pupils stood for any meaning, he might also

have added that neither had he entirely conquered the bitterness of that earlier time. Then Boone went on slowly:

"I kept my word, but you wouldn't have me go so far in turning the other cheek as to let him kill me--by his own hand or that of a hireling--would you?"

The gray eyes of the tall soldier held both sternness and reminiscence, but the reminiscence was all for something that brought a painful train of thought. Those were eyes that seemed looking back on smoking ruin, and that sought out of disastrous experience, to sound a warning. Into Boone's mind flashed a couplet:

"The Emperor there in his box of state, looked grave as though he had just then seen
The red flags fly from the city gates--where his eagles of bronze had been."

At times, when McCalloway wore that cryptic expression, Boone burned with an eager curiosity to have the curtain lifted for him, and to be able to see just what life had once spelled for this extraordinary man. Now the veteran was speaking again with a carefully intoned voice:

"I would have you defend your life, aggressively and fully, but your honour no less jealously. I am no psychologist, but I have read that almost every man has some spot on his sanity that is like a blind spot on his eye. Into your blood, distilled through generations, came a spirit that made a veritable religion of vengeance. You have sought to modify that and to become an apostle of progress. Apparently you have succeeded."

He paused and cleared his throat, and Boone once more prompted him with an interrogative repetition:

"Apparently, sir?"

"Yes, apparently--because one hour of passion might blacken your future into ruin; char it into destruction. In God's name make no such mistake. If Saul Fulton seeks your life, as you suggest, he should pay for his plotting, and pay in full. But if, by the subconscious workings of that old hatred, you are placing the blame on Saul because Saul is the man that instinct seeks a pretext to kill, then let me implore you to search your soul before you act."

Boone made no response, but over the clear intelligence of his pleasing features went the cloud of that unforgettable thing that had been with him from childhood. It was the same cloud that had settled there when he had made shrill interruption in the courtroom where Asa Gregory's life was being sworn away.

Into McCalloway's voice leaped a fiery quality.

"You have come too far to fail, Boone," he declared. "I need make no protestations of loyalty to you. You know what your success means to me, but I know the price a man pays who has tasted ruin. I would save you from that if my counsel can avert it."

The young man came close and looked into the eyes that had guided him.

"If I ever make a mistake like that," he said, "it will not be because I have lacked warnings."

On the night when Larry Masters had sat until dawn by an unreplenished fire, the physical resistance of his body had ebbed to feebleness. Under the quenching chill of despair his pulse-beat had become as sluggish as the unfed blaze, and the days that followed had called for exertions which would have taxed greater reserves of vitality. They had been days of alternating blizzard and soggy thawing, and Larry Masters had been constantly in the saddle like a commander who seeks to remedy a break in his lines and must not pause to consider personal exposure. A cough wracked him, and shifting pains gnawed at his joints and chest as he rode the slippery roads. He shivered, and his teeth chattered when the sleet lashed his face, and when at last he turned away from the Lexington office where he had reported the matter in hand accomplished, he had need to keep himself studiously in hand because a tide of fever crept hotly along his arteries and blurred his senses into confusion.

When he could not rise from his bed in the bungalow to which he had returned, a message went to Louisville, and his wife, somewhat tight-lipped and silently resentful, yet with a stern sense of duty, made the uncomfortable journey to Marlin Town, accompanied by a trained nurse who would be very expensive. She tarried only until the doctor said that the crisis was over, and then leaving the nurse behind came back to Louisville, feeling that she had virtuously met a most annoying obligation.

To Masters, with a sorry company of memories, which, in delirium, took human shape and gibed at his self-esteem, the bedridden days were irksome. But one morning the sick man awoke from a restive and nightmarish sleep to a grateful

impression of sunlight on window panes which had been gray and dripping. Then he realized that it was not, after all, only the sun, but that there was a presence in his room.

There sitting at his bedside, with eyes not austere but smiling and sympathy-brimming, was Anne, and when he sought to question her she laid a smooth hand on his lips and admonished: "Don't ask any questions now, Daddy. There's lots and lots of time for that. I've come to stay with you until you are well."

There would be some lonely weeks for the girl coming fresh from town, but they would not trouble her until the time arrived when Boone would have to go to Frankfort for the opening of the legislature, and there were ten days yet before that. Now he rode over every evening, and their voices and laughter drifted into the sick room where Larry Masters lay.

Anne had no suspicion that every night Victor McCalloway sat up waiting for Boone's return, for the most part forgetful of the book which lay on his knee, with a crooked finger marking the place. She did not guess the anxiety which kept his brows knit until the reassurance of footsteps at the door relaxed them, or that on more than one occasion the soldier even saddled his own horse and surreptitiously followed the lover with a cocked rifle balanced protectingly on his saddle pommel. Once though, when Boone had returned and was unsaddling, his lantern betrayed fresh sweat and saddle marks on McCalloway's horse. McCalloway lay on his cot but was not asleep, and the young man spoke sternly:

"If you're going to follow me as a bodyguard, sir, I sha'n't feel that I can ride over there any more--and while she's there--"

McCalloway had nodded his head.

"I understand," he responded. "You have my promise. I won't do it again. I grew a bit anxious about you, tonight."

Looking into the fine eyes that, for himself, knew no fear, the young man felt a sudden choke in his throat. He could only mutter, "God bless you, sir," and take himself off to bed.

One night, though, as Boone was leaving her house, Anne stood with him outside the door. He had taken her in his arms, and they ignored the sweep and snarl of the night wind in their lovers' preoccupation. Suddenly, as he held her, he bent his head, and her intuition recognized that he was listening with strained intentness to something more remote and faint than her own whispered words. In the abrupt tightening of his arm muscles there was the warning of one abruptly thrown on guard, and she whispered tensely, "What is it, Boone?"

After another moment of silence, he laughed.

"It's nothing at all, dear. I thought I heard a sound."

"What?"

He had not meant to give her any alarming hint of the caution which he must so vigilantly maintain, and now he had to dissemble. It came hard to him to lie, but she must be reassured.

"That colt I'm riding tonight doesn't always stand hitched. I thought I heard him pulling loose--and it's a long walk home."

"Go and look," she commanded. "If he's broken away, come back and spend the night here."

But a few minutes later he returned and said: "It's all right. I must have been mistaken."

When she had watched him start away and melt almost at once into the sooty darkness, it suddenly struck her as strange that he had come back and spoken in so guarded an undertone instead of calling from the hitching post. It might have been the lover's ready excuse for another good night, but Anne was vaguely troubled and remained standing on the doorstep shivering and listening.

The road itself was so dark that she could rather feel than see the closing in of the laurelled mountainsides, and as for the time of her waiting, it might have been two minutes or five. She could not tell. The wind was like a whispered growl, mounting now and again into a shrieking dissonance, and there was no other sound until, as if in violent answer to her fears, came the single report of a rifle immediately followed by the hoarser barking of a pistol.

Anne, acting with a speed that sacrificed nothing to the fluster of panic, turned back into the house, caught up the rifle that leaned near the door and an electric flash-torch from the table. Outside again, she found the road wet and rutty, and through the gust-driven clouds filtered no help from the stars, but remnants of snow along the edges of the way gave a low hint of visibility.

Several hundred yards brought her to an abrupt turning, and to her ears there came an uncertain sound as of something heavy being thrashed about in the mud. The girl's pupils, dilated now until the darkness was no longer so all-concealing, could make out a shapeless mass, and it seemed to her that the bulk--too large for a human body--stirred. Her finger was on the button of the torch, but an impulse of caution deterred her, and she left it unlighted. If Boone lay there wounded, her flash would make of him a clear target for any lurking assassin.

As she stood nerve-taut and with straining eyes, a furious indignation mounted in her. The vague shape that lay prone had become still now, and when she had almost stepped on it, she knew it for a fallen and riderless horse. It must be Boone's, because she would have heard the approach of another, but the man himself was nowhere in sight. So far as outward indications went, she was herself the only human thing within the range of her vision or the sound of her voice.

Her suspense stretched until her knees grew weak, and the wind, momentarily subsiding, left her in a stillness that was like bated breath. Then she felt a touch on her elbow, and a voice barely audible commanded, "Come back along the edge."

Under the reflex of that relief-wave her tight-keyed nerves threatened to collapse, but for a little longer she commanded them, and when the two stood again in her own yard, she wilted and lay limp in her lover's arms.

"Thank God, you are safe," she whispered. "What was it?"

He pressed her close and spoke reassuringly:

"It may have been that I was mistaken for another man," he said. "The most serious thing is that I'll have to walk home. My colt has been killed."

"And be assassinated on the way! No, you'll stay here!"

Boone thought of the veteran sitting by the hearth waiting for his return. He laughed.

"If I go through the woods all the way, I'll be safe enough. In the laurel it would take bloodhounds to find me, and Mr. McCalloway," he added somewhat lamely, "wasn't very well when I left."

Finally he succeeded in reassuring her. He was not apt, twice in one night, to get another fellow's medicine, and he would avoid the highway, but while he was fluent and persuasive for her comforting he could not deceive himself. He could not take false solace in the thought that his anonymous enemy's resolve, once registered, would die abomin' because of its initial thwarting. The night had confirmed his ugly suspicion that he was marked for death, and though he had escaped the first attack it was not likely to be the end of the story.



CHAPTER XXXV

It was almost a relief to Anne when she stood on the platform of the dingy little station and waved her farewell to Boone, leaving for the state capitol and his new duties. Of course, as she turned back to the squalid vistas of the coal-mining town, a sinking loneliness assailed her heart, but for Boone's safety she felt a blessed and compensating security.

Her father's recovery was slow and his convalescence tedious, and Anne's diversion came in tramping the frost-sparkling hills and planning the future that seemed as far away and dream-vague as the smoky mists on the horizon rim.

One morning as she walked briskly beyond the town she encountered an old man who, after the simple and kindly custom of the hills, "stopped and made his manners."

"Howdy, ma'am," he began. "Hit's a to'able keen an' nippy momin', hain't hit?"

"Keen but fine," she smilingly replied, as her eyes lit with interest for so pronounced a type. Had she seen him on the stage as representing his people, she would have called the make-up a gross exaggeration. He was tall and loose-jointed, and his long hair and beard fell in barbaric raggedness about a face seamed with deep lines. But his eyes were shrewd and bold, and he carried himself with a sort of innate dignity despite the threadbare poorness of patched trousers and hickory shirt, and he tramped the snowy hills coatless with ankles innocent of socks. The long hickory with which he tapped the ground as he walked might have been the staff of a biblical pilgrim, and they chatted affably until he reached the question inevitable in all wayside meetings among hillmen.

"My name's Cyrus Spradling, ma'am. What mout your'n be?"

"Anne Masters," she told him. "My father is the superintendent of the coal mine here."

She was unprepared for the sudden and baleful transformation of face and manner that swept over him with the announcement. A moment before he had been affable, and her own eyes had sparkled delightedly at the mother-wit of his observations and the quaint idiom and metaphor of his speech. Now, in an instant, he stiffened into affronted rigidity, and made no effort to conceal the black, almost malignant, wave of hostility that usurped the recent mildness of his eyes.

"Ye're ther same one that used ter be Boone Wellver's gal," he declared scornfully; and the girl, accustomed to local idiosyncrasies, flushed less at the direct personality of the statement than at the accusing note of its delivery.

"Used to be?" The question was the only response that for the instant of surprise came to her mind.

Cyrus Spradling spat on the ground as his staff beat a tattoo.

"Wa'al, thet war y'ars back, an' ye hain't nuver wedded with him yit." The old man stood there actually trembling with a rage induced by something at which she had no means of guessing.

She, too, drew herself up with a sudden stiffness and would have turned away, but he was prompter.

"Hit 'pears like no woman won't hev him! I reckon I don't blame 'em none, nuther. I disgusts ther feller my own self," and before she could gather any key to the extraordinary incident, he had gone trudging on, mumbling the while into his unshaven beard.

Anne walked perplexedly homeward, and out of it all she could winnow only one kernel of comprehensible detail. Obviously she had met an enemy of Boone's, and yet she had heard Mr. McCalloway speak with warmth of the neighbourly kindness of Cyrus Spradling.

When she entered the house her father was sitting before the hearth, somewhat emaciated after his tedious convalescence, and his eyes followed her with a wistful dependence as she measured his medicine and rearranged the pillows at his back.

When, finally, she, too, drew a chair close to the blaze, the man said seriously:

"When your mother was your age, Anne, you had been born."

To this statistical announcement, the obvious response being denied by kindness, she made no answer. Perhaps she could not help reflecting had her mother been more deliberate, many years of discontent might have been escaped.

"My family has little to thank me for," observed Masters at last, with a candour that the daughter found embarrassing.

"Conversely, I dare say, I have little claim to expect much--and yet even life's derelicts are subject to human emotions."

"For instance, Daddy?"

"Tom Wallifarro stands pretty close to his allotment of three score and ten," came the thoughtful answer. "Neither your mother nor I is exactly young. It would be a comfort to think of you as settled, with your own life plans drawn and arranged."

The girl smiled up at him from her low chair. "Daddy," she said softly, "you know what I'm waiting for. You're the one person of my own blood that I can take into full confidence, because you're the only one who doesn't think of my life as a piece of cloth to be cut and fitted to Morgan's measure, whether it suits me or not. You've never said much, but I've known you were on my side."

For the first time in her memory her father was not immediately responsive. His hand falling on her bright head rested there with a dubious touch, and his eyes were irresolutely clouded.

"I wonder, dear," he said slowly, "whether, after all, I don't agree with the others--in part, at least. All my life I've been an insurgent, scorning the caution of the provident, and paying a beastly stiff price for my mutiny against smugly accepted rules of the game."

"A woman has only one life to share," she answered firmly. "It's not exactly insurgency to insist on loving the man."

After a little he inquired, "You *are* fond of Morgan, though, aren't you? If there were no Boone Wellver, for instance, you might even love him, mightn't you?"

"There is a Boone, though." She spoke quietly but with a finality that seemed to close the doors upon discussion, and a silence followed.

Finally, however, Larry Masters cleared his throat in an embarrassed fashion. "I spoke a while back of wanting to see you protected in the shelter of a home. Since we've embarked on the subject, I'm going to tell you something more. A certain truth has been carefully withheld from you, and I believe you ought to know it."

"What truth?" Her eyes widened a little, and the man shifted his position uneasily.

"The true realization of how deeply we all stand in Tom Wallifarro's debt," he made blunt response.

"I've always known," she hastily declared, "that he's been a fairy godfather, and given me things--luxurious things--that mother's income couldn't run to."

Larry Masters laughed with a shade of bitterness.

"Your mother has never had any income, Anne. As for myself, there's never been a time since you were a baby when I could make buckle and tongue meet. That's the whole ugly truth. House-rent, clothes, food, education, everything, necessities as well as comforts, livelihood as well as luxuries--the whole lot and parcel have come to my wife and my daughter from the generous hand of Tom Wallifarro. But for that, God knows what their lives would have been."

Anne Masters rose and stood unsteadily on the rag rug before the stone flaggings of the hearth.

"You mean ... that we ... have ... been actual dependents on his kindness--that we've just been ... charity ... parasites?"

The girl's hands came to her bosom and a shiver ran through her. The warm flood of colour left her cheeks, and her eyes were deep with chagrined amazement.

The man did not answer the questions, and she went on with another:

"Do you mean ... for I must know ... that we've lived as we have on nothing but ... generous charity?... That he's been paying all these years what it cost ... to raise me properly ... for his son?"

"Hold on, Anne--" The convalescent raised an admonitory hand. "There's danger of doing people who love you a grave injustice. Tom Wallifarro would go to his grave with his lips sealed, though torture were used to open them, before he would seek to coerce you or make you unhappy. If you've never been told the facts, it was because he preferred that there should be no burdensome sense of obligation."

"But always," Anne insisted faintly, as though oppressed by poignant physical pain, "he has done these things ... with the one ... idea ... that I was to be ... his son's wife."

"I should rather say," quietly amended Larry Masters, "with that dream and hope."

"And, Mother," she asked, in a strangely strained voice, "Mother has assured him that ... when the time comes ... she could ... deliver the goods?"

Larry had seen Anne in childhood transports of passion, but never before cold and white in such a stillness of wrath as that which transformed her now. Her eyes made him feel the accomplice in some monstrous traffic upon his daughter's womanhood, and it was difficult to remain complacent under her cross-examining.

"Your mother has had the same dream and hope. If the marriage was not repugnant to you, I dare say it would take cavilling to criticize it."

"You don't see, then ..."--the girl felt suddenly faint and dizzy as she moved a little to the side and leaned inertly against the wall--"you don't see that the very chivalry of Uncle Tom's conduct ... enslaves me a ... hundred times ... more strongly ... than a cruder effort to force me? You don't see that ... he's paid for me ... and that if Boone came today ... with a marriage license ... I couldn't marry him ... without feeling that I must buy ... myself back first?"

"That, of course, my dear, is a morbid and distorted view."

"Is it? Haven't I eaten the food and worn out the clothes and acquired the education that were all only items of an investment for Morgan's future? Haven't I used these payments made on that investment only to take them away from him and give them to some one else? I haven't even been given the chance of protest against these chains of damnable kindness."

"You seem, my dear, to have given your heart to Boone, and that settles it, I suppose. I might wish it otherwise--Tom and your mother may still cling to the other hope, but--"

"You say I've given my heart to Boone," she interrupted fiercely, "but I find that it wasn't mine to give. I find that I wasn't a free agent. I had already been mortgaged and remortgaged for things not only used by me but by my mother, and--" She paused, and Masters added with a twisted smile of chagrin,

"Yes--and your father."

"But how about Boone?" she demanded. "What of the debt owed to him? Did they have the right to barter off his happiness as well as mine?"

"Tom Wallifarro," her father gravely reminded her, "has been a benefactor to Boone. Tom Wallifarro has not complained. Moreover, the wounds of youth are not quite so fatal as they seem when one suffers them. If they were, few men would live to middle-age. I dare say Boone would survive even if he lost you."

Anne's brain was dizzy and stunned. Mortification and wretchedness were blurring the focus of her vision, and this suggestion that after all she was exaggerating her importance in Boone Wellver's life seemed the dictum she could not allow to pass unchallenged. With an instinctive lashing out of her hot emotions she pitched the battle on that single issue, an issue which seemed to determine whether after all she was fighting in fairness and clean conscience for independence, or only clinging to a selfishness that trod toward its gratification on the happiness of others.

"Prove that to me," she retorted in the same cold fury. "Prove that he doesn't need me and that I'm thinking only of myself, and I'll marry anybody you say. I'll obediently deliver myself over and say, 'Here's your marriageable asset. Do what you like with it.'"

Her words had not been torrential, but glacially cold and hard under the congealing pressure of indignation, but now the tone broke into something like a sob, as she declared:

"Boone has had only one girl in his life. His whole scheme has been built about me. Show me that a love like that is only a whim, and I'll agree that this chattel idea of marriage is as good as any other, and I'll submit to it."

Swiftly Larry Masters repressed a smile. Anne, he reflected, did not realize how often that refurbished fiction has been retailed as an axiom by young hearts in equinox.

"Why did you smile, Father?" she demanded militantly, and he shook his head.

"I was only reflecting," he assured her, "that every girl thinks that of every man she loves."

"Do you know of anything to disprove it in the present case?"

"Since you ask," he made hesitant reply, "I did hear some unsubstantiated rumours hereabouts that he had proposed and been rejected by a mountain girl--Cyrus Spradling's daughter."

Cyrus Spradling's daughter! At the name, Anne saw again the lank mountaineer of the loose joints and the uncombed

hair, who this morning had parted from her mumbling maledictions against Boone.

He had been a mystery then. Now his name falling into the conversation like a shell that has found its range, had the demoralizing force of an explosion. Her belief was no weathervane to veer lightly, but the bruise on her heart was sensitive even to the touch of a breeze, and it was freshly sore.

"Who--ever told you that," she asseverated in slow syllables, "was a liar. I'd gamble my life on it." Then having made her confession of faith in those staunch terms, she illogically demanded, "When was this alleged affair?"

"Just after he finished college, I believe. I can't be quite sure."

"At that time," said Anne Masters, "and before that, and after that, Boone loved me. It was no divided or vacillating love. I'm so sure of him that I'm perfectly willing to stake everything on it. I'm willing, if I'm wrong, even to pay off my mortgage!"

"Since you take that view," said her father, "I'm sorry to have repeated the story. I hadn't regarded it as so damning, myself. Young men sometimes love more than once without forfeiting all human respect. You might ask Boone about it? I don't fancy he'd lie to you."

"I will ask him," she vehemently declared, "and if there's any atom of truth in it--and I know there isn't--I don't care whom I marry or what happens afterwards! As to Uncle Tom, I don't think I can go on another day being his charity child."

"If you don't, you'll break his heart," her father told her, in a voice of urgent persuasiveness. "For the present, at least, you must regard what I've told you as Masonically confidential."

"Why?"

"Because he would see himself as having hurt you where he sought only to be a loving magician with a wand of kindness, and I'm not the man to injure him like that." He hesitated, and the climax of his statement came with explosive suddenness. "Good God, Anne, he's just saved me from disgrace."

Then came the story of Colonel Wallifarro's latest benefaction, and at the end of it the girl pressed her hands to temples that were hot.

"I think," she said falteringly, "I'll go out for a while where the air is fresher. It's very close in here."

The door closed silently, almost stealthily, behind her, and Masters thought she walked with the noiseless care of one moving in a chamber of death.



CHAPTER XXXVI

Anne Masters looked out of the car windows with shadowed and preoccupied eyes on that journey from the mountains back to Louisville. The old conductor who always stopped and chatted with her, after a glance at her expression, punched her ticket and passed on. Something was not well with her, he reflected.

To this girl, the joyous sense of freedom had been the essence of life, and now she was going home with the feeling of one who has passed under a yoke. It was as if henceforth she were to know the sea which she had adventurously sailed in liberty only from the chained oar bench of the galley slave. She felt humiliated and utterly miserable, and perhaps, worst of all, she was oppressed by an unrelieved realization of her own futility. Beside the competence of the young woman who took dictation at Morgan's desk, her own social accomplishments appeared for the first time summoned for comparison, and the parallel left her branded in her own mind as an economic parasite. Marriage was the one way in which a woman of her sort could finance her life, and the only marriage which for her would be a fulfilment and not a travesty--itself requiring financing--lay remote.

Anne repressed the first indignant impulse to write to Boone of the unjustifiable charge against him to which she had been forced to listen. There at the capital he was adjusting himself to new duties and settling his shoulders into an unaccustomed harness. She knew that he took these things seriously since he meant to use their opportunities as stepping-stones to broader achievement, and a letter on such a subject would seem hysterical and wanting in faith, when perhaps he was most depending on that faith. Now she told herself that except for having unalterably committed herself to that course with foolish emphasis, she would not even speak incidentally to Boone of the matter. She assured herself that already she knew the answer and needed no further evidence--but a pledge was a pledge, and she must have the reply to take from his lips to her father.

Yet in the weeks which intervened before that opportunity arrived, the repudiated matter rankled like a poison, which abates none of its malignity because its victim has pasted an innocuous label on the bottle.

So one day, while Anne was being tortured in spirit and was telling herself that she was serenely untroubled, Boone was at the school where Happy Spradling had for some years been a member of the teaching staff.

His eyes were glowing with appreciation as he went about the place, recognizing the magic that had grown there. It had woven its spell out of the dauntless resolution of a little coterie of women who, like unostentatious vestals, had kindled and fed here, where it meant everything, the fire of education and wholesomeness. Surrounded by a hinterland where sloven illiteracy fostered lawlessness, that fire burned in houses that stood up as monuments both of practical utility and surprising beauty. Its light was reflected in keen young faces hungry for education and smiling young eyes in which Boone read the presage of a new future for his people.

Women had done this thing: women for the most part from the Bluegrass who had surrendered ease and chosen effort: women who, out of a volunteer greatness of spirit, elected to "wait in heavy harness on fluttered folk and wild."

Boone drew a long breath of silent tribute and homage. It pleased him to think, too, that not all of the magic-makers came from beyond the hills. Happy was one of them. In these years she had developed until one might not have guessed that she, too, had not come from the source of a gentler rearing. She had met the representative of her district as an old friend, but in no glance or inflection was there a hint that between them lay any buried memory.

"They sent for you to come here," the girl told him, as she showed him over the redeemed grounds, "because we want your help. They didn't know that we were old friends, and I didn't mention it. You see what we are trying to do here, but we need roads. A country without highways is a house without windows. That is where you can help us. We're very poor, you know."

"You're making the country very rich," he answered gravely, and he returned to Frankfort with the affairs of that school near his heart.

That week-end he went to Louisville, and as he sat at Anne's right at a dinner party a mood of romanticism laid its glamour upon his thoughts. Tonight he could seem to step back across the years and stand looking into the hungry, discontented eyes of a boy in hodden-gray perched on the topmost rail of a rotting fence. It seemed incredible that that boy had been himself. To that boy, all life except the hard realities of a pioneer people had been an untried thing of formless dream tissue.

