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"The moonlight flickered on the blade in his hand as he reeled backward over the bluff" (page 145).

JUDITH OF THE CUMBERLANDS

BY
ALICE MACGOWAN

AUTHOR OF
"THE WIVING OF LANCE CLEAVERAGE,"
"THE LAST WORD," "HULDAH," "RETURN," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR
BY
GEORGE WRIGHT

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ALICE MACGOWAN

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DEDICATION

To my mountain friends, dwellers in lonely cabins, on winding horseback trails and steep, precarious roads; or in the tiny settlements that nestle in the high-hung inner valleys; lean brown hunters on remote paths in the green shadowed depths of the free forest, light-stepping, keen-eyed, humorous-lipped, hitting the point as aptly with an instance as with the old squirrel gun they carry; wielders of the axe by many a chip pile, where the swinging blade rests readily to answer query or offer advice; tanned, lithely moving lads following the plough, turning over the shoulder a countenance of dark beauty; grave, shy girls, pail in hand, at the milking-bars in dawn or dusk; young mothers in the doorway, looking out, babe on hip; big-eyed, bare-footed mountain children clinging hand in hand by the roadside, or clustered like startled little partridges in the shelter of the dooryard; knitters in the sun and grandams by the hearth; tellers and treasurers all of tales and legends couched in racy old Elizabethan English; I dedicate this—their book and mine.

FOREWORD

I have been so frequently asked how I, a woman, came by my intimate acquaintance with life in the more remote districts of the southern Appalachians, particularly in the matter of illicit distilling, that I think it not amiss to here set down a few words as to my sources of knowledge.

I have always lived in a small city in the heart of the Cumberlands, and a portion of each year was spent in the mountains themselves. The speech of Judith and her friends and kin has been familiar to me from childhood; their point of view, their customs and possessions as well known to me as my own. Then when I began to write, I was one summer at Roan Mountain, on the North Carolina-Tennessee line, probably less than two hundred miles from Chattanooga by the railway, and Gen. John T. Wilder, who had campaigned all through the fastnesses of that inaccessible region, suggested to me that I buy a mountain-bred saddle horse, and ride such a route as he would give me, bringing up, after about a thousand miles of it, at my home. To follow the itinerary that the old soldier marked out on the map for me was to leave railroads and modern civilisation as we know it, penetrate the wild heart of the region, and, depending on the wayside dwellers for hospitality and lodging from night to night, be forcibly thrust into an intimate comprehension of a phase of American life which is perhaps the most primitive our country affords.

I was more than eight weeks making this trip, carrying with me all necessary baggage on my capacious, cowgirl saddle with its long and numerous buckskin tie-strings. At first I shrank very much from riding up to a cabin—a young woman, alone, with garments and outfit that must challenge the attention and curiosity of these people—in the dusk of evening or in a heavy rain-storm, and asking in set terms for lodging. But it took only a few days for me to find that here I was never to be stared at, wondered at, nor questioned; and that, proffering my request under such conditions, I was met by instant hospitality, and a grave, uninquiring courtesy unsurpassed and not always equalled in the best society, and I seemed to evoke a swift tenderness that was almost compassion.

During this journey I became acquainted with some features of mountain life which I might never have known otherwise. My best friends in the mountains in the neighbourhood of my own home had always been a little shy of discussing moonshine whiskey and moonshiners; but here I

earned a dividend upon my misfortunes, being more than once taken for a revenue spy; and in the apologetic amenities of those who had misjudged me, which followed my explanations and proofs of innocence, I have been shown in a spirit of atonement, illicit still and "hideout." I have heard old Jephthah Turrentine make his protest against the government's attitude toward the mountain man and his "blockaded still." I have foregathered with the revenueurs in the settlements at the foot of the circling purple ranges, and been shown the specially made axes and hooks they carry with them for breaking up and destroying the simple appurtenances of the illicit manufacture. Knowing that Blatch Turrentine's still must have cost him three hundred dollars, I cannot wonder that a mountain man, a thrifty fellow like Blatch, should have lingered, even in great danger, over the project of carrying it with him.

These dwellers in the southern mountain region, the purest American strain left to us, hold the interest and appeal of a changing, vanishing type. The tide of enlightenment and commercial prosperity must presently sweep in and absorb them. And so I might hope that a faithful picture of the life and manners I have sought to represent in *Judith of the Cumberlands* would be the better worth while.

A. MAC G.

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Judith of the Cumberlands

Chapter I

Spring

"Won't you be jest dressed to kill an' cripple when you get that on! Don't it set her off, Jeffy Ann?"

The village milliner fell back, hands on hips, thin lips screwed up, and regarded the possible purchaser through narrowed eyes of simulated ecstasy.

"I don't know," debated the brown beauty, surveying herself in a looking-glass by means of an awkwardly held hand-mirror. "'Pears to me this one's too little. Hit makes me look like I was

sent for and couldn't come. But I do love red. I think the red on here is mightily sightly."

Instantly the woman of the shop had the hat off the dark young head and in her own hands.

"This is a powerful pretty red bow," she assented promptly. "I can take it out just as easy as not, and tack it onto that big hat you like. I believe you're right; and red certainly does go with yo' hair and eyes." Again she gazed with languishing admiration at her customer.

And Judith Barrier was well worth it, tall, justly proportioned, deep-bosomed, long-limbed, with the fine hands and feet of the true mountaineer. The thick dusk hair rose up around her brow in a massive, sculptural line; her dark eyes—the large, heavily fringed eyes of a dryad—glowed with the fires of youth, and with a certain lambent shining which was all their own; the stain on her cheeks was deep, answering to the ripe red of the full lips.

In point of fact Mrs. Rhody Staggart the milliner considered her a big, coarse country girl, and thought that a pair of stout corsets well pulled in would improve her crude figure; but she dealt out compliments without ceasing as she exchanged the red bow for the blue, and laboriously pinned the headgear upon the bronze-brown coils, admonishing gravely, "Far over to one side, honey—jest the way they're a-wearin' them in New York this minute."

The buyer once more studied her mirror, and its dumb honesty told her that she was beautiful. Then she looked about for some human eyes to make the same communication.

"What's a-goin' on over yon at the Co't House?" she inquired with languid interest, looking across the open square.

"They's a political speakin'," explained the other. "Creed Bonbright he wants to be elected jestic of the peace and go back to the Turkey Tracks and set up a office. Fool boy! You know mighty well an' good they'll run him out o' thar—or kill him, one."

Although the girl had herself ridden down from Turkey Track Mountain that morning, and the old Bonbright farm adjoined her own, the news held no interest for her. She wished the gathering might have been something more to her purpose; but she solemnly paid for the hat, and with the cheap finery on her stately young head, which had been more appropriately crowned with a chaplet of vine leaves, moved to the door. She hoped that standing there, waiting for the boys to bring her horse, she might attract some attention by her recently acquired splendour.

She looked up at the Court House steps. The building was humbly in the Greek manner, as are so many of the public structures in the South. Between its great white pillars, flaking paint and half-heartedly confessing their woodland genesis, stood a tall young man, bareheaded. The doubtful sunlight of a March day glinted on his uncovered yellow hair. He was speaking rapidly in a fervid fashion that seemed beyond the occasion; in his blue eyes shone something of the fanatic's passion; his bearing was that of a man who conceives himself to have a mission and a message.

Judith looked at him. She heard no word of what he was saying—but him she heard. She heard the high, vibrant voice, saw the fair hair on the upflung head, the rapt look in the blue eyes with their quick-expanding pupils. Suddenly her world turned over. In a smother of strange, uncomprehended emotions, she was gropingly glad she had the new hat—glad she had it on now, and that Mrs. Staggart herself had adjusted it. On blind impulse she edged around into plainer view, pushing freely in amongst the fringe of men and boys, an unheard-of thing for a well taught mountain girl to do, but Judith was for the moment absolutely unconscious of their humanity.

"You never go a-nigh my people," cried Bonbright in that clear thrilling tenor that is like a trumpet call, "you never go a-nigh them with the statute—with government—except when the United States marshal takes a posse up and raids the stills and brings down his prisoners. That's all the valley knows of the mountain folks. The law's never carried to anybody up there except the offenders and criminals. The Turkey Track neighbourhoods, Big and Little, have got a mighty bad name with you-all. But you ought to understand that violence must come when every man is obliged to take the law into his own hands. I admit that it's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth with us now—what else could it be? And yet we are as faithful to each other, as virtuous, and as God-fearing a race as those in the valley. I am a mountain man, born and bred in the Turkey Tracks; and I ask you to send me back to my neighbours with the law, that they may learn to be good citizens, as they are already good men and women."

Upon the word, there broke out at the farthest corner of the square an abrupt splatter of sound, oaths, cries, punctuated by the swift staccato of running feet. The ringing voice came to a sudden halt. Out of a little side street which descended from the mountain, a young fellow burst into view, running in long leaping bounds, his hands up. Behind him lumbered Dan Haley the United States marshal, a somewhat heavy-set man, puffing and panting, yelling, "Halt! halt! halt!" and finally turning loose a fusillade of shots aimed high over the fleeing lad's head. There was a drawing back and a scattering in every direction.

"Hey, Bonbright!" vociferated a man leaping up from the last step where he had been sitting, pointing to where the marshal's deputy followed behind herding five or six prisoners from the mountains, "Hey, Bonbright! There's some of your constituency—some God-fearing Turkey-Trackers—now, but I reckon you won't own 'em."

"I will!" shouted Bonbright, whirling upon him, and one got suddenly the blue fire of his hawk-like eye with the slant brow above. "They *are* my people, and the way they're treated is what I've been trying to talk to you-all about."

"Well, you better go and take them fellers some law right now," jeered his interlocutor. "Looks like to me they need it mighty bad."

"That's just what I'm about," answered Bonbright. "God knows they'll get no justice unless I do. That's my job," and without another word or a look behind him he made his way bareheaded through the group on the steps and down the street.

Meantime the pursued had turned desperately and dodged into the millinery store whence Judith Barrier had emerged a little earlier. Instantly there came out to the listeners the noise of falling articles and breaking glass, and the squeals and scufflings of the women. The red-faced marshal dived in after his quarry, and emerged a moment later holding him by one elbow, swearing angrily. Creed Bonbright came up at the instant, and Haley, needing some one to whom he could express himself, explained in voluble anger:

"The damned little shoat! Said if I'd let him walk a-loose he'd give me information. You can't trust none of them."

Bonbright laid a reassuring touch on the fugitive's shoulder as Haley fumbled after the handcuffs.

"I ain't been into no stillin', Creed!" panted the squirming boy.

"Well, don't run then," admonished Bonbright. "You've got no call to. I'll see that you get justice."

While he spoke there wheeled into the square, from a nearby waggon-yard, two young mountaineers on mules, one leading by the bridle-rein a sorrel horse with a side-saddle on it. At sight of the marshal and those with him, an almost imperceptible tremor went through the pair. There was a flicker of nostril, a rounding of eye, as their glance ran swiftly from one to another of Haley's prisoners. They were like wild game that winds the hunter.

"St! You Pony Card, is that them?" whispered Haley, sharply nudging the prisoner he held. "Turn him a-loose, Bonbright; I've got him handcuffed now."

The boy—he was not more than sixteen—choked, reddened, held down his head, studying the marshal's face anxiously from beneath lowered flax-coloured brows.

"Yes, them's Andy and Jeff Turrentine," Bonbright heard the husky, reluctant whisper. "Now cain't I go?"

The newcomers were beyond earshot, but the by-play was ominous to them. The lean young bodies stiffened in their saddles, the reins came up in their hands. For a moment it seemed as if they would turn and run for it. But it was too late. Without making any reply Haley shoved his prisoner into the hands of the deputy and with prompt action intercepted the two and placed them under arrest. Bonbright observed one of the boys beckon across the heads of the gathering crowd before he dismounted, and noted that some one approached from the direction of the Court House steps and received the three riding animals. In the confusion he did not see who this was. Haley spoke to his deputy, and then drew their party sharply off toward the jail, which could be used temporarily for the detention of United States prisoners. To the last the young Turrentines muttered together and sent baleful glances toward Bonbright, whom they plainly conceived to be the author of their troubles. Poor Pony Card plodded with bent head mutely behind them, a furtive hand travelling now and again to his eyes.

Such crowd as the little village had collected was following, Bonbright with the rest, when he encountered the girl who had come from the milliner's shop. She stood now alone by the sorrel horse with the side-saddle on it, holding the bridle-reins of the two mules, and there was a bewildered look in her dark eyes as the noisy throng swept past her which brought him—led in the hand of destiny—instantly to her side.

"What's the matter?" he asked her. "Can I help you?" And Judith who, in her perturbation, had not seen him before, started violently at the words and tone.

"They've tuck the boys," she hesitated, in a rich, broken contralto, that voice which beyond all others moves the hearts of hearers, "I—I don't know how I'm a-goin' to get these here mules home. Pete he won't lead so very well."

"Oh, were you with the men Haley arrested?" ejaculated Bonbright.

"Yes, they're my cousins. I don't know what he tuck 'em for," the young, high-couraged head turned jailward; the dark eyes flashed a resentful look after the retiring posse.

"It looks like to me, from what Haley said, that there's nothing against them," Bonbright reassured her. "But they're likely to be held as witnesses—that's the worst about this business.

"I was going over there right now to see what can be done about it—being a sort of lawyer. But let me help you first. I'm Creed Bonbright—reckon you know the name—born and raised on Big Turkey Track."

Judith's heart beat to suffocation, the while she answered in commonplace phrase, "I shorely do. My name is Judith Barrier; I live with Uncle Jephthah Turrentine, on my farm. Hit's right next to the old Bonbright place. We've been livin' thar more'n four years. I hate to go back and tell Uncle Jep of the boys bein' tuck; and that big mule, Pete, I don't know how I'm a-goin' to git him out o' the settlement, he's that mean and feisty about town streets."

"I reckon I can manage him," Bonbright suggested, looking about. "Oh, Givens!" he called to a man hurrying past. "When you get over there ask Haley not to take any definite action—I reckon

he wouldn't anyhow. I'm going to represent the prisoners, and I'll be there inside of half an hour. Now let me put you on your horse, Miss Judith, and I'll lead the mules up the road a piece for you."

And so it came about that Judith sprang to the back of the sorrel nag from Creed Bonbright's hand. Creed, still bareheaded, and wholly unconscious of the fact, walked beside her leading the mules. They passed slowly up the street towards the mountainward edge of Hepzibah, talking as they went in the soft, low, desultory fashion of their people.

The noises of the village, aroused from its usual dozing calm, died away behind them. Beyond the last cabin they entered a sylvan world all their own. While he talked, questioning and replying gravely and at leisure, the man was revolving in his mind just what action would be best for the prisoners whose cause he had espoused. As for Judith, she had forgotten that such persons existed, that such trivial mischance as their arrest had just been; she was concerned wholly with the immediate necessity to charm, to subjugate the man.



"Creed walked beside her leading the mules."

A rustic belle and beauty, used to success in such enterprises, in the limited time at her command she brought out for Creed's subduing her little store of primitive arts. She would know, Pete suggesting the topic, if he didn't despise a mule, adding encouragingly that she did. The ash, it seemed, was the tree of her preference; didn't he think it mighty sightly now when it was just coming into bloom? His favourite season of the year, his favoured colour, of such points she made inquiry, giving him, in an elusive feminine fashion, ample opportunity to relate himself to her. And always he answered. When all was spoken, and at the first sharp rise she drew rein for the inevitable separation, she could not have said that she had failed; but she knew that she had not succeeded.

"Ye can jest turn Pete a-loose now," she told him gently. "He'll foller from here on."

Bonbright, on his part, was not quite aware why he paused here, yet it seemed cold and unfriendly to say good-bye at once, Again he assured her that he would go immediately to the jail and find what could be done for her cousins. There was no more to be said now—yet they lingered.

It was a blowy, showery March day, its lips puckered for weeping or laughter at any moment, the air full of the dainty pungencies of new life. Winged ants, enjoying their little hour of glory, swarmed from their holes and turned stone or stump to a flickering, moving grey. About them where they stood was the awakening world of nature. Great, pale blue bird-foot violets were blooming on favoured slopes, and in protected hollows patches of eyebright made fairy forests on the moss, while under tatters of dead leaves by the brookside arbutus blushed. Above their heads the tracery of branches was a lace-work overlaid with fanlike budding green leaves, except where the maples showed scarlet tassels, or the Judas tree flaunted its bold, lying, purple-pink promise of fruitage never to be fulfilled.

Could two young creatures be wiser than nature's self? It was the new time; all the gauzy-winged ephemerae in the moist March woods were throbbing with it, buzzing or flashing about seeking mates and nectar. The earth had wakened from her winter sleep and set her face toward her ancient, ardent lover, the sun. In the soul of Judith Barrier—Judith the nature woman—all this surged strongly. As for the man, he had sent forth his spirit in so general a fashion, he

conceived himself to have a mission so impersonal, that he scarce remembered what should or should not please or attract Creed Bonbright.

Judith dreaded lest he make his farewells before she had from him some earnest of a future meeting. He could not say good-bye and let her leave him so! It seemed to her that if he did she should die before she reached the mountain-top. Dark, rich, earth-born, earth-fast, material, she looked down at Creed where he stood beside her, his hand on the sorrel's neck, his calm blue eyes raised to hers. Her gaze lingered on the fair hair flying in the March breeze, above a face selfless as that of some young prophet. Her eager, undisciplined nature found here what it craved. Coquetry had not availed her; it had fallen off him unrecognised—this man who answered it absently, and thought his own thoughts. And with the divine pertinacity of life itself she delved in the ancient wisdom of her sex for a lure to make him rise and follow her. It was not bright eyes nor red lips that could move or please him? But she had seen him moved, aroused. The hint was plain. Instantly abandoning her personal siege, she espoused the cause of her bodiless rival.

"I—I heard you a-speakin' back there," she said with a little catch in her breath.

Bonbright's eyes returned from the far distances to which they had travelled after giving her—Judith Barrier, so worthy of a blue-eyed youth's respectful attention—a passing glance. She replied to his gaze with one full of a meaning to him at that time indecipherable; nevertheless it was an ardent, compelling look which he must needs answer with some confession of himself.

"You wouldn't understand what I was trying to tell about," he began gently. "Since I've been living in the valley, where folks get rich and see a heap of what they call pleasure, I've had many a hard thought about the lives of our people up yonder in the mountains. I want to go back to my people with—I want to tell them—"

The girl leaned forward in her saddle, burning eyes fixed on his intent face, red lips apart.

"Yes—what?" she breathed. "What is it you want to say to the folks back home? You ort to come and say it. We need it bad."

"Do you think so?" asked Bonbright doubtfully. "Do you reckon they would listen to me? I don't know. Sometimes I allow maybe I'd better stay here where the Judge wants me to till I'm an older man and more experienced."

He studied the beautiful, down-bent face greedily now, but it was not the eye of a man looking at a maid. His thoughts were with the work he hoped to do. Judith's heart contracted with fear, and then set off beating heavily. Wait till he was an old man? Would love wait? Somebody else would claim him—some town girl would find the way to charm him. In sheer terror she put down her hand and laid it upon his.

"Don't you never think it," she protested. "You're needed right now. After a while will be too late. Why, I come a-past your old home in the rain last Wednesday, and I could 'a' cried to see the winders dark, and the grass all grown up to the front door. You come back whar you belong —" she had almost said "honey"—"and you'll find there is need a-plenty for folks like you."

"Well, they all allow that I'll be elected next Thursday," Creed assented, busying himself over the lengthening of Beck's bridle, that she might lead the mule the more handily. "And if I am I'll be in the Turkey Tracks along in April and find me a place to set up an office. If I'm elected—"

"Elected! An' ef yo'r not?" she cried, filled with scorn of such a paltry condition. What difference could it make whether or not he were elected? Wouldn't his hair be just as yellow, his eyes as blue? Would his voice be any less the call to love?

He smiled at her tolerantly, handing up the lengthened strap.

"Well, I don't just rightly know what I will do, then," he debated.

"But you're a-comin' up to the Turkey Tracks anyhow, to—to see yo' folks," persisted Judith with a rising triumph in her tone.

"Yes," acquiesced Bonbright, "I'll come up in April anyhow."

And with this assurance the girl rode slowly away, leading Beck, the now resigned Pete following behind. All the sounds from the valley were gathered as in a vast bowl and flung upward, refined by distance. A moment she halted listening, then breasted the first rise and entered that deep silence which waits the mountain dweller. The great forest closed about her.

Creed Bonbright stood for a moment in the open road looking after her. Something she had conveyed to him, some call sent forth, which had not quite reached the ear of his spirit, and yet which troubled his calm. He lifted his gaze toward the bulk of the big mountain looming above him. He passed his hand absently through his fair hair, then tossed his head back with a characteristic motion. It was good to know he was needed up there. It was good to know he would be welcomed. So far the girl had made her point. After this the mountains and Judith Barrier would mean one thing in the young man's mind. As the shortest way to them both, he turned and walked swiftly down toward the settlement and to the undertaking which there awaited him.

Chapter II

At "The Edge"

The girl on the sorrel nag and the two riderless animals toiled patiently up the broad, timbered flank of Big Turkey Track, following the raw red gash in the greenery that was the road.

She gazed with wondering eyes at the familiar landmarks of the trail. All was just as it had been when she rode down it at dawn that morning, Andy and Jeff ahead on their mules whistling, singing, skylarking like two playful bear cubs. It was herself that was changed. She pushed the cheap hat off her hot forehead and tried to win to some coherence of thought and—so far had she already come on a new, strange path—looked back with wondering uncomprehension, as upon the beliefs and preferences of a crude primitive ancestress, to the girl who had cared that this hat cost a dollar and a half instead of a dollar and a quarter—only a few hours since when she bought it at the store. She went over the bits of talk that had been between her and Creed Bonbright. What had he said his favourite colour was? Memory brought back his rapt young face when she put the question to him. She trembled with delight at the recollection. His eyes were fixed upon the sky, and he had answered her absently, "blue."

Blue! What a fool—what a common thickheaded fool she had been all her days! She let the sorrel take his own gait, hooked his bridle-rein and Beck's upon the saddle-horn, and lifting her arms withdrew the hatpins and took off the unworthy headgear. For a moment she regarded savagely the cheap red ribbon which had appeared so beautiful to her; then with strong brown fingers tore it loose and flung it in the dust of the road, where Pete shied at it, and the stolid Beck coming on with flapping ears set hoof upon it.

What vast world forces move with our movements, pluck us uncomprehending from the station we had struggled for, and make our sorrowful meat of our attained desires! The stars in their courses pivot and swing on these subtle attractions, ancient as themselves. Judith Barrier, tearing the gaudy ribbon from her hat and casting it upon the road under her horse's feet, stood to learn what the priests of Isis knew thousands of years ago, that red is the symbol of pleasure and of mere animal comfort, while blue is the colour of pure reason.

Halfway up the trail they rode into a cloud that rested trembling on the mountain-side, passed through it and emerged upon fitful sunlight. Near the top there came a sudden shower which descended with the souse of an overturned bucket. It won small attention from Judith, but Pete and Beck resented it in mule fashion, with a laying back of ears and lashing out of heels. These amenities were exchanged for the most part across the intervening sorrel nag and his rider, and Selim replied promptly and in kind, almost unseating Judith.

"You Selim!" she cried jerking the rein. "You feisty Pete! You no-account Beck! What ails you—Cain't you behave?" and once more she lapsed into dreaming. It was Selim who, wise and old, stopped at Aunt Nancy Card's gate and gave Judith an opportunity to descend if such were her preference.

On the porch of the cabin sat a tall, lean, black-eyed old man smoking his pipe, Jephthah Turrentine himself. Nancy Card, a dry, brown little sparrow of a woman, occupied a chair opposite him, and negotiated a pipe quite as elderly and evil-smelling as his own.

The kerchief folded about her neck was notably white; her clean check-apron rustled with starch; but the half-grey hair crinkling rebelliously from its loose coil was never confined by anything more rigorous than a tucking comb. In moments of stress this always slipped down, and had to be vigorously replaced, so that stray strands were apt to be tossing about her eyes—fearless, direct blue eyes, that looked out of her square, wrinkled, weather-beaten little face with the sincere gaze of an urchin. Back of her chair lay a bundle of white-oak splits for use in her by-trade of basket-weaver; above them hung bundles of drying herbs, for Nancy was a sick-nurse and a bit of an herb-doctor. She had made a hard and a more or less losing fight against poverty—the men folk of these hardy, valiant little women seem predestined to be shiftless.

It came back to Judith dimly as she looked at them—she was in a mood to remember such things—that her uncle had courted Nancy Card when these two were young people, that they had quarrelled, both had married, reared families, and been widowed; and they were quarrelling still! Acrimonious debate with Nancy was evidently such sweet pain that old Jephthah sought every opportunity for it, and the sudden shower in the vicinity of her cabin had offered him an excuse to-day.

Nancy did not confine her practice to what she would have called humans, but doctored a horse or a cow with equal success. One cold spring a little chicken had its feet frozen in the wet barnyard so badly that it lost one of them, and Nancy, who had taken the poor mite into the house and nursed it till she loved it, constructed for it a wooden leg consisting of a small, light peg strapped to the stump. And thereafter Nicodemus, a rooster who must now belie the name since he could not cling to a perch with his single foot, became an institution in the Card household.

Jephthah Turrentine was a natural bone-setter, and was sent for far and near to reduce a dislocation or bandage a broken limb. In the pursuit of this which came to be almost a profession, he acquired a good knowledge of tending upon the sick, and the bitterness of rival practitioners was added to the score between him and Nancy. The case of Nicodemus furnished

the man with a chance to call the woman a chicken doctor, and the name appealing to the humorous side of mountain character stuck to her, greatly to her disgust.

Aunt Nancy's dooryard was famous for its flowers, being a riot of pied bloom from March till December. Even now fire-in-the-bush and bridal wreath made gay the borders.

"Good land, Jude Barrier!" called Nancy herself. "You're as wet as a drowned rat. 'Light and come in."

Old Turrentine permitted his niece to clamber from Selim, and secure him and both mules.

"Whar's the boys?" he inquired in a great, sonorous bass, the deep, true-pitched voice promised by the contours of strong bony arches under heavy brows and the strong nose-bridge.

"In jail," responded Judith laconically, turning to enter the gate. Then, as she walked up the hard-trodden clay path between the tossing, dripping heads of daffodils, "Uncle Jep, did you know Creed Bonbright's daddy?"

"In jail!" echoed Nancy Card, making a pretence of trying to suppress a titter, and thereby rendering it more offensive. "Ain't they beginnin' ruther young?"

Tall old Jephthah got to his feet, knocked the ashes from his pipe and put it in his pocket.

"Who tuck 'em?" he inquired briefly, but with a fierce undernote in his tones. "What was they tuck fer?"

"I never noticed," said Judith, standing on the step before them, wringing the wet from her black calico riding skirt. "Nobody named it to me what they was tuck fer. I was talkin' to Creed Bonbright, and he 'lowed to find out. He said that was his business."

"Creed Bonbright," echoed her uncle; "what's he got to do with it? He's been livin' down in Hepzibah studyin' to be a lawyer—did he have Jeff and Andy jailed?"

Judith shook her head. "He didn't have nothing to do with it," she answered. "He 'lowed they would be held for witnesses against some men Haley had arrested. But he's goin' to come back and live on Turkey Track," she added, as though that were the only thing of importance in the world. "He says we-all need law in the mountings, and he's a-goin' to bring it to us."

"Well, he'd better let my boys alone if he don't want trouble," growled old Jephthah but half appeased.

"I reckon a little touch of law now an' agin won't hurt yo' boys," put in Nancy Card smoothly. "My chaps always tuck to law like a duck to water. I reckon I ain't got the right sympathy fer them that has lawless young 'uns."

"Yo' Pony was arrested afore Andy and Jeff," Judith remarked suddenly, without any apparent malice. "He was the first one I seen comin' down the road, and Dan Haley behind him a-shootin' at him."

Jephthah Turrentine forebore to laugh. But he deliberately drew out his old pipe again, filled it and stepped inside for a coal with which to light it.

"Mebbe yo' sympathies will be more tenderer for me in my afflictions of lawless sons after this, Nancy," he called derisively over his shoulder.

"Hit's bound to be a mistake 'bout Pony," declared the little old woman in a bewildered tone. "Pone ain't but risin' sixteen, and he's the peacefulest child—"

"Jest what I would have said about my twin lambs," interrupted old Jephthah with twinkling eye, as he appeared in the doorway drawing mightily upon the newly lighted pipe, tossing his great beard from side to side of his mighty chest. "My chaps is all as peaceful as kittens; but some old woman gits to talkin' and gives 'em a bad name, and it goes from lip to lip that the Turrentine boys is lawless. Hit's a sad thing when a woman's tongue is too long and limber, and hung in the middle so it works at both ends; the reppytations hit can destroy is a sight."

"But a body's own child—they' son! They' bound to stan' up for him, whether he's in the right or the wrong," maintained Nancy stoutly.

"Huh," grunted Jephthah, "offspring is cur'ous. Sometimes hit 'pears like you air kin to them, and they ain't kin to you. That Pony boy of your'n is son to a full mealsack; he's plumb filial and devoted thataway to a dollar, if so be he thinks you've got one in yo' pocket. The facts in the business air, Nancy, that you've done sp'iled him tell he's plumb rotten, and a few of the jailings that you so kindly ricommend for my pair won't do him no harm."

Nancy tossed up her head to reply; but at the moment a small boy, followed by a smaller girl, coming around the corner of the house, created a diversion. The girl, a little dancing imp with a frazzle of flying red hair and red-brown eyes, catching sight of Judith ran to her and flung herself head foremost in the visitor's lap, where Judith cooed over her and cuddled her, rumpling the bright hair, rubbing her crimson cheek against the child's peachy bloom.

"Little Buck and Beezy," said Nancy Card, addressing them both, "Yo' unc' Pony's in jail. What you-all goin' to do about it?"

The small brown man of six stopped, his feet planted wide on the sward, his freckled face grave and stern as became his sex.

"Ef the boys goes down for to git him out, I'm goin' along," Little Buck announced seriously. "Is they goin', granny?"

"I'll set my old rooster on the jail man, an' hit'll claw 'im," announced Beezy, reckless of distance and likelihood. "My old rooster can claw dest awful, ef he ain't got but one leg."

Nancy chuckled. These grandchildren were the delight of her heart.

The rain had ceased for the moment; the old man moved to the porch edge, sighting at the sky.

"I don't know whar Blatch is a-keepin' hisself," he observed. "Mebbe I better be a-steppin'."

But even as he spoke a tall young mountaineer swung into view down the road, dripping from the recent rain, and with that resentful air the best of us get from aggressions of the weather. Blatchley Turrentine, old Jephthah's nephew, was as brown as an Indian, and his narrow, glinting, steel-grey eyes looked out oddly cold and alien from under level black brows, and a fell of stiff black hair.

When the orphaned Judith, living in her Uncle Jephthah's family, was fourteen, the household had removed from the old Turrentine place—which was rented to Blatchley Turrentine—to her better farm, whose tenant had proved unsatisfactory. Well hidden in a gulch on the Turrentine acres there was an illicit still, what the mountain people call a blockade still; and it had been in pretty constant operation in earlier years. When Jephthah abandoned those stony fields for Judith's more productive acres, he definitely turned his own back upon this feature, but Blatch Turrentine revived the illegal activities and enlisted the old man's boys in them. Jeff and Andy had a tobacco patch in one corner where the ground suited, and in another field Jim Cal raised a little corn. Aside from these small ventures, the place was given over entirely to the secret still. The father held scornfully aloof; his attitude was characteristic.

"Ef I pay no tax I'll make no whiskey," he declared. "You-all boys will find yourselves behind bars many a time when you'd ruther be out squirrel-huntin'. Ef you make blockade whiskey every fool that gits mad at you has got a stick to hold over you. You are good-Lord-good-devil to everybody, for fear they'll lead to yo' still; or else you mix up with folks about the business and kill somebody an' git a bad name. These here blockaded stills calls every worthless feller in the district; most o' the foolishness in this country goes on around 'em when the boys gits filled up. I let every man choose his callin', but I don't choose to be no moonshiner, and ef you boys is wise you'll say the same."

As Blatchley came up now and caught sight of the animals tethered at the fence he began irritably:

"What in the name of common sense did Andy and Jeff leave they' mules here for? I can't haul any corn till I get the team and the waggon together."

"Looks like you've hauled too many loads of corn that nobody knows the use of," broke out the irrepressible Nancy. "Andy and Jeff's in jail, and some fool has tuck my little Pone along with the others."

Blatch flung a swift look at his uncle; but whatever his private conviction, to dishonour a member of his tribe in the face of the enemy, on the heels of defeat, was not what Jephthah Turrentine would do.

"The boys is likely held for witnesses, Jude allows," the elder explained briefly. "You take one mule and I'll ride 'tother," he added. "I'll he'p ye with the corn."

This was a great concession, and as such Blatchley accepted it.

"All right," he returned. "Much obliged."

Then he glanced unconcernedly at Judith, and, instead of making that haste toward the corn-hauling activities which his manner had suggested, moved loungingly up the steps. Beezy, from her sanctuary in Judith's lap, viewed him with contemptuous disfavour. Her brother, not so safely situated, made to pass the intruder, going wide like a shying colt.

With a sudden movement Blatchley caught the child by the shoulders. There was a pantherlike quickness in the pounce that was somehow daunting from an individual of this man's size and impassivity.

"Hold on thar, young feller," the newcomer remarked. "Whar you a-goin' to, all in sech haste?"

"You turn me a-loose," panted the child. "I'm a-goin' over to my Jude."

"Oh, she's yo' Jude, is she? Well they's some other folks around here thinks she's their Jude—what you goin' to do about it?"

All this time he held the small, dignified atom of humanity in a merciless grip that made Little Buck ridiculous before his beloved, and fired his childish soul to a very ecstasy of helpless rage.

"I'll—kill—you when I git to be a man!" the child gasped, between tears and terror. "I'll thest kill you—and I'll wed Jude. You turn me a-loose—that's what you do."

Blatch laughed tauntingly and raised the little fellow high in air.

"Ef I was to turn you a-loose now hit'd bust ye," he drawled.

"I don't keer. I—"

Around the corner of the cabin drifted Nicodemus, the wooden-legged rooster, stumping gravely with his dot-and-carry-one gait.

"Lord, Nancy, thar comes the one patient ye ever cured!" chuckled old Jephthah. "I don't wonder yo're proud enough of him to roof him and affectionate him for the balance of his life."

"I reckon you'd do the same, ef so be ye should ever cure one," snapped Nancy, rising instantly to the bait, and turning her back on the others. "As 't is, ef they hilt the buryin' from the house of the feller that killed the patient I reckon Jude wouldn't have nothin' to do but git up funeral dinners."

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Little Buck, despairing of granny's interference, began to cry. At the sound Judith came suddenly out of a revery to spring up and catch him away from the hateful restraining hands.

"I don't know what the Lord's a-thinkin' about to let sech men as you live, Blatch Turrentine!" she said almost mechanically. "Ef I was a-tendin' to matters I'd 'a' had you dead long ago. Ef you're good for anything on this earth I don't know what it is."

"Oh, yes you do," Blatchley returned as the old man started down the steps. "I'd make the best husband for you of any feller in the two Turkey Tracks—and you'll find it out one of these days."

The girl answered only with a contemptuous glance.

"Come again—when you ain't got so long to stay," Nancy sped them sourly. "Jude, you'd better set awhile and get your skirts dry." She looked after Blatch as he moved up the road, then at little Buck, so ashamed of his trembling lip. Her face darkened angrily. She turned slowly to Judith.

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"What you gwine to do with that feller, Jude?" she queried significantly.

"Do? Why, nothin'. He ain't nothin' to me," responded the girl indifferently.

"He ain't, hey? Well, he's bound to marry ye, honey," said the older woman.

"Huh, he ain't the first—and won't be the last, I reckon," assented Judith easily.

"Ye'd better watch out fer that man, Jude," persisted Nancy, after a moment's silence. "He'll git ye, yet. I know his kind. He ain't a-keerin' fer yo' ruthers—whether you want him or no. He jest aims to have *you*."

"Well, I reckon he'll about have to aim over agin," observed the unmoved Judith.

"An' Elder Drane? Air ye gwine to take him?—I know he's done axed ye," pursued Nancy hesitantly.

"'Bout 'leven times," agreed Judith with perfect seriousness. "No—I wouldn't have the man, not ef he's made of pure gold." She added with a sudden little smile and a catch of the breath: "Them's awful nice chaps o' his; I'd most take him to git them. The baby now—hit's the sweetest thing!" And she tumbled Beezy tumultuously in her lap, then suddenly inquired, apparently without any volition of her own, "Aunt Nancy, did you know Creed Bonbright's folks?"

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"Good Lord, yes!" returned old Nancy. "But come on inside and set, Jude. This sun ain't a-goin' to dry yo' skirt. Come in to the fire. Don't take that thar cheer, the behime legs is broke, an' it's apt to lay you sprawling. I've knowed Creed Bonbright sence he wasn't knee-high to a turkey, and I knowed his daddy afore him, and his grand-daddy, for the matter of that."

Avoiding the treacherous piece of furniture against which she had been warned, Judith slipped out of her wet riding-skirt and arranged it in front of the fire to dry, turning then and seating herself on the broad hearth at Nancy's knee, where she prompted feverishly,

"And is all the Bonbrights moved out of the neighbourhood?"

The old woman drew a few meditative whiffs on her pipe.

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"All gone," she nodded; "some of 'em killed up in the big feud, and some moved away—mostly to Texas." Presently she added:

"That there Bonbright tribe is a curious nation of folks. They're always after great things, and barkin' their shins against rocks in the way. Creed's mammy—she was Judge Gillenwaters's sister, down in Hepzibah—died when he was no bigger'n Little Buck, and his pappy never wedded again. We used to name him and Creed Big 'Fraid and Little 'Fraid; they was always round together, like a man and his shadder. Then the feuds broke out mighty bad, and the Blackshearses got Esher Bonbright one night in a mistake for some of my kin—or so it was thort. Anyhow, the man was dead, and Creed lived with me fer a spell till his uncle down in Hepzibah wanted him to come and learn to be a lawyer."

"Lived right here—in this house?" inquired Judith, looking around her, as she rose and turned the riding-skirt.

"Lord, yes—why not? You would a-knowed all about it, only your folks never moved in from the Fur Cove neighbourhood till the year Creed went down to the settlement."

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The girl sank back on the hearth, but continued to gaze about her, and the tell-tale expression in her eyes seemed to afford Nancy Card much quiet amusement.

"Do you reckon he'll live with you again when he comes back into the mountains?" she inquired finally.

"I reckon he'll be weddin' one of them thar town gals and fetchin' a wife home to his own farm over by yo' house," suggested the inveterate tease.

Judith went suddenly white, and then red. "You don't know of anybody—you hain't heard he was promised, have you?" she hesitated.

"I ain't hearn that he was, and I ain't hearn that he wasn't," returned Nancy serenely. "The gal that gits Creed Bonbright'll be doin' mighty well; but also she may not find hit right easy for to

trap him. I'll promise ef he does come up hyer again I'll speak a good word for you, Jude. The Lord knows I don't see how you make out to live with that thar old man. You'll deserve a crown and a harp o' gold sot with diamonds ef you stan' it much longer."

Judith put on the now thoroughly dried riding-skirt, and the two women went outside together.

"Well, good-bye, Aunt Nancy," she said, as she led the sorrel nag to the edge of the porch and made ready to mount. "I'll be over and bring the pieces for you to start me out on that Risin' Sun quilt a-Wednesday."

It was late afternoon as she took her homeward way across the level of the broad mountain-top to the Turrentine place. She left the main-travelled road and struck directly into a forest short-cut. After the rain earth and sky were newly washed; the clear, sweetened air was full of the scent of damp loam and new-ploughed fields; the colours about her were freshened and glad, and each distant bird-note rang clear and vivid. To Mrs. Rhody Staggart and her likes at Hepzibah she might be a crude, awkward country girl; here she was a princess in her own domain; and it was a noble realm through which she moved as she went forward under the great trees that rose straight and tall from a black soil, making pillared aisles away from her on every side. The fern was thick under foot—it would brush her saddle-girth, come midsummer. Down the long vistas under the greening trees, where the moist air hung thick, her bemused eyes caught the occasional roseflash of azalea through the pearly mist, her nostril was greeted by their wandering, intensely sweet perfume, with its curious undernote of earth smell.

She smiled vaguely at the first butterfly she had seen, and again as she noted the earliest lizard basking in the sun-warmed hollow of a big rock. Absently her gaze sought for cinnamon fern in low woods, sweet fern in the thickets, and exquisite maidenhair just beginning to uncurl from the black leaf mould of dripping brakes.

Like a woman in a dream she made her progress, riding through the wonderful stillness of the vast wild land, an ocean on which each littlest sound was afloat, so that each was given its true value almost like a musical tone. An awful, beautiful silence this, brooding back of every sound; nothing in such a place gives forth mere senseless noise; the ripple of frogs in marsh and spring branch fall upon the sense as sweet as bird-songs. The clamour of little falls, the solemn suggestion of wind in the pines, the sweet broken jangle of cow-bells, a catbird in a tree—a continuous yet zigzag sort of warble, silver and sibilant notes alternating,—the rare wild turkey's call along a deeply embowered creek—one by one all these came to Judith's dreaming ears, clear, perfect, individual, on the majestic sea of silence about her.

She turned Selim's head at a little intersecting trail, and rode considerably out of her way to pass the old Bonbright place and brood upon its darkened windows and grass-besieged doorstone. Some day all that would be changed. Still in her waking dream she unsaddled Selim at the log barn, and turned him loose in his open pasture. She laid off her town attire, put on her cotton working-dress, kindled afresh the fire on the broad hearthstone and got supper. Her Uncle Jephthah and Blatch Turrentine came in late, weary from their work of hauling corn to that destination which old Nancy had announced as disreputably indefinite. The second son of the family, Wade, a man of perhaps twenty-four, was with them, and had already been told of the mishap to Andy and Jeff.

Old Jephthah sat at the head of the board, his black beard falling to his lap, his finely domed brow relieved against a background of shadows. Judith needed the small brass lamp at the hearthstone, and a tallow candle rather inadequately lit the supper-table. The corners of the room were in darkness; only the cloth and dishes, the faces and hands of those about the table showed forth in sudden light or motion.

Hung on the rough walls, and glimpsed in occasional flickers only, were Judith's big maple bread-bowl, the churn-dash, spurtle, sedge-broom, and a round glass bottle for rolling piecrust; cheek by jowl with old Jephthah's bullet moulds and the pot-hooks he had forged for Judith. There were strings of dried pumpkin, too, and of shining red peppers. On a low shelf, scarce visible at all in the dense shadow, stood a keg of sorghum, and one beside it of vinegar, flanked by the butter-keeler and the salt piggin with its cedar staves and hickory hoops. And there, too, was the broken coffee-pot in which garden seeds were hoarded.

"What's all this I hear about Andy and Jeff bein' took?" inquired a plaintive voice from the darkened doorway whose door, with its heavy, home-made latch, swung back against the wall on its great, rude, wooden hinges, as abruptly out of the shadow appeared a man who set a plump hand on either jamb and stared into the room with a round, white, anxiously inquiring face. It was Jim Cal, eldest of the sons of Jephthah Turrentine, married, and living in a cabin a short distance up the slope. "Who give the information?" he asked as soon as he had peered all about the room and found no outsider present.

"Well, we hearn that *you* did, podner," jeered Blatch.

"Come in and set," invited the head of the household, with the mountaineer's unforgetting hospitality. "Draw up—draw up. Reach and take off."

"Well—I—I might," faltered the fleshy one, sidling toward the table and getting himself into a seat. Without further word his father passed the great dish of fried potatoes, then the platter of bacon. Judith brought hot coffee and corn pone for him. She did not sit down with the men, having quite enough to do to get the meal served.

Unheedingly she heard the matter discussed at the table; only when Creed Bonbright's name came up was she moved to listen and put in her word. Something in her manner of describing

the assistance Bonbright offered seemed to go against Blatch's grain.

"Got to look out for these here folks that's so free with their offers o' he'p," he grunted. "Man'll slap ye on the back and tell ye what a fine feller ye air whilst he's feelin' for your pocket-book—that's town ways."

The girl was like one hearkening for a finer voice amid all this distracting noise; she could hear neither. She made feverish haste to clear away and wash her dishes, that she might creep to her own room under the eaves. Through her open casement came up to her the sounds of the April night: a heightened chorus of little frogs in a rain-fed branch; nearer in the dooryard a half-dozen tree-toads trilling plaintively as many different minors; with these, scents of growing, sharpened and sweetened by the dark. And all night the cedar tree which stood close to the porch edge below moved in the wind of spring, and, chafing against the shingles, spoke through the miniature music in its deep, muffled legato, a soft baritone note like a man's voice—a lover's voice—calling to her beneath her window.

