



HARD WOOD

A Three-Part Story - Part I

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CHAPTER I

THE WAR-NAME

"**H**ARD WOOD" won his war-name on the golden October afternoon when he thrashed "Copperhead."

It was bestowed on him, that name, during a halt in hostilities enforced by Steve Oaks, an older and deadlier fighter than he. It was given by Steve himself, whose twinkling brown eyes belied the harshness of his mouth as he spoke. It stuck to him as immediately and persistently as a burdock, and he made no effort to shake it off. Indeed, he accepted it with pride—and he lived up to it.

Copperhead, too, was rechristened that afternoon. Like his conqueror, he took his new name from the lips of a fighter. But the lips were those of Hard Wood himself—lips swollen and reddened by fist-blows—and the epithet was spat at him in hatred and scorn. He writhed under it, as well he might; for in all the length of the Shawangunk mountains no creature is loathed more than that hideous spotted reptile which strikes without warning. But the sobriquet, once fastened on him, stayed with him. So, being Copperhead by name and copperhead by nature, he also lived up to it.

The sun of that day was rolling low toward the Minnewaska cliffs when Oaks came trudging up the winding hill road of that crag-bound bowl among the New York hills which, ever since the ambush-fighting Indian days, had been known as "The

Traps." In his right fist swayed a shotgun, and from his left dangled a brace of grouse. In the brush fringing the sandy wheel track sounded only the drowsy drone of katydids and crickets, and the road ahead seemed empty of all life. But then, from around the sharp turn where squatted the weather-beaten little schoolhouse, shrill voices broke into the peaceful chorus.

"Rassle him down, Harry!"

"Look out! Don't let him bite ye!"

"Use yer knees onto him!"

"Oh, gosh, he's gougin'! He's gougin'!"

The advancing man glanced at the westerling sun, which was well below its four-o'clock station in the sky; listened again, grinned, and quickened his pace to a lope. A couple of minutes later he entered the schoolyard and joined the tense little knot of youngsters witnessing the combat.

Down on the rock-studded ground, a black-haired and a red-headed boy were fighting with the ferocity of catamounts. Wrestling, wrenching, kicking, clawing and battering, they battled in the rough-and-tumble style of the backwoods, which knows no rules except the world-old maxim, "Git the other feller and git him good!"

Over and over they rolled, heaving each other about, shooting hard fists into face or body, with such rapidity that the hunter could catch only fleeting glimpses of their faces. He made no move to interfere. With the younger spectators whooping useless advice, the duel went on until it paused from sheer exhaustion.

Then, while the antagonists lay clinching and gasping, the man had a brief opportunity to study them. On the red-haired, bull-necked youngster his eye rested only an instant, and he nodded slightly in recognition. But as he scanned the slender boy with the black hair and the high cheekbones he frowned as if puzzled.

"Red-Top's one o' the Cooper kids," he told himself. "But who's this here wild Injun?"

Before he had time to voice the question the fight was renewed. With cat-like quickness, he of the raven hair twisted himself partly free and snapped two left-handed blows into his opponent's mouth. The other snarled and jolted savagely upward with one knee. Then he drove an elbow into his foe's neck, squirmed upward, gained his footing, and kicked viciously for the stomach.

But the slender lad, either instinctively or accidentally, had rolled over backward, and the copper-toed boot missed him. While it was still in air he snatched at it, caught it, yanked and twisted, and bore the red-headed one thumping to earth again. Then, so swiftly that he seemed to shoot through the air, he was on the other's body and had clamped him to the ground.

Red-Top was down to stay. Flat on his back he was, with arms pinioned by the victor's knees. His own legs were useless, for his opponent was straddling him high on the body, where neither kicks nor knee-thumps could be effective. And now, his bruised face hard as ironwood, the conqueror began merciless punishment.

Rapidly, unceasingly, he hammered both fists down into the red face which sought to turn itself aside or sink itself turtlewise into the thick shoulders below it. And with each blow he rose on his knees to give more weight to the downward smash. It was grim, cruel work, but no lust of cruelty showed in the face of the boy on top. His expression was, rather, that of a ruthless avenger—hard, cold, implacable. The regularity of his blows and the sway of his body seemed almost mechanical, as if he were an engine of retribution which must pound the thing below it into pulp.

Something of this feeling crept into the minds of the watching boys around them, who now were stricken silent. The man, too, quietly laid his gun and birds on the ground. As he did so, one of the schoolboys, unable longer to endure the strain, shrilled:

"Oh, gosh, he'll kill him! He's killin' him now!"

Steve Oaks stepped forward, gripped the conqueror's shoulders, swung him bodily up off the battered Cooper.

"That's 'nough!" he said tersely, loosing his hold.

Instantly the boy whirled and struck. Steve had to move lightning fast to block the blow. A split-second later another savage punch was fended aside. Then Oaks caught a wrist and a forearm and held them.

"Ye catamount!" he grunted. "I said that's 'nough!"

"Lemme loose, consarn ye!" gritted the boy. "Leggo!"

Furiously he strained to free himself. As he found his efforts futile, his black eyes flamed. He kicked Steve in the shins and snapped his strong young teeth at one of the sinewy hands holding him. Steve grunted again and his mouth narrowed. With a couple of wide strides he forced the boy's legs between his own and clamped them there by a knee-grip.

"Might's well ca'm down," he warned. "What ye maulin' him fer? Who be ye?"

"None yer business! Lemme loose an' I'll lick ye, ye big bully!"

"Awright. Ye'll stay right where ye be till ye answer me."

Holding his grips, Oaks lifted his head and glanced at Cooper, who was sitting up and dazedly pawing at his face. Then he looked inquiringly at the other boys. One of them vouchsafed information:

"He's Harry Wood—that new boy that come here lately, Steve. Come from over west somewheres. Him an' Coop was fightin' 'bout Harry's mother."

As his name was spoken, Steve felt the resistance of Harry Wood slacken a bit. Looking down, he found the black eyes burning into his own.

"Steve?" his captive asked sharply. "Steve who? Ye ain't one o' them Cooper tribe?"

"Nope. Steve Oaks."

The boy looked startled.

"Steve Oaks? Gorry! The feller that kilt 'Snake' Sanders? You him?"

"Yep."

Boy and man probed each other with unwavering gaze for a long minute. Then:

"Reckon I can't lick ye yit, Steve—not till I git growed bigger. I'll thank ye to leave me go."

A faint smile quirked Steve's set lips.

"When ye git bigger ye'll maul me, hey? I'll be a-waitin' any time ye're ready." He relaxed his grip. Then his eye fell again on Cooper. "What ye killin' him fer?" he demanded.

"Him!" Harry's face darkened again. "He ain't even licked yit. He can set up, can't he?"

"Huh! Your idee is to pound 'em till they can't move," chuckled Steve. "Ye're hard, Hard Wood."

"I've heard tell that Oaks was kind o' hard wood too," retorted the lad.

He stepped toward Cooper. The latter lurched to his feet.

"Ye dirty-mouthed snake!" grated young Wood. "Ye yellin'-bellied copperhead! Ye got to eat what ye said or I'll muckle onto ye ag'in! Hurry up!"

Steve, watching Cooper, admitted to himself that the epithets fitted. Like the snake, Cooper was thick-bodied. His hair was a dull, coppery red. His face had a reptilian flatness, and his swollen eyes held a venomous glint as they centered on Hard Wood.

"Ye ain't got no right to say nothin' like that even if 'twas so," continued the victor, his voice vibrant. "An' 'tain't so. My mother *was* married! The s'tificate is framed an' hangs on to the bedroom wall, with the names an' dates an' everything. Now eat what ye said!"

His fists curled and lifted as he spoke. Steve, suddenly perceiving the cause of the fight, wished he had not interfered. His face hardened. And Copperhead, catching his chill stare, realized that his rescuer would not again save him. As Hard Wood took a purposeful step toward him he quailed.

"I—I didn't mean nothin'," he mumbled. "Yer mother's a—a nice woman."

"Awright. But ye ever open yer head about her ag'in—good or bad—an' I'll jest about kill ye. Now git out!"



HARRY WOOD was young, and at that point he made a mistake. He turned his back contemptuously on his enemy. The enemy also turned away, sullenly—and spied Steve's shotgun on the ground. With a sudden spring he snatched up the weapon and swung the twin muzzles to an aim at Harry's receding back. Then he pulled both triggers.

The gun, though loaded, did not respond. Unlike the usual Traps arm, it was hammer-

less, and its safety-catch was on, locking it against discharge. Copperhead knew nothing about such requirements of gunnery. For an instant he stood frozen, staring down at the balky weapon. Then, muttering something that sounded like an oath, he dropped it and ran.

In the same instant Harry and Steve leaped after him. Young Wood, lighter and a shade quicker, led the man by a scant yard. Steve had to cramp his stride or collide with him.

"Git outen the way!" he snapped.

"Lemme git him!" gritted the boy.

Steve slowed.

"Awright," he acquiesced. "Git him an' git him good!"

Wood did. Within ten yards he had run down his quarry. Diving headforemost at the thick neck ahead, he darted an arm around it and yanked Copperhead sprawling backward in the road. A brief struggle, and again Copperhead was underneath. Forthwith retribution recommenced. And this time Steve, towering grimly over the two, did not intervene.

Soon Copperhead was begging for mercy. He received none. He broke into hoarse screams. These diminished into broken groans. The groans in turn grew faint, sank into dull whines. And when young Wood paused for breath and then slowly arose, the beaten boy no longer even whined. He lay inert.

"Guess he's licked now," panted Harry, scanning him judicially. "Can't soak him no more, anyway—my arms are tired an' my hands hurt. I'll call him licked."

Steve looked thoughtfully at his lean, high-cheeked profile and then at the mauled face of Copperhead.