And tonight he sat here! In many respects it was just such a table and just such a company as everywhere reflected the niceties of civilized society, yet in the little intimate things it was distinctive.

In the voices, the colloquialisms--the very colour of thought--spoke the spirit of the South--not the Old South, perhaps,

yet the offspring of a mother who had passed on much of herself.

From the log cabin to this dinner seemed to him the measure of his progress thus far. It was as though with seven-league boots he had crossed the centuries!

Behind him lay a boyhood that belonged to the little sectionalism of the backwoods settlement. Here was the widening circle of the life evolved out of it, yet still a circle of sectionalism. What lay beyond?

In his imagination the young Kentuckian saw the dome of the capitol at Washington, the nerve centre of the nation, where functioned the broad affairs of statecraft. Above the dome an afterglow hung in the sky, and in it shone a single star--the evening star. That, of course, was a long way off, yet from Louisville to Washington seemed a shorter and smoother road than from the laurel thickets to Louisville. Youth was his, and a resolution forged and tempered. Ambition was his, and the incentive of a beacon whose light he renewed whenever he looked into the violet eyes that were not far from his own.

The race would not, of course, be easy. There would be the heart-testing smother of effort before the prize was won, but the future lay open, and he coveted no victory of unwrung withers and unwearied lungs.

Thank God, the one thing without which he must fail was surely his: the loyalty of the woman he loved.

Anne had been unusually quiet and grave this evening, but he had arrived on a late train and had as yet had no opportunity for talk with her alone. That would come later.

When he had driven home with her, he followed her into the old parlour, with its ripe portraits from the brush of Jouett, and the cheery blaze of its open fire. With her opera cloak thrown across his arm, he watched her go over and stand on the hearth, while the firelight played on the ivory whiteness and the satin softness of her neck and shoulders, and made a nimbus about her bright hair.

"You're not wearing your string of pearls tonight," he smiled; and she smiled, too, but not happily.

"No," she said. "I thought I wouldn't."

She did not add that she had not worn them because they were the gift of Colonel Wallifarro and seemed to her an emblem of bondage.

All that she would tell him in a few minutes, but first she had an awkward question to ask which had hung over her all evening as the threat of bedtime punishment hangs over a child. Now she meant to dispose of that quickly and categorically and have it done with. She felt shamed, as his frank eyes met hers, to broach an inquiry that seemed so nearly an insult to his allegiance. But she stood pledged and she had planned the matter in just one fashion. There would be the question and the negative reply, then the ghost would be laid.

That there could be any other answer than "No," however modified or justified by circumstance, had not entered into her premises of thought as conceivable. The general who, no matter how flawless his plan-in-chief, has arranged no alternative strategy, is a commander doomed. Anne had admitted in advance no substitute for absolute denial.

Now she turned and spoke gently:

"Before we talk of anything else, dear, there's a question I must ask you, and you must answer it in one word--yes, or no. You'll want to say more, and afterwards you may--but not at first." She paused, and a note of apology crept into the voice that went on again: "I feel disloyal even to ask it, but it's a thing I'm pledged to do, and I'll explain the reason afterwards."

Boone smiled with the confidence of a man for whom the witness stand holds no terror.

"Ask it, dearest."

"Did you ... ever"--she faltered a moment, then went hurriedly on, as if racing against a failure of resolve--"ask ... any other girl ... to marry you?"

The smile was struck from his face in an instant, leaving his eyes pained and his lips straight and tight, and her gaze, fixed on his, read the swift change of expression and responded with a sudden terror in her own pupils.

"I was never ... in love with any one...!"

"One word!" Her interruption came in a tone he had never heard her use before. It was so quiet that it carried with it a chill like that of death. "Yes or no."

Boone felt a cold moisture on his hands and temples. A matter easy to explain had, of a sudden, become inexplicable. Looking back over lapsed years, all the quixotic urging of a false sense of justice had gone out of conduct which had then seemed so mandatory. The inescapable obligation to which he had responded seemed empty and twisted now. He could see only that he had insulted Happy with a half offer and been false to his avowed love of Anne and to his duty to himself.

That, at the time, he had been groping toward a callow and half-baked conception of honour failed now to extenuate his blunder, and if he himself could no longer understand it, how could he hope to make her do so?

His voice came in a dull monotone.

"Yes," he said, "I did. May I explain?"

In the credo of this girl's life fairness and generosity were twin cornerstones, and condemnation without hearing was an abhorrent and mean injustice. But the unadmitted poison of an accusation fought in secret had been insidiously undermining her sanity on the one central theme of her life, and Boone's affirmative had seemed to sever with a shock of complete surprise the anchor cable of her faith.

"No," she said, and for once it might have been the acid-marred voice of her mother, "that's all I need to know."

"But, Anne"--Boone took an impulsive step toward her and sought to speak sanely, while he held off the sense of chaos under which his brain staggered--"but, Anne, after all these years, you can't throw overboard your faith in me without giving me a chance to be heard."

She laughed bitterly, and of course that was hysteria, but to the man it seemed only derision.

"Until three minutes ago," she said, "I would have staked my life on my faith in you ... I did just about do it.... Now, I'm afraid ... there isn't any left ... to throw away."

"If you ever had any," he declared--and he, too, spoke under a stress that gave an unaccustomed hardness to his voice, "there should be some still. The answer you held me to answers nothing. It gives no reason--no explanation."

"The reasons ... don't count for much. Yes means yes. It means years of deceit and lies to me.... Good-bye."

Boone Wellver turned and walked to the door. His eyes, fixed ahead, saw nothing. As he went, he collided with a table and paused, looking at it with a dazed sense of injury. On the threshold he halted to speak in a voice which was queer and uncommanded.

"You are sending me away," he said, "without a chance. I still have faith in you ... unless it's a false faith, you'll send for me to come back ... and give me that chance.... Until you do, I won't ask it ... or try to see you."

The girl stood looking past him in a sort of trance. "Good-bye," she repeated, and he took up his coat and hat and went out.

For a little while after he had gone Anne Masters remained staring with a stunned and transfixed immobility at the empty frame of the door through which he had gone; a frame it seemed to her out of which had suddenly been torn the picture of her life, leaving a tattered canvas. She shivered violently; then she, too, started toward the door, swayed unsteadily, and fell insensible.

A measure before the lower house of the General Assembly had split it so evenly that when the roll call came on the vote, a deadlock was predicted and one absentee might bring defeat to his cause. After each adjournment noses were jealously counted, and the falling gavel, calling each session to order, found Boone in his seat with a face that sought to mask its misery behind a stony expressionlessness. It was a deadly sober face with eyes that wandered often into abstraction, so that men who had seen it heretofore ready of smile commented on the change, yet hesitated to question one so palpably aloof.

In these days it was hard for Boone to see, with his single purpose shattered, the reason or value of any purpose, yet habit held him to his routine duties with an overserious and humourless inflexibility.

After the first dull wretchedness of the night when he and Anne had parted, he had laid hold upon a hope which had not endured. He had told himself with the persistence of a refrain that the girl who had that night condemned him out of hand was a girl temporarily bereft of reasoning balance by a tide of heartache and a tempest of anger. The mail would soon bring him a note announcing the restoration of the woman he loved to her own gracious fairness and serene self-

recovery. He could not, without losing his whole grip on life, bring himself to the admission that the passion of a wild, ungenerous moment would endure. Indeed, the thought of what she must have suffered--what she must still be suffering--so to carry her and hold her outside her whole orbit of being, tortured him as much as his own personal loss and grief.

But no word had come. That wild, hurried interview had moved with such torrential haste and violence to its culmination of breached understanding that there had been no time for stemming it with moderation or explained circumstances.

She had not had the chance to tell him of the disclosures her father had made, or of the sense of bondage that had weighed upon her until the colour of her thought had lost its clarity and become bewilderingly turgid. She had not been able to let the light into the festering brooding that had subconsciously poisoned her mind. A single idea had carried all else with it as a flood carries wreckage. For years she had stood out for Boone. A time had come when he had been charged with absolute duplicity toward her, and she had scornfully wagered her life on his fealty and submitted the whole vital matter to one question. His answer had been a confession.

There had been no years of intermittent association when he could logically or decently have entertained another love affair. From the first day of his avowed allegiance until now there had been no break in his protestations. Therefore, the word "yes" or "no" contained all the answer there could be to the question of his loyalty, and the word which shattered the whole dream came from his own lips.

One day, as Boone was leaving his hotel room for the state house, two letters were handed him, and his heart leaped into drum-beat. One was addressed in her hand, and that one he thrust into his pocket, as one saves the best to read last.

The other was an invitation from Colonel Wallifarro: an engraved blank filled in with a name and date. In a secluded corner of the hard-frozen, state house grounds he sat on a bench to read the note from Anne, but when he had torn the envelope and glanced at the sheet the light went out of his eyes and his bronzed cheeks became suddenly drawn.

"I thought you might like to know," she said. "The invitation from Uncle Tom looks innocent enough, but I don't think you'd enjoy the party. It's given to announce my engagement to Morgan."

Boone sat there dazed, while in the icy air his breath floated cloudlike before his lips.

Eventually he awoke to some realization of the passage of time, and looked at his watch. It was past the hour for the roll-call on the bill which his absence might deliver into the hands of the enemy, the cause for which he and his colleagues had been fighting.

He came with an effort to his feet and went heavily through the corridor and into the chamber. At the door, where he leaned against the casing, he heard the clerk of the house calling the roll, and the staccato "Ayes" and "Noes" of the responses. Already the alphabetical sequence had progressed to the U's, and soon his own name would follow. Then it came, and at first his stiff tongue could not answer. He was licking his lips and his throat worked with some spasmodic reflex. Finally he heard a strained and unnatural voice, which he could hardly recognize as his own, answering "No."

Heads turned toward him at the queer sound, and from somewhere rose a twittering of laughter. That was perhaps natural enough, for to the casual and uncomprehending eye he made a spectacle both sorry and ludicrous--this usually self-contained young man who now stood stammering and disordered of guise, like a fellow not wholly recovered from a night-long debauch.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The transforming touch of a razor, a studied amendment of manner and apparel, and the passing of ten years: these are things which can work an effective disguise for an Enoch Arden returned to village streets that knew him long ago. Quietly dressed in clothes that were neither good enough nor mean enough to arrest the passing eye, a middle-aged man dropped from the evening train onto the cinder platform at Marlin Town.

Shrewd winds whipped in through icicled ravines, and the new arrival fresh from equatorial latitudes shivered under their sting.

He thrust his hands into his pockets and scowled about him. For so long his memory had softened the uneven contours and colours of this town with the illusory qualities of homesickness that now its tawdry actuality brought something of a shock. It was all raw and comfortless, and as the newcomer looked up at the forbidding summits he snarled to himself, "They ain't a patch on the Andes."

Across from the old brick court house, with its dilapidated cupola and its indefinable air of the mediaeval, sat the general store, proclaimed in a sign of crippled lettering, "The Big Emporium." Tom Carr's nephews directed this centre of industry and, from a grimy "office" above stairs, Tom Carr directed his nephews. Until recent days he had also directed, with a dictator's fiat power, most of the affairs of the countryside. From that second-story room, the Gregories would have declared with conviction Tom's father had "hired" Asa's father killed. It was in its unadorned fashion a place of crumbling traditions.

Sitting there of late, Tom had done some unvarnished thinking anent the expanding influence of young Boone Wellver.

He was sitting there now in the light and reek of a smoky lamp, by a stove that was red-hot with no window open, and he was alone. He heard the wooden stairs creaking under the ascending tread of stranger feet, for to his acute ears footsteps were as individual as voices, and his head inclined expectantly. Tom was waiting there for a man who had written him a letter.

There followed a rap on the panels, and in response to his growled permission the door opened and closed almost without sound, showing inside the threshold a man clean shaven and inconspicuously dressed.

"Howdy, Saul," welcomed the seated baron of diminished powers. "I'd call hit a right boldacious thing ter do--comin' back hyar--if I stood in yore shoes."

Into the furtive eyes of the visitor came a shallow flash of bravado.

"Who's to hinder me, Tom?"

"Young Boone Wellver's got ter be a right huge power in these parts here of late. He don't love ye none lavish, ef what folks norrates be true."

Saul seated himself, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I've had run-ins with worse men than him," he declared, "and I'm still on the hoof."

"On the hoof an' fattenin', I should say," graciously acceded the leader of the Carrs. "Ye've got a corn-fed look about ye, Saul."

"I stayed away from home," continued Fulton, "so long as it was to my profit to be elsewhere. Now it suits me to come back, and there isn't room enough here for both me an' him."

The elderly feudist surveyed his visitor with a cool shrewdness, and after a long pause he remarked drily: "Ef so be, Boone Wellver was called ter his reward, Saul, I wouldn't hardly buy me no mournin' clothes, but for my own self I don't dast break ther truce. Howsomever, when a feller hits at a snake he had ought ter *git* hit. Thet feller thet ye hired ter lay-way him hyar of late didn't seem ter enjoy no master luck."

"All he needed was a little overseein'," retorted Saul blandly. "That's why I'm here now. I've got to lay low for a while because there's still the little matter of an indictment outstandin' but the same man stands in your light and mine--we ought to be able to do some business together."

"Things have changed a mighty heap," demurred Tom uneasily, but Saul laughed.

"Let's change them back, then," he responded.

The plotting of a murder is erroneously presumed by the unpracticed to be an affair of hushed voices and deeply

closeted conspirators. Between these two craftsmen it was discussed in the calm hard-headedness of severe practicality. To Saul, who had been long an absentee, Tom Carr's intimate familiarity with current conditions proved a bureau of vital statistics. To Tom, who saw in Boone a dangerous trouble-maker and who yet hesitated to make a feud-killing of the matter, the hand of a volunteer was welcome, and so, as they talked, a community of interests developed. Tom was to provide Saul with an inconspicuous refuge, and Saul was to do the rest. A few others whose active participation was needed were to be taken into confidence, but the secret was to be held in close-guarded circle.

It is said that no other bitterness can be so saturated as that of the apostate, and Saul brought into Tom's presence one day a boyish fellow whose blood was Gregory blood but whose one strong emotion seemed to be hatred of his own breed. He had been selected by the intriguer as the man to take in hand and carry to success the assassination of Boone Wellver.

Into Tom's office slouched "Little" Jim Bartleton by the front way, and into it, by back stairs, came Saul at the same time.

Until a short time back no one had thought much about Little Jim. He had not been a positive personality until recently, when he had taken to drink and developed a mean streak. Always he had been fearless, but that elicited no comment in a land where cowards are few. His most recent friendships had all been among the Carrs, and no insult to his own people had been uttered in his hearing which he had not capped with one more scathing.

Just where his grievance lay had been his own secret. For Saul's purpose, it sufficed that it existed and was dominant.

"Son," questioned Tom Carr in his suave voice, "I see plenty of reasons why a feller should disgust Boone Wellver, but he's yore kin. Why does ye hate him so?"

The answer came, prefaced with a string of oaths:

"I hain't niver named this hyar ter nairy man afore now, but I aimed ter wed an', ter git me money enough, I sot me up a small still-house nigh ter whar he dwells at."

Spurts of hatred shot out of the speaker's dark eyes; eyes which in kindlier moods were lighted by intelligence.

"Ef I'd been left alone I could of got me enough money ter do what I wanted ter do ... ther gal was ready ter hev me. But, damn his law-an'-order, hypocritical piety! he hed ter nose out my still an' warn me thet without I quit he'd tip me off ter ther revenuer."

"Some folks," put in Tom, "moutn't even hev warned ye."

"Thet's jest ther p'int," panted the boy. "He told ther revenuer fust-off an' then warned me atterwards. Ef hit hedn't of been fer a right gay piece of luck, ther raiders would of come afore I got ther still hid away--an' I'd be sulterin' in jail right now. I've done swore ter kill him."

"An' ther gal, son," prompted Tom gently.

The black face went even blacker.

"I reckon," he said savagely, "she don't aim ter wait fer me no longer. I owes thet ter Boone Wellver, too."

"An' so ye're willin'--?"

"Plumb willin' an' anxious! I've done held my counsel. He don't suspicion how I feels.... I knows every path an' by-way over thar. I knows every step he takes when he's at home. Thar hain't no fashion I could fail."

"An' ye knows, too, how ter keep yore mouth shut?"

"I hain't niver told nuthin' yit."

The two conspirators looked at each other and nodded. Here was an agent who could move without suspicion and act out of his own ardour of hatred. Decidedly he was a discovery.

So the hireling was instructed and given a leave of absence to go and "set up with ther gal in Leslie County." But he did not go to Leslie County. He went, instead, by a roundabout road to the state capital, and one evening knocked on the door of Boone Wellver's hotel room.

When the messenger arrived, Boone was sitting alone with a brooding face, while in his hand he held a telegram which had fallen like an unwarned bolt on his lacerated soreness of spirit.

Two hours ago he had received and read it. In it Victor McCalloway had said: "Deeply regret not seeing you for farewell. Called suddenly for indefinite absence. Luck and prosperity to you always."

Luck and prosperity! Boone just now was hoping at best to fend off despair and a total disintegration of a hard-built structure of ideals. To McCalloway his thoughts had turned for the succour of a steadying calm--and that one ally was no longer in reach. Boone had read the words with a numbed heart, for now out of the confusion of tempest-smother that beat about him he had lost even the solace of the bell-buoy's strong note.

This misfortune, he assured himself, at least exhausted the possibilities of perverse circumstance to hurt him. Misfortune's box of tricks were empty now!

Tonight Colonel Wallifarro was entertaining at dinner. Anne would be smiling as they congratulated her. A little while ago he had been at just such a dinner, marvelling greatly at the good fortune that had brought to him such progress. Now it stood for the emptiness of effort.

Tonight he wanted the hills--not calm and star-lit, but rocking to hurricane fury and thundering with flood. No voice of all their voices could be too wild or ruthless for his temper.

Boone was in a dangerous mood. He sat there with no eye to censor him, and more than once he winced, biting back an outcry. His strongly thewed shoulders heaved and flinched with thoughts that fell on quivering brain-nerves like the merciless lashing of an invisible scourge. He tried to analyze himself and his relation to affairs outside himself, but his psychological attuning was pitched only to such an agony as cries for outlet. Everything that he was, he bitterly reflected, was a summary of acquired ethics designed to bury and hide his natural heritages. He was a tamed and performing wild animal, and just now the only assuagement that tempted him was the instinct to be wild again--to lash out and punish some one for his hurting.

The star that had led him had gone out, but one could not punish a star. Even in his frenzied wretchedness he could not even want to punish his star.

But her world--to which he had climbed with a dominant ambition--that was different. That smugly superior world had betrayed him.

The young features hardened, and the eyes kindled into the lightning-play that leads men, but it was such a leadership as animates the chief who dances around the war fires and no longer of him who smokes the pipe of sane counsel.

Just now it would take little to send the pedestal of acquired thought down in ruin. Just now an enemy would not have been safe within the reach of his blow.

Yet with a pale, expiring flicker, struggling through darkness, there remained a half realization that this was all a delirium which he must combat and overcome.

"I reckon," he said aloud, with that self-pity which is not good for a man, "I've been as deep down in hell today as a man can go." Then he started as a knock came on his door, and into the room stepped Jim Bartleton of Marlin Town.

"Saul Fulton's done come back," he announced curtly, "an' Tom Carr's done tuck him in. I'm one of the men thet's been hired ter kill ye."

Of course, the tale of the still and the threatened raid was of a piece with all of Jim Bartleton's hatred; of a piece, too, with his seeming degeneration. Boone Wellver, facing the animosities of enemies who fought with ancient guile, had sought to meet that condition. "Little" Jim was one of several, wholly faithful to him, who had undertaken to insinuate themselves into the confidence of the conspirators.

The same Commonwealth's attorney who had prosecuted Asa Gregory had gone to his own house for dinner, and now he sat before his library fire in slippers and faded smoking jacket. On the floor near him lay an afternoon paper, but the day's chief news he had garnered more directly by personal contact. Over there in the Assembly was being waged a battle which interested him deeply. So inured had he become to high tides of political struggle that it did not occur to him to reflect upon the frequency with which, in his native State, bitter campaign followed upon bitter campaign. A Democrat and a Republican were at grips for the United States senatorship. Each of them had been a governor of Kentucky and the legislature, where senators were still made, hung in grimly unyielding deadlock. All that afternoon until its adjournment the lawyer had sat in the visitors' gallery of the house or laboured in the lobby. Now he sought brief relaxation after his own fashion. He sat upright in his armchair with a clarinet pressed to his lips and his cheeks

ballooned, playing "Trouble in the Land."

The soloist at length took the instrument from his pursed lips and wiped the mouthpiece with his handkerchief, and as he did so the negro man who was both bodyservant and butler opened the door of the room.

"Thar's a gentleman done come ter see you, sah. He 'pears mighty urgent in his mind an' he wouldn't give me no name."

The officer, bethinking himself of political satellites who sometimes make a virtue of mystery, smiled as he directed: "Bring him in here, Tom. It's cold in the parlour."

Into the library came Boone, and stood silent until the negro had closed the door upon his exit; then he nodded curtly. There was an air of suppressed wildness in his eyes and a pallor under the bronze of his cheeks, upon which the attorney, as he offered a chair, made no comment.

"I'm here," announced the visitor with a brusque pointedness, "to give you information upon which it is your duty to act."

There was an unintended rasp of challenge in the manner, and under it the official's lips compressed themselves. Boone in his overwrought state felt that he must make haste, while he yet held himself in hand, and the attorney, believing his visitor to be ill, curbed his own temper.

"Let's have the information," he suggested. "Then I'll be in a better position to construe my own duty."

"Presumably you wish to punish all those guilty of the conspiracy that ended in Senator Goebel's death," went on the mountain man in a hard voice. "I say presumably, because the Commonwealth has heretofore appeared to discriminate among the accused."

The attorney bridled. "As to Governor Goebel's death," he asserted heatedly, and in the very employment of the widely different titles the two men proclaimed their antithesis of political creed and opinion, "my record speaks for itself. My sincerity needs no defence."

"That you can prove. Saul Fulton is under indictment in your court. He forfeited his bond and went to South America with or without your knowledge. He has come back, and I am prepared to direct your deputy sheriff to his hiding place. If he got away without your knowledge you ought to be glad to have this news. If you winked at his going, I mean to put you on record."

Boone Wellver had not seated himself. He still stood, with a stony face out of which the eyes burned unnaturally, and the Commonwealth's attorney took a step forward, his own cheeks grown livid with anger, so that the two men stood close and eye-to-eye.

"In this fashion I permit no man to address me," said the prosecutor, with his voice hard-schooled to evenness. "You have come to my house to insult me, and I order you to leave it."

For a moment Boone remained motionless. Between him and the man across from him swam spots of red; then words came with a coldly affronting yet quiet ferocity:

"I am not surprised, but I've done what decency demanded. I ... gave you your chance ... and you repudiated it ... like the charlatan you are. This man shall die ... but it was your duty and your right ... to know first."

He turned on his heel and opened the door, and the man in the smoking jacket gazed after him in amazement. Evidently, the truculent visitor was not himself, and there was no virtue in quarrelling with a temporary madman. Boone knew only that he had invoked the law and the law had rebuffed him. He could not see that his reception, however just his mission, was inevitable since he had invited it with insult.

Back at his room he found another guest awaiting him. It was Joe Gregory, who had also come from the hills. Boone had reached that point at which surprise ends, and to this man, who was a kinsman and a deputy sheriff in Marlin County, he gave as cursory a greeting as though he had come only from the next street.

But Joe's grave face, in which character and sense spoke from every strongly drawn lineament, was disturbed, and he went without preamble to his point. Down there in the hills trouble was brewing, and among both Gregories and Carrs a restive feeling stirred. Fellows walked with chips on their shoulders as though each side were seeking to invite from the other some overt act of truce-breaking. Joe had sought to analyze the causes of this seemingly chance rebirth of long-quiet animosities. He had learned of Saul's return, but Saul was lying low and most men did not know of his presence. It must be, then, that from his hiding place that intriguer was inciting a spirit of truculence in the Carrs to which the Gregories were automatically responding. If that went on it meant the breaking out of the "war" afresh—and a renewal

of bloodshed. The bearer of tidings ended his narrative with an appeal based on strong trust.

"Boone, thar's jest one man kin quiet our boys down and stop 'em short of mortal mischief, I reckon. They all trusts *you*."

"Will they all follow me?"

"Straight inter hell, they will!"

"And yet you think"--Boone looked full into the direct eyes of the other with a glint of challenge in his own--"yet you think I ought to quiet them instead of leading them?"

"Leading them which way, Boone? Whatever ther rest aims at, you an' me, we stan's fer law and peace, don't we? That's what you've always drilled into me, like gospel."

To his astonishment Joe had, for answer, a mirthless, almost derisive, laugh--a laugh that was barked.

"So far we've stood for that, and what have we gained?" Boone's mood, which had been all day seething like the imprisoned fire-flood of a volcano, burst now in lava-flow through the ruptured crater of repression. "Asa abided by the law seven years and more ago--didn't he? Well, he's rotted in a cell ever since! Saul Fulton played with the law and the law played with him and paid him Judas money and made him rich! You say they'll follow me. Then, before God in heaven, I'll lead them to a cleansing by fire! When we finish the job, those murderers and perjurers will be done for once and for all!"