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It roused her from fitful slumbers to happy waking, when she lay and stared into the dark, and painted for herself on its sombre background Creed Bonbright's figure, the yellow uncovered head close to her knee as he stood and talked at the foot of the mountain trail. And the voice of the tree in the eager spring airs said to her waiting heart—whispered it softly, shouted and tossed it abroad so that all might have heard it had they been awake and known the shibboleth, murmured it in tones of tenderness that penetrated her with bliss—that Creed was coming—coming—coming to her, through the April woods.

Chapter III

Suitors

47

April was in the mountains. All the vast timbered slopes and tablelands of the Cumberlands were one golden dapple, as yet differentiated by darker greens and heavier shadows only where some group of pine or cedar stood. April in the Cumberlands is the May or early June of New England. Here March has the days of shine and shower; while to February belongs the gusty turbulence usually attributed to March. Now sounded the calls of the first whippoorwills in the dusk of evening; now the first mocking-bird sang long before day, very sweetly and softly, and again before moonrise; hours of sun he filled with bolder rejoicings, condescending in his more antic humour to mimic the hens that began to cackle around the barn. Every thicket by the water-courses blushed with azaleas; all the banks were gay with wild violets.

Throughout March's changeful emotional season, night after night in those restless vehement impassioned airs, the cedar tree talked ardently to Judith. Through April's softer nights she wakened often to listen to it. It went fondly over its first assurances. And the time of Creed Bonbright's advent was near at hand now. Thought of it made light her step as she went about her work.

48

"Don't you never marry a lazy man, Jude."

The wife of Jim Cal Turrentine halted on the doorstep, a coarse white cup containing the coffee she had come to borrow poised in her hand as she turned to harangue the girl in the kitchen.

"I ain't aimin' to wed no man. Huh, I say marry! I'm not studyin' about marryin'," promptly responded Judith in the mountain girl's unfailing formula; but she coloured high, and bent, pot-hooks in hand, to the great hearth to shift the clumsy Dutch oven that contained her bread.

"That's what gals allers says," commented Iley Turrentine discontentedly. "Huldy's forever singin' that tune. But let a good-lookin' feller come in reach and I 'low any of you will change the note. Huldy's took her foot in her hand and put out—left me with the whole wash to do, and Jim Cal in the bed declarin' he's got a misery in his back. Don't you never wed a lazy man."

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"Whar's Huldy gone?" inquired Judith, sauntering to the door and looking out on the glad beauty of the April morning with fond brooding eyes. The grotesque bow-legged pot-hooks dangled idly in her fingers.

"Over to Nancy Cyard's to git her littlest spinnin' wheel—so she *said*. I took notice that she had a need for that wheel as soon as ever she hearn tell that Creed Bonbright was up from Hepzibah stayin' at the Cyards's."

Had not Iley been so engrossed with her own grievances, the sudden heat of the look Judith turned upon her must have enlightened her.

"Huldy knowed him right well when she was waitin' on table at Miz. Huffaker's boarding-house down at Hepzibah," the woman went on. "I ain't got no use for these here fellers that's around tendin' to the whole world's business—they' own chil'en is mighty apt to go hongry. But thar, what does a gal think of that by the side o' curly hair and soft-spoken ways?"

For Judith Barrier at once all the light was gone out of the spring morning. The bird in the Rose

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of Sharon bush that she had taken for a thrush—why, the thing cawed like a crow. She could have struck her visitor. And then, with an uncertain impulse of gratitude, she was glad to be told anything about Creed, to be informed that others knew his hair was yellow and curly.

“Gone?” sounded old Jephthah’s deep tones from within, as Mrs. Jim Cal made her reluctant way back to a sick husband and a house full of work and babies. “Lord, to think of a woman havin’ the keen tongue that Iley’s got, and her husband keepin’ fat on it!”

“Uncle Jep,” inquired Judith abruptly, “did you know Creed Bonbright was at Nancy Card’s—stayin’ there, I mean?”

“No,” returned the old man, seeing in this a chance to call at the cabin, where, beneath the reception that might have been offered an interloper, even a duller wit than his might have divined a secret cordial welcome. “I reckon I better find time to step over that way an’ ax is there anything I can do to he’p ‘em out.”

“I wish ‘t you would,” assented Judith so heartily that he turned and regarded her with surprise. “An’ ef you see Huldy over yon tell her she’s needed at home. Jim Cal’s sick, and Iley can’t no-way git along without her.”

“I reckon James Calhoun Turrentine ain’t got nothin’ worse ‘n the old complaint that sends a feller fishin’ when the days gits warm,” opined Jim Cal’s father. “I named that boy after the finest man that ever walked God’s green earth—an’ then the fool had to go and git fat on me! To think of me with a *fat* son! I allers did hold that a fat woman was bad enough, but a fat man ort p’intedly to be led out an’ killed.”

“Jude, whar’s my knife,” came the call from the window in a masculine voice. “Pitch it out here, can’t you?”

Judith took the pocket-knife from the mantel, and going to the window tossed it to her cousin Wade Turrentine, who was shaping an axe helve at the chip pile.

“Do you know whar Huldy’s gone?” she inquired, setting her elbows on the sill and staring down at the young fellow accusingly.

“Nope—an’ don’t care neither,” said Wade, contentedly returning to his whittling. He was expecting to marry Huldah Spiller, Iley’s younger sister, within a few months, and the reply was thus conventional.

“Well, you’d better care,” urged Judith. “You better make her stay home and behave herself. She’s gone over to Nancy Card’s taggin’ after Creed Bonbright. I wouldn’t stand it ef I was you.”

“I ain’t standin’—I’m settin’,” retorted Wade with rather feeble wit; but the girl noted with satisfaction the quick, fierce spark of anger that leaped to life in his clear hazel eyes, the instant stiffening of his relaxed figure. Like a child playing with fire, she was ready to set alight any materials that came within reach of her reckless fingers, so only that she fancied her own ends might be served. Now she went uneasily back to the hearthstone. Her uncle, noting that she appeared engrossed in her baking, gave a surreptitious glance into the small ancient mirror standing on the high mantel, made a half-furtive exchange of coats, and prepared to depart.

Up at the crib Blatch Turrentine was loading corn, and Jim Cal came creeping across from his own cabin whence Iley had ejected him. He stood for a while, humped, hands in pockets, watching the other’s strong body spring lithely to its task. Finally he began in his plaintive, ineffectual voice.

“Blatch, I take notice that you seem to be settin’ up to Jude. Do ye think hit’s wise?”

The other grunted over a particularly heavy sack, swung it to the waggon bed, straightened himself suddenly, and faced his questioner with a look of dark anger.

“I’d like to see the feller that can git her away from me!” he growled.

“I wasn’t a-meanin’ that,” said Jim Cal, patiently but uneasily shifting from the right foot to the left. “I’ll admit—an’ I reckon everybody on the place will say the same—that she’s always give you mo’ reason than another to believe she’d have ye. Not but what that’s Jude’s way, an’ she’s hilt out sech hopes to a-many. What pesters me is how you two would make out, once you was wed. Jude’s mighty pretty, but then again she’s got a tongue.”

“Her farm hain’t,” chuckled Blatch, pulling a sack into place; “and I ‘low Jude wouldn’t have after her and me had been wed a short while.”

“I don’t know, Blatch,” maintained the fleshy one, timid yet persisting. “You’re a great somebody for havin’ yo’ own way, an’ Jude’s mighty high sperrity—why, you two would shorely fuss.”

“Not more than once, we wouldn’t,” returned Blatch with a meaning laugh. “The way to do with a woman like Jude is to give her a civil beatin’ to start out with and show her who’s boss—wouldn’t be no trouble after that. Jude Barrier has got a good farm. She’s the best worker of any gal that I know, and I aim for to have her—an’ this farm.”

Within the house now Judith, her cheeks glowing crimson as she bent above the heaped coals, was going with waxing resentment over the catalogue of Huldah Spiller’s personal characteristics. Her hair, huh! she was mighty particular to call it “aurbu’n,” but a body might as well say red when they were namin’ it, because red was what it was. If a man admired a turkey egg he would be likely to see beauty in Huldah’s complexion—some folks might wear a sunbonnet to bed, and freckle they would! A vision of the laughing black eyes and white flashing

teeth that went with Huldah Spiller's red ringlets and freckles, and made her little hatchet face brilliant when she smiled or laughed, suddenly put Judith on foot and running to the door.

"Uncle Jep," she called after the tall receding form, "*Oh*, Uncle Jep!"

He turned muttering, "I hope to goodness Jude ain't goin' to git the hollerin' habit. There's Iley never lets Jim Cal git away from the house without hollerin' after him as much as three times, and the thing he'd like least to have knowed abroad is the thing she takes up with for the last holler."

"Uncle Jep," came the clear hail from the doorway, "don't you fail to find Huldy and send her straight home. Tell her Iley's nigh about give out, and Jim Cal's down sick in the bed—hear me?"

He nodded and turned disgustedly. What earthly difference did it make about Jim Cal and Huldah and Iley? Why should Judith suddenly care? And then, being a philosopher and in his own manner an amateur of life, he set to work to analyze her motives, and guessed obliquely at them.

The sight of his broad, retreating back evidently spurred Judith to fresh effort. "Uncle Jep!" she screamed, cupping her hands about her red lips to make the sound carry. "Ef you see Creed Bonbright tell him—howdy—for me!"

The sound may not have carried to the old man's ears, but it reached a younger pair. Blatch Turrentine was just crossing through the grassy yard toward the "big road," and Broyles's mill over on Clear Fork, where his load of corn would be ground to meal with which to feed that blockaded still on the old Turrentine place which sometimes flung a delicate trail of smoke out over the flank of the slope across the gulch. As he heard Judith's bantering cry, Blatch pulled up his team with a muttered curse. He looked down at her through narrowed eyes, jerking his mules savagely and swearing at them in an undertone. He was a well-made fellow with a certain slouching grace about him as he sat on his load of corn; but there were evil promising bumps on either side of his jaws that spoke of obstinacy, even of ferocity; and there was something menacing in his surly passivity of attitude. He looked at the girl and his lip lifted with a peculiar sidelong sneer.

"Holler a little louder an' Bonbright hisself'll hear ye," he commented as he started up his team and rattled away down the steep, stony road.

Sunday brought its usual train of visitors. The Turrentine place was within long walking distance of Brush Arbor church, and whenever there was preaching they could count on a considerable overflow from that direction. The Sunday after Creed Bonbright put in an appearance at Nancy Card's, there was preaching at Brush Arbor, but Judith, nourishing what secret hopes may be conjectured, refused to make any preparation for attending service.

"An' ye think ye won't go to meeting this fine sunshiny Sabbath mornin', Sister Barrier?" Elder Drane put the query, standing anxious and carefully attired in his best before Judith on the doorstep of her home.

She shook her dark head, and looked past the Elder toward the distant ranges.

"I jest p'intedly cain't git away this morning," she said carelessly.

The Elder combed his sandy whiskers with a thoughtful forefinger. Not thus had Judith been wont to reply to him. Always before, if there had been denial, there were too, reasons adduced, shy looks from the corners of those dark eyes and tender inquiries as to the health of his children.

"Is they—is they some particular reason that you cain't go this morning?" the widower inquired cautiously.

There was, and that particular reason lay as far afield as the Edge and Nancy Card's place, but Judith Barrier did not see fit to name it to this one of her suitors, who had brought her perhaps more glory than any other. She was impatient to be rid of him. Like her mother Earth, having occupied her time for lo! these several years in the building of an ideal from such unpromising materials as were then at hand, she was ready to sweep those tentative makings—confessed failures now that she found the type she really wanted—swiftly, ruthlessly to the limbo of oblivion.

Elihu Drane stood high among his neighbours; he was a man of some education as well as comfortable means. His attention had been worth retaining once; now she smiled at him with a vague, impersonal sweetness, and repeated her statement that she couldn't go to church.

"I've got too much to do," she qualified finally. "Looks like the work in this house never is finished. And there's chicken and dumplin's to cook for dinner."

The Elder's pale blue eyes brightened. "Walk down to the gate with me, won't you?" he said hopefully, "I've got somethin' to talk to you about."

When they were out of earshot of the house, he began eagerly, "Sister Barrier you're workin' yourse'f to death here, in the sweet days of your youth. I did promise the last time that I never would beg you again to wed me, but looks like I can't stand by and hold my peace. If you was to trust yourse'f to me things would be different. I never did hold with a woman killin' herse'f with hard work. My first and second had everything that they could wish for, and I was good and ready to do more any time they named what it was. I've got a crank churn. None of these old back-breaking, up-and-down dashers for me. I hired a woman whenever my wife said the word. I don't think either of mine ever killed a chicken or cut a stick of firewood from the time they

walked in the front door as a bride till they was carried out of it in their coffins."

He stared eagerly into the downcast face beside him, but somewhere Judith found strength to resist even these dazzling propositions.

"I ain't studyin' about gittin' wedded," she told him most untruthfully. "Looks like I'm a mighty cold-hearted somebody, Elder Drane. I jest can't fix it no way but to live here with my Uncle Jep and take care of him in his old days. Oh, would you wait a minute?" as they reached the horse-block and the Elder began to untie his mount with a discouraged countenance. "Jest let me run back to the house—I won't keep you a second. I got some little sugar cookies for Mart and Lucy."

Mart and Lucy were the Elder's children. He stood looking after her as she ran lithely up the path, and wondered why she could love them so much and him so little. She came back laughing and a bit out of breath.

"I expect we'll have company to-day," she told him comfortably. "We always do when there's preaching at the church, and I 'low I'd better stay home and see to the dinner."

The Elder had scarcely made his chastened adieux when the Lusk girls came through the grove walking on either side of a young man.

The Lusk girls were Judith's nearest neighbours—if you excepted Huldah Spiller at Jim Cal's cabin, and at the present Judith certainly was in the mind to make an exception of her. The sisters were seldom seen apart; narrow shouldered, short waisted, thin limbed young creatures, they were even at seventeen bowing to a deprecating stoop. Their little faces were alike, short-chinned with pink mouths inclined to be tremulous, the eyes big, blue, and half-frightened in expression, and the drab hair drawn away from the small foreheads so tightly that it looked almost grey. They inevitably reminded one of a pair of blue and white night-moths, scarcely fitted for a daylight world, and continually afraid of it.

"Cousin Lacey's over from the Far Cove," called Pendrilla before they reached Judith. "Ain't it fine? Ef we-all can git up a play-party he says he'll shore come ef we let him know in time."

The young fellow with them, their cousin Lacey Rountree, showed sufficient resemblance to mark the family type, but his light eyes were lit with reckless fires, and his short chin was carried with a defiant tilt.

"What you foolin' along o' that old feller for, Judith?" he asked jerking an irreverent thumb after the departing Elder.

"I wasn't fooling with him," returned Judith, her red lips demure, her brown eyes laughing above them through their thick fringe of lashes. "Elder Drane was consulting me about church matters—sech as children like you have no call to meddle with."

Young Rountree smiled, "I'll bet he was!" picking up a stone and firing it far into the blue in sheer exuberance of youthful joy. "Did he name anything about a weddin' in church?"

"Elder Drane is a mighty fine man," asserted Judith, suddenly sober. "Any gal might be glad to git him. But its my belief and opinion that his heart is buried with his first—or his second," and she laughed out suddenly at the unintentional humorous conclusion she had made.

"See here, Jude," the boy put it boldly as the four young people strolled toward the house, "you're too pretty and sweet to be anybody's thirdly. Next time old man Drane comes pesterin' round you, you tell him that you're promised to me—hear?"

Again Judith laughed. It is impossible to talk seriously to a boy with whom one has played hat-ball and prisoner's base, whose hair one has pulled, and who has, in retort courteous, rolled one in the dust.

"I'm in earnest if I ever was in my life," asserted Lacey, taking it quite as a matter of course that Cliantha and Pendrilla should be made party to his courting.

And the two little old maids of seventeen looked with wondering admiration at Judith's management of all this masculine attention—her careless, discounting smile for their swaggering young cousin, her calm acceptance of imposing Elder Drane's humble and persistent wooing.

Chapter IV

Building

Judith awakened that morning with the song of the first thrush sounding in her ears. Day was not yet come, but she knew instantly it was near dawn, so soon as she heard the keen, cool, unmatched thrush voice. Not elaborate the song like the bobolink, nor passionate like the nightingale, nor with the bravura of the oriole; but low or loud, its pure tones are always penetrating, piercing the heart of their hearer with exquisite sweetness.

The girl lay long in the dark listening, and it seemed to her half-awakened consciousness that this voice in the April dawn was like Creed Bonbright. These notes, lucid, passionless, that yet always stirred her heart strangely, and the selfless personality, the high-purposed soul that spoke in him, they were akin. The crystal tones flowed on; Judith harkened, the ear of her spirit alert for a message. Yes, Creed was like that. And her feeling for him too, it partook of the same quality, a thing to climb toward rather than concede.

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And then after all her tremulous hopes, her plannings, the dozen times she had taken a certain frock from its peg minutely inspecting and repairing it, that it might be ready for wear on the great occasion, the first meeting with Creed found Judith unprepared, happening in no wise as she would have chosen. She was at the milking lot, clad in the usual dull blue cotton gown in which the mountain woman works. She had filled her two pails and set them on the high bench by the fence while she turned the calves into the small pasture reserved for them and let old Red and Piedy out.

He approached across the fields from the direction of his own house, and naturally saw her before she observed him. It was early morning. The sky was blue and wide and high, with great shining piles of white cloud swimming lazily at the horizon, cutting sharply against its colour. Around the edges of the cow-lot peach trees were all in blossom and humming with bees, their rich, amethystine rose flung up against the gay April sky in a challenge of beauty and joy. The air was full of the promises of spring, keen, bracing, yet with an undercurrent of languorous warmth. There was a ragged fleece of bloom, sweet and alive with droning insects, over a plum thicket near the woods,—half-wild, brambly things, cousin on the one hand to the cultivated farm, and on the other to the free forest,—while beyond, through the openings of the timber, dogwood flamed white in the sun.

66

Judith came forward and greeted the newcomer, all unaware of the picture she made, tall and straight and pliant in her simple blue cotton, under the wonderful blue-and-white sky and the passionate purple pink of the blossoms, with the scant folds of her frock outlining the rounded young body, its sleeves rolled up on her fine arms, its neck folded away from the firm column of her throat, the frolic wind ruffling the dark locks above her shadowy eyes. There were strange gleams in those dark eyes; her red lips were tremulous whether she spoke or not. It was as though she had some urgent message for him which waited always behind her silence or her speech.

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"I thought I'd come over and get acquainted with my neighbours," Bonbright began in his impersonal fashion.

"Uncle Jep and the boys has gone across to the far place ploughing to-day," said Judith. "They's nobody at home but Jim Cal and his wife—and me." She forebore to add the name of Huldah Spiller, though her angry eye descried that young woman ostentatiously hanging wash on a line back of the Jim Cal cabin.

"I won't stop then this morning," said Bonbright. "I'll get along over to the far place. I wanted to have speech with your uncle. He was at Aunt Nancy's the other day and we had some talk; he knows more about what I'm aiming at up here than I do. A man of his age and good sense can be a sight of help to me."

"Uncle Jep will be proud to do anything he can," said Judith softly. "Won't you come in and set awhile?"

She dreaded that the invitation might hurry him away, and now made hasty use of the first diversion that offered. He had broken a blooming switch from the peach-tree beneath which he stood, and she reproached him fondly.

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"Look at you. Now there won't never be no peaches where them blossoms was."

He twisted the twig in his fingers and smiled down at her, conscious of a singular and personal kindness between them, aware too, for the first time, that she was young, beautiful, and a woman; before, she had been merely an individual to him.

"My mother used to say that to me when I would break fruit blows," he said meditatively. "But father always pruned his trees when they were in blossom—they can't any of them bear a peach for every bloom."

She shook her head as though giving up the argument, since it was after all a matter of sentiment. Her dark, rich-coloured beauty glowed its contrast to his cool, northern type.

At present neither spoke more than a few syllables of the spiritual language of the other, yet so powerful was the attraction between them that even Creed began to feel it, while Judith, the primitive woman, all given over to instinct, promptly laid about her for something to hold and interest him.

"The young folks is a-goin' to get up a play-party at our house sometime soon," she hazarded. "I reckon you wouldn't come to any such as that, would you?"

69

"I'd be proud to come," returned Creed at once. But he spoiled it by adding, "I've got to get acquainted with people all over again, it's so long since I lived here; and looks like I'm not a very good mixer."

"Will you sure come?" inquired Judith insistently, as she saw him preparing to depart.

"I sure will."

"You could stay over night in your own house then—ain't you comin' back, ever, to live there?"

"Why, yes, I reckon I might stay there over night, but it's too far from the main road for a justice's office."

"Well, if you're going to try to sleep in the house, it ort to be opened up and sunned a little; you better let me have the key now," observed Judith, assuming airs of proprietorship over his inept masculinity.

Smiling, he got the key from his pocket and handed it to her. "Help yourself to anything you want for the party, or any other time," he said in mountain fashion.

She looked down at that key with the pride of one to whom had been given the freedom of a city. Its possession enabled her to bear it with a fair degree of equanimity when Huldah Spiller, having "jest slung her clothes anyway onto that line," as Judith phrased it to herself, came panting and laughing across the slope between the two houses and called a gay "Howdy!" to the visitor. The lively little red haired flirt professed greatly to desire news of certain persons in Hepzibah, and as Creed was departing sauntered unconcernedly beside him as far as the draw-bars, detaining him in conversation there as long as possible. She had an instinctive knowledge that Judith, looking on, was deeply disturbed.

Creed set his justice's office about a hundred yards from Nancy Card's cabin, on the main road that led through the two Turkey Track neighbourhoods out to Rainy Gap and the Far Cove settlement. The little shack was built of the raw yellow boards which the new saw-mill was ripping out of pine trees over on the shoulder of Big Turkey Track above Garyville. Most of the mountain dwellers still preferred log houses, and the lumber was sent down the mountain by means of a little gravity railway, whose car was warped up after each trip by a patient old mule working in a circular treadmill.

God knows with what high hopes the planks of that humble shanty were put in place, with what visions sill and window-frame were shaped and joined, Aunt Nancy going out and in at her household tasks calling good counsel over to him; Beezy, the irrepressible, adding shaving curls to her red frazzle; Little Buck, furnished with hammer and tacks, gravely assisting, pounding his fingers only part of the time. Hens were coming off. Old Nancy had a great time with notionate mothers hatching out broods under the floor or in the stable loft, and the plaintive cheep-cheep! of the "weedies" added its note to the chorus of sounds as the children followed them about, now and then catching up a ball of fluff to pet it, undeterred by indignant clucks from the parent.

As Creed whistled over his work, he saw a shadowy train coming down the road, the people whom he should help, his people, to whose darkness he should bring light and counsel. They knew so little, and needed so much. True, his own knowledge was not great; but it was all freely at their service. His heart swelled with good-will as he prepared to open his modest campaign of usefulness.

To come into leadership naturally a man should be the logical outgrowth of his class and time, and this Creed knew he was not. Yet he had pondered the matter deeply, and put it thus to himself: The peasant of Europe can only rise through stages of material prosperity to a point of development at which he craves intellectual attainment, or spiritual growth. But the mountaineer is always a thinker; he has even in his poverty a hearty contempt for luxury, for material gain at the expense of personality. With his disposition to philosophy, fostered by solitude and isolation, he readily overleaps those gradations, and would step at once from obscurity to the position of a man of culture were the means at hand.

"Bonbright," remonstrated Jephthah Turrentine, in the first conversation the two held upon the subject, "Ye cain't give people what they ain't ready to take. Ef our folks wanted law and order, don't you reckon they'd make the move to get it?"

"That's it exactly, Mr. Turrentine," responded Creed quickly. "They need to be taught what to want."

"Oh, they do, do they?" inquired Jephthah with a humorous twitch of the lips. "Well, ef you're a-goin' to set up to teach, hadn't you better have a school-house, place of a jestice's office?"

"Maybe you're right. I reckon you are—exactly right," Creed assented thoughtfully. "I'd studied about that considerable. I reckon I'm a more suitable age for a schoolmaster than for a justice; and the children—but that would take a long time; and I wanted to give the help where it was worst needed."

"Oh, well, 'tain't a hangin' matter," old Jephthah smiled at the younger man's solemn earnestness. "Ef this new fangled buildin' o' yours don't get used for a jestice's office we can turn it into a school-house; we need one powerful bad."

The desultory, sardonic, deep-voiced, soft-footed, mountain carpenters who worked leisurely and fitfully with Creed were always mightily amused by the exactness of the "town feller's" ideas.

"Why lordy! Lookee hyer Creed," remonstrated Doss Provine, over a question of matching boards and battening joints, "ef you git yo' pen so almighty tight as that you won't git no fresh air. Man's bound to have ventilation. Course you can leave the do' open all the time like we-all do; but when yo're a-holdin' co't and sech-like maybe you'll want to shet the do' sometimes—and then whar'll ye git breath to breathe?"

"I reckon Creed knows his business," put in the old man who was helping Doss, "but all these here glass winders is blame foolishness to *me*. Ef ye need light, open the do'. Ef somebody

comes that you don't want in, you can shet it and put up a bar. But saw the walls full o' holes an' set in glass winders, an' any feller that's got a mind to can pick ye off with a rifle ball as easy as not whilst ye set by the fire of a evenin'."

He shook a reprehending head, hoary with the snows of years, and containing therefore, presumably, wisdom. He had learned the necessary points of life in his environment, and as always occurs, the younger generation seemed to him lavishly reckless.

It was only old Jephthah's criticisms that Creed really minded.

"Uh-huh," allowed Jephthah, settling his hands on his hips and surveying the yellow pine structure tolerantly; "mighty sightly for them that likes that kind o' thing. But I hold with a good log house, becaze it's apt to be square. These here town doin's that looks like a man with a bile on his ear never did ketch me. Ef ye hew out good oak or pine timber ye won't be willin' to cut short lengths for to make such foolishness."

Creed would often have explained to his critics that he did not expect to get into feuds and have neighbours pot-hunting him through his glass windows, that he needed the light from them to study or read, and that his little house was as square as any log hut ever constructed; but they lumped it all together and made an outsider of him—which hurt.

Word went abroad to the farthest confines of the Turkey Track neighbourhoods, carried by herders who took sheep, hogs, or cows up into the high-hung inner valleys of Yellow Old Bald, or the natural meadows of Big Turkey Track to turn them loose for the season, recited where one or two met out salting cattle, discussed by many a chip pile, where the willing axe rested on the unsplit block while the wielder heard how Creed Bonbright had done sot up a jestice's office and made peace between the Shallidays and the Bushareses.

"But you know in reason hit ain't a-goin' to hold," the old women at the hearthside would say, withdrawing their cob pipes to shake deprecating heads. "The Bushareses and Shallidays has been killin' each other up sence my gran'pap was a little boy. They tell me the Injuns mixed into that there feud. I say Creed Bonbright! Nothin' but a fool boy. He better l'arn something before he sets up to teach. He don't know what he's meddlin' with." All this with a pride in the vendetta as an ancient neighbourhood institution and monument.

The office of the new justice never became, as he had hoped it would, a lounging place for his passing neighbours. He had expected them to drop in to visit with him, when he might sow the good seed in season without appearing to seek an occasion for so doing. But they were shy of him—he saw that. They went on past the little yellow pine office, on their mules, or their sorry nags, or in shackling waggons behind oxen, to lounge at Nancy Card's gate as of old, or sit upon her porch to swap news and listen to her caustic comments on neighbourhood happenings. And only an occasional glance over the shoulder, a backward nod of the head, or jerk of the thumb, told the young justice that he was present in their recollection.

But there was one element of the community which showed no disposition to hold aloof from the newcomer. About this time, by twos and threes—never one alone—the virgins of the mountain-top sought Nancy Card for flower seed, soft soap recipes, a charm to take off warts, or to learn exactly from her at what season a body had better divide the roots of day lilies.

Old-fashioned roses begin blooming in the Cumberlands about the first of May, and when this time came round Nancy's garden was a thing to marvel at. The spring flowers were past or nearly so, and the advent of the roses marked the floral beginning of summer. In the forest the dogwood petals now let go and fell silently one by one through the shadowed green. But over Nancy's fence of weather-beaten, hand-rived palings tossed a snow of bloom so like that here they were not missed at all; and the mock orange adds to the dogwood's simple beauty the soul of an exquisite odour. Small, heavily thorned roses, yellow as the daffodils they had succeeded, blushing Baltimore Belles, Seven Sisters all over the ricketty porch—one who loved such things might well have taken a day's journey for sight of that dooryard in May.

"Well, I vow!" said the old woman one day peering through her window that gave on the road, "ef here don't come Huldly Spiller and the two Lusks. Look like to me I have a heap of gal company of late. Creed, you're a mighty learned somebody, cain't you tell me the whys of it?"

Creed, sitting at a little table deep in some books and papers before him, heard no word of his friend's teasing speech. It was Doss Provine, at the big fireplace heating a poker to burn a hole through his pulley-wheel, who turned toward his mother-in-law and grinned foolishly.

"I reckon I know the answer to that," he observed. "The boys is all a warnin' me that a widower is mo' run after than a young feller. They tell me I'll have to watch out."

"I say watch out—*you!*" cried Nancy, wheeling upon him with a comically disproportionate fury. "Jest you let me ketch you settin' up to any of the gals—you, a father with two he'pless chaps to look after, and nobody but an old woman like me, with one foot in the grave, to depend on!"

There was one girl however who, instead of multiplying her visits to the Card cabin with Creed's advent, abruptly ceased them. Judith Barrier was an uncertain quantity to her masculine household; unreasonably elated or depressed, she led them the round of her moods, and they paid for the fact that Creed Bonbright did not come across the mountain top visiting, without being at all aware of where their guilt lay. After that interview at the milking lot one thought, one emotion was with her always. Always she was waiting for the next meeting with Creed. Through the day she heard his voice or his footstep in all the little sounds of the woods, the humble noises of the farm life; and at night there was the cedar tree.

Now the cedar tree had affairs of its own. When, with the egotism of her keen, passionate, desirous youth, the girl in the little chamber under the eaves listened to its voice in April, it was talking in the soft air of the vernal night about the sap which rose in its veins, spicy, resinous, odoured with spring, carrying its wine of life into the farthest green tips, till all the little twigs were intoxicated with it, and beat and flung themselves in joy. And the tree's deep note was a song of abiding trust. There was a nest building within its heart—so well hidden in that dense thicket that it was safe from the eye of any prowler. Hope and faith and a great devotion went to the building. And the tree, rich and happy in its own life, cherished generously that other life within its protecting arms. Its song was of the mating birds, the building birds, the mother joy and father joy that made the nest ready for the speckled eggs and the birdlings that should follow.

But to the listening girl the cedar tree was a harp that the winds struck—a voice that spoke in the night of love and Creed.

Finally one morning she saddled Selim and, with something in her pocket for Little Buck and Beezy, set out for Hepzibah—reckon they's nothin' so turrible strange in a body goin' to the settlement when they' out o' both needles *an'* bakin' soda!

As she rode up Nancy herself called to her to 'light and come in, and finally went out to stand a moment and chat; but the girl smilingly shook her head.

"I got to be getting along, thank ye," she said. "I can't stop this mornin'. You-all must come and see us, Aunt Nancy."

"Why, what's Little Buck a-goin' to do, with his own true love a-tearin' past the house like this and refusin' to stop and visit?" complained Nancy, secretly applauding the girl's good sense and dignity.

"Where *is* my beau?" asked Judith. "I fetched him the first June apples off the tree."

"Judy's brought apples to her beau, and now he's went off fishin' with Doss and she's got nobody to give 'em to," old Nancy called as Creed stepped from the door of his office and started across to the cabin. "Don't you want 'em, Creed?"

The tall, fair young fellow came up laughing.

"Aunt Nancy knows I love apples," he said. "If you give me Little Buck's share I'm afraid he'll never see 'em."

Judith reached in her pocket and brought out the shiny, small red globes and put them in his outstretched hand.

"I'll bring Little Buck a play-pretty from the settlement," she said softly. "He'll keer a sight more for hit than for the apples. I wish I'd knowed you liked 'em—I'd brought you more. Why don't you come over and see us and git all you want? We've got two trees of 'em."

Chapter V

The Red Rose and the Briar

ALL through April Judith's project of a play-party languished. She had to pull steadily against the elders, for not only were the men hard at it making ready for the putting in of the year's crops, but it was gardening time as well, when even the women and children are pressed in to help at the raking up and brush piling. Wood smoke from the clearing fires haunted all the hollows. Everybody was preparing for the making of the truck patch. Down on the little groups would drop a cloud and blot out the bonfire till it became the mere glowing point at the heart of a shaken opal—for if you are wise you burn brush on a rainy day.

Old Jephthah opposed the plan for the girl's festivity on another ground. "I've got no objection to a frolic, Jude," he observed quietly, on hearing the first mention of the matter, "but I wouldn't have no play-party at this house. Hit's too handy to that cussed still of Blatch's. A passel of fool boys is mighty apt to go over thar an' fill theirselves up with corn whiskey, an' the party will just about end up in a interruption."

He said no more, and Judith made no reply. Though ordinarily she would have hesitated to go against her uncle's expressed wishes, her heart was too much set on this enterprise to allow of easy checking. She made no reply, but her campaign on behalf of the merrymaking went steadily on.

"I wonder you can have the heart to git up play-parties and the like when Andy and Jeff's a-sufferin' in the jail," Pendrilla Lusk plucked up spirit to say when the plan was first mooted to her.

Andy and Jeff, the wild young hawks, with the glamour upon them of lawless, adventurous spirits, and bold, proper lovers, equally fascinated and terrified the Lusk girls—timid, fluttering

pair—and were in their turn attracted to them by an inevitable law of nature.

"I don't see how it hurts the boys for us to have a dance," rejoined Judith with asperity. "If we was all to set and cry our eyes out, it wouldn't fetch 'em back on the mountain any quicker." Then with a teasing flash, "I'll tell 'em when they git home what you said, though."

"Now, Jude, you're real mean," pleaded Cliantha Lusk sinking to her knees beside Judith and raising thin little arms to clasp that young woman around the waist. "You ain't a-goin' to tell them fool boys any sech truck as that, air ye? Pendrilly jest said it for a sayin'. We'd love to come to yo' play-party, whenever it is. I say Andy and Jeff! Let 'em git out of the jail the way they got in."

This is the approved attitude of the mountain virgin; yet Cliantha's voice shook sadly as she uttered the independent sentiments, and Pendrilla furtively wiped her eyes in promising to attend the play-party.

All this was in April. By the time May came in, that dread of a belated frost which amounts almost to terror in the farmer of the Cumberlands was ended; the Easter cold and blackberry winter were over, and all the garden truck was planted. Everybody began whole-heartedly to enjoy the time of year. The leaves were full size, but still soft; the wind made hardly any noise among them. In the pasture lot and fence corners near the house, meadow flowers began to star the green. The frog chorus, so loud and jubilant in early spring, had subsided now except at night, when their treble was accompanied by the bass "chug-chug" of the bull-frogs. The mornings were vocal with the notes of yellow hammer, cuckoos; the cooing of doves, the squawk of the jay, and the drum of the big red-headed woodpecker sounded through the summer woods; while always in the cool of the day came the thrush's song. The early corn was in by mid April. About the first full moon of May the main crop was planted.

Early in June Judith, walking in the wood, brought home the splendid red wood lily, and a cluster too of "ratsbane," with its flowers like a little crown of white wax.

The spring restlessness was over throughout all the wild country; life no longer stirred and rustled; the leaves hung still in the long sunny noons. The air was clear, rinsed with frequent showers; the woods were silent except for birds and cow bells. The crops were laid by. The huckleberries ripened; the "sarvices" hung thick in the forest. Even the blackberries were beginning to turn and Andy and Jeff had been back at home more than a week, when Judith finally succeeded in getting her forces together and her guests promised. Many of them would have to walk four or five miles to sing and play for a few hours, tramping back at midnight to lie down and catch what sleep they could before dawn waked them to another day of toil. Thursday evening was set for the event. On Wednesday the Lusk girls coming in to discuss, found Judith with shining eyes and crimson cheeks, attacking the simple housework of the cabin.

"I wish't you'd sing while I finish my churnin'," the girl said, "I'm so flustered looks like I can't sca'cely do anything right."

The sisters clasped hands and raised their childish faces. Cliantha had a thin, high piping soprano like a small flute, and Pendrilla sang "counter" to it. They were repositories of all the old ballads of the mountains—ballads from Scotland, from Ireland, from England, and from Wales, that set the ferocities and the love-making of Elizabeth's time or earlier most quaintly amidst the localities and nomenclature of the Cumberlands.

"Sing 'Barb'ry Allen,'" commanded Judith as she swung the dasher with nervous energy.

The July sunshine filtered through the leaves of the big muscadine vine that covered and sheltered the tiny side porch. Bees boomed about the ragged tufts of clover and Bouncing Bet that fringed the side yard. The old hound at the chip pile blinked lazily and raised his head, then dropped it and slumbered again. Within, the big room was dim and cool. The high, thin, quavering voices celebrated the love and woe of cruel Barbara Allen. Judith's dark eyes grew soft and brooding; the nervous strokes of her dasher measured themselves more and more to the swing of the old tune.

"I don't see how anybody can be hardhearted thataway with a person they love," she said softly as the song descended to its doleful end.

The next morning Judith hurried her work that she might get through and go over to the Bonbright house, there to put in execution her long-cherished plan of cleaning it and making it fit for Creed's occupancy that night. Old Dilsey Rust, their tenant, came in to help at the Turrentine cabin always on occasions like this, or with the churning or washing; and penetrated with impatience the girl finally left her assistant in charge of matters and set forth through the woods and across the fields, the little key which she had carried ever since that morning in early April in her pocket like a talisman. At last it was to open her kingdom to her. Behind the bolt that it controlled lay not only the home of Creed's childhood, but supposably the home of his children. Judith's heart beat suffocatingly at the thought.

Halfway across she met Huldah Spiller coming up from the Far spring with a bucket of sulphur water which was held to be good for Jim Cal's rheumatism.

"Whar ye goin'?" asked Huldah, looking curiously at the broom over Judith's shoulder, the roll of cloths and the small gourd of soft soap she carried.

"I'm a-goin' whar I'm a-goin'," returned Judith aggressively. But the other only smiled. It did not suit her to be offended at that moment. Instead, "What are you goin' to wear to-night, Judy?" she inquired vivaciously. It was one of the advantages of waiting on table at a boarding house in

the settlement—pieced out perhaps by the possession of red hair—that Huldah had the courage to address Judith Barrier as “Judy.”

The hostess of the evening’s festivities was half in the mind to pass on without reply; then her curiosity as to Huldah’s costume got the better of her, and she compromised, with a laconic,

“My white frock—what are you?”

“Don’t you know I went down to Hepzibah after you said you was goin’ to have a play-party?” asked Huldah, tossing her head to get the red curls out of her eyes. “Well, Iley had give me fifty cents on my wages—” Huldah worked as a servant in her sister’s family, which is not uncommon in the mountains—“an’ I tuck it and bought me ten yard of five-cent lawn, the prettiest blue you ever put yo’ eyes on.”

“Blue!” A sudden shock went over Judith. She had forgotten; and here Huldah Spiller would wear a blue dress, and she—oh, the stupidity, the bat-like, doltish, blindness of it!—would be in white, because it was now too late to make a change. Out of the very tragedy of the situation she managed to pluck forth a smile.

“I was aimin’ to wear blue ribbons,” she said finally. It had just come into her head that she could pull the blue bow from her hat—that blue bow with which she had zealously replaced the despised and outcast red—and so make shift.

“Blue’s my best feller’s favourite colour,” contributed Huldah, picking up the bucket which she had set down, and starting on. “He ’lows it goes fine with aurbu’n hair.”

“Wade never said that,” muttered Judith to herself as she took her way to the Bonbright place.

But after all one could not be long out of tune with such a summer day. The spicy odour of pennyroyal bruised underfoot, came to her nostrils like incense. Even the sickly sweet of jimson blossoms by the draw-bars of the milking lot was dear and familiar, while their white trumpets whispered of childish play-days and flower-ladies she had set walking in procession under the shadow of some big green leaf. Blue—the soft stars of spider-wort opening among the rocks reminded her of the hue; blue curls and dittany tangled at the path edge; but the very air itself was beginning to wear Creed’s colour and put on that wonderful, luminous blue in which the Cumberlands of midsummer melt cerulean into a sky of lapis lazuli. Creed’s colour—Creed’s colour—her dark eyes misted as they searched the far reaches of the hills and found it everywhere.

Jephtah Turrentine used to say that if a man owned enough mountain land to set his foot on, he owned the whole of the sky above him; it was a truer word than this old mountain dweller could have known, since the mere possessor of a city lot, where other tall roofs cut the horizon high, must content himself with less of the welkin.

Judith opened the door, went in, closed it behind her, and gazed about. There lay over everything a fine dust; there was the look of decay which comes with disuse; and the air bore the musty odour of a shut and long uninhabited house. The Bonbright home had been a good one for the mountains, of hewn logs, and with four rooms, and two great stone chimneys. Inside was the furniture which Mary Gillenwaters brought to it as a bride when her mountain lover came down to Hepzibah and with the swift ardour of his tribe—this Bonbright’s fires of eloquence were all kindled upon the altar of his mating romance—charmed the daughter of its one merchant. These added to the already fairly complete plenishings, many of which had come over the mountains from Virginia when Sevier opened up the new State, gave an air of abundance, even of sober elegance to the room.

Reverently Judith moved among the dumb witnesses and servitors of Bonbright generations. Here was the spinning-wheel, here the cards, and out in the little room off the porch stood the loom. She had dreams of replacing these with a sewing machine. Nobody wove jeans any more—but a good carpet-loom now, *that* might be made useful. Unwilling to hang the bedding on bushes for fear of a chance tear from twig or thorn, she rigged a line in the back yard, and spread quilt and homespun blanket, coarse white sheets and pillowcases that were yellowing with age, out for the glad gay wind to play with, for the sunshine to sweeten.

“What a lot of feather beds!” she murmured as she tallied them over. “That there ticking is better than you can buy in the stores. My, ain’t these light and nice!”

All the warm, sunny afternoon she toiled at her self-appointed labour of love. She swept and dusted, she scrubbed and cleaned, with capable fingers, proud of the strength and skill that made her a good housewife; then bringing in the fragrant, homely fabrics, made up the beds and placed all back in due order.

“He’s boun’ to notice somebody’s been here and put things to rights,” she said over and over to herself. “If it looks sightly, and seems like home, mebbe he’ll give out the notion of stayin’ at Nancy Card’s, and come and live here.” She brooded on the bliss of the idea as she worked.

Under the great mahogany four-poster in the front room was slipped a trundle-bed that she drew out and looked at with fond eyes. No doubt Creed’s boyish head had lain there once. She wished passionately that she had known him then, all unaware that we never do know our lovers when they and we are children. Even those playfellows who are destined to be mates find, all on a day, that the familiar companion who has grown up beside each has changed into quite a different person.

She rolled the trundle-bed back into place and turned to lift a pile of bedding that lay apparently on a chest. When it was raised it revealed the clumsy old cradle that had rocked three

generations of Bonbrights. She stood looking down at it with quickening pulse, then reached a fluttering hand and touched its small pillow tenderly. Here had rested that golden head, so many years ago; beside it his mother had sat and rocked. At the thought Judith was on her knees, her hands falling naturally upon the side and rocking the small bed. In a strange conflict of dreamy emotion, she swayed it back and forth a moment, and then—what woman could resist it?—began to croon an old mountain cradle song. Suddenly the westerling sun got to the level of a half shrouded window and sent a beam in across Judith's bent head.

"My land!" she whispered, getting to her feet. "I ain't got no call to stay foolin' here all day. Dilsey'll jest about burn them cakes I told her to bake, and I ain't fixed my blue bow for my hair yet."

She swept a glance around the speckless room, gathered up her paraphernalia of cleaning, passed out, locked the door, and set her face toward home.

In Mary Bonbright's garden, now given over to weeds as the gardens of dead women are so apt to be, there had grown a singular, half wild rose. This flower was of a clear blood red, with a yellow heart which its five broad petals, flinging wide open, disclosed to view, unlike the crimped and guarded loveliness of the more evolved sisters of the green-house. Mowed down spring after spring by the scythe of Strublely, the renter, the vigorous thing had spread abroad, and as Judith stepped from the door its exultant beauty caught her eye. Flaming shields of crimson, bearing each its boss of filagree gold, the hosts of the red rose stood up bravely in the choking grass to which the insensate scythe blade had so often levelled them, and shouted to the girl of love and joy, and of youth which was the time for both. Wide petalled, burning red, their golden hearts open to sun and bee, they were the blossoms for the earth-woman. She ran and knelt down beside them.