"So'll I," he dryly agreed.

Stepping to the side of the road, he dipped up a hatful of water from a tiny brooklet and deluged Cooper's head. A second hatful was necessary before that head moved and its owner strove to rise.

Nobody gave him a helping hand, and he slowly crawled up unassisted. Under lids bloated almost shut he peered around him. Without a word he stumbled away toward the turn of the road, whence he would descend the hill to a wagon track alongside gurgling Coxing Kill and follow it through the brush to the Cooper clearing away back in the Traps.

When he had lurched out of sight the

boys looked at one another and grinned in sudden relief from tension. Steve again studied Harry. The latter stooped beside the brooklet and thoroughly washed hands, face and neck.

"Be I cut up much?" he asked when he arose.

"Nope. Fussy 'bout yer looks?" Steve twitted.

The black eyes stabbed straight into the brown ones. Across them flickered a hot light. Then they hardened and turned cold.

"Yep."

He turned and stalked down the road.

"Wait a minute. Got to git my gun." Steve lounged after him. "Lemme tell ye somethin'. Don't never turn yer back onto a feller ye've jest licked."

Harry nodded, and his hard mouth softened. Steve Oaks, of the formidable reputation, was treating him as a fellow-fighter. The rangle of the jest concerning his looks died.

"Wouldn't of done it if I'd knowed there was a gun 'round," he explained. "I was busy when ye come, an' I didn't see yer gun."

They walked on to the schoolyard, where they paused.

"Ye asked me jest now, was I fussy 'bout my looks," vouchsafed Harry. "I don't care nothin' 'bout myself, but I've got to be careful 'bout mother. If she see blood onto me she'd go all to pieces. My pop, he got his head blowed 'most off last fall when he was a-huntin', an'—wal, ye know how women is."

"Uh-huh." Steve nodded gravely. "Where was ye then?"

"Over into the Big Injun country—'way onto the west end of Ulster County. I was borned there. So was my pop and gran'pop. But mother's folks come from 'round here, an' she didn't like Big Injun much, an' with pop dead—wal, we up an' moved. Now I've got to git home an' do the chores. G'by."

"Jest a minute." Steve stepped over to his birds. "Mebbe yer mother'd like a pa'tridge for dinner tomorrer."

For the first time Harry smiled. The smile transformed his somber face.

"I thank ye kindly," he acknowledged. "Mother does like pa'tridge mighty well, an' I don't git much time for huntin' these days."

He took the plump bird, appraised it with

practised eye, looked a moment at Steve. Then he went on:

"Ye give me a name awhile ago—Hard Wood. That means somethin', comin' from you to me. Folks say ye're pretty hard yerself when ye git a-goin'. I've got some Injun blood into me; my gran'pop was 'bout half Injun. I've heard pop tell that the Injuns had different names: Some was dream-names an' some was war-names, an' so on. I s'pose the fellers 'round here will call me Hard Wood now, an' that ain't no dream-name. Seein' who started it, I'll let it stick."

"Awright. But don't bully the little fellers to keep up yer name."

"I never fight nobody without he ought to be fit," asserted Hard Wood. "Then I make him know he's been fit with."

Steve chuckled.

"Where d'ye go from here?" he asked.

"Down toward the Clove. I go up this woods path here an' cut 'crost the Van Hooven place. Gits me home quickest. Wal, g'by."

He turned, plodded his way into the wood-road, and was gone.

Steve looked after him, picked up his gun and the remaining bird, and resumed his own way. And as he went he alternately chuckled and scowled, knowing that young Hard Wood's vengeance upon the defamer of his mother would result in the virulent enmity of the entire Cooper "tribe"—a family known to be "p'ison mean."

CHAPTER II

THE DEADLINE

HARD WOOD himself never knew all the results of his first fight in the Traps. Nor did he ever realize how fortunate was the chance arrival of Steve Oaks during the progress of that fight.

He did not know, for instance, that the saturnine Steve discussed his affairs at the supper-table that day with his only real friend—"Uncle Eb" Wilham, a fearless, whole-souled old fellow, with whom he lived. Nor did he know that thereafter Steve walked down to the junction of the road and the Cooper path, where he presently intercepted two of the older Cooper brothers and intimated that any excursion in the direction of the Wood home might prove exceedingly unhealthful. Yet such was the

case. And, since no two men in all the Traps cared to antagonize Steve Oaks, the beetle-browed Coopers were at pains to declare that they were only going coon hunting and to turn their steps east, toward the Gap, instead of north, toward the Clove.

Neither did Harry ever suspect that the friendship which presently developed with Uncle Eb and Steve was at all due to his fierce defence of his mother. It seemed to come about casually, and he accepted it in the same way. Uncle Eb he already knew by sight, as the vigorous old man drove weekly down the Clove road en route to the village of High Falls for mail and supplies; and when the white horse formed the habit of stopping half an hour at the Wood doorway while his master joked explosively with the slow-smiling young widow, neither boy nor mother realized that the caller was making sure that all was well with them.

Steve, who was a born hunter, drifted past the schoolhouse from time to time with small game; nodded to him, talked briefly about nothing in particular, and gave him squirrels or rabbits or birds "for yer mother." It never entered Harry's head that his schoolmates duly reported these occurrences to their families, which thereafter bore in mind the fact that the redoubtable Steve was a friend of the Woods.

Nor, to his credit be it said, did he realize that his own fighting ability now was feared by all his schoolmates. He noted, of course, that there were no further attempts to "pick on to" him; but he did not know that his terrific thrashing of Copperhead had virtually "licked" all the other boys as well. In his own Big Indian country—at that time a turbulent lumbering section—men fought to an absolute finish; and in finishing Copperhead he had merely followed the Big Indian code. The Traps boys themselves were tough little fighters, but they never had seen such thoroughly conclusive work as that of the lad from "over west," and now they had no desire to undergo similar treatment. Yet their sturdy pride forbade any subservience, and they gave Harry no hint that he was virtually cock-of-the-walk at school. Since the self-reliant young battler himself was not of a bullying temperament, he sought no sign of fear in his fellows, and thus found none.

The only indication of his change in status in their minds was his new nickname, which

they fastened firmly on him at his next appearance.

"Lo, Hard Wood!" chorused the youngsters that morning, meanwhile watching sharply to see whether the name would "mad" him.

"Lo, soft pines," he retorted, with a slight smile.

Finding him not averse to the sobriquet, the boys forthwith whooped at him the names of all local hardwoods which occurred to them.

"Lo, Ironwood!"

"Lo, Hickory!"

"Lo, Maple!"

Oak, cherry, pepperidge—they named him all of them. At the last he frowned.

"Don't call me Pep'ridge," he warned. "Pep'ridge is hard, but it's mean wood an' 'tain't no good. Nor don't call me no other names but Hard. That name was give me by a real man, an' I'll wear it."

A momentary silence ensued. When the boys spoke to him again they used the name he had specified. And "Hard" he was from that day.

Copperhead did not fare so well. For several days he did not reappear at all; and when, with face still disfigured, he came sullenly plodding into the schoolyard, he found his reception decidedly uncordial. Boys and girls alike eyed him in sour silence. Then somebody jeered—

"Copperhead!"

Others echoed the odious name in a crescendo of contempt. Maddened, he lunged at a boy smaller than himself—and collided with the tough fists of that boy's older brother. The ensuing combat had hardly begun when it was cut short by the schoolmaster.

That worthy gentleman, whose pedagogical qualifications consisted mainly of ability to make small sums add up right and to swing a wicked harness strap, popped through the doorway and proceeded forthwith to exercise the aforesaid strap in the interest of order. He had, of course, heard of Copperhead's recent attempt to shoot young Wood in the back, and the few blows which now fell on Copperhead's present antagonist were merely pattering raindrops compared to the storm which broke on the thick-bodied aggressor. When his wiry right arm was tired, the teacher gave the blubbery red head a shake that made his teeth rattle, turned him toward the road,

and gave him a final shove and a final dismissal.

"Git outhen this yard and stay out!" he panted. "This fightin' on school grounds has got to stop, and you're the brat that's started most o' the fightin'. Ye're p'ison mean, like the rest o' yer family—'ceptin' yer mother—and I won't have ye here no more. Start yer boots!"

Copperhead went. Not a jeer followed him, for the irate old despot had swung a bleak eye toward his flock, and all knew the sting of that strap.

At his command, the others filed into the schoolhouse and took their seats for the morning session. Quiet had just settled when a window crashed.

Pane after pane flew apart, smashed by stones hurled with vicious fury from the road. Pandemonium filled the room. Amid the shattering of glass, the clatter of bouncing stones, and the shrill screams of hurt or frightened girls, the schoolmaster and the boys rushed for the door. They found the road empty. The stone-thrower had vanished, snake-like, into the nearby brush and made good his escape.

Thus ended Copperhead's schooling, and thus another drop of venom entered his blood. Not that the loss of school privileges was at all unwelcome to him; he attended only because compelled to do so by his mother, and what studying he did was actuated by fear of the master's strap. But the final castigation, the mocking grins of the other boys while he writhed under it, the loathsome name they had given him—these were gall and wormwood, embittering all the more his black hatred for the boy who had first thrashed him in that school-yard. But he did not yet strike back at that boy. He waited to catch him unawares.



SMOOTHLY, peacefully, the October days glided past, and Hard Wood swung back and forth in his orbit. From home to school, and from school to home. As man of the house, he was far too busy at present to deviate from his direct route and his fixed duties. Yet, from the tongues of his fellows, he learned more about those in whom he was most interested than if he had been at liberty to go visiting. These were the Coopers and his friends up the road.