"And you," the deputy sheriff reminded him soberly, "you'll be plumb ruint."

"I'm ruined now."

It was not a handsome room in which the two men stood, and Boone had taken it with a provident eye to its cheapness, but it was in a hotel stone-built in the times of long ago, and from the days of Henry Clay and John C. Breckinridge to the time when Goebel died there history had had birth between those heavy walls.

In the cheaply furnished bedroom whose paper was faded, the observant eyes of Joe Gregory had caught one detail that struck his simple interest, even in the surge of weightier tides.

A massive silver photograph frame lay face downward on the table as though it had been inadvertently over-turned.

Now with a sudden gesture Boone picked it up and held it in his hand a moment. His eyes centred their blazing scrutiny on it with a fixity which the ruder mountaineer did not miss. For a moment only Boone held the frame, out of which looked Anne Masters' face before his gaze; then he replaced it on the table. He did not stand it up but laid it face down, and in the moment of that little pantomime and the quality of the gesture the visitor read something illuminating. He felt with an instinctive surety that he had seen an idol dethroned, and the mysterious words, "I'm ruined now," filled out with meaning as a sagging and formless sail rounds into shape under the livening breath of wind.

He, too, had in those few moments seen an idol at least totter on its pedestal. He had been a hill boy famishing for advancement, and before his eyes Boone Wellver, distantly his relative, had been an exemplar. Now Boone was in some unaccountable vortex and talking wildly of inciting men who needed to be calmed. Into Joe Gregory's mind flashed an instinct of resentment against Anne Masters, whom he had often seen there in the hills. In some fashion, he divined, she was to blame for this situation.

The representative wheeled and left his bewildered visitor standing in the room alone. Below in the basement bar of the hotel a noisily laughing crowd jostled at the counter, and the white-aproned Ganymedes were busy. From the door Boone Wellver cast smouldering eyes about the place, searching for a certain partisan Democrat.

Yonder, talking in loud voice, stood a colleague from a neighbouring mountain district. He was nursing, in fingers more used to the gourd-dipper, the stem of a cocktail glass, and his cheap wit, couched in an affected drawl and garbed with exaggerated colloquialisms, was being acclaimed with encouraging mirth. The fellow fancied himself a *raconteur*, appreciated. In reality he was a sorry clown being baited.

At another time that sight, trivial in itself, would have steadied Boone with a realization of his own self-duty to represent another type of mountain man. Now he was past such realization.

He found the man of whom he had come in search and drew him hastily aside.

"You said this afternoon you wanted to get away from Frankfort for a week."

"Why, yes, Wellver, I've got a sick child at home; but this deadlock's got me tied up. A man must stick to his colours."

Boone nodded. "You can go," he said briefly. "I've come to pair with you. I've got to go home, too. Do you agree not to vote in the house for one week's time?"

The opponent extended his hand. "It's a go, and thank you. Let's have a drink on it." But Boone had already turned. He was hastening up the stairs, and five minutes later found him throwing things into a bag.

"Now," he said in a savage voice to Joe Gregory who still waited, "let's get away from here. There's going to be a snake killing in Marlin."



CHAPTER XXXVIII

Left alone in Wellver's bedroom, Joe Gregory had been thrown back on the companionship of his own thoughts, and they told him that a tide and a wind were mounting which, unless they could be swiftly stemmed, would leave a trail of wreckage along the heights and valleys of Marlin, like drift in the wake of a spring flood-tide; but this would be human wreckage.

None of Boone's adherents at home had supported his program of progress more whole-heartedly than young Joe Gregory, and the infamous perfidy of Saul Fulton was a hateful thing to him, burning in his heart with need of reprisal, for Asa was his "blood-relation."

But as things had shaped themselves, Saul Fulton no longer stood alone, and so long as he was sheltered under the wing of Tom Carr, no blow could be struck him without reopening the "war." Joe knew what that meant. The hills again would redden; again men would ride in fear of death, and that fear would verify itself in murders; as Joe had put it, in "mortal mischief." The whole archaic damnation would rear its head over the new-taught security of peace. The sum of effort toward a stabilized order which men like Boone and himself had built tediously upon patience, would go the collapsing way of land behind a broken dyke.

If a human being lived who could stay that catastrophe it was Boone, so to Boone he had come and found the single available mediator hot-blooded for violence.

Now he shuddered. If Boone Wellver had the power to dissuade those tempestuous clansmen and hold them in abeyance, how much more easily and mightily could he spur them forward! If he, the apostle of peace, breathed the one word, "war," they would be the wild-eyed followers of a Geronimo cast loose on the blood trail.

And Boone's own future, the deputy sheriff mournfully reflected, when this storm was past would be a bright bubble pin-pricked and ended. The man whom local pride proclaimed a statesman to be reckoned with would stand a relapsed son of the vendetta with blood-soiled hands and an inconsistency-smirched record. Even the men whom he could so easily inflame now would, in the end, turn on him, and his career would be as brief as it was floridly picturesque.

They followed feud leaders--but they did not send them to Washington!

Yet Joe was of that blood, too, and could understand Boone's reversion--a reversion willing in a moment to cast aside the armour which he had served his term of years for the right to wear. The thing now was to bring him back in time out of the crimson fog that blinded him. Joe's eyes dwelt absently on the over-turned frame as he stood there thinking, and the articles on the table were photographed on his gaze with a pictorial accuracy of detail, yet because of his abstraction, without meaning of their own.

So mechanically and without at first realizing what he was doing, he read two outspread sheets of paper: Anne's note and McCalloway's telegram. Then abruptly the messages became an integral part of his thought.

Anne Masters, whom Boone loved, was going to marry another man--there was the key to Boone's wild mood, and Victor McCalloway, his friend, had gone away!

If it was Anne who had led Boone to the brink of this peril, it was her duty to lead him back. So ran his elementally simple logic.

"Ef she's decent," declared Joe Gregory tensely to himself, "she kain't skeercely do no less."

So after Boone had returned and begun packing his bag, Joe made a plausible excuse and went out to seek a telephone pay-station. Over the long distance he got Colonel Wallifarro's house, with the amused assistance of an operator who saw only his rustic gaucherie, and who missed entirely the simple, almost biblical, dignity of his bearing.

"Miss Anne? No, sir, she isn't here," replied Moses, the negro butler, and, while Joe's heart sank, that admirable majordomo, recognizing the long-distance call, secured a connection for the speaker with the Country Club.

While the wire buzzed distractingly, Joe Gregory stood in the closed booth and perspired. Outside he watched a travelling salesman who, with a chewed cigar between stout fingers, bent over the switchboard and chatted with the blonde operator. Then finally he heard a voice at the far end. It was a somewhat frightened and faint voice, but even in his anger he admitted that it held a sweet and gentle cadence.

Perhaps the girl half hoped that this ring which called her from guests to whom her engagement was being announced carried a twentieth-century equivalent for the appearance of Lochinvar. Perhaps she only feared bad news. At all events, she spoke low.

"Miss Masters, I'm Joe Gregory," announced an unfamiliar voice which held across the wire a straightforward and determined significance. The name, too, carried its effect, for Anne knew of this man as Boone's most stalwart disciple. "The thing I've got ter tell ye hain't skeercely suited ter speech over a telephone, an' yet thar hain't no other way. Hit's about him, an' he's in ther direst peril a man kin stand in. Thar's just one human soul thet hes a chanst ter save him--an' thet's you."

Sometimes the long-distance wire hums with confusion. Sometimes it enhances and clarifies the ghost of a whisper. Now Joe Gregory heard a choking breath, and for an instant there was no other sound; the man, catching the import of the gasping agitation, went on talking to its speechlessness. It was if between them "he" could mean only one man.

"He hain't skeercely in his rightful senses, or I wouldn't hev no need ter call on ye. He's goin' back ter--well, back home tonight. I kain't handily tell ye what ther peril is, but ef I was ter say thet two days hence he'll be past savin'--an' others along with him--I'd only be talkin' text ter ye."

"But how"--there was desperation of panic in the question--"how could I--save him?"

"He needs savin' from hisself, ma'am. Thar's a train of cars leavin' Looeyville nigh on midnight. Ef ye teks hit I'll meet ye at ther station when ye gets *thar* in ther mornin'. Him an' me is leavin' on one thet starts from hyar an hour from now. Thet's all I kin say afore I sees ye--save thet matters are plumb desperate."

"But I can't--I don't see how--"

Anne had never quite realized such a quietly unbending sternness as that of the voice which interrupted her:

"Ef ye don't aim ter stand by an' see his ruin, ye needs must *find* a way. Jest *come*, thet's all--an' come alone. No other way won't do. I'll be at ther deppo."

And the receiver clicked with a finality that brooked no argument, leaving the girl leaning unsteadily against the wall of the booth. She opened the heavy door a little but did not go out. From the dining-room came a sally of laughing voices, and from the dancing floor haunting scraps of the "Merry Widow" waltz. A clock across the passage ticked above these sounds, and on its dial the hands stood at eight forty-five.

Upon her ears these impressions fell with a sense of remoteness and lightness as if they could be thrust away, but more oppressive and close was the unnamed something brooding in the hills two hundred miles--yes, and two centuries--away.

She knew that she stood at one of those unequivocal moments that cannot be met with life's ordered deliberation. By tomorrow things might be done which could never be undone. An hour hence, decision would be the harder for newly recognized difficulties. The penalty of faltering might be a life of self-accusation for herself--for Boone a tragedy.

She had assured herself with passionate reiteration that Boone was a character in a chapter torn out of her life, but the heartache remained in stubborn mutiny against that ordaining. It had been first gnawingly, then fiercely, present while she laughed and talked at the table with an effervescence no more natural than that pumped into artificially charged wine, and she had needed no death's-head to sober her against too abandoned a gaiety at that feast. Joe Gregory's words had, for all their want of explicitness, been inescapably definite. They meant ruin--no less--unless she intervened and came at once.

To go meant to stir tempests in teapots--to defy conventions, and perhaps by a vapidly rigid interpretation, to compromise herself. To refuse to go meant to abandon Boone to some undescribed, and therefore doubly terrifying, disaster.

Anne Masters was not the woman to shrink from crises or from the determined action for which crises called. Almost at once she knew that she was going by the midnight train to the hills, and let the problems that sprung from her going await a later solution. But how?

Going unaccompanied from a country-club dinner party to desperate affairs brewing in the Cumberlands presented difficulties too tangible to be dismissed. To confide in Colonel Tom or Morgan would mean only that they would insist upon accompanying her. To confide in her mother would mean burning up precious moments in hysteria. The one unobstructed alternative appeared to be the unwelcome one of flight without announcement.

But back to the table she carried little outward agitation. If her heart pounded it was with a sort of exaltation born of impending moments of action. If her face had paled it gave a logical basis for the plea of violent headache upon which she persuaded Morgan to drive her home as soon as the guests rose, and to make the necessary explanations only after she had gone.

When Mrs. Masters returned she found a note entreating her not to give way to undue anxiety. Anne was gone, and the hurriedly written lines said she would telegraph tomorrow from her father's house, but that it was not illness which had called her there.

In such a situation, provided one approach it in the mood of Alexander toward the Gordian knot, the greater complexities appear in retrospect.

It was looking back on those pregnant hours that their various enormities were made plain to her, chiefly through the expounding of *ex-post-facto* wisdom operating cold-bloodedly and without the urge of a peril to be met.

With much the same acceptance of the bizarre as that which marks the fantasy of dreams, she endured the discomforts of that night's journey and found herself at daybreak looking into gravely welcoming eyes on the station at Marlin Town.

Her own eyes felt sunken and hot with fatigue, but to Joe Gregory, who had also spent a sleepless night, she seemed a picture of the fresh and dauntless.

They went first to her father's bungalow, and there a new difficulty presented itself. Larry Masters had gone away to some adjacent town and had left his house tight locked.

"Boone's on the move today," Joe Gregory informed her, "but matters'll come to a head ternight. Twell then things won't hardly bust, but when ther time comes, whatever ye kin do hes need ter be done swiftly. When I talked with ye last night I misdoubted we'd hev even this much time ter go on."

Then as they sat on the doorstep of the closed house, which no longer afforded her the conventional sanction of paternal presence, the deputy sheriff outlined for her with admirable directness and vigour the situation which had driven him to her for help. To clear away all mystification he sketched baldly the little episode of the down-turned photograph and the bitterness of the three words, "I'm ruined now."

"That's how come me ter know," he enlightened simply, "thet Boone war sort of crazed-like--an' thet *you* mout cure him, ef so be ye *would*." Then with a sterner note he added: "Whatever took place betwixt ther two of ye air yore own business, but thar's some of us thet would go down inter hell ter save Boone Wellver. I needed ye, an', despite yer bein' a woman, ef ye're a man in any sense at all, ye'll stand by me right now."

Anne rose from the doorstep where she had been dejectedly sitting and held out a hand.

"You see, I came," she said briefly; "and I aim to be man enough to do my best."

From the door of the wretched hotel as the morning grew to noon, she watched the streets, and it seemed to her that, quite aside from the usual gloom of the winter's day and the scowl of the heavy sky, there was a new and intangible spirit of foreboding upon the town. That, she argued, could be only the creative force of imagination.

She wished for Joe Gregory, but among many busy people that day he was the busiest, and it was not until near sunset that he came for her, leading a saddled horse. Riding along the steep and twisting ways, a sense of sinister forces oppressed her.

It seemed to her that the dirge through the brown-gray forests and the shriek of blasts along the gorges were blended into an untamable litany. "We are the ancient hills that stand unaltered! We and our sons refuse to pass under the rod. Wild is our breath and fierce our heritage. Let the plains be tamed and the valleys serve! Here we uphold the law of the lawless, the nihilism of ragged freedom!"

Once Joe halted her with a raised band. "Stay hyar," he ordered, "twell I ride on ahead. Folks hain't licensed ter pass hyar terday ontill they gives ther right signal."

He went forward a few rods, and had Anne not been watching his lips she would have sworn that it was only the caw of a crow she heard; but soon from a cliff overhead and then from a thicket at the left came the response of other cawing. Then with a nod to her to follow, her guide flapped his reins on the neck of his mule, and again they moved forward.

It was dark when they came to the road that passed in front of Victor McCalloway's house, and there Joe drew rein.

"I've still got some sev'ral things ter see to," he informed the girl, "so I won't stop hyar now. Boone's inside thar, an' like as not hit'll be better fer ther two of ye ter talk by yoreselves. I'll give ther call afore I rides on, so thet ther door'll open

for ye. Hit hain't openin' ter everybody ternight."

Then for the first time Anne faltered.

"Must I go in there--alone?" she demanded, and Gregory looked swiftly up.

"Ye hain't affrighted of him, be ye? Thar hain't no need ter be."

Anne stiffened, then laughed nervously. "No," she said, "I'll go in."

The deputy sitting sidewise in his saddle, watched her dismount, and when she reached the doorstep he sung out: "Boone, hit's Joe Gregory talkin'. Open up!"

Anne's knees were none too steady, nor was her breath quite even as the door swung outward and Boone stood against its rectangle of light peering out with eyes unaccommodated to the dark. He was flannel shirted and corduroy breeched, and since yesterday he had not shaved. But his face, drawn and strained as he looked out, not seeing her because he was studying the stile from which the voice had come, was the face of one who has been in purgatory and who has not yet seen the light of release.

"Boone," said the girl softly, and he started back with astonishment for the unaccountable. Then as his gaze swung incredulously upon her, still wraith-like beyond the shaft of the door's outpouring, he moved to the side, and she stepped into the room.

"But you're in Louisville," he declared in the low voice of one whose reason resents the trickery of apparitions, and his pupils burned with an abnormal brightness. "You're announcing your engagement."

"Not tonight," she reminded him; and then his brain, like his eyes, having readapted its perception to reality, he slowly nodded his head.

"No. That was--*last* night," he answered, with a bitter change of tone. "I'd forgotten.... Things are moving so rapidly, you see."

"I came," she said, with direct gravity, "because some one told me that you were in danger--of wrecking your life. I came to speak ... for the thought in time."

While her eyes held his, he returned her gaze with a steady inscrutability, and the two stood there with a long silence between them.

Then the man announced in a dead tone:

"It's too late. Come here!"

He led the way to the bedroom door and threw it open with an emotionless gesture. The girl flinched as she looked in and succeeded in stifling a scream only by bringing both her hands swiftly to her lips. But Boone took a step over to the cot where Victor McCalloway had slept and lifted the sheet from something that lay there.

"That's 'Little' Jim Bartleton--or was," he added slowly. "I folded his hands there on his breast such a little while ago that they're hardly cold yet." He paused a moment; then the flat quality went out of his bearing and his voice, though no louder than before, became transformed. It held the throbbing intensity of distant drums beating for action and battle.

"He was trying to serve me by watching the enemies that plotted my murder. He was riding my horse--and was mistaken for me. You see, you come too late."

"But, Boone--when--did this--?"

"About an hour ago," the man interrupted her. "He fell just about where you dismounted, drilled through by a bullet hired by Saul Fulton and Tom Carr. I found him there--and brought him in."

"Do--do his people know?"

"Not yet. Only you and I know it--yet." Again the voice leaped tumultuously: "But soon his people are coming here--his people and mine. They are coming for my counsel, and, by God, it's ready for them!"

"And you'll tell them?"

"I'll tell them that I've come back from following after new gods. I'll tell them that the blood of my forefathers hasn't grown cold in me, and that if they follow me, tonight they will see 'Little' Jim avenged." He paused an instant before

adding passionately, "Not by a single man or a couple, but with as many filthy lives as it takes to balance one decent life."



CHAPTER XXXIX

As Anne Masters stood in the narrow doorway of the room where lay the dead body of "Little" Jim Bartleton, she seemed to lose her hold on modernity and to stand a hostage to the forces and emotions of the mediaeval.

The fire rose and fell and flickered. It snapped and sighed, roared and whispered, and with it the shadow of the sheeted figure and silhouette of the uncovered face grew and lessened in grotesque fluctuation.

Before she could begin her struggle with the man whose face wore little promise of conversion, she must conquer the struggle in herself, for suddenly she had need to defend her own feelings against the currents of thought that swayed him, and the role of righteous avenger no longer seemed so indefensible.

"Boone," she said, with an effort at convincing steadiness, yet feeling weak of will beside the set determination of his bearing, "I've come a long way to talk with you. Will you listen?"

His bow was that of compulsory assent, but his eyes showed defiant through their enforced courtesy.

"I'm listening," he said, "though when I asked you to listen, and everything we'd planned our lives for depended on your hearing me, you refused. Yet that was different, I suppose. After all, I'm only partly educated in the ways of polite society. I haven't learned to be casual in such things."

"If you're a barbarian now," she told him quietly, "it's from pure choice. Gentlemen have taught you their code. You've been a gentleman yourself."

Boone laughed.

"Cleopatra, I believe, had pet leopards that were allowed to purr on the steps of her throne. But they were only a part of the picture and they didn't quite become gentlemen. You let me be a pet leopard, too--for a while. Now I've gone back to the jungle."

She ignored the reference to herself. That way lay endless dispute, and this battle to avert feudal tragedies, she thought, was not a thing to be fought on a field of personalities. She spoke slowly and with a dignity that made his cheeks redden to the realization of his own bitter facetiousness. "I came," she said, "only to bring a warning--while there was time."

"Warning of what?" The question was ominously quiet.

"Against confusing black hallucinations with all the saner, bigger things that you know. Warning against betraying a confidence you have won by stampeding people who believe in you and follow you blindly."

The eyes of Boone Wellver narrowed and hardened defensively under this arraignment from lips that had once shaped for him softer responses. Then as they fell again upon the man who had died in his cause, a baleful light reawoke in them. From that spokesman came a silent argument which needed no voice: "Here I am, not a theory but a fact. I died for you!"

He spoke to her as one who makes an explanation, not of obligation but as a concession to the motives which had brought her.

"Before I usurped the functions of the law I appealed to the law. Blackstone says that before a man takes human life--even in defence of his own--he must 'retreat to the ditch or wall!' I obeyed that mandate, and the law refused me. Saul Fulton came back ten thousand miles to have me murdered, and by accident an innocent man died in my stead. Then, and then only, I assumed a man's prerogative to do for himself and his people what courts of injustice decline to do for him." He paused then, and the ferocity of his thoughts brought an ironical smile to his tight lips.

"You *have* come a long way. One can only appreciate what rampant difficulties stood in your path by considering how sacred and unbending are the artificial little laws of your world. It was a bold thing and a kindly thing for you to do, but the text that you preach is--you must pardon the candour of saying it--a sermon of platitudes. They have lost their virtue with me--because, tonight, I'm looking straight into facts and thinking naked thoughts."

"Just what are you going to do?"

"Do?" He echoed the word tempestuously. "I'm going to call on Tom Carr to deliver Saul Fulton over to me and my mob. I suppose you'd call them that. Saul is going to die, and Tom is going into exile. I reckon first, though, there'll be a sort of a battle. The Carrs are a headstrong crew."

He turned on his heel with the air of a man who has surrendered to the demands of politeness moments that can be ill spared from a more pressing urgency, and walked around the cot to lift from the floor behind it a heavy box of rifle cartridges. But when he had straightened up and his eyes again met hers, the sight of her and the sound of her voice brought overpoweringly upon him a surge of that feeling which he had been trying to repress.

They had met thus far as two duellists may meet, each testing the blade of his will and studying the eye of the adversary where may be read the coming thrust in advance of its attempted delivery.

Consciously Anne had admitted that wariness and determination. Boone had chosen to regard her merely as the woman he had once worshipped, who, after failing of loyalty, was making a theatric effort in his behalf, inspired by a sentimental memory of a dead love.

Now he recognized with a disturbing certainty that to try to think of her in any past tense of love was worse than hypocritical. He knew that to him she had never seemed more incredibly beautiful than at this moment when she stood there in the rough corduroy riding clothes in which she had crossed the hills. Those eyes, with the amazing inner lights, were to him dazzling and unsteady.

"What you have just told me is what you meant to do," she declared, with the sort of calm assurance that can speak without faltering or misgiving against the howl of the furies, "but you aren't going to do it. You *couldn't* do it, except in a moment of delirium--"

Boone's chest heaved with a spasm of agitation that made his breath a struggle. Until tonight he had not seen her since they had separated in Colonel Wallifarro's library in Louisville. The world had been desolate. Now she seemed to fill it with Tantalus allurements, and they stood in a battle of wills with a dead man lying between them--and the dead man had been murdered for him.

"Why do you care," he demanded, with a fierce outburst of hungry emotion, "what I do? What are the lives of these human snakes to you?"

Anne's chin came up a little.

"Nothing," she declared crisply. "Perhaps death is too good for them; but murder's not good enough for you!"

He leaned forward toward her with an avid eagerness in his eyes, and abruptly his voice shook as he stubbornly repeated his question:

"I was asking you why--so far as I'm concerned--you care?"

The curt interrogation, with the throb of the restraint in the voice that put it, brought to Anne that same feeling of exaltation that had come when he had seized her so vehemently in his arms in the bluegrass garden on a June morning. Even now she could sway him if only she let a touch of the responsiveness that clamoured in her firm expression, but she had come in answer to a more austere summons. Between them as lovers who had irreparably quarrelled matters stood unchanged, and she was not here to fight emotion with emotion. She had come to draw him back, if she could, from the edge of disaster. Incidentally--for to her just then it seemed quite incidental--she was engaged to marry Morgan Wallifarro.

"I care," she said, rather weakly and conscious of the ring of platitude in her words, "because of the past--because we are--old friends."

Boone's face darkened again into clouded disappointment; then he looked down, jerking his head toward the cot, and demanded shortly:

"All right. I was a fool, of course, but how about him?"

"Will he sleep easier because you prove a deserter to the cause to which you swore allegiance?" There was a touch of scorn in her voice now. "Does his rest depend on your punishing one murder with another?"

"We're talking two languages," he retorted, and the upflaring of his lover's hope had left him, in its quenching, inflexible. "Our standards are as far apart as the Koran and the Bible."

"Neither of them exalts the coward," came her swift response. "Any agitator could lash the Gregories into mob-violence tonight. Only one man might have the courage--and the strength--to hold them in leash."

Boone set down the heavy box and came out into the room where the fire burned. He seemed, in his white-hot anger, too distrustful of himself for speech, and, perhaps because he loved her so unconquerably and despairingly, his fury against her was the greater.

"Before Almighty God," he declared, in a voice low and quaking with passion, "I think I can understand how some men kill the women they love! Call me a barbarian if you like. I am one. Call me a renegade from your self-complacent culture. I welcome the impeachment, but don't call me a coward, because that's a lie."

He broke off; then burst out again in a mounting voice:

"Until a little while ago I might have yielded to everything you asked, because the fear of offending you was a mightier thing to me than everything else combined. But that was the infirmity of a man weakened by love--not strengthened. I've regained my strength now, and I mean to keep it. Hate is a stronger god than love!"