He had said that his favourite colour was blue—but there are no blue roses. She did not follow it far enough to guess that the man who was content with the colour of the sky might not get his gaze down close enough to earth to care for roses. She bent above them gloating on their fierce, triumphant splendour. Was there ever such a colour? But the stems were dreadfully short. A sudden purpose grew in her mind. With hasty, tremulous fingers she gathered an apronful of the blossoms. Once more she unlocked the front door, hurried back to that bed which she had so lovingly spread, and on its white coverlet began arranging a great, glowing wreath, fashioned by setting a circle of red roses petal to petal.

As she worked Cliantha Lusk's ballad came into her head, and she sang it under her breath.

"And they grew and they grew to the old church top
Till they couldn't grow any higher,
And there they twined in a true lover's knot,
The red rose and the briar.'

"No—that ain't it—

"And there they twined in a true lover's knot,
For all true lovers to admire.'"

True lovers—she crooned the word over and over. It was sweet to say it. She thrilled through all her strong young body with the delight of what she was doing.

"He'll wonder who put 'em there," she whispered to herself. "Ef nothin' else don't take his eye, these here is shore to."

Chapter VI

The Play-Party

Long lanes of light crossed the grass from window and door of the Turrentine house; Judith's play-party was in full swing. They were dancing or playing in the big front room which was lit only by the rich broken shimmer and shine from a fire of pine sticks in the cavernous black chimney. Though it was early July the evening, in those altitudes, had its own chill, and the heat from this was not unpleasant, while its illumination became necessary, for all the lamps and candles available were in use out where the tables were spread.

Old Jephthah held state in his own quarters, a detached log cabin standing about thirty feet from the main structure, and once used probably to house the loom or for some such extra domestic purpose. Here too a fire smoldered on the hearthstone, for the head of the Turrentine clan was tormented by rheumatism, that plague of otherwise healthy primitive man. He lounged now on the doorstep, smoking, ready to intercept and entertain any of the older men who might come with their women folk. Occasionally somebody rode up, or came tramping down the trail or through the woods—a belated merrymaker hurrying in to ask who had arrived and who was expected.

To the father's intense disgust Jim Cal had elected to sit with the elders that night, and obstinately held his place before the hearthstone in the cabin room. Jephthah Turrentine's sons were none of them particularly satisfactory to their progenitor. A man of brains, a creature to whom an argument was ever more than the mere material thing argued about, these male offspring, who took their traits naturally after the spindle side, vexed him with resemblance to their handsome, high-tempered, brainless mother. But Jim Cal was worse than a bore to his father; the old fellow regarded a son who weighed above two hundred pounds as a disgrace. And to-night the fact that the door of his room commanded a sidelong view of the tables which were being spread, and about which Iley circled and scolded, furnished so fair a reason for James Calhoun's selection of it as an anchorage that his father was the more offended.

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"You thar, Unc' Jep?" sounded Blatchley Turrentine's careless voice from the dark.

"I make out to be," returned his uncle lazily.

Blatchley came into the circle of dim light about the door, Andy and Jeff at his shoulder. Wade followed a moment later.

"Why ain't you-all boys down thar whar the gals is at, playin'?" inquired Jim Cal fretfully. "Looks like to me ef I was a young feller an' not wedded I wouldn't hang around whar the old men was."

"Is Creed Bonbright comin' over here to-night?" inquired Andy abruptly, in obedience apparently to a nudge from Blatch.

"I reckon he is," observed the old man dispassionately. "Jude has purty well bidden the whole top of the mountain."

"Is Pone Cyard comin'?" put in Jeff. The twins usually spoke alternately, the sum of their conversation counting thus for one.

"That I can't say," returned the old man with mildly ironic emphasis. "Mebbe him and the chaps and the lame rooster—and Nancy—will come along at the tail of the procession."

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"Well," persisted Andy, breaking a somewhat lengthened silence in which all the newcomers stood, and through which their breathing could be distinctly heard, "well I think Creed Bonbright has got the impudence! He come to the jail, whar me and Jeff was at, an' he had some talk with us, an' I let him know my mind. He stood in with that marshal—I know it—and so does Jeff. Pone Cyard got out quicker becaze Bonbright tipped the marshal the wink; but I don't hold with him nor his doin's."

The parent of the twins regarded them both with sardonic black eyes half shut. "You don't? And who-all might you be, young fellers?" he asked. "This here Bonbright man has come up on Turkey Track to give us a show at law. If they's persons engaged in unlawful practices on this here mountain top, mebbe he'll knock up against 'em. Them that keeps the law and lives decent has no reason to fear the law. Ain't that what you say, Blatch?" turning suddenly to his nephew.

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The big swart mountaineer drew up his shoulders with a sort of shrug.

"Ef you stand in with Bonbright, Unc' Jep," he said, bluntly, "we might as well all go down to Hepzibah and give ourselves up. You've done rented me the land, and yo' boys is in the still with me—air ye a-goin' to stand from under, and have the marshal forever keepin' us on the jump?"

Old Jephthah looked wordless contempt at the nephew who knew little enough to impute such a course to him.

"That's what I say," put in Jim Cal's thin, querulous tones from the back of the room—the voice of a fat man in trouble; can anyone say why the sorrows of the obese are always comic to the rest of the world? "A body cain't sleep nights for thinkin' what may chance."

"Oh,—air you thar, podner?" inquired Blatch, with a sort of ferocious banter in his tone which he frequently used toward his fleshy associate. "I thort ye was down in the bed sick."

"I was," said Jim Cal sulkily; "but Iley she said—Iley 'lowed—"

Blatch burst into a great horse laugh, which the others joined.

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"I know'd in reason ye'd be down when they came any trouble at the still," he commented. "Hit always affects yo' health thataway; but I didn't know Iley had seed reason to dig ye out. What you goin' to do about Bonbright, Unc' Jep—stand in with him?"

"Well—you *air* a fool," observed the old man meditatively. "Who named standin' in with Bonbright, or standin' out agin' him? When I rented you my farm for five year I had no thought of yo' starting up that pesky ol' still on it. But I never was knowed to rue a trade. My daddy taught me when I made a bad bargain to freeze the tighter to it, and I've no mind to do other."

"They'd been a still thar," said Blatch defensively.

The old man nodded.

"Oh, yes," he agreed. "Hit had been,—I put it thar. I've made many a run of whiskey in my young days—and I've seed the folly of it. I reckon you fool boys'll have to see the folly of it too befo' yo've got yo' satisfy. As for Creed Bonbright, he 'pears to think that if we have plenty of law in the Turkey Tracks we'll all go to heaven in a hand-basket. Mebbe he's right, and then agin mebbe he's wrong; but this I know, ain't anybody goin' to jump on him in my house, and he gets a fair show when fightin' time comes."

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"Well, if he ain't standin' in with the marshal, what does he—" began Andy's high-pitched boyish

voice, when somebody called, "Good evening," in pleasant tones, and Bonbright himself got off a light-stepping mule, tethered him to the fence, and came toward the cabin.

He had just returned from a meeting of the County Court at Hepzibah, where he did good service in representing the needs of his district, fighting hard for more money for schools—the plan heretofore had been to let them have only their own pro rata of the school tax.

"It'll pay you a heap better to educate the mountain people than to hire their keep in jail," he said to his fellow justices of the valley. "The blue-backed speller is the best cure for crime in the mountains that I know of."

He failed to get this; but he succeeded in another matter, one less near his heart, but calculated to appeal perhaps more strongly to his constituents; he secured the opening of a highway for which the people in the two Turkey Tracks had struggled and prayed more than twenty years. It was with the pride of this victory strong in him that he had set out for Judith's play-party. The young fellow might have been pardoned a half wistful belief that this first success was the entering wedge and would lead swiftly to that standing with his neighbours lacking which he was helpless. Yet the sons of the house replied but gruffly to his greeting, and, as though his coming had been a signal, the younger group promptly disappeared in the direction of the main cabin.

At the old man's hearty invitation, Creed seated himself on the doorstep, while his host went in for a coal from the smouldering hearth to light his pipe, and joined the guest a moment later.

"Well sir, and how's the law coming on these days?" inquired old Jephthah somewhat humorously.

"I reckon it's doing pretty well," allowed Creed. "The law's all right, Mr. Turrentine; it's what our people need; and if there comes any failure it's bound to be in me, not in the law."

"That's right," old Jephthah commended him. "Stand up for yo' principles. Ef you go into a thing, back it. I never could get on with these here good-Lord-good-devil folks. I like to know whar a man's at—cain't hit him unless 'n you do."

"That's what I say," piped Jim Cal's reedy voice from the interior. "Is it true that you've done made up the Shalliday fuss over that thar cow, Creed? I thort a jestice of the peace was to he'p folks have fusses, place o' settlin' 'em up."

"That's what everybody seems to think," replied Creed rather dolefully. "I can't say I'm very proud of my part in the Shalliday matter. It seemed to be mighty hard on the widow; but the law was on her brother-in-law's side; so I gave my decision in favour of Bill Shalliday, and paid the woman for the cow. And now they're both mad at me."

Old Jephthah narrowed his eyes and chuckled in luxurious enjoyment of the situation.

"To be shore they air. To be shore they air," he repeated with unctiousness. "Ain't you done a favour to the both of 'em? Is they anything a man will hate you worse for than a favour? If they is I ain't met up with it yet."

"That's what I say," iterated Jim Cal. "What's the use o' tryin' to he'p folks to law and order when they don't want it, and you've got to buy 'em to behave? When you git to be a married man with chaps, like me, you'll keep yo' money in yo' breeches pocket and let other folks fix it up amongst themselves about their cows an' sech."

"I had hoped to get a chance to do something that amounted to more than settling small family fusses," Creed said in a discouraged tone. "I hoped to have the opportunity to talk to many a gathering of our folks about the desirability of good citizenship in a general way. This thing of blockaded stills keeps us forever torn up with a bad name in the valley and the settlement."

Old Jephthah stirred not a hair; Jim Cal sat just as he had; yet the two were indefinably changed the moment the words "blockaded still" were uttered.

"Do you know of any sech? Air ye aimin' to find out about em?" quavered the fat man finally, and his father looked scornfully at him, and the revelation of his terror.

"No. I don't mean it in that personal way," Creed answered impatiently. "Mr. Turrentine, I wish you'd tell me what you think about it. You've lived all your life in the mountains; you're a man of judgment—is there any way to show our people the folly as well as the crime of illicit distilling?"

Jephthah surveyed with amusement the youth who came to an old moonshiner for an opinion as to the advisability of the traffic. He liked the audacity of it. It tickled his fancy.

"Well sir," he said finally, "the gov'ment sets off thar in Washington and names a-many a thing that I shall do and that I shan't do. Howsomever, they is but one thing hit will come here and watch out to see ef I keep rules on—and that's the matter o' moonshine whiskey. Gov'ment," he repeated meditatively but with rising rancour, "what has the gov'ment ever done fer me, that I should be asked to do so much for hit? I put the case thisaway. That man raises corn and grinds it to meal and makes it into bread. I raise corn and grind hit to meal and make clean, honest whiskey. The man that makes the bread pays no tax; gov'ment says I shall pay a tax—an' I say I will not, by God!"

The big voice had risen to a good deal of feeling before old Jephthah made an end.

"Nor I wouldn't neither," bleated Jim Cal in comical antiphon.

In the light from the open doorway Creed's face looked uneasy.

"But you don't think—you wouldn't—" he began and then broke off.

Old Jephthah shook his head.

"I ain't got no blockade still," he asserted sweepingly. "I made my last run of moonshine whiskey many a year ago. I reckon two wrongs don't make a right."

Creed's dismay increased. Inexperienced boy, he had not expected to encounter such feeling in the discussion of this the one topic upon which your true mountaineer of the remote districts can never be anything but passionate, embittered, at bay.

"You name the crime of makin' wildcat whiskey," the old man's deep, accusing voice went on, after a little silence. "It ain't no crime—an' you know it—an' no gov'ment o' mortal men can make a crime out'n it. As for the foolishness of it," he dropped his chin on his breast, his black eyes looked out broodingly, his great beard rose against his lips and muffled his tones, "I reckon the foolishness of a thing is what each feller has to find out for hisself," he said. "Daddies has been tryin' since the time of Adam to let their knowin' it sarve for their sons; but ef one of 'em has made the plan work yit, I ain't heard on it. Nor the gov'ment can't neither. A man'll take his punishment for a meanness an' l'arn by it; but to be jailed for what's his right makes an outlaw of him, an' always will. Good Lord, Creed! What set you an' me off on this tune? Young feller, you ort to be down yon dancin' with the gals, instead of here talking foolishness to a old man like me."

Creed arose to his tall young height and glanced uncertainly from his host to the lighted room from which came the sounds of fiddle and stamping feet. It was a little hard for a prophet on his own mountain-top to be sent to play with the children; yet he went.

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Chapter VII

Kisses

112

With the advent of the four Turrentine boys festivities had taken on a brighter air, the game became better worth while.

"Wade, you've got to fiddle," cried Judith peremptorily. A chair was set upon a table in the corner, the rather reluctant Wade hoisted to it, and soon "Weevily Wheat," as the twitting tune comes from the country fiddler's jigging bow, was filling the room.

"I reckon I ought to have asked your ruthers before I took Wade out of the game," Judith said to Huldah Spiller as they joined hands to begin.

"Like I cared!" retorted Huldah, tossing her red head till the curls bobbed. She was wearing the new blue lawn dress, made by a real store pattern cut out of tissue paper, and was supremely conscious of looking her best.

The Lusk girls in spotted calico frocks, the dots whereof were pink on Cliantha's dress, and blue on Pendrilla's, had bridled and glanced about shamefaced when Andy and Jeff came in; they now "balanced" demurely with down dropped eyes as the game moved to the music.

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Judith had left the supper preparations with the elder women, pieced out by the assistance of old Dilsey Rust, and was most active in the games. In the white muslin, washed and ironed by her own skilful, capable fingers, with the blue bow confining the heavy chestnut braids at the nape of her neck, her dark beauty glowed richly. Now the players shifted to "Drop the Handkerchief." Judith delighted in this game because, fleeter of foot, quicker of hand and eye than the others, she continually disappointed any daring swain who thought to have a kiss from her. Her shining eyes were ever on the doorway, till Blatch Turrentine left his seat at the back of the room and elected to lounge there watching the play with the tolerant air of a man contemplating the sports of children. It apparently gave him satisfaction that Judith time after time eluded a pursuer, broke into the ring and left him to wander in search of a less alert and resolute fair.

"Cain't none of the boys kiss yo' gal," panted Huldah Spiller, pausing beside him. "I doubt mightily ef ye could do it yo'self 'less'n she had a mind to let ye'."

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Judith heard, and the carmine on her cheek deepened and spread, while the dark eyes above gleamed angrily.

"Come on and play, Blatch," called Wade, jigging away valiantly at his fiddle. "We all know who it is you want to kiss—most of us is bettin' that you're scared to try."

"Play!" echoed Blatchley in a contemptuous tone. "I say play! When I want to buss a gal, I walk up and take my ruthers—like this."

Again that daunting panther quickness of movement from the big slouching figure; the powerful lines seemed to melt and flow as he flung himself in Judith's direction, and cast one arm firmly about her in such a way that it pinioned both her elbows to her side.

"You turn me a-loose!" she cried, even as Little Buck had cried. "That ain't fair. I wasn't ready for ye, 'caze ye said ye wouldn't play. You turn me a-loose or ye'll wish ye had."

"No fair—no fair!" came the cries from the boys in the ring. "Either you stay out or come in. Jude's right."

"Well, some of ye put me out," suggested Blatchley, significantly. He had brought a jug of moonshine whiskey over from the still and it was flowing freely, though unknown to Old Jephthah, in the loft where most of his possessions were kept.

No man moved to lay finger on him. He held Judith—scarlet of face and almost in tears—by her elbows, and lowered his mocking countenance to within a few inches of her angry eyes.

"Now kiss me pretty, and kiss me all yo'self. I ain't got nothin' to do with this; hit's yo' play. You been wantin' to git a chance to kiss me this long while," he asserted with derisive humour. "Don't you hold off becaze the others is here; that ain't the way you do when we're—"

"Wade—Jim Cal! Won't some o' you boys pull this fool man away," appealed Judith. "I wish somebody'd call Uncle Jep. You can hold yo' ugly old face there till yo' hair turns grey," she suddenly and furiously addressed her admirer. "I'll never kiss ye."

"Oh, yes you will—you always do," Blatchley maintained. "Ef I was to tell the folks how blame lovin' ye are when jest you and me is alone together—"

He looked over his shoulder to enjoy the triumph of the moment. Blatchley Turrentine's delight was to traverse the will of every other human being with his own preference. Judith's gaze, tormented, tear-blurred, followed his and saw across the shoulders of the others, the shine of Creed Bonbright's fair hair, in the doorway. The sight brought from her an inarticulate cry. It fired Blatchley to take the kiss which he had vowed should be given him. As he bent to do so, Creed stepped forward and laid a hand upon his shoulder. The movement was absolutely pacific, but the fingers closed with a viselike grip, and there was so sharp a backward jerk that the proffered salute was not delivered.

In the surprise of the moment Judith pulled herself free and stood at bay. For an instant the two men looked into each other's eyes. Creed's blue orbs were calm, impersonal, and without one hint of yielding or fear.

"If you don't play fair," he said in argumentative tone, "there's no use playing at all. Let's close up the ring and try it again."

All eyes in the room turned to Blatchley Turrentine, the women in a flutter of terrified apprehension, the men with a brightening of interest; surely he would resent this interference in some notable manner. But Blatch was in fact too deadly to be merely high-tempered, quick in anger. For a moment he stared at Bonbright, trying to look him down; then those odd, whitey-grey eyes narrowed to mere slits. He laid the matter up in his mind; this was not the time for settling it—here before Judith Barrier and the women. He did not mean to content himself with mere fisticuffs, or even a chance pocket-knife which might double in his grasp and cut his own hand. To the immense surprise of everybody he stretched out his long arms, caught carelessly at the fingers of a player on either side of him, and, mending the line, began to move in rhythmic time to the fiddle.

It was soon observable that Creed Bonbright's presence caused Huldah Spiller's spirits to mount several notes in the octave. Whether it was that her own betrothed was looking on, and this an excellent chance to show him that even the town feller felt her charm, or merely Creed's personal attractions could hardly be guessed.

"Come on," she cried recklessly, "let's play 'Over the River to Feed my Sheep.' Strike up the tune, Wade."

The game she mentioned was also a forfeit play, with the difference that the kiss was more certain, being taken of mere choice—though delivered, of course, with due maidenly reluctance and a show of resisting—whenever the girl facing one could be caught over the line. All the young people played it; all the elders deprecated it. At the bottom of Judith's heart lay one reason for making a play-party and bidding Creed Bonbright to it; and now Huldah Spiller was blatantly calling out the unconfessed, the unconfessable; Wade was sullenly dropping into the old Scotch air; the long lines were forming, men opposite the girls—and the red-headed minx had placed herself directly across from Creed!

The laughing chains swayed back and forth to the measure of the music—advancing, retreating, pursuing, evading, choosing, rejecting, in a gay parody of courtship. Voices were added to that of the fiddle.

"Hit's over the river to feed my sheep,
Hit's over the river to Charley;
Hit's over the river to feed my sheep
An' to kiss my lonesome darling,"

they sang.

Shadows crouched in the corners, flickering, dancing, threatening to come out and play, then shrinking back as the blaze leaped and the room widened. The rough brown walls took the shine and brodered themselves with a thread of golden tracery. In such an illumination the eyes shone with added luster, flying locks were all hyacinthine, the frocks might have been silks and satins.

In the movement of the game girls and boys divided. The girls tossed beribboned heads in unwonted coquetry, yet showed always, in downcast eyes and the modest management of light draperies, the mountain ideal of maidenhood. Across from them the line of youthful masculinity swayed; tall, lean, brown-faced, keen-eyed young hunters these, sinewy and light and quick of movement, with fine hands and feet, and a lazy pride of bearing. A very different type from that found in the lowlands, or in ordinary rustic communities.

Judith noted the other players not at all; her hot reprehending eyes were on the girl in the blue dress. She did not observe that she herself was dancing opposite Andy, while Pendrilla Lusk dragged with drooping head in the line across from the amiably grinning Doss Provine. Finding herself suddenly in the lead and successful, Huldah began to preen her feathers a bit. She withdrew a hand from the girl on her right to arrange the small string of blue glass beads around her neck.

"Jest ketch to my skirt for a minute," she whispered loudly. "I reckon hit won't rip, though most of 'em is 'stitches taken for a friend'—I was that anxious to get it done for the party. Oh, Law!"

And then—nobody knew how it happened—she was over the line, her hold on the hands of her mates broken, she had tripped and fallen in a giggling blue lawn heap fairly at Bonbright's feet. He was in a position where the least gallant must offer the salute the game demanded, but to make assurance doubly sure Huldah put out her hands like a three-year-old, crying,

"He'p me up, Creed, I b'lieve I've sprained my ankle."

The young fellow from Hepzibah was in a mood for play. After all he was only a big boy, and he had been long barred out from young people's frolics. Here was a gay, toward little soul, who seemed to like him. He stooped and caught her by the waist, picking her up as one might a small child, and holding her a moment with her feet off the floor. Something in the laughing challenge of her face as she protested and begged to be put down prompted him as to what was expected. He kissed her lightly upon the cheek before he released her.

As he set her down he encountered Wade Turrentine's eye. A spark of tawny fire had leaped to life in its hazel depth. The fiddler still clung faithfully to his office. If he missed a note now and again, or played off key, he might be forgiven. It is to be remembered that he sawed away without a moment's pause throughout the entire episode.

Creed reached out to join the broken line and touched Jeff's arm. The boy flung away from the contact with a muttered word. He looked helplessly at Judith, but she would not glance at him; head haughtily erect, long lashes on crimson cheeks, red lip curled to an expression of offence and disdain, the young hostess mended the line by joining the hands of the two girls on each side of her.

"You-all can go on playin' without me," she said in a constrained tone. "I got to see to something in the other room."

"See here, Mister Man," remarked Blatch, as Judith prepared to leave. "You're mighty free and permisc'ous makin' rules for kissin' games, but I take notice you don't follow none of 'em yo'se'f."

Judith halted uncertainly. To stop and defend Creed was out of the question. She was about to interpose with the general accusation that Blatch was trying to pick a fuss and break up her play-party, when Iley's voice, for once a welcome interruption, broke in from the doorway.

"Jude, we ain't got plates enough for everybody an' to put the biscuit on," called Jim Cal's wife. "Ax Creed Bonbright could we borry a few from his house."

Judith closed instantly with the diversion. She moved quickly toward the door; Bonbright joined her.

"Why yes," he said. "You know I told you to help yourself. Let me go over now and get what you want. Is there anything else?"

"That's mighty kind of you, Creed," Judith thanked him. "I reckon I better go along with ye and see. I don't think of anything else just now. Iley, we'll be back quick as we can with all the plates ye need."

Together they stepped out into the soft dusk of the summer night, followed by the narrowed gaze of Blatch Turrentine's grey eyes.

Chapter VIII

On the Doorstone

Behind them the play was resumed in the lighted room; the whining of the fiddle, the thud and stamp of many feet, came to them softened and refined by a little distance. They were suddenly drawn together in that intimacy of two who leave the company and the lights on a special

expedition. Judith made an impatient mental effort to release the incident of Huldah and the kiss, which had so unreasonably irritated her.

"If we was to go acrosst fields hit would be a heap better," she advised softly, and they moved through the odorous, myriad-voiced darkness of the midsummer night, side by side, without speech, for a time. Then as Creed halted at a dim, straggling barrier which crossed their course and laid down a rail fence partially that she might the more easily get over in her white frock, she returned to the tormenting subject once more, opening obliquely:

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"You and Huldy Spiller is old friends I reckon. Don't you think she's a powerful pretty girl?"

"Mighty pretty," echoed Creed absently. All girls were of an even prettiness to him, and Huldah Spiller was a pleasant little thing. He was wondering what he had done back there in the play-room that had set them all against him.

"Her and Wade is goin' to be wedded come September," put in Judith jealously.

"Yo' cousin will be getting a mighty fine wife."

The mountain man is apt to make his comments on the marriages of his friends with dignified formality, and Creed uttered the accustomed phrase without heat or enthusiasm; but it seemed to Judith that he might have said less—or more.

"Well, I never did like red hair," the girl managed to get out finally; "but I reckon hit's better than old black stuff like mine."

"My mother's hair was sorter sandy," Creed answered in his gentle, tolerant fashion. "Mine favours it." And he had not the wit to add that dark hair, however, pleased him best.

Judith stepped beside him for some moments in mortified silence. Evidently he was green wood and could by none of her old methods be kindled. Then, their eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness, they came out into a modified twilight in the clearing about the Bonbright house. "You better unlock the door and go in first," suggested Judith, in a depressed tone.

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"Why, I ain't got the key," Creed reminded her. "I left it with you—didn't you bring it?"

They drew unconsciously close together in the dark with something of the guilty consternation of childish culprits. A mishap of the sort ripens an acquaintance swiftly.

"What a gump I was!" Judith breathed with sudden low laughter. He could see her eyes shining in the gloom, and the dim outline of her figure. "I knowed well an' good you didn't have the key—hit's in the blue bowl on the fire-board at home."

"I ought to have thought of it," asserted Creed shouldering the blame. "And I'm sorry; I wanted to show you my mother's picture."

"An' I'm sorry," echoed Judith, remembering fleetingly the swept and garnished rooms, the wreath of red roses; "I had something to show you, too."

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Nothing was said of the dishes for the merrymakers at Judith's house. Another interest was obtruding itself into the simple, practical expedition, crowding aside its original purpose. The girl looked around the dim, weed-grown garden, its bushes blots of deeper shadow upon the darkness, its blossoms vaguely conjectured by their odour.

"There used to be a bubby bush—a sweet-scented shrub—over in that corner," Creed hesitated. "I'd like to get you some of the bubbies. My mother used to pick 'em and put 'em in the bureau drawers I remember, and they made everything smell nice."

He had taken her hand and led her with him, advancing uncertainly toward the flowers. He felt her shiver, and halted instantly.

"Yo' cold!" he said. "Let me take my coat off and put it around ye—I don't need it. You got overheated playing back there, and now you'll catch a cold."

"Oh, no," disclaimed Judith, whose little shudder had been as much from excitement as from the sharp chill of the night air after the heated play-room. "I reckon somebody jest walked over my grave—I ain't cold."

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But he had pulled off the coat while he spoke, and now he turned to put it about her, and drew her back to the doorstep. Judith was full of a strange ecstasy as she slipped her arms into the sleeves. The lover's earliest and favourite artifice—the primitive kindness of wrapping her in his own garment! Even Creed, unready and unschooled as he was, felt stir within him its intimate appeal.

A nebulous lightening which had been making itself felt behind the eastern line of mountains now came plainly in view, late moon, melancholy and significant, as the waning moon always is. By its dim illumination Creed saw Judith Barrier standing at the door of his own house, smiling at him tremulously, with the immemorial challenge in her dark eyes. To that challenge the native man in him—the lover—so long usurped by the zealot, the would-be philanthropist, rose thrilling, yet still bewildered and uncertain, to respond. Something heady and ancient and eternally young seemed to pass into his soul out of the night and the moonlight and the shining of her eyes. He was all alive to her nearness, her loveliness, to the sweet sense that she was a young woman, he a young man, and the loveliness and the dearness of her were his for the trying—for the winning. His breath caught in his throat.

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"Wait a minute," he whispered hurriedly, though she had not moved. With eager hands he wrapped the coat close about her. "Let's sit here on the doorstep and talk awhile. There are a

heap of things I want to ask you about—that I want to tell you.”

Young beauty and belle that she was, Judith had been sought and courted, in that most primitive society, since she was fourteen. She was love's votary by birthright, and her wit and her emotions were schooled in love's game: to lure, to please, to exploit, to defend, evade, deny; in each postulant seeking, testing, trying for the right man to whom should be made love's final surrender. But Creed, always absorbed in vague altruistic dreams, had no boyish sweethearting behind him to have taught him the ways of courtship.

Fire-flies sparkled everywhere, thickest over the marshy places. A mole cricket was chirring in the grass by the old doorstone. Sharp on the soft dark air came the call of that woodland night bird which the mountain people say cries “chip-out-o'-white-oak,” and which others translate “chuck-wills-widow.”

“I—” he began, hesitated momentarily, then daunted, grasped at the familiar things of his life —“I don't get on very well up here. I'm afraid I've made a failure of it; but”—he turned to her in a curious, groping entreaty, his hat in his hands, the dim moonlight full on his fair head and in his eager eyes—“but if you would help me—with you—I think I ought to—”

“I say made a failure!” cooed Judith in her rich, low tones. “You ax me whatever you want to know. You tell me what it is that you're aimin' to do—I say made a failure!”

Her trust was so hearty, so wholesale, she filled so instantly the position not only of sweetheart but of mother to a small boy with an unsatisfactory toy—that would always be Judith Barrier—that Creed's heart—the man's heart—a lonely one, and beginning to feel itself misunderstood and barred out from its kind—melted in his bosom. There was silence between them, a silence vibrant with the coming utterance. But even as the dark, fond, inviting eyes and the troubled, kindling blue ones encountered, as Creed lifted the girl's hand timidly, and essayed speech, the voice of that one who had stepped on her grave harshly aroused them both.

“I vow—I thort it was thieves, an' I was a-goin' to see could I pick off you-all,” drawled Blatchley Turrentine's level tones from the shadow of the garden. Mutely, with a sense of chill and disappointment that was like the shock of a physical blow to each, the two young creatures got to their feet and turned to leave the place, preparing to go by the high road, without consultation. As they passed him near the gate, Blatch Turrentine fell in on the other side of the girl and walked with them silently for a time.

“Iley sont me over,” he said finally. “She was skeered you-all wouldn't bring any plates.”

Neither Judith nor Creed offered any explanation. Instead:

“Well, I don't see how you're goin' to help anything,” said the girl bitterly—any presence must have been hateful to her which interrupted or forestalled what Creed would certainly have said, that for which her whole twenty years had waited.

“Oh, I've got the plates,” chuckled Blatch, jingling a bulky package under his arm.

“Why, how did you—” began Judith in amazement.

“Uh-huh, I've got my own little trick of gittin' in whar I choose to go,” declared Turrentine. He leaned around and looked meaningly at the man on her other side, then questioned, “How long do you-all reckon I'd been thar?” and examined them keenly in the shadowy half light.

But neither hastened to disclaim or explain, neither seemed in any degree embarrassed, though to both his bearing was plainly almost intolerable. Thereafter they walked in silence which was scarcely broken till they reached the gate and Iley came shrilling out to meet them demanding,

“Did you get them thar plates from Miz. Lusk's, you Blatch Turrentine?”

Judith looked at him with angry scorn. It was the old tyrannical trick which she had known from her childhood up, the attempt to maintain an ascendancy over her by appearing to know everything and be everywhere—“like he was the Lord-a'mighty Hissself,” she muttered indignantly, as Creed joined a group of young men, and she passed in to her necessary activities as hostess.

Judith Barrier's play-party won to its close with light hearts and light feet, with heavy hearts which the weary body would fain have denied, with love and laughter, with jealousy and chagrin, with the slanted look of envy, of furtive admiration, or of disparagement, from feminine eyes at the costumes of other women, just as any ball does.

The two who had trembled upon the brink of some personal revelation, a closer communion, were not again alone together that evening. Amid the moving figures of the others, now to his eyes as painted automatons, Creed Bonbright watched with strong fascination in which there was a tincture that was almost terror, the beautiful girl who had suddenly emerged from her class and become for him the one woman.

So adequate, so competent, Judith dominated the situation; passing among her guests, the thick dark lashes continually lowered toward her crimson cheeks. Some subtle sense told her that the spell was working. Smiles from this sweet inner satisfaction curved her red lips. No need to look—she knew how his eyes were following her. The exultant knowledge of it sang all through her being. Gone were her perturbations, her chilling uncertainties. She was at once stimulated and quieted.

Their good-byes were said in the most public manner, yet one glance flashed between them which asked and promised an early meeting.

Chapter IX

Foeman's Bluff

It was near midnight when Creed sought his patient mule at the rack, to find that Doss Provine had ridden the animal away.

"He said you was a-goin' to stay at yo' own house to-night, an' he 'lowed ye wouldn't need the mule, an' he was mighty tired. He 'lowed hit was a mighty long ja'nt out to the Edge whar he was a-goin'," contributed Blev Straley, who seemed to have been admitted to Provine's confidence.

"Mighty long ja'nt—I say long ja'nt!" ejaculated old man Broyles, who was engaged in saddling his ancient one-eyed mare. "Ef I couldn't spit as fur as from here to the Edge I'd never chaw tobacker agin! Plain old fashioned laziness is what ails Doss Provine. I'd nacher'ly w'ar him out for this trick, Bonbright, ef I was you."

"Well, I did aim to stay over at my house to-night," said Creed, "But I can't. I've got a case to try in the morning, soon, that I've got to look up some points on yet to-night. I reckon I'll have to foot it out to Aunt Nancy's."

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As Creed spoke a fellow by the name of Taylor Stribling, a sort of satellite of Blatchley Turrentine's came slouching from the shadows of the nearby smoke-house. He watched old man Broyles ride away, and Blev Straley take a leisurely departure.

"Mighty bad ye got to hoof it, Creed," he observed. "Ef you've a mind to come with me I can show you a short cut through the woods by Foeman's Bluff. Hit's right on the first part of my way."

Creed had been long out of the mountains or he would have known that a short cut which led by Foeman's Bluff would certainly be a strange route toward Nancy Card's cabin; but it was characteristic of the man that without question or demur he accepted the proffered friendly turn at its face value, and he and Stribling at once took the way which led across the gulch to the still. They walked for some time, Stribling leading, Creed following, deep in his own thoughts.

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"Looks like this is a queer direction to be going," he roused himself to comment wonderingly as they dipped into the sudden hollow.

"The trail turns a piece up yon," explained the guide briefly.

Again they toiled on in silence, crossing the dry boulder-strewn bed of a stream, travelling always in the dense darkness of the tall timber, finally striking the rise, which was so abrupt and steep that they had to catch by the path-side bushes to pull themselves up. It was lighter here, as the trail mounted toward a region of rocky bluffs where there was no big timber, running obliquely across the great promontory that had got the name of Foeman's Bluff, from old Ab Foeman whose hideout, still unknown, was said to be somewhere in its front.

"Ain't it mighty curious to be goin' up so?" Creed panted. "Aunt Nancy's place lies lower than the Turrentines'. By the road it's down hill mighty near all the way."

"Thishyer's a short cut," growled the other evasively. "Mind how you step. Hit's a fur ways down thar ef a body was to fall."

With the words they came out suddenly on the Bluff itself where the trail widened into a natural terrace, and the great rock, solemn with majestic peace, faced an infinity of sky with bared brow. As they emerged into the light Creed took off his hat and lifted his countenance, inhaling the beauty of the summer night. The late moon had climbed a third of the way up the heavens; now she looked down with a chastened, tarnished light, yet with a dusky, diminished beauty that held a sort of mild pathos. Great timbered slopes, inky black in this illumination, fell away on every hand down to where the mists lay death-white in the valley; behind them was a low, irregular bulk of brush-grown rock; and all about the whirr of katydids, a million voices blended into one. From a nearby thicket came to them the click and liquid gurgle, "Chip-out-o'-white-oak!" It sent Creed's heart and fancy questing back to the past hour with the girl on the doorstone. What would he have asked, she answered, if Blatch had not interrupted them? He scarcely heard the wavering cry of a screech-owl that followed hard upon the remembered notes. Stribling, however, noted the latter promptly, and began edging toward the shadow as his companion spoke.

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"This is mighty sightly," said Creed, looking about him musingly; "I do love a moonshiny night."

For a moment there was only the noise of the katydids, backgrounded and enfolded by the deep silence of the great mountains. Then someone broke out into what was evidently a forced laugh, a long-drawn, girthing, mirthless haw-haw, the laboured insult of which stung Creed into a certain resentment of demeanour.

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"What's the joke?" he inquired dryly, turning toward Taylor Stribling. But Stribling had silently melted away among the shadows of distant trees along the trail. It was Blatchley Turrentine

who stood before him thrusting forward a jeering face in the uncertain half light, while three vaguely defined forms moved and shouldered behind him. The apparition was sinister, but if Blatch looked for demonstrations of fear he was disappointed.

"What's the joke?" Creed repeated.

"I couldn't hold in when I heard your pretty talk," drawled Blatch, setting his hands on his hips and barring the way. "Whar might you be a-goin', Mr. Creed Bonbright?"

"Home," returned Creed briefly. "Get out of my road, and I'll be obliged to you."

"Yo' road—yo' road!" echoed Blatch. "Well, young feller, besides this here road runnin' acrosst the south eend o' the property that I've rented on a five-year lease, ef so be that yo're a-goin' to Nancy Cyard's house this is a mighty curious direction for you to be travellin' in."

"I was told it was a short cut," said Bonbright controlling his temper. A man who was justice of the peace, going home to get ready to try a case on the morrow, must not embroil himself.

"Good Lord!" scoffed Blatch. "You claim to be mountain raised, and tell me you think this is a short cut from whar you was at to Nancy Cyard's? I reckon you'll have to make up another tale."

Bonbright became suddenly aware that he was surrounded, two of the men who were with Turrentine having slipped past him and appearing now as blots of blacker shadow against the trees on either side of the path by which he had come. Turrentine and the remaining man barred the way ahead; on the one side was the sheer descent of the bluff; on the other the rough, broken rise.

It was like a bad dream. With his usual forthright directness he spoke out.

"What is it you want of me—all of you? This meeting never came about by chance."

Blatch shook his head. "Yo' mighty right it didn't," he said. "Me an' the boys has a word to speak with you, and when we ketch you walkin' on our land in the middle o' the night—with whatever intentions—we think the time has come for talkin'."

"Andy! Jeff! Is that you?" Creed, the rash, called over his shoulder to the two behind him.

An inarticulate growl answered, and then a boyish voice began,

"Yo' mighty free with folks' names, you Creed Bonbright. Me and my brother both told you what we thought o' you when you come to the jail. I told you then you'd be run out of the Turkey Tracks ef you tried to come up here. We don't want no spies."

"Spies!" echoed Creed with a rising note of anger in his voice. "Who said I was a spy? What should I be spying on?"

"Yo' friend Mr. Dan Haley might 'a' said you was a spy," suggested Andy's higher pitched tones. "As for what you'd be a-spyin' on you know best. We're all mighty peaceable, law-abidin' folks in the Turkey Tracks. I don't know of nothin' that we're apt to break the law about 'less'n it would be beatin' up and runnin' out a spy that—"

The childish bravado of this speech evidently displeased Blatch, who wanted the thing done and over with. His heavier, grating tones broke in,

"They's jest one thing to be said to you, Creed Bonbright. You've got to get out of the Turkey Tracks—and get quick. Air ye goin'?"

"No!" Creed flung back at him. "When I take my orders from you it will be a mighty cold day. I came up here in the Turkey Tracks to do a good work among my own people. I'm going to stay here and do it in my own way. Is that you, Wade Turrentine? What have you got to say to me?"

The second of the men who faced him stirred uneasily at the mention of his name. It rankled in the expectant bridegroom's heart that all he could complain of concerning Creed Bonbright was that Huldah had thrown herself in his way and forced a kiss upon him—not that Bonbright had been the amatory aggressor!

"I say what Blatch says," growled Wade as though the words stuck in his throat.

More and more the whole thing was like a nightmare to Creed; he felt as though with sufficient effort he might throw it off and wake. The four men hung at the path-side eyeing him, motionless if he were still, moving only if he stirred. Even this scarcely gave him a complete understanding of the gravity of his situation.

"Well," he said finally, "I'm going on home. If any of you boys has anything to say to me, tomorrow or any day after—you know where to find me."

He made as though to pass; but Blatch Turrentine stepped swiftly to the middle of the pathway and stood breathing a little short.

"No, by God, we don't!" he panted. "Ef we let you to go this night—we don't know whar we'll ever find you again. Mebbe you've got yo' budget made up—on yo' way to yo' friend Mr. Dan Haley right now. *Ye don't go from here!*"

Instinctively Creed fell back a step. It was out at last—this was neither more nor less than a waylaying. Did they mean to kill him? Blatch Turrentine had crouched where he stood, and even as the question went through the victim's mind, he launched himself with that sudden frightful quickness bodily upon Creed.

It would seem that the slighter man must be borne down by the onset. But Bonbright gathered himself, his arms shot out and gripped his assailant midway. Struggling, panting, gasping,

stamping, they wrenched and swayed, the three who watched them holding aloof. Then with a sheer effort of strength Creed tore the heavier man from his footing and lifted him clear of the ground.

With a little sobbing oath Andy ran in. Bonbright could have heaved the man he held over his shoulder in that terrific fall well known to deadly wrestling. Wade's stern, "Sst! Git back there!" stopped the boy. Even as Creed's muscles knotted themselves to the supreme effort came sudden memory of what he must stand for to these people. It was his right to defend his own life; he must not, in any extremity, take that of another. His grip relaxed. Turrentine partially got his feet again; his arms were free; the right made a swift movement, and Creed caught the gleam of a knife-blade. Without volition of his own he flung all his weight and strength into one mighty movement that hurled man and weapon from him.

Plunging, staggering, clutching at the air, Turrentine gave ground. The moonlight flickered on the blade in his upflung hand as, with a strangled hoarse cry he reeled backward over the bluff.

There was a rending sound of breaking branches, a noise of rolling rocks; then deadly silence. For a long moment the men left standing on the cliff strained eyes and ears to where Blatch had gone down, then,

"Keep off!" shouted Creed as the three others began silently to close in on him. "Stand back, boys. We've had enough of this. Draw off and let me get down and see what's happened to him." He kept slowly backing away, striving not to be hemmed in against the rock behind him. The others warily followed.

"Let you down and finish him, ye mean—don't ye?" screamed Andy with all a boy's senseless rage.

"You're a fine one to bring law and order into the Turkey Tracks," Wade taunted savagely. "You've brought murder—that's what you've done."

"He drew a knife on me," cried Bonbright. "You all saw that. I only shoved him away. I never meant to throw him over the bluff."

"Nobody seen no knife but you, Creed Bonbright," Jeff doggedly asseverated. "All three of us seen you fling Blatch over the bluff. You ain't in no court of law now. Yo' lies won't do you no good. Yo' where we kill the feller that done the killin'."

"How?" said Creed, still backing, feeling his way slowly, seeking for some break in the rise behind, the others coming a little closer. "By jumpin' on to him somewhere out at night, four to one—or even three to one?"

"Yes, by God! thataway, ef we cain't do it no better way," panted Wade.

Years before—heaven knows how many—a little seep of water began to gather between two huge stones in the small broken bluff behind Creed. Winter after winter the crevice through which the trickle came enlarged, the water caught in a natural basin and froze with all its puny might to heave the stones apart. The winter before this slow process had closed leaving a wedge of rock trembling upon its base, ready to fall into a crevice. Yet the opening was masked with vine leaves, and when the spring rains finally washed away the mould and the crude doorway tottered and sank, the gap thus left was unnoted, invisible to the sharpest eye.

Bonbright pressing close against the rock to pass, stepping warily when it was forward, but hugging his barrier as a safety, missed his footing, and slipped almost without a sound into this opening. For a moment he sustained himself holding to tree roots, hearkening to the voices of those above him.

"Wade—you fool! What did you let him get a-past you for?"

And then Wade's heavier tones, "I didn't. He run back yo' way."

He could hear their footsteps pounding to and fro, their hoarse cries which finally settled down into a demand for a lantern.

"We can't find Blatch nor do nothing for him, nor git on the track of Bonbright nor nothin' else, without a lantern. You Jeff, run round to the still; me and Andy'll go back and fetch pap."

Creed sought cautiously for footing, lost all hold, and began a headlong descent.

Low limbs thrashed his face and body; again and again his head was dashed against rocks or tree stems; his forehead was gashed; the blood poured into his eyes; he rolled and bounded and slid down and down and down the crevice, and into the ravine, bruised, bleeding, breathless, blinded and choked by blood and earth and gravel. He was more than half unconscious when he brought up at last with a rib-smashing thump upon a sapling, and there he clung like a dazed animal, gasping.

Slowly, as his breath came back to him, and he cleared the blood and dust from his eyes, Creed became aware of a dim glow coming through the bushes in one direction. For some time he watched it, making ready to get away as quickly as possible, since this must be on Blatch Turrentine's land, and the light came probably from some of Blatch's party searching for Turrentine himself, or for Creed.