The Coopers, he heard, numbered seven: "Old" Bill and Mis' Cooper, the father and

mother, "Young" Bill, also known as "Bad" Bill, Joe, Jed, and Jerry, the last-named being Copperhead, and the one girl, Jane. Old Bill and all his sons were a surly, thick set, red headed, vicious breed, who drank and fought among themselves, had little to do with any one else, never worked off their own rocky land, yet seemed always able to buy whatever they needed. The mother, now faded and gaunt, had been a fair-haired and attractive young woman from "down Granite way," and the girl Jane was said to "take after" her. But nobody knew much about Jane, for she had never gone to school. She was blind.

The Cooper place was said to be far back, and almost under the steep six-hundred-foot slope on whose summit lay the odd little Lake Minnewaska. The only work in which its owners were known to engage was that of charcoal burning. From time to time Old Bill or Joe drove a wagon-load of charcoal down into the Wallkill Valley and, presumably, sold it at some Hudson River town at the east. Bad Bill and the others never left the hills; the former because, for some unstated reason, he was bashful about meeting police officers, and the others because they would or could not.

As for the others, Uncle Eb was spoken of with affection and Steve Oaks with awe. Steve was characterized by the boys as "a kind of an Injun, wild like a wolf." It was whispered that his father had disappeared before his birth, his mother had become "queer into the head," and he had been born in the woods, not in a house. Then the mother had died, and he had grown up as a waif of the hills. Now he was a swarthy, taciturn, hard-jawed young man who acknowledged attachment to only one person, Uncle Eb, and who spent much of his time in the woods, earning a passable living by his gun and his knowledge of honey-trees. His enmity, once aroused, was known to be implacable. He fought, not with fists, but with buckshot. And he had killed his man.

Of this killing Harry had heard before meeting Steve; and he knew it to be a well-merited vengeance on a murderous malefactor. At the same time, it gave the avenger a sinister reputation in the community. Yet, the more the boy learned about the killer, the better he liked him. Something about the wolfish woods-wanderer appealed to him.

This feeling grew much stronger before the month was out. As has been said, it was the month of October; and as the falling of the leaves opened up short vistas in the dense hardwoods, the bang of muzzle-loading guns became more frequent. Every explosion, every echo rolling and roaring among the crags, goaded the boy's hunting instincts. At length, on a Saturday when he had sawed stovewood for hours, he could no longer stand the strain.

"Goin' a-walkin', Mom," he briefly announced. "I'll git back 'fore dark."

His mother, busy at sewing, cast a glance at the well-filled woodbox and nodded a perfunctory assent. In his little bedroom he quietly slid his dead father's long double-barrelled gun through the window and concealed powder-flask and shot-pouch and cap-box in his pockets. Then he strolled out, got the gun, and headed into the woods.

An hour or two later, with a rabbit slung down his back, he emerged from a wood-path and found himself at the road near the schoolhouse. Beyond, open pasture-land dipped to the bed of Coxing Kill; and across the stream he caught a brief glimpse of a flying grouse. Marking the spot where the bird disappeared, he scrambled over a wall, loped to the creek, crossed on stones, and stole along another path toward the covert of his quarry.

The bird was wild and wise. Twice it hurtled up and away in brush so thick that he had no chance for a shot. The second time, after a short flight, it swerved across the stream, vanishing in scrub on the farther shore. The boy followed with silent persistence.

As he recrossed the rushing water, a loose stone tilted under foot. He lost balance, slipped in up to the waist, and dropped his gun. It fell between two stones, lodging about a foot below the surface. Raging, he retrieved it and swashed on shoreward. Then, from the brushy bank behind, broke a howl of malicious fiirth.

There, half concealed, stood Copperhead and a heavier, older youth of vicious expression and Cooper features—Bad Bill. Both were laughing in a sneering way which stung worse than verbal vituperation. Yet they laughed only with their mouths; their eyes held a cold, evil light. Through the leaves, hip-high, glinted the gray steel of gun barrels.

"Haw haw haw!" jeered Bad Bill. "Shot-

gun, whar ye goin' with that boy? Baby ain't learnt to walk yit! Does yer momma know ye're out? C'm'ere an' gimme that gun. Jerry here 'll give ye suthin' for it. Yas, he'll give it to ye with both hands. C'm'ere!"

"S'posin' ye come an' take it away from me," retorted Hard Wood, his voice level. "The two o' ye together. That there copperhead with ye don't dast to try it alone."

Copperhead snarled, and his gun moved. "Yah! I'll fix ye!" he yelled. "Hard Wood, hey? We make charcoal outen hard wood! We got ye now, an' when we got through with ye ye'll look wuss'n that pop o' yourn when he got drunk an' kilt hisself."

"Ye dirty liar!" flared Harry. "Keep yer rotten tongue offen my pop! He warn't no swillin' pig of a Cooper, always drunk an' dirty! Copperhead, ye——"

"Shet up!" bellowed Bad Bill.

His grin was gone and his face reddening with rage. For a minute he cursed foully. Then his tobacco-yellowed teeth grinned again in a grimace more malevolent than that of a snarling panther.

"Jest like yer father!" he called, gloating on a new thought. "He went a-huntin' an' fell down an' got shot, 'cordin' to what I hear. Ye're a-huntin' an' ye fell down like him. We kin fix the shootin' part of it——"

His gun lifted. But it stopped abruptly. His eyes seemed to rest on something above his victim. Copperhead, too, looked blank. There was a tense silence.

The gun sank. Bad Bill swallowed. Once more he grinned—a sickly grin. His color had faded, and when he spoke again it was in a husky tone.

"Ye ain't scairt, hey? Wal, awright. But lemme tell ye suthin'. Ye ain't got no business sneakin' 'round up here. Ye live into the Clove. Ye stay thar! Fust time we ketch ye this side o' the road ag'in, ther' won't be no foolin'. This here kentry's ourn, an' ye keep outen it. C'm'on, Jerry."

And Copperhead faded back into the brush with him, saying not a word.

For a minute Hard Wood stared after them, bewildered by their unexplainable change of front. Then, with sudden energy, he sprang ashore and worked swiftly to draw his wet charges. With the barrels swabbed dry and new loads rammed home, he started back across the creek.

A drawling voice halted him.

"I'd leave 'em go, Hard."

The words came from behind and above him. Facing about, he discovered the reason for the withdrawal of the Coopers. At the top of the bank stood a sizable pine, and against the pine lounged Steve Oaks.

The boy wavered. Then his mouth hardened. He resumed his way, mounted the farther bank, and looked for his enemies. They had gone.

Retracing his steps, he found Steve still leaning carelessly against his tree, shotgun dangling beside one leg. Steve said nothing. His deep-set brown eyes dwelt on the youngster's, noting the hard glitter in their depths. The ghost of a smile passed across his set mouth and was gone. After a wordless minute or two he lazily straightened up.

"Yer pa'tridge is over yender into that hickory," he said, moving his head sideways. "Thinks he's hid."

The other followed the motion, and, after a moment's keen scrutiny, detected the bird crouching in fancied security. The gun rose, froze, kicked back. The grouse tumbled and was still. Steve, who had watched the handling of the weapon, nodded approvingly. The two walked to the fallen bird.

"Bliged to ye," said Harry.

A short headshake refused gratitude. Steve knew well that the boy thanked him for standing at his back in peril, rather than for pointing out his game. And Hard Wood knew well how deadly his peril had been. But neither spoke further of it.

Returning to the pine, Steve picked up his own game—several birds—glanced at the sun, and moved roadward. A little later the pair stood in the sandy highway. There Steve spoke again:

"Folks is funny. Some likes to git visited; some don't. Them Cooperses don't. Nobody goes nigh 'em much. Course, a feller's got a right to go where he wants to. But if I had a mother a-livin' an' some fellers drewed a kind of a deadline, I dunno as I'd go a couple o' miles outen my way to git acrost it; 'specially if they kep' onto their own side o' the line an' they didn't have nothin' I wanted. A shotgun don't care who it kills, an' some mothers needs their boys powerful bad. G'by, Hard."

"G'by, Steve."

They parted. Harry went home, thinking deep; and for a long time that brief talk

echoed in his memory. And, because of it, he remained thereafter on his own side of the deadline drawn by the Coopers—until his mother no longer needed him.

CHAPTER III

CHICKADEES

FOUR winters turned the Traps into a bowl of icy stones and naked trees, and three summers transformed it back into a gulf of greenery. The fourth summer still was weeks in the future when into the Wood home stalked the dread specter of the hills: Pneumonia. Around the lungs of Mis' Wood it wrapped its lethal fingers in a clutch which never relaxed.

Dumb, dazed, the son she left behind her sat at the bedside and stared fixedly at the wan face which never again would brighten at his home coming. Despite the fact that no hope had been extended by the doctor summoned from High Falls, despite the funereal air with which neighboring women had come visiting during the past few days, Hard Wood had doggedly rejected every suggestion that his mother would not recover. And now she was gone.

The Hard Wood who today loomed in the low chair was not the slim schoolboy who had thrashed Copperhead. Although still only a youth in years, he was a man in stature and in feature. At nineteen, he was already acquiring the slight stoop often seen in tall men; and his shoulders had widened so far that, in passing through a doorway, he unconsciously stepped with a sidling motion. Nor were those shoulders angular with scantily fleshed bones. They were padded with muscles as hard as his name, built up through three years of steady toil with sledge and chisel. Since quitting school he had labored at millstone quarrying.

Hard work, hard rock, and hard years had hardened also the face and the reputation of Hard Wood. The face had not grown coarse; it was clean and strong. But the stern jaw, the tight mouth, the lean cheeks, the slitted eyes and straight brows, might well have been carved from cold flint. Only his mother knew how that forbidding countenance could melt and how the challenging eyes could soften. To all the rest of his world he turned a bleak countenance, and to all but two, Steve Oaks and Uncle

Eb, his sledge-hammer fists were an ever-ready menace. Hence his reputation.