Remaining stiff-postured on the hearth, Boone rained upon her the wrath that cumulative incitements had kindled and fed to something like mania, and she met it with challenge for challenge and with eyes whose fires were clearer than those of his own.

"You say you've regained your strength. Is that why you're afraid to listen to me? Is that why you don't dare undergo my test?"

"Afraid to listen?" In spite of his fury he put his question with a courteous gravity that was disconcerting. "Haven't I been listening? Am I not still listening?"

But Anne was not to be deflected, and her clear-noted voice still rang with the authority of conviction:

"You talk of holding your hand until you had 'retreated to the ditch or wall,' or whatever your legal phrase was, yet you know that you don't dare give your anger time to cool. You don't dare hold these men, who are crying out for blood, quiet for twenty-four hours and spend that time alone with your own conscience."

"And yet," he ventured to remind her, "I left Frankfort last night. Before I started I reached my decision. There have been already more than twenty-four hours, but they haven't cooled me except to make my certainty greater."

"This boy whose face you just showed me brought word to Frankfort that Saul Fulton was back to have you murdered," went on the girl with unshaken steadiness. "The old instinct for vengeance swept you into passion, but you didn't surrender to it then. You went to the prosecutor. Why?"

"I've already told you. I tried the law first."

"Because yesterday you realized that this lawless way was the wrong way. Your rebuff there maddened you still more. You came back, and when you got here you were in doubt again. Isn't that true?"

"Not for long," he replied shortly.

"Yet you *were* in doubt. Then you listened to the hot heads, and the fever rose again in your veins. Tonight this boy was killed. One after the other these things happened to work you up to a sort of frenzy and keep you there. I've heard you tell how murder lords here used to hire assassins and how they had to keep them keyed up with whiskey till the work was done. Don't you see that you've been drinking a more dangerous whiskey, and that you don't dare to let this vengeance wait, because you know if you did, you couldn't face your own self-contempt?"

At first there had been despair in her heart because the face of the man she thought she knew had been the face of a stranger, as unamenable to change as that of the sphinx. But now she knew that if she could only make him see in time what she had seen, she might succeed. He was a sleep-walker, and to the sleep-walker only the dream is real--yet he had only to be waked to step again into sanity. The steel had been too gradually forged, tempered and tested to become pig iron again in a breath, simply because it dreamed itself pig iron.

"You talk of your strength, and I call on you to test it. I call on you to do not what any persuasive agitator could do, but what only you can do--to keep the wild-beast impulses in your own men caged for one more day--and to spend that day with your own conscience."

"You ask me first to forget that you are anything more to me than an old friend. Then you ask me to obey your whim in doing what is next to impossible," he summarized in a coldly ironical voice. "You are setting me very easy tasks tonight!"

"Any one can do the easy things." The contempt in her clear tone was not for him. It was not accusing, but it seemed to wither the men of lesser strength and subtly to pay him tribute by its indirection, and then abruptly she played her strongest card: "Victor McCalloway, your teacher, didn't school you to seek the easy way."

Once more the anger darted in his eyes, but he flinched at the name as though under a lash.

"Why need we bring Mr. McCalloway into this discussion?" he indignantly demanded. "Perhaps I understand him better than you. Mr. McCalloway is no apostle of tame submission."

Anne caught the tempestuous note of protest, and she caught, as well, the meaning that actuated it; Boone's self-denied unwillingness to confront the accusing thought of his hero. That name she had studiously refrained from mentioning until now.

"And yet you know that what I am saying might come from his own lips. You know that if he were here and you left this house tonight to lead a mob of incendiaries and gunmen over the ridge you couldn't go with his blessing or his handshake. You know that you'd have to leave behind you a man whose respect you'd forfeited and whose heart you'd broken."

She stopped, and the voice that came to her was strained as it questioned: "Is that all you've got to say?"

Anne shook her head. "No," she told him, "there's one thing more--a request. Please don't answer me for five minutes."

Boone Wellver jerked his head with a gesture that might have been either acquiescence or refusal. But from his pocket he drew a watch and stood holding it in his hand. The tight-drawn muscles of his face made it a painful thing to watch, and after a little while he turned from her and she could see only his back--with shoulders that twitched a little from time to time under the spasmodic assault of some torturing thought. She was glad that she could not see his eyes. Had there been any place of retreat, save that room where death lay, she would have fled, because when a man stands in his place of Gethsemane he should be alone.

But before Boone's mental vision, a vision from which a bloody and darkening veil seemed to be drawing slowly aside, were passing pictures out of his memory. He saw grave eyes, clouded with the embarrassment of talking self, as the tall figure of Victor McCalloway stood in the woods admitting that he had refused a commission in China, because a mountain boy might need him in his fight against an inherited wormwood of bitterness. He saw himself now an apostate to a faith he had embraced; a doctrine he had both learned and taught. Boone Wellver was waking out of an ugly trance, but he was not waking without struggle, not without counter waves that threatened to engulf him again, not without the sweat of agony.

The crystal into which he gazed cleared and clouded; clouded and cleared. He could not yet be sure of himself. While he stood with that stress upon him still in molten indecision, he was not quite sure whether he heard the girl's voice, or whether it came to him from memory of other days, as it had sounded under dogwood blossoming on the crest of Slag-face:

"Comes now to search your manhood
Through all the thankless years,
Cold, edged with dear bought wisdom,
The judgment of your peers!"

It was, however, a real voice though a faint one, that came next to his ears.

"You said these wild sheep were your people--that you owed them what you could give them--of leadership."

Boone wheeled, and his voice broke from him like a sob, as the watch slipped from his fingers and fell, shattered.

"Do you mean to go through with it--you and Morgan?"

But before she could shape a response, his hand came up and he went on in excited haste: "No, don't answer. You didn't come to answer questions." Then, with a long intake of breath and an abrupt change to flint hardness again, he added: "It was I who was to answer you. You are right. I was a damned quitter. These *are* my people, and I belong to them--but not to the feud-war, to myself--nor to you."

"Boone," began Anne Masters, but she got no further than that, for the man again raised a warning hand and spoke in a crisp whisper:

"Hush!" he commanded, and bent, listening.

In the distance a long whoop was dying away, and then after a moment of tense silence a cautious whistle sounded from the night outside. Boone took a step toward the door, and halted.

"They're coming! It won't do for you to be found here with me alone." He cast a hurried glance toward the other room, then added; "No--*he's* in there. They'll have to see him. Can you wait upstairs?"

Anne Masters nodded, and as, with a lamp which he handed her, she put her foot upon the lowest step of the boxed-in stairway, he went on:

"You've paid me one compliment tonight. You said that I could control men. As for myself, I doubt that, and if I fail--well, that comes later."

From the stairhead she looked down. Boone had gone to the door and stood with his hand on the latch, yet for the moment he did not lift it. To her he seemed bracing himself against a fresh assault of heavy forces.



CHAPTER XL

With Joe Gregory entered three others, and to Anne, who was walled off from any sight of what went on, every word and intonation came up the enclosed stair well as if from a sounding board. She felt like a blind theatregoer whose ears strain to make amends for the want of eyes while a tense melodrama is building toward its climax.

Her imagination filled in the intervals of silence with heart-straining anxiety, and she felt that she must see the movements, the gestures, the light and shadow in the sombre eyes, when the wrath of the voices broke off in ominous quiet. At the thought of the closed door which must soon be opened to them she shuddered, and she wanted to see Boone; to be able to assure herself that he was dominating the situation, which, as she listened, seemed blazing beyond control like a fire that outgrows the power of its fighters.

It was difficult to gauge the flow and counterflow of influences in the scene below stairs. Boone's voice came infrequently as though he, too, were only a listener, and in the other voices was a unanimity of violence and hatred. It was a clamour for prompt vengeance unfolding an Iliad of long-fostered animosities.

To the girl it seemed an intolerable babel--a dissonance of profane fury and menace--and she could feel her heart pounding like a muffled drum.

"We've passed out word to the boys and we won't hev need ter delay now ter git 'em gathered together," came a deep-chested voice at whose raising the others fell silent. "They're gathered right now in leetle clumps an' hovers hyar an' thar, whar they kin rally straightway when ye gives ther signal." The bass fell silent, then supplemented in reassurance to the leader: "Thar hain't a timorous ner a disable feller in ther lot."

"I'm obliged to you, Luther," Boone spoke as one in deep contemplation. "Then I reckon we're fixed to go over there and take Saul away from the Carrs, aren't we?"

Anne Masters pressed her hands agitatedly to her breast as a chorus of yapping assent gave answer. Had he so soon, under the pressure of their crowd influence, repudiated his decision to play the hard rle of restraint?

"Maybe, though, boys," the representative's voice continued reflectively when he had succeeded in quieting them, "we'd better wait for the other men before we start on any grave errand. I hear some of them out there now."

For an hour the talk ran in a hot freset, while newcomers augmented the handful, and with the increase of numbers came a fuller-throated mounting of passion. Would Boone be able to curb their ferocities? Could any man do it? Did he even mean to try?

As she listened to the feud disciples coming in from creek beds and cove pockets, it appeared to her entirely possible that they were capable of turning on and rending the leader who ventured to cross their strongly fixed purposes.

Saul Fulton's treachery to Asa, Tom Carr's giving sanctuary to the Judas, the affront to the clan; these things made up the inflamed burden of their growing and deepening wrath, and as yet they had not been told of the man who lay dead, a victim freshly justifying their hunger for reprisal!

Anne missed the voice of Joe Gregory who, after a brief consultation with Boone, had gone out again. In Joe's presence she would have felt strong reassurance, but Joe was carrying sorry tidings to the house of the boy who lay dead.

Boone knew his people, and he was adroitly playing a most difficult rle, but to her ears came no proof of that. Until the clansmen had opened and aired the festering sores of their grievances there lay in them no hope of amenability. After that--perhaps--but the issue must await its moment, neither anticipating nor procrastinating by the part of a minute.

At last Boone's glance measured the crowd and recognized that there was no longer any one for whom to wait. Ahead lay a disclosure, but before its making he must throw his dice and let circumstances ordain with what faces upward they would roll.

He stood before Victor McCalloway's fireplace and raised his hands.

"Men," he began without haste or excitement, "I've listened to all of you and I've had little to say. I sat with Asa in the court that tried him. I've visited him not once but often in the jail where Saul Fulton's perjury has put him and kept him. I've besieged the Governor to plead for him, and I yield to no man in loyalty to Asa Gregory. Now I claim the right to be heard."

Anne crouched, listening with inheld breath, while the voices below stairs dwindled from clamour to attention. She

tried to visualize the speaker, but because the whole world had receded from familiarity he, too, became vague and hard to picture.

But as Boone talked, she knew that his voice and words and the heart which was meeting, full-front, an issue he had been in danger of deserting, were making magic, and along her own scalp went the creep that is the ultimate test of drama. Inconsequentially she fretted because she could not see his eyes. His auditors, though, could see the eyes and respond to their hypnotic fires--respond though the text he taught was hard to stomach.

He was winning them against their prejudices, and so skilfully had he carried them step by step that they were saved from anything like full realization of self-reversal, which means loss of self-esteem. If for the hireling shot from the laurel they had no other response than retaliation in kind, they were only rising to the bait of a lawless and unimaginative enemy. It was better, he asserted, that the efforts to murder him succeed than that they should draw the life essence out of every principle in which his adherents had supported him.

Anne said to herself that Boone had carried the night, but Boone knew otherwise.

A handful of men keyed for violence now accorded him calm attentiveness. They could even laugh, on occasion, but he was thinking of the closed door of McCalloway's room. He had need to grapple them to his leadership more strongly yet, for when he opened that door they would no longer laugh.

Now he drew a deep breath.

"These things that I am saying to you, I say not only with a full knowledge of all that you men have told me but with a knowledge of a harder thing to bear." He paused, and then he told them bluntly:

"'Little' Jim Bartleton lies dead behind that door. He was killed tonight when he rode my horse on an errand for me, and was taken for me."

After an interval of hushed amazement, the commotion broke afresh, and Boone again raised his hands and awaited its subsiding.

"When a man asks his friends to hold their hands, though their hearts are justly hot, he has need to prove his own steadfastness. Here is my promise. Tomorrow Joe Gregory as deputy sheriff, and myself are going to Tom Carr's house. We are going alone in the full light of day and without any force of armed men to bolster up our demands. If any enemy seeks our injury he must do that too in the full light of day. In the name of the law and not of the mob, we will demand that Saul be turned over to us. We will accept no lies and no evasions. We will take Saul to Frankfort and present him to the court that refused to send for him. If they fail, then, it will be time for *you* to act. Meanwhile you must wait. I have never before asked any test of your trust in me. Now those that believe in me must stand with me, and--" his last words were like the crack of a cattle whip--"and those that don't must fight me."

With eyes that burned and a breast that pounded, Anne awaited the reception of that peroration, and for what seemed an endless time there was no reception at all, except tense silence. The girl closed her eyes and fancied a pendulum swinging in the dark, and as it registered seconds her nerves tautened until the impulse to scream became poignant. Yet she told herself this long silence meant assent--must mean assent.

Then, with an abruptness that made her start, came a voice, not from the room below, but raised from the roadside in a long halloo, and from within sounded the staccato challenge, "Who's thar?"

Once more a silence momentary and taut, a silence that hurt, came like a margin about sound, then the outer voice spoke again:

"Hit's me--Mark Bartleton." That much was steady, but there the intonation altered and mingled challenge with heartbreak. "I've done come with my jolt wagon--ter fotch my dead boy home."

Anne covered her face with her hands and shivered behind the door. She did not need to have her fears confirmed in the growing whisper that raised itself slowly from the sunken levels of silence. Those words with the weighty force of their simplicity had crashed upon trembling scales of indecision, and they trembled no longer. Labour and courage and effort had gone into Boone's upbuilding dam of persuasion. It took a single blow to shatter it.

Now the night belonged to the torch and rifle, unless a miracle intervened, and though Boone would struggle like a shepherd whose flock has been scattered, he would persevere in the face of foredoomed failure. Yet until the death-frighted and ox-drawn wagon had strained and jolted slowly away, and even a little longer, the specious calm held.

The swinging lantern had disappeared around a turn; the sounds of creaking axle and hub had died into the night and the door of the house had been closed, before the hum of low talk gave her any coherent sign. Below there was only

the confused blurring of words such as may come from a locked jury room, until over it sounded the deep basso that she had heard first that evening.

Its words were not pitched in oratorical effect, but they were contemptuous and final. "Come on along, men," said the voice. "We're wastin' time hyar foolin' with a man thet kain't do nothin' but talk. What we wants now is a man with guts inside him."

The sentiment of accord declared itself loudly, profanely and indubitably. But as the fickle gathering grew turbulent, Anne heard once again a shout followed by the opening of a door, and after that an outcry of amazement which she could in no wise translate, beyond a realization that something was happening which was both unforeseen and incredible.

Anne's posture, as she listened to the fluttering of her own heart, was one of terror in its most abject and helpless form. She had persuaded him, not only with argument but the taunt of cowardice, to interpose himself between this tidal wave of human savagery and its object. Now the wave had seized him up and tossed him from his precarious foothold. His career had ended: his influence, crumbled under too severe a strain, and his life itself probably hung on a hair balance while he stood among wolves. She told herself that the responsibility lay with her, and her reason grew palpitant and dizzy. Only a miracle could quench the conflagration now, and a miracle five minutes hence would be too late.

This deadly pause was unendurable. A door had opened and clamour had been breathlessly stilled. What did it mean? Some one had entered--Who was it?

The man who had just made his entrance had boldly pushed his way to the threshold before he called out, and had as boldly thrown wide the door without awaiting a reply. Faces turning with a single impulse toward the invader remained staringly intent as they saw standing there the broad-shouldered figure of Asa Gregory, who should be in jail, who for seven years had not been free to ride or walk the highways.

"I was pardoned out, this morning," he said briefly, "and I met up with some of our boys whilest I was ridin' home. I was right interested in what them boys told me."

"Ye've done come in good season, Asa," shouted an impulsive spokesman. "We're settin' out ter settle old scores, an' Boone Wellver's done laid down on us."

But Asa turned a cool eye on the informant, and into the sonorous quality of his voice came an acid bite.

"Who's got the best license here to talk about score-settling? Who's been sulterin' in jail for seven years?"

"You have, Asa," came the chorused response. "We're hearkenin' ter ye, Asa."

"All right," snapped back the new arrival. "What I have need to say I kin say right speedily. Quit it! Go home and leave me to pay off my own scores!" He crossed to Boone and laid a hand on his shoulder, and standing that way, he added: "The man that says this boy lays down is a liar. As for me, I stands by what *he* says! Ef our own folks don't know who their strong men are, our enemies know--an' seek to hire 'em kilt. Go home an' wait till we calls on ye!"

An hour later Boone stood alone with Anne in the room where he had been overthrown and rehabilitated.

"I ought to take you across to Aunt Judy's house," he told her in a weary voice. "I don't suppose you should be left here--with me--like this--for what's left of the night. Until now there's been company enough."

The girl shook her head wearily. "I'd fall off of a horse," she said. "I'm too tired to ride. I'm going back up those stairs--"

The man moved a step forward.

"Joe Gregory is coming back," he explained, "but it will probably be near to dawn before he gets here."

As she reached the stairway she halted impulsively with her hand on the latch, and stood poised there with an expression of baffling, half-eager expectancy. The sensitive beauty of her face and the slender grace of her body seemed for a moment to cast aside their fatigue and to invite him, but Boone stood resolutely the width of the room away.

Had he known it, that was a moment in which he might have grasped a more vital rehabilitation. Had he then offered again the explanation for which he had once been denied opportunity, her readiness to hear him would have been eager. At that moment she was once more his for the taking. He need only have extended his arms and said, "Come!" and she would have responded instantly and gladly. She was receptive, stirred, but one thing her pride still inhibited. She could not make the advances.

Boone let his moment pass; let it pass unrecognized with the blindness of life's perverse coincidence. At that precise instant, a mood was upon him which was no intrinsic reflection of his own spirit, but rather the reflection of all the stormy transitions of the night.

She had seen him at a crisis when he had been on the verge of collapse like a bridge whose centre rests upon a span of flawed steel. True, he had not actually collapsed, but, save for her intervention, he would have done so. Now his mortification withered him and perversely expressed itself in resentment against her--for having witnessed his shame.

He owed her everything--so much that his self-respect was bankrupted--and if he could have hated her, he would have hated her just then. He even fancied that he did. He saw in her a cold, impersonal deity, consciously superior to himself and secretly triumphant over his weakness. So he not only let the moment pass, but he rebuffed its unspoken invitation.

"I owe you everything," he said with the cold ungraciousness of a grudging confession. "If you hadn't come, I'd have had a hell in my conscience tomorrow. I'd have been a murderer. I even tried to force you to admit that it was for me, myself, that you cared enough to do it. I'm ashamed of that.... It won't happen again." He paused and his voice was bitterly edged when he went on. "I begged for the chance to explain things--when there was still time. You refused to hear me. Now I wouldn't explain if *you* begged *me* to--That's over, but I acknowledge the debt I owe you--for tonight. It's a heavier debt than any man can stand in and keep his self-respect."

Morgan and Anne had been to the theatre, and when they came back to the house the lawyer had drawn from his pocket a small package, and while Anne opened it he looked on. It was an engagement ring, and quite worthy of his connoisseur's selection. But when he put out his hand to take hers, she drew it back and spoke impulsively:

"Before you put that on--Morgan--there's something I must tell you."

He smiled his acquiescence and waited with the emerald set emblem in his fingers, while, in the manner of one who has determined upon a recital that does not flow easily, she began. She filled in for him the events of the two days of her recent and somewhat mysterious absence, and its cause.

Morgan had learned to accept with a certain philosophy the impulse-governed life of the girl who had promised to marry him. If Anne had been less uniquely her own unsteretyped self, she would not have been the fascinating person who had captured his fastidious admiration.

While she talked, his face grew sober, but he refrained from any interruption, and at last she looked up and said simply: "I thought it was best to tell you all about it now. I went--and that's where I was--and for hours of that ghastly night--there was no one else there--but just the two of us."

"I see," said Morgan slowly. She waited for him to supplement the two words, and when he failed to do so, she went on:

"I thought maybe that--knowing about that--you might not want to--" She broke off, and her eyes falling on the ring, finished the sentence.

Morgan shook his head. His usual self-possession was a shade shaken, but he responded definitely, "I do."

"Of course," she conscientiously explained, "when I went, I didn't know what lay ahead, but I took the chances and--that's what it's important for you to understand, Morgan--even if it were to do over--and I knew it all, I'd go again."

"Yes," said her fianc slowly, "I suppose so." He paused a moment before he finished. "Naturally, it's not a thing that I'd have chosen to have occur, but it was the only thing you could do--and be yourself."

"And you have no--questions to ask me?"

Once more he shook his head. He even smiled faintly.

"No," he said without hesitancy, "I have no questions to ask you."

Anne rose from her chair and laid a hand on his arm.

"Morgan," she exclaimed, "you know how to be generous. I've got to be honest with you. I'll stand by my agreement--but I guess I'll always love him. If you marry me, you're taking that chance. I can't give you my heart because it's not mine."

He slipped the ring on her finger, and across his serious features came a slow smile.

"I suppose it's what a thousand fools have said before, Anne, and a thousand more may say it again, but all I ask is the chance to make you love me. I'll succeed because I can't afford to fail."



CHAPTER XLI

Had Tom Carr chosen to sit in a penitential spirit, reviewing his life, he might, perhaps, have been forced to acknowledge a record tarnished with misdeeds, but his conscience would have remained clear of that most depressing sin--bungling the undertaking to which he had set his hand. Even his delegated murders had been accomplished with tidy and praiseworthy dispatch. Now he had collaborated with a bungler and harvested a dilemma. Saul Fulton had selected an executioner whose rifle ball had targeted itself in a breast not marked for death--yet one which would none the less cry out for vengeance. Above all, the *contretemps* had proven most ill-timed, since it coincided with Asa's pardon and return.

Word of his coming had reached the house of Tom Carr before Asa himself had ridden away from the livery stable, and that same hour found Saul, like the general discredited by a *dbcle*, an outcast from the support of his late allies and a refugee in full flight.

Tom conceived that he was doing enough by way of generosity when he supplied Saul with a horse and a lantern and set him on his way toward the Virginia boundary. Asa's recrudescence from the burial of prison walls to the glamour of a delivered martyr brought him to a choice between standing siege or throwing his Jonah to the whales, and Tom had not hesitated.

So when the party that rode with the deputy sheriff dismounted at the door of the Carr house, they found it unreservedly open to them. Tom did not even waste a lie when he met eyes as uncompromising as though they were looking across rifle-sights.

"You boys hev come jest a leetle too late," he tranquilly informed them. "Yore man spent some sev'ral days an' nights with me--but he hain't hyar now."

"Then,"--it was Boone who put the question, while Asa maintained the stony-faced silence of a graven image--"then you admit that you took him in and sheltered him?"

The eyes of the Carr leader had held the open light of candour. Now they mirrored that of guileless surprise, and both expressions were master achievements of deceit.

"Why wouldn't I take him in, Boone," he inquired with admirable gravity. "He 'peared ter be mighty contrite erbout ther way he'd done acted at Asa's trial. He 'lowed he'd come back home a' purpose ter put sartain matters before ther new governor thet mout help Asa git his pardon. Thet was p'intedly what he said--or words ter thet amount."

Boone smiled his open and ironic disbelief. "And you swallowed that lie, Tom? It doesn't stand on all fours with your repute for keen wits."

The face of the intriguer remained steadfast save that the unblinking eyes became a little pained. He fumbled in his breast pocket, and from among the few dirty envelopes that came out sheafed in his hands, selected a crumpled page of letter paper.

"Thet's whut I went on," he said simply. "I've done lost ther envellup hit come in, but thar hit is in Saul's own hand-write."

Boone took the missive which bore a South American date line and, after reading it, handed it without comment to Asa.

"Dear Tom," it ran. "I swore to a volume of lies at Asa Gregory's trial to save my own neck. It's been haunting me until I've got to come back and help to get him a pardon. I'm indicted myself, and I've got to come in secret or go to jail without getting results. I'm coming to your house, and until the time is ripe it mustn't be known that I'm there. You don't love Asa, but we're all mountain men together, and that trial was a trial of the mountains. Resp. Saul Fulton."

Saul had ridden away the night before in the haste of a man whose life is forfeit to delay, yet before he mounted he had penned that letter at Tom Carr's dictation, and the ink of the South American date line was scarce twelve hours dry.

"I'll send it back to you, Tom," he had demurred. "There isn't time now. They may come any minute to get me!"

"If ye don't write hit--an' thet speedily--they'll find a ready-made corpse when they gits hyar," had been Tom's succinct reply with an eloquent gesture toward his armpit holster. "Ye got me inter this fix--now ye've got ter alibi me outen hit."

Without waste of words, the posse turned and left the house. They were starting on a pursuit which they knew would end in nothing, but Tom, following them to the gate, called out cheerfully: "I hope ye gits him, boys. He left my house

without no farewell betwixt sundown an' sun-up--an' he took ther best nag outen my stable ter go with."