But when he noted that the illumination was steady and stationary, he began to move hesitatingly in its direction. He had gone probably two or three hundred feet when he came to a place whence he had an unobstructed view. The light shone out from the cramped opening of a cave. He went nearer in a sort of daze. There was nobody to intercept him, Blatch and the boys,

whom he had left on the bluff above, when he so unexpectedly descended from it, being the only sentinels out. No approach was looked for from the quarter where he now was, and he found himself, gazing directly into Blatch Turrentine's blockaded still. He could distinctly see Jim Cal and the fellow Taylor Stribling moving about within the cave. They were attending to a run of whiskey. While Bonbright stood motionless, not yet fully comprehending the sinister colour his presence might wear, there was the thud of running footsteps, Jeff Turrentine rounded the boulder on the other side of the cave and called aloud to those within,

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"Jim Cal! Taylor! Buck! Creed Bonbright's killed Blatch—flung him clean over the bluff—and got plumb away from us! Bring a lantern you-all. We've got to hunt for Blatch in under Foeman's Bluff—I'll show you whar."

Silently Creed drew back into the dense undergrowth. He knew where he was, now. As he retreated swiftly in the opposite direction from that in which Jeff had approached, he could vaguely hear the excited voices at the still, questioning, replying, denouncing, exclaiming. Presently he came out upon the main trail, rounded the Gulch, heading for the big road and Nancy Card's cabin, his soul sick within him at the events of the evening, bitterly regretting the explicit and unwelcome knowledge of the secret still which had been forced upon him, feeling himself now a spy indeed—a spy and a murderer.

He walked with long nervous strides; beaten and bruised though he was, he was unconscious of fatigue; the grief and regret that surged within him were as an anodyne to physical pain, and it was less than half an hour later that he opened the door of Nancy Card's cabin, his white face scratched and bleeding, his torn hands, too, covered with blood, his clothing rent and earth-stained, his eyes wild and pain-bright.

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"Good Lord, boy! What's the matter with ye?" cried the old woman, coming toward him in terror, both hands out. "I sot up for ye, 'caze Pony he jest come from Hepzibah an' said that spiled-rotten Andy an' that feisty Jeff 'lowed ye was a spy an' they was a-goin' to run ye out of the Turkey Tracks."

She laid hold of him and examined him with anxious eyes.

"I was plumb werried about ye. I knowed in reason they was a-goin' to be trouble at that fool play-party."

"No, I ain't hurt, Aunt Nancy," said Creed desolately, and he stared past her at the wall. "But looks to me like I'm cursed. I meant so well—" He choked on the word. "I'd just had a talk with—She said—we—I thought that everything was about to come right. And now—I've killed Blatch Turrentine, and I've just got away from the others. They was all after me."

Chapter X

A Spy

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Old Jephthah was winding the clock when the door—which he had closed some time ago after the last retiring guests—flung violently open, Andy paused, flying foot on the threshold, and gasped out hoarsely,

"Pap—Creed Bonbright's killed Blatch and got away from us!"

The Lusk girls had staid to help Judith clear up, intending to remain over night unless Andy and Jeff returned in time to take them home. The three young women working at the table lifted pale faces; Pendrilla let fall the plate in her hand and broke it. Unconscious of the fact, she stood staring with open mouth at the fragments by her feet. Jephthah took one more turn mechanically, then withdrew the key and laid it down.

"Whar at?" he inquired briefly.

"Up on our place," said Wade who now appeared at the boy's side. "Bonbright threwed him over Foeman's Bluff."

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"How come it?" queried the head of the tribe.

"They was a fussin'," began Andy, but his father interrupted him in a curious tone.

"Foeman's Bluff," he repeated. "What tuck Bonbright thar at this time o' night?"

"That's what I say," panted Jim Cal's voice in the darkness outside. He had come straight from the still instead of going with Jeff and the others to search; and for all his flesh he had overtaken his brothers. But there was none now to demand sardonically why he fled the seat of war and ran to the paternal shelter for re-enforcements. "Ef folks go nosin' around whar they ain't wanted, sometimes they git what they don't like," he concluded.

Judith, very pale, had parted her lips to utter words of indignant defence, and denial of this broad imputation, but before she could speak Huldah Spiller irrupted into the room, her red curls flying, her bodice clutched about her in such a fashion as to suggest she had been

undressing when the news reached her.

The mountain woman with temperament is reduced to the outlets of such occasions as these, or revival seasons and funerals; and Huldah Spiller, having abandoned the protesting Iley with her babies, whom the mother could not leave alone, meant to make the most of the occasion.

"You-all ain't got no right to talk the way you do about Creed," the red-haired girl burst out. "Him and me's been friends ever sence I went to Hepzibah, and there ain't a better man walks the earth. Ef he done anything to Blatch hit was becaze Blatch laywayed him an' jumped on him, an' he had to. Oh, Lord!" and she began to weep, "I wish't my daddy was here—I jest wish Pap Spiller was here. Pore Creed! Ef you-all git yo' hands on him, mad thisaway, the Lord knows what will be did!"

Jephthah regarded his postulant daughter-in-law from under lowered, bushy brows.

"Kin you make her hush?" he inquired of Wade.

"I ain't got no interest in makin' her hush nor makin' her holler," returned Wade contemptuously. Dishonoured before his clan, his male dignity sadly shorn, his woman shrieking out the wrongs and excellences of another man—and that man a young and well-favoured enemy—his bitterness may be forgiven.

"Fetch the lantern," ordered Jephthah briefly. "We-all have got to git over thar and see to this business."

"Well, I'll hush—but I'm goin' along," volleyed Huldah.

"Le's us go too, Jude," pleaded Cliantha Lusk in a trembling whisper. "I'm scared to be left here in the house with the men all gone. He might take a notion to come and raid the place and kill us. They do thataway in feud times. My gran' mammy——"

"Do hush!" choked Judith. But she hurried out in the wake of the departing men, Cliantha clinging to one arm, Pendrilla to the other.

They left the doors open, the candles flaring, and nobody to guard but the toothless old hound who slept and snored on the chip pile.

The journey to Foeman's Bluff, following the flicker of the lantern in Wade's hand, with the voices of the men coming back to her, hoarse, fragmentary, ejaculatory, reciting Creed's offences asseverating that they had expected nothing else, was like a nightmare to Judith. When Cliantha screamed and clung to her and said she thought she saw Creed Bonbright in the bushes by the path-side, Judith shook her off angrily, but let the clamouring little thing creep back and make her peace.

"I forgot about you and Blatch—Oh, po' Judy!" moaned Cliantha. "Ef hit was me goin' to s'arch for the murdered body of my true love I don't know as I could put foot befo' foot!"

"The trail's mighty narrow here—I'll go in front," said Judith. She freed herself, and thereafter walked alone with bent head.

As they descended into the hollow Andy began to hoo-ee; and finally he was answered from the neighbourhood of the bluff. Up this they climbed, since on this side they were cut off from the region below it by an impassable gulley. Halting on the top and looking down, they could see a lantern moving about and catch faint sound of the men's voices.

"Who's down thar?" Jephthah's big rolling bass sent out the call. There was an ominous hesitation before Jeff's perturbed tones replied,

"Hit's me, pap, me an' Buck Shalliday an' Taylor Stribling."

Andy found a tall tree at the bluffs edge, and began to descend through its branches with the swiftness and agility of a monkey.

"How is he—is he alive?"

The old man put the query at the edge of the gulf, stooping, peering over. Jim Cal sat down suddenly and began wiping his forehead. The moonlight showed his round face very pale under its beaded sweat.

"Andy'll git hisself killed!" whimpered Pendrilla.

And Huldah broke into loud hysteric weeping, on the tide of which "Creed—Pap Spiller—Blatch Turrentine" were cast up now and again.

"Hush, cain't ye?" demanded Jephthah, angrily; "I cain't hear one word they answer me down thar. Hello, boys. Is he livin'?"

Andy had evidently reached the searchers at the foot of the cliff. Loud, confused voices came up to those above. Finally,

"W'y, Pap, we ain't never found him," Jeff called.

"Ye *what?*" demanded the father incredulously.

"We ain't—never—found him," reiterated Jeff doggedly.

The old man drew back sharply with a look of swift anger in his face.

"Well, ef ye hain't found him by now ye better quit lookin', hadn't ye?" he suggested as he straightened to his full height and turned his back.

"Creed Bonbright's jest about been here an' hid the body, that's what he's done," Taylor Stribling clamoured after him in futile explanation. But the old man gave no heed. Lantern in hand, he was already addressing himself to a careful examination of the scene of the struggle. The torn vines where Creed had fallen through the fissure instantly caught his eye.

"Come up here, you-all!" he turned and shouted toward the gulf. He swung his lantern far out over the crevice. "Look at that," he said quietly. "Thar's whar yo' man got away from ye." He handed the lantern to Wade, and swung himself lightly down where Creed had fallen.

"Better let me go, Pap," said Wade, and Judith mutely stared after the old man as he disappeared into the dark.

For fifteen minutes or more the watchers on the cliff waited and trembled, straining ears and eyes. In that time they were joined by those from the foot of the bluff, all but Stribling, who, the boys said, had "gone on home." Then they heard sounds of clambering in the cleft, and the old man's face appeared in the well of inky shadow, pale, the black eyes burning, the great black beard flowing backward to join the darkness behind him. Wade held his lantern high. It lit a circle of faces on which terror, anger, and distress wrought. Judith could scarcely look at her uncle, and a great trembling shook her limbs, so that she laid hold of a little sapling by which she stood, and closed her eyes.

"Well," said the old man on a falling note, and his voice sounded hollowly from the cleft, "well, I reckon this does settle it—whether Blatch is hurt or no. How many of ye was a-workin' in the still to-night?"

"I was," quavered Jim Cal; "me and Taylor Stribling and Buck Shalliday. Blatch had left a run o' whiskey that had to be worked off, and when he didn't come I turned in to 'tend to it—why, Pap?"

"Ef Bonbright wanted to find out about the still he shore made it, that's all," answered Jephthah. "Ye can see right into it from whar he went. Ef you-all boys wants to stay out o' the penitentiary I reckon Creed Bonbright's got to leave the Turkey Tracks mighty sudden," and he swung himself heavily to the level of the cliff.

"That's what I say," whispered Jim Cal, pasty pale and quivering. "We've got it to do."

Old Jephthah looked darkly upon his sons.

"Well, settle it amongst ye, how an' when. I'll neither meddle nor make in this business. I don't know how all o' this come about, nor what you-all an' Blatch Turrentine air up to. You've made an outsider o' me, an' an outsider I'll stay. Ef ye won't tell me the truth, don't tell me no lies. Come on, gals."

He strode into the homeward trail, the four girls falling in behind his tall figure. Judith was sick with misery and uncertainty; the Lusk girls looked back timidly at Andy and Jeff; even Huldah was mute.

Chapter XI

The Warning

Five o'clock Friday morning found Creed, pale, hollow-eyed, a strip of Nancy's home-made sticking plaster over the cut on brow and cheek, but otherwise composed and as usual, at the pine table in his little shack, working over the references which applied to the case he was to try that morning. But an hour later brought old Keziah Provine to the door to borrow the threading of a needle with white thread.

"I hearn they had an interruption," she began, pushing in past Nancy and the two children, "but thar—you kin hear anything these days and times. They most gen'ally does find trouble at these here play-parties, that's why I'm sot agin 'em."

Poor old soul, it was not on account of her rheumatic legs, her toothless jaws, nor her half-blind eyes that she objected to play-parties, of course.

"I got no use for 'em," she pursued truthfully, "specially when they're started up too close to a blockade still. They named it to me that Creed had done killed one of the Turrentine boys—is that so?"

"No," returned Nancy stoutly. "By the best of what I kin git out o' Creed, him and Blatch was walkin' along, an' Blatch missed his footin' and fell off o' Foeman's Bluff. Creed tried to he'p him, an' fell an' got scratched some. I reckon the Turrentines'll tell it different, but that's what I make out from what Creed says."

"Lord, how folks will lie!" admired Keziah, piously. "Now they tell that Blatch was not only killed up, but that some one—Creed, or some o' them that follers him—tuck the body away befo' they could git to it. They say they was blood all over the bushes, an' a great drug place whar Blatch

had been toted off. One feller named a half-dug hole sorter like a grave; but thar! I never went over to see for myse'f, an' ye cain't believe the half o' what ye hear."

"Well, I'd say not," snapped Nancy. "Not ef hit was sech a pack o' lies as that."

Thread in hand old Keziah lingered till Arley Kittridge came with his mother's baking-pan and request for a little risin'. Arley it seemed had been commissioned to find out what he could on behalf of the Kittridge family. And so it went till breakfast-time. 163

How these things travel in a neighbourhood where there is no telephone, postman, milkman, nor morning paper, and where the distances are considerable, is one of the mysteries of the mountains—yet travel they do, and when time came for court to open Creed found that he had a crowd which would at any other juncture have been highly gratifying.

Every man that came in glanced first at the cut on his cheek, swiftly noted the pale face, sunken, purple-rimmed eyes, the scratched hands, then looked hastily away. Several made proffers of an alliance with him, being at outs with the Turrentines. All reiterated the story of the missing body.

"You done exactly right," old Tubal Kittridge told him. "With a man like Blatchley Turrentine, hit's hit first or git hit. I wonder he ever let ye git as far as Foeman's Bluff; but if you made good use o' yo' time, I reckon you found out what you aimed to," and he winked laboriously at poor Creed's crimsoning countenance. 164

"I wasn't trying to find out anything, Mr. Kittridge. Blatch forced the quarrel upon me. I was on my way home at the time."

"Well, a lee-tle out of yo' way, wasn't ye?" objected Kittridge, slightly offended at not being offered Bonbright's confidence.

The case on the docket, one that had interested Creed deeply, being the curious matter of a mountain creek which in the spring storms had changed its direction, scoured off a good field and flung it to the opposite side of the road, thus giving it to a new owner, dragged wearily. Who cared about the question of a few rods of mountain land, even if it had raised good tobacco, when the slayer of one of the bullies of the neighbourhood sat before them—a man who had not only killed his victim but had, within fifteen minutes, hidden all traces of the body—and the opening of a new feud was taking place before their eyes?

At noon Creed, in despair, adjourned his court, setting a new date for trial, explaining that this Turrentine matter ought to be looked into, and he believed it was not a proper day for him to be otherwise engaged. Then he sought old Tubal Kittridge. 165

"There's something I want you to do for me," he said.

"Shore—shore; anything in the world," Kittridge agreed eagerly.

"Aunt Nancy won't hear of my going over to the Turrentines'," hesitated Creed. "I looked for them to be here—some of them—long before this."

"Huh-uh; ah, Law, no—they won't come in the daytime," smiled Kittridge.

Creed looked annoyed.

"They will be welcome, whenever they come," he asserted. "What I want you to do is to go to Jephthah Turrentine and say to him that I thought I ought to go over, and that I'll do so now if he wants me to—or I'll meet him here at the office, or anywhere he says."

"Huh-uh—uh!" Old Tubal shook his head, his eyes closed in quite an ecstasy of negation. "You cain't git Jep Turrentine in the trap as easy as all that," he said half contemptuously. "Why, he'd know what you was at a leetle too quick." 166

Bonbright looked helpless indignation for a moment, then thought better of it and repeated:

"I want you to go and tell him that I'm right here, ready to answer for anything I've done, and that I would like to talk to him about it. Will you do it?"

"Oh,—all right," agreed Kittridge in an offended tone. "There's plenty would stand by ye; there's plenty that would like to see the Turrentines run out of the country; but if ye want to fix it some new-fangled way I reckon you'll have to." And to himself he muttered as he took the road homeward, "I say go to the Turrentines with sech word at that! That boy must think I'm as big a fool as he is."

At the Turrentine home life dragged on strangely. Jephthah in his own cabin, busied himself overhauling some harness. The boys had been across at the old place, presumably making a thorough inspection of the scene of the trouble. Judith went mechanically about her tasks, cooking and serving the meals, setting the house in order. Only once did she rouse somewhat, and that was when Huldah Spiller flounced in and flung herself tempestuously down in a chair. 167

"How you come on, Judy?" inquired the red-haired damsel.

"About as usual," returned Judith coldly, and would fain have added, "none the better for seeing you."

"I jest had to run over and see how you was standin' it," Huldah pursued vivaciously. "I cried all night—didn't you?"

"What for?" inquired Judith angrily.

"Oh—I don't know. I'm jest thataway. Git me started an' thar's no stoppin' me. But then I've

knowed Creed so mighty long—him an' me was powerful good friends, and my feelin's is more tenderer than some folks's anyhow."

"Huldy," said Judith in a tone so rigidly controlled that it made the other jump, "ef you'll jest walk yo'self out of here I'll be obliged to you. I've stood all I can. I don't want to say anything plumb bad to you, but ef you set thar an' talk to me like that for another minute I will."

"Oh, you po' thing!" cried Huldah, jumping to her feet. "I declare to goodness I forgot all about you an' Blatch. Here I've been carryin' on over Creed Bonbright—and you mighty near a widder. You po' thing!"

Judith faced around with such blazing eyes from the biscuits she was moulding that Huldah beat a hasty retreat, dodged out of the door, and ran up the slope. At Jim Cal's cabin she paused and looked about her uncertainly. Iley had the toothache, and for various reasons was proving a poor audience for her younger sister's conversation. The day had been a trying one to Huldah's excited nerves, a sad anti-climax after the explosions of the night before. It was five o'clock. The men were all over at the old place. If she but had an excuse to follow them, now. Why, the whole top of the Bald above Foeman's Bluff, and the broad shelf below it, were covered with huckleberry bushes! She put her head in at the door. Iley looked up from the hot brick which she was wrapping in a wet cloth with ten drops of turpentine on it preparatory to applying the same to her cheek above the swollen tooth.

"Ef you say 'Creed Bonbright'—or 'kill'—or 'Blatch Turrentine,'—to me, I vow I'll hit ye," she warned shrilly. "I ain't never raised hand on ye yet sence ye was a woman grown, but do it I will!"

"I wasn't goin' to say nothin' about nothin'," asserted Huldah sweepingly. "I was jest goin' to ax did ye want any huckleberries, and git a pail to pick some."

She sought out a small tin lard bucket as she spoke, and Iley's silence presumably assenting, within twenty minutes was picking away eagerly on the Bald above the bluff.

Below her stretched meadows drunk with sun—breathless. A rain crow called from time to time "C-c-c-cow! cow! cow!" The air was still heavy with faint noon-day smells, the sky tarnished with heat.

"I wonder where in all creation them boys has got theirselves to," she ruminated as she peered about, dragging green berries and leaves into her bucket, for which Mrs. Jim Cal would afterward no doubt scold her soundly. "'Pears to me like I hearn somebody talkin' somewhars."

She pushed cautiously down to the edge of the rocks where the bushes grew scatteringly, pretending to herself that she wanted a bit of wild geranium that flourished in a crevice far below the top. Setting down her pail she threw herself on her face, her arms over the edge, and reached. But the fingers hung suspended, opened in air, her mouth open too, and she listened greedily to faint sounds of men's voices.

"I'll bet it's old Ab Foeman's hideout that nobody but him and the Cherokees knowed of," she muttered to herself. "Some one's found it and—Lord, look at that!"

From the bushes below her, coming apparently out of the living rock itself, crept Andy, and then Jeff Turrentine. Now she could see the narrow, door-like opening of the cave which had given them up, and realised how, from below, it passed for a mere depression in the rock.

Huldah drew back silently, inch by inch, and instinctively pulled her black calico sunbonnet over her red curls as she crouched down among the huckleberry bushes. When she looked again Andy and Jeff had disappeared, but she could see the head and shoulders of a man who still lay at the cave's mouth—and that man was Blatch Turrentine!

At first she shuddered, thinking that she had come upon the dead body; then she noted a tiny trail of smoke, and, by craning a little farther around, saw that Blatchley lay at ease with a pipe in his mouth, smoking.

"The triflin', low-down, lyin' hound!" she muttered to herself. "I'm a-goin' this very minute and tell Creed Bonbright."

She hesitated, glanced over her shoulder in the direction of the Turrentine cabin, then bent dubiously and set up her overturned bucket. Not a berry had spilled from it, yet the sight of its mishap gave her an idea. Quietly slipping through the bushes till she was far enough away to dare run, she hurried home to the cabin.

"Iley," she gasped, as soon as she put her head in at the door, "I upsot my berry pail and lost most of the fruit. Can you make out with that?" and she set the little bucket on the table.

"I reckon I'll have to, ef you've got so work-brickle ye won't pick any more," returned Iley.

"I would—I'd git ye all ye need," protested Huldah with unexpected meekness, "but I'm jest obliged to go over to—" she had all but said Creed Bonbright's, but she caught herself in time and concluded lamely. "I jest have obliged to run down to Clianthy Lusk's and see can she let me have her crochet needle for to finish up my shawl."

She delayed for no criticism or demur on Iley's part, but was off with the last word, and once out of sight of Jim Cal's cabin she took a short cut through the woods and ran; but in spite of her best efforts darkness began to gather before she won to the high road, for the evening had closed in early, thick and threatening; a mountain thunder-storm was brewing. Opposite a tempestuous, magnificent sunset, there had reared in the eastern sky a tremendous thunder-head, a palace of a thousand snowy domes, turning to gold, and then flushing from base to

crown like a gigantic many-petalled rose. It swept steadily up and over, hiding the sky, and leaving the earth in almost complete darkness. There were low rolls of thunder, at first mellow and almost musical, crashing always louder and stronger as they came nearer. The wind thrashed and yelled through the tossing forest; and as she approached the Card cabin she heard the banging of barn shutters, the whipping of tree boughs against the windows. There were the first spears of rain flung at roof and door; and it was in the torrent itself which followed fast that Huldah beat upon that closed door, giving her name and demanding entrance. Within, Creed Bonbright sprang up from where he sat with a book in his hand, his eyes fixed on vacancy, and would have answered her, but Old Nancy put a hasty palm over his lips.

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"Hush—for God's sake," she whispered.

They stood in the lighted cabin, all on foot by this time, and listened intently, tall Creed, the little grey-haired woman clinging to him and restraining him, Doss with his light eyes goggling, and Little Buck and Beezy hand in hand, studying their grandmother's face, not their father's.

"Who is it?" quavered Nancy. "I'm all alone in here, and I'm scared to let wayfarers in."

"It's me—Huldy Spiller—Aunt Nancy," called back the voice in the rain.

"Well, I vow! You know how things air, Huldy—what do ye want, chile?"

"I want Creed Bonbright. I've got something to tell him."

"Thar—ye see now," breathed the old woman, turning toward Creed. Then she raised her voice.

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"He ain't here, honey," she lied unhesitatingly.

"Why don't ye go to his office—that's whar he stays at."

"Oh, for the Lord's sake—Aunt Nancy!" came back the girl's shrill, terrified tones. "I've done been to the office; I know in reason Creed ain't there, or he'd a-answered me. Please let me in; I'm scared some of the Turrentines'll come an' ketch me."

At this Creed strode to the door, Nancy dragging back on his arm and Buck and Beezy seconding her with all their small might, while Provine spluttered ineffectually in the background.

"Hit's a lie," hissed Nancy. "She's a decoy. Ef you open that thar do' with the light on ye, they'll shoot ye over her shoulders. Hit was did to my man thataway in feud times. Don't you open the do' Creed."

"Why, Aunt Nancy," remonstrated Creed, almost smiling, "this isn't like you. There's nothing but a girl there in the rain. Keep out of range if you're scared. I'm sure going to open that door."



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"They stood in the lighted cabin and listened intently."

As he made ready to do so Nancy flew back to the table and blew out the light, and the next minute Huldah Spiller, dripping like a mermaid, was standing in the middle of the darkened room, and Doss Provine, breathing short, was barring the door behind her.

"Who's here?" gasped the girl peering about the gloom. "What air you-all a-goin' to do to me?"

Nancy relighted the lamp and set it on the table, and Huldah discovered with a long-drawn

sobbing sigh of relief that there was no one save the immediate family present.

"I came quick as I could," she began in the middle of her story, grasping Creed by the arm and shaking him in the violence of her emotion and insistence. "Blatch Turrentine's alive. Andy and Jeff have got him hid out. I seed him myse'f with my own eyes, in a hideout thar below Foeman's Bluff, not more'n a hour ago. I'll bet he aims to layway you, ef he cain't git ye hung for murderin' of him. You got to git out o' here. It was as much as my life was worth to come over and tell ye. I'm afraid to go back. I'm goin' right on down to Hepzibah and stay thar."

"Come up closer to the fire," commanded Nancy, who had watched the girl keenly throughout her recital. "Doss, put some sticks on and git a little blaze so she can dry herself. Huldah, you're a good girl to come over and warn Creed—when was you aimin' to go to Hepzibah?" She looked up from the hearth where she knelt with the frankest inquiring gaze.

"To-night—right now," half whimpered Huldah. "I'm scared to go back. I'm scared to be here on the mountain at all."

"And did ye aim to have Creed go along of ye?" old Nancy questioned mildly.

"Yes—yes—he'd better," agreed Huldah hysterically. "Hit's the onliest way for him now."

Nancy caught Creed's eye above the girl's drenched head, and shook her own warningly. Leaving Doss to look after the newcomer, she drew the young justice into the kitchen.

"Whatever ye do," she warned him hastily, "don't you put out with that red-headed gal in the dark. Things may be adzackly as she says—looks to me like she thinks she's a-speakin' the truth; but then agin the Turrentines might a' sent her for to draw you out. They wouldn't like to shoot ye in my cabin, 'caze they know me and my kinfolks would be apt to raise a fuss; but halfway down the mountain with this sweetheart of Wade's—huh-uh, boy; I reckon they could tell their own tale then, of how you come by yo' death. Don't you go with her."

"I wasn't aiming to, Aunt Nancy," said Creed quietly. "As soon as I heard that Blatch Turrentine was alive, I intended to go right over and have a talk with old Jephthah. He's a fair-minded man, and if he is informed that his nephew is living I think he and I can come to terms."

"Fa'r-minded man!" echoed Nancy contemptuously. "Jephthah Turrentine a fa'r-minded man! Well, Creed, ef I hadn't no better eye for a fat chicken than you have for a fa'r-minded man, you wouldn't enjoy yo' dinner at my table as well as you do. I say fa'r-minded! This thing has got into a feud, boy, and in a feud you cain't trust nobody—*nobody!*"

Creed went back into the room, and Nancy reluctantly followed him. Huldah was getting dry and warm, and that fluent tongue of hers was impatiently silent. As soon as she saw the returning pair she began to repeat again the details of her information—how she had glimpsed the hidden man through the bushes, how she knew in reason he could be none other than Blatch. Nancy exchanged a glance of intelligence with Creed.

"Ye see!" she murmured, aside. "Ef she *ain't* a decoy they've sont, she don't know nothin' for sartin."

"I'm scared of all the Turrentines," Huldah declared. "They're awful folks. From the old man down to Jude, they scare me. I reckon Jude's had a big hand in this," she went on excitedly. "Her and Blatch is goin' to wed shortly, and she'd be shore to know any meanness he was into. I'll be glad to git shet of sech. When you're ready to be a-steppin' Creed, I am."

She looked up at the young fellow with a sort of unwilling worship.

"I don't aim to go with you, Huldah," he said gently. "You love Wade Turrentine, and Wade loves you; you was to be wedded this fall. I don't aim for any affairs of mine to part you two."

The girl hung her head, painfully flushed, her eyes full of tears.

"I don't care nothin' about Wade," she choked. "Him and me has—"

"I reckon you've quarrelled" said Creed, sympathetically. "That needn't come to anything. I'm going over and talk to Jephthah Turrentine to-morrow morning, and I want you to come with me!"

"No," said Huldah getting to her feet and looking strangely at him. "The rain's about done now; the moon'll be comin' up in half a hour—I'm a-goin' on down to Hepzibah, like I said I was. Ef Wade Turrentine wants me, he knows whar to come for me. Ef he thinks of me as he said he did the last time we had speech together—w'y, I never want to put eyes on his face again. Oh—Creed, I wish't you'd come with me!"

"But it was me you quarrelled about," remonstrated Bonbright with that sudden clear vision which ultra-spiritual natures often show, and that startling forthrightness of speech which amazes and daunts the mountaineer. "I'm the last man you ought to leave the mountain with, Huldah, if you want to make up with Wade."

"How—how did you know?" whispered the girl, staring at him. "Well, anyhow, I ain't never a-goin' back thar."

She could not be prevailed on to go to bed with Aunt Nancy, when Doss Provine and the children were asleep, and Creed had gone to his quarters in the little office building, but sat by the fire all night staring into the embers, occasionally stirring them or putting on a stick of wood. At the earliest grey of dawn she waked Nancy, bidding the elder woman fasten the door after her. Declining in strangely subdued fashion her hostess's offer of hot coffee, she stepped noiselessly out and, with a swift look about, dived into the steep short-cut trail which led almost

straight down the face of Big Turkey Track, from turn to turn of the main road.

A cloud clung to the Side; the foliage of only the foremost trees emerged from its blur, and these were dimmed and flatted as though a soft white veil were tangled among their leaves. Into this white mystery of dawn the girl had vanished.

Nancy looked curiously after her a moment, then glanced swiftly about as Huldah had done, her eyes dwelling long on Creed's little shack, standing peaceful in the morning mists. Softly she turned back, and closed and barred the door.

Chapter XII

In the Lion's Den

At seven o'clock, despite entreaties and warnings, Creed mounted his mule and set out for the Turrentine place.

"Don't you trust nothin' nor nobody over thar," Nancy followed him out to the gate to reiterate. "Old Jephthah Turrentine's as big a rascal as they' is unhung. No—I wouldn't trust Judith neither (hush now, Little Buck; you don't know what granny's a-talkin' about); she's apt to git some fool gal's notion o' being jealous o' Huldy, or something like that, and see you killed as cheerful as I'd wring a chicken's neck. (For the Lord's sake, Doss, take these chil'en down to the spring branch; they mighty nigh run me crazy with they' fussin' an' cryin'!) Don't you trust none on 'em, boy."

"Why, Aunt Nancy, I trust everybody on that whole place, excepting Blatchley Turrentine," said Creed sturdily. "Even Andy and Jeff, if I had a chance to talk to them, could be got to see reason. They're not the bloodthirsty crew you make them out. They're good folks."

She looked at him in exasperation, yet with a sort of reluctant approval and admiration.

"Well," she sighed, as she saw him mount and start, "mebbe yo' safer goin' right smack into the lion's den, like Dan'el, than you would be to sneak up."

Summer was at full tide, and the world had been new washed last night. Scents of mint and pennyroyal rose up under his mule's slow pacing feet. The meadow that stretched beyond Nancy's cabin was a green sea, with flower foam of white weed and dog-fennel; and the fence row was a long breaker with surf of elder blossom, the garden a tangle of bean-vine arbours. The corn patch rustled valiantly; the pastures were streaked with pale yellow primroses; and Bob Whites ran through the young crops, calling.

Creed rode forward. A gay wind was abroad under the blue sky. Every tiniest leaf that danced and flirted on its slender stem sent back gleams of the morning sunlight from its wet, glistening surface. The woods were full of bird songs, and the myriad other lesser voices of a midsummer morning sounded clear and distinct upon the vast, enfolding silence of the mountains.

It seemed beyond reason out in that gay July sunshine that anything dark or tragic could happen to one. But after all man cannot be so different from Nature which produces him, and the night before had given them a passionate, brief, destructive thunder-storm. Creed noted the ravages of it here and there; the broken boughs, the levelled or uprooted herbage, the washed and riven soil, as his mule moved soberly along.

At the Turrentine cabin all was quiet. The young men of the house had been out the entire night before guarding the trails that Creed Bonbright should not leave the mountains secretly. A good deal of moonshine whiskey went to this night guarding, particularly when there was the excuse of a shower to call for it, and the watchers of the trails now lay in their beds making up arrears of sleep. Jephthah stood looking out of his own cabin door when, about fifteen minutes ahead of Creed, Taylor Stribling tethered his half-broken little filly in the bushes at the edge of the clearing, and ran across the grassy side yard.

"Bonbright's out an' a-headin' this way!" he volleyed in a hoarse whisper as he approached the head of the clan.

"Who's with him?" asked Jephthah, turning methodically back into the room for the squirrel gun over the door.

"Nobody. He ain't got no rifle. I reckon he's packin' a pistol, though, of course. Nancy Cyard bawled an' took on considerable when he started. Shall I call the boys?"

"No," returned Jephthah briefly, replacing the clean brown rifle on its fir pegs. "No, I don't need nobody, and I don't need Old Sister. I reckon I can deal with one young feller alone."

He walked unhurriedly toward the main house. Stribling stood looking after him a moment, uncertainly. The spy's errand was performed. He had now his dismissal; it would not do to be seen about the place at this time. He went reluctantly back to the waiting filly, mounted and turned her head toward a high point that commanded the big road for some distance. A little

later Jephthah Turrentine sat in the open threshing-floor porch of the main house smoking, Judith within was busy looking over and washing a mess of Indian lettuce and sissles in a piggin, when Creed rode into the yard.

The ancient hound thumped twice with a languid tail on the floor; Judith, back in her kitchen, stayed her hand, and stared out at the newcomer with parted lips which the blood forsook; Jephthah's inscrutable black eyes rose to Creed's face and rested there; nothing but that aspect, pale, desolate, ravaged, the strip of plaster running from brow to cheek, marked the difference between this visit and any other.

Yet the old house seemed to crouch close, to regard him askance from under lowering eyes, as though through all its timbers ran the message that the enemy was here.

"Good morning," he hailed.

"Howdy. 'Light—'light and come in," Jephthah adjured him, without rising, "I'm proud to see ye."

His own countenance was worn and haggard with sleeplessness and anxiety, but with the mountaineer's dignified reticence he passively ignored the fact, assuming a detached manner of mild jocularity.

Creed, under inspection from six pairs of eyes, though there was only one individual visible to him, got from his mule, tethered the animal, and came and seated himself on the porch edge.

"Aunt Nancy didn't want me to come over this morning," he began with that directness which always amazed his Turkey Track neighbours and put them all astray as to the man, his real meaning and intentions.

"Well, now—didn't she?" inquired the other innocently. "Hit was a fine mornin' for a ride, too, and I 'low ye' had yo' reasons for comin' in this direction—not but what we're proud to see ye on business or on pleasure."

"Are any of the boys about?" asked Creed, suddenly looking up.

"I don't know adzackly whar the boys is at," compromised Jephthah, soothing his conscience with the fiction that one might be lying in one bed and another in some place to him unknown. "Was there any particular one you wanted to see?"

"I was looking for Wade," said Creed briefly, and a silent shock went through one of the men kneeling on the bed inside the log wall, peering through a chink at the visitor.

Judith could bear the strain no longer. Torn by diverse emotions, she snatched up a bucket, ran out of the back door and down to the spring. Returning with it, and her composure somewhat repaired, she dipped a cool and dripping gourdful, walked swiftly through the front room and stood abruptly before Creed, presenting it with almost no word of greeting, only the customary, "Would ye have a fresh drink?"

"Thank you," said Creed taking the gourd from her hand and lifting his eyes to her face. He needed no prompting now; his own heart spoke very clearly; he knew as he looked at her that she was all the world to him—and that he was utterly lost and cut off from her.

Jephthah, on the porch, and those unseen eyes within, watched the two curiously, while Creed drank from the gourd, emptied out what water remained, and returned it to Judith, and she all the while regarded him with a burning gaze, finally bursting out:

"What do you want to see Wade about? Is it—is it Huldy?"

"Yes, Miss Judith, it's Huldah," Creed assented quietly.

"I don't know as its worth while talkin' to Wade about that thar gal," put in Jephthah meditatively. "She sorter sidled off last night and left the place, and I think he feels kinder pestered and mad like. My boys is all mighty peaceful in their dispositions, but it ain't the best to talk to any man when he's had that which riles him."

"Whar is Huldy Spiller?" demanded Judith standing straight and tall before the visitor, disdainful of the indirection of her uncle's methods. "Is she over at you-all's?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to Wade about," returned Creed evasively. "Huldah's a good girl, and I'm sorry if he thinks—I'd hate to be the one that—"

For a moment Judith stared at him with incredulous anger, then she wheeled sharply, went into the house and shut the door. Creed turned appealingly to the older man. He had great faith in Jephthah Turrentine's good sense and cool judgment. But the young justice showed in many ways less comprehension of these, his own people, than an outsider born and bred. Jephthah Turrentine was no longer to be reckoned with as a man—he was the head of a tribe, and that tribe was at war.

"I don't know as that thar gal is worth namin' at this time," he vouchsafed, almost plaintively. "Ef she had taken Jim Cal's Iley 'long with her, I could fergive the both of 'em and wish ye joy. As it is, she's neither here nor thar. Ef you had nothin' better to name to my son Wade, mebbe we'd as well talk of the craps, and about Steve Massengale settin' out to run for the Legislature."

Creed stood up, and in so doing let the little packet of papers he held in his hand drop unnoted to the grass. He scorned to make an appeal for himself, yet it seemed worth while to let his adversaries know that he was aware what they would be at.

"Who found Blatch Turrentine's body and removed it?" he asked abruptly.

Blatch's body,—unknown to his uncle and Judith—at that moment reposing comfortably upon a bed in the loft room adjoining the porch, heaved with noiseless chuckles.

Old Jephthah's eyes narrowed. "We 'low that ye might answer that question for yo'self," he said coolly. "Word goes that you've done hid the body, so murder couldn't be proved."

The visitor sighed. He was disappointed. He had hoped the old man might have admitted—to him—that Blatch had not been killed.

"Mr. Turrentine," he began desperately, "I know what you people believe about me—but it isn't true; I'm not a spy. When I came upon that still, I was running for my life. I never wanted to know anything about blockaded stills."

"Ye talked sort o' like ye did, here earlier in the evenin'," said the old man, rearing himself erect in his chair, and glaring upon the fool who spoke out in broad daylight concerning such matters.

"I didn't mean that personally," protested Creed. "I wish to the Lord I didn't know anything about it. I'm sorry it chanced that I looked in the cave there and saw your son——"

"You needn't go into no particulars about whar you looked in, nor what you seed, nor call out no names of them you seed," cut in the old man's voice, low and menacing; and around the corner of the house Jim Cal, where he had stolen up to listen, trembled through all the soft bulk of his body like a jelly; and into his white face the angry blood rushed.

"Wish ye didn't know nothin? Yes, and you'll wish't it wuss'n that befo' yo're done with it," he muttered under his breath.

"I don't intend to use that or any other information against a neighbour and a friend," Creed went on doggedly. "But they can't make me leave the Turkey Tracks. I'm here to stay. I came with a work to do, and I mean to do it or die trying."

The old man's head was sunk a bit on his breast, so that the great black beard rose up of itself and shadowed his lower face. "Mighty fine—mighty fine," he murmured in its voluminous folds. "Ef they is one thing finer than doin' what you set out to do, hit's to die a-tryin'. The sort of sentiments you have on hand now is the kind I l'arned myself out of the blue-backed speller when I was a boy. I mind writin' em out big an' plain after the teacher's copy."

Creed looked about him for Judith. He had failed with the old man, but she would understand—she would know. His hungry heart counselled him that she was his best friend, and he glanced wistfully at the door through which she had vanished; but it remained obstinately closed as he made his farewells, got dispiritedly to his mule and away.

Judith watched his departure from an upper window, smitten to the heart by the drooping lines of the figure, the bend of the yellow head. Inexorably drawn she came down the steep stairs, checking, halting at every step, her breast heaving with the swift alternations of her mood. The door of the boys' room swung wide; her swift glance descried Wade's figure just vanishing into the grove at the edge of the clearing.

The tall, gaunt old man brooded in his chair, his black eyes fixed on vacancy, the pipe in his relaxed fingers dropped to his knee. Up toward the Jim Cal cabin Iley, one baby on her hip and two others clinging to her skirts, dodged behind a convenient smoke-house, and peered out anxiously.

Judith stepped noiselessly into the porch; the old man did not turn his head. Her quick eye noted the paper Creed had dropped. She stooped and picked it up unobserved, slipped into the kitchen, studying its lines of figures which meant nothing to her, caught up her sunbonnet and, glancing warily about, made an exit through the back door. She ran through a long grape-arbour where great wreathing arms of Virgin's Bower aided to shut the green tunnel in from sight, then took a path where tall bushes screened her, making for the short cut which she guessed Creed would take.

Down the little dell through which she herself had ridden that first day with what wonderful thoughts of him in her heart, she got sight of him, going slowly, the lagging gait of the old mule seeming to speak his own depression. The trees were all vigorous young second growth here, and curtained the slopes with billows of green. The drying ground sent up a spicy mingling of odours—decaying pine needles, heart leaf, wintergreen berries, and the very soil itself.

Bumblebees shouldered each other clumsily about the heads of milk-weed blossoms. Cicada droned in long, loud crescendo and diminuendo under the hot sun of mid forenoon. A sensitive plant, or as Judith herself would have said, a "shame briar," caught at her skirts as she hastened. Dipping deeper into the hollow, the man ahead, riding with his gaze upon the ground, became aware of the sound of running feet behind him, and then a voice which made his pulses leap called his name in suppressed, cautious tones. He looked back to see Judith hurrying after him, her cheeks aflame from running, the sunbonnet carried in her hand, and her dark locks freeing themselves in little moist tendrils about her brow where the tiny beads of perspiration gathered.

"You dropped this," she panted, offering the paper when she came abreast of him.

For a moment she stood by the old mule's shoulder looking up into the eyes of his rider. It was the reversal of that first day when Creed had stood so looking up at her. Some memory of it struggled in her, and appealed for his life, anyhow, from that fierce primitive jealousy which would have sacrificed the lover of the other woman.

"I—I knowed the paper wasn't likely anything you needed," she told him. "I jest had to have speech with you alone. I want to warn you. The boys is out after you. They ain't no hope, ef the Turrentines gits after you. Likely we're both watched right now. You'll have to leave the mountains."

Creed got quickly from the mule and stood facing her, a little pale and very stern.

"Do you hold with them?" he asked. "I had no intention of killing Blatch. The quarrel was forced on me, as they would say if they told the truth."

"Well, they won't tell the truth," said Judith impatiently. "What differ does it make how come it? They're bound to run ye out. Hit's a question of yo' life ef ye don't go. I—I don't know what makes me come an' warn ye—but you and Huldy had better git to the settlement as soon as ye can."

Creed saw absolutely nothing in her coupling of his name with Huldah Spiller's, but the fact that both were under the displeasure of the Turrentines. She searched his face with hungry gaze for some sign of denial of that which she imputed. Instead, she met a look of swift distress.

"I've got to see Wade about Huldah," Creed asserted doggedly. "I promised her—I told her——"

Judith drew back.

"Well, see Wade then!" she choked. "There he is," and she pointed to the wall of greenery behind which her quicker eyes had detected a man who stole, rifle on shoulder, through the bushes toward a point by the path-side.

"What do I care?" she flung at him. "What is it to me?—you and your Huldy, and your grand plans, and your killin' up folks and a-gittin' run out o' the Turkey Tracks! Settle it as best ye may—I've said my last word!"

Her breast heaved convulsively. Bitter, corroding tears burned in her flashing eyes; rage, jealousy, thwarted passion, tenderness denied, and utter terror of the outcome—the time after—all these tore her like wild wolves, as she turned and fled swiftly up the path she had come.

The pale young fellow with the marred, stricken face, standing by the mule, looked after her heavily. Those flying feet were carrying away from him, out of his life, all that made that life beautiful and blest. Yet Creed set his jaw resolutely, and facing about once more, addressed himself to the situation as it was.

"Wade—Wade Turrentine!" he called. "Come out of there. I see you. Come out and talk to me."

With all the composure in life Wade slouched into the opening of the path.

"You've got good eyes," was his sole comment. Then, as the other seemed slow to begin, "What might you want speech with me about?" he inquired.

"It's about Huldah," Creed opened the question volubly now. "You love her, and she loves you. She came over to warn me because we are old acquaintances and friends, and I guess she don't want you to get into trouble. Is it true that her life is not safe if she stays here on the mountain?"

Wade's pleasant hazel eyes narrowed and hardened.

"You're a mighty busy somebody about things that don't consarn ye," he remarked finally.

"But this does concern me," Creed insisted. "I can't be the cause of breaking up a match between you and Huldah——"

He would have gone further, but Wade interrupted shaking his head.

"No—I reckon you cain't. Hit'd take more than you to break up any match I was suited with. Mebbe I don't want no woman that's liable to hike out and give me away whenever she takes the notion."

"Oh, come now, Wade," said Bonbright, with good-natured entreaty in his voice. "You know she wouldn't give you away. She didn't mean any harm to you. I'll bet you've done plenty of things twice as bad, if Huldah had the knowing of them."

"Mebbe I have," agreed Wade, temperately, and suddenly one saw the resemblance to his father. "Mebbe I have—but ye see I ain't the one that's bein' met up with right now. I ain't carin' which nor whether about Huldy Spiller; but *you've* got to walk yo'self from the Turkey Tracks—and walk sudden and walk straight, Mr. Creed Bonbright—or you'll come to more trouble with the Turrentines. I tell ye this in pure good will."