The reputation was earned. More than one man carried on his face scars left by those merciless fists; each a man, older than Wood, who had taken the youngster too lightly and tried to bully him. There was also one who, because of offense against Mis' Wood, would end his days as a cripple. There were even women who had felt the stinging weight of Hard Wood's hands and the terror of his ferocious wrath.

Like every other community, the Traps had its quota of mean-minded men and of snake-tongued women. It was one of the former who had suffered the full force of Hard Wood's fury, and two of the latter who had received nerve shocks never to be forgotten. The man had attempted to pay court to the widow, who still was in her mid-thirties and not unattractive. Repulsed, he had taken revenge by circulating slanders so vile as to be understandable only by habitual foul-thinkers. Thanks to a half-witted child who babbled these slanders within Hard Wood's hearing, that man had undergone such devastating vengeance that he was carried home apparently dead; and, but for an incredibly tough constitution, he would never have regained life.

As for the women, they had hissed abroad the same hideous libel. To each of their habitations Hard Wood had come when their men were at home; and, with terrific slaps in the face and shakings that left them half senseless, he had promised to twist their heads from their shoulders if ever they spoke his mother's name again. They never did. Nor did their men attempt retaliation.

So Hard Wood's name had grown all the harder, and his house had been visited by very few except Steve and Uncle Eb. Now, with the attainment of his growth and the acquisition of notable skill in millstone-making, he had become a veritable tower of strength on which his mother might lean as her years lengthened. And the mother had been torn from him forever.

Vaguely he knew that just beyond the open door were other people: The doctor, who was preparing to return to High Falls, and women who had drifted in to commiserate and stare. They were staring now, bunched at the door; staring at him as he sat there bolt upright, and gaping at the motionless figure on the bed. One of them was beginning to sniffle in the lugubrious

way considered fitting in the presence of death. He gave them no attention. Not until one of them intruded into the chamber did he move.

She was the sniffer, a long-nosed, watery-eyed female who now decided that she had waited long enough. It was time for this great lout to move and let the women take charge of things—incidentally prying into everything in the house and inspecting all the dead woman's possessions. With a sharper snuffle she came forward, bearing two huge old-time pennies which she had carefully brought with her.

"Them pore eyes won't see no more," she droned. "'Tain't fitten they should stay open——"

She stopped short. Hard Wood was rising, and somehow he seemed to fill the whole room. His black eyes bored into hers.

"Git out!" he rasped.

She sucked in her breath and gave back a step; then stubbornly held her ground.

"Now, ye pore boy, ye're all upsot, 'n' it's 'n awful sad thing, so 'tis, but ye mus'n't——"

"Git out!"

The tone was low, as before, but the impact of the words was that of fists. The watery eyes blinked, the flabby lips wagged soundlessly—and the woman got out. Behind her he strode to the door. At his advance the others apprehensively gave way. Blocking the doorway, he glowered at them.

"Out, the hull kit an' b'ilin' of ye!" he rumbled. "Ye never done nothin' to help her when she was a-livin', an' ye can keep yer hands offen her now. Git out an' stay out!"

Not a woman remonstrated. Not a woman spoke until they were all in the road. Then they began an angry cackle among themselves. He did not hear them. He was fronting the doctor, who, with overcoat buttoned and medicine case in hand, alone remained.

"How much do I owe ye?" he demanded.

"Oh, I dunno, maybe 'bout twenty dollars. Let it run along awhile if you want to, Mr. Wood. There'll be the funeral and——"

"There ain't goin' to be no funeral. Nor nobody a-pawin' her over or gawpin' at her." Hard Wood strode heavily into his own room, returned, poked the money at the physician. "G'by."

The doctor eyed him keenly.

"Good-by, and thanks. Try not to take this too hard, boy. We've all got to lose our folks sometime——"

"G'by!"

The medical man turned and went. As he drove out of the yard the women flocked toward him, demanding particulars about the burial.

"If I was you I'd git right away from here," was his dry retort.

Without another word to them he chirruped to his horse and rolled away northward.

Within the house, its master drew a bolt across the door-casing. Slowly then he returned to the still form on the bed. For a long time he stood beside her. At length, still dry-eyed, but with shoulders sagging wearily, he came out; rekindled the fire, made coffee, and drank cup after cup. Then he walked to the door and unbolted it.

As he opened it, a figure lounging on the steps turned toward him. A scowl swiftly creased his forehead, then faded. The loungeer, tranquilly smoking, was Steve Oaks. On the steps beside him lay a spade.

"Lo, Hard."

"Lo."

Not another word was said for hours. Such is the understanding of real comrades.



THERE was sawing and hammering in the woodshed. A stout pine box was borne to the house. The pair emerged again, took spades and ax, and walked to a big maple, a few rods behind the dwelling, at whose base stood a crude but comfortable settee of boards. Two smaller maples flanked it, and the three together had formed a shady nook on hot days for the woman who now awaited her last passage to that spot. There the men dug. At length, leaving behind them a rectangular hole, a large mound, and a few severed roots, they returned to the house. There Steve sat once more upon the steps, mopped his brow, and refilled his cob pipe. His companion went in and shut the door.

For a long time it was very quiet. Through the leafless branches of maple and oak, through the shaggy limbs of the pines, soughed a chill spring wind. Down the road, mellowed by distance, sounded the occasional crow of a cock.

By and by the door creaked. Hard Wood stood there, silent. Steve arose and entered. On the floor rested the long box, its lid

screwed tight. The comrades lifted it and went forth into the lengthening shadows of the dying day.

Perched on the crest of the earth heap they found half a dozen chickadees, which, on their approach, took wing into the nearest hemlock. Hard Wood's brows contracted. These cheery little feathered mites, bravely flitting over the brushy land while snow and ice still gripped the northern clime, had always been favorites of his mother. Their presence now at her graveside, like a pathetic little delegation from birdland, gave him a stab of pain. Too, it goaded the dumb ache at his heart into wrathful rebellion against her passing.

When the grave was filled, he suddenly hurled the spade from him and turned hard eyes to the cold blue sky. Straight, grim, with fists clenched and teeth set, he spoke directly to his Maker.

"God, Ye've took her away. Ye've took her jest when things was a-gittin' a little easier. Ye give her the rough end o' life an' Ye wouldn't give her none o' the smooth. Ye let my pop git shot without no reason. Ye let folks treat her mean. Now Ye've kilt her.

"She read her Bible right 'long an' she said prayers to Ye—an' Ye've kilt her. An' yit Ye let animils like them Coopers keep right on a-livin'. I don't see no sense or no jestice into it. There ain't none. An' from now on I ain't a-goin' to pay no 'tention to what Ye say is right or wrong. I'm a-goin' to use my own judgment an' do what I want, whether Ye like it or not!"

His mouth closed like a trap. A moment longer he stood rigid, face upturned. Steve, too, stood motionless, staring at him. Dead silence enveloped the pair.

Then from the hemlock floated a soft, mournful little chant which pierced the stiff-grained soul of Hard Wood to its core.

"Chickadeedeedee! Chickadeedeedeedee!" it crooned.

A spasm of pain twisted Wood's face.

"Mom—" he choked.

Wheeling, he strode rapidly to the house.

Steve stood for some minutes, his dark eyes dwelling soberly on the mound, his ears listening to the requiem in the hemlock. Presently he drifted houseward. As he disappeared, the chickadees flitted forth and once more settled on the newly turned earth.

The outer portal was open, but the bedroom door was shut. Steve quietly went

about kindling a fire and making a meal. By the time it was ready the sun had set, and the breeze had grown into a wind which moaned drearily around the chimney. Steve drew the coffee-pot toward him, lifted a bottle of colorless liquid from an inner pocket, and was uncorking it when the door reopened. The man emerging caught sight of the bottle.

"Licker?" he asked shortly.

"Uh-huh. Droppin' a little snort into the coffee. Kind o' cheers a feller up."

"Gimme it!"

After a keen look, Steve smiled slightly and passed the bottle. The other, with half a dozen huge gulps, drained it.

"Good 'nough," nodded Steve. "Ye'll feel better now. Set up an' eat. S'pose ye ain't et nothin' today, have ye? Thought so."

They sat down. As they devoured the rough fare Steve talked briefly.

"Uncle Eb would of come down, but he's got roomytiz so bad he can't walk," he said.

His companion moodily chewed on, making no reply.

"There ain't as many Cooperses as there was," the visitor added after awhile. "Mis' Cooper, she up an' made a die of it yest'day. S'pose ye hearn 'bout it."

Hard Wood stopped eating, looking blank. He shook his head.

"Yep," Steve nodded. "She's been a-failin' all winter."

His table-mate scowled. Then:

"O' course 'twould have to be her," he growled. "The onliest decent one into the hull pack."

Steve filled his pipe and puffed thoughtfully.

"M-m-m, wal, yas. 'Ceptin' mebbe the gal. She's awright, I guess. It's a-goin' to come kind o' hard for her now, too. Blind an' all, ye know."

Hard grunted again, sourly; pushed away from the table, and filled his own pipe.

"Funny thing 'bout her," pursued Steve. "Animils an' birds kind o' come to her, like. Leastways that's what I hearn. If she's a-settin' out a ways from the house, a squir'l or a rabbit 'll come right 'round her. An' the chickadees. Them chickadees 'll set right onto her lap an' eat outen her hand. I never hearn o' nothin' like it. D'ye s'pose them critters know she can't see 'em, or what?"

"Shut up 'bout chickadees!" the other

broke out. "I don't never want to hear 'nother of 'em! An' shut up 'bout them Coopers too. Got any more licker?"

Steve deliberately tamped his pipe.