One who would sound the depths of ingenious depravity should lend ear to the tale of the householder whose life has been ravished of tranquillity by that small boy of the neighbourhood who leads and incites the local gang of youthful hooligans.

To such a tale the judge of the Louisville Juvenile Court was listening now, and the defendant, who sat sullen eyed in the essential wickedness of his eleven years, heard witness after witness unfold his record of misdoing. He and his vassal desperadoes, it was averred, broke windows and street light globes, preyed upon the apple barrels of the corner grocery, and used language that scalded and sullied the virginal ears of passing wash-ladies and plumber-gentlemen.

"There can't nobody live in peace in them two blocks, Judge, your Honour," came the heated asseveration of the man in the witness chair. "He's got more influence over my boys than what I've got myself--and the Reform School's the only place for the likes of him."

"Where do you spend your Saturday nights?" inquired the personage on the bench irrelevantly, and the furtive eyes of the witness shifted and lost their self-assurance.

"Here and there, Judge, your Honour. Sometimes I drop in at Mike's place for a glass of common beer."

"Do you occasionally send your boys--the followers of this dangerous bandit--to Mike's place with a bucket?"

The man hesitated, and his glance savoured of repressed truculence. "Maybe I do, once in a while," he replied doggedly. "I ain't on trial here, am I?"

"No--not just now." The judge spoke almost gently. "Stand down and let the fellow who *is* on trial take that chair."

The child with the sullen face slouched forward, and the Judge's eyes engaged his smouldering young pupil's with less austerity perhaps than the description of his turpitude warranted. This man, who sat one day a week to try the cases of delinquent and incorrigible children, presided five days over more mature hearings. From Monday through Thursday he mantled himself in judicial dignity and his language was the decorous speech of the bench. One who observed him only on Friday would hardly have gathered that. Just now he leaned forward and addressed the boy in a conversational tone and an argot that savoured of the alley-playground.

"Willie, haven't you got any other name--I mean amongst those kids that belong to your gang?"

Willie swallowed hard, but inasmuch as he failed to reply, his inquisitor went on:

"Surely those other kids don't call a rough-neck like you just Willie. You wouldn't stand for that, would you? Haven't you got some professional name like Bulldog Bill--or something?"

A fugitive glint of pride flashed in the boy's eyes under their cultivated toughness and their present alarm, and with a sheepish grin he enlightened this embodiment of the law.

"The other kids calls me 'Apache Bill.'"

The Judge did not smile, but accepted the information with full gravity, and spoke reflectively:

"Officer McGuire tells me that there are about a dozen members in your gang. It looks like a feller that can boss a crew of that size ought to have something in him. Look here, kid, let's talk this over."

After five minutes of low-toned confidences the man on the bench found himself looking into eyes of abated sullenness and listening to a voice that was simply small boy.

"You see it's a sucker play for you to travel the route that ends in the pen."

The Judge made it seem that Apache Bill himself had arrived at this sane conclusion in which his Honour merely concurred.

"And since you realize that yourself, I'm not going to send you to the Reform School this trip. You are going to give me your promise to run that gang differently." He looked up, and his glance fell on a young woman sitting among several others at the back of the room. There was much in her appearance to arrest the attention and challenge interest, but what one noticed most were eyes that held an inner light and a starry brightness. "I'm going to have you report to one of our probation officers every week," continued the Judge to Willie alias "Apache Bill," "and come to see me myself

occasionally."

Usually for a case of this sort he would have selected a man from that group of volunteers who made effective the machinery of the children's court but this young terrorist would take a bit of understanding in his reclamation, and among the men and women who aided and abetted his efforts no other seemed to see into the intricacies of the boy mind quite so unerringly as that young woman with the starry eyes, who had been a famous belle and before that a tom-boy.

So the Judge nodded to her and said, "Miss Masters, I'm going to have 'Apache Bill' report to you. You two might talk over a boy-scout organization down there in his district."

As the girl rose from her chair, the Judge's face suddenly developed stern lines and his brows knit closely as he turned his attention to the principal complainant.

"John Vaster," he announced, this time with no softening of tone, "a probation officer is coming to your house, too. If those boys of yours go to Mike's place after this with a bucket, or if you don't find a way to keep them off the streets at night, you're coming back here, not as a prosecuting witness but as a defendant."

Anne Masters had turned to this work of volunteer probation officer as to a refuge from herself. Perhaps in her own mind it stood also for a sort of penance for sins with which she stood self-charged.

Her marriage with Morgan had been set for June, and somehow it seemed to her that when the ceremony had been gone through with her besetting doubts and struggles would end, if not in happiness, at least in resignation. Then she would acknowledge the abdication of Romance and accept her allegiance to Duty.

But meanwhile, until the solemn seal of the Church's ritual had been set upon that resolve, bringing, as she sought to convince herself it would, a steadied feeling of solace and of perplexities resolved, she seemed to hang like a Mahomet's coffin in suspended disquiet and misery.

Boone had said he would never explain--and she accepted his assertion as final. But for that explanation which she had once silenced, and which, when she was receptive, he had refused, she now burned with anxiety. Unless she had work to do while she fought back the insurgency and revolt of her heart, she would not be able to endure the pictures with which her imagination filled the future. Through this period of heartache she missed the essential, in that she did not discern the artificiality of the whole situation or the cure that would have lain in a repudiation of false pride.

Whatever mistakes she had made, she was now bound by her promise to Morgan, and doubly bound by the tyranny of her mother's dependence which, having been once accepted, could no longer be repudiated.

Colonel Wallifarro, bending over his desk one forenoon some two months after he had given the dinner to announce his son's engagement, had chokingly fallen forward with his face on his elbows.

When the physicians arrived, he was lying on his office lounge under the age-yellowed engraving of President Jefferson Davis and the grouped cabinet of the erstwhile Confederate States of America, and it was there that he died within the half hour.

"Acute indigestion," said the doctors, "His blood pressure was high and he refused to ease up on the work. He had often been warned that this might occur."

His will showed that in one respect at least he had heeded the warning, for its date was recent. The estate, much shrunken below the estimate of public supposition, was devised entirely to his son except for a bequest of a few thousand dollars to Anne's mother. There was mention, too, of a note, as yet unpaid, for twenty thousand dollars "loaned and hereby released, to my friend Lawrence Masters, Esq."

"In leaving my whole estate to my beloved son Morgan," read an explanatory clause of the document, "I do so happy in the knowledge that I likewise provide for my niece, Anne Masters, to whom he is engaged to be married, and for whom my love and affection is that of a father."

And Boone Wellver, who had still hoped against hope to receive from Anne the word that would restore to him at least a fighting chance, heard nothing. It all seemed to his gloomy analysis relentlessly logical that the girl, who for a long while had fought for her choice of an alien in her own world, should go back to her kind. After all she was not for him, and his dream had only been a fantasy long indulged but no longer possible of indulgence. So Boone plodded on, and in the more obvious manifestations of life was not greatly changed. The zest of the game was gone, but its realities remained to be met, and for him there was a coward memory to be lived down--the memory of a relapse from which a woman had saved him.

The ordeal of waiting was almost over for Anne, and the wedding preparations were under way. From the bed which she had not been able to leave since the day of Colonel Wallifarro's burial, Mrs. Masters injected a more fervent enthusiasm into these preliminaries than did the bride to be.

After the fashion of one who has been embittered and enjoys a belated triumph, the mother lived in a sort of fantasy which could see no clouds in the sky of her daughter's future. A factitious gaiety animated her, even though the death of her mainstay had crushed her into invalidism.

The haunted misery in Anne's face, and the lids that closed as if against a painful glare when Mrs. Masters forecast the happiness to be, were things that had no recognition or acknowledgment from the lady in the sick bed. It was as if her own joy in a dream achieved were comprehensive enough to embrace and assure the life-long happiness of her daughter, as the whole includes the part.

But when Anne sat down at her desk one afternoon to address some of the wedding invitations, she was out of sight of the maternal eye and her sensitive lips dropped piteously.

On the list before her, made out by herself and augmented by Morgan and her mother, she had come upon the name of Boone Wellver, and suddenly the things on her desk swam through a mist of tears.

Anne Masters sat there for a long while, then with a white face she drew a line through the name on the list. At least he should be spared that heartlessness of reminder.

She and Morgan were going abroad. Morgan had foreign business which made the journey imperative, and it was only when the courts adjourned and political matters fell quiet with the coming of summer that he could so long be away from his practice and his public affairs, but Anne could not think of Europe now. Her thoughts turned mutinously to imagined vistas seen from a rock at the top of Slag-face across valleys where sunset cast the shadows of mountains: where just now the dogwood was in a foam of blossom and the laurel would soon be in pink flowering.



CHAPTER XLII

When Victor McCalloway came home in June he read in the face of the young man he met there that chapters deeply shadowed had been written into his life, and Boone was prompt enough in his confessions, though when he alluded to Anne's approaching marriage his words became meagre and his utterance flat with a hampering distrust of emotion and self-betrayal.

McCalloway gazed off grave-eyed across the small door-yard and mercifully refrained from any hurtful attempt at verbal solace.

Finally when the hum of bees in the honeysuckle had been the only disturbers of their long silence, the Scotchman spoke--and the younger features relaxed into relief because the words did not, even in kindness, touch upon the soreness of his mood. "The old spruce over there--the one that used to be the tallest thing we saw--it's gone, isn't it?"

Boone nodded. "The sleet took it down last winter."

Victor McCalloway was sage enough in human diagnosis to divine that, however much Boone had suffered through a period of months, the expression of quiet but well nigh unendurable suffering that just now haunted his eyes had not been constant in them. A man subjected long to that soul-cramping stress, with no outlet or abatement, would have become a melancholiac. In one sense it might be a chronic wretchedness, but today some particular incitement had rendered it acute--acute beyond the power of stoic blood to hold in concealment.

Repression only made the gnawing ache more burdensome. McCalloway wished that Boone might have gone, like the less inhibited folk of an elder generation, to some wailing wall and beat his breast with clenched fists--and come away less pent with hard control.

"I'll just go in and have a look over my scant accumulation of mail," he said with the same Anglo-Saxon pretence of armour-plated emotion. "In these days even the hermit doesn't altogether escape letters."

But when, inside the house, he found among the few and dusty envelopes one containing a wedding invitation, and when his eyes went, quick-glancing, to the wall calendar in a comparison of dates, his brain cleared of its mystification.

Tomorrow was the day of Anne's marriage.

If the number twelve on the calendar's June page bore a black penciling, like a mourning band, it was palpably a thing that Boone had not meant other eyes to see or understand.

McCalloway, himself in the shadowed interior, turned his head and could see through the door a sweep of sun-flooded hills and flawless sky. Against a background of blossoming laurel and crystal brightness Boone sat, stiff-postured, with eyes fixed and unseeing. McCalloway carried the card and its covering to the empty fireplace and touched a match to its edge. When it had been consumed, he went out again, and the younger man looked up, slowly, as though bringing himself out of a lethargy, and spoke with a dull intonation.

"You have said nothing, sir, of what I told you of myself. Saul came back and I reverted. That night I was a feud killer pure and simple. If blood didn't flow it was only because--" He broke off and began over, speaking with the rapidity of one rushing at an obstacle which has balked him, "it was only because--*she* stopped me."

"The point is," responded McCalloway soberly, "that blood didn't flow. You threw your weight into the right pan of the scales."

Boone shrugged his shoulders, disdaining a specious justification. "The rescue came from outside myself. One must be judged by his motive--and by that standard I failed."

"Not at all, sir! Damn it, not at all!"

At the sudden tempestuousness of the soldier's outburst, Boone looked up, surprised. McCalloway, too, had felt and reacted to the tension of their interview, and now he cleared his throat self-consciously and proceeded in a manner of recovered calmness.

"You were in the position of infantry just then, my boy, under the fire of field pieces. You needed artillery support--and, thanks to her, it came. There are times when no infantry can endure without a curtain of fire."



"She looked as if she'd been seeing ghosts," announced Anne's maid-of-honour, with a little shudder of emphasis, as she stood in a chatting group of wedding attendants just outside the door of Christ Church.

"I think she's the loveliest thing I've ever seen," declared another girl. "Anne has a distinction that's positively royal. Don't you think so, Reed?"

The young man addressed, after a half hour's deprivation inside the church, was hastening to avail himself of a cigarette. With a match close to his lips he grunted, and then having inhaled and exhaled, he supplemented the incoherent affirmative. "You're both right. As for myself, I'd rather have my bride's royalty less suggestive of Marie Antoinette riding in a tumbril. I don't like to have it brought home to me that marriage is life's supreme sacrifice."

Anne herself, sitting beside Morgan Wallifarro as they drove home, was rather breathless in her silence. Today it had been the rehearsal, but tomorrow it would be the ceremony itself, and from that there would be no turning back. An intolerable sense of inevitability seemed to close and darken in a stifling oppression that left her faint.

Until now she had been telling herself, as one will tell oneself specious things to prop a tottering resolution, that the ghosts of incertitude and panic would hold dominion only over the days and weeks of waiting. If she could keep her courage steadfast until she had actually become Morgan's wife, the forces that support one in one's duty would rally in closer order to uphold her.

But there in the church, going through the formula of the rehearsal, that fallacious self-bolstering had collapsed, and the misgivings of these days stood revealed as prefatory only to a more permanent and chafing thralldom.

If Boone had been there she felt that there was no law within herself strong enough to have prevented her from fleeing to him--and terror had seized upon her.

Then it was that the something came into her eyes which the maid-of-honour had described as the appearance of one seeing ghosts.

Morgan owed every success in life, or at least attributed every success, to his refusal to admit the possibility of failure. Like the Nervii, "he was strong because he seemed strong." Anne had brought him, at times, close to an acknowledgment of defeat in his paramount resolve--but his perseverance, he believed, had conquered, and his fears were over.

Now he looked into a face from which the colour had ebbed and in which the eyes were far from radiant--but Morgan told himself that it should be his privilege to bring the bloom of happiness back, and his colossal self-confidence was not daunted by any serious misgiving.

It was not until they had entered the house and stood alone in the same room where Boone had listened to his edict of banishment, that she turned slowly and said in a voice both terrified and defiant:

"Morgan--I can't do it.... For God's sake release me from my promise!"

She stood facing him and braced for the recoil of that indignant protestation which she had every right to expect from him. She was not only withdrawing the promise upon which she had let him plan the entire edifice of his future, but doing so with a tardiness that made it, for him, inescapably conspicuous and mortifying.

But Morgan was a master of the strategy of surprise. His jaw did not drop in stricken amazement. His left hand, holding the glove just drawn from the right, did not clench in dramatic tension. His eyes did not even smoulder into that suppressed rage which mischievously she used to tease into them for the pleasure of seeing them snap.

If anything, the prominent out-thrust of the clean-cut jaw was less emphatic than usual, and the girl felt the sinking helplessness of one who, keyed to a hard battle, launches the attack and encounters no opposition.

Morgan had seen the wild, almost irrational, terror of her eyes, and they had silenced argument. For once he recognized a defeat that he could avoid only by an ungenerous victory to which he could not bring himself, and he had no reproach because he could see that, in her effort to perform her promise, she had goaded herself to the breaking point.

His face showed every thoroughbred and manly quality of its blood as he inquired, with as great a deference as though her sudden announcement came with entire reasonableness: "Are you sure--you can't?"

When she had nodded her head miserably, Morgan argued his cause. He talked with a quiet and earnest eagerness but without reproach, as if he were for the first time pleading his love.

But the arguments held nothing new. She herself had lain awake at night repeating them until they were like parrot reiterations. They interposed no answer to the monstrous fact that a marriage which she faced in such unwillingness

would be a thing that divorced the heart from the body. That she had so long beguiled herself into believing it possible, filled her now with self-scorn, but to the untimeliness of her decision he offered no protest.

They talked, all things considered, with surprising calmness, and at length Morgan glanced down and, seeing on the table near his hand the plans for the house they had meant to build, picked them up absently, glanced at them and tossed them back. It was the gesture of accepting a finality.

"I suppose, Anne," he said, with a rather more than merely decent assumption of whatever fault existed, "I've refused to see the truth because I was blindly selfish, but I couldn't seek to hold you--if it costs you both happiness and self-respect." He paused and then added. "I ask only one thing, now. Don't make this decision final. Think it over for three months--"

"Morgan dear," she interrupted in a gasping voice, "for more than three months, I've thought of nothing else."

"I know." The gentleness of his speech was the more telling by its contrast with his aggressive habit of self-assertion. "But you were thinking then with a sense of being bound. Complete freedom may make a difference. At least leave me that hope."

"I'm afraid," she faltered, "I'm very certain."

"Anyway," he reminded her, as he forced a rueful smile, "it will be easier to tell your mother in that fashion. She is on my side, you know."

Possibly Morgan had long ago counted this over-ardent advocacy on the part of Mrs. Masters as a hurtful partisanship. He knew that Anne's spirit had been fretted, ragged under the maternal insistence, even when it was tempered with finesse. He knew too that in this final declaration of freedom, the girl could not escape the knowledge that for her mother as well as herself she was wrecking every provident prospect and raising the ghosts of shabby, genteel poverty.

"I think," said Morgan, with a delicacy of tact which one would hardly have expected from him, "you'd better let me tell her--that we've decided to wait until I come back from abroad."

Anne sickened at the thought of her mother's disappointment and at the thought too of how, for her, the future was to be met. Then as if that were too gigantic a problem, her mind veered to lesser, yet disturbing, complications.

Today's papers had printed advance details of the wedding. The type of one heading seemed to stand at the moment before her eyes, "Happy Event of Interest to Society," but when she spoke somewhat timidly of these things to Morgan he contemptuously waved them aside.

"Damn the invitations and the wedding guests," he exclaimed. "We weren't getting married for their benefit. Leave that to me. The papers will announce that I've got to go to Europe--and that because of a turn in your mother's condition you've decided to defer the wedding until I come back. That's all they need to know."

He turned to the window and after a minute wheeled suddenly back.

"I have one thing still to ask. I have no longer any claim, of course. But until three months have passed--you won't send for Boone Wellver, will you?"

The girl's head came up with a tilted chin.

"I shall never send for him," she vehemently declared. "He's done with me and that's all there is to it!"

It was not undiluted fiction which Morgan gave to the morning papers that night, as he regretfully reported the sudden heart attack of Mrs. Masters, which necessitated an eleventh hour postponement of his wedding. There had been a heart attack which might have been averted had the good lady been able to receive his tidings with a less flurried spirit, but that he did not regard it necessary to explain, and a flinty something in his eye discouraged unnecessary questions.

So Morgan set out alone on the trip which was to have been a honeymoon, and the lady whose dreams of a rehabilitated place in society had been dashed afforded her daughter a fulness of anxiety by hanging precariously between life and death.

It is doubtful whether those circles in which Anne and Morgan moved were wholly beguiled, and it is certain that sympathy followed the traveller.

"The engagement will never be renewed," mused an elderly lady who had been fond of Anne from childhood. "She

won't take up again with her wild man of the mountains either, you may rest assured of that."

"But why?" challenged the gentleman to whom these sage observations were addressed. "Presumably a persistent interest in young Wellver caused this break with--"

A quiet laugh interrupted him, and the gentleman's eyes for some reason grew grave. He and the woman with whom he talked had been lovers once, engaged years upon years ago, and society had always wondered that neither of them had ever married. Now with snow upon both their heads he still sedately marched where he had once danced attendance upon her.

"Because," she soberly replied, "there is such a thing as letting the psychological moment go by. Life isn't all mating season."

"As to that," he entered dignified demurrer, "we have always disagreed."

The lady, ignoring the observation, went on, holding intact the thread of her reflections. "If the break with Boone had been remediable it would never have widened till so many months ran between them. No, she has given each his *cong*, and she hasn't a penny of her own in the world and--" She paused dramatically, and the man finished the sentiment for her in a less alarmed tone.

"It would seem to leave her flat; still she has a good mind and wonderful charm."

"Yes,"--the retort was dry. "The mind is untrained, and the charm is a menace."

Mrs. Masters died early that summer, though the physicians assured her self-accusing daughter that no possible connection of cause and effect could be traced between her death and the heart attack provoked by the doldrums of disappointment. But the girl's eyes were haunted when she came back from the funeral to the empty house, which was not her own house, and sat down, ghost-pale, against the black of her mourning. The world which she must now face was an absolutely changed world from which, as from dismantled furniture, all the easy cushioning and draperies had been ripped away, leaving sharp and uncovered angles of contact.

In it there was no place for her, save such a place as she could gain by invoking some miracle, for which she had no formula, to exchange butterfly beauty for the provident effectiveness of the ant hill.

Morgan, whose frequent letters had gone unanswered, became obsessed with an anxiety which drove him homeward by a fast steamer that had seemed to him intolerably slow.

When its voyage had ended, a fog had held it in the harbour for half a day, and during that half day Morgan paced the decks, fuming over a dozen apprehensions.

It was to a Morgan Wallifarro unaccustomedly pale and agitated that the same lady, who had pessimistically forecast Anne's future, gave him, on his arrival at home, what information she could.

"No one seems to have her address, Morgan," she said. "I suppose she wanted, for a while, to be in new surroundings. As for myself, I had a brief note sent back with a book I'd lent her. She said that she was going to New York--but that was all, and when I telephoned she had gone."

"But her affairs must be arranged for her. She has nothing," protested the man desperately. "In God's name what is she going to do? How did she suppose I was going to find her?"

The lady laid a hand on the young man's elbow, and tears came into her own eyes,

"She didn't confide in me, Morgan. What I think is only guess-work--but I don't believe she wanted you to find her."

CHAPTER XLIII

To Boone Wellver, Louisville had become a city lying without the zone of personal experience. Like a steamer which has altered its sailings, he made it no longer a port of call.

That mad hiatus of apostasy, in which he had been willing to throw down all the shrines of his acquired faith, had become to him an evil dream of the past--yet out of it something had remained. The fog which had bemused him then had left uncleared certain minors of realization. Just as he had not yet recognized that the Commonwealth's attorney had sent him away unsatisfied because he had come making his demands to the arrogant tune of insult, so he failed, too, to appreciate that Anne had held the silence, which, without her permission, he was resolved not to break, because he had violently rebuffed her.

He had refused to read the papers on the day set for her wedding, because he could not bear the torture of what he had expected to find there, and McCalloway had not spoken of the postponement because it fell within the boundaries of a topic upon which he had set a ban of silence, unless the younger man broached it. So with what would have seemed an impossible coincidence, it was weeks later that Boone ceased to flagellate himself with the thought of a honeymoon that had never begun. Even then he, unlike the more sophisticated of the circle to which he had once been admitted, accepted without question the reason given for the deferred marriage, and saw for himself no brightening of possibility.

With the curtain rung down on the thrilling drama whose theme had been dominated by love, work seemed to Boone increasingly the motif of things. Service appeared more and more the purpose meant in the blind gropings of existence toward some end. Otherwise there was nothing.

But one day long after all this, when the months had run to seasons, Boone broke his law of self-appointed exile and went to Louisville. He did not go from Marlin Town but came the other way--from Washington.

For now the mountain man had his place on Capitol Hill and no longer felt the uncertainty of diffidence in answering when he heard himself recognized from the speaker's chair as "the gentleman from Kentucky."

It was not at all the Washington he had pictured. In many ways it was a more wonderful, and in many a less wonderful, place than that known from photographs and print and fancy.

Life had caught him out of meagre and primitive beginnings and led him, for a while, through corridors of romanticism. Before his eyes, imagination-kindled, had been the colours of dreams and the beckoning of an evening star. The colours had been evanescent, and the star had set. The corridor of visionary promise had come to an end, and its door had opened on commonplace.

He told himself that he was done with romance. In his life it had been, perhaps, necessary as a stage through which experience must lead him. Henceforth his deity was to be Reason, a cold and austere goddess but a constant one.

But Boone did not quite know himself. Sentiment still lay as strong in him as the spring life that sleeps under the winter sleet. The man in whom it does not survive is one whose spiritual arteries have hardened.

One lesson he modestly believed he had learned out of his journeying from his log-cabin down to the Bluegrass and up to Capitol Hill. He had become an apostle of Life's mutability, chained to no fixed post of unplastic thought.

Upon these things his reflections had been running as he made the journey back to Kentucky, and of them he was thinking now, as, having arrived, he stood with bared head in the billowing stretches of Cave Hill Cemetery.

Victor McCalloway had been in Marlin County hardly at all during these last two years and he was not there now. As usual, when the veteran was absent, Boone had no idea to what quarter of the globe, or in response to what mysterious call, his steps had turned. He thought, though, that it would be his preceptor's wish to be represented as the body of General Prince was lowered to its last rest.

He saw again in memory two figures before a cabin hearth, debating with the heat of devotees, the calibre and qualities of today's and yesterday's military leaders in general, of Hector Dinwiddie in particular. He saw himself again sitting huddled in the chimney corner, nursing the patched knees of an illiterate boy.

Now one was dead--he could not even be sure that both were not dead--and Boone, no longer in homespun, had come from Washington to uncover his head under the winter sky as the words of the last rites were spoken over the body of General Prince.