Chapter XIII

In the Night

In dark silence Judith made ready a late breakfast for the boys, leaving her coffee-pot as of

custom on its bed of coals in the ashes, hot bread in the Dutch oven, and a platter of meat on the table. Jeff and Andy straggled in and ate, helping themselves mutely, with sidelong glances at her stormy face.

During the entire forenoon Wade was off the place, but the twins put in their time at the pasture over the breaking of a colt to harness. Old Jephthah was in his room with the door shut. Jim Cal, almost immediately on Creed's departure, had retired to the shelter of his own four walls, and, sick and trembling, taken to his bed, after his usual custom when the skies of life darkened.

Dinner was got ready with the same fury of mechanical energy. During its preparation Iley stole to the door and looked in. The only women on the place, held outside the councils of the men, she longed to make some unformulated appeal to Judith, to have at least such help and comfort as might come from talking over the situation with her. But when the desolate dark eyes looked full into hers, and uttered as plainly as words the question that the sister dreaded, Jim Cal's wife turned and fled.

"She might as well 'a' said 'Huldy,'" whimpered the vixen, plucking at her lip and hurrying back, head down, to her own cabin.

The day dragged its slow length. The sun in the doorway had crept to the noon-mark, and away again. Flies buzzed. A cicada droned without. The old hound padded in to lie down under the bed.

After dinner Jephthah went away somewhere, and the boys gathered in their room, whence Judith could hear the clink and snap which advised her that the guns were having a thorough overhauling, cleaning, and oiling. She looked helplessly at the door. What could she do? Follow Creed as Huldah had done? At the thought, all her bitterness surged back upon her. What had she been able to accomplish when she stood face to face alone with him on the woods-path? Nothing. She turned and addressed herself once more savagely to her tasks. That was what women were for—women and mules. Men had the say-so in this world. She—she the owner of this house, its real mistress—was to cook three meals a day for the men folks, and see nothing and say nothing.

Supper was the only meal at which the entire family gathered that day. It was eaten in an almost unbroken silence, the younger boys plainly hesitating to speak to either Judith or their father. Save for elliptical requests for food, the only conversation was when Wade offered the opinion that it looked like it might rain before morning, and his father replied that he did not think it would. Leaving the table without further word, Jephthah returned to his own quarters; the boys drifted away one by one giving no destination.

The light that used to wink out in friendly fashion from the smaller cabin across the slope was darkened. Jim Cal had crawled out of bed after a somewhat prolonged conversation with Wade. A little later he had sullenly harnessed up a mule of Blatch's and, with Iley and the children, started for old Jesse Spiller's, out at Big Buck Gap, the sister maintaining to the last that Huldah must certainly have gone out to pap's, and would be found waiting for them at the old home.

There was nobody left on the place but Judith and her uncle. The girl went automatically about her Saturday evening duties, working doggedly, trying to tire herself out so that she might sleep when the time came that there was nothing to do but go to bed. As she passed from her storeroom, which she had got Wade to build in the back end of the threshing-floor porch, to the great open fireplace where a kettle hung with white beans boiling that would be served with dumplings for the Sunday dinner, as she took down and sorted over towels and cloths that were not needed, but which made a pretext for activity, her mind ground steadily upon the happenings of the past days. She could see Creed's face before her as he had looked the night of the play-party. What coarse, crude animals the other men were beside him! She could hear his voice as it spoke to her in the dark yard at the Bonbright place, and her breath caught in her throat.

She must be up and away; she must go to him and warn him, protect him against these her fierce kindred.

Then suddenly came the vision of Creed's laughing mouth as he bent to claim the forfeited kiss when Huldah Spiller had openly pushed herself across the line "and mighty nigh into his arms." Huldah had run hot-foot to warn him. Arley Kittridge brought word of having seen her dodge into the Card orchard on her way to the house on the evening before, and nobody had had sight of her since.

Judith's was a nature swayed by impulse, more capable than she herself was aware of noble action, but capable also of sudden, irrational cruelty. Just now her soul was at war with itself, embittered by rage, by what she had done, by what she had left undone, by her helplessness, by what she desired to do. Finally, despairing of any weariness bringing sleep—she had tried that the night before and failed—she put by her work and went up to her room, undressed and lay down in the dark.

For a long time she interrogated the blackness about her with wide open eyes. The house was strangely still. She could hear the movement and squawk of a chicken in one of the trees in the side yard when some fellow lodger disturbed it, or a sudden breeze shook the limb upon which it roosted. She wondered if the boys had come back yet and slipped in quietly. Had she slept at all? About eleven o'clock there arose an unquiet, gusty, yet persistent wind, that moved the cedar tree against the edge of the porch roof and set it complaining. For a time it moaned and protested like a man under the knife. Then its deep baritone voice began to cry out as though it were calling upon her. The tree had long ceased to mean anything other than Creed to Judith,

and now its outcry aroused her to an absolute terror. Again and again as the wind the tree, so those tones shook her heart with their pain and love and anguish of entreaty.

Finally she arose in a kind of torture, slipped on her clothes and went through all the rooms. They were silent and empty. Not a bed had been disturbed. She breathed loud and short in irrepressible excitement.

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"They're all over at the still," she whispered, clutching at the breast of her dress, and shivering. But the old man never went near the still, she knew that. For a while she struggled with herself, and then she said, "I'll just go and listen outside of Uncle Jep's door. That won't do any harm. Ef so be he's thar, then the boys is shore at the still. Ef he ain't—"

She left her mentally formed sentence unfinished and, on feet that fear winged, stole through the side yard, across the long, lush, uncut grass to her uncle's door.

The old man must have been a light sleeper, or perhaps he was awake before she approached, for he called out while she yet stood irresolute, her hand stretched toward the big wooden latch.

"Who's thar?"

Startled, abashed, she replied in a choked, hesitating tone.

"It's only me—Jude. I reckon I'm a fool, Uncle Jep. I know in reason there ain't nothin' the matter. But I jest couldn't sleep, and I got up and looked through the house, and the boys is all gone, and I got sorter scared."

He was with her almost instantly.

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"I reckon they're all over 'crost the gulch," he said in his usual unexcited fashion, though she noted that he did not go back into his room, but joined her where she lingered in the dark outside.

"Of course they air," she reassured herself and him. "Whar else could they be?"

"Now I'm up, I reckon I mought go over yon myself," the old man said finally. "My foot hurts me this evening; I believe I'll ride Pete. I took notice the boys had all the critters up for an early start in the mornin'."

Both knew that this was a device for investigating the stables, and together they hurried to the huddle of low log buildings which served to house forage and animals on the Turrentine place. Not a hoof of anything to ride had been left. The boys would not have taken mules or horse to go to the still—so much was certain. In the light of the lantern which Jephthah lit the two stood and looked at each other with a sort of consternation. Then the old man fetched a long breath.

"Go back to the house, Jude," he said not unkindly, putting the lantern into her hand; and without another word he set off down the road running hard.

Chapter XIV

The Raid

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Earlier that same Saturday evening, while Judith Barrier was fighting out her battle, and trying to tire down the restless spirit that wrung and punished her, Nancy Card, mindful of earlier experiences in feud times, was getting her cabin in a state of defence.

"You know in reason them thar Turrentines ain't a-goin' to hold off long," she told Creed. "They're pizen fighters, and they allus aim to hit fust. No, you don't stay out in that thar office," as Creed made this proffer, stating that it would leave her and her family safer. "I say stay in the office! Why, them Turrentines would ask no better than one feller for the lot of 'em to jump on—they could make their brags about it the longest day they live of how they done him up."

So it came to pass that Creed was sitting in the big kitchen of the Nancy Card cabin while Judith wrought at her fruitless labours in her own home. Despite the time of year, Nancy insisted on shutting the doors and closing the battened shutters at the windows.

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"A body gets a lot of good air by the chimney drawin' up when ye have a bit of fire smokin'," she said. "I'd ruther be smothered as to be shot, anyhow."

Little Buck and Beezy, infected by the excitement of their elders, refused peremptorily to go to bed. "Let me take the baby," said Creed holding out his arms. "She's always good with me. She can go to sleep in my lap."

"Beezy won't go to sleep in *nobody's* lap," that young lady announced with great finality. "Beezy never go to sleep *no* time—*nowhere*."

"All right," agreed the young fellow easily, cutting short a futile argument upon the grandmother's part. "You needn't go to sleep if you can stay awake, honey. You sit right here in Creed's lap and stay awake till morning and keep him good company, won't you?"

The red head nodded till its flying frazzles quivered like tongues of flame. Then it snuggled down on the broad breast, that moved rhythmically under it, and very soon the long lashes drooped to the flushed cheeks and Beezy was asleep.

Aunt Nancy had picked up Little Buck, but that young man had the limitations of his virtues. Being silent by nature he had not so much to keep him awake as the loquacious Beezy, and by the time his father on the other side of the hearth had dropped asleep and nearly fallen into the fire a couple of times, been sternly admonished by the grandmother, and gone to fling himself face down upon a bed in the corner, Little Buck was sounder asleep than his sister.

The old woman got up and carried her grandson to the bed, laid him down upon it and, taking basin and towel, proceeded to wipe the dusty small feet before she took off his minimum of clothing and pushed him in between the sheets.

"Minds me of a foot-washin' at Little Shiloh," she ruminated. "Here's me jest like the preacher and here's Little Buck gettin' all the sins of the day washed off at once."

She completed her task, and was taking Beezy from Creed's arms to lay her beside her brother on the bed, when a tap—tap—tapping, apparently upon the window shutter, brought them both to their feet, staring at each other with pale faces.

"What's that?" breathed Nancy. "Hush—hit'll come again. Don't you answer for your life, Creed. Ef anybody speaks, let it be me."

Again the measured rap—rap—rap!

"You let my Nick in," murmured Beezy sleepily, and Creed laughed out in sudden relief. It was the wooden-legged rooster, coming across the little side porch and making his plea for admission as he stepped.

Something in the incident brought the situation of affairs home to Creed Bonbright as it had not been before.

"Aunt Nancy," he said resolutely, "I'm going to leave right now and walk down to the settlement. I've got no business to be here putting you and the children in danger. It's a case of fool pride. They told me down at Hepzibah that I'd be run out of the Turkey Tracks inside of three months if I tried to set up a justice's office here. I felt sort of ashamed to go back and face them and own up that they were right—that I had been run out. I ought to have been too much of a man to feel that way. It makes no difference what they say—the only thing that counts is that I have failed."

"You let me catch you openin' that do' or steppin' yo' foot on the road to-night!" snorted Nancy belligerently. "Why, you fool boy, don't you know all the roads has been guarded by the Turrentines ever since they fell out with ye? They 'lowed ye would run of course, and they aimed to layway ye as ye went. I could have told 'em ye wasn't the runnin' kind; but thar, what do they know about—"

She broke off suddenly, her mouth open, and stood staring with fear-dilated eyes at Creed.

"Hello!" came the hail from outside.

Nancy let the baby slip from her arms to the floor, and the little thing stood whimpering and rubbing her eyes, clinging to her grandmother's skirts.

"Hush—hush!" cautioned the old woman, barely above her breath.

"Hello! Hello in thar! You better answer—we see yo' light. Hello in thar!"

"Whose—voice—is that?" breathed old Nancy.

"It sounded like Blatch Turrentine's," Creed whispered back as softly.

"Hit do," she agreed with conviction.

Suddenly a shot rang out, and Doss Provine sat up on the edge of the bed with a gurgle of terror. Little Buck wakened at the same instant, and ran to his grandmother.

"I ain't scared, Granny," he asseverated, "I kin fight fer ye."

"Hush—hush!" cautioned Nancy, bending to gather in the sun-burned tow head at her knee.

Another shot followed, and after it a voice crying,

"You've got Creed Bonbright in thar. You let him come out and talk to us, or we'll batter yo' do' in."

"You Andy—you Jeff!" shouted the old woman in sudden rage. "Ef you want Creed Bonbright you know whar to find him. You go away and let my do' alone."

"You quit callin' out names, Nancy Cyard," responded the first, menacing voice out of the darkness. "We know Bonbright's in thar, and we aim to have him out—or burn yo' house—accordin' to yo' ruthers."

Creed had parted his lips to answer them, when old Nancy sprang at him and set her hand over his open mouth.

"You hush—and keep hushed!" she whispered urgently.

"I just wanted to call to the boys and tell them I'm here," Creed whispered to her. "Aunt Nancy, I'm bound to go out there and talk to them fellows. I can't stay in here and let you and the children suffer for it."

"Aw, big-mouthed, big-talkin' brood—what do I keer for them?" demanded Nancy, tossing her head with a characteristic motion to get the grey curls away from her fearless blue eyes; whereupon the tucking comb slipped down and had to be replaced, "You ain't a-goin' out thar," she whispered vehemently from under her raised arm, as she redded back the straying locks with it. Nancy had the reckless, dare-devil courage those blue eyes bespoke. Presuming a bit, perhaps, on her age and sex, she yet ran risks that many men would have shunned without deeming themselves cowards. "You ain't a-goin' out thar, I tell ye," she reiterated. "I wouldn't let ye ef they burnt the house down over our heads. Pony'll be along pretty shortly from Hepzibah, and when he sees 'em I reckon he's got sense enough to git behind a bush and fire at 'em—that'll scatter 'em."

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As if inspired to destroy this one slender hope, the voice outside spoke again, tauntingly.

"Nancy Cyard, we've got yo' son Pony here—picked him up on the road—an' ef yo'r a mind to trade Creed Bonbright for him, we'll trade even. Better dicker with us. Somepin' bad might happen this young 'un."

At the words, Creed wheeled and made for the door, Nancy gripping him frantically but mutely.

"Creed—boy—honey!"—she breathed at last, "they's mo' than one kind o' courage. This is jest fool courage—to go an' git yo'se'f killed up. Them Turrentines won't hurt Pone. But you—oh, my Lord!"

"I reckon ye better let him go, maw," Doss Provine chattered from the bed's edge where he still crouched. "Hit's best that it should be one, ruther than all of us."

Old Nancy flung him a glance of wordless contempt. Beezy ran and tangled herself in the tall young fellow's legs, halting him.

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"Creed," the old woman urged, still below her breath, holding to his arm. "Creed, honey, as soon as you open that do' and stand in the light, yo'r no better than a dead man. Listen!"

All caution had been thrown aside by the besiegers. Hoarse voices questioned and answered outside, sounds of stumbling footsteps surrounded the house.

"Boys," called Creed in that clear, ringing voice of his that held neither fear nor great excitement, "I'm coming out to talk to you. Aunt Nancy, take the children away. You've got it to do."

"Well, come on," replied the voice without. "Talk—that's all we want. You'll be as safe outside as in—and a damn' sight safer."

Nancy gathered up her youngsters, flung them in a heap into their father's lap, and, overturning and putting out the candle as she went, sprang to the hearth to quench a small flame which had risen among the embers there.

"Ye might have some sense!" she panted angrily. "The idea of walkin' yo'se'f into a lighted doorway for them fellers to shoot at! For God's sake don't open that do' till I get the lights out!"

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But Creed was not listening. He had pulled the big pine bar that held the battened door in place, and now flung it wide, stepping to the threshold and beginning again,

"Boys——"

He uttered no further word. A rifle spoke, a bullet sang, passed through the cabin and buried itself in the old-fashioned chimneypiece. Creed fell where he stood. As he went down across the threshold, Nancy whirling around to the door, bent over his prostrate form.

Outside, the ruddy, shaken shine from a couple of lightwood torches which stood alone, where they had been thrust deep into the garden mould made strange gouts and blotches of colour on Nancy's flower beds. A group of men halted, drawn together, muttering, just beyond the palings. Each had a handkerchief tied across the lower part of his face, a simple but effectual disguise.

Her groping hand came away from the prostrate man, red with blood; she dashed it across her brow to clear her eyes of blowing hair. At the moment a figure burst through the grove of saplings by the roadside, a tall old man whose long black beard blew across his mighty chest that laboured as he ran. His hat was off in his hand, his face raised; he had no weapon. With a gasp of relief Nancy recognised him, yet rage mounted in her, too.

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"Yes—come a-runnin'," she muttered fiercely. "Come look at what you and yo'rn have done!"

As he leaped into the clearing the old man's great black eyes, full of sombre fire, swept the scene. They took in the prone figure across the threshold, the blood upon the doorstone, and on Nancy's brow and hair.

"Air ye hurt? Nancy, air ye hurt?" he cried, in such a tone as none there had ever heard from him.

"Am I hurt?—No!" choked the old woman, trying to get a hold on Creed's broad shoulders and drag him back into the room. "I ain't hurt, but it's no credit to them wolves that you call sons of yo'rn. They've got Pone out thar, ef they hain't shot him yit. And they've killed the best man that ever come on this here mountain. Oh, Creed—my pore boy! You Doss Provine! Come here an' he'p me lift him." She reared herself on her knees and glared at the group by the gate. "He had no better sense than to take ye for men—to trust the word ye give, that he was safe when he opened the do'. Don't you come a step nearer, Jep Turrentine," she railed out at him suddenly, as the old man drew toward the gate. "I've had a plenty o' you an' yo' sons this night. They're

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jest about good enough to shoot me while I'm a-tryin' to git this po' dead boy drug in the house, an' then burn the roof down over me an' my baby chil'en. You Doss Provine, walk yo'se'f here an' he'p me."

Doss, who found the presence of Jephthah Turrentine reassuring, whatever his mother-in-law might say, slouched forward, and between them they lifted the limp figure.

"God knows I don't blame ye, Nancy," muttered the old man in his beard, as the heavy door was dragged shut, and the bar dropped into place. Then he advanced upon the men at the palings.

At Jephthah's first appearance the tallest of these had dropped swiftly back into the shadows on the other side of the road and was gone. Unsupported, the four or five who were left shuffled uneasily, beneath the old man's fierce eye.

"Where's Pone Cyard?" he demanded.

"We hain't tetched him, pap. We never seed him. We said that to draw 'em."

"Huh!" ejaculated Jephthah, as though further comment were beyond him. "Git yo' ridin' critters," he gave the short, sharp order. "Fetch Pete to me." And he whirled his back, and stalked out into the main road.

A hundred yards or so up, there was a sound of hoofs and tearing bushes, as the boys came through the greenery with their mules. Pete was led up and the bridle-rein presented in meek silence. By the dim, presaging light of the little waning moon, delaying somewhere down below the shoulder of Big Turkey Track, old Jephthah took it, set foot in stirrup, and made ready to swing to saddle. Then he slowly withdrew the foot and turned back.

"Take them cussed rags off o' yo' faces!" he burst out in a fury of contempt. "Now. Who laid out this night's work? Well, speak up—how come it?"

Dead silence answered. Of the three who faced him not one—lacking the leader who had skulked away at Jephthah's approach—could have explained just why he was there. And none of them would betray the man who had led them there and left them to answer as best they might for their actions to the head of the tribe.

"Uh-huh, I thort so," nodded the old man bitterly, as they yet stood mute. "Ain't got a word to say for yo'selves. No, and they ain't a word to be said. Yo' sons in my house. I was thar—I was standin' with ye about this business. Why couldn't this be named to me? What call had ye to sneak around me—to make a fool o' me, an' shame me?"

He waited. Receiving no response, he concluded as he got to the mule's back,

"You do me thisaway once mo'—jest once mo'—and hit will be a plenty."

With that he gave Pete the rein, and the mule's receding heels flung dust in the dismayed countenances he left behind him.

Chapter XV

Council of War

The Turrentine clan was gathering for consultation, Judith knew that. It was Sunday, and much of this unwonted activity passed as the ordinary Sabbath day coming and going. But there was a steady tendency of tall, soft-stepping, slow-spoken, keen-eyed males toward old Jephthah's quarters, and Judith had got dinner for the two long-limbed, black-avised Turrentine brothers, Hawk and Chantry, from over in Rainy Gap; and old Turrentine Broyles, a man of Jephthah's age, had ridden in from Broyles's Mill that morning.

With the natural freedom of movement that Sunday offers, information from the Card neighbourhood came in easily. Inevitably Judith learned all the details of last night's raid; and everybody on the place knew that Creed Bonbright was alive, and that he was not even seriously wounded. He had been observed through the open door of Nancy's cabin moving about the rooms inside. Arley Kittridge declared that he had seen Bonbright, in the grey of early morning, his head bound up and his left arm in a sling, cross from Nancy's house to his office and back again, alone.

Sunday brought the Jim Cals home, too. Iley, humiliated and savage, bearing in her breast galling secret recollections of Pap Spiller's animadversions on her management of Huldah, raged all day with the toothache, and a pariah dog might have pitied the lot of the fat man.

All day, as Judith cooked, and washed her dishes, and entertained her visitors, the events of last night's raid were present with her. When at the table one of the boys stretched a hand to receive the food she had prepared, she looked at it with an inward shuddering, wondering, was this the hand that fired the shot?

All day as she talked to her women visitors of patchwork patterns, or the making of lye soap, as

she admired their babies and sympathised with their ailments, her mind was busy with the inquiry what part she should take in the final inevitable crisis. She remembered with a remorse that was almost shame how, at their last interview, she had plucked back from Creed her rescuing hand in jealous anger. That big mother kindness that there was in her spoke for him, pleaded loud for his life, when her hot passionate heart would have had revenge for his slight.

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Yes, she had to save Creed Bonbright if she could, and to be of any use to him she must know what was planned against him. It was dark by the time the women-folk had gone their ways and the men remaining had assembled definitely in old Jephthah's separate cabin. No gleam of light shone from its one window. Judith watched for some time, then taking a bucket as a pretext walked down the path to the cow-lot, which led her close in to the cabin. She could hear as she approached the murmur of masculine voices. Secure from observation in the darkness, she crept to the window and listened, her head leaned against the wooden shutter. Old Jephthah was speaking, and she realised from his words that she had chanced upon the close of their council.

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The big voice came out to her in carefully lowered tones.

"Well, Broyles, yo' the oldest, an that's yo' opinion. Hawk an' Chantry says the same. Now as far as I'm concerned—" the commanding accents faltered a little—"I'm obliged to agree with you. The matter has got where we cain't do no other than run him out. I admit it. I'll say yes to that."

Judith trembled, for she knew they spoke of Creed.

"Well, Jep, you better not put too many things in the way," came accents she recognised as Turrentine Broyles's, "or looks like these-here boys is liable to find theirselves behind bars befo' snow flies."

"Huh-uh," agreed the old man's voice. "I know whar I'm at. I ain't lived this long and got through without disgrace or jailin' to take up with it at my age; but they don't raid no more cabins. I freed my mind on that last night; I made myself cl'ar; an' that's the one pledge I ax for. Toll him away from the place and layway him, if you must, to run him out. But they's to be no killin', an' no mo' shootin' up houses whar they is women and chil'en. This ain't no feud."

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"All right—we've got yo' word for it, have we?" inquired Buck Shalliday eagerly. "You'll stand by us?"

Suddenly a brand on the hearth flamed up, and Judith peering through a crack of the board shutter had sight of her uncle standing, his height exaggerated by the flickering illumination, tall and black on the hearthstone. About him the faint light fell on a circle of eager, drawn faces, all set toward him. As she looked he raised his hand above his head and shook the clenched fist.

"I've got obliged to," he groaned. "God knows I had nothing against Creed Bonbright. And I can't say as I've got anything against him yit. But I've got a-plenty against rottin' in jail. I'd ruther die."

"Will ye come with us, pap?" Jim Cal instantly put the question, and as he spoke the light went suddenly out.

"No," returned old Jephthah doggedly. "I won't make nor meddle. I've give you my best advice; I sont for Hawk an' Chantry, here, an' for Turn Broyles, to do the same. We've talked it over fa'r an' squar', aimin' to have ye do this thing right—" He broke off, and then amended sombrely, "—As near right as sech a thing can be did. But you-all boys run into this here agin' my ruthers, an' you'll jest have to git out yo'selves. All I say is, no killin', and no raidin' of folks' homes."

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"No *mo'* killin', ye mean,—don't ye?" asked Jim Cal. The fat man, goaded beyond reason, was ready to turn and fight at last.

"No, I don't," answered his father. "When I mean a thing I can find the words to say it without any advice. As for Blatch bein' killed—you boys think yo' mighty smart, but you'd show yo' sense to tote fair with me and tell me all that's goin' on. I wasn't born yesterday. I've seen interruptions and killin's befo' I seen any of you. An' I'll say right here in front o' yo' kinfolks that's come to he'p you out with their counsels—an' could do a sight better ef you'd tell 'em the truth—that I never did think it was likely that Creed Bonbright made away with a body inside of fifteen minutes. That tale's too big for me—but I'm askin' no questions. Settle it your own way—but for God's sake settle it. Him knowin' what he does an' havin' been did the way you boys have done him, he's got to go. Run him out—an' run him out quick. Don't you dare tell me how, nor when, nor what!"

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Judith started back as the sounds within told her that the men were groping their way to the door. As she stood concealed by darkness, they issued, made their quiet adieux, and went over to the fence where she could hear the stamping of the tethered animals. Cut off from the house, she retreated swiftly down the path toward the stable and would have entered, but some instinct warned her back. As she paused uncertain, hearing footsteps approaching from behind, indefinably sure that there was danger in front, there sounded a cautious low whistle. Those who came from the cabin answered it. She drew back beneath one of the peach-trees by the milking-pen—the very one from which Creed had broken the blossoming switch, with which she reproached him. Flat against its trunk she crouched, as six men went past her in the gloom.

"Who's here?" demanded a voice like Blatch Turrentine's, and at the sound she began suddenly to shudder from head to foot. Then she pulled herself together. This was no ghost talking. It was the man himself.

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"Me," answered Jim Cal's unmistakable tones, "an' Wade, an' Jeff, an' Andy. Buck and Taylor's

both with us—and that’s all.”

The man within opened the grain-room door, and the six newcomers entered.

“Whar’s old man Broyles, an’ Hawk an’ Chantry?” questioned Blatch.

“They rid off home,” said Shalliday.

“Well, what does Unc’ Jep say?” demanded Blatch, plainly not without some anxiety.

Before anyone could answer,

“Hark ye!” came Jim Cal’s tones tremulously. “Didn’t I hear somebody outside? Thar—what was that?”

In her excitement and interest Judith had moved nearer with some noise.

“I vow, podner,” came Blatch’s rich, rasping tones. “Ef I didn’t know it was you I’d be liable to think they was a shiverin’ squinch-owl in here with us. Buck, step out and scout, will ye? Git back as soon as ye can, ’caze we’re goin’ to have a drink.”

She heard the rattle of a tin cup against the jug. As she moved carefully down the way toward the spring, Blatch’s voice followed her, saying unctuously:

“Had to go through hell to get this stuff—spies a-follerin’ ye about, an’ U.S. marshals a-threatenin’ ye with jail—might as well enjoy it.”

She dipped her bucket in the spring branch, and bore it dripping up the path a short way. If Buck Shalliday met her, she had an errand and an excuse for her presence which might deceive him. When she came within sight of the stables once more she set down her bucket and stood listening long. Something moved outside the logs. They had posted their sentry then. She groaned as she realised that what she had heard was inadequate and insufficient. The knowledge was there to be had for a little daring, a little cunning.

Just as she had become almost desperate enough to walk up to the place and make pretence of being one with them, a stamp from the figure outside the corner told her that it was a tethered mule instead of a man. Emboldened she stole nearer, and found a spot where she could crouch by the wall so hidden among some disused implements that she might even have dared to let them emerge from their hiding-place and pass her. Again Blatch was speaking.

Blatchley Turrentine had come to his uncle’s house, a youth of seventeen—a man, as mountain society reckons things. At that time Andy and Jeff were seven-year-olds, Wade a big boy of thirteen; and even Jim Cal, of the same years but less adventurous in nature, had been so thoroughly dominated by the newcomer that the leadership then established had never been relinquished. And now the artfully introduced whiskey had done its work; these boys were quite other than those who had gone in sober and grave less than half an hour before, their father’s admonitions and the counsels of old man Broyles and their Turrentine kindred lying strongly upon them.

Judith heard no demur as Blatch detailed their plans.

“They’s no use to go to Unc’ Jep with what I’ve been a-tellin’ ye,” the voice of natural authority proclaimed. “I tell ye Polk Sayles says he’s seen Bonbright meet Dan Haley about half way down the Side—thar whar Big Rock Creek crosses the corner of the Sayles place—mo’ than once sense he’s been on the mountain. Now with what that man knows, and with the grudges he’s got, you let him live to meet Dan Haley once mo’ and even Unc’ Jep is liable to the penitentiary—but tell it to Unc’ Jep an’ he won’t believe ye. He’s got a sort of likin’ for the feller.”

“That’s what I say,” Jim Cal seconded in a voice which had become pot-valiant. “Pap is a old man, and we-all that air younger have obliged to take care on him.”

At any other time these pious sentiments would have brought a volley of laughter from Blatchley, but this evening Judith judged from the sounds that he clapped the fat man on the shoulder as he said heartily:

“Mighty right you air, James Calhoun. Unc’ Jep is one of the finest men that ever ate bread, but his day is pretty well over. Ef we went by him and old man Broyles and Hawk and Chantry, we’d find ourselves in trouble mighty shortly. They’s but one way to toll Bonbright out to whar we want him. We’ve got to send word that Unc’ Jep will meet him at moonrise and talk to him. The fool is plumb crazy about talkin’ to folks, and looks like he cain’t get it through his head that Unc’ Jep ain’t his best friend. It’ll fetch him whar nothin’ else will.”

“And we’ve got to hunt up something else for you to ride, Blatch, ef Jim Cal an’ me takes the mules,” Jeff remarked. “Jude mighty nigh tore up the ground when she found we’d had Selim last night. She give it out to each and every that nobody is to lay a hand on him day or night from this on.”

The girl outside heard Blatch’s hateful laugh, and knew with a great throb of rage who had ridden her horse the night before.

There was a stir among the men seated, Judith conjectured, on the grain-room floor, and a little clinking, as the jug of corn whiskey was once more brought into play by Blatch. Presently,

“All right,” said Buck Shalliday. “I’ll bring Lige’s mule. And I’ll have a message got to Bonbright that Jephthah Turrentine wants to see and talk with him out at Todd’s corner at moonrise a-Monday night. Will that suit ye?”

“Hit’ll answer,” returned Blatch. “Let’s see,” he calculated; “that’ll be about two o’clock. Ef he

comes up to the scratch we'll git Mr. Man as he goes by the big rock in the holler across from the spring. That rock and the bushes by it gives plenty of cover. They's bound to be light enough to see him by, with the moon jest coming up, and I want to hear from every man present that he'll shoot at the word. I don't want any feller in the crowd that'll say he didn't pull trigger on Bonbright. Ef we all aim and shoot, nary a one of us can say who killed him—and killed he's got to be."

The listening girl hoped for some demur, but Blatch Turrentine and his potent counsellor, the jug, dominated the assembly, and there came a striking of hands on this, a hoarse murmuring growl of agreement. She doubled low to avoid being seen against the sky and hurried back toward the cabin as she heard the men preparing to leave the grain-room.

Brave as any one of them there, enterprising and full of the spirit of leadership, Judith addressed herself promptly to saving Creed Bonbright. She went straight to her uncle's cabin. No mountaineer ever raps on a door. Judith shook the latch, at first gently, then, getting no response, more and more imperatively, at length opening and walking in, with a questioning, "Uncle Jep?"

There was no answer, no sound or movement. With hasty fingers she raked together the brands of the fire; they flickered up and showed her an untenanted room. The bed was untouched, the old man's hat and coat were gone. The pegs above the door where Old Sister always rested were empty.

Instantly there flashed upon Judith the intuition that her uncle, heartsick and ill-affected toward the quarrel, had silently withdrawn until it should have been settled one way or another. Well, she must work alone.

Chapter XVI

A Message

When Judith stole noiselessly into the house and up to her room, she could hear the boys preparing for bed in their own quarters, with unwonted jesting and laughter, and even some occasional stamping about which suggested horse-play; and her lip curled angrily as she recalled Blatch's jug of corn whiskey.

She lay thinking, thinking; and at length there evolved itself in her mind a plan for getting Creed safely out of the mountains by way of an ancient Cherokee trail that ran down the gulch through a distant corner of the old Turrentine place. By this route they would reach the railroad town of Garyville, quite around the flank of Big Turkey Track from Hepzibah. She could do that. She knew every step of the way. The trail was a disused, forgotten route of travel, long fenced across in several places, and scoured out of existence at certain points by mountain streams; but she had known every foot of it in years past; she could travel it the darkest night; and Selim was her own horse; she need ask nobody.

When she got so far, came the pressing question of how to send word to Creed. She must see and warn him before the men put their plan into practice. But she was well aware that she herself was under fairly close espionage, and that her first move in the direction of Nancy Card's cabin would bring the vague suspicions of her household to a certainty. Where to find a messenger? How to so word a message that Creed would answer it? These were the questions that drove sleep from her pillow till almost morning.

She rose and faced the dawn with haggard eyes. Unless she could do something this was the last day of Creed's life. In a tremor of apprehension she got through her morning duties, cooking and serving a breakfast to the three boys, who made no comment on their father's absence, and whose curious looks she was aware of upon her averted face, her down-dropped eyelids. She felt alone indeed, with her uncle gone, and the boys who had been as brothers to her almost since babyhood suddenly become strangers, their interests and hers hostile, destructive to each other.

Woman will go to woman in a pinch like this, and in spite of her repugnance at the thought of Huldah, Judith late in the afternoon made her way over to the Jim Cal cabin and asked concerning its mistress' toothache.

"Hit's better," said Iley briefly. Her head was tied up in a medley of cloths and smelled loud of turpentine, camphor, and a lingering bouquet of assafoetida. She was not a hopeful individual to enlist in a chivalrous enterprise.

"Huldy git back yet?" Judith asked finally.

"No, an' she needn't never git back," snapped Iley. "Her and Creed Bonbright kin make out best they may. I don't know as I mind her bein' broke off with Wade. One Turrentine in the fambly's enough fer me."

"Air her and Creed Bonbright goin' to be wedded?" inquired Judith scarcely above her breath.

"Air they?" echoed Xantippe, settling her hands on her hips and surveying Judith with an angry stare, the dignity of which was sadly impaired by a yellow flannel cloth-end which persisted in dabbling in her eye. "Well, I should hope so! I don't know what gals is comin' to in this day an' time—follerin' 'round after the young men like you do. Ef I'd a' done so when I was a gal my mammy'd have took a hickory to me. That's what she would. Here's Jim Cal be'n rarin' around here like a chicken with its head off 'caze Huldy run away with Creed Bonbright, and here *you* air askin' me do I think Creed and Huldy is apt to marry. What kind of women do ye 'low the Spiller gals is, anyhow?"

Judith turned away from so unpromising an ally. She was accused of running after Creed Bonbright. When he got her message it would be with Huldah Spiller beside him to help him read it. The thought was bitter. It gave that passionate heart of hers a deadly qualm; but she put it down and rose above it. Huldah or no Huldah, she could not let him die and make no effort.

Leaving Jim Cal's cabin she walked out into the woods, and only as she turned at the edge of the clearing and looked back to find Iley furtively peering after her from the corner of the house did she realise that the woman's words had been dictated because she had been taken into the confidence of the men and set to keep an eye on Judith.

At the conviction a feeling of terror began to gain ground. She was like a creature enmeshed in a net weak in its cordage, but many-stranded and hampering; turn whichever way she would some petty restriction met her. She moved aimlessly forward, reasonably sure that she was not followed or observed, since she was going away from rather than toward the Card place. About a mile from the cabin of old Hannah Updegrove, a weaver of rag carpet, she suddenly came upon two little creatures sitting at a tree-foot playing about one of those druidical-looking structures that the childhood of the man and the childhood of the race alike produce. It was Little Buck and Beezy come to spend the day with old Hannah who, on their father's side, was kin of theirs, and making rock play-houses in the tree-roots to put over the time. Judith ran to the children, gathered them close, and hugged them to her with whispered endearments in which some tears mingled.

Then for half an hour followed the schooling of Little Buck for the message which he was to carry, and which Beezy must be so diverted that she would not even hear.

Judith plaited grass bracelets for the fat little wrists, fashioned bonnets of oak leaves, pinning them together with grass stems, and then sending Beezy far afield to gather flowers for their trimming. On long journeys the little feet trudged, to where the beautiful, frail, white meadow lilies rose in clumps from the lush grass of the lowlands. She fetched cardinal flowers from the mud and shallow water beyond them, or brought black-eyed Susans from the sun of open spaces. And during these expeditions Judith's catechism of the boy went on.

"How you goin' to git home, Little Buck?"

"Pappy's a-comin' by to fetch us."

"When?"

"A little befo' sundown?"

"You goin' straight home?"

"Yes, Jude, we' goin' straight home to Granny, why?"

"Never mind, honey. Is Creed there at yo' house?"

A silent nod.

"Is—honey, tell Jude the truth—is it true that he ain't bad hurt? Could he ride a nag?"

Little Buck looked all around him, drew close to his big sweetheart, and pulled her down that he might whisper in her ear.

"I know somethin' that Granny and Creed don't know I know, but I mus'n't tell it to anybody—only thest you. Creed—no, he ain't so awful bad hurt—he walks everywheres most—he's a-goin' to take the old nag and go over to Todd's corner to see yo' Unc' Jep, about moonrise to-night. They said that—Granny an' Creed. An' they fussed. Granny, she don't want him to go; but Creed, he thest will—he's bull-headed, Creed is."

Judith caught her breath. They had got the message to him then, and he was going. Well, her appointment with him must be first.

"Little Buck, honey, ef you love me don't you forget one word I say to you now," she whispered chokingly, holding the child by both hands.

He rounded eyes of solemn adoration and acquiescence upon her.

"You say to Creed Bonbright that Judith Barrier says he must come to her at the foot of Foeman's Bluff—on yon side—as soon after dark as he can git there. Tell him to come straight through by the short cut; hit'll be safe; nobody'll ever study about him comin' in this direction. As soon after hit's plumb dark as he can git there—will ye say that? Will ye shore tell Creed an' never tell nobody but Creed?"

"But he won't go," said Little Buck wisely. "Granny's scared to have him go to talk to yo' Unc' Jep, but she'd be a heap scareder to have him come to you, 'caze you' one o' the Turrentines too—ain't ye, Judith?"

Judith's face whitened at the weakness of her position.

"I would come, Judith, because I love you an' you love me—but Creed, he won't," said the boy.

"You tell him Little Buck," she whispered huskily, terror and shame warring in her face, "tell him that I do love him. Tell him I said for God's sake to come—if he loves me."

The child's eyes slowly filled. He dropped them and stood staring at the ground, saying nothing because of the blur. Finally:

"I'll tell him that—ef you say I must," he whispered. And loving, tender Judith, in her desperate preoccupation, never noted what she had done to her little sweetheart.

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Chapter XVII

The Old Cherokee Trail

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"The supper's all ready for you boys," Judith called in to Wade whose whistle sounded from his own room. "Hit's a settin', kivered, on the hearth; the coffee-pot's on the coals. Would you-all mind to wait on yo'selves, an' would you put the saddle on Selim for me? I'm goin' over to Lusks'. I'll eat supper there; I may stay all night; but I'll be home in the mornin' soon to git you-all's breakfast."

"Why—why, pap 'lowed——"

"Well, Uncle Jep ain't here. Ef you don't want to——"

"Oh, that's all right Judith. Of course it's all right. But you say you're goin' to ride to Lusks'?—to ride?" hesitated Wade uneasily. Judith flung up her head and stared straight at him with angry eyes.

"Yes," she said finally, "when I leave this place for over night I'd ruther know whar my hoss is at. I'll take him along."

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"Oh,—all right," her cousin hastened to agree; "I never meant to make you mad, Jude. Of course I'd jest as soon saddle up for you. I don't wonder you feel thataway. I never like to have anybody use my ridin' critter."

Judith had made her point. She let it pass, and went sombrely on with her preparation for departure. Wade still hesitated uneasily. Finally he said deprecatingly,

"Ef ye don't mind waitin' a minute I'll eat my supper, an' ride over with ye—I was a-goin' after supper anyhow; I want to see Lacey Rountree ef he's not gone back home yit."

"I'll be glad to have ye," answered Judith quietly. "I don't mind waitin'." And Wade, plainly relieved, hurried out to the stables.

They rode along quietly in the late summer afternoon; the taciturn habit of the mountain people made the silence between them seem nothing strange. Arrived at the Lusks', both girls came running out to welcome their visitor. She saw Wade's sidelong glance take note of the fact that Grandpap Lusk led away Selim to the log stable. Lacey Rountree was gone home to the Far Cove, and Wade lingered in talk with Grandpap Lusk a while at the horse-block, then got on his mule and, with florid good-byes, rode back home, evidently at rest as to Judith.

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The evening meal was over. Judith helped Cliantha and Pendrilla prepare a bit of supper for herself, aided in the clearing away and dish-washing, and after they had sat for a while with Granny Lusk and the old man in the porch, listening to the whippoorwills calling to each other, and all the iterant insect voices of a July night, went to their own room.

"Girls," said Judith softly, drawing the two colourless little creatures to the bed, and sitting down with one on each side of her, "girls," and her voice deepened and shook with the strain under which she laboured, "I want you to let me slip out the back door here, put my saddle on Selim, and go home, quiet, without tellin' the old folks. I was goin' home by daylight in the mornin' anyhow, to get the boys' breakfast," as the girls stared at her in wordless surprise. "I've got a reason why I'd ruther go now—and I'd ruther the old folks didn't know. Will ye do this for me?"

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The sisters looked at each other across their guest's dark eager face, and fluttered visibly. They would have been incapable of deceit to serve any purpose of their own; they were too timid to have initiated any actions not in strict accordance with household laws; but the same gentle timidity which made them subservient to the rules of their world, made them also abject worshippers at the shrine of Judith's beauty and force and fire.

"Shore, shore," they both whispered in a breath.

"I hate to have ye go Jude—" began Cliantha; but Pendrilla interrupted her.

"An' yit ef Jude would ruther go—and wants to slip out unbeknownst, why we wouldn't say nothin' about it, and jest tell granny and grandpap in the mornin' that she left soon to git the boys' breakfast."

They watched her pass quietly out the back door and toward the log stable, their big blue eyes wide with childish wonder and interest. Judith with her many suitors, moving in an atmosphere of romance, was to them a figure like none other, and she was now in the midst of tragic doings; the glamour that had always been upon her image was heightened by the last week's occurrences. They turned back whispering and shut the door.

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Thus it was that Judith found herself on Selim, moving, free from suspicion or espionage, toward the point below Foeman's Bluff where she had sent word to Creed to meet her.

The big oaks shouldered themselves in black umbels against the horizon; pointed conifers shot up inky spires between them. The sky was only greyish black, lit by many stars, and Judith trembled to note that their dim illumination might almost permit one to recognise an individual at a few paces distance. Without misadventure she came to the spot designated, urged Selim in under the shadow of a tree, dismounted, and stood beside him waiting. Would Creed come? Would Huldah persuade him that the message was only a decoy? Would he come too late? Would some of the boys intercept him, so that he should never come at all?

At the last thought she started and leaned out recklessly to search the dark path with desperate eyes. Perhaps she had better venture forward and meet him. Perhaps after all it would be possible for her to get closer to Nancy Card's. Then in the midst of her apprehensions came the sound of shod hoofs.

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She had chosen this point for two reasons: first the old trail she meant to follow down the mountain passed in close to the spot; and second it was the last place they would expect Bonbright to approach; his way to it would never be guarded. But of course she ran the risk of Blatch himself or some of his friends and followers appearing. And now she held her breath in intense anxiety as the trampling came nearer.

There appeared out of the dense shadow of the bluff a man walking and leading a mule by its bridle. She knew the mule, because she got the silhouette of it against the sky, and directly after she saw that the man who led it was tall, with a bandaged head, which he carried in a manner unmistakable, and one shoulder gleaming white—she guessed that that was because his coat was off where the bandages lay under his white shirt and over the wound in his shoulder. It was Creed. With a throb of unspeakable thankfulness she realised that she had till now dreaded that if he came at all Huldah would be with him. She moved out from the dense shadow.

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"Whar—whar's Huldah?" she questioned before she would trust herself to believe. But Creed, full of the wonder of her message, dropped the mule's bridle and came toward her his uninjured arm outstretched. He put the inquiry by almost impatiently.

"Huldah? She went on down to Hepzibah soon Saturday morning," he said. "O Judith, did you mean it—that word you sent me by Little Buck?"

He came swiftly up to her, snatching her hand eagerly, pressing it hard against his breast, leaning close in the twilight to study her face.

"You couldn't mean it," he hurried on passionately, tremulously, "not now; you just pity me. Little Buck cried when he told me what you said, honey. He was jealous. But he needn't have been—need he Judith? You just pity me."