"Nope. An' ye don't need no more. Wal, I reckon I'll move 'long." He rose, casually probing the smoldering eyes across the table, then moved doorward. "One thing I kind o' think 'bout sometimes," he continued, "is that there's things a lot wuss than bein' jest dead. Bein' blind, now. Settin' all day an' never seein' nothin', an' a-stumblin' 'long when ye've got to go somewheres—mebbe a snake's jest ahead o' ye an' ye can't see it. Nope, I'd ruther be dead ten times than blind once. G'night, Hard."

Hard forgot to answer. A queer chill went over him as he suddenly realized that his mother's sight had been failing for some time before she fell sick. Was it possible that if she had lived—?

Steve quietly passed out. Hard Wood sat alone, surrounded by a vast emptiness. Somewhere, far, far off, seemed to echo ghostly voices of chickadees.

CHAPTER IV

DRIFTING

SPRING budded, blossomed, and bloomed into summer. The grim gray cliffs of Dickie Barre and Minnewaska jutted from a billowy sea of verdure. The stony slopes of Mohonk and Millbrook masked their harsh features under green velvet. Apple and cherry, peach and pear, starred the little Traps farms with great bouquets, and in woody recess and rocky clearing alike unfolded dainty flowerets. Robins flaunted their red breasts, bluebirds flitted like living flecks of sky, yellowhammers winnowed softly among the branches and bobbed their crimson crowns to one another. The furry little people of the ground and the branches brought forth their babies and foraged for the food to give them growth.

Men furrowed the soil with plowshares and sowed their seed; then turned again to their hoop-shaving, their quarrying, their various means of supporting themselves and their own. Again the steel of the millstone makers, no longer hampered by blizzard and ice, clinked musically and steadily along the slopes of the mountain bowl.

But there was one in whose soul the

symphony of spring awoke no echo. There was one sledge which rang no more, one chisel which struck no spark. The hammer was growing rusty in the dampness of the new season, the chisel was dull. They had cut their last stone. And that stone, unlike all others which had gone before it, would never grind grain into food for the living. Instead, it would stand guard over the dead.

It was a millstone, but cut in half. It stood at the base of a robust maple, against which, mute and empty, leaned a little settee of weatherworn boards. It bore, in neat though slightly irregular graving, the name of the woman who had been wont to sew and read her Scripture and meditate in the maple shade. Standing there like a sun half sunk below the horizon, it was strikingly original and quaintly symbolic. Yet no thought of symbols had been in the mind of the boy-man who cut and set it there. Seeking a stone for the grave, he had turned naturally to his own last millstone, not quite completed; recut it to suit the need, and put it in position. This done, he had cast aside his tools with no intention of again using them.

Hard labor and lean pay had been his lot for years. Now that his strength and skill made the work easier, his pay would have been better had he continued at his trade. But he no longer had any incentive to toil. His one fixed aim had been to excel in the highest calling of the region and thereby to provide most handsomely for his mother. With her loss, the mainspring of his life stopped.

There were others who would not have been averse to starting that spring on a renewed swing of industry. Girls of the Traps, they were, whose eyes were by no means blind to the fact that Hard Wood would be a very good catch—if he could be caught. He had been a steady worker; he now was a master at his trade; his best years were ahead of him. His intense devotion to his mother, his ferocity in protecting her, might logically be expected to become the devotion and defense of the next woman to enter his heart.

Moreover, that prowess in fight which caused him to be feared by many and hated by some only made him a heroic figure to the minds of the younger feminine element. And, despite his stony expression, he was by no means bad looking. In fact, the few

who had seen him smile thought him downright handsome.

Nor were the girls alone in casting calculating eyes toward the womanless home. Matchmaking mothers are by no means confined to city society, and more than one Traps woman boldly encouraged her daughter to angle for the lonely youth. But all tentative advances fell flat, for the prospective victim himself remained totally oblivious of the fact that any fishing was in progress, and the bait would not have interested him even if he had seen it.

Thus, while the rising tide of life impelled all other fleshly things to turn their thoughts toward mates and homes, Hard Wood continued as indifferent as if he were indeed wooden. Yet, being alive and young and strong, he could not remain insensible of the primal urge to move about; indeed, a vague but mighty restlessness possessed him. So he became, for a time, a vagrant of the hills. And, in wandering, he avoided not only the roads and the haunts of other men, but even the companionship of that fellow-rover who was his best friend, Steve. His mood demanded solitude.

At first, chained by force of habit, he drifted along near-by hunting-trails laid down, perhaps, by the now vanished Indians. He had no wish to shoot any creature, but he carried always his dead father's gun; it was a silent companion which felt almost chummy to his hand. Sometimes, resting on log or stone, he contemplated that gun absently for many minutes, seeing again in memory his stalwart father and his boyhood home in the Big Indian country. Then arose in him a longing to return to the westward, to renew old acquaintances, to join one of the roystering lumber outfits and leave all this craggy Traps country behind him forever. But then the new half-moon millstone under the maples gleamed wanly before his brooding mind, and the impulse died. With a sigh, he straightened up and drifted aimlessly onward.

After a time he began to explore the maze of gigantic cliff fragments lying in fantastic confusion at the base of the precipice of Dickie Barre. Among them he found weird holes and occasional bones. The bones were always those of animals, the prey of lynx or catamount; but they were a reminder of the fact that his own skeleton might whiten there for years undiscovered if accident should befall him. So he turned

from the treacherous chaos of ill-balanced blocks to the face of the cliff itself, in which he discovered caverns black as night and crevasses open to the sky. The former he left alone, having no light and no inclination to pry. The latter he clambered through, finding nothing worth while. But at length he chanced on something which strangely interested him.

Pausing at a little distance from a bastion split by a narrow black rift, he detected a small light space against one wall of the crevice, as if light shone from an opening in the other wall. That other wall was, apparently, the solid face of the cliff. Puzzled, he worked his way to the rift, sidled in, and found that there was indubitably a hole whence came the light. It was some four feet above his head. The jagged walls afforded hand-holds. Leaning his gun against the rock, he pulled himself upward. A moment later he squirmed through the hole.

He found himself lying on a rock shelf. At his right side soared a towering block; at his left fell a sheer wall, ending, some twenty feet below, in the rock-strewn floor of a natural room, perhaps forty feet square. Ahead of him, but cut off by intervening emptiness, rose the true face of the precipice. Creeping to the end of the shelf, he saw that another room ran off to the right. This one was nearly roofed by overhanging cliff; but there was light enough to show its end wall, with a faintly outlined fissure in it, and to reveal also that a tiny, silent stream of water ran from a crack in the cliff-face along a grooved bed and vanished in a cavity about midway across.

For some time he lay there studying the place. As he crept back to the hole he muttered: "I bet the Injuns used this here cave. Gorry, what a hide-out it'd be! Feller could live here months—s'posin' he had vittles—an' nobody know what had 'come o' him."

On departing, he noted every feature of the immediate environment, feeling that he should come back. And several times in succeeding days he did come back, finding a way of clambering down into the open room and thence exploring the darkened one more thoroughly. He learned only two more things about the place: That its water was pure and apparently inexhaustible, and that the shadowed split in the inner room formed a zigzag and swiftly dropping means

of exit. It opened finally into thick brush about sixty feet below. Only by the most arduous effort could a man climb up it; but, if driven by extreme necessity, he could descend it.



THE wanderer's interest in the rocky covert waned, and he roved in other directions. Eastward, he climbed the Mohonk slope and rambled along the brink of the great wall fronting the Wallkill Valley; he threaded his way among jumbled crags until he stood on the stony lip of queer little Mohonk Lake, resting nearly a thousand feet higher than the valleys on either side; he scaled the precipitous slopes above it and halted at length on the dome of Sky Top.

Little did he suspect that before many years a tavern would be built on the shore of that lake, to expand later into a huge summer hotel whose supercilious "guests" would complain to the management if such as he were found on the grounds. Yet, even then, the place did not greatly appeal to him, and he lingered only to scan thoroughly the rambling valley, the creek, and the village of New Paltz to the east, and the Catskills to the north. The valley looked too smug and flat, the mountains too tame and orderly. So he came down and swung westward again into rougher country.

Threading the trails, he surmounted Dickie Barre and descended to ramping, brawling Peters Kill. And here, for the first time in many days he smiled. This was no gentle little stream, like the gurgling Coxing Kill which flowed near his own home. It differed from Coxing as the boisterous, two-fisted woodsmen of Big Indian would differ from easy-going farm folk. It was headstrong, reckless, plunging defiantly down Awosting and Peters Kill Falls, hurling itself with a growl over shorter drops, fighting ever with tilted strata and stubborn boulders to reach its goal. Between conflicts it gathered strength, in deep pool or in quiet level, to attack the next barrier that dared oppose it. Along its course were no houses, no clearings; its rugged banks were too steep and rocky. Tough rhododendron lined its shores, and a tangle of timber rose forbiddingly on either slope above. Peters Kill was rough and wild.

Hugging his gun, he roamed a couple of miles along the little torrent, sometimes in

it, more often skirting it on rimrock. The next day he returned early, having determined to follow it and learn whither it led. Four miles down, and several hundred feet lower, it began to flow more peacefully. Presently it passed under a road, and then under another. At length a highway began to run beside it, heading northeast. The traveler slowed, wavered, considered; then took to the road. Late in the day he ambled into the village of Kyserike, on the southern bank of the long Delaware and Hudson canal, which, winding here along Rondout Creek, formed the great traffic highway from the Hudson to Pennsylvania.

There, at Kyserike, he tarried for days; or, rather, in the vicinity. The town was too noisy for him; but a little outside it he could be quiet and alone. For that matter, it was not at all difficult for him to be alone even in the town. The townspeople had sized him up as "one o' them hillbillies," and they steered clear of him. The canal men, reckless though they were, also knew something of Shawangunk mountaineers; and after one glance at his gun, another at his physique, and a third at his bleak jaw and narrowed eyes, they had nothing to say to him. Still, the stranger felt crowded in the town, and spent most of his time outside it, silently watching the procession of boats.