Into that grave, it seemed to him, was going something unreplaceable. This man was the embodiment of a passing tradition, almost of a dead era, in the altering life of the nation itself.

The ideas and beliefs for which his early life had stood were already buried, and now he lay himself at rest, a link between present and past--as much an exemplification of chivalry as though his feet had been crossed and his sword laid in the crusader's posture of repose.

Boone heard the austere beauty of the service--but he felt more poignantly the picture that his eyes looked on: the coffin draped with two flags that overlapped their folds--though once a tide of cannon-smother ran between them--the Stars and Stripes of the Nation and the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy.

On one hand, in a grizzled honour-guard, stood old men in the same mist grey that he had worn with a general's stars until Lee surrendered, and on the other hand was ranged an equally frosted and withered squad in Grand Army blue. Then at last a clear and flawless sweetness floated away from the lips of the militia bugler, who, in accordance with the General's wish, was sounding taps across his closing grave.

Something rose in Boone Wellver's throat, and a strange idea stole, not facetiously but with reverent sincerity, into his thoughts. He wished it might have been possible for him to stand there as the clouds fell, not as he stood now in the dress of a gentleman, but in homespun and butternut, clasping in his tight hands the coon-skin cap that his boyhood had known. For in this gathering, that was like a quiet pageant of passing eras, he stood for an elder thing than any other here. He was, in effect, by birth and by beginning, the ancestor of them all, for he had been born a pioneer!

The school, which had become a home to Happy Spradling, had grown marvellously since that day when the old mountaineer wrote with his donation of rocky acres: "I have heart and cravin' that our young people may grow better, and I deed my land to a school as long as the Constitution of the United States stands."

It was a precarious undertaking with no endowment except its spirit, but it is not recorded that Elijah went hungry when his commissary was in the keeping of ravens--for back of the ravens was the Promise.

From year to year, dependent upon the generosity of those whom its accomplishments convinced, the school not only existed but grew, and in order that the springs which fed it might not run dry there were, several times each year, the "begging trips" of the women who "went out."

For that was the phrase they used, just as in all wilderness life it is the phrase with which men speak of journeys from the solitudes.

When Miss Shorte went east or west, she carried to the outer world a living and vivid portraiture of that folk immured behind the ridge and its elder life. Then somehow the undertakings, absurdly impractical from a material viewpoint, realized themselves, and a new school building, a tiny hospital or a needed dormitory rose among the hardwood and the pines of Marlin County.

In the fall of 1913 Miss Shorte brought east with her a younger woman also from the school, to sing for her audiences those quaint "song-ballets" that sound around smoky mountain hearths to the accompaniment of banjo and "dulcimore."

Because no dollar could go out from the school's closely guarded treasury without assurance that it would bring other dollars back, the experiment of increasing the traveling expenses by including this girl in the journey to New York had been discussed back of Cedar Mountain with prayerful earnestness, and the girl herself had greeted the final decision as one of the great moments of her life.

Now that girl stood beside the piano a little tremulous with stage fright as she looked out over an audience more sophisticated than any to which she had ever sung before. It was in one of the women's university clubs in the Forties and to her uninitiated eye the light fell on a confusing display of evening dress and worldly-wise faces full of self-containment.

They would listen with politeness but how could her offering interest these men and women to whom great voices were familiar? Hers was untrained and the songs were crude vehicles for folk-lore compositions, plaintive with uncultivated minors.

That elderly gentleman, sitting far back near the door, had been identified to her in a whisper. He was a music critic whose word carried the force of authority--and she wondered if he sat near the exit with thought of escape from her inflictions. Just now he was writing a series of magazine articles on folk-lore music in America, and the girl felt herself the subject of a cold experiment in mental vivisection.

The lady with the white pompadour was one whose name she had known with awe on the school's list of patronesses and even here in New York it was a great name.

The mountain singer's knees trembled a little as the accompanist struck the keys, and her first note stole out, sweetly clear and naturally fresh.

She finished her first song and retreated to her chair on the platform, wishing that there had been a trap-door through which she might have escaped that barrage of human sight.

Then her glance caught the elderly man with the great reputation in the music world. He had not yet fled. He was making notes on a scrap of paper and his keenly alert, finely chiselled face wore the expression of unmistakable interest. The singer glanced at the white-haired lady--the great Mrs. Arton--and she read "well-done, my child," in a smile of moist eyes.

She could not know that there was a direct simplicity of pathos and artless humour in her ballads, borne on a bird-like sweetness of voice, to the hearts of these people. She could not know that she was bringing to the touch of their sympathy phrases and forms that had seemed as remote and unreal as lines from Chaucer and Shakespeare.

Yet, because it was all so new and strange, the air seemed heavy to her with a terrifying formality, as the incense laden atmosphere of a cathedral might have been. So she looked, as she rose to sing again, for the comforting presence of some face that might reassure her with a kin-ship of human simplicity.

Then she saw slip quietly through the entrance door, and drop into a seat near the critic, a young woman who was unaccompanied and who, at first glance, seemed to carry in her fine eyes the burthen of habitual weariness.

These eyes were deeply violet and though sadness haunted them and bespoke ghosts that stirred uneasily and often back in their depths they still held the hint of fires that had flashed, once, into gay and spontaneous whimsies. The singer had a momentary sense of looking at a face made for gracious and merry expressions, but drawn into the short and desperate outlook of one who has fallen into deep and angry waters, and who can see nothing ahead beyond the struggle to keep afloat.

The newcomer was tall and slender, even thin, but there was still an intrinsic gallantry about the swing of her shoulders that made one think of invincible qualities, though the plain severity of her clothing brought into that contrasting company the undeniable assertion of poverty.

The singer finished her ballad and once again went back to her chair. This time with a diminished diffidence. She was thinking about the other young woman at the back who looked poor and sick and who, in spite of these things, gave her an indescribable impression of distinction. The two of them, thought the mountain girl, had a bond of sympathy in that they were each set quite apart from all these others unified by the stamp of affluence.

Miss Shorte was talking now; telling the story of the school and its work; flashing before her hearers as if her words were pictures imbued with colour and form, the patriarchal conditions with which this work was surrounded. Laughter interrupted her lighter recitals, and when she spoke of graver phases there was that light clearing of throats that carries from an audience to a stage the proclamation of stirred emotion, and of tears not far from the surface.

The speaker gave a few illustrations of the sort of manhood and womanhood that is sometimes wrought out of that crude ore when the tempering of help and education is available to refine it.

Lincoln had sprung from such stock. Even now the member in Congress from that district was a man born in a log shack of illiterate parents. He had fought feudal animosities and gone upward by a rugged ascent. Now he was recognized by his colleagues as a man of ability and breadth. So far had he outgrown the strictures of provincialism, that he was a member of the Foreign Relations Committee. But better than that his own people swore by him because they knew "their lives and deaths were his to him"--because in a land where men had been afraid to serve on juries and to enforce the law, they were no longer afraid.

The school sought to develop other Boone Wellvers from the same beginnings ... to help others toward a similar fulfilment.

The musical critic heard a faint gasping breath from the chair at his side. He turned quickly and was startled by the pale, emotion-drawn face of the young woman who sat there without escort. For an instant he thought that some poor creature actually pinched by want had crept in, attracted by the light and warmth for a brief interval of rest, then he looked with a more piercing appraisal at the features and discarded that idea.

"Are you ill?" he demanded in a low voice. "Can I serve you?"

The young woman shook her head and forced a smile whose graciousness must have come less from conscious effort than from life habit.

"No, thank you," she answered in a low voice that had meaning to one who knew music wherever he found it. "It was nothing ... I came late ... who is the girl who sang?"

"She was introduced as Miss Happy Spradling," said the critic.

His questioner's hands were at her sides where he did not see them tighten convulsively, but he saw the pale cheeks go a shade whiter and wondered if she was going to faint.

She did not faint, and though through the course of the evening the elderly man found time, more than once, to turn his friendly glance of solicitude her way he did not again intervene with questions. Clearly this young woman, whatever the cause, was in a condition of nerves that might mean skirting the precipitous edge of collapse. Clearly too she had that fortitude which can resist and after a shock bring itself back to the poise of equilibrium. What had shocked her? He could not guess, but he knew that in the depleted condition that her pale cheeks and thinness argued, unaccountable trifles may assume the gravity of a crisis. And besides the critic found his attention and interest elsewhere engaged. That other girl who was singing claimed them both. She was having a little triumph there on the platform beside the piano. On her smooth, dark face was a pink flush and her deep eyes glowed with pleasure for the enthusiasm that had capped the cordiality of her reception.

When the program came to its end the audience in large part gathered about the platform and the meeting resolved itself into an informal reception. Among the first to go forward was the critic and as he rose, noticing a struggle between eagerness and hesitation in the violet eyes of his chance neighbour, he yielded to an impulse of the moment.

"Shall we go up together," he smiled, "and introduce each other? I have a question or two to ask her?"

But the girl shook her head. She had started nervously at the question as though in realization that he had read her thoughts and as if she had not wished them to be readable.

Still when he had left her she lingered in the door before she turned out to the street as if some strong magnetism sought to draw her into the group about the speaker and singer--a group in which her clothes would have been conspicuous. Finally she turned and left and went outside, where the obscurity was more merciful.

Her course took her southward and eastward and brought her at last to a building that loomed large and dark now, but which in daylight sounded to the shouts of immigrant children whose voices might have rung in the sun-yellowed bazaars of Levantine towns or about the moujik habitations of Russia. It was one of the settlement schools of the East Side where the strident grind of the elevated was never silent, and in a small and very bare room the girl took off her hat and coat. She was one of the least important of the women who conducted the affairs of this mission school. Its assembly rooms, *crches* and diet kitchens constituted her present world.

They had said that there was nothing she could do--a society girl with a drawing room and hunting field equipment--and only the All-seeing and herself knew how near true it had proven.

All these years, she reflected with a smile of self-derision, she had harboured the thought of this mountain girl, caricatured by imagination into a bare-foot sloven, before whose vulgar charms Boone's loyalty had discredibly wavered. Now she had seen that girl and the dimensions of her own injustice loomed in exaggeration before her self-accusation.

For a long while Anne Masters sat there in her bare room. Often she had wondered whether she could go on enduring the strain of a life that had emptied out all its fulness and become pinched and aching. It seemed to her that now she stood as one having touched the depths and the fine quality of her courage was not far from disintegration.

A great and hungry impulse filled her. She wanted to talk to Happy Spradling--to talk to her under an assumed name--and to lay to the bruises about her heart the solace of hearing something of those hills she had once loved so intensely--something of the man who was now a member of the Foreign Relations Committee of Congress! The wish grew into an obsession and when, toward daylight, sleep came fitfully, it wove itself into the troubled pattern of her dreams.

There were many reasons why she should repress that desire. If Happy learned who she was, the secret of her hiding would be penetrated, and she would show herself as conquered.

Yet the next day when the time came that gave her leisure from her duties she went again, invincibly drawn, to the University Club in the Forties.

Opposite the door, and across the street, she paused, holding herself hard in hand against a tidal sweeping of emotions, and as she stood there she saw the door open and Mrs. Arton come out, followed by Happy. The two crossed the sidewalk to the curb and stepped into the great lady's limousine.

Anne still hesitated, then she shook her head and turned resolutely away. The car rolled forward and rounded a corner, and the one possible association with a part of Anne's old world was lost.

Anne herself went over to the avenue and climbed to the roof of a bus.

On the way downtown as the traffic crowded, the limousine and the omnibus passed and repassed each other. It was a frostily clear forenoon with Fifth Avenue sparkling like a string of jewel beads, and sometimes Anne could see Happy's face thrust out with wonderment written large upon its features. To her it was all new: this miracle of a city of millions. Her heart was fluttering to the first sight of that tide of men and motors; that crest-pluming of wealth and undertow of misery; that gaiety and tragedy that rolls in vigour and in poison along a mighty urban artery.

But Anne felt like a fragment of flotsam carried hopelessly on the current.

When the limousine had turned into a side street of dignified old houses, Anne rode on, and leaving the bus made her way on foot through meaner streets where the smell of garlic hung pervasive and the gutturals of Slavic speech came from bearded and beady eyed faces. She went through the East Side's warrens of congestion and poverty, slipping through crowds of shawled and haggling women who elbowed about push-carts.

Yet when she had time to retreat again to the sanctuary of her own small room, Anne felt that an element of augmented strength had come to her, as if she had caught a breath of the laurel bloom from Slag-face through the stench and the jargons.

"If I can hold out," she told herself, "if I can only hold out, I'll have my self-respect!" After a moment she added, "She will probably see him soon, but she can't tell him she saw me--because she doesn't know it."



CHAPTER XLIV

Uncle Billy Taulbee's store had stood for a half century in the shade of mighty sycamores, where a trickle of water glinted over pebble and shale, worn hub-deep into wheel-ruts. Except when the spring thaws carried a tawny flood up almost to the edge of his doorstep and the "tide" had right of way, that creek bed and the sandy lane angling across it constituted the junction of the Smoky Hollow Road and that debouching over to "The left hand fork of Nighway Creek." Roundabout it were streamlets with pools where, in season, the mountain trout leaped and darted in shimmering flashes, and to the store one summer noon came two hungry fishermen from the lowlands. They sat on cracker boxes, eating canned peaches and "Vienny" sausages, encouraging the keen-eyed old storekeeper to talk and plying him with questions as to what his coal royalties had run to on this tract and what on that, in the space of the past few years. With neither boast nor evasion, the old man answered them.

"But, heavens above, Uncle Billy," exclaimed one of the visitors--(for every man and child called him Uncle Billy--"An' I reckon," he said, "ther houn-dawgs would too, if so be they had ther gift of speech"). "Heavens above, if you go on making money like that you'll be able to sign a check for a million dollars before you end up!"

The storekeeper fished from the pocket of cotton overalls some crumbs of "natural leaf" to rub between his leathery palms, and thrust them greedily between his white-stubbled lips.

"I reckon, son," he answered drily as he once more shoved forward along the counter the tin of crackers, "ef so be thar was any sich-like need, I could back a bank-check fer that much money terday."

His visitors sat up agaze, with "Vienny" sausages poised between tin-can and lip, dripping grease on their khaki-clad knees.

At last one of them inquired in a dazed voice, "But why don't you live like a rich man, Uncle Billy? Aren't you sick of this God-forsaken desolation?"

Uncle Billy leaned with his elbows on his counter and seemed to be giving the question judicial reflection. Finally he shook his head.

"A man's right apt ter weary of anything in due time, but I've always lived hyar. I wouldn't hardly hev no ease in my mind no-whars else, I reckon. I leaves all thet newfangled business ter my children an' gran'children and I follers in the track of my fore-parents my own self." He paused, then added with a note of defensive pride:

"Not that I denies myself nothin' though. My old woman's got a brussels cyarpet on ther floor upsta'rs right now an' a pianner thet hit tuck four yoke of oxen ter team acrost ther mountings from ther railroad cars."

"Would she play it for us, Uncle Billy?"

"Wa'al she kain't jest ter say play hit, yit, but she aims ter git somebody ter l'am her how some day--She larnt readin' an' writin' when she war past three score."

Back in Marlin Town--a town now boasting sidewalks of concrete and a new brick station, the fishermen saw the columned and porticoed mansions of the old man's sons--and their thoughts went back to the store with its bolts of calico, its harness, and above it the living quarters where these children had been born.

For the wealth of that county in coal had brought spurs of railroads bristling into pockets of the wilderness where there had hardly been "critter trails," and overnight fortunes had sprung into being. Moneyed interests that centered there would have made the young attorney, who was also the district's member in Congress, something more than a local representative, had he not chosen to represent the native holders and to stand as a buffer between their unsophistication and their would-be exploiters. But if Boone could set his name to no million-dollar checks or build himself no colonial mansions, more practice came to the office where his shingle hung than he and his two new associates could handle.

In other newly developed sections, Boone had seen the native exploited and embittered. It had been his care that when prosperity came into Marlin it should come as a blessing to the hill dwellers and not as a curse. To that end he had locked horns with some adroit and powerful adversaries, outriders of capital who would have been bandits had the way lain open. They had first laughed at him, then resolved to crush him and in the end sought to propitiate him. Finally they gave him his half of the road and shook their heads in wonderment because he chose the way of folly and refused to be made deviously rich.

To each new advance he had had one answer: "I belong to these people, gentlemen. They must be fairly dealt with."

And yet while these mighty transitions worked themselves into being, the alchemy of the Midas touch left life unchanged back of Cedar Mountain itself. The brooding range threw its cordon of peaks across the tide of development and turned it right and left. Not until the many fields lying virgin and accessible had been worked out, would capital need to wrestle with engineering assaults upon those sky-high barriers of flint.

And with fidelity to history's ironic precedent, the man whose dream had been strong in a world of doubters stood by unbenefited, while others who had not known the nature of a vision reaped wealth. For Larry Masters had thrown his initial winnings into other speculative properties. He was the gambler who had won a large bet, and whose ambition straightway burns to "break the bank." He had bought land in his own right on a rising tide of values, and he had seen his own veins of coal narrow to nothing, until his engineers had "pulled the pillars" and abandoned the lodes. Finding himself ill omened and fallen on desert spots in a land of oases, he had closed his bungalow in disgust and taken a salaried position with an oil concern operating in Mexico.

Sometimes there comes into a Kentucky midsummer a strayed touch of autumn. Then while the woods stand freckled and the ironweed waves its sprays of dusty purple, a touch of languor steals into the sky, and the horizon veils itself with a mist that is sweetly melancholy.

On such a period, when the sun should have held its dog-day heat, yet fell in mellow mildness, Boone Wellver sat on a low, hickory-withered chair outside the door of McCalloway's house.

He did not require the spell of that indefinable melancholy which lay along the hilltops to bring home to him a mood of sadness, because for two weeks he had been here alone with his thoughts. It had been his whim during that time to isolate himself completely, and to wear, as a man may wear old clothes or old shoes, the ease of solitude that makes no demands upon one's conventional self.

In Washington there was always the need of living before other eyes. Here he had not even ridden across the ridge for letters or papers.

At the moment, while the bees droned loudly about him and the mountains slept in their ancient impassivity, he held on his knees Victor McCalloway's tin dispatch box, and his eyes were deep with thoughts of bereavement.

The veteran had said that, on his death, Boone might turn the key of that battered receptacle and read the papers which would give him a full knowledge of the identity of his benefactor.

Once he had declared, half smilingly and half in earnest:

"I suppose that at any time you hear nothing of me for five years you may assume my death." It had been five years now, and more, since he had left the little world of his hermitage, and no word had come back to Boone.

The young man's heart was heavy with loneliness, and as he sat there alone, he ached to know the secret that had shadowed the life of the man to whom his devotion was almost an idolatry; the secret that had robbed of a name one whose past must have been both colourful and tragic.

In those five years since they had met, Boone had passed the milestones from the local to the national, and if he held the respect of his colleagues he owed it all to Victor McCalloway. They said that he was a man with a broad and national vision. That, too, if it were true, was a reflection of the soldier's teaching.

But if McCalloway were to be only a memory, Boone looked forward to a life almost beggared. There was that solitary strain in his nature which came perhaps of having attached himself too strongly to a few, all-important friends. Of these McCalloway had been the chief. A facetious fellow-member had given Boone a nickname out of Kipling in coatroom small-talk, and the title had stuck. "Wellver," said the representative, "is 'the cat that walks by himself, and all places are alike to him.'"

Now, if he were not to see his old preceptor again, he must indeed walk by himself.

With a drawn brow he thought what eventful years those five had been, and, looking up at the unchanging hills, laughed aloud.

The North and South poles had been discovered. Portugal and China had set up republics on the ashes of monarchy and empire. Diaz, the old feudist lord of Mexico, had relinquished his powers and dropped out. The Italian had fought the Ottoman; Europe's cry of "Wolf! wolf!" in the Balkans had ceased to be an empty alarm and, burning fiercely up and burning out, had broken again into secondary blazing. Our own armies were on Mexican soil. In which of these

abstract and epochal affairs had his friend played a part?

Boone felt, in his heart, a newly comprehended ache for the pathos of the veteran's life. He could realize, as he had not before realized, the unsatisfied hungers that must have been always with that solitary exile--a hunger appeared in part only when under some name not his own he heard again the call of the bugles and followed the flight of the war-eagles.

Manifestly, for all their closeness of thought and companionship, he had only seen a part of the man McCalloway. There must be facets in the stone even finer than those he knew, which had never been revealed to him. He had seen--often--the warmth of affection like the softened glow of a diamond lying on a jeweller's velvet, and--on occasion--the keen, cold brightness of unyielding strength, but there must have been, too, white spurts of blaze almost dazzling in their fierce lustre which it had taken the battlefield to bring out.

And these he did not know.

He had just been reading a paper with which the gentleman had beguiled many a lonely winter night and which he had left unfinished. It was a critical analysis of Hector Dinwiddie's career and military thought, undertaken at the request of Basil Prince.

Prince himself had been a historian, and yet Boone doubted whether he could in style or vigour of thought have bettered this casual writing. As Boone read it, the portrait of a great soldier stood before his eyes. He had never guessed until then how great a soldier had been cut off by Dinwiddie's suicide. Now he could perceive why other governments, governments which might some day meet Britain in the field, had drawn sighs of relief at his death. So in a greater degree the world had breathed easier when Bonaparte went to St. Helena.

Yet of Dinwiddie, McCalloway had not written flatteries. Rather his portraiture was strong because his brush stroke was so strict and severe that often it became adverse criticism.

Boone leaned back and drew from his pocket the key that would unlock an answer to his questionings. He thrust it into the keyhole and then, as a spasm of pain crossed his face, hesitated.

Once he had done that, he should have admitted to himself that he had abandoned hope, and he realized that he could not bring himself, even after five years, to that admission.

For a long while he sat hesitant. A squirrel chattered; a woodpecker rapped high overhead on a dead limb, and at last the young man thrust the key back into his pocket and carried the metal strong box into the house again, unopened.

Boone had ordained it as his law that when thoughts of Anne came into his mind, he would not entertain them; that a seal had been placed on those closed pages of his experience; but it was a law which he had no power of enforcing on his heart, and as he came out again into the sunlight he was thinking of her.

He had never known in its true baldness the dependence of mother and daughter upon the bounteous generosity of their kinsman, and without that knowledge he had not guessed that Anne's departure from Louisville had been an adventure, daring everything.

All that he knew, or fancied he knew, was that even when she had broken with Morgan she had felt no need of him, and it had been her callous wish to live as if she had never known him. Since love is set in the most delicate and intricate bearings of life, and holds in its own core the possibilities of hate, he fancied that he felt for the Anne Masters of his past adoration the present contempt due a woman who had been able only to trifle with a life she had shaped. Because, too, she had once saved that life from its threatened smirching, the gratitude which might have been his most treasured sentiment became to him an intolerable obligation.

Standing there by the door, the man's face darkened, until for the moment it wore again the sombre and sullen hate that had marred its boyhood. The hands at his side closed into fists, and looking off across the hills, he said aloud:

"It was a dream that well-nigh wrecked me. I never want to see her or hear of her again!"

But after a moment the bitterness turned to longing, and with an indignant voice, as though denouncing an enemy who stood before him, he broke out tempestuously: "That's a lie! You love her... You always will!"

Then around the abrupt turn of the road came a horseman, and Boone recognized him, with astonishment, as Morgan Wallifarro, dust-covered and mounted on a livery beast.

But the Morgan who dismounted by the rail fence wore a face aged in a fashion that startled Boone. He was not the kidney that burns out in a few years of strenuousness, but a man with a mind of steel and a body of whipcord, and now his eyes were lined and ringed as they should not have been until his hair had turned white.

Boone supposed that some matter of party consultation had brought his unannounced guest, since they were both now men of leadership, so he inquired, after they had shaken hands:

"Is it politics, Morgan?"

Wallifarro nodded.

"In part that," he answered slowly, "but it's hard to pin one's mind down to party details today, Boone. It's like whistling a petty tune into the teeth of a hurricane."

"Hurricane?" Boone repeated the final word in a puzzled tone. "I don't follow you."

"My God, man," exclaimed the other, in sheer and undisguised amazement, "don't you know?"

"Know what? Remember that I've been in the backwoods for three weeks," smiled the hillsman, "and I haven't seen a paper for ten days."

Again for a moment the Louisville lawyer stood incredulously silent; then he said sharply:

"The war... It's four days old and more.... Austria, Servia, Germany, Russia, France! They are all in it--and yesterday England came in."

The face of the member of the Foreign Affairs Committee wore a stunned blankness, and the blood went out of it. From the tree across the road the woodpecker began once more his hammering, and about the hoofs of the hitched horse drifted a cloud of pale-yellow butterflies.

Finally Boone asked in a husky voice: "What of us?"

Morgan shook his head. "Two weeks ago," he said, "the whole thing was a sheer impossibility.... Now anything is possible."

Boone's mind had flashed back to McCalloway's prophecy.... "When that message of merging and common cause comes, it will come not on the wings of peace but belched from the mouths of guns--riding the gales of war."

"You are tired and hot," he found himself saying. "Let's go inside."

Later the mountain man reminded his guest: "But you came on another errand. What was it?"