Creed's manner and his words were instant reassurance to Judith's womanly pride. But immediately on the relaxation of that pain rose clamouring her anxiety for his safety—his life.

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"Yes, yes, Creed," she murmured vehemently. "I did mean it—I sure meant every word of it. But we got to get right away from here. Do ye reckon ye can stand it to ride as far as the foot of the mountain? Ye got to go—and I'm here to take ye."

They drew out of the path and into the deep blackness beneath the trees. There was but a hundredth chance that anybody would be passing here, or watching this point, yet that hundredth chance must be guarded against.

Poor Creed, he detained her, he clung to her hands hungrily, and invoked the sound of her voice. So much hate had daunted him, the strength and sweetness of her presence, the warm tenderness of her tones, were like balm to his lacerated spirit.

"I couldn't go to-night—dear——" he faltered, abashed that the first word he uttered to her must be a denial. "You're mighty sweet and good to offer to take me—I don't know what I have ever done that you should risk this for me—but I'm to have a chance to talk to your Uncle Jephthah at moonrise to-night, and I can't turn my back on that. He's a fair-minded man and I'll make this thing right yet."

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Judith shuddered. "Don't you never believe it," she urged in a panting whisper. "Uncle Jep hadn't a thing on earth to do with that word goin' to you. He's left home. I can't find him nowhars, or I'd have went straight to him and begged him to help me out when I found what the boys was aimin' to do. Hit was Blatch planned it all. I tell ye Creed, Blatch Turrentine is alive—you never killed him when you flung him over the bluff—and while he lives you can't stay here. He's bound to kill ye."

"Have you seen Blatch, yourself, Judith?" Creed asked quickly.

"Oh, laws, no. He's a layin' out in the woods somewheres, aimin' to make Uncle Jep believe you killed him. But I heard him plain enough—I heard him and the boys fix it all up—hid out from Uncle Jep down in the grain-room. There's to be seven of 'em a-waitin' down by the big hollow, and when they git you betwixt them an' the sky at moonrise they're all promised to shoot at

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once, so that nary man dast to go back on the others when you're killed."

Wounded, appalled, the young fellow drew back from her and clung to the saddle of the old mule, with a boyish desire to hide his face against the arm which he threw over it.

"How they hate me!" he breathed at last. "Oh, I've failed—I've failed. I meant so well by them all—and I've got nothing but their hate. But I won't run. I never ran from anything yet. I'll stay here and take what comes."

Perhaps in his extremity the despair of this speech was but an unconscious reaching out for Judith's expressed affection, the warmth and consolation of her love. If this were so, the movement brought him what he craved. In terror she laid hold upon him, holding to his unwounded arm, pressing her cheek upon his shoulder, making her protest in swift passionate sentences.

"What good will it do for you to get yourself killed—tell me that? Every one of them men will be murderers, when you've stayed and seen it through. Lord, what differ is it whether sech critters as them love you or hate you? 'Pears to me I would ruther have their ill-will as their good-will. Don't you have no regards for them that is good friends to you? *I care. I understand what it was you was tryin' to do. I thort it was fine. Air you goin' to break my heart by stayin' here to git yourself killed? Oh, don't do it, Creed. You let me take you out of the mountains, or I'll never know what it is to sleep in peace.*"

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His arm slipped softly round her waist and drew her close against his side, so close that the two young creatures, standing silent in the midst of the warm summer night, could almost hear the beating of each other's heart. In spite of their desperate situation they were tremulously happy.

"I thank my God for you, Judith," murmured Creed, bending to lay his cheek timidly against hers. "Never was a man in trouble had such a sweet helper. It's mighty near worth it all to have found you. Maybe you never would have cared for me at all if this hadn't come about—if I hadn't needed you so bad."

Judith's lavish heart would have hastened to break its alabaster jar of ointment at love's feet with the impetuous avowal that he had been dear to her since first she looked on him. But there was instant need of haste; the situation was full of danger; that confession, with all its sweetness, might well wait a more secure time and place. She got to her horse glowing with hope, feeling herself equal to the dubious enterprise before them.

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"Whatever you say honey," Creed assured her. "Do with me as you will. I'm your man now."

They had wheeled their mounts toward the open.

"Hark! What's that?" whispered Judith.

The quavering cry of a screech-owl came across the gulch to them. The girl crouched in her saddle, shivering slightly, and stroking Selim's nose so that he might make no stir nor sound.

"They use—that—for a signal," she breathed at last. "The boys is out guardin' the trails. And 'pears like they're a-movin'. We got to go quick."

They set forth in silence; Judith riding ahead, skirted at a considerable distance the buildings on the old Turrentine place, then followed down a rocky stream-bed, dry now and leading abruptly into a ravine. Here the girl took her bearings by the summits she could see black against the star-lit sky, and, avoiding the open, made for the old Indian trail which would lead them directly down to Garyville. They could ride abreast sometimes, and they began to talk together in these broken intervals.

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"And Little Buck cried when he told you," Judith said, in that tender, brooding voice of hers. "That was my fault. I'm mighty sorry. I wouldn't 'a' hurt the child's feelings for anything; but I never thought."

"I fixed it up with him some," said her lover, quickly. "I told him you only said that because I was hurt and you was sorry for me. I thought I was telling the truth."

"Uncle Jep feels mighty bad about this business," she began another time, hastening to offer what consolation she could. "Nothin' would have made him willin' to it, but the fear that when you brought the raiders up he'd get took hisself. He ain't had nothin' to do with stillin' for more'n six year, but of course hit's on his land, and the boys is his sons. He says he's too old to go to the penitentiary."

Creed reached out in the gloom and got the girl's hand.

"Oh, Judith, darling!" he said eagerly. "Let me tell you right now, and make you understand—I never had any more notion of bringing raiders into the mountains than you have yourself. I do know that blockaded stills and what they mean are the ruin of this country; but honey, you've got to believe me when I say I never wanted to get any information about them or break them up."

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The girl harkened, with close attention to the man—the lover—but with simple indifference to the gist of what he was saying. It was plain that she would have loved and followed him had he been a revenue officer himself.

"I'll tell Uncle Jep," she said presently. "He'll be mighty proud. He does really set a heap of store by you, and they all know it. But I ain't never goin' to let you talk like that to him," she added, the note of proud possession sounding in her voice. "Ef you're goin' to live in the mountains you'll have to learn not to have much to say about moonshine whiskey and blockaded

stills—you never do know who you might be hittin’.”

“You’ll take good care of me, won’t you Judith?” he said fondly, pressing the hand he held. “And I reckon I need it—I surely do manage to get into misunderstandings with people. But that wasn’t the trouble with Blatch Turrentine—he never thought any such thing as that I was a spy. He was mad at me about something else—and I don’t know yet what it was.”

Judith laughed softly, low in her throat, so far had they come from the uncertainty, strain, and distress of an hour before. When next the trail narrowed and widened again, she came up on his left, the side of the injured arm, but which brought her nearer to him, leaned close and laying her hand on his shoulder, whispered,

“I reckon I know. I reckon you’ll have to blame me with Blatch’s meanness.”

“Why, of course that was it!” exclaimed Creed. He looped the bridle on his saddle horn, reached up and drew her hand across his shoulders and around his neck. “That’s what comes of getting the girl that everybody else wants,” he said with fond pride. “But nobody else can have her now, can they? Say it Judith—say it to me, dear.”

Judith made sweet and satisfying response, and they rode in silence a moment. Then she halted Selim thoughtfully.

“This path takes off to Double Springs, Creed,” she said, mentioning the name of a little watering place built up about some wells of chalybeate and sulphur water. “We might—do ye think mebbe we’d better go there?”

Creed, who felt his strength ebbing, calculated the distance. They had seen, as they made the last turn under the bluff, the lights flaring at the Garyville station. Double Springs was more than a mile farther. “I reckon Garyville will be the best, dear,” he returned gently. Then, “I wish I had cut a little better figure in this business—on account of you,” he added wistfully. “You’re everything that a man could ask. I don’t want you to be ashamed of me.”

“Ashamed of you!” Judith’s deep tones carried such love, such scorn of those who might not appreciate the man of her choice, that he was fain to be comforted.

“If we had known each other better from the first I reckon you would have kept me out of these fool mistakes I’ve made,” the young fellow said humbly.

“You ain’t made no mistakes,” Judith declared with reckless loyalty, “Hit’s the other folks—Blatch Turrentine and them that follers him—no good person could git along with them. Are you much tired Creed? Does yo’ shoulder pain you?”

“No, dear,” he said softly, laying his cheek against the hand which he had drawn around his neck. “Nothing pains me any more. I’m mighty happy.”

And together thus they rode forward in darkness, toward Garyville and safety.

Chapter XVIII

Bitter Parting

In the sickly yellow flare of the kerosene lamps around the Garyville station Judith got her first sight of Creed’s face: sunken, the blood drained from it till it was colourless as paper, the eyes wild, purple rimmed, haggard—it frightened her. She was off of Selim in a moment, begging him to get down and sit on the edge of the platform with her, here on the dark side where nobody would notice them, and they could decide what was to be done next.

He dismounted slowly, stumblingly, gained the edge of the platform, and there sat with drooping head. Judith tied the two animals and ran to sit beside him.

“Ye ain’t goin’ to faint air ye?” she asked anxiously. “Lean on me, Creed. I wish’t I knew what to do for ye!”

The young fellow, half unconscious indeed, put his head down upon her shoulder with a great shuddering sigh.

“I’ll be better in a minute, dear,” he whispered. “I reckon I got a little tired—riding so far.”

For some time Judith sat there, Creed’s head on her shoulder, the black night all about them, the little lighted station empty save for the clicking of the telegraph instrument, and the footsteps of the station master who had opened up for the midnight train. She was desperately anxious and at a loss which way to turn. And yet through all her being there rolled a mighty undernote of joy. As to the dweller on the coast the voice of the sea is the undertone to all the sounds of man’s activities, so beneath all her virginal hesitancies, her half terror of what she had done, surged and sang the knowledge that Creed was hers, her avowed lover. She, Judith, had him here safe; she had brought him away out of the mountains, from those who would have harmed him—and those who would have loved him too well. In all her plannings up to this time

she had never quite been able to see clearly what should come after getting Creed down into the valley. Over her stormily beating heart now there rose and fell a little packet of bills, savings above necessary expenditures on the farm, and her own modest expenses, savings which had been accumulating since Uncle Jephthah rented the place, and now amounted to some hundreds of dollars. These she had put in the bosom of her frock when she set out on this enterprise, with, as she now realised, the vaguest expectation of ever returning to her uncle's house.

"Creed," she whispered, "air ye better?"

"Yes," responded her charge, "yes—I'm better." But he made no movement to raise his head, and with eyes long accustomed to darkness she was able to see that his lids were still closed.

"Creed," she began again, "what shall I do for you now? Must I go ask at the hotel will they give you a room? Have you—have you got money with you?"

Bonbright roused himself.

"I'm all right now," he said in a strained tone. "Yes, dear, I've got some money with me, and a little more in the bank at Hepzibah. I can get hold of that any time I want to. I don't know just what I'll do," he looked around him bewildered. This had not been his plan, and the long ride down the mountain, and above all the happiness of being with Judith, of her avowals had made him forgetful of its exigencies. "I reckon I'll make out. You needn't worry about me any more, Judith. I'm safe down here."

These words sounded dreadfully like a dismissal to the girl. She locked her hands hard together in her lap and fought for composure. An older or a more worldly woman would have said to him promptly that she could not leave him in this case, and that if they were ever to be married it must be now. But all the traditions of the mountain girl's life and upbringing were against such a course. She gazed at him helplessly.

"I ain't got but one friend on this earth, looks like," began Creed wearily, as he got to his feet, "and now I'm obliged to send her away from me."

It was more than Judith could bear. She lifted her swimming eyes to him in the dusk; he was recovering self command and strength, but he was still white, shaken, the bandaged head and shoulder showing how close he had been to death. Her love overbore virgin timidity and tradition.

"Don't send me away then," she said in the deepest tones of that rich, passionate voice of hers. "Ef hit's me you're namin' when you speak of having but one friend—don't send me away, Creed."

He came close and caught her hand, looking into her face with wondering half comprehension of her words. That face was dyed with sudden, burning red. She hoped and expected that he would make the proffer which must come from him. When he did not, she burst out in a vehement, tense whisper,

"If—if you love me like you said you did——"

Creed hesitated, bewildered. He was too ill to judge matters aright, but he knew one thing.

"I do love you," he said with mounting firmness. "I may be a mighty poor sort of a fellow—I've begun to think so of late—but I love you."

Judith put out both hands blindly toward him whispering,

"And I love you. I don't want nothin' but to be with you an' help you, an' take keer of you. I'll never leave you."

For a moment the young fellow felt only the dizzy rapture of her frank confession. In that instant he saw himself accepting her sacrifice, taking her in his arms; in anticipation he tasted the sweetness of her lips. Then pure reason, that shrew who had always ruled his days, spoke loud, as the bitterness of his situation rolled back upon him.

"No—no!" he cried. "Judith—honey—I can't do that. Why, I'd be robbing you of everything in the world. Your kin would turn against you. Your farm would be lost to you, I reckon—I don't know when I'll be able to go back and claim mine."

In the moment of strained silence that followed this speech, with a sense of violent painful revulsion the girl pushed him back when he would timidly have clung to her. What woman ever appreciated prudence in a lover? It is not a lover's virtue. Her farm—her farm! He could listen to her confession of love for him, and speculate upon the chances of her losing her farm by it! She had one shamed, desperate instant when she would have been glad to deny the words she had spoken. Then Creed, reading her anger and despair by the light of his own sorrows, said brokenly:

"You feel—you're offended at me now—but Judith, you wouldn't love me if I had taken you at your word, and ruined all your chances in life. I—Judith—dear—I'll make this thing right yet. I'll come back—and you'll forgive me then."

With a sudden flaring up of strength he took quiet mastery of the situation. He kissed her tenderly, but sadly, not such a kiss as either could ever have imagined their first would be.

"I love you too well to let you wed a man that's fixed like I am—a man that's made such a failure of life—a fugitive—a fellow that has nothing to offer you, and no more standing with your people than a hound dog. I love you better than I do myself or my comfort—or even my life."

In anguished silence Judith received the caress; dumb with misery she got to her horse. Creed stood looking up at her for their last words, when, with a rattle and clang, the train from the North swept in and halted. Selim jibed and fought the bit as any sensible mountain horse feels himself entitled to do under similar circumstances; but Judith heeded him almost not at all.

"My Lord—who's that?" she cried, staring toward the lighted train where the figure of a man mounted the platform.

"What is it?" queried Creed.

"Hit looked like Blatch," whispered the girl; "but I reckon it couldn't a-been."

"Blatch!" echoed Creed, all on fire in an instant—where now was her poor invalid whose head she had pillowed, of whom she had thought to take care? "Blatch Turrentine!—Good-bye, honey—you mustn't be seen with me. If Blatch is here I've got to find and face him. You see that, don't you?—You understand."

And he turned and left her so. Oh, these men, with their quarrels and their nice points of honour—while a woman's heart bleeds under the scuffling feet!

She watched him hurry to the train, his staggering step advertising how unfit he was for any such attempt, watched him mount the platform where she had seen the man that looked like Blatch; and then the conductor swung his lantern, the wheels began to revolve, she half cried out, and Selim at the end of his patience, bolted with her and never stopped running till he had topped the rise above the village.

Here, with some ado, she got him quieted, brought to a standstill, got off and tightened the girth, for the saddle was slipping dangerously. She climbed on once more, mounting from a fallen tree, and was moving again up the trail when, down toward Garyville, someone called her name.

"Judith!"

She did not turn her head. She knew to whom the voice belonged. As he rode up to her:

"What you doin' here, Blatch Turrentine?" she demanded fiercely, "an' what'll the boys say to you for slippin' away from 'em to-night?"

He took her inferred knowledge of all his enterprises without a word of comment. Bringing his mule up closer to her where she sat on Selim he answered:

"The boys know whar I'm at. We got word last evenin' that the man I sell to was waitin' for me in Garyville. He don't know nobody but me in the business, and nobody but me could do the arrent. I hauled a load down, an' I would have been back in plenty time, ef I hadn't met you and Bonbright right thar whar that old Cherokee trail comes into the Garyville road."

Judith started, her face burned in the darkness, but she said nothing. Blatch peered curiously at her as he went on:

"I reckon you never took notice of the waggon that was under the bluff thar by the turn, but that was my waggon, and I was a-settin' on it. I wheeled myse'f round, when I seed 'twas Bonbright, and follered you two down to Garyville, and put up my mules."

Again he peered sharply at her.

"Jude," as she still sat silent, "I won't tell the boys what kept me—I won't tell them nary thing about you. I'll just let on that I happened to see Bonbright at Garyville."

"You tell what you're a mind to," said Judith bitterly. "I don't keer what you say."

Blatchley took the retort coolly. But his light grey eyes narrowed under the black brows.

"Bonbright seemed mightily upsot," he commented. "Went off on the train an' left his mule a-standin'."

Went off on the train! Judith's heart leaped, then stood still.

"Ye needn't worry about it—I had Scomp put it up, 'long o' my other 'n. He'll send 'em both up a Wednesday. I reckon it ain't to be wondered at Bonbright was flustered. Who do you 'low he went with on the railroad train? Jude, air you so easy fooled as to think it was a new notion for him to go to Garyville? Didn't he name it to you that it was a better place than Double Springs?"

Leaning close and watching her face, he saw in it confirmation.

"Shore. They was a little somebody on the railroad train waitin' to go on with him—after he'd done kissed you good-bye—and *left* you!"

Judith sat, head up, staring at him. Her less worthy nature was always instantly roused by this man's approach. Savage resentment, jealousy, hate, stirred in her crushed spirit; they raised their heads; their movement crowded out grief and humiliation. It must be true—she had proposed Double Springs, and he had said Garyville would be better. He had refused in so many words her offer of herself. He had kissed her—

"No!—no!—no!" she cried to the man before her, "don't you look at me—don't you speak to me."

"Why, Judith," he protested, hanging on Selim's flank and talking to her as she whirled the sorrel into the road and put him at the slope at a pace which that petted animal very much resented, "why Judith, ef one feller goes back on you thataway you be mad at him—he's the one to be mad at. Here's me, I stand willin' to make it up. Creed Bonbright has shamed you—he's left you; but you could make him look like a fool if you would only say the word—and you and me

would——”

“Now you go back!” Judith turned upon him as one speaks to a dog who is determined to follow. “I ain’t nary ’nother word to say to you. Leave me alone!”

“But Judith, hit ain’t safe for you to be ridin’ up here in the night time, thisaway,” Blatch insisted. “Lemme jest go along with you——”

“I’ll be a mighty heap safer alone than I’d be with you,” Judith told him, urging Selim ahead, “and anybody that knows you well will say so. You—go—back.”

Chapter XIX

Cast Out

Judith reached the Top in the grey, disillusioning light of early dawn. The moon, a ghastly wraith, was far down in the west, the east had not yet taken any hint of rose flush, but held that pallid line of greyish white that precedes sunrise.

She clambered across the Gulch, her tired horse stumbling with drooping head over the familiar stones, and rode slowly up to the home place. The huddle of buildings looked gaunt, deserted, inhospitable. There was light here enough to see the life which in daytime made all homelike, but which now, quenched and hidden, left all desolate, forbidding. As sleep takes on the semblance of death, so the sleeping house took on the semblance of desertion. The chickens were still humped on their perches in the trees, the cows had not come up to the milking-pen, their calves lay in a little bunch by the fence fast asleep. To the girl’s heavy heart it seemed a spot utterly forlorn in the chill, sad, ironic half-light of the slow-coming morning.

She rode directly to the barn, unsaddled, and put her horse out. As she was coming back past her uncle’s cabin, she saw the old man himself sitting in the door. He was fully dressed; his hat lay on the doorstone beside him, and against the jamb leaned Old Sister. He looked up at her with a sort of indifferent, troubled gaze.

“So you got back, Jude,” he said quietly.

“Yes, Uncle Jep,” she returned as quietly.

He made no comment on her riding skirt which she held up away from the drenching dew. He asked no questions as to where she had been, or what her errand. She noted that he looked old and worn.

“I’m mighty sorry it happened,” he began abruptly, quite as though he was continuing a conversation which they had intermitted but a few moments, “mighty sorry; but I don’t see no other way. I’ve studied a heap on it. Folks that stirs up trouble, gits trouble. I——”

He broke off and sat brooding.

“I’m glad you ain’t mad at me for the part I’ve tuck in it,” Judith began finally.

“Don’t tell me.” He raised a hasty, protesting hand. “I don’t want to know nothin’ about it. All is, I couldn’t have things according to my ruthers, and they had to go as they must. Hit ain’t what a man means that makes the differ—hit’s what he does that we count. Them that stirs up trouble, finds trouble.”

“I reckon so, Uncle Jep,” said the girl, drooping as she stood.

“They ain’t been a roof between my head and the sky sence I left this house,” the old man’s big voice rumbled on monotonously, hollowly. “I tromped the ridges over to’ds Yeller Old Bald. I left mankind and their works behind me, and I have done a power of thinking; but I can’t make this thing come out no other way.”

He ceased and sat looking down. The girl could fancy his solitary meals where he cooked what he had killed and ate it, to lie down under the sky and sleep. Women are denied this fleeing to the desert to be alone with God and their sorrow. She envied him the privilege. She had no heart to repeat to him Creed’s statements that he was not a spy. That was all past—wiped out by the parting between her and her lover.

“Yes, Uncle Jep,” she uttered low, and with bent head she moved dejectedly on toward the house.

Here all the boys were sleeping noisily after their vigils of the night before. About three o’clock, or a little after, they had come home to find their father turning in at the gate. With their disappointment fresh upon them they broke through his command of silence, and Wade told him how they and Blatch had planned the ambush, how Blatch had been called away, how they had waited in the hollow for Creed, who had promised to “come and talk to them,” how he had never come, but how Arley Kittridge a few minutes ago had ridden up to notify them that Bonbright was gone from Nancy Card’s, and that the mule was gone with him. None of the watchers could

say what direction he took, except to give earnest assurances that he had not left by any trail leading down the mountain. "He's bound to be over here somewhars," Wade concluded, "and Blatch not havin' got back from Garyville, they two has met somewhars."

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The old man listened in silence, and when his son had made an end offered neither comment nor reply. He passed over without a word the revelation of the deceit about Blatch's supposed killing. It was as though, weary and foredone, he dismissed the young fellows to the logic of events—to life itself—for response, explanation, or punishment.

Judith changed her dress, bathed her pale face, and set about preparing breakfast. And that was a strange meal when she had finally put it on the table and bidden them to it. The sons sat in their places like chidden schoolboys, furtively studying their father's ravaged visage, looking at each other and muttering requests or replies. They were all aware of the ugliness of their several offences. Creed's strange disappearance, Blatch's failure to return, the utter collapse of their errand, these had shaken them terribly.

About a third of the way through the meal Jim Cal shuffled in.

"Do you mind givin' me some breakfast, Jude?" he asked humbly. "Iley an' the chaps is all sound asleep. I hate to wake 'em, an' I never was no hand to do for myse'f."

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"Set and welcome," said Judith, mechanically placing a chair for the one who had been most resolute of all that Creed must die. So it was that they were all seated about the board when Blatch Turrentine, without a word, made his appearance in the door. Without moving his head Jephthah turned those sombre eyes of his upon his nephew, and regarded him steadily. The younger man stopped where he was on the threshold.

"So ye ain't dead?" inquired his uncle finally.

"I reckon that ain't news to you, is it?" asked Blatch, making as though to come in and take his place at the table.

For a moment the loyalty of the tribal head, the hospitality of the mountaineer, warred in old Jephthah's heart with deep, strong resentment against this man. Then he said without rising,

"Yes, hit's news. But you may take it that hit's news I ain't heard. I reckon we'll just leave it that you *air* dead. The lease on the ground over thar runs tell next spring. I'll not rue my bargain, but no son of mine sets his foot on yo' land and stays my son, and you don't put yo' foot in this house again. You give it out that you was dead—stay dead."

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"Oh, I see," said Blatch. "Yo' a-blamin' the whole business on me, air ye? Well, that's handy. What about them fine fellers that's settin' at meat with ye now? I reckon the tale goes that I led 'em into all their meanness."

Jim Cal dropped his head and stared at the bit of cornbread in his pudgy fingers; Wade glanced up angrily; the twins stirred like young hounds in leash; but Jephthah quieted them all with a look.

"Blatch," began the head of the house temperately, even sadly, "yo' my brother's son. Sam and me was chaps together, and I set a heap of store by him. Sam's been gone more than ten year, and in that time I've aimed to do by you as I would by a son of my own. I felt that hit was something I owed to Sam. But ef I owed hit hit's been paid out. Yo' Sam's son, but also yo' a Blatchley, and I reckon the Blatchley blood had to show up in ye. My boys is neither better nor worse than others, but when I say that I don't aim to have you walk with 'em, I say what is my right. What I owed yo' daddy, and my dead brother, has been paid out—hit's been paid plumb out."

Now that it was made plain, Blatch took the dismissal hardily. Perhaps he had been more or less prepared for it, knowing as he would have phrased it that his uncle wanted but half a chance to break with him. He was aware, too, that the secret of his illicit traffic was safe in the old man's hands, and that indeed Jephthah would strain a point to defend him for the name's sake if for nothing else.

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"All right," he said, "ef them's yo' ruthers, hit suits me. What do you-all boys say?—I reckon Unc' Jep'll let ye speak for yo'selves—this one time."

"I say what pap says," came promptly from Wade. And, "Jeff an' me thinks it's about time pap's word went with his boys," put in the younger and more emotional Andy.

"All right, all right," agreed Blatch in some haste, finding the battle to go thus sweepingly against him. "I wont expect no opinions from you, podner, tell you've had time to run home an' ax Iley what air they. Ye ain't named Judith, Unc' Jep," he went on, glancing to where the girl knelt on the hearthstone dishing up corn pones from the Dutch oven. "Cain't she come over and visit me when she has a mind?"

"Judith's her own mistress. She can use her ruthers," returned Jephthah briefly, "but I misdoubt that you'll be greatly troubled with her company."

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"Help me git my things out of the cupboard thar, Jude, won't ye?" asked Blatch civilly enough.

Without reply, without glancing at him, Judith preceded him into the fore-room, opened the doors and sought out his clean clothing, making it into a neat pile on the table.

"You come over and see me sometimes, won't ye, Judy?" whispered the tall man as he bundled these up. "I won't tell who I seen you with."

Judith looked at him with wordless contempt. Her own pain was so great that even anger was

swallowed up in it.

"Tell anybody you're a mind to," she said listlessly. "I ain't a-carin'."

"I may git word of him, Jude," persisted Blatch as he was departing. "Ef I do would you wish to hear it? Ef you say yes, I'll send ye notice."

Again she glanced at him with that negligent disdain. What could he do to her now who had lost all? She was beyond the reach of his love or his malice.

Chapter XX

A Conversion

And now Judith's days strung themselves on the glowing thread of midsummer weather like black beads on a golden cord, a rosary of pain. She told each bead with sighs, facing the morning with a heavy heart that longed for darkness, lying down when day was over in dread of the night and a weariness that brought no sleep. And the cedar tree, swayed in the raw autumn air, talking to itself sombrely of the empty nest in its heart, sounded upon her wakeful ears a note of desolation and despair. For all the Turkey Tracks soon knew that Blatch Turrentine was sound and whole; all Hepzibah knew it eventually—and Creed Bonbright neither returned nor made any sign.

The embargo being removed, Judith went straight to Nancy Card.

In the preoccupation of her sorrow, she might have forgotten Little Buck's wounded heart; but when as of custom Beezy came rioting out to meet her, the man child hung back with so strange a countenance that she needs must note it.

"Come here, honey," she urged tenderly—her own suffering made her very pitiful to the childish grief.

Little Buck came slowly up to his idol, lifting doubtful eyes to her face. The girl's ready arm went swiftly round the small figure.

"Are you pestered about that word I sent Creed Bonbright by you?" she whispered.

The little boy nodded solemnly, and you could see the choke in his throat.

"Well, you don't need to be," she reassured him. "I had to send jest that word, Little Buck—jest that very word; nothin' less would 'a' brought him."

Again the child nodded, twisting around to look in her face, his own countenance clearing a bit.

"But it don't make any differ between you an' me, does it, honey?" she pursued. "You're Jude's man, jest the same as you ever was, ain't ye? You wouldn't never need to be jealous of anybody; 'cause you know all the time that Judy loves you."

Silently the small man put his arms round her neck and hugged her hard—an unusual demonstration for Little Buck. And during her entire stay he hung close about, somewhat to Nancy's annoyance, seeming to find plentiful joy in the contemplation of his recovered treasure.

The loss of Creed had meant a good deal to Nancy. More like a son than a boarder in her house, he had brought with him a sense of support and competence such as the hard-worked little woman had never known. With his going, she was back again in the old helpless, moneyless situation, with Pony on her hands a growing problem and anxiety, and Doss Provine but a broken reed on which to lean. Such inquiries after Creed as they managed to set afoot fetched no return.

"Hit ain't like Creed to be scared and keep runnin'," she would repeat pathetically. "I know in reason something awful has chanced to that boy. Either that, or it's like they're all beginning to say, he's wedded and gone to Texas same as his cousin Cyarter done. Cyarter Bonbright run away with a gal on the night she was to have wedded another feller—tuck her right out of the country and went to Texas. That's Bonbright nature: they ain't much on sweet-heartin' an' sech, but when they git it, they git it hard."

She laid a loving hand on the girl's shoulder, and leaned around to look frankly into the beautiful, melancholy, dark face with the direct, honest grey eyes that would admit no concealments between herself and those whom she really cared for.

"I speak right out to you, Jude," she said kindly, "'caze I see how hit's been between you an' Creed, an' hit'll hurt you less if you get used to the idy of givin' him up. Him treated the way he was, I don't know as I'd blame him."

But Judith could have blamed him. It was only when despair pressed too hard that she could say she would be glad to know he was alive even though he belonged to somebody else. Yet to credit Blatch's story for a moment, to think he had gone that night with Huldah Spiller, was to open the heart's door on such a black vista of treachery and double-dealing in Creed's conduct, to so

utterly discredit his caring for herself, that she had no defence but to disbelieve the whole tale, and this she was generally able to do.

But as far away as Hepzibah a small event was preparing that should break the monotony of Judith's grievous days. Venters Drane, the elder's twelve-year-old boy, going to school in the village, fell ill of diphtheria. When word was brought to the father—a widower and wise—he loaded his three younger children and their small belongings into the waggon and drove over to the Turrentine place.

"I jest p'intedly ain't got nary another place to leave 'em, Sister Barrier, nor nary another soul on earth that I could trust 'em with like I could with you," he said wistfully, after he had explained the necessities of the case. "I'm on my way down now to get Venters and bring him home—look at that, will ye!" as the baby made a dash for Judith who stood by the wheel looking up.

"They're mighty welcome, Elder Drane," Judith declared warmly, receiving the little fellow in open arms. "I'll be glad to do for 'em."

Martin and Lucy were old-fashioned, repressed, timid children, with the pathetic outlook of young persons brought up by a melancholy, ancient hireling. But the baby, glowing-eyed, laughing-mouthed rogue, staggering valiantly on sturdy, emulous legs, taking tribute everywhere with all babyhood's divine audacity, walked straight into her heart. He slept beside her at night, for him she darkened and quieted the house of afternoons, lying down with him to watch his slumbers, to brood with mother fondness upon the round, rosy, small face, and the even, placid breathing.

Drane had brought such clothing as they had, but Judith found them ill-provided, and set to work for them at once. Being a capable needlewoman she soon had them apparelled more to her liking, and the labour physicked pain. Sitting in the porch sewing, with the baby tumbling about the floor at her feet and Mart and Lucy building play-houses in the yard under the trees, Judith began dimly to realise that life, somewhere and at some time, might lack all she had so passionately craved, all she so piercingly regretted, and yet hold some peace, some satisfaction. True she was still desolate, robbed, despairing, yet with the children to tend there were hours when she almost lost sight of her own sorrow, in the sweet compulsion of doing for them.

Jim Cal shook his head over these arrangements. "Looks like to me ef I was a widower with chaps, trying to wed a fine lookin', upheaded gal like Jude, I'd a' kep' the little 'uns out of her sight as much as I could, 'stid of fetchin' 'em right to her. Hit seems now as though she muched them greatly, but she's sartin shore to find out what a sight o' trouble chaps makes, and ain't any woman wantin' more work than she's 'bleeged to have."

Lacking active concerns of his own, James Calhoun was always greatly interested in those of the persons about him. Judith's doings, on account of her reticence, beauty and high spirit, proved a theme of unending, mild interest.

"Jude," he opened out one day as he sat on the edge of the porch while his cousin was busy with some sewing for her little visitors, "did ye hear 'bout Lace Rountree?"

Judith never moved her eyes from her work. "I know they's sech a person," she said evenly, "if that's what you mean."

"No, but have ye heard of how he's a-doin' here lately?" persisted the fat man. "I don't know as anybody has named anything special to me about Lacey Rountree or his doin's," Judith returned with a rising irritation. "Why should they?"

Jim Cal heaved a wheezy sigh. "'Caze yo' said to be the cause of it," he expounded with lugubrious enjoyment. "Lace Rountree is fillin' hisse'f up on corn whiskey and givin' it out to each and every that he's goin' plumb straight *di*-rect to the dav-il, an' all on yo' accounts—'caze you wouldn't have 'im. Now what do you make out o' that?"

"I make out that some folks are mighty big fools," retorted Judith with asperity. "Lace Rountree is no older than Jeff and Andy—he's two years younger'n I am—why, he's like a child to me. I never no more thought of Lace Rountree than I'd think of—well, not so much as I would of Little Buck Provine."

"Uh-huh," agreed Jim Cal shaking his head dolefully, "that's the way you talk; but you-all gals had ort to have a care how you toll fellers on. Here's Huldy got Wade so up-tore about her that he's a-goin' to dash out and git him a place on the railroad whar he's mighty apt to be killed up; and you—"

"I what?" prompted Judith sharply, as he came to a wavering pause.

"Well—they was always one man that you give good reason to expect you'd wed him. I myse'f have heard you, more'n forty times I reckon, say to Blatch Turrentine—or if not say it in so many words, at least—"

"Cousin Jim," broke in Judith, carefully ignoring this last charge, "so far as that Lace Rountree is concerned, did you ever know of a reckless feller that come to no good but what he had some gal at whose door he could lay it all? I vow I never did. They ain't a drinkin' whiskey becaze they like it; they don't git into no interruptions becaze they're mad—it's always 'count o' some gal that has give 'em the mitten. I'll thank you not to name Lace Rountree to me again, nor—nor anybody else," as she saw his eyes wander to the sewing in her lap.

"Well, Drane's old enough to look out for hisse'f," said Jim Cal, rising and trying his joints

apparently for a movement toward home. "Ef you choose to toll him on by takin' care of his chaps, that's yo' lookout, and his lookout—'taint mine; but 'ef I was givin' the man advice, I'd say to him that he might about as well take 'em home, or hunt up some other gal to leave 'em with, 'caze yo' apt to much the chil'en and then pop the do' in the daddy's face."

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The weeks brought piecemeal confirmation of Jim Cal's dismal forebodings. Elihu Drane took advantage of every pretext to haunt about the roof that sheltered his children. Though he was not with the sick boy, he made the presence of a "ketchin' town disease" in his home, reason for not coming near the little ones, but called Judith down to the draw-bars to talk to him. When he had her there at such disadvantage, he so pertinaciously urged his unwelcome suit that he made her finally glad to be rid of the children, to see him, when Venters was once more well, take them away with him and give her respite from his importunities.

In the case of Wade, too, the fat man's pessimistic expectations were realised; the young man did, early in August, dash out and secure a place on the railroad. Mountain people write few letters. They heard nothing from him after the first message which told them where he was employed and what wages he was to have.

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It was September when Iley announced to Judith that she had word from some of Pap Spiller's kin who were living in Garyville, that acquaintances of theirs from Hepzibah, coming down to the circus at the larger town, had given them roundabout and vague news of Huldah. The girl had delayed in Hepzibah but a few days. The story as it came up on the mountain was that she had married "some feller from Big Turkey Track, and gone off on the railroad."

"Them Tuels is mighty po' hands to remember names," Iley said. "But all ye got to do is to look around and take notice of anybody that's gone from Big Turkey Track here lately. Ye can fix it to suit yo'se'f. But I reckon Huldy has made a good match, and I'm satisfied."

Judith looked upon the floor in silence. In silence she left the cabin and took her way to her own home. And that night, while the cedar tree talked to her in the voice of love—Creed's voice—she fought with dragons and slew them, and was slain by them.

When Blatchley Turrentine had asserted this thing to her at Garyville, she found somewhere—after her first gust of unreasoning resentment was past—strength to disbelieve it utterly. But now it came again in more plausible guise. It gained likeliness from mere repetition. And hardest of all to bear, she was totally unsupported in her trust. She knew Creed, knew his love for her; yet to cling to it was to fly in the face of probabilities, and of everything and everybody about her. The lover who is silent, absent from her who loves him, at such a time, runs tremendous risks.

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It was the set or turn of the year's tide; sunsets were full, rich, yellow, and a great round, golden moon swung in the evening sky above the purple hills. A soft, purring monotone of little tree crickets in the night forest replaced the shriller insect chorus of midsummer. Garden patches, about through their summer yield, were a tangle of bubble-tinted morning glories, the open woods misty with wild asters, bell flowers trembling from the crevices of rocks; and along fence-row and watercourse turkey-pea, brook sunflower, queen of the meadow, and joe-pye-weed made gay the land.

Such farm work as remained was only garnering—fodder-pulling, pea-hay and millet hay to gather; with a little sowing of wheat, rye, or turf oats.

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In late midsummer and early fall revivalists, preachers, and exhorters go through the Cumberlands holding protracted meetings in the little isolated churches. At this time of year the men as well as the women are most at liberty. To a people who live scattered through a remote and inaccessible region, who have few and scanty public gatherings and diversions, this season of religious activity offers the one emotional outlet which their conception of dignity permits them, and it is proportionately precious in their eyes. In addition to the women and the girls and boys, who usually make up the rank and file of religious gatherings elsewhere, here at this favoured season old fellows, heads of families and life-long pillars of the Church, give up their entire time to the meetings. The family is put into the waggon with a basket of dinner, and they make a day of it. Services hold as late as twelve and one o'clock, and after them this contained, stoic folk will go home through the woods, carrying pine torches, singing, shouting, laughing, sobbing.

Hiram Bohannon came into the two Turkey Tracks this year and held services at Brush Arbour church. He was very much in earnest, Brother Bohannon, a practical man with a rough native eloquence that spoke loud to his hearers.

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Every afternoon the wild, sweet hymns rang out over the little cup-like valley in which Brush Arbour church stood. The month was extremely warm, and they used the outside brush arbour from which the schoolhouse-church received its name.

Judith went day and night in a feverish attempt to get away from herself and her sorrows. Even the fact that Elihu Drane was very much to the fore in these gatherings could not deter her. Sitting in the open there, her hands clasped upon her knee, her sombre eyes on the ground, or interrogating the distance with an unseeing stare, she would let hymn and sermon, prayer and the weeping and shouting which always close night meeting, go past her ears well-nigh unheard. Before those darkened, bereaved eyes, turn where they would, Love's ever-renewed idyl of rustic courtship was enacting, since Big Meetin' was the time and occasion of all the year for Corydon to encounter Phyllis, to stroll or sit beneath the trees with her, possibly to "carry her home."

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Andy and Jeff began taking the Lusk girls to meeting, and within a week's time two very pale young men—the twins always acted in concert—stumbled up the earthen aisle between the puncheon seats to join the group at the mourners' bench and ask for the prayers of the congregation. Brother Bohannon knew what quarry he had netted, and he hurried down at once, half in doubt that this was another scheme of these young daredevils to make game of his meeting. But both boys were on their knees, and the tears with which they began confessing to him past sins, the penitence of their shaking voices, proclaimed the genuineness of their conversion.

Cliantha and Pendrilla left behind—they had been sober church members since they were twelve years old—fluttered to Judith and demanded her instant attention to the miracle.

"Oh, Judith, ain't it jest too good to be true?" panted little Cliantha. "Jeff never did lack anything of bein' the best man that ever walked this earth except to jine the church—an' now look at him!"

"And Andy, too," put in Pendrilla jealously. "I do believe Andy is a prayin' the loudest—I'm shore he is."

Judith roused herself. "I'm mighty glad—for the both of ye," she said kindly.

And then she looked at their tremulous, happy faces, at the kneeling boys up among the press of figures about the pulpit, and burst into a storm of weeping. Where was her lover? Where was Creed? Dead—or he had forgotten her.

"Are you under conviction of sin, sister?" inquired one of the helpers.

Judith let it pass at that, and flung herself on her knees beside the bench to wait until the last hymn and the dismissal.

Brother Bohannon was an extremely practical Christian; his creed applied to every day in the year and to the most commonplace acts. He adjured his converts not only to quit their meanness, but to go and acknowledge past errors, to repair such evil as they could, and if possible to seek forgiveness from man, certain that God's forgiveness would follow. Such counsel as this brought the twins to their father's cabin early on the morning after their conversion at Brush Arbour church.

"Pap," began Andy standing before his parent with an odd suggestion of the small boy caught in mischief, "me and Jeff are aimin' to join the church."

"That's right, son," said the old man rising and clapping a hearty hand on each young shoulder. "I'm mighty proud to hear it. Hit's a good way for fellers like you to start out in this world."

"Well, befo' we do so," Jeff took up the burden, "the preacher says we ort to confess our sins and git forgiveness from them we have done wrong by. Creed Bonbright ain't here. Mebbe he's never goin' to be back any mo'. We talked it over and 'lowed we'd better come tell you, pap."

At Creed Bonbright's name a pathetic change went over old Jephthah's pleased countenance. He had received the opening words with satisfaction, not untinctured by the mild, patronising indulgence we show to children. But when Bonbright was mentioned he sat back in his chair, nervously knocking the ash from his pipe, anxiously staring at the boys.

"I'm mighty proud," he repeated, "to hear what you say." He spoke gravely and with dignity; but a note of uncontrollable eagerness stole into his voice, as he added in a lower tone, "What mought you-all have to tell me about Creed Bonbright?"

"Pap, we done you a meanness in that business," hastened Jeff. "We had no call to lie to you like we done, and send the feller word in yo' name."

"Wade, he was mad about his gal," agreed Andy thoughtfully, "but what possessed me and Jeff I'll never tell ye. Spy or no spy, we done that man wrong."

Jephthah looked expectantly and in silence from one young face to the other.

"Blatch let on to you hit was the still; but of course we knowed hit was Jude that ailed him. He got Taylor Stribling to toll Creed to Foeman's Bluff that night," Jeff supplied. "Blatch picked the quarrel, and drew a knife when they was wrastlin', and when Bonbright pushed Blatch away from him, he fell over the cliff. That's God's truth about the business, pappy, ef I ever spoke it. Me an' Andy an' Wade was all into it."

The boyish countenance was pale, and Jeff drew a nervous hand across his brow as he concluded. There followed a lengthened silence. Old Jephthah sat regarding his own brown right hand as it lay upon his knee.

"Ye tolled him thar," he said finally. "Ye tolled him thar. Then Creed Bonbright wasn't no spy." He lifted his head. "I never could make it figure up right for that feller to be a spy. Curious he was, and he had some idees that I couldn't agree with; but a spy——"

He broke off suddenly, and one saw how strong had been the bond between him and the young justice, how greatly he cared that the memory of the man even should be cleared.

The boys looked at each other, and with a gulp Jeff began again:

"I reckon you knowed well enough we stood in with Blatch when he hid out and let folks believe the killin' had been did. We knowed you seen through it all; but when ye git started in a business like that, one thing leads on to another, and befo' you're done with it, ye do a plenty that you'd ruther not."

"Well, hit's over and cain't be he'ped, but you've done what's right at last," Jephthah assured them. "The church is a mighty good thing for young fellers like you. A good wife'll do a sight to he'p along."

He looked at them kindly. He had never liked his boys half so well.

"I'm mighty proud of the both of ye," he concluded heartily. "Ef Creed Bonbright ever does come back in the mountains, we'll show him that the Turrentines can be better friends than foes to a man."

Chapter XXI

The Baptising

October had led forth her train across the Cumberlands. One night the forest was fairly green, but early risers next morning found that in the darkness while they slept the hickories had been touched to gold, the oaks smitten with a promise of the glowing mahogany-red which was to be theirs. Sourwood and sumach blazed; the woodbine flung its banner of blood, chestnuts were yellow where the nuts dropped through them from loosened burs. The varying dark greens of balsam and fir, pine and cedar, heightened by contrast the glow of colour, while the dim blue sky above set its note of tender distance and forgetfulness. On a thousand mountain peaks smoked and smouldered, flared and flamed the altar fires of autumn.