A vast array, they seemed to him. In truth, there were many of them; for at that time a railroad along that valley was beyond imagination, and all the freight between the great river and the back districts must move by boat. Stone-boats, wood-boats, rum-boats, merchandise-boats—the stocks of backwoods stores, the clothing and the weapons and the tools of the backwoodsmen, the backwoods products of farm and forest bound cityward—all these were towed and locked along the waterway. The watchful hillman saw them all float past by countless tons, along with animals and humans of both sexes and all ages.

Once more the restless urge arose in him, goading him to get a job on one of those ugly craft and drift with it, seeing the world along this narrow but far-reaching road. But then once more the rounded stone under the maples held him back. He might go sometime, yes; but not now. The canal and its boats would be here whenever he might decide to take the step. Meanwhile it was not well to leave his little home and his mother's meager effects too long unguarded.

So, having gazed his fill, he headed back toward his Traps, going as he had come. With him he carried ancient newspapers in which his frugal lunches of bread and cheese had been wrapped up daily when he left the town. His hard years had taught him to waste nothing, and he now had two uses for those printed sheets: First, to read every word on them, and then to save them for additional bed-wrappings on future cold winter nights. He knew well the heat-preserving virtues of paper.

Starting early and striding with his natural long swing, he rapidly covered the distance to the rougher region of Peters Kill. Thereafter he perforce climbed more slowly; but so steady was his progress that by mid-afternoon he was once more resting at the start of the dim trail leading homeward across Dickie Barre. Since leaving the canal he had not paused, and now his appetite was keen. So he unwrapped his last Kyserike lunch and fell to eating. While his jaws worked his eyes crept over the little newspaper in which the provender had been folded.

This paper had been printed in Kingston, and was devoted almost entirely to local events. Chief among its items was an account of the return of a well-to-do townsman from New York city, where he had undergone treatment by a specialist. The results of the operation were considered worth half a column on the front page. The reader perused it all.

"By mighty!" he mumbled. "Think o' that, now! Some o' them doctors can fix 'most anything that ails ye. I s'pose they git an awful lot o' money for doin' them kind o' things. Still an' all, it's wuth it. Mebbe if mom could of had a city doctor——"

With a sigh he folded the sheet and slipped it under the cord binding the other papers; glanced at the sun, arose, and headed eastward.

The sun was low when he crossed the rolling top of Dickie Barre, and as he descended the eastern side he found all the Clove region in shadow. The crests of Mohonk and Eagle Cliff still shone, but the valley had lost its light for the day. With lengthened stride he swung along the winding wood-path by which he had recently become accustomed to approach and leave his place. Lonely and silent though it was, that drab little house ahead was home. After

wandering afar, he now would once more sit at his own table; eat, smoke, read his papers, and then enjoy the comfort of his bed.

As he drew near, a faint, unfragrant odor floated to his nostrils. With every stride it seemed to grow slightly stronger. His brows drew together, his eyes glimmered, and his pace quickened into a lope. The smell was that of burnt wood.

Emerging into his little open field, he stopped as if shot.

His home had vanished. Where it had stood was only a sepulchral brick chimney and a black-and-gray patch of charred timbers and ashes.

CHAPTER V

DOUBT

STUNNED, the wanderer stood staring at the funereal splotch on the green. From it rose no wisp of smoke. The odor, too, seemed stale. The catastrophe had not occurred today, nor, probably, last night. The débris must be two or three days old.

Numbly he moved to the spot, casting a glance, as he did so, toward the three heavy-headed maples. Among the shadows beneath them, the low half-moon stone stood out clear and clean. No harm could come now to the still figure guarded by that monument. He turned his gaze once more to the devastated patch which had been home.

The one calamity against which he could not take precautions had befallen his place. His neighbors in the Clove, though perhaps inquisitive, were honest enough; but before leaving home he had always fastened doors and windows, wedging down the movable lower sashes with strong sticks, bolting the rear door, and locking the front one as he departed. As for fire, he had invariably made sure that the morning blaze in the stove had sunk to embers and that the drafts were shut. The house stood well away from the woods, and at this season of the year the ground was too damp and the grass too green to allow any wild fire to approach. There was no apparent reason why this disaster should have come about, unless through malicious design.

"'Twas set!" grated the homeless man.

But "set" by whom? By man or God?

His wrathful thoughts darted first to the Coopers, then to the chance of lightning. In all the time since that day on the creek when the Coopers drew their deadline, no further clash had taken place. He had stayed on his side of the line, they on theirs—at least so far as the Clove was concerned. There was no cause for them now to fire his house.

On the other hand, there had been a wicked thunderstorm three nights ago in the Catskills, some twenty miles to the north. A belated traveler, according to reports received at Kyserike, had been struck and killed by lightning. But that storm had not swung southward. Yet was it possible that the invisible Power whom he had bitterly arraigned awhile ago had now retaliated by shooting a single bolt into the Traps?

"If He done it," growled Hard, "He's awful slow an' He dunno much. The time to git me is when I'm here, not down yender into the valley."

What enraged him most was not the loss of roof and personal belongings, but the destruction of his mother's treasures. There had been a chest in which she kept them—some quaint pieces of pottery, an amethyst brooch of old design, some tinctypes of his father, and similar simple heirlooms; and her clothes. There was a white dress, he remembered, in which she had been married, and which she had sometimes shown him when talking of the days before his birth. There were other dresses, too, which she had seldom worn since coming to the Traps. And there was one which she had never used at all; a new one made during the winter from a flowery cloth bought last fall from a wandering Jew peddler. This she had toiled upon while her sight steadily grew worse; and, when completed, had carefully laid away for wear this spring. Weeks after her passing he had found it in the top of the chest, and the sight of it had cut him to the quick. Now all was gone, fired like so much trash by the malignant agency which had struck while he was away.

Looking with bitter gaze into the meagre débris, he presently perceived that those charred remnants had been moved. Somebody, probably several somebodies, had been prying into them. A searing malediction which had been gathering force within him broke explosively from his set lips. He glared around, seeking the human jackals

who had pawed over the bones of his house.

He found one of them. A man carrying an empty dinner-pail had come along the road and, spying him, halted. He was a millstone worker, one Jonas Brock, and nearest neighbor to the Woods. Now he came hurrying forward, a wide grin on his weatherbeaten face.

"H'are ye, Hard! Gorry, ye're awright, be ye? We been a-wonderin'——"

Then he caught the menacing flame of the black eyes. He slowed abruptly; then came warily on.

"Who done this?" flared Hard, jerking his head toward the ruin.

"Wal, now, I dunno, Hard—nor nobody else, fur's I can hear. Fust I knowed 'bout it——"

"Who's been a-pokin' into here?"

"A-pokin'? Oh, I see what ye mean. Why, some of us been a-turnin' things over——"

"You one of 'em?"

So fierce was the demand, so terrible the tone, that Brock took a backward step. But then, doggedly, he stood his ground and retorted.

"Yas, I'm one of 'em! If my house burnt an' ye didn't know if I was into it or not, ye'd poke 'round into it till ye found out, wouldn't ye? Wal, that's what we done. Nobody knowed whether ye was to home or not, an' we sort o' raked 'round into them ashes to see. Ca'm down, Hard. Don't git onreasonable."

The other's gaze bored into his, then became less sharp. Hard nodded, swallowed, and spoke more mildly.

"Awright, Jone. Been any lightnin' storm here?"

"Naw." Jonas looked curiously at him. "Ye must of been a good ways off, ain't ye, if ye dunno what the weather's been?" Getting no answer, he continued: "'Twarn't lightnin' that done this, Hard, 'less 'twas lightnin' without no thunder or rain. Don't ast me what 'twas—I tell ye I dunno. But it come night 'fore last, way into the night. I know that, 'cause me an' Jim Quick come 'long here 'bout nine o'clock, an' yer house was jest the same as usual. Jim, he hol-lered out to ye, but ther' warn't no answer or no light inside, so we went 'long."

"Then, yes'day mornin', I come up the road to git to work, same's I allus do, an' the house was burnt down. Ther' was jest a little smoke a-risin', an' a few coals, but

the fire was 'most out; so I figger it must of caught 'round the middle o' the night. An' ther' warn't no lightnin' that anybody knows 'bout.

"Wal, 'course the fust thing I thought was, ye'd come home into the night an' sumpthin' happened, an' ye might be into the ashes—what was left o' ye. So after I looked things over I told some other fellers, Steve Oaks, for one, an' we throwed water on to here till 'twas cool 'nough to dig 'round some. But we didn't find nothin'—no bones or nothin', I mean. So then we left it 'lone."

Hard nodded again, saying nothing.

"Wal, come 'long home with me, Hard," invited Brock. "Ye'll be jest in time for supper."

"Nope." The refusal was curt, decisive.

"'Bliged to ye, Jone. 'Night."

Brock fingered his bristly chin, hesitating and probing the younger man's drawn face.

"Better come 'long," he ventured again. "Glad to have ye——"

"Nope!" The word snapped.

Brock, who possessed an inquisitive wife and a garrulous daughter, as well as a large personal bump of curiosity, turned reluctantly away.



WHEN he had vanished beyond the next brushy bend, the man beside the débris walked slowly around the site; paused a while longer, scowling down; then turned and trudged to all that remained to him—the stone and the seat under the maples. The Clove shadows now were merging gradually into twilight, and beneath the luxuriant trees it was dusk. He sank heavily on the bench, which creaked beneath his weight. And there, for some time, he stayed, unseen and unseeing.

Out on the road several men passed by, casting glances at the houseless clearing, but failing to discern the huddled figure in the darkling covert beyond. And they in turn were unobserved by the youth who sat with powerful hands gripped around his father's gun and gaze fixed on his mother's grave.