Morgan, who had been seated, rose and paced the floor with his mouth tight drawn, and then stopping before his host, he broke out bluntly: "Once before, Boone, we talked about *her*. Now we must do it again."

Boone's shoulders stiffened, and his face froze into an unresponsive reserve. Even with McCalloway he had not been able to discuss Anne, and with Morgan it was impossible.

"Morgan," he answered very deliberately and guardedly, "it was Anne's wish to eliminate me from her scheme of things. To that wish I bowed, and what is sealed must remain sealed. In all candour--I can't talk of her."

"Can't talk of her!" Through the strained composure of Morgan's manner darted a flash of the old electric force. "When she may be suffering actual hunger, and you might help! Can you afford to say you can't talk of her?"

"Hunger? Help?" Boone's voice was one of deadly tenseness. "My God, man, don't bait me with words like that unless you mean them--and, if you do, don't waste time!"

For the first time the mountain man learned how Anne had burned her bridges behind her and disappeared from her own world; how so resourceful a lawyer as Morgan, employing every agency at his command, had failed to learn anything of her or her circumstances.

"It is as if," went on the lawyer desperately, "she had gone out of some cabin in a frozen wilderness--without provisions, without even matches or an axe, and God knows what she found there!"

The two Kentuckians stood gazing into each other's eyes across the table that lay between them. Upon the temples of each glistened beads of terror sweat. With the suddenness of revelation, Boone Wellver saw the falsity of all his bitter and fallacious judgments, and the love that he had denied swept over him with the onrush of an avalanche. Then he heard Morgan again:

"Between us--somehow we managed to do this for her. From babyhood she was under a coercion that neither of us appreciated. I don't know what parted you--but I know that I love her enough to be happy if I could see her married to you--and safe. I've hunted her and I haven't found her. Perhaps she has hidden purposely from me. Perhaps she

wouldn't hide from you--"

Boone raised a hand, and it fell limply at his side. He dropped abruptly into a chair and cradled his face on his bent forearms. But after a short while he rose, lividly colourless of check, and said:

"I'll ride back with you. I'm going to New York to find her."

But when he had been a month in New York he knew as little as when he had come.

One morning he read a brief item hidden away on an inside page of his newspaper. A young woman had taken gas in a boarding house in the Forties. She had been there only a few days and, save by the name she had given, was unknown. A few dollars in change had been found in her bedroom, but no letters or identifying data. She was tall, well dressed, and had been beautiful. Her body lay, awaiting claim, in an undertaker's shop of given address. In default of identification, it would be turned over for burial among the pauper dead.

Boone Wellver dropped the paper and went stumblingly across his room for his hat. At his door he paused to steady the palsy that had seized him. In his mind he was seeing a little girl at a Christmas dance, in a hall where the tempered glow of mahogany and silver awoke to the tiny fires of candle-light.



CHAPTER XLV

As Boone's taxi wrenched its way uptown, threading jerkily in and out between the pillars of the Sixth Avenue Elevated, he sought vainly to close the sluice gates of fear and hold his equilibrium by a self-hypnosis of arrested thought.

But words of newsprint broke through this factitious barrier. The "brown hair" of the reportorial description might be the same that McCalloway had called a disputed dominion along the border land of gold and brown. The "evidences of former beauty" might be an unappreciative appraisal of *her*, badgered by misfortunes to her death.

Standing at last on the curb before the undertaker's establishment, Boone had to be reminded to pay his fare, because his attention dwelt with a morbid fascination on the gilt words, "Funeral Directors and Embalmers," etched on the black plate glass of the windows.

After an appreciable interval of struggle with panic, he drew himself together and went in through the open door, becoming instantly conscious of a subtle, chemical odour.

From his newspaper a man in broadly patterned green and lavender shirt-sleeves lifted his eyes without rising. On the desk beside him, however, ready at notice to convert him from the liveliness of colour which in private life he fancied to the sable formality of his art, stood celluloid cuffs and a made-up tie as black and sober as his caskets.

"I am an attorney," said Boone curtly. "I came to see if--" He broke off and, proffering the newspaper clipping, made a fresh beginning: "To see if I could identify her."

Then the proprietor rose and, not deeming it essential, for that occasion, to cover the fitful pattern of his shirt, led the way to the back of the place, nursing a cigar stump between his fingers. The heightened beating of Boone's temples was as though with small, insistent knuckles all his imprisoned emotions were rapping against his skull for liberation, and when the undertaker swung open one of several doors along a narrow and darkened hallway, he found himself halting like a frightened child. The motor centres of his nerves mutinied, so that it seemed a labour of Hercules to force his balking foot across the threshold, and when he saw that the room was too dark for recognition a gasp of relief broke from his tight-pressed lips as if in gratitude for even so momentary a reprieve.

"Stand right there," directed the matter-of-fact voice of his conductor; "I'll switch on the light."

Boone Wellver was trembling, with a chill dampness on his forehead and hair. He struggled against the powerful impulse to beg another minute of unconfirmed fear. Then the light flashed, and Boone started as an incoherent sound came from him which might have meant anything--the muscular expulsion of breath deep held and the relaxation of a cramped throat.

The girl, who lay there, was very slender, and the still features were delicately chiselled. She had been, as the clipping stated, in a fashion beautiful, but it was not Anne's beauty.

Perhaps the ivory whiteness and the wan thinness of the crossed hands were the attributes of death rather than of the living girl. Most of all he felt, with an awed appreciation, the serene and calm courage written on the lifeless features. He had tried to reassure himself in advance that it could not be Anne, because Anne's courage would not seek the coward's escape of self-destruction. Now he could no longer reconcile any idea of cowardice with that sweet tranquillity.

"She must of caught her lip in her teeth," the undertaker interrupted his reflections to inform him. "She took gas, you know, and sometimes just at the last there's a little struggle against it."

The Kentuckian nodded silently, and the proprietor went on: "I take it she's not the party you were looking for, then?"

"No." The response was brusque, and with a sudden craving for the outer air, Boone turned on his heel to go--but stopped again inside the threshold. "If relatives don't claim her," he said, "I want her to have a private burial. Arrange the details--and look to me for settlement."

In the office stood a little man, gray and poorly dressed, yet with that attempt at fashion that strives through shabbiness after at least an echo of smart effect.

"I have come to learn when this poor child is to be buried, gentlemen," he began, with that ready emotion which is easily stirred and runs to volubility. "I didn't know her until a few days ago, when she took a small room in the house where I board. She kept to herself, but her manner was sunny and gracious, and her refinement was a matter of comment among us. None of us suspected that she was contemplating--this! I passed her in the hallway the night

before it happened, and she smiled at me."

Boone sat afterward in the dreary little mortuary chapel while a clergyman whom, the undertaker said, "came in in these cases," performed, with the perfunctoriness of routine, the services for the dead. Later, still with the gray little man at his side, the Kentuckian drove in the one cab that followed the hearse to a Brooklyn cemetery where Boone had paid for a grave. The little man, it seemed, had been a character actor and, from his own testimony, one of ability beyond the appreciation of a flippant present.

Their mission today recalled to his mind others of like nature, and as he talked of them, enlarging upon the piteous helplessness of young women whose gentle natures are unequipped for the predatory struggles of a city where one does not know one's next-door neighbour, Boone's anxieties grew heavier.

Those months of unavailing search stood always out luridly in his memory, and because his search was a thing that could accommodate itself to no rule except to follow faint trails into all sorts of places, he grew to an astonishing familiarity with parts at least of the town whose boast it is that no man knows it.

It was natural that he should take up his own quarters near Greenwich Village, where the fringes of the town's self-styled bohemia trail off from Washington Square. There, with all its eccentricities and absurdities, effort dwelt side by side with dilettante anarchy, and strugglers with definite goals brushed shoulders with the "brittle intellectuals that crack beneath a strain."

He grew to know some of the sincere workers of this American *Quartier Latin* and some exponents of affectation-ridden cults who travesty life and the arts under creeds of pathetically shallow pretence.

But these things, though absorbed into observation were small, foreground details of Boone's life at that time. The motif of the picture was the vain search for Anne Masters, and the whole was drawn against the sombre and colossal background of the war itself. For in those epic months was fought the First Battle of the Marne. In them Hindenburg emerged from the obscurity of retirement to drive the Russian hordes back from East Prussia, and, most tragic of all, the flood was sweeping across Belgium.

If he could think little of other matters than the girl he loved and had come to seek, neither could the spirit that McCalloway had shaped ever quite escape a deep feeling of the war, like an incessant rolling of distant and sinister drums.



In the spring of 1916 the legations and embassies at Washington had their birds of passage. They were neither secretaries nor attaches in precise definition, yet men vouched for by their chiefs. Uniforms bloomed, and among the visitors were those who wore scars and decorations. To this category belonged the Russian Ivangoroff, and between him and Boone Wellver sprang up a friendship which, if not intimate, was certainly more than casual.

Ivangoroff was young, tall and electric with energy. Animation snapped and sparkled in his dark eyes; it broke into a score of expressive gestures that enlivened his words: it manifested itself in quick movements and a fresh flow of unflagging conversation.

It puzzled Boone that, though he was some sort of adjunct to the Russian Embassy, his gossip of intrigue at the Court of Petrograd should, on occasion, permit itself a seemingly unguarded candour.

One evening, as the two sat together at dinner, the Kentuckian made bold to suggest something of the sort, and his companion laughed with an infectious spontaneity that bared the flash of his white teeth.

"Even at the court itself talk is quite frank," he declared. "Every dinner party is a small cabal. What would you, with a German army hammering at our front and a German influence infecting those about the Tzarina?"

"But surely," expostulated the congressman, "you can't be serious. How can an enemy influence survive at a belligerent capital?"

Ivangoroff shrugged his shoulders.

"You call it incredible, yet because of that influence the greatest soldier in Europe was stripped of his powers as commander-in-chief and exiled to a nominal viceregency in the Caucasus."

Boone leaned forward, his attention challenged.

"You mean the Grand Duke Nicholas?"

"Yes. You ask how such things can be. I can reply only that they are."

The Russian raised his hands and let them fall in a gesture of one who expresses disgust for the unalterable.

"And yet what would you?" he demanded. "If a weak monarch is torn between a genuine love, almost an idolatry, for a stronger man, and a carefully fostered fear of him? If, while the soldier is in the field, there are those at home who every day are whispering into the anxious, imperial ear that his great kinsman will presently overshadow and replace him, what are the probabilities? With the Empress ruling her consort, and herself being ruled by a closet cabinet of women and monks, what else was possible than that the captain who was busy stemming the outer enemy should fall before the inner enemy?"

"And," mused Boone thoughtfully, "there were few who could not have been better spared."

"My friend," asserted the Russian, "the world does not yet appreciate the Grand Duke's measure. In retrospect history will devote some pages to his achievements. She will canonize the magnificent ability and the grim courage with which he fought on without support, without munitions, crying out for the metal which did not come, and vainly demanding the death of traitors at home whose failure to supply him was eating up his armies. She will celebrate an orderly retirement which under other leadership would have been a rout: the reluctant giving back of hosts that were interposing bare breasts to artillery. As for the Tzar's jealous fears--bah!"

The speaker paused to light a cigarette, and from it puffed nervous clouds of brown smoke through his nostrils.

"I was at the Moghileff headquarters," he resumed, "when the Tzar arrived to take into his own hands the duties that those stronger hands had held. What took place between the two Romanoffs, I cannot tell you. My place was not inside those doors ... but at the end I saw them both."

Again the narrative broke in a pause, and the bright, dark eyes of the Russian sobered into reflectiveness and pain.

"You have seen his pictures? Nicholas Nicholaivitch, I mean? Yes, of course; but they fail to give the adequate impression: the tall, gaunt power of the figure; the dauntless eagle pride of the eye and stern sadness of the mouth; the noble dignity of bearing! When the Tzar stood with him at the railway station bidding him farewell, it was the eyes of the monarch that held incertitude and tears. It was the Tzar who was shaken with the wish to undo what he had done, yet who lacked the resolution."

For a little while the two men sat over their coffee, and even the voluble animation of the Russian was stilled; then, as the talk drifted, chance guided it to the topic of army caste.

"Generally speaking, we are officers or men by heredity--yet anything can happen in Russia," declared Ivangoroff, "when a peasant monk can gain a hold like Rasputin's at court!" He paused, then laughed. "I even know of one man who came to the Grand Duke's headquarters in civilian garb--who was not a Russian--who was unknown. He secured an audience, and ten days later found him a member of the leader's personal staff--a confidant of the Commander-in-Chief!"

Boone raised his brows. It occurred to him that this highly entertaining companion might be more vivacious than authentic, and he murmured some expression of interest.

"Read your dispatches," said the Russian. "Occasionally you will find there the name of one General Makailoff. It is not a name you will have seen in our army matters before this war. True, one could look at this man and know that he was a soldier, yet he was a foreigner, and it was at a time when spy-ridden Russia distrusted every one. He went into the Commander-in-Chief's presence. He said something to the Commander-in-Chief, which no one else heard. He came out an officer on the staff."

With a sudden flash of deeper interest that made his words eager, Boone bent across the table. "Tell me," he demanded, "what was his appearance?"

"It interests you?" laughed Ivangoroff. "Naturally, because it has the essence of drama, has it not? He is tall and spare, with a florid face and gray temples. He is hard-bitten and leather-tanned, as a soldier should be, and in his eye, a gray-blue eye, dwells a quality which one does not find in common eyes."

"And when the Grand Duke went into his retirement in the Caucasus--what became of this other soldier?"

"That I cannot say. I fancy, judging from what I know of Nicholas Nicholaivitch, that he did not waste this man. I should hazard the guess that he passed him on to another commander--perhaps to Alexieff--perhaps to Brussilov."

"Do you know anything more about General Makailoff?" The Kentuckian sought to clothe his question in the casual

tone of ordinary interest, but as he lighted a cigar his fingers held a tremour.

Ivangoroff shook his head.

"Of course there was mess-table talk--but that is always the gauziest myth. Perhaps you know the fable that is told in all European armies of the ghost general?"

"No, I've never heard it."

"The story runs that there is a certain man of extraordinary military genius--genius of the first class--who is not so much a soldier of fortune as a super-soldier. In peace times no army knows him. No government owns him. He disappears as does the stormpetrel when the sea is quiet. But when the tempest breaks and the need arises for a leader beyond small leaders--then, under a new name each time, this ghost-commander reappears. You see, they make the story a good one. Mess tables have embellished and elaborated it with much retelling over their wine glasses. It is even said that the mystery man fights on the righteous side and brings victory." The Russian lighted a fresh cigarette and navelly observed, "When we fought Japan, however, he was reported to be against us, guiding the hand of Kuroki. When Savoff defeated the Turks, it was rumoured that he sat in the Bulgar's councils. Now"--Ivangoroff laughed--"now it is whispered in Petrograd and Moscow that he laid his sword at the service of the Grand Duke Nicholas and stands shoulder to shoulder with the men he fought in Manchuria."

The *raconteur* glanced at his wrist watch and rose hastily.

"I have overstayed my time," he declared. "It is hard for me to leave one who suffers me to talk--even when I talk of moonshine gossip like this."

But when he had gone, Boone sat for a long while unmoving, and before he went to his bed that night he had resolved, so soon as his duties freed him long enough, to undertake a journey to Russia.



CHAPTER XLVI

The snow that had lain along the Appalachian slopes had felt the first breath of thawing breezes in March, 1917. Here and there, in a sun-touched hollow, dry twigs grew less brittle and the hint of buds gave timid forecasting of spring. The roads were deep in red mud and black mud, and men in ill-lighted cabins looked to crowbar and pike-pole and made ready for the swelling of the "spring tide" that should heft their rafted logs on its shoulders of water to the markets of a flattened world.

In the log house which Victor McCalloway had built, Boone Wellver was making his final preparations to go to Washington again--and, after that, if God willed, to Russia. Upon his wall calendar once more a date was marked; the date of a call, come at last, for which through two years his spirit had fretted.

The President had sent his summons for Congress to gather in extraordinary session, and that order, given first for April the sixteenth, had been advanced to April the second. That could carry one meaning only--that at last the fiction of a national aloofness was to be cast aside as a garment unworthy of its wearer; that at last the nation was to take her place at Armageddon!

Ahead lay action; the only medicine for a deep-rooted sorrow which, after a grim clinging to the fringe of hope, had begun to admit despair.

For almost three years Boone had divided himself between his work and his search for Anne, and his mission had come to seem as far from attainment as that of the seekers of the Holy Grail. Now he was to be one of those whose voices should speak for the nation in its declaration of war.

That would not be enough. It would be only a beginning of his self-required service, but since the well-springs of sentiment were deeper in his nature than he realized, it was important to him that he, the pioneer type of American, should join with his modern brethren in committing his country to her forward stride across the Atlantic.

The sun was setting over the "Kaintuck' Ridges" in a blazing glory of wine red and violet, and his imagination flamed responsively until it saw in the bristle of crest pine and spruce, the silhouette of lance-bearing legions marching eastward.

Already his trunk had gone in a neighbour's "jolt wagon," and the horse that he was to ride across Cedar Mountain was saddled. Other respondents to that call might motor to their trains. He must make the beginning of his journey on horseback, with his most immediate needs packed in saddle bags--as Jefferson had done before him.

Boone paused at the door of the house, where already the fire had been quenched and the windows barred. Now he turned the key in the lock and went slowly to the barn, but even when he had led out his mare and stood at the stirrup, something held him there with the spell of memory.

He was not coming back here until he had fulfilled the resolve long ago made--and since in these days overseas journeys were less simple than in other times, he could not be sure of coming back at all. So with his bridle rein over his forearm, he stood for a while with the picture of the log cabin and the sunset in his eyes.

Then he mounted and rode slowly away.

In a few days he was to hear the earnest voice of the President sounding over the sober faces of his gathered colleagues: "Gentlemen of the Congress:--I have called the Congress into extraordinary session because there are serious, very serious, choices to be made, and made immediately, which it was neither right nor constitutionally permissible that I should assume the responsibility of making."

Though he came bearing no official mission, because he was a member of the American Congress and because the United States Ambassador had exerted himself to that end, Boone Wellver found it possible to leave revolutionary Petrograd and make his way to the front where, after a year of successful offensive, the armies of Brussilov lay drugged with the insidious poison of anarchy.

Already, "Order Number One to Army" had with a pen-stroke abolished all the requirements of discipline and all the striking power of unity.

The marvel was that the heart of the organization had not at once stopped beating--but old traditions still held the

fragments loosely cemented, and the resolute hand of Brussilov still grasped and steadied the brittle material left to him in the face of the enemy and disaster.

If guns still thundered on the eastern front, the men who had for a year been launching successful assaults knew that their voices were hollow. If his army groups still maintained a zone of activity between themselves and the foe, he knew that it was only a screen behind which he sought to shield the evaporating powers of his forces.

Yet even in these days the commander adhered to his custom and received the correspondents, and when Boone came to his headquarters with the credentials that had passed him that far, he was turned over to an intelligence officer, whose instructions were to serve him in every way compatible with military expediency until the general could grant him an audience.

He had been motored through a timber-patched country of waving wheat fields and had listened to the deep voices of the guns. He had been taken into the trenches where he read the spirit of decay in sullen eyes that had once been stolidly impassive or cheerfully childlike. He had seen the "little and terrible keyholes of heaven and hell" through which one looks, both sickened and exalted, upon modern warfare.

In his mind, still unassimilated, were countless impressions, gruesome and inspiring, petty and magnificent, appalling and ennobling; impressions of broken men and broken villages, of pock-marked country and unbruised valour. As the battered military car, mud-brown over its gray, wallowed back from the front lines, he seemed to be leaving the war behind him, though he knew that he was approaching the nerve centre from which emanated the impulses which forged and wrought the purposes of the Inferno.

Finally in a village less hideously war-spoiled than its fellows, and in a small but tidy room of what had been the inn, he awaited the pleasure of the Commander.

Of his conductor along the front he had put questions as to General Makailoff. Yes, the officer, of course, knew of the General, but where he was now he could not say.

The General was a wheel in the mechanism of Brussilov's staff--and that directing force was remote from the lives of lower grade officers. It belonged to the part of the temple which lay behind the veil. Even in attempted description of the man, the intelligence officer grew vague, and Boone did not press him for a greater explicitness. That military reticence that no civilian could justly appraise might be parent to the officer's indefinite responses, and, if so, its covertness must be respected.

So in the room of the Russian inn the man from the Cumberland waited, and at length, when he opened his door in response to a light rap, he saw an officer in a major's uniform, who saluted smartly and announced in excellent English,

"General Brussilov will receive you now, sir."

Again a battered military car lurched through village streets darkening to twilight, and brought up before a plain two-storied house, whose walls, though shell marked, stood upright.

Into a whitewashed room, littered with map-strewn tables, and empty until they entered it, Boone was ushered and left alone.

A lamp upon a crude table stood as yet unkindled, and only candles in two tall sticks on a wall-shelf gave a yellow effect against which the shadows stirred cloudily.

Even the whitewashed walls were the gray yellow of putty in that feeble light, and Boone turned his eyes toward the brighter spot of the door, giving upon another room, where operators sat at switchboards and where were mingled the buzz of voices, the tramp of booted feet, the clink of spurs and accoutrements, into a tempered babel as restlessly constant as surf on rocks.

That door was a kaleidoscopic patch of changing colour, and Boone watched it with a sense of confused unreality until a second opened, letting in a draught under which the candles wavered and grew more dim, and a spare figure entered through it, clad in a field uniform which had seen heavy wear, and holding between the tapering fingers of the left hand a freshly lighted cigarette.

Boone had a realization in that first moment of a shadowy shape in a semi-obscurity, yet out of the dimness, as though they were brightly painted on a dark canvas, stood clear--or so it seemed to him--the features of the man and the cross of St. George on his breast.

Alexieff Brussilov closed the door behind him and inclined his head in something less casual than a nod and less formal than a bow, and the flames of the candles rose and steadied as if standing at attention. In all of Boone's

subsequent remembrance of that meeting, it was difficult for him to unravel the fact from the play of an imagination, more fitful just then than the candle glimmer, or to dissociate from the impressions of that moment all that he had known before or learned afterwards of this man, whose feats of arms he had heard so widely acclaimed.

Even when the General's voice had broken the silence and they had exchanged commonplaces, a surge of influences quite apart from his words seemed to emanate from the erect figure and the stern eyes, as electric waves flow out from an induction coil.

Boone questioned himself sternly afterwards and could never answer his own questioning as to whether he actually felt at that time or only realized in retrospect the strong impression of doom and heartbreak in Brussilov's eyes. His story was not yet ended, but he must have known its end. He was yet to be commander-in-chief for two months of futile struggle with crumbling armies, succeeding Alexieff, and being himself supplanted by Korniloff. He was even to essay one more offensive--yet his inner vision must already recognize the writing on the wall. He must have seen the black smudge-smoke of disaster stifling the clean fire of his achievement.

But Boone knew that the time granted him out of those hours of stress must not be abused, and as shortly as possible he told the General with full candour why he had come, and ended by asking that he be presented to General Makailoff and be allowed to see his face. If in Ivangoroff's story there had been even a germ of truth, this man of mysterious advent into the Russian army might well look to his superiors to protect his secret.

So Boone made it unmistakably clear that his eagerness was that of a foster son, and he felt that his testimony needed no corroboration, because under the searching severity of the eyes which held his own, as he talked, any falsity must break into betrayal as manifest as a flaw in crystal.

When he had finished, Brussilov did not at once reply, and Boone thought that back of the mask of reserve stirred a shadowing of strong emotion. At last the General spoke evenly, almost stiffly:

"As to General Makailoff's former record, I have practically no knowledge. He came to me from the Grand Duke Nicholas. Naturally I required nothing more. Of my own knowledge I can declare him a soldier with few peers in Europe."

"Then I may have the honour of being presented, sir? I may see his face? If he is the man I have come to learn of, he will welcome me, I think. If not, I shall pay my respects and rest under a deep obligation to you."

The eager thrill of the civilian's voice was unmistakable, and for a moment the soldier stood looking into the face of his visitor, seeming himself uncertain of his answer. But it was only the words of its couching that troubled him, and presently Brussilov raised a hand and let it fall while his reply came in few syllables and blunt directness:

"Makailoff is dead."

"Dead!" Boone echoed the word with a gasp. Only now did he realize how strongly the hopes stirred to rebirth by Ivangoroff's fantastic narrative had laid hold upon him and what power of shock lay in this *dnouement*. Then he heard again the voice of Russia's second in command:

"It is incredibly strange that you should have come just now--if indeed he is the man you seek. Thirty-six hours since you might have talked with him." The General broke off and began afresh with an undertone of savage protest in his voice: "In these late days when troops may ballot and wrangle as to whether they will advance or retire, we must squander our most indispensable. It is only by precept and example that we can hope to hold them. Makailoff was such a sacrifice. He fell yesterday in a position as far forward as that of any colonel or major of the line. Had I been left a free hand, I could have enforced obedience more cheaply--with machine guns!"

He broke off and raised the forgotten cigarette to his lips, with an ironic shrug of his shoulders, while Boone Wellver steadied himself with an effort.

"You must make allowances for my impatience, sir," he implored. "The suspense of uncertainty is hard. May I know at once?"

Brussilov bowed, and the falcon eyes moderated with the abruptness of a transformation. "He lies only a few versts from this spot. Tonight we bury him and fire his last salute.... You shall go with me.... I am waiting now for--a gentleman, who knew him even better than I. I cannot say who was more devoted to him, for that, I think, would be impossible."

An aide entered, saluted, handed his chief a paper, and went out again. To Boone it seemed the irritating interruption of an automaton, in boots of clicking heels that moved on hinges and pivots, but it served to bring back to the General's attitude and bearing that impersonal and aloof concentration which for the moment had been lost. Again his eyes were windows of drawn shades, and as he studied the communication in his hand, the civilian remembered that, though

comrades fell, the task went on, and its director could not be deflected.

Beyond the door the noise of the switchboard operators and the tramp of heavy feet coming and going sounded monotonously through the silence, and then a second officer entered, saluted, as though he were twin automaton to the first, and spoke in Russian.

"You will excuse me for a moment," said the General. "The gentleman of whom I spoke has arrived."

He left the room, and Boone remained standing, his gaze wandering, but his brain singularly numb and inoperative, like stiff machinery, until he heard footsteps again, and with a conscious effort shook off his heaviness of torpor. Then quite instinctively his civilian attitude altered into something like the soldier's attention, as General Brussilov re-entered with another figure, wrapped to the chin in a heavy motor coat. The newcomer was not in uniform, yet Boone felt the creep along his scalp of an electric and dramatic thrill because the giant height of lean stature, the calmly indomitable bearing and the indescribable stamp of greatness proclaimed the Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholaivitch; the man from whose sure grasp the supreme command had been filched by a jealous weakling; the man who might have saved Russia.

He was a gray old eagle, whose mighty talons had been clipped and whose strong pinions had been broken, but the eagle light was in the iris still and the eagle power in its glance.

The Kentuckian's thoughts flashed back to the night when life had first begun to take on colour before his visioning. Then McCalloway and Prince had named the pitifully few great soldiers of the present, peers of those who had passed to Váhhalla. Were it tonight instead of almost two decades ago, they must have named this man among the mighty few.

Boone found himself bowing, then he heard the deep voice of the tall gentleman saying, "General Brussilov has told me. Let us go at once."

Under a sky banked with clouds the car which they entered felt its way along a broken road. Its lights glared on dark masses that leaped out of the blackness and became lines of exhausted men stumbling rearward, or carts of wounded bumping toward relief. The throats of the guns bellowed with a nearer roar, and eventually they halted at another headquarters and silently passed between saluting officers into a bare room where candles burned dimly at the head of a coffin and Cossacks stood at attention, guarding the dead.

At a low-voiced word from Brussilov the place emptied, save for the three who looked down on the casket, closed but not yet fastened. Then, as Boone drank in his breath deeply with a steadying inhalation, the General lifted the covering and raised his eyes interrogatively toward the American.

Boone's lips stirred at first, without sound, then moved again as he said quietly: "It is he."

With the last monosyllable, answering to a command of reverence and awe and stricken grief, he dropped to his knees and knelt beside the casket, and when at length he looked up--and rose gropingly--the picture of two elderly soldiers, standing stiff and tight-lipped, stamped itself ineradicably on his brain. He found himself a minute later fumbling in a pocket and bringing out a small object from which with slow and tremulous fingers he removed the tissue paper wrapping.

His eyes turned first toward the Grand Duke, then toward the General, in a mute appeal for counsel in a matter of fitness.

"This is his," he said, with awkward pauses between his word groups; "he won it in Manchuria.... May I pin it on his breast?"

"The Japanese decoration of the Rising Sun," said the Grand Duke, gravely and acquiescently bowing his head. "Why not?"

Then, turning back his heavy civilian coat, his fingers sought the spot where should have been the Cross of St. George, and came away empty.

"I had forgotten," he observed drily, "I no longer wear a uniform--nor have I any longer the authority. You, Brussilov--with you it is different."

So the man who still held precarious reins over a runaway army detached the clasp of his ornament and pinned the two side by side on the unstirring breast of the dead man; the emblem of honour he had gained in war on Russia and that which rewarded the giving of his life to Russia.

The Grand Duke turned his gaze on Boone Wellver. "Brussilov tells me that this man was as a father to you ... that you

had his permission, when he was dead, to inspect papers revealing his true identity.... Is that true?"

"It is true, sir," came the low reply.

"Then on my own responsibility I am going to share that secret with General Brussilov--implicitly trusting his discretion. He"--the tall Romanoff indicated with a gesture the body of the man who lay dead--"he told me, when he came to me. He was one of the world's greatest soldiers. Once before a casket, draped with flags and supposedly containing his body, was borne to the grave on a gun caisson--and a court paid tribute." The Grand Duke paused and spoke again in the manner of one challenging contradiction. "But he was not buried. He had not died except to the eyes of the world which was his right. His name was Hector Dinwiddie."

For a little while no one spoke, and at last Brussilov, with a reverent hand, lowered the plate over the white face. "Come, gentlemen," he said, with a brusque masking of agitation, "the burial detachment is ready."



CHAPTER XLVII

With the half-realized familiarity of unplaced features, one face besides that of his two distinguished companions, declared its existence to Boone Wellver out of all the faces that set the stage that night. When they had entered the room where the body lay and the soldiers had turned and clanked out, they had been as devoid of personal entities as links in a chain--except one.

An officer, though seen only through half shadow, had worn a stamp of grief on eyes and a mouth which the Kentuckian did not seem to be seeing for the first time.

Again under the night skies by the open grave, when the lanterns burned yellow and the white shaft of an automobile lamp bit out a hard band of glare, the figures of the burial party might have been effigies, but once more the tight-drawn figure of that spare officer declared itself human because only something human could, without word or motion, convey such a declaration of suffering.

It was he who gave the orders, and as Boone watched the firing squad step forward--gaunt, shadow shapes in silhouette--to fire the last salute, he saw the details with a dazed and blunted gaze.

The sharp order which brought the pieces to shoulder; the other sharp order, and the clean-tongued reports, single in unison but multiple in their crimson jets--somehow these took a less biting hold on his memory than the hint of the break in the officer's voice or the empty click of the back-thrown breech-blocks and the light clatter of empty and falling cartridge shells from the chambers.

It was over, and back in his bare inn room Boone sat in a heavy dulness, alone once more, when a rap sounded on the door.

"You are Mr. Boone Wellver, sor'r, are ye not? I heard them call ye so."

With the Scotch rolling of the r's, a flood of memory came back to the Kentuckian. This was the messenger who so long ago had come to the mountain cabin, seeking to lure his preceptor out of his hermitage, to China. The years had drawn him leaner and battered him, and his insignia proclaimed him a major, but his beard and uniform had not Russianized him.

"Major McTavish!" exclaimed the younger man, and across the older face passed a momentary surprise, too trivial to endure long against the head currents of graver emotion. "Yes, I am Boone Wellver. I was his foster-son."

The veteran of forty years of soldiering stood stiff for a little while and embarrassed. His undemonstrative nature was, just now, an ice-flow racked by a warm and unaccustomed freshet, and his straight lip-line twisted up, down, and up again under his effort.

"I have a message for ye, sor'r. He did not die at once--and I was with him from the moment he was struck."

Boone closed the door and turned eagerly. He had been hungry for a word--for a reassurance that in these last busy years this gallant gentleman had remembered him; yet now he put another matter ahead of that.

"But tell me first, sir, of his death," he begged. "I have heard little of that."

"It was as he would have had it." The soldier spoke brusquely, as if jealous of his superior's military devotion and in a monotone because his voice needed guarding. "He fell under fire, holding steady a shaken command."

"Was there--much suffering?"

"There was fever, sor'r, and he was out of his head at the end." The officer reached into his tunic and brought out a pencil-scribbled paper. "He had me write this for him. 'Tis to you."

Boone took the note in tremulous fingers and spread it close to the lamp. While he read, the other stood stiff, but his breathing, with a catch like the ghost of an inhibited sob, was audible.

"My dear boy," ran the message, "McTavish writes this for me. I have fallen at last in what I believe to be a fight for God's cause on earth. That is well. I go now to report to the Great Commander-in-Chief, before whom mere appearances do not damn a man if he go clean-hearted. Russia will collapse and the cause will depend upon your own country--a country no longer aloof, thank God.

"But, my dear boy, my thoughts that have been with you so long, turn to you at the end. You filled with affection and pride an emptiness that would have starved my soul. When I think of your country, I think of you as an

embodiment of its intrepid youth and strength. Can I say more? God keep you. I--"

It broke off there, and Boone raised his eyes to the Major, who, divining that the glance was an inquiry, said shortly, "He gave out there, sor'r. The fever took him. What you have read required half an hour to give me--between breaths, as it were."

"You say he was delirious--after that?"

The other nodded.

"He spoke your name--and another."

"Whose?" Boone whispered the question.

"A man named Prince. Some General Prince, of whom I never heard. He fancied that this man came from God to fetch him, sor'r. It was part of the lightheadedness."

"Can you recall his words?"

"I was holding his hand. He pressed mine a bit and said very faintly, 'Good-bye, Sergeant.'--'Twas so he remembered me from other times.--'Tell Boone good-bye. General Prince has come for me.'"

The narrator broke off, and Boone refrained from hastening him. Finally McTavish resumed:

"He said, 'General Prince has come. Don't ye hear him, McTavish? He says, "The Commander-in-Chief sends His compliments, and you will report to Him, in person."--That was all, sor'r. I thought at the time he meant Brussilov, but I comprehend now that it was of God he spoke."

"I see," responded Boone huskily. "I thank you."

In Cincinnati, loyal to the core, yet Germanic enough of feature and accent to render him inconspicuous, a fair-haired Bavarian with borrowed naturalization papers pursued an avocation which merited the attention of a firing squad. One day in a boarding house of excellent repute, not far from Eden Park, a stranger called to see him, whose dark hair fell in a forelock over a face of sardonic cast.

This pair strolled out through the wooded acclivities of the park which looks down over the city and, between blossoming redbud trees, found a spot favourably secluded for their interview.

"I still don't see," admitted the sallow stranger in a dubious voice, "what it's going to profit your Kaiser to preach draft resistance down there in the hills. I'm not contending that they don't hate to have the Government say, 'You must,' yet on the other hand, they don't hang back on soldiering. What's the bright idea?"

The German lifted his straw-coloured brows indulgently.

"You Americans have no thoroughness. You cannot grasp the detail because you are too impatient of small matters. One does not seek to administer a cumulative poison with a single dosage. The German mind considers each contributing element--and of the small things are born the large. I sketch for you a picture: your mountaineer in resistance; the southern negro stirred to sullenness; the reservation Indian made restive--all small problems in themselves, perhaps, but taken together making a sabotage of human machinery that destroys your unity. At all events, we are paying those whom we employ. We can afford to be liberal since in the end the foe will foot the bill."

Saul Fulton shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Gehr--"

"Not Gehr," the other irritably interrupted him. "That was my name when we met in South America. It is not the name on my papers. Schultz, it is. Please do not forget again."

"Schultz, then.... I'm willing to take my share of this wasted coin, but I can't work in my home county. I tried going back there once and it was enough."

"You know other mountain sections, though--and in your native county you can influence lieutenants?"

"Yes, I reckon maybe I can do that, all right."

Saul Fulton, to whom intrigue was as the breath of life, had again undertaken to earn the Iscariot wage, and he worked as covertly as if he had lain hidden in the laurel thickets.

The result of his efforts was that in one county, not his own, a handful of desperadoes listened greedily to his teachings, and in his own a single man--or boy--of whom it was said that he "was pizen mean an' held a grudge ergin all creation."

Save for that, he gained no disciples, and if, when the registration day came, only one quarter of the men of military age went to enroll themselves, it was because already, through the channels of recruiting offices, the other three-fourths had flowed into the khaki-brown reservoirs of the army. It is history now how the "feud counties" responded; how in two of them not a single man claimed exemption; how in one only two souls waited for the draft.

But Marlin County had her shameful exception in young "Dog" Burtree, who lived alone in a log shack at the head of Pigeonroost Creek.

One Saturday night young Dog drank white whiskey at a blind tiger, and it was reported of him that, in the Holly Hill barber shop, he "made the brag that he hedn't registered, an' didn't aim ter register." Those who were present reported his manifesto with admirable promptness to the local draft board, and the scandal winged its way along the creek-beds.

Dog may have been drunk beyond remembrance that evening, for when neighbours with faces set in lines of patriarchal sternness rode to his door demanding the truth, he turned putty pale and swore that he had been libelled, and would make his detractors eat their calumnies.

It was on the next Saturday night and in the same barber shop, with much the same group of loiterers present, that the ensuing act was staged.

The shabby little place, lighted by lamps with tin reflectors, was full of pipe smoke and talk that evening, when some one, looking up from a tilted chair, saw a figure in the door.

A startled silence fell and lasted, though not for long--because the eyes of the face that looked in were blood-shot and the lips twisted to an ugly snarl.

Except for its malevolence of expression it was not a repulsive face, though its lower jaw was overly prominent. Its eyes were amber spots beneath heavy brows, and under the back-thrust, felt hat a heavy mass of chestnut hair bushed in curls about the temples. The lips were brightly red like a girl's, but over the whole countenance now lay a spirit both desperate and wicked.

Dog appreciated that what he did must be speedily done, and before the pause broke; before the startled accusers had realised the mission that had brought him his pistol had leaped from its holster; had, several times, risen and fallen in the grasp of a hand hinged on a steady wrist, and had barked each time its muzzle fell level.

Wreaths of smoke and the acrid smell of burnt powder drifted through the barber shop, and four bodies lay on the puncheon floor--of whom two were already dead.

Swiftly the night took Dog Burtree to itself, and almost as swiftly a posse was on the trail, with Joe Gregory, now high sheriff of Marlin County, riding a blood-sweat out of his black colt to assume command of the man-hunt.

The quarry circled over a wide arc of broken fastnesses and went to earth in an abandoned cabin thickly timbered about, and shielded back of huge boulders. There he barred the door and barked out his defiant challenge, "Come in an' git me!"

The cordon closed about the house and awaited the light of day. Until hunger and thirst conquered him, the few casualties were all of the refugee's making, but after two nights and a day of siege, a white rag appeared through a chink on the end of a ramrod.

"Tell Joe Gregory he kin come in," shouted the voice of the besieged man. "I'm ready ter surrender ter *him*--but not ter nobody else!"

"No," shouted back Gregory, who already wore a bandage about a grazed arm; "you come out, and come with your hands high."

So it was that Saul's single convert came, and it was three weeks afterwards that, the jury having spoken and the higher court having denied an appeal, Joe sat in a day-coach leaving Marlin Town, while in the seat facing him sat Dog Burtree, with irons on his wrists, and a journey before him which should have no return. He was going to the electric chair at Eddyville.

Word ran mysteriously through the length of the train that the slight, youthful prisoner in charge of the tall, grave-faced sheriff was the Holly Hill murderer, and passengers sauntered, with specious carelessness and inquisitive side glances, past the section where he sat.

The condemned man gave them back stare for stare, seeking the sorry refuge of a bravado which, when he forgot his pose and gazed out of the window, sagged into a spiritless and haunted misery. The face of his captor was harder to read, yet the young woman who had also boarded the train at Marlin Town with a group of settlement school children bound for trachoma treatment in Lexington thought that it held an unusual magnetism.

Simplicity and courage were written in the sober eyes; responsibility and self-knowledge were stamped on the firm mouth-line and jaw-angle.

Joe, who had once come to Frankfort to seek Boone's aid in curbing the violence of Gregory's wrath, was going through the capital now on another mission, and he made no effort to conceal his heaviness of heart. He was taking a fellow-man to die, and though the duty lay as clear-writ as when it had called him into rifle fire from the fugitive's barricade, it was no longer so easy to obey.

From time to time the condemned man leaned forward and talked, and Joe bent with as considerate an attention as though he were listening to a dignitary. Sometimes he smiled in answer to a forced jest; sometimes to a more sincere and less brazen effort he nodded grave response. One would have said that the two were friends, and against the approaches of the morbidly curious Joe interposed an aloofness as repellent as bayonets. What were they, he thought, but men anxious to see the wheels turn in a head that was soon to wear a cap with electrodes fitting against shaven temples?

From across the car Happy Spradling watched the mingled strength and gentleness of the law's servant, and felt that she would like to know this neighbour, whom, as it happened, she had never met.

The girl was going home, a few days after that, on the same train that carried the returning sheriff--this time travelling alone--and coming to her seat somewhat diffidently, he held out a book.

"If you'll excuse me for introducing myself," he said, "I'll give you this. You left it in your seat when you got off the train coming down."

Happy smiled, and, since they were, after all, neighbours, talked with him for the rest of the journey. Though it had been a long while since her heart had admitted a flutter at the glances or speeches of a man, the young woman found herself awakening to the discovery that she was still young. He asked if he might come to see her, and often after that his horse stood hitched at the settlement school. When one night a few months later he smiled his grave smile and said, "I've come to bid you farewell; I'm going away tomorrow," she acknowledged a sudden sharpness of pang.

"Where?" she demanded. And he answered:

"Over there."

They were standing on the squared log that made a foot bridge between the thicketed banks of Little Laurel, and through a heavy mass of clouds the moon was just emerging into a narrow field of pearl and opal.

Because it was rising and still hung low, its face was not pallid but rosy, and the top plumes of a single hemlock-clump showed outlined, and swaying. Elsewhere the sky was still cloud-dark.

"I haven't known you long," Joe Gregory was saying, "and I've always been a mighty plain, uninteresting sort of man, but if I come back, there'll be things I've got to say to you." He paused, and there was a touch of eager hope in his voice as he finished. "The war'll change lots of things. Maybe it'll change me some, too."

"Don't let it change you too much, Joe," the girl cautioned him, and he bent forward to assure himself that the light which he thought he saw in her eyes was real.

CHAPTER XLVIII

Paris by night was a dancer who has taken the veil. Paris by day, when the siren screamed its air-raid warning, was a bold spirit not cowed but sobered with a realization of death. Yet today Paris was vibrantly alive along her boulevards where, despite the shadow, bright currents flowed and sparkled.

For was not this the Fourth of July, the national day of the sister republic across the sea? And this afternoon would not the avenues echo to the tramp of the first marching feet, as columns in khaki swung along under the flag of the new ally?

Paris had bled as she waited; France had given life and treasure and made no lament, but now the vanguard of mighty reinforcements had arrived, and this afternoon, in the welcome poured out upon them, Paris would voice her quickened spirit of confidence restored and doubt dispelled.

Along sidewalks, where once the world had come to behold the gaiety and taste the enchantment, trooped civilian crowds, linking elbows with the uniformed sleeves of France, of Italy, of Britain, of Belgium and of Portugal. Everywhere flashed and rang the cheer of a great day, and everywhere showed the sobering of black with the tunics of horizon blue. With the fluttering flags went the white of bandages, and with tramp of feet mingled the stumping of the *bles's* crutch.

Boone Wellver had been in Paris a short time only, and tomorrow he was leaving for England--and then home. He felt that Congress was no longer his place of first duty--and he meant to resign. Pitched to a tone as much deeper than feud hatreds as the bay of artillery is deeper than rifle-fire, the voice which called for vengeance rang in his ears, and his hands ached for the feel of the musket.

He would have preferred that today, his last in Paris, should have been left untrammelled. He wanted to drift with the laughing crowds between the chestnut trees and to return the gay salutation of eyes that gleamed the more brightly because they had been washed with tears. He wanted to lose himself in that general picture which portrayed the spirit of France so simply and gloriously valiant that, as one laughed, one felt a catch in the throat for the background of tragedy against which all the brightness was painted.

But a requirement of civility had robbed him of that full liberty and left him no choice but to follow the instructions which had been contained in a letter from a New York member of the House of Representatives.

"If you have the opportunity in Paris," his colleague had written, "my wife and I wish very much that you would look up some close friends of ours.

"They are a little group of New York women who, with some reconstruction unit, have been doing worth-while work in stricken territories of France and Belgium. Our particular friend is Mrs. L. N. Steele, and while I can't direct you to her, at the enclosed address they can give you greater particulars. I understand they are occasionally in Paris, and, if so--" Boone had groaned impatiently, then had dutifully made inquiries, with the result that at noon today he was to meet and lunch with a party including his friend's friend.

Now he reluctantly made his way along the thronged streets to the designated restaurant in the Rue de Rivoli.

Even of her grim necessity, Paris had made a decorative virtue. The pasted-paper designs on the shop windows--put there to prevent bomb-shattered panes from flying dangerously--seemed to have had no other purpose than the expression of their designers' originality and temperament. The piled sand-sacks that buttressed monuments and arches had a certain deftness of arrangement that escaped the unsightly.

Boone crossed the Place de la Concorde--where once the guillotine had stood--and turned under the arches, looking at the signs.

He entered a restaurant that was, today, crowded, looking vaguely about him, and with a shepherding urbanity of deportment the head waiter came forward to his assistance.

Boone paused, still searching the tables across the colour scraps which two colours always dominated--horizon-blue and mourning black.

Then he saw a gloved hand raised in a signalling gesture, and recognized the lady of whom he had made his inquiries for Mrs. Steele.

He had seen only the one face, for that particular group sat partly screened behind the inevitable centre stand crowned with its masterpiece of decoration, where a huge lobster lay in state on an ice-cake, surrounded by a variegated cordon

of *hors d'oeuvres*.

Then Boone made his way between the tables and found himself being presented to several other women, to a pair of liaison officers on leave and, because it all took place in a moment, suddenly felt the floor grow unsteady under his feet, and saw, as the one clear vision in a blur of indistinctness, the slender figure of a woman whose hair was a disputed dominion along the borderland of gold and brown.

As Anne rose to meet him—for she did rise—the man looked into the face for which he had so long been seeking, and found it paler and thinner than he had known it, yet paradoxically older only in the sense of being perfected and tempered.

The violet eyes held undimmed the light that he had worshipped, and if one could see that sometimes they had looked on ghosts one could see too that they had prevailed over their haunting.

Boone forgot the others about him.

"I have been searching for you," he said.

It was not until late that day that they found themselves alone, sitting in the gardens of the Luxembourg on the south side of the Seine. Convalescent veterans, some of them pitifully young, were taking the air there as the day cooled toward evening, and Boone and Anne Masters sat on a bench, contented for a while to let the silence rest upon them.

Much had been said and much remained to be said. Finally Boone declared fervently; "At all events, I've found you!"

"Somehow," her voice was low and a little tremulous, "I always felt that if—we ever found ourselves—we would find each other."

"And I think," he responded gravely, "we've done that."

"It wasn't an easy road," she told him, and then as suddenly as an April sun may break dartingly through rainclouds she laughed, and in her violet eyes flashed the old merriment and whimsical humour. "I can laugh now, Boone, but I couldn't then.... Once I could have reached out my hand and touched you."

His eyes widened, and his vanity suffered a sharp sting. He would have sworn that his heart-hunger would have declared her nearness at any hour of that long period of search, and he told her so, but she laughed again.

"That's in romance, Boone dear. We were in life."

"When was it?"

"It was on Fifth Avenue—just off of Washington Square, one night when sleet was falling. I remember the wet pavements, because I had a hole in one shoe. I was wrestling with an umbrella that the wind tried to turn inside out—and we all but collided..."

"And you didn't speak to me!"

"No. I hurried away as fast as my feet could carry me—including the one with the leaky shoe."

"But, Anne!" The reproach in his voice was almost an outcry, and the girl laid a hand gently, for a moment, over his.

"If I'd let you find me, Boone—just then—I'd never have found myself. It would have been surrender."

"But why!"

"Because—just then, I wasn't far from being hungry, and I was very—very close to despair."

The man shuddered, and after a long silence he asked:

"But how did you come into this work?"

"It was logical enough. I graduated into it out of an East Side settlement, but I went into *that* because it was all I could get to do. I don't deserve any credit."

She sketched for him what her life had been here in ruined and desolate towns, and made him see vividly the picture of the reclamation work. She had been in places where the war tide had flowed near and spoke shudderingly of the stark things which a generous world had been slow to believe, and at the end he told her of McCalloway's death, but not of his true identity, for that one secret he might not share with her.

"And now," he questioned, "now that I have found you—after these years of search?"

Her violet eyes met his, and he read in them an answer that sent turbulent and rejoicing currents, like wine, through his veins.

"There is no one else, Boone--but I've enlisted for the war."

He nodded. "I shall soon be in uniform, too," he said. "I'm going to come back here with some of those barbarians that I was born among--I think it's with them I'd rather visit the German trenches. But when the war is over, dearest--"

"*Après la guerre*," she murmured. "How often have I heard that here! After the war we shall have our lives."

A blind *poilu* went by on the arm of a girl and, though his eyes were covered with a bandage and his free hand moved gropingly, his laugh was that of a lover, and not a hopeless one. Boone's fingers closed over those of the girl.

"After the war!" he breathed, in a low and vibrant voice.