After that each day saw a deepening of the glory in the hills. It was like a noble overture a multitudinous chorus made visible. The marvel of it was that one sense should be so clamorously challenged while the other was not addressed. The ear hearkened ever amid that grand symphony of colour for some mighty harmony of sound. But even the piping song-birds were gone, and the cry of a hawk wheeling high in the blue, the voice of a woman calling her cow, these sounded loud in the autumnal hush.

The streams were shrunken to pools whose clear jade reaches reflected the blazing banners above them, and offered mimic seas for the sailing of painted argosies when the wind shook the leaves down. There was a fruity odour of persimmon and wild grape forever in the air. The salmon-pink globes stood defined against the blue on leafless twigs, while the frost sweetened them to sugary jelly, and the black wild grape by the water-courses yielded an odour that was only less material than the flavour of its juices. Every angle of the rail fences became a parterre with golden-rod, cat-brier, and the red-and-yellow pied leaves of blackberries, while a fringe of purple and white asters thrust fragile fingers through the rails below, or the stout iron-weed pushed its purple-red blooms into view at the head of tall, lance-like stems.

Judith walking in the woods one day found a great nest of Indian pipe. She bent listlessly to pick the waxen mystic blossoms, thinking to herself that they were like some beautiful dead thing; and then she came upon a delicate flush on the side of their clear, translucent pearl, and wondered if it were an omen.

It was a gorgeous October Sabbath when the boys were baptised. Baptisms always took place from Brush Arbour in a sizable pool of Lost Creek which flows through one corner of the little valley that holds the church building. The sward which ran down to its clear mirror was yet green, but the maples and sourwoods above it were coloured splendidly. Among their clamant red and yellow laurel and rhododendron showed glossy green, and added to the gay tapestry. The painted leaves let go their hold on twig or bough and dropped whispering into the water, like garlands flung to dress the coming rite.

Morning meeting was over. The women-folks who had come far spread dinner on the grass near the church, joining together occasionally, the children wandering about in solemn delight with a piece of corn pone in hand, whispering among the graves in the tiny God's acre, spelling out the words upon some wooden head-board, or the rarer stone.

The Big Spring was the customary gathering place of the young people before church, and during intermissions, about its clear basin, on the slopes above the great rock from under which it issued, might be seen a number of couples, the boys in Sunday best of jeans or store-bought clothing, the girls fluttering in cheap lawns or calicoes, and wearing generally hats instead of the more becoming sunbonnet. Judith had been used to lead her following here, and the number of her swains would have been a scandal in any one else: but there was a native dignity about Judith Barrier that kept even rural gossip at bay. This morning, however, when Elder Drane gave her the customary invitation to walk down there for a drink, she refused, and all during the first service the widower had sat tall and reproachful on the men's side and reminded her of past follies. She was aware of his accusing eyes even when she did not look in his direction, and uncomfortably aware too that others saw what she saw.

Throughout the pleasant picnic meal, shared with its group of neighbours, the sight of Andy and Jeff with Cliantha and Pendrilla aggravated a dull pain which dragged always in her heart, and when dinner was over and they had packed the basket once more, and set it in the back of the

waggon, she left them, to wander by herself on the farther side of Lost Creek, sitting down finally in the shade of a great sourwood, and looking moodily at the water. All afternoon she sat there wrapt in her own emotions, forgetful of time and place. The congregation straggled back into the little log church, and the second service was begun. The preacher's voice came floating out to her softened by distance, and with it the sound of singing; as the meeting drew to its close an occasional more vociferous "Amen!" or "Glory!" or "Praise God!" made itself heard. The sun was beginning to slant well from the west when she got suddenly to her feet with the startled realisation that afternoon preaching was over, the people were pouring from the church door, streaming across the green toward the baptising pool. They were in the middle of a hymn.

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"Oh, wanderer return—return,"

came their musical tones across the water. The grey-haired old preacher was in the lead, his black coat blowing about him, the congregation spreading out fan-wise as they followed after, Andy and Jeff arm in arm, the half-dozen others who were to be baptised walking with them.

Her fretted, pining spirit had no appreciation left for the appeal of the picture. She gazed, and looked away, and groaned. "Oh, wanderer return," they sang—almost her heart could not bear the words.

She sighed. Ought she to cross the foot-log and be with them when the boys were dipped? But while she hesitated the singers struck up a different hymn, a louder, more militant strain. Brother Bohannon was at the water; he was wading in; he was up to his knees now—up to his waist.

"Send 'em in, Brother Drane," she heard him call. "This is about deep enough. That's right—give me the young men first. When the others see them dipped they'll have no fear."

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Elihu Drane took Andy's arm, and another helper laid hold of Jeff.

"Sing—sing brethren and sisters," admonished the preacher. "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord. This is the time for Hallelujahs. Ef ye don't sing now, when will ye ever?"

Andy spoke low in the elder's ear, whereupon he was released, and turned to his brother; hand-in-hand the two stepped into the water alone. Judith saw the pale, boyish faces, strangely refined by the exaltation of spirit which was upon them, as the twins waded out toward the preacher. Bohannon called to Jeff, shook hands with him, shouted, "Praise God, brother. Glory! Glory! Now—make yo'se'f right stiff. Let me have ye. Don't be scared. I won't drop ye. I've baptised a many before you was born, son." His right hand was lifted dripping above the dark head. "I baptise ye, Thomas Jefferson Turrentine, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen."

"Amen—Amen!" came the deep chorus from the bank, the high, plaintive women's voices undertoned by the masculine bass.

The black coat sleeve went around the white-clad shoulders, the preacher dropped his new convert gently backward into the shining water, dipped him, and Jeff who was not an excellent swimmer for nothing, came up quiet, smiling, and stood aside to wait for his brother.

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"Sing—sing!" cried the preacher. "Here goes another soul on its way to glory," and he reached forth to take Andy. A moment later he sent him, drenched, but washed clean of his sins, so far as mountain belief goes, after his twin. The hallelujahs burst forth to greet the boys: joyful shouts, amens, and some sobbing when, hand-in-hand—even as they had gone in—they came up out of the water.

"Mighty pretty to look at, ain't it?" said a voice at Judith's shoulder.

She turned to find Blatch Turrentine standing behind her.

"I reckon Andy and Jeff is goin' to be regular little prayin' Sammies from this out," jeered the newcomer.

"Granny Lusk has given her consent for them and the gals to be wedded," remarked Judith softly. To her—and perhaps to Cliantha and Pendrilla also—the main importance of the twins' conversion was in this permission, which had been withheld so long as they were wild and had a bad name.

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"I heard of another weddin' that might interest ye," Blatch insinuated. "Want to come and walk a piece over by the Big Spring, Judy?"

Judith turned uncertainly. The boys had passed on up to the sheds to get on dry clothing. It was nearly time for her to be going back to the waggon. Bohannon was dipping Doss Provine's sister Luna. A group of trembling, tearful candidates, mostly young girls, were being heartened and encouraged for the ordeal by the helpers on the bank.

"Tell me here—cain't ye?" she said listlessly.

"I heard from a feller that got it from another feller," Blatch began smilingly, "that Huldy Spiller an' Creed Bonbright was wedded and gone to Texas. I reckon hit's true, becaze the man that told me was aimin' to buy the Bonbright farm."

Judith did not cry out. She hoped her colour did not change very much, for Blatch's eyes were on her face. After a while she managed to say in a fairly steady voice,

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"Does Wade know? Have ye sent any word to him?"

"No," drawled Blatch. "Unc' Jep aimed to break off with me, and he left you the only one o' the

family that dared speak with me. Mebbe you would like to write an' tell Wade?"

"I don't know," sighed Judith hopelessly. "What's the use?"

"Farewell," said Blatch, using a common mountain form of adieu. "I reckon Unc' Jep won't want to see me standin' around talkin' to ye. You tell Wade," significantly. "The sooner he gets Huldah out of his head the better for him. No use cryin' over spilt milk. They's as good fish in the sea as ever come out of it."

He looked long at her downcast face.

"Jude, the man that told me that about Bonbright," he said, speaking apparently on sudden impulse, "lowed that the feller had left you—give ye the mitten. You're a fool ef ye let that be said, when his betters is wantin' ye."

Without another word, without a glance, he turned and slouched swiftly away down the path behind the fringe of bushes by the creek side.

The baptising was over. Judith, crossing the stream, saw her uncle's waggon, Beck and Pete already hitched to it, being loaded with Jim Cal and his tribe. Andy and Jeff were horseback with the Lusk girls. She hurried forward to join them and make ready for departure when, to her dismay, she encountered Drane at the foot of the slope coming toward her.

"Wasn't that thar Blatchley Turrentine?" inquired the elder.

The girl nodded.

"I didn't see him in the church," Drane pursued.

"I reckon he wasn't there," assented Judith lifelessly, making as though to pass on.

"He jest came here to have speech with you, did he?" inquired the man, nervously, brushing his sandy whiskers with unquiet fingers.

"I reckon he did," acknowledged Judith without coquetry, without interest.

"Jude!" burst out the widower, "I promised you I never would again ax you to wed; but I'm obliged to know ef you're studyin' about takin' that feller."

"No," said Judith, resenting nothing, "I never did aim to wed Blatch Turrentine, and I never will."

The elder stood directly in her path, blocking the way and staring down at her miserably for a long minute.

"That's what you always used to tell me," he remarked finally with a heavy sigh. "Back in them days when you let me hope that I'd see you settin' by my fireside with my children on your knees, you always talked thataway about Blatch—I reckon you talked thataway of me to him."

Judith's pale cheek slowly crimsoned. She looked upon the ground. "I'm mighty sorry," she said slowly.

Elihu Drane's faded eyes lighted with fresh fires. He caught the hand that hung by her side.

"Oh, Jude—do you mean it?" he cried. "Do you care? You don't know how the chaps all love ye and want ye. That old woman I've got doin' for 'em ain't fittin' to raise 'em. Everybody tells me I've got to marry and give 'em a mother, but I cain't seem to find nobody but you. If you feel thataway—if you'll——"

Judith drew her hand away with finality, but her eyes were full of pitying kindness. She knew now what she had done to this man. By the revealing lamp of her own suffering she read his. Back in the old days she had counted him only one more triumph in her maiden progress.

"No," she said gravely, "I ain't studyin' about marryin' anybody. I'm mighty sorry that I done thataway. I'm sorry, and ashamed; but I have to say no again, Elder Drane. There ain't never goin' to be no other answer."

"Hit's that feller Bonbright," declared the elder sternly as he stood aside to let her pass. "Good Lord, why ain't the man got sense enough to come back and claim his own!"

Chapter XXII

Ebb-Tide

Life closed in on Judith after that with an iron hand. She missed sorely the children's demands upon her, their play and prattle and movement about the place. Huldah was gone. Wade was gone. She could get no news of Creed. The things to love and hate and be jealous of seemed to have dropped out of her existence, so that the heart recoiled upon itself, the spirit wrestled blindly in darkness with an angel which was but its own self in other guise.

Day by day she turned from side to side for an exit from the fiery path she trod, and cried out to

Heaven that she could not bear it—she could not stand it—there must be some way other than this!

The Lusk girls and the Turrentine twins were to have a double wedding. The preparations for this event were torture to Judith. Everybody, it seemed, could be happy but her own poor self. Even the fact that Jeff and Andy were changed, kinder to her, more considerate, better men in every way, had its own sting. If this could have been so before, the wreck of her world need not have come about.

Blatch kept rigorously to his own side of the Gulch, yet once in a while Judith met him on the highroad; and then, while he approached her with the carefullest efforts toward pleasing, he showed the effects of anxiety, the hard life, and the fact that he had begun to drink heavily—a thing he had never done before.

Spring would terminate his lease of the Turrentine farm, and then he must seek other quarters for his illicit traffic. His situation was doubled in danger by the fact that it could not be disguised how his uncle had turned upon him. Now that one did not, supposedly, incur the displeasure of the Turrentines by giving information concerning Blatch and his still, the enterprise was a much safer one, and he trembled in hourly terror of its being undertaken by some needy soul. This terror gave a certain ferocity to his manner. Also the man who had come in with him to take Jim Cal's place in the partnership was a more undesirable associate even than Buck Shalliday.

Judith watched all these things with an idle lack of interest that was strangely foreign to her vivid human temperament. As time passed and she could hear nothing from Creed Bonbright, nor of him beyond what Blatch had told her, and the connection she made between it and Iley's report of Huldah's marriage, the inaction of her woman's lot was almost more than she could endure. Of an evening after her milking was over she would stand at the draw-bars under the wide, blue, twilight sky, and stare with her great, black, passionate eyes into the autumn dusk, and her whole being went forth with such an intensity of longing that it seemed some part of it must find Creed, wherever he was, and speak for her to him.

After Iley's announcement in September Judith never approached her nor talked to her again, though the shrew was growing strangely mild and disciplined since Jim Cal had broken with Blatch Turrentine and was become a partner in his father's affairs—a husband who is out of the good books of other people is a scold-maker with the type of woman Jim Cal had married. To go near Pendrilla and Cliantha was to be overwhelmed instantly with the joyous details of their wedding preparations. Judith flinched from bringing her troubles before such happy eyes. She had but Aunt Nancy.

It was bitter hard times at the little cabin on The Edge. Doss Provine had begun actively looking for a "second," and his courting operations sorely interfered with the making of the small crop. Nancy took the field behind the plough; but her efforts came late and availed little. There was scarcely food for their mouths; she was continually harassed by anxiety concerning Pony, who had got to running with a bad crowd in Hepzibah. And finally the thing happened which had not been since Big Turkey Track was a mountain and Nancy Card was born in that small cabin. At her wit's end, she took Little Buck and Breezy and went away to visit a married daughter whose husband worked in a machine-shop in a valley settlement, leaving Doss Provine to stay with his kin for the time. There was plenty at her daughter's table, and a warm welcome awaiting her and the children; besides, the man of the house had promised to find a job for her spoiled boy, and give him the masculine oversight and discipline he needed. At Hepzibah she gathered up that rather astonished young man, exerting for once the real authority that was in her, and with him set out on this formidable journey.

Just once old Jephthah went past that closed door. Just once he looked on the little front yard spilling over its rived palings with autumn blossoms. And he came home so out of joint with life, in so altogether impossible a mood, that it was fairly unsafe to mention as innocent a matter as the time of day to him. Up to now perhaps he had not known what a very large place in his life those almost daily quarrels with his old sweetheart filled. Now the restlessness which had come with the trouble over Creed Bonbright was renewed; he wandered about aimlessly, with a good word for nothing and nobody, and opined darkly that his liver was out of order.

"Aunt Nancy told me one time that she would almost be willin' to wed you to get a chance to give you a good course of spring medicine for that thar liver," remarked Judith casually. And then she looked up with a wan little smile, to find an expression in her uncle's eyes that set her wondering.

Oh, dear Heaven—was it like that? Would she grieve for Creed all her life long, till she was an old, old woman? She declared it should not be so. Love would never be within her reach—within the reach of her utmost efforts—and escape her, leave her an empty husk to be blown by the wind of years to the dust pile of death. One day in this mood she broke down and talked to the Lusk girls.

"He said he'd shore come back," she concluded hopelessly. "Well, anyhow, he named things that would be done when he come back. I call that a promise. I keep thinking he'll come back."

Pendrilla sat, her great china-blue eyes fixed on Judith's tense, pale, working face, and the big tears of pure emotional enjoyment began to slip down her pink cheeks. In the glow of Judith's splendid, fiery nature, the two pale little sisters warmed themselves like timid children at a chance hearth. As the full, vibrant voice faltered into silence, Cliantha went forward and took her favourite position on her knees beside Judith, her arms raised and slipped around the taller

girl's waist.

"Oh," she began, with a sort of frightened assurance. "Ef my lover had gone from me thataway, and I didn't know whar he was at, an' couldn't git no news to him nor from him, I know mighty well and good what *I'd* do."

"What?" whispered Judith, young lioness that she was, reduced to taking counsel from this mouse, "what would you do, Clianthy?"

"I'd make me a dumb supper and call him," asserted the Lusk girl with tremulous resolution.

"A dumb supper!" echoed Judith, and then again, on a different key, "a dumb supper. I never studied about such as that."

She brooded a moment on the thought, and the girls said nothing, watching her breathlessly.

"Do you reckon hit'd do me any good?" she questioned then, half-heartedly. "Why, dumb suppers always seemed to me jest happy foolishness for light-hearted gals that had sweethearts."

"Oh, no!" disclaimed Pendrilla, joining her sister on the floor at Judith's feet. "They ain't nothin' like foolishness about a shore-enough dumb supper. Why, Judith, Granny Peavey, our maw's mother, told us oncet about a dumb supper that her and two other gals made when she was but sixteen year old, and her sweetheart away from her in Virginny, and she didn't know whar he was at, an' they brought her tales agin him." 322

"Well?" prompted Judith feverishly. "Did it do any good? Did she find out anything?"

"Her and two others went to a deserted house at midnight—you know that's the way, Jude."

Judith nodded impatiently.

"They tuck 'em each some bread an' salt, an' a candle to put the pins in and name. They done everything backwards—ye have to do everything backwards at a dumb supper. I don't know what happened when the candle burned down to the other girls' pins—I forget somehow—but when the pin Granny had stuck in the candle an' named for her lover was melted out and fell, the do' opened and in he walked and set down beside her. They wasn't a word said betwixt 'em. He tasted her salt, an' he et her bread; and then he was gone like a flash! And at that very same identical time that thar young man was a-crossin' the mountains of Virginny. It drawed him—don't you see, Judith?—it drawed him to Granny. He came back to her, shore enough, three months after, and they was wedded. He was our grandpap, Adoniram Peavey—and every word of that's true." 323

Judith sank lower in her splint-bottomed chair, looking fixedly above the flaxen heads at her knees, out through the open door, across the chip pile, and away to the bannered splendours of the autumn slopes.

Cliantha laid her head in Judith's lap and began to whimper.

"They's awful things chanced at them thar dumb suppers," she shivered. "I hearn tell of one gal that never had no true-love come, but jest a big black coffin hopped in at the do' and bumped around to her place and stopped 'side of her. My law, I believe I'd die ef sech as that should chance whar I was at!"

Judith's introverted gaze dropped to the girl's face.

"I reckon that gal died," she suggested musingly, "I don't know as I'd care much ef the coffin come for me. Unless—he—was to come, I'd ruther it would be the coffin. Pendrilly," with a sudden upflash of interest, "what is it that comes? Is it the man hisself—or a ghost?" 324

"'T ain't a ghost—a shore-enough ha'nt," argued Pendrilla soberly, sitting back on her heels, "not unless 'n the man's dead, hit couldn't be. Hit wasn't no ha'nt of Grandpap Peavey—and yet hit wasn't grandpap hisself. I reckon it was a sort of seemin'—jest like a vision in the Bible. Don't you, Jude?"

"I 'low," put in Cliantha doubtfully, "that if the right feller is close by when he's called by a dumb supper, he comes hisself. But ef he's away off somewhars that he cain't git to the place, then this here seemin' comes. An' ef he's dead and gone—why you'll see his ha'nt."

"They's jest three of us," whispered Pendrilla. "Three is the right number—but I know in my soul I'd be scared till I wouldn't be no manner of use to anybody."

"Hit's comin' close to Hollow Eve," suggested Cliantha. "That's the time to hold a dumb supper ef one ever should be held. Hit'll work then, ef it wouldn't on no other night of the year." 325

"It has to be held in a deserted house," Pendrilla reiterated the condition. "Ef you was to hold a dumb supper, Jude, we could go to the old Bonbright house itse'f—ef we had any way to git in."

"I've got the key," said Judith scarcely above her breath. "Creed left it with me away last April, to get things for the—for the play-party."

The Dumb Supper

It was the thirty-first of October, All Souls' eve, that mystic point of contact between the worlds when quick and dead are fabled to walk the ways of earth together, to meet eye to eye, and hold converse. A web of mountain legend clings dimly about this season.

The spirit of it—weird, elfin—was abroad, the air was full of it as, alone out in the gusty darkness of the autumn night, at eleven o'clock, Judith walked swiftly toward the Lusk place. Wrapped in a little packet she carried bread and salt, and a length of candle. She went across fields, and thus cut down the distance till it was possible to walk it in fifteen minutes.

As she approached the house, Speaker, a barely grown hound-pup, came rollicking out to meet her, leaping about her shoulder-high, frisking back toward the porch and waiting for her, all the while barking joyously.

"My Lord!" said Pendrilla's sleepy small voice when Judith tapped on their window in the wing of the building where the girls roomed. "Ef that thar fool hound-pup ain't loose! I hope he don't wake up Grandpap. Cain't you make him hush, Judith?"

Judith stooped and caressed the dog for a moment, quieting him. The girls presently appeared in the doorway fully dressed and, as it seemed, with their packets made, in addition to which Cliantha carried an old lantern unlighted in her hand.

"I'll light it as soon as we get out in the road," she announced whisperingly.

When they would have secured the dog that he might not follow them, they found that he, wise for his age, had disappeared.

"I bet he's run down the road apiece; he'll be a-hidin' in the bushes waitin' for us," Cliantha opined pessimistically. But there was nothing to be done about it, and they set out, to be intercepted in just such manner as she foretold.

"I vow, I ain't so mighty sorry Speaker's along of us," Pendrilla said after they had vainly browbeaten, threatened, and stoned the hound to drive him back through the gate. "He's a mighty heap of company and protection out thisaway in the night."

"Girls," said Judith, suddenly halting them all in the little byroad which they were travelling, "don't you think we'd better cut across here? Hit'll be a lot nearer."

"Grandpap's jest ploughed that thar field to put in his winter wheat," objected Pendrilla. "Hit'll make mighty bad walkin'."

"But we'll get there quicker," urged Judith feverishly, and that closed the argument. Between them the Lusk girls had succeeded in lighting the old lantern; by its illumination the party climbed the rail fence, and struggled for some distance across the loose hillocks of ploughed ground.

"Hit wouldn't make such awful walkin' if it had been drug," Cliantha murmured. In the mountains they hitch a horse to a log or a large piece of brush and, dragging this over the ploughed ground, make shift to smooth it without a harrow.

They had hobbled about one third of the toilsome way when there came a rush of galloping hoofs, the girls had barely time to crouch and cry out, Speaker barked loud, and suddenly half a dozen young calves ran almost into them.

"Oh landy!" cried Pendrilla. "Ef them thar calves ain't broke the fence again! Grandpap will be so mad—and we don't darst to tell him that we know of it."

"Come on," urged Judith. "We've got to get over there."

But it was found when they would have moved forward that they could not shake off their unwelcome escort. The calves had been tended occasionally in the dusk by a man with a lantern, and they hailed this one as a beacon of hope. Finally even Judith, desperately impatient to be gone, agreed that they would have to turn back and put the meddlesome creatures into their pasture and lay up the fence before they could make any progress.

"Hit'll save time," she commented briefly, as though time were the only thing worth considering now.

At last, one after the other, they climbed the fence at the side of the Bonbright place. The air was soft, heavy with coming rain. Up through the weed-grown yard they went, greeted and beckoned by the odours of Mary Bonbright's garden, thyme and southernwood, herbs by the path-side, clumps of brave chrysanthemums, a wandering spray or two of late-blooming honeysuckle. Judith trembled and locked her teeth together in anguish as she remembered that other night in the odorous dusk when she and Creed had stood under these trees and sought in the darkness for the bush of sweet-scented shrub.

The empty house bulked big and black before them in the gloom. She took the key from her pocket and opened the front door, Pendrilla and Cliantha clinging to her in an ecstasy of delicious terror. She stepped into the front room, struck a match, and lighted her candle. It was half-past eleven by the small nickel alarm-clock which she carried. Its busy, bustling, modern tick roused strange, incongruous echoes in the old house, and reproved their errand.

Speaker made himself at home, coming in promptly, seeking out the corner he preferred, and turning around dog-fashion before he lay down and composed himself to half-waking slumbers.

"I reckon in here will be the best place," murmured Cliantha, seeking a candlestick from the mantel for their light. "We could set around this table."

"It's more better ef we-all set on the flo'," reminded Pendrilla doubtfully. "Don't ye ricollect? all the dumb suppers we ever hearn tell of was held thataway. Set on the flo' and put yo' bread and salt on the flo' in front of you."

"Mebbe that's becaze they was held in deserted houses, and most generally deserted houses don't have no tables nor chairs in 'em," Cliantha speculated.

From the moment the lantern revealed the room to them, Judith had stood drawn back against the wall curiously rigid, her hand at her lip, her over-bright eyes going swiftly from one remembered object to another. This fleeting gaze fixed itself at last on the inner door.

"I'll go in the other room a minute for—for something," she whispered finally. "You gals set here. I'll be right back. I've got two candles."

She lighted the second candle, left the girls arranging the dumb supper, and stole, as though some one had called her, into that room which she had made ready for Creed's occupancy on the night of the play-party. It had reverted to its former estate of dust and neglect. She looked about her with blank, desolate eyes which finally found upon the bed a withered brown something that held her gaze as she crept toward it—the wreath of red roses!

There it was, the pitiful little lure she had put forward to Love, the garland she had set in place to show Creed how fine a housewife she was, how grandly she would keep his home for him. The brave red roses, the bold laughing red roses, their crimson challenge was shrivelled to darkened shreds, each golden heart was a pinch of black dust; only the thorny stems remained to show what queen of blossoms had been there.

She knelt beside the bed, and when the Lusk girls, frightened at her long absence, crept timidly in to look for her, they found her strangling passionate sobs in its white covering.

"It's most twelve o'clock, Jude," whimpered Cliantha.

"Hit's come on to rain," supplied Pendrilla piteously, and a gusty spatter on the small-paned window confirmed her words, as the three girls went back into the room where the candle stood in the middle of the floor with the three portions of bread and salt about it.

The pale little sisters glanced at each other, and then at Judith, wistfully, timorously, almost more in terror of her than of their anomalous situation, this new, unknown Judith who scarce answered when she was spoken to, who continually failed them, who looked so strangely about her and wept so much.

"Pendrilla an' me has done put our pins in close to the bottom," Cliantha explained deprecatingly. "Hit wouldn't do any good to have Andy an' Jeff come trompin' in here—though I shore would love to see either or both of 'em this minute," she concluded forlornly, as they set the door ajar and the long slanting lines of rain began to drive obliquely in at the opening.

"Push the candle back whar the draught won't git a fair chance at it," quavered Pendrilla. "We're obliged to have the do' open, or what comes cain't git in. An' we mustn't ne'er a one of us say a word from now on, or hit'll break the charm."

Judith moved the candle and bent to thrust her pin in, close to the top where the melting wax might soon free it, concentrating all her soul in a passionate cry that Creed should come to her or send her some sign. Then she crouched on the floor next to Pendrilla and nearest to the door, and the three waited with pale faces.

The wavering light of the candle, shaken by gusts which brought puffs of mist in with them, projected huge, grotesque shadows of the three heads, and set them dancing upon the walls. The hound-pup raised his head, cocked his ears dubiously, and whined under his breath.

"What's that?" gasped Cliantha. "Didn't you-all hear somethin'?"

Judith was staring at the candle flame and made no reply. Her big dark eyes had the look of one self-hypnotised.

"Oh, Lordy! Ye ortn't to talk at a dumb supper—but I thort I hearn somebody walkin' out thar in the rain!" chattered Pendrilla.

The old house creaked and groaned in the rising autumn storm, as old houses do. The rain drummed on the roof like fingers tapping. The wind stripped dry leaves from the bough, or scooped them up out of the hollows where they lay, and carried them across the window, or drove them along the porch, in a gliding, whispering flight that was infinitely eerie.

In their terror the girls looked to Judith. They saw that she was not with them. Her gaze was on the pin in the candle. Back over her heart swept the sweetness of her first meeting with Creed. She could see him stand talking to her, the lifted face, the blue eyes—should she ever see them again?

Then suddenly the flame twisted and bent, the tallow melted swiftly on one side, and Judith's pin fell to the floor.

"Hit's a-comin'!" hissed Cliantha frantically.

"Oh, Lord! I wish 't we hadn't—" Pendrilla moaned.

The dog uttered a protesting sound between a growl and a yelp. He raised on his forelegs, and the hair of his head and neck bristled.

Outside, a heavy stumbling step came up the walk. It halted at the half-open door. That door was flung back, and in the square of dripping darkness stood Creed Bonbright, his face death white, his eyes wide and fixed, the rain gemming his uncovered yellow hair.

A moment he stood so, and the three stared at him. Then with a swish of leaves in the wind and a spatter of rain in their faces, the candle blew out. The girls screamed and sprang up. The hound backed into his corner and barked furiously. Whatever it was, it had crossed the threshold and was in the room with them.

“Jude—Jude!” shrieked Cliantha. “Run! Come on, Pendrilly!”

Judith felt a wavering wet hand fumbling toward her in the darkness. It clasped hers; the arm went around her; she raised her face, and the cold lips of the visitant met her warm tremulous ones.

For an instant she had no thought but that Creed had returned from the dead to claim her—and she was willing to go. Then she was aware of a swift rush, as the fleeing girls went past them, and the patter of the hound’s feet following. Slowly the newcomer’s weight sagged against her; he crumpled and went to the floor, dragging her down in his fall.

“Girls! Clianthy! Pendrilly!” she cried as she crouched there, clinging to the prostrate form. “Don’t leave me—it’s Creed himself. You got to he’p me!”



“The door was flung back and in the darkness stood Creed Bonbright.”

But the girls were gone like frightened hares. As she got to her feet in the doorway she could hear the sound of their flying footsteps down the lane. All was dead still in the room behind her, yet only an ear as fine as hers could have distinguished those light, receding footfalls that finally melted into the far multitudinous whisper and rustle of the storm.

She turned back in the dark and knelt down beside him, passing a light, tender hand over his face and chest. He breathed. He was a living man.

“Creed,” she whispered loud and desperately. There was no movement or response.

“Creed,” raising her voice. “O my God! Creed, darlin’ cain’t you hear me? It’s me. It’s Jude—poor Jude that loves you so—cain’t you answer her?”

There came no reply. She lifted the cold hand, and when she let go of it, it fell. She leaped to her feet in sudden fear that he might die while she delayed here. With trembling fingers she struck a match and lit her candle. Her eye fell on the two pins the girls had thrust in it and named for Andy and Jeff. With a swift motion she plucked them out and threw them on the floor. She looked from the prostrate figure to the bed in the corner. No—she couldn’t lift him to lay him there; but she ran and brought pillows and covers, raising his head upon the one, lapping him softly in the other.

When all was done that she could do, there was the instant need to hurry home for help. She hated terribly to leave him alone in the dark, yet a lighted candle with a man so ill was a risk that she dared not run—he might move about and set the house on fire. When she closed the darkened room with its stark figure lying under the white covers, her heart sank and sank. She must turn the key upon him. There was no good in hesitating. Only her strong will, her high courage, sustained her as she locked the door, and turning ran, with feet that love and terror winged, toward her own home. The rain drenched her; the darkness seemed a thing palpable;

she slipped and fell, got to her feet and ran on. Jephthah Turrentine, asleep in his own cabin, heard the sound of beating palms against his door, and a voice outside in the dark and the rain that cried upon him.

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"Uncle Jep! Uncle Jep! For God's sake get up quick and help me. Creed Bonbright's come home to his house, and I think he's dead or dyin' over there."

Chapter XXIV

A Case of Walking Typhoid

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"Uh—*huh!*" said the old man as he straightened up after a long examination of Creed. "I thort so. He's got a case o' walkin' typhoid, an' looks like he's been on his feet with it till hit's plumb wore him out."

He stood staring down at the prostrate figure, which had neither sound nor movement, the fluttering breath of which seemed scarcely to stir the chest.

"Walkin' typhoid," he repeated. "I've met up with some several in my lifetime. Cur'ous things. His wound looks to be healed. Reckon he's been puny along ever sence he got that ball in his shoulder, and hit's ended up in this here spell of fever."

"Will he die, Uncle Jep?" whispered Judith, crouching beside him, her dark eyes roving desperately from the still form to her uncle's countenance. "What must we do for him?"

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"N-no—I reckon he has a chance," hesitated Jephthah. Then, glancing at her white, miserable face, "an' ef he has, hit's to git him away from here an' into bed right. Lord, I wish 't the boys had been home to he'p us out. Well, we'll have to do the best we can."

As he spoke he put the word into action, getting a length of home-made carpet to put in the bottom of the waggon before he should lay in the feather-bed upon which Creed was to rest. As he worked, despite the look of acute anxiety, the old man's eye was brighter, his step was freer, his head was borne more erect, than Judith had seen it since the trouble came.

Silent, efficient, careful, experienced, he managed with her help to lift the unconscious man into the waggon and place him, his head in Judith's lap, for the journey home.

"You mind now, Judy," he admonished, almost sternly, "ef he comes to hisse'f you speak to him mighty quiet and pleasant-like. Don't you set to cryin'—don't you make no fuss. 'Tain't every gal I'd trust thisaway. Nothin' worse for a sick man than to get him excited." He took the lines and drove with infinite care and caution, walking beside the horse.

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But his warning was unnecessary; Creed never roused from the lethargy in which his senses were locked. They got him safely home, the old man undressed him and laid him comfortably in that big show-bed in the front room that was given to any guest of honour.

Morning was breaking when Judith, coming into the kitchen, found Andy and Jeff sitting by the fire, and Dilsey Rust in charge.

"Yo' uncle sont fer me," the old woman said. "He 'lowed he needed yo' he'p takin' keer o' Bonbright."

Judith sat with Creed while the others had breakfast. When her uncle went out, closing the door softly behind him, leaving her alone with her recovered treasure, she went and knelt down by the bed, and looked at its silent occupant with a bursting heart.

Here was Creed, Creed for whom she had longed and prayed. He had come back to her. She stared at the wasted face, the transparent temples where the blue veins showed through, the black circles beneath the lashes of the closed eyes. No, no, this was not Creed, this dying man who mocked her longing with a semblance of her lover's return!

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There was a sound at the door. Andy and Jeff came awkwardly in, and while they all stood looking, Creed's eyes opened suddenly upon them. Andy put out a hand swiftly.

"I'm mighty sorry for—for all that chanced," he said huskily.

"So 'm I," Jeff instantly seconded him.

Creed looked at them both with a little puzzled drawing of the brows; then the ghost of a smile flickered across his lips, and his hand that lay on the covers moved weakly toward theirs.

"It's all right," he said, scarcely above a whisper—the first words he had uttered. "I told—Aunt Nancy—you were good—boys—" he faltered to a hesitating close, his eyelids drooped over the tired eyes; but they flashed open once more with a smile that included Judith and her uncle standing back of the two.

"You're all—mighty—good—to me," said Creed Bonbright. And again he sank into that lethargic sleep.

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As the day advanced came the visitors that are the torment of a sick-room in the country. It would scarcely have been thought that a bare land like that could produce so many. Finally Judith went to her uncle and begged that Creed be no longer made a show of, and that old Dilsey set out food in the other room and entertain those who came, without promising that they should see the sick man.

"Uh—huh," agreed Jephthah, understandingly, "I reckon yo' about right, Jude. Creed's obliged to lay there like a baby an' sleep ef he's to have any chance for his life. I don't want to fall out with the neighbours, but we'll see if we cain't make out with less visitin'."

But this prohibition was not supposed to apply to Iley Turrentine, a member of the family. About eight o'clock that morning, having then for the first time heard of the arrival at the cabin, she came hurrying across the slope with the baby on her hip. Long abstinence had made keen that temper of hers, and here was a situation where virtue itself cried to arms. She was eager to give Creed Bonbright a piece of her mind.

"You cain't go in unless'n you'll promise to be plumb quiet—not to open yo' mouth," Judith told her sharply. "Uncle Jep ain't here right now—but that's what he said."

"Don't Bonbright know folks? Cain't a body talk to him? Is he plumb outen his head?" demanded Iley, somewhat taken aback.

"He knew some of us a while ago," admitted Judith, "but mostly he doesn't notice nothing—jest stares right in front of him, and Uncle Jep said we mustn't let him be talked to nor worried."

The big red-headed woman, considerably lowered in note, stepped inside the door of the sick-room, hushing the child in her arms. A moment she stood staring at the bed and its single occupant, at the pale face on the pillow, then she burst suddenly into tempestuous sobs and fled.

Judith followed her out.

"What's the matter, Iley? You never set much store by Creed Bonbright—what you cryin' about?" she asked.

"Hit's—Huldy," choked the sister. "I reckon you thort I talked mighty big about the business the last time you an' me had speech consarnin' hit; but the facts air that I don't know a thing about whar she's at, nor how she's doin'. Judy, ef yo' a-goin' to take keer o' the man, cain't ye please ax him for me when did he see Huldy last, an'—an' is they wedded?"

Judith assented. She knew what her uncle would think of such an inquiry being put to the sick man, yet her own heart so fiercely demanded knowledge on this point that she promised Iley she would ask the question as soon as she dared.

The week that followed was a strange one to active Judith Barrier, used to out-door life under the sky for such a large part of her days. Now those same days were bounded by the four walls of a sick-room, the sole matter of importance in them whether the invalid took his gruel well, whether he had seemed better, whether her uncle spoke encouragingly of the eventful outcome of this illness. Old Jephthah himself nursed Creed, and Judith was but a helper; yet, such was her torture of uncertainty, of anxiety, that she often left to go to her own room and get some sleep, only to return and beg that she might be allowed to sit outside the threshold for the rest of the night and be ready if she were needed.

"Ain't no use wearin' yourself out thataway," her uncle used to say kindly. "That won't do Creed no good, nor you neither. I wish to the Lord I had Nancy here to he'p me!"

For in this day of real need he dropped all banter about Nancy's value in sick-room practice, and longed openly for her assistance. Creed had been in the house nearly a week and was showing marked improvement, when Judith got a message from Blatch Turrentine—Would she be at the draw-bars 'long about sundown? He had something to tell her.

She paid no attention to the request, but it put her in mind to do finally what she had long contemplated—write to her cousin Wade. It was but a short scrawl, stating that Creed Bonbright was sick at their house, and not able to tell them anything concerning Huldah, and that Iley and the others were troubled. Would Wade please ask information in Hepzibah, and write to his affectionate cousin.

Every day Iley made a practice of coming up and sitting dejectedly in the kitchen till Judith entered the room, when she would draw her mysteriously to one side and say:

"Have ye axed him yet? What did he tell ye? I'm plumb wo' out and heart-broke' about it, Jude."

Though Judith realised fully just how much of this display proceeded from a desire on Iley's part for notice, yet her own passionate, rebellious heart seconded the idle woman, and allowed the continual harping on that string to finally drive her to the set determination that, as soon as Creed could talk to her at all, she would ask him about Huldah.

Had she lacked resolution, the patient himself would have supplied and hardened it. About this time he developed a singular form of low delirium in which he would lie with closed eyes, murmuring—murmuring—murmuring to himself in a hurried, excited whisper. And always the burden of his distress was:

"I must get to her. Where is she? It's a long ways. Oh, I've got to get to her—there's nobody else."

Kneeling by his bed, her burning gaze upon his shut eyes and moving lips, Judith racked her

soul with questioning. Often she heard her own name in those fevered whisperings; once he said with sudden determination, "I'm going home." But she listened in vain for mention of Huldah.

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And what might that mean? All that she hoped? Or all that she dreaded? Oh, she could not bear this; she must know; she must—must—must ask him.

The Evil One, having provided the counsel, was not slow in following it up with the necessary opportunity. Judith was sitting with Creed alone, on a Wednesday night—he had come to them the preceding Tuesday. Her uncle being worn out had planned to sleep till midnight, thus dividing the watch with her. About eleven o'clock Creed opened his eyes and asked in what seemed to her a fairly natural tone for a drink. She brought it to him, and when he had drunk he began speaking very softly.

"I'm glad I came back to the mountains," he said in a weak, whispering voice. "I promised you I'd come, and I did come, Judith."

"Yes," answered Judith, putting down the glass and seating herself at the bedside, taking his hand and stroking it softly, studying his face with intent, questioning eyes. "You know where you are now, don't you, Creed?"

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He smiled at her.

"I'm in the front room at your house where we-all danced the night of the play-party," he said. "I loved you that night, Judith—only I hadn't quite found out about it."

The statement was made with the simplicity of a child—or of a sick man. It went over Judith with a sudden, sweet shock. Then her jealous heart must know that it was really all hers. Nerve racked as only a creature of the open can be after weeks of confinement in a sick-room, torn with the possessive passion of her earth-born temperament, she stood up suddenly and asked him in a voice of pain that sounded harsh and menacing,

"Creed, whar's Huld'y?"

"I don't know," returned Creed tremulously. The blue eyes in their great hollows came up to her face in a frightened gaze. Instantly they lost their clearness; they clouded and filmed with that look of confusion which had been in them from the first.

"You're married to her—ain't you?" choked Judith, horrified at what she had done, loathing herself for it, yet pushed on to do more.

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"Yes," whispered Creed miserably. "Sit down by me again, Judith. Don't be mad. What are you mad about? I forget—there was awful trouble, and somebody was shot—oh, how they all hate me!"

The fluttering moment of normal conditions was gone. The baffled, confused eyes closed; the thin hands began to fumble piteously about the covers; the pale lips resumed their rapid motion, while from between them flowed the old, swift stream of broken whispers.

Judith had quenched the first feeble flame of intelligence that flickered up toward her. She remained a moment staring down at her handiwork, then covered her face, and burst out crying. An ungentle grasp descended upon her shoulder. Her uncle, standing tall and angry behind her, thrust her from the room.

"Thar now!" he said with carefully repressed violence, lest his tones should disturb the sick man. "You've raised up a pretty interruption with my patient. I 'lowed I could trust you, Jude. What in the world you fussin' with Creed about? For God's sake, did you see him? You've nigh-about killed him, I reckon. Didn't I tell you not to name anything to him to worry him?"

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"He says he's married Huld'y," said Judith in a strangled voice.

"Say! He'd say anything—like he is now," retorted her uncle, exasperated. "An' he'd shore say anything on earth that was put in his mouth. I don't care if he's married forty Huld'y's; what I want is for him to get well. Lord, I do wish I had Nancy here, and not one of these fool young gals with their courtin' business and their gettin' jealous and having to have a rippit with a sick man that don't know what he's talkin' about," he went on savagely.

But high-spirited Judith paid no attention to the cutting arraignment.

"Do you think that's true—oh, Uncle Jep, do you reckon he didn't mean it?" was all she said.

"I don't see as it makes any differ," retorted her uncle, testily. "Marryin' Huld'y Spiller ain't no hangin' matter—but hit'll cost that boy his life ef you fuss with him and git him excited and all worked up."

Judith turned and felt her way blindly up the steep little stair to her own room. That night she prayed, not in a formulated fashion, but to some vague, over-brooding goodness that she hoped would save her from cruelty to him she loved.

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The next morning Creed was plainly set back in his progress toward sound rationality, though there seemed little physical change. He recognised no one, and was much as he had been on those first days. While this condition of affairs held, and it lasted nearly a week, there was no need for Jephthah to repeat his caution. But one morning when Judith went in to relieve her uncle, Creed smiled at her again with eyes that knew.

As soon as they were alone together, he asked her to come and sit by him, and told her with tolerable clearness how he had followed Blatch Turrentine onto the train at Garyville, how he had fainted there, and only recovered consciousness when they were halfway to the next

station.

"I was too bad off for them to leave me anywhere, and they carried me plumb to Atlanta. I was in the hospital there a long while. Looks like I might have written to you—but I thought the best I could do was to let you alone—I'd made you trouble enough," he ended with a wistful, half-hopeful glance at her face.

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Judith, taught by bitter experience, tried to meet this with the gentle, reassuring cheerfulness of the nurse. It was all right. He mustn't talk too much. He was here now. They didn't need any letter. But strive as she might she could not keep out of her voice a certain alien tone; and afterward the bitter thought dogged her that he had told her nothing definite. She knew nothing, after all, about his relations with Huldah; the girl might even, as Blatch declared, have been on the train, and gone to Atlanta with him, and he have held back this information.

Perhaps, considering her temperament, Judith did as well as could have been expected in the three days that followed—days in which Creed seemed to make fair physical gain, but to grow worse and worse mentally. Never once did she put into words the query that ate into her very soul, quite innocent of the fact that it spoke in every tone of her voice, in every movement of her head or hand, and kept the ailing mind to which she ministered at tremble with the strain to answer.

On the fourth day, fretted past endurance by the situation, Judith permitted herself some oblique hints and suggestions, on the heels of which she left to prepare his breakfast. Returning to the sick-room with the bowl of broth, she met the strange, unexpected, unsolicited reply to all these withheld demands. Creed greeted her with a half-terrified smile.

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"Did you meet her goin' out?" he asked.