Many things passed through his mind as he sat there. The dusk thickened into gloom before his lips moved.

"Mom," he said, in husky tones, "who done it?"

From the shadow-shrouded stone came no reply. From the foliage above sounded a

long sigh as a little night breeze wandered past. From the vacant grassland cheeped an insect chorus so monotonous as to pass unheard. From somewhere over on Coxing Kill floated the senseless twanging of frogs. Nothing spoke to him. Yet, presently, he seemed to have an answer.

"Yas. I figgered 'twas them," he muttered. "Them p'ison Coopers. Ain't no sense into s'posin' anybody else done it. 'Twas them! An' they're a-goin' to hear from me!"

He lengthened upward, standing grim and straight beside his long gun.

"Night, mom," he said.

The night breeze touched his face lightly in a soft caress. He stalked away, passing his black home-site without a pause, to the road.

A thin moon now was stealing upward over the Big Wall, and its ghostly light marked the sandy track plainly before him. At long intervals, a few houses dotted the way, each faintly illumined within by candle or oil lamp; and through open doors or windows sounded calm conversation, sharp wrangling, or shrill laughter. With only a glance at each, he swung on. After a time he reached the junction of the Clove road and the Traps road, and directly opposite him opened the darksome path leading to the Cooper place. He was on the deadline.

Without slowing, he crossed it and entered the Cooper country. As he did so, however, he reached to a pocket to reassure himself. He brought up short, feeling the pocket again, smitten by a sudden sense of loss. Somewhere he had dropped his powder-flask.

For a moment he stood nonplused. His gun was loaded, and with buckshot; but, now that he thought of it, those charges might not be wholly reliable. They had been in place for a long time, and the gun had been exposed to considerable dampness. He wanted no hangfires or misfires when presenting his compliments to the Cooper tribe. Reluctantly he turned back, recrossed the deadline, and scouted back a little way along the road, seeking the lost powder.

This quest he soon abandoned, for there was not much chance of finding the flask in the road. It probably was far away in the woods or beside Peters Kill, joggled from his pocket by rough going. After considering a bit, he once more turned about. This

time he followed the Traps road, heading toward the home of Steve and Uncle Eb.

He found the pair lounging peacefully on the stoop of Uncle Eb's little yellow house, enjoying their pipes and the balm evening air. Faint though the light was, Steve's keen eyes recognized him before he entered the yard.

"Lo, Hard," came his usual drawling salutation. "Where ye been so long?"

"Trompin' 'round. I want to borry some powder."

There was a silence. Steve slowly breathed out a thin dribble of smoke. Uncle Eb, his frosty blue eyes peering sharply upward under bushy white brows, ejected short, rapid puffs from his walrus mustache. Neither man moved.

"Lost my flask somewheres," explained the visitor. "An' I ain't sure 'bout the gun."

"Goin' a-huntin'?" queried Steve.

"Yup. Snake-huntin'."

"Uh-huh. Copperheads, mebbe."

"Uh-huh. Things that bite when ye ain't lookin'."

Steve nodded. Uncle Eb took out his pipe, spat noisily, and cleared his throat.

"Grrrup! Had yer supper yit?"

"Don't want none. I want some powder."

"Hmp. Marthy! Put some vittles onto the table!"

Somewhere within, a feminine voice demanded: "Who for?"

"Nev' mind. Hard Wood, if ye have to know. Come in, Hard. Now don't git balky 'bout it. Come into here an' throw some vittles into ye. Any snakes ye want to git will stay right where they be. Don't spite yer stummick; it's the best friend ye've got. Come on, I tell ye!"



HE LIFTED his angular frame while he barked, shaking his pipe-stem at the grim-jawed youth by way of emphasis. Steve chuckled. Hard frowned, then grinned, and followed the beloved old autocrat into the house.

"Set up!" ordered Eb, designating a chair with his pipe. "Things is cold now, but that won't spile 'em. Marthy, fresh up the fire an' make some coffee. I'll have some m'self, an' some crullers. Now, son, le's hear 'bout this snake-huntin'."

Once seated before the spread laid out by Mis' Wilham, the wanderer discovered

that he was ravenous. Between mouthfuls he briefly stated his case. Steve, nibbling at a doughnut, then calmly corroborated Jonas Brock. He, with others, had delved into the char and ash to ascertain the fate of the owner; then, like every one else, had waited for Hard to reappear. They had found nothing to indicate the cause of the fire.

"I've got all the proof I want," was the ominous reply. "Will ye lend me that powder?"

Uncle Eb, with another clearing of the throat, intervened.

"Grrrup! Hold yer hosses, son. Ye ain't got no proof at all yit. Ye better git some 'fore ye go gittin' brash. Now hol' on a minute an' let an ol' man talk. I've been a-livin' 'most seventy-six year, an' I've seen more'n you have. I've seen lots o' folks make bad mistakes actin' too hasty-like. I don't want ye to make no mistake.

"Ye ain't got no proof that them Cooperses done it. Ye ain't got no proof that *nobody* done it! Now, for one thing, 'less'n yer house was dif'rent from everybody else's, ye had some rats or mice into it. Didn't ye?"

"Some."

"O' course. An' ye had matches, an' ile, sech stuff. Wal, mice'll gnaw matches. There's many a house been burnt by them sneakin' little varmints. Could ye take yer oath, now, that every match into yer house was where the mice couldn't git to it?"

The younger man meditated. Grudgingly he shook his head.

"I ain't sure," he admitted. "But——"

"Nev' mind buttin'! That makes one way it could of started. An' here's 'nother way—with mice into it too. Them critters 'll make nests for themselves under the upstairs floor, great big nests o' trash, three or four foot square sometimes; an' they make them beds right ag'inst the chimbley, so's they can keep warm. Wal, mebbe yer chimbley is kind of old, an' bimeby a spark gits through a crack into the nest, an' if ye don't find out 'bout it quick enough, yer house is gone. I see that happen m'self one time, right into my own house. Marthy smelt the smoke, an' I got water an' tore up the floor, an' 'twas the awfulest mess ye ever see—'most a bushel o' stuff. Wal, now, mebbe 'twas sumptin' like that that started yer house. Ye had it shet up tight, an' it might of worked there a long time

after ye left the place, an' finally bust out the night 'fore last."

Hard squinted thoughtfully at his coffee. Many a time he had heard mice squeaking between his bedroom ceiling and attic floor.

"An' then ag'in, s'pose somebody *did* set it. Them Cooperses ain't the onliest folks ye've fit with, ye know. There's more'n one man's got a kind of a grudge ag'in ye. Mebbe some feller got some lickin' into him an' went there an' done it, a-figgerin' ye'd lay it onto the Cooperses jest like ye're a-doin'. Sech things has happened here 'fore now."

He glanced at Steve, whose face contracted. Hard Wood, too, looked startled. He knew that such things had happened, and that Steve had suffered bitterly in consequence. Steve had served years in a penitentiary for burning a house and shooting its owners, when the crime really had been committed by Snake Sanders. It was this which later had led to the killing of Sanders by his scapegoat.

"Ye're right. It's happened," rasped Steve. "Hard, I ain't got no use for them Cooperses, but I want ye to be sure ye git the right man—if 'twas done by a man. Ye ain't even sure o' that. Better make sure. Ye've got good strong s'picious, but s'picious ain't proof; an' even proof is sometimes lies. I know. I'd ought to know."

Hard Wood sat a minute thinking. Then his jaw set and his eyes slid toward his gun. Steve, watching him, added: "When ye're sure, I'll give ye all the powder ye want. Mebbe I'll go 'long with ye."

At that the tight mouth relaxed a little and the eyes came back.

"'Bliged to ye, Steve. But I aim to settle my own bills. Still an' all, mebbe ye're right. I'll wait a little while. Tomorrer I'll poke 'round into things down to the house. Mebbe I'll find somethin'."

"Now ye're talkin' sense!" approved Uncle Eb. "Ain't no use into goin' too fast. An' meanwhile jest settle down here an' make yerself to home. Ye can live 'long of us, an' welcome. We'll sleep ye with Steve. Don't talk back to me, now, or I'll take ye out an' whale ye."

Steve chuckled again. Hard grinned feebly, his eyes suddenly growing misty.

"Thank ye," he said huskily. "I—I ain't got nowheres else to go jest now."

Uncle Eb gulped his coffee, refilled his

pipe, passed the tobacco. Hard fumbled in a coat pocket and drew out a battered applewood. Steve reloaded his cob. And, with no more words, the three went back to the porch, sat, and smoked in silent comradeship. In the room behind them, the Wood gun leaned even more silently in a corner—and bided its time.

CHAPTER VI

"GOD WILLIN' "

IN THE sun-splashed shade at the edge of the woods, two young men paused and scowled across open land toward a black patch where had stood a house. Over there, several children were delving into the débris.

"Git out o' that!" roared the taller of the two.

The gnome-like figures froze, staring toward the forest. The pair swung forward into the bright morning sunlight. The spell holding the youngsters broke.

"Oh, gosh, it's Hard an' Steve! An' they're mad!" squealed a boy.

At top speed he bolted for the road. The others, swept by panic, tore after him. Before the long-striding men reached the ruin the excavators had vanished homeward.

"By the time a few more folks have dug into here ye can't find nothin' at all," grumbled Hard, setting down a dinner pail and pulling off his coat. "Fust thing we know, somebody'll sneak up an' steal this dinner, 'less'n we watch it."

"Like to see 'em try it," grunted Steve. "But I don't b'lieve there was much findin's left here for anybody. Fire got everything that'd burn."

His mate gloomily surveyed the small chaos.

"Fellers that was here with ye didn't carry nothin' away, did they?" he questioned.

"Nope, ye bet they didn't. We turned over some stuff—coffee-pot an' sech-like—while we was a-diggin' 'round, an' throwed it out to one side, but I told 'em— Huh! Come to think of it, where's that coffee-pot now? It's gone. 'Less'n somebody throwed it back into here."

"Kids lugged it off, prob'ly. Some o' them little rats 'd carry off anything."

"Guess so. I told the other fellers, when we see ye warn't into here, 'Wal, then he'll

be back, an' I don't want nothin' touched, or there'll be trouble.' They wouldn't bother nothin'. Wal, le's git to work."

Steadily they toiled until noon. By that time they had cleared everything except the bottom of the tiny cellar. In a small heap at one side lay such objects as had resisted the flames: The remains of the stove, the works of a once-wooden clock, cooking and eating utensils, door-knobs and hinges, and similar refuse. Dirty as coal-heavers, they knocked off at midday, washed and drank at the well, and devoured their lunch. Then Hard inspected the worthless metal thus far garnered.

"We ain't got all of it," he said. "Ye mind that chest o' mom's? 'Twas an old-timer—belonged to my gran'ther once—an' folks said it come from some furrin place; an' it had funny handles onto it, an' corner-pieces an' some strips—brass, mebbe; anyway they never rusted. An' it had a funny kind of a lock, too, an' a big key. We ain't found one o' them things. Did ye see anything like that when ye fust dug into here?"

"Nope." Steve's answer was positive. "'Course, I wouldn't pay no 'tention to 'em then if I did; but I'd prob'ly 'member 'em when ye ast me 'bout 'em. I didn't see nothin' like that."

"Kind o' funny where they all went to. Couldn't fall into the cellar, seems like. The cellar was only under the kitchen, an' the chest set into mom's room. 'Twas jest 'bout there." He pointed to a spot cleared some time previously. Then he walked to the designated place, squatted, and searched the ashes inch by inch.

"Nothin'." He straightened up, frowning. "Wal, le's try the cellar."

They resumed their toil. At length they climbed out and looked at each other. The hole had yielded nothing but fragments of jars and bottles.

Doggedly the owner turned back to the place where he believed the chest to have reposed, and for an hour he furrowed the ash in all directions. Only old nails rewarded his persistence.

Steve mopped his forehead, adding another black smear to his face, and glanced suggestively down the road. Hard nodded grimly.

"Two o' them kids was Jone Brock's," he recalled, "an' the others was Seth Becker's. I'm goin' a-visitin'."

They followed the direction taken by the children. Presently they swung into the Brock dooryard. Within the house they heard terrified voices. The Brock children had spied their approach and fled to their mother.

"Mis' Brock!" boomed Hard.

The over-plump wife of Jonas, looking somewhat perturbed, came to the door.

"I want to know what yer boys took 'way from my place."

"Wal, now," hesitated the woman, "I told 'em not to 'sturb nothin', an' so'd their father, an' they wouldn't take nothin' 't was any use to ye. Says I, 'Danny,' says I, 'an' Tommy,' says I, 'don't ye lay a finger onto nothin' o' Hard's,' says I, 'cause he ain't——'"

"Wha'd they take?"

"Wal, now— Don't look so mad-like, Hard! My sakes, ye'd scare a body to death! Wal, now them youngers o' Seth Becker's, they come 'long, an' they says sumptin' to our boys, an' fust I knowed, they was gone. I didn't know they'd gone down to your place, I thought they was jest a-playin' clus by, an'——"

"Wha'd they take?"

Mis' Brock fell back a step.

"They—they—they— Why, Hard, jest an ol' burnt coffee-pot an' a door-knob. That's every blessed thing! I'll give 'em right back to ye——"

"Keep 'em. G'by."

Mis' Brock blinked and stood open-mouthed as the pair strode away. Then her fleshy countenance reddened and she turned inward with a bounce. To the ears of the departing companions came lusty slaps and shrill howls. Danny and Tommy were paying the price of causing their mother to be "scairt to death."



AT THE home of Seth Becker they met a different reception. Mis' Becker was the watery-eyed woman who, not long ago, had been summarily banished from the death-chamber of Wood house. Now, on her own ground, the she shrewishly denied that her children had even entered the Wood yard.

"They wouldn't touch nothin' o' yours," she went on, with a sharp sniff, "not even if ye give it to 'em! They don't want nothin' to do with ye. Ye needn't come a-sayin' they was down to there——"

"I seen 'em!" asserted Hard. "I'm

askin' ye once more, wha'd they take?"

"Nothin'! 'Tain't so! They warn't there! Nex' thing ye'll be a-sayin' we set yer house afire!"

"Mebbe ye did," countered Hard, his voice ominous. "I'm a-lookin' for the feller that done it, an' I mind I licked the stuffin' out o' yer brother one time. Where was he the night my house burnt?"

Mis' Becker's lips wobbled. Then she burst out:

"He never! He was right to home all night an' he didn't know nothin' 'bout it. An' I tell ye, that fire warn't set! 'Twas a jedgment onto ye! 'Twas God, Hissself, that done it, 'long o' yer evil ways—a-buryn' yer mother 'thout no service an' a-tellin' Him to His face ye didn't b'lieve into Him—ye'd oughter been struck by the wrath o' God right then——"

Her voice suddenly failed, and her yellowish face turned ashy. Into the slitted eyes fronting her had leaped a look that shocked her dumb.

Hard neither spoke nor moved for half a dozen breaths. In a metallic tone he said then—

"Steve."

"What?"

"Ye been a-talkin'?"

Steve, sole attendant at the burial of Mis' Wood, understood.

"Nary a word."

"Then," rasped Hard, his burning gaze holding the woman, "ye sneaked 'round to see the buryin', didn't ye? Ye couldn't paw over her like ye wanted to—ye never was fitten to breathe the same air she did, ye snivelin' ol' she ——, ye!—an' so ye crawled 'round an' spied onto us. There ain't no other way ye could know what I said. Ye varmint, ye're lower down than them Coopers! An' ye talk 'bout jedgment! Ye talk 'bout God!"

"Ye're a liar an' a sneak, an' ye've proved it out o' yer own mouth. Mebbe 'twas *you* that burnt my place! If ye'd sneak to a grave ye could sneak to a house—an' set it, so's to bring the 'jedgment o' God' on to me! *Did ye?*"

"Oh, my Gawd, no!" moaned the woman.

"Did some o' yer tribe?"

"No! No-o-o!"

The basilisk eyes pierced to the depths of her shriveled soul.

"Then ye tell me what I asked ye—an' if ye lie ag'in ye'll find out what 'jedgment'

is! Wha'd them brats o' yourn bring home?"

"Some—some burnt knives," she gasped. "An'—an' a stove-lifter. Ther' warn't 'nother thing."

"No lock an' key? No pieces o' brass?"

"No—nothin' but what I told ye."

"Awright. Now, ye whinin' rat, lemme tell ye somethin'. Ye ever open yer head ag'in about my mom, an' the 'wrath o' God' won't be as big as a firefly 'longside o' what'll come to ye! An' if one o' yer tribe ever sets a foot onto my land they'll git what a snake gits. Soon's yer menfolks git home tell 'em what I said."

He stalked away. The woman wavered, turned about as if in a trance, stumbled to a chair, and collapsed into it.

Back at his own yard, Hard Wood walked straight to the well, drew a bucket of water, and washed himself clean of char and ash, perhaps, also, of rage. Steve silently followed his example. Then, his tone calm and controlled, Hard commented:

"Ain't no more use into rootin' 'round here, as I can see. Them brass things are gone somewheres—I s'pose today ain't the fust time kids have poked 'round here. Likely they've lugged off a lot o' things their folks don't know 'bout. An' there ain't no sign o' how the fire started. Must of been a 'judgment.'"

His lips curled contemptuously.

Steve, who had not spoken a word since leaving the Becker place, studied him cornerwise and then got out his pipe. Without filling it, he puffed thoughtfully at it for a couple of minutes. His gaze strayed to the stone under the maples.

"It's kind o' funny how things happen sometimes," he remarked. "I ain't got no religion; never had none; don't want none. Folks says I'm wild, an' a killer, an' sech-like. An' mebbe I am. But I ain't as wild as I was 'fore I took to livin' 'long of Uncle Eb. He's stidded me down some. I've learnt quite a lot from that wise ol' feller. An' I've learnt that there's some things ye can't never rightly understand, an' there's some things a feller better not say."

"Now, three-four year back, there was a city feller into here awhile, name o' Hampton. He could lick his weight o' wildcats, an' him an' me got to be pretty good friends. Wal, he was a-huntin' 'round quite a long spell for a feller that was a-hidin' out from him, an' while he was a-huntin' he found

Ninety-Nine's Mine. This Ninety-Nine's Mine had been lost a good many years—ever sence the Injuns died out—an' a good many fellers had hunted for it without no luck. An' now Hampton, he found it, but he didn't want it. So he told me an' Uncle Eb we could have it an' make what we could outen it; an' then he went out, back to Noo York.

"Wal, 'twas comin' on winter then, so me an' Uncle Eb, we let it lay till spring. An' we talked 'bout it a lot into the winter, an' Uncle Eb he used to say, 'We'll find it awright—God willin'.' An' I'd say, 'Seein' Hampton put it all down on to paper, we'll find it anyways—God willin' or not.' Uncle Eb didn't like it, but I said it jest the same."

"Wal, come spring, we couldn't find the paper. We knowed jest where 'twas put, but when we come to look for it 'twarn't there no more. What 'come of it, we dunno."

"But I 'membered what was on to that paper, so I went an' hunted. An' I fell down an' broke my arm. When that got well I hunted some more, an' some way I kep' a-gittin' hurt. But bimeby I found the place—or what used to be the place. Everything was like Hampton said, 'ceptin' this: a piece o