"Did I meet who, Creed?" inquired Judith, setting the bowl down on a splint-bottomed chair, spreading a clean towel across the quilts, and preparing for his breakfast. "Has there been somebody in here to see you a'ready?"

"It was only Huldah," deprecated Creed. "You said—you asked—and she just slipped in a minute after you went out."

Judith straightened up with so sudden a movement that the chair rocked and the contents of the bowl slopped dangerously.

"Which way did she go?" came the sharp challenge.

"Out that door," indicating with an air of childlike alarm the front way which led directly into the yard.

Judith ran and flung it open. Nobody was in sight. Heedless of the sharp wintry air that blew in upon the patient, she stood searching the way over toward Jim Cal's cabin.

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"I don't see her," she called across her shoulder. "Mebbe she's in the house yet."

She closed the door reluctantly and came back to the bedside.

"No," said Creed plaintively, lifting a doubtful hand to his confused head, "she ain't here. She allowed you-all were mad at her, and I reckon she'll keep out of sight."

"But she had to come to see you—her wedded husband," accused Judith sternly.

He nodded mutely with a motion of assent. He seemed to hope that the admission would please Judith. The broth stood untouched, cooling on the chair.

"Is she stayin' down at Jim Cal's?" came Judith's next question.

"She never named it to me where she was stayin'," returned Creed wearily. As before, Judith's ill-concealed anger and hostility was as a sword of destruction to him; yet now he had more strength to endure with. "She just come—and now she's gone." He closed his eyes, and leaned his head back among his pillows. The white face looked so sunken that Judith's heart misgave her.

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"Won't you eat your breakfast now, Mr. Bonbright?" she said stiffly.

"I don't want any breakfast, thank you. I can't eat," returned Creed very low.

Judith pressed her lips hard together to refrain from mentioning Huldah again. She knew that she had injured Creed, yet for the life of her she could not get out one word of kindness. Finally she took her mending and sat down within sight of the bed, deceiving herself into the belief that he slept.

The next day an almost identical scene pushed Judith's strained nerves to the verge of hysteria. In the afternoon when the old man came to relieve her he returned almost immediately from the sick-room, called her downstairs once more, and complained of Creed's progress.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Look like somethin' has went wrong here right lately. Ever sence you got that fool notion in yo' head that Creed and Huldah was man and wife, he's been goin' down in his mind about as fast as his stren'th come up. The best thing you can do is to put it out of yo' head."

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"Well, they *air* wedded," returned Judith passionately. "They ain't no use to fergit it, 'caze she's done been here—she's down at Jim Cal's right now; and when we-all are out of the room he says she slips in to visit him."

The girl stood trembling; her rounded cheeks that used to blush with such glowing crimson

were white; she was a figure to move any one who loved her to pity; but the old man regarded her with strong contempt.

"Good Lord—is *that* what's ailin' ye?" he burst out. "You might at least have had the sense you was born with, and asked somebody is Huldy here. You know in reason it shows that Creed's out of his head—when he tells you a tale like that. The Lord knows there's no fool in the world like a jealous woman. Do ye want to kill the boy?—or run him crazy?"

Judith struggled with her tears.

"Uncle Jep," she finally choked out without actually sobbing. "I won't say another word—now that I know. I ain't got nothin' agin' Creed Bonbright, nor his wife—why should I have?"

Some ruth came into the scornful glance those old black eyes bent on her.

"You're a good gal, Jude," Jephthah said softly, "ef ye air somethin' unusual of a fool in this business. But I reckon I got to take this boy out o' yo' hands someway. I'm obliged to leave Creed with ye for one short while—an' agin' my grain it goes to do it—an' go fetch him a nurse that won't take these tantrums. But mind, gal, it's Creed's reason I'm leavin' with you; mebbe his life—but sertain shore his reason. I won't be gone to exceed two days. Ye can hold out that long, cain't ye?"

"I'll do the best I can, Uncle Jep," said Judith with unexpected mildness. "An' ef Huldy 's here ___"

"My Lord!" broke in Jephthah. "Why don't ye go to Iley an' set yo' mind at rest about Huldy?"

"Hit is at rest," returned Judith darkly. "When Creed come here, Iley was at me every day to ask him whar was Huldy; but I take notice that sence that day he named Huldy visitin' him Iley ain't been a-nigh the place."

The old man heaved a heavy sigh.

"Well, ye say ye'll do yo' best? Hit's apt to be a good best, Jude. In two days, ef I live, I'll be back here, an' I'll bring he'p."

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Chapter XXV

A Perilous Passage

It was a strange thing to Judith to be left alone in the house, in charge of it and the sick man. Old Dilsey did the cooking and all the domestic labour. Had Wade been at home, and the patient any other than Creed Bonbright, she would have had a capable assistant at the nursing. Andy and Jeff tried to be as kind as they could. But they were an untamed, untrained pair, helpless and hapless at such matters, and their approaching wedding kept them often over at the Lusk place. From Iley Judith held savagely aloof.

It was on the second morning of her uncle's absence that Dilsey Rust brought again that message from Blatch, and Judith caught at it. She had done her best; she had refrained from any questions; but the night before Creed told her without asking that Huldah had been in to see him twice again. As her patient's physical strength notably increased, his appeal to her tender forbearance of course lessened, and the raw insult of the situation began to come home to her.

She put a shawl over her head and ran swiftly down through the chill November weather to the draw-bars, where in the big road outside Turrentine slouched against a post waiting for her. The man spoke over his shoulder.

"Howdy, Jude—you did come at last."

"Ef yo' goin' to say anything to me, you'll have to be mighty quick, Blatch," she notified him, shivering. "I got to get right back."

"They's somebody new—and yet not so new—a-visitin' in the Turkey Tracks that you'd like to know of," he prompted coolly. "Ain't that so?"

"Huldy," she gasped, her dark eyes fixed upon his grey ones.

He nodded.

"I 'lowed you'd take an intrust in that thar business, an' I thort as a friend you ort to be told of it," he added virtuously.

"Where's she at?" demanded Judith.

"Over at my house," announced Turrentine easily, with a backward jerk of his head.

"At yo' house!" echoed Judith; "at yo' house! Why, hit ain't decent."

"Huh," laughed Blatch. "I don't know about decent. She was out thar takin' the rain; she had nobody to roof her; an' I bid her in, 'caze I'm in somewhat the same fix myse'f."

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"No one to roof her," repeated Judith. "What's henderin' her from comin' over this side the Gulch?"

"Well, seein' the way she's done Wade I reckon she 'lows she'd better keep away from his pap's house. She's at the outs with Iley—Jim Cal's lady sont her word she needn't never show her face thar agin. She gives it out to everybody that'll listen at her talk that she's skeered o' you 'count o' Bonbright."

Judith studied his face with half-incredulous eyes.

"How long has she been there?" she interrogated keenly.

Turrentine seemed to take time for reflection.

"Lemme see," he ruminated, "she come a Wednesday night. Hit was rainin', ef you remember, an' I hearn something outside, and it scairt me up some, fer fear it was revenuers. When I found hit was Huldy, I let her in, an she's been thar ever sence."

Wednesday night! It was Thursday morning that Creed had first announced the visit of his wife. Oh, it must be true! Judith trembled all through her vigorous young body with a fury of despair. As always, Blatchley had found the few and simple words to bid her worsen angel forth. She even felt a kind of hateful relish for the quarrel. They had tricked her. They had made a fool of her. She had suffered so much. She longed to be avenged.

"Judy," murmured Blatch softly, bending toward her but not laying a hand upon her, "you white as a piece o' paper, an' shakin' from head to foot. That's from stayin' shet up in the house yonder nussin' that feller Bonbright night an' day like a hirelin'. W'y, he never did care nothin' for ye only becaze ye was useful to him. Ye stood betwixt him an' danger; ye he'ped him out when he needed it wust. An' he had it in mind to fool ye from the first. Now him and Huldy Spiller has done it. Don't you let 'em. You show 'em what you air. I've got a hoss out thar, and Selim's down in the stable. I'll put yo' saddle on him. Git yo' skirt, honey. Let's you and me ride over to Squire Gaylord's and be wedded. Then we'll have the laugh on these here smart folks that tries to fool people."

He leaned toward her, all the power of the man concentrated in his gaze. Perhaps he had never wanted anything in his twenty-seven years as he now wanted Judith Barrier and her farm and the rehabilitation that a union with her would give him. Once this girl's husband, he could curtly refuse to rent to Jephthah Turrentine, who had, he knew, no lease. He could call into question the old man's stewardship, and even up the short, bitter score between them. He could reverse that scene when he was sent packing and told to keep his foot off the place.

"Judy," he breathed, deeply moved by all this, "don't ye remember when we was—befo' ever this feller come—Why, in them days I used to think shore we'd be wedded."

Judith rested a hand on the bars and, lips apart, stared back into the eager eyes of the man who addressed her. Blatchley had always had some charm for the girl. Power he did not lack; and his lawlessness, his license, which might have daunted a feebler woman, liberated something correspondingly brave and audacious in her. He had been the first to pay court to her, and a girl does not easily forget that.

For a moment the balance swung even. Then it bore down to Blatch's side. She would go. Yes, she would. Creed might have Huldah. The girl might be his wife, or his widow. She, Judith Barrier, would show them—she would show them. Her parted lips began to shape to a reckless yes. The word waited in her mind behind those lips all formed. Her swift imagination pictured to her herself riding away beside Blatch leaving the sick man who had been cause of so many humiliations to her to die or get well. Blatch, watching narrowly, read the coming consent in her face. His hand stole forward toward the draw-bars.

Her salvation was in a very small and commonplace thing. The picture of herself riding beside Blatch Turrentine brought back to her, with an awakening shock, the recollection of herself and Creed riding side by side, her arm across his shoulder, his drooping head against it. How purely happy she had been then—how innocent—how blest! What were these fires of torment that raged in her now? No, no! That might be lost to her; but even so, she could not decline from its dear memory to a mating like this. Without a word she turned and ran back to the house, never looking over her shoulder in response to the one or two cautious calls that Blatch sent after her.

Judith's day was mercifully full of work. When Creed did not require her, Dilsey demanded help and direction, and one or two errands from outside kept her mind from sinking in upon itself. It was night-fall, Andy was lending her his awkward aid in the sick-room, when Jeff came in and beckoned the two of them out mysteriously.

"How's Bonbright this evenin', Jude? Do you reckon I could have speech with him?" he asked in a troubled tone.

Judith shook her head. Her own near approach to absolute failure in her charge that morning made her the more punctilious now.

"No." She spoke positively. "Uncle Jep said he wasn't to be worried about anything."

"Why, he's settin' up some, ain't he?" said the boy in surprise. "I thort he looked right peart."

"Yes," agreed Judith dejectedly, "he's gettin' his strength all right; he does look well. But you ax him questions, or name anything to him to trouble him, an' it throws him right back. Uncle Jep says hit's more his mind than his body now. What is it ye want from Creed? Cain't I tend to it?"

"I don't reckon a gal like you could he'p any," Jeff said doubtfully. His eye wandered toward his

twin. "I reckon this is men's business. I've got word that Huldy Spiller—or some say Huldy Bonbright—is over at Blatch's cabin, and he's got her shut up."

Judith's heart gave a great leap as of terror; the thing was out at last—people knew it. Then that heavily beating heart sank sickeningly; what difference to her, though all the world knew it? Yet she held to her trust.

"Oh, shore not, Jeff. You cain't *nigh* talk to him about nothin' like that," she maintained. "Uncle Jep made me promise that nothin' should be named to him to excite him."

"Well, then," pursued Jeff, "pappy not bein' here, nor Wade, and Jim Cal over at Spiller's, an' the gal not havin' no men folks in reach, me an' Andy has got to look after this thing. Fact is, Blatch sent word that ef we wanted her we could come over and git her."

"I don't know as we do want her—I don't know as we do," put in Andy. "And we both promised pappy that we wouldn't set foot on the land whilst Blatch had it rented."

"Then ag'in," debated Jeff—"Oh, no, buddy, we cain't leave the gal thar. We're plumb obliged to find out if she wants to come away, anyhow."

Andy turned to his cousin.

"What do you say, Jude? Ort we to go?"

Judith locked her hands hard together and held down her head, fighting out her battle. She longed to say no. She longed to shout out that Huldah Spiller might take care of herself, since she had been so unwomanly as to run after men and bring all this trouble on them. What she did say, at the end of a lengthened struggle, was:

"Yes, I think both of you ort to go. Can it be did quiet? You got to think of her good name."

Jeff nodded.

"Well, how air we goin' to be sure that gal's over there?" inquired Andy, still half reluctant.

"Oh, she's there," returned Judith heavily; and when the boys regarded her with startled looks, "I ain't seen her, but she's been on the mountain since Thursday. She's been slippin' over to visit—her—Creed named it to me then."

"Well that does settle it," Andy concluded. "Reckon Blatch has shut her up for pure meanness. When was we to go? Was there any time sot?"

"To-night," Jeff informed them. "Any time after ten o'clock'll do—that was the word I got."

"Well, that'll be all right," agreed Andy; "I can fix Creed up for the night, and ef we git Huldy away in the dark nobody need know of the business—not even Bonbright."

A slow flush rose in Judith's pale cheeks. But she offered no comment on this aspect of the case. She only said:

"Just do what you think best, and don't name it to me again, please." Then, as both boys looked wonderingly at her, she added haltingly, "I've got enough to worry over—with a sick man here on my hands, an' Uncle Jep gone."

She went to her room. When at midnight she slipped down as of custom to see how all fared in the sick-room, she found the patient sleeping quietly, and Andy ready for the trip across the Gulch. The boys were going unarmed; they felt no fear of treachery on Blatch's part—it could profit him nothing to injure either of them in so public a way, and indeed he had never shown them any ill-will.

Chapter XXVI

His Own Trap

"I reckon that'll about do for you, my pretty young men," remarked Blatchley Turrentine as he put the last knot in the line with which he was securing Andy to a splint-bottomed chair.

His concluding words were the refrain of a familiar old ballad, and he continued to hum this as he straightened up and set his hands on his hips, regarding the twins through wickedly narrowed eyes. He was flushed with drink and inclined, as always at such times, to swagger with a sort of savage playfulness.

"Scalf, you ain't got yo' feller half tied," he broke out, jerking the cord around Jeff. "Why, Lord A'mighty! I could pull myse'f a-loose from that mess o' rope inside o' five minutes," and he set to work to make his cousin secure.

"Do yo' own dirty work," growled Scalf. "Yo' the only one that's a-goin' to profit by it."

It was after midnight. When the two boys had approached Blatch's cabin as agreed, they had been set upon from behind, pinioned, and taken to the cave where the still was. Here they now

sat bound and helpless.

"What do you aim to make out of it, Blatch?" asked Jeff, offering the first remark that had come from either of them since their capture.

"Is—uh—" Andy glanced at Scalf, and strove to keep Huldah's name out of it—"is what we come for here yet?"

Blatch burst into a great horse laugh and slapped his thigh.

"What you come after," he repeated enjoyingly. "Lord—Lord! What you come after! You was easy got. I counted on Jude to set you on, and I see I never counted none too much."

"What do you aim to make out of it?" persisted Andy.

The light from the fire built at the back of the cave, whose smoke went up a cleft and entered the chimney of the cabin far above, illuminated the dark interior flickeringly. Blatch went to a jug on a shelf, noisily poured a drink into a tin cup, swallowed it, and then addressed himself to his cousins. 373

"Yo' pappy ordered me off his land. My lease is up next month. I got to git out of here anyhow, and I aimed to raise a stir befo' I went. This here town podner what I got after you-all quit me," glancing negligently at Scalf, "has many a little frill to his plans, and he knows Dan Haley, the marshal, right well. Sometimes I misdoubt that he come up on Turkey Track to git in with me and git the reward that I'm told Haley has out for the feller that can ketch me stillin'."

He wheeled and looked fully at Scalf with these words, and the town man made haste to turn his back, warming his hands at the blaze. Blatch laughed deep in his throat.

"Scalf's on the make," he asserted with grim humour. "He needed somebody to give up to Dan Haley, and as I hain't got no likin' for learnin' to peg shoes in the penitentiary, I 'lowed mebber the trade would suit you-all boys, an' I sont over for ye."

The twins writhed in their chairs as much as their tight bandings would permit. How simple they had been to trust the mercy of a desperate man. And they knew Blatch Turrentine. In days past, they had been on the inside, pupils and assistants in such work as this. They stole sheepish looks at each other. But the message he had sent them was yet to be explained. If Huldah was not with him, how had he known she was on the mountain at all? 374

"What made you send the word you did?" burst out Andy wrathfully.

Blatch had moved over by the fire.

"Oh, I hearn through old Dilsey Rust—that I've had a-listenin' at key-holes and spyin' through chinks—about Bonbright's talk concernin' Huldy, and I thort——"

At these words ancient Gideon Rust, posted as sentinel outside the cave's entrance, keeping himself warily from view of the prisoners, craned forward and stared with fallen jaw, reckless of observation. Humble tenants, pensioners of Judith and the Turrentines, with these words Blatch had wantonly stripped the poor roof from above their grey heads, and turned them out defenceless, to the anger of that strong family. Come what would, he must protest. 375

"Now Blatch," he whined, "you ort not to go a-namin' names like you do. You said that Dilsey nor me, nary one, needn't be known in this business."

In his excitement he came fully into the light.

"I hope you-all boys understand that I didn't aim to do ye a meanness. Yo' pap—I—I hope he won't hold this agin' us. The Turrentines has been mighty good friends to Dilsey—and here's Blatch lettin' on to 'em like she was a spy."

"Well, what else is she?" asked Blatch with an oath. "What else are any of ye? The last one of ye would sell yo' own fathers and mothers. Don't I know ye? A man's only chance is to get ye scared of him, or give ye somebody else to tell tales on—and that's what I've done."

He turned his attention once more to Andy and Jeff, and left the old man staring aghast, plucking at his beard.

"I've bought me a good team, an' I'm goin' to move my plunder out of here," he told them. "I've done picked me a fine place over yon," jerking his head vaguely in the direction of the Far Cove. "Every stick and ravellin' that belongs to me I'll take, exceptin' the run of whiskey that I'll leave in the still here for to make the marshal shore he's got the right thing. You might expect him any time to-morrow. Old Gid here will lead him in, or Scalf, and the testimony they stand ready to give means penitentiary to you two." 376

"I reckon you-all won't deny that you have made many a run of blockaded whiskey right here in this cave," put in Scalf, nervously.

"That's so—that's so, boys, I've seed ye many a time," whimpered Gideon Rust, almost beside himself with terror. "I hope ye won't hold it ag'in us that we he'ped to have ye took instead of Blatch here. Blatch is a hard man to deal with—he's been too much fer me—and hit wouldn't do you all no manner of good ef he was took along with ye. I don't see that yo' any worse off ef he goes free."

The twins looked at each other and forebore to reply. Blatch moved over to Scalf, and after some muttered parley with the town partner strode away into the dark. Scalf himself waited only long enough to be sure that Blatch had left, then slipped away, posting the old man down the path as lookout. 377

Alone in the cave, it was long before either boy spoke. Then came a rush of angry comment and bitter reflection which interrogated the situation from all sides, tending always to the conclusion that it was mighty hard, when a man had given up his evil courses, when he had just joined the church and was about to get married, to have the whole ugly score to pay. They sat cramped and miserable in their splint-bottomed chairs and the hours wore away till dawn in this dismal converse. Pappy was right—he was mighty right. If they ever got out of this—But there, Blatch wasn't apt to make a failure.

It was broad daylight when at last Blatch Turrentine brought his team up and as close to the cave's mouth as he dared. It was loaded already with a considerable amount of furniture and clothing from the cabin, and he climbed down the steep approach to take from the cave the jugged whiskey, and the keg or two which was aging there. His eyes were reddened; but the dark flush which had been on his face had now given place to a curious pallor. There was a new element in his mood, a different note in his bearing, a suggestion of furtive hurry and anxiety.

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He was not afraid of the marshal. Haley could not be on the mountain before noon. But he had left that behind in the little log stable from which his team came that cried haste to his going.

Gord Bosang from whom he was to buy the horses was a man somewhat of Blatch's own ilk. Cavalierly called out of bed after midnight and offered only a partial cash payment—all that Blatch had been able to raise—he had angrily refused to let the team be taken off the place. Turrentine's situation was desperate. He must have the horses. In the quarrel that followed, he struck to clear this obstacle from his path; but whether he had left a dead man lying back there on the hay—whether it was a possible charge of murder he was now fleeing from—he had not stopped to find out. He had got back to his cabin with all haste, pitched his ready belongings into the wagon, and now he came down to the still to get the last, and see that all there was working out right.

As his foot reached the opening he uttered a loud exclamation, then leaped into the cave. Both chairs were empty, the ropes lying cut beside them. He sprang back to the rude doorway and gave the usual signal—the screech-owl's cry. It was inappropriate at this time, yet he could not risk less, and he sent it forth again and again.

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Getting no answer he ventured cautiously to call Gideon Rust's name, and when this failed he looked about him and came to a decision. The boys were gone. The fat was in the fire. Yet—he returned to it—the marshal could not be there before noon. He had time to remove the whiskey if he worked hard enough. He glanced at the still. The worm and appurtenances were of value. He had saved money for nearly two years to buy the new copper-work. He wondered if he might empty and take it also.

For half an hour he toiled desperately, carrying filled jugs up the steep and hiding them carefully in his loaded wagon. The kegs he could not move alone, and set to work juggling the fluid from them. Sweat poured down his face, to which, though he drank repeatedly from the tin cup, no flush returned. His teeth were set continually on his under lip. His breath came heavily as he lifted and stooped. In the midst of his labours a slight noise at the cave entrance brought him to his feet, staring in terror. The sight of trembling Gideon Rust in the opening reassured him.

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"Come in here, you old davel, and help me jug this whiskey," he cried out. "Whar's Scalf? How come you an' him to let them boys git away? What do you reckon I'm a-goin' to do to you for it?"

"Why, is them fellers gone?" quavered the old man, craning his neck to look gingerly in. "I never seen nothin' movin' up here, but—they was a gal or so come norratin' past on the path; I 'lowed when I seed calicker that it mought be Huldy, you named her so free."

"Well, shut yo' fool mouth and get yo'se'f to work," ordered Blatch. "I've got to be out o' this."

He turned his back on old Gid and forgot him.

"Ef I thort I had time I'd take my still with me," he ruminated, going close to it and laying a fond touch upon the copper-work. "I'm a mind to try it."

"Hands up, Turrentine!" came a short sharp order from outside. Blatch whirled like a flash, and looked past Gideon Rust in the doorway. Over the old man's shaking shoulders, he saw the levelled rifles of the marshal and his posse.

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"Thar," whispered ancient Gideon fairly weeping, as they closed in on Turrentine and snapped the handcuffs on his wrists, "now mebbe ye won't name a pore old woman's name so free, ef you *have* bought her to yo' will, and set her to spy on them that's been good friends to her."

Chapter XXVII

Love's Guerdon

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When Judith left Andy in charge of her patient and mounted the ladderlike stair to her own

small room under the eaves, she felt no disposition to sleep. She did not undress, but sat down by the window and stared out into the black November night. Despite everything, there had come a sort of peace over her tumult, a stilling that was not mere weariness. She was like a woman who has just been saved from a shipwreck, snatched away from the imminent jaws of doom—chastened, and wondering a little. Intensely thankful for what she had escaped, she sat there in the dark, cold little room, Judith Barrier, safe from the sin of a godless union, from the life that would have been hers as Blatchley Turrentine's wife.

In the light of her danger, familiar things took on a new face, strange, yet dear and welcome. She turned and gazed with childish eyes up at the decent beams of her roof-tree, glad that they still sheltered her a maid, glad that the arms of her home were about her.

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With remorseless honesty she went back over her years. Always in the past months of suffering she had blamed this or that extraneous circumstance with her undoing; now she saw and recognised and acknowledged that nothing and nobody had brought disaster upon her but herself. It was not because Blatchley Turrentine was a bad, lawless man, not because the boys were reckless fellows, led and influenced by him, that all this trouble had come. If she, Judith Barrier, had dealt fairly and humbly by her world, she might have had the lover of her choice in peace as other girls had—even as Cliantha and Pendrilla had. But no, such enterprises as contented these, such stir as they made among their kind, would not do her. She must seek to cast her spells upon every eligible man within her reach. She must try her hand at subjugating those who were difficult, pride herself on the skill with which she retained half a dozen in anxious doubt as to her ultimate intentions concerning them.

Her forehead drooped to the window pane and her cheeks burned as she recollected times and seasons and scenes that belonged to the years when Blatch was building up his firm belief that she loved him, and would sometime marry him. It had been a spirited, dangerous game to her then, nothing more.

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Her passionate, possessive nature was winning to higher ground, leaving, with pain and travail of spirit, the plane on which her twenty years had been lived. The past months of thwarting, failure, and heart-hunger had prepared for this movement, to-night it was almost consciously making. She was coming to the place where, if she might not have love, she could at least be worthy of it. The little clock which had measured her vigils that night of the dumb supper slanted toward twelve. She got to her feet with a long sigh. She did not know yet what she meant to do or to forbear doing; but she was aware, with relief, of a radical change within her, a something awakened there which could consider the right of Creed—even of Huldah; which could submit to failure, to rejection—and be kind. Slowly she gathered up her belongings and took her way downstairs.

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When the door of the sick-room closed behind the boys, she went and knelt down beside the bed and looked fixedly at the sleeper. With the birth of this new spiritual impulse the things Blatch Turrentine had said of Creed and Creed's intentions dropped away from her as fall the dead leaves from the bough of that most tenacious of oak trees which holds its withered foliage till the swelling buds of a new spring push it off. He was a good man. She felt that to the innermost core of her heart. She loved him. She believed she would always love him. As for his being married to Huldah, she would not inquire how that came about, how it could have happened while she felt him to be promised to herself. There was—there must be—a right way for even that to befall. She must love him and forgive him, for only so could she face her life, only so could she patch a little peace with herself and still the gnawing agony in her breast. Long she knelt thus.

Who that knows even a little the wonders of the subjective mind, who that has tested the marvellous communication between the mood of nurse and patient, will doubt that the sick man, lying passive, receptive, got now Judith's message of peace and relaxation. The girl herself, powerful, dominating young creature, had been fought to a spiritual standstill. She was at last forced to her knees, and the atmosphere which her passionate struggles had long disturbed grew serene about her. Even a wavering note of something more joyous than mere peace, a courage, a strength that promised happiness must have radiated from her to him. For Creed's eyes opened and looked full into hers with a wholly rational expression which had long been absent from their clear depths.

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"Judith—honey," he whispered, and fumbled vaguely for her hand upon the coverlet.

"Yes, Creed—what is it? What do you want?" she asked tremulously, taking the thin fingers in her warm clasp.

"Nothing—so long as I've got you," he returned contentedly. "Can't I sit up—and won't you sit down here by me and talk awhile?"

Gently smiling, Judith helped him to sit up, and piled the pillows back of his head and shoulders, noting almost with surprise how well he looked, how clear and direct was his gaze.

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"I've been sick a long time, haven't I?" he asked.

"Yes," the girl replied, drawing up a chair and seating herself. "It's more'n six weeks that Uncle Jep an' me has been takin' care of you."

He lifted her hand and stroked it softly.

"A body gets mighty tired of a sick fellow," he said wistfully.

Judith's eyes filled at the pitiful little plea, but she could not offer endearments to Huldah's

husband.

"I ain't tired of you," she returned in a low, choked voice. "I most wisht I was. Creed——"

She slipped from her chair dropping on her knees beside him.

"Creed, I want to tell you now while I can do it that the boys is gone to get Huldah. She can take care of you after this—but I'll help. I ain't mad about it. I was aimin' to tell you that the next time she come in you should bid her stay. God knows I want ye to be happy—whether it's me or another."

Bewilderment grew in the blue eyes regarding her so fixedly.

"Huldah?" he repeated. And then again in a lower, musing tone, "Huldah."

"Yes—yo' wife, Huldah Spiller," Judith urged mildly. "Don't you mind namin' it to me the first time she slipped in to visit you?"

An abashed look succeeded the expression of bewilderment. A faint, fine flush crept on the thin, white cheek.

"I—I do," Creed whispered, with a foolish little smile beginning to curve his lips; "but there wasn't a word of truth in it—dear. I've never seen the girl since she left Aunt Nancy's that Saturday morning."

"What made you say it then?" breathed Judith wonderingly.

"I—I don't know," faltered the sick man. "It seemed like you was mad about something; and then it seemed like Huldah was here; and then—I don't know Judith—didn't I say a heap of other foolishness?"

The simple query reproved his nurse more than a set arraignment would have done. He had indeed babbled, in his semi-delirium, plenty of "other foolishness," this was the only point upon which she had been credulous.

"Oh Creed—honey!" she cried, burying her face in the covers of his bed, "I'm so 'shamed. I've got such a mean, bad disposition. Nobody couldn't ever love me if they knew me right well."

She felt a gentle, caressing touch on her bowed head.

"Jude, darling," Creed's voice came to her, and for the first time it sounded really like his voice, "I loved you from the moment I set eyes on you. I didn't sense it for a spell, but I come to see that you were the one woman in the world for me. There never was a man done what went more against the grain than I the night I parted from you down at the railroad station and let you go back when you would have come with me—so generous—so loving—"

He broke off with a choking sigh, and Judith raised her head in a sort of consternation. Were these the exciting topics that her Uncle Jep would have banished from the sick-room? she wondered. But no, Creed had never looked so nearly a well man as now. He raised himself from the pillows.

"Don't!" she called sharply, as she sprang up and slipped a capable arm under his shoulders, laying his head on her breast. "You ort not to do thataway," she reproached him. "When you want anything I'll git it."

"I don't want a thing, but this," whispered Creed, looking up into her eyes. "Nothing, only——"

Judith read the mute prayer aright, and tears of exquisite feeling blinded her. As she looked at him, there was loosed upon her soul the whole tide of passionate tenderness which had gathered there since first she saw him standing, eager, fearless, selfless, on the Court House steps at Hepzibah. The yellow head lay on her arm now; those blue eyes which, in many bitter hours since that time, had seemed as unattainable to her love as the sky itself, were raised to her own, they were pleading for her kiss. She bent her face; the full red lips met Creed's. The weary longing was satisfied; the bitterness was washed away.

They remained quietly thus, Creed drinking in new life from her nearness, from her dearness. When she would have lifted her head, his thin hand went up and was laid over the rounded cheek, bringing the sweet mouth back to his own.

"I'll need a heap of loving, Judith," he whispered,— "a heap. I've been such a lone fellow all my days. You'll have to be everything and everybody to me."



"They had forgotten all the world save themselves and their love."

Judith's lavish nature, so long choked back upon itself, trembled to its very core with rapture at the bidding. It seemed to her that all of Heaven she had ever craved was to do and be everything that Creed Bonbright needed. She answered with an inarticulate murmur of tenderness, a sound inexpressibly wooing and moving. All that she had felt, all that she meant for the future, surged strong within her—was fain for utterance. But Judith was not fluent; she must content herself with doing and being—Creed could speak for her now. She cherished the fair hair with loving touch, nestling the thin cheek against her soft, warm one.

The beautiful storm-rocked craft of Judith's passion was safe at last in Love's own harbour; the skies were fair above it, and only Love's tender airs breathed about its weary sails.

"We'll be wedded in the spring," Creed's lips murmured against her own. "I'll carry home a bride to the old place. Oh, we'll be happy, Judith."

All through the latter part of the night, while the two lovers were drawing out of the ways of doubt and pain and misunderstanding, into so full and sweet a communion, the November breeze had been rising; toward dawn it moved quite steadily. And with its impulse moved the cedar tree, a long, smooth swaying, that set free that tender, baritone legato to which Judith's ears had harkened away last March, when she came home from Hepzibah after first seeing Creed Bonbright. It was the voice which had talked to her throughout the spring, the early summer, through autumn's desolate days, when the waiting in ignorance of his whereabouts and of his welfare seemed almost more than she could bear; it was the voice which had called upon her so tragically, so insistently, the night of the raid on Nancy Card's cabin. But Creed himself was here now; Creed's own lips spoke close to her ear. The cedar tree had its song to itself once more; she no longer needed its music. Its sound was unheard by her, as the flame of a candle is unseen in the strong light of the sun.

Chapter XXVIII

A Prophecy

Over the shoulder of Yellow Old Bald up came the sun, bannered and glorious; the distant ranges glowed in his splendours; the sere fields about the place were all gilded. The small-paned eastern window of the sick-room let in a flood of morning light. Gone was the bird choir that used to welcome his earliest rays, swept south by the great tide of migration. Those that remained, snowbird, cardinal, and downy woodpecker—the "checkerback" of the mountaineer,—harboured all night and much of the day in the barn loft and in Judith's cedar tree. Their twittering sounded cheerily about the eaves.

Back and forth in the puncheon-floored kitchen trudged old Dilsey Rust's heavy-shod foot, carrying her upon the appointed tasks of the day.

In the quiet sick-room, where the low, alternating voices had subsided into an exchange of murmured words, suddenly Creed dropped his head back to stare at his companion with startled eyes.

"Judith!" he exclaimed. "Where are the boys?"

He glanced at the window, then about the room.

"It's broad day. That word Blatch sent was a decoy; Huldah Spiller isn't on the mountain. Somebody must go over there."

Judith rose swiftly to her feet.

"My Lord, Creed! I forgot all about 'em," she said contritely. "Ye don't reckon Blatch would harm the boys? And yet yo' right—it does look bad. I don't know what to do, honey. They ain't a man on the place till Uncle Jep comes. But maybe he'll be along in about an hour."

She hurried to the window and stared over toward the Gulch; and at the moment a group of people topped the steep, rising into view one after the other out of the ravine, and coming on toward the house.

"Here they are now," she said with relief in her tones. "Thar's Andy—Jeff, Pendrilly—why, whatever—The Lusk girls is with 'em! They's another—Creed, they *have* got Huldy! And that last feller—no, 'tain't Blatch—of all things—it's Wade! They're comin' straight to this door. Shall I let them in?"

"Yes," said Creed's steady voice. "Let them right in."

She ran swiftly to slip an extra pillow under her patient's shoulders, straighten the covers of the bed, and put all in company trim. Her eye brightened when she saw him sitting so erect and alert almost like his old self. Somebody rattled the latch.

"Come in, folks," Creed called, speaking out with a roundness and decision that it did her heart good to hear.

They all pushed into the room, the men shouldering back a little, glancing anxiously at the sick man, the Lusk girls timid, but Huldah leading the van.

"How's Creed?" cried the irrepressible one, bounding into the room and looking about her. "Wade got yo' letter, Cousin Judy, an' I says to him that right now was the time for us to make a visit home. Wade's got him a good place on the railroad, and I like livin' in the settlement; but bridal towers is all the go down thar, and we 'lowed we'd take one."

Every inch of her raiment bespoke the bride, and it did not take Creed many moments to understand the situation, put out a thin white hand and, smiling, offer his congratulations. Wade received them with some low-toned, hesitating words of apology.

"Law, Cousin Creed's ready to let bygones be bygones, Wade, honey!" his wife admonished him.

"*Cousin Creed?*" echoed the obtuse Jeff.

Wade's wife whirled to put a ready arm around Judith's waist. "Why, you an' him is a-goin' to be wedded, ain't you Judy? I always knowed, and I always said to everybody that I named it to, that you was cut out and made for each other. We heard tell from everybody in the Turkey Tracks that you an' Creed was goin' to be wedded as soon as he got well—then I reckon he'll be my cousin, won't he?"

Creed looked past the whispering girls to where Andy and Jeff stood. As the boys moved toward the bed.

"Did you find Blatch?" he asked, with a man's directness. "How did you-all make out?"

Andy opened his lips to answer, when there was a clatter of hoofs outside. As they all turned to the window, Jephthah Turrentine's big voice, with a new tone in it, called out to somebody.

"Hold on thar, honey—lemme lift ye down."

"Ain't Uncle Jep goin' to be proud when he sees how well you air?" Judith, stooping, whispered to Creed. "He went off to get somebody to he'p nurse you, because he said I done you more harm than good."

"Your Uncle Jep don't know everything," returned Creed softly.

No mountaineer ever knocks on a door, but Jephthah Turrentine made considerable racket with the latch before he entered the room.

"Oh—you air awake," he said cautiously, then, looking about at the others, "an' got company so airy in the mornin'." He glanced from the newcomers to his patient. "You look fine—fine!" he asserted with high satisfaction; then turning over his shoulder, "Come right along in, honey—Creed'll be proud to see ye."

He paused on the threshold, reaching back a hand and entered, pulling after him Nancy Card—who was Nancy Card no longer. A wild-rose pink was in her withered cheeks under the frank grey eyes. She smiled as Judith had never imagined she could smile. But even then the young people scarcely fathomed the situation.

"Creed," cried the old man, "I've brung ye the best doctor and nurse there is on the mountings. Nancy she run off and left us, and I had to go after her, and I 'lowed I'd make sartain that she'd never run away from me again, so I've jest—we jest—"

"Ye ain't married!" cried Judith, sudden light coming in on her.

"We air that," announced old Jephthah radiantly.

"Well, Jude, I jest had to take him," apologised Nancy. "Here was him with the rheumatics every spring, an' bound and determined that he'd lay out in the bushes deer-huntin' like he done when he was twenty, and me knowin' in reason that a good course of dandelion and boneset, with my liniment well rubbed in, would fix him up—why, I jest *had* to take him."

She looked about her for support, and she got it from an unexpected quarter.

"Well, I think you done jest right," piped up Huldah, who had been a silent spectator as long as she could endure it, "I'm mighty glad I've got a new mother-in-law, 'caze I know Pap Turrentine's apt to be well taken keer of in his old days."

His old days! Nancy looked indignantly from the red-haired girl to her bridegroom who, in her eyes, was evidently still a sprightly youth.

"Huh!" she remarked enigmatically. Then with a sudden change; "Yit whilst we are a-namin' sech, honey, won't you jest run out to my saddle and bring me the spotted caliker poke off'n hit—hit's got my bundle of yarbs in it. I'll put on a drawin' of boneset for you befo' I set down."

"All right, Nancy—but I reckon I'll have to clear these folks out of this sick-room fust," responded old Jephthah genially. "We're apt to have too much goin' on for Creed."

But as they were marshalled to leave, the noise of a new arrival in the kitchen brought the curious Huldah to the door and she threw it wide to admit Iley, into whose arms she promptly precipitated herself with voluble explanations, which covered her career from the time she left Jim Cal's cabin till that moment.

"You an' Wade are wedded? Why couldn't you let a body know?" inquired Iley wrathfully, grasping her by the shoulder, holding her off for somewhat hostile inspection.

"That's what I say," echoed Jim Cal's voice from the doorway where he harboured, a trifle out of sight. "Ef you-all gals would be a little mo' open an' above-bo'd about yo' courtin' business hit would save lots of folks plenty of trouble. Here's Iley got some sort o' notion that Huldy was over at Blatch's, an' she put out an' run me home so fast that I ain't ketched my breath till yit."

"Over at Blatch's?" old Jephthah looked angrily about him, and Judith made haste to explain the whole matter, detailing everything that had led up to the trouble.

"We-all talked it over, Uncle Jep, and as you wasn't here we made out to do the best we could, and the boys went."

"After me!" crowed Huldah. "An' thar I was on the train 'long o' Wade comin' to Garyville that blessed minute."

"Well, Blatch had us hog-tied an' waitin' for the marshal to come an' cyart us down and send us to the penitentiary," Jeff set forth the case. "But you know how Blatch is, always devilin' folks; he made old Gid Rust mad, an' when Clianthy an' Pendrilly met the old man out on the road soon this mornin', he told 'em to take a knife and come up to the cave an' they could keep what they found."

"I never was so scairt in my life," Cliantha asseverated. Her china-blue eyes had not yet resumed their normal size or contour, and the assertion was easily believed.

"Nor me neither," agreed Pendrilla. "I says to him, says I, 'Now you, Gid Rust, do you 'low we're crazy? We're a-lookin' for old Boss and Spot, an' we ain't a-goin' up yon nary step.' An' he says to us, says he, 'Gals, you never mind about no cows,' he says. 'Hit'll shore be the worse for Andy and Jeff Turrentine ef you don't git yo'selves up thar an' git up thar quick.' An' with that he gives us his knife out of his pocket, 'caze we didn't have none, and we run the whole blessed way, and cut the boys a-loose."

"I was that mad when I seen 'em tied up thataway," chimed in Cliantha, "that I wouldn't a 'cared the rappin' o' my finger ef old Blatch Turrentine hisself had been thar. I'd 'a' stood right up to him an' told him what I thort o' him an' his works." There are conditions, it is said, in which even the timid hare becomes militant, and doves will peck at the intruder.

"Well, I reckon I got to get you folks out of here now for sartain," said Jephthah as she made an end. "Nancy, honey, is the yarbs you wanted for Creed in with them you're a-goin' to use on me?"

The little old woman felt of Creed's fingers, she laid a capable hand upon his brow. Then she flashed one of her quick, youthful smiles at her husband.

"You named it to me about Jude and Creed being at the outs," she said frankly; "but I see they've made up their troubles. The boy don't need no medicine."

Jephthah stared at his transformed patient, and admitted that it was so.

"Well he does need some peace and quiet," the head of the house maintained as he ushered his clan into the adjoining room.

"Uncle Jephthah," called Creed's quiet voice, with the ring of the old enthusiasm in it, as his host was leaving the room. "Do you remember telling me that the trouble with my work on the mountain was, I was one man alone? Do you remember saying that if I was a member of a big family—a great big tribe—that I'd get along all right and accomplish what I set out for?"

"I say sech a lot of foolishness, son, I cain't ricollect it all. Likely I did say that. Hit mought have some truth in it."

"Well," said Creed, carrying the hand he held to his lips, "I reckon I'll be a member of a big tribe now; maybe I can take up the work yet, and do some good."

The old man looked at him. Here was the son of his heart—of his mind and nature—the congenial spirit; the welcome companion, interested like himself in abstractions, willing to stake all on an idea. Days of good comradeship stretched before these two. He reached down a brown right hand, and Creed's thin white one went out to meet it in a quick, nervous clasp.

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"Son," spoke out Jephthah in that deep, sonorous voice of his, "Creed, boy, what you set out to do was a work for a man's lifetime; but God made you for jest what you aimed then to do and be. Yo' mighty young yet, but you air formed for a leader of men. To the last day of its life an oak will be an oak and a willer a willer; and yo' head won't be grey when you find yo' work and find yo'self a-doin' it right."

"Pap Turrentine!" called Huldah from the kitchen, "Maw wants ye out here."

The door swung wide; it showed a vision of Nancy Turrentine, flushed, bustling, capable, the crinkled grey hair pushed back above those bright eyes of hers with a prideful hand, entering upon the administration of her new realm. Oh, it had not been easy for one of her spirit to be a poor little widow, living out on the Edge, with nobody but slack Doss Provine to do for her, hardly dishes enough to set the table, often not much to put in them, eking out a scanty living by weaving baskets of white-oak splits. When Judith rode up to the cabin on the Edge that evening of late March, it was the hardest time of the year; now was the mountaineer's season of cheer and abundance—his richest month. Outside, nuts were gathering, hunting was good, and she had for her provider of wild meat the mightiest hunter in the Turkey Tracks. Jephthah Turrentine's home was ample and well plished. There was good store of root crops laid up for winter. Judith had neglected such matters to tend on Creed, but Nancy was already putting in hand the cutting and drying of pumpkins, the threshing out of beans. Here were milk vessels aplenty to scald and sun—and filling for them afterward. Oh, enough to do with!—the will to do had always been Nancy's—and for yokefellow in the home, one who would carry his share and pull true—a real man—the only one there had ever been for Nancy.

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"Pap," called Huldah's insistent voice again.

"All right—I'm a-comin'," declared Jephthah, then, with the door in his hand, turned back, meaning to finish what had been in his mind to say to Creed.

Jephthah Turrentine was himself that day a bridegroom, wedded to the one love of his life; he appreciated to the full that which had come to Creed. He had thought to say to the boy that now was the opening of great things, to remind him that one must first live man's natural life, must prove himself as son, brother, husband, father, and neighbour, before he will be accepted or efficient in the larger calling. He would have said that life must teach the man before the man could teach his fellows.

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But the words of homely wisdom in which he would have clothed this truth remained unspoken. He glanced back and saw the dark head bent close above the yellow one, as Judith performed some little service for Creed. The girl's rich brown beauty glowed and bloomed before the steady, blue fire of her lover's eyes. She set down her tumbler and knelt beside him. Their lips were murmuring, they had forgotten all the world save themselves and their love. Jephthah looked at the rapt young faces; these two were on the mount of transfiguration; the light ineffable was all about them.

"Lord, what's the use of a old fool like me sayin' I, ay, yes or no to sech a pair as that?" he whispered as he went out softly and closed the door.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JUDITH OF THE CUMBERLANDS ***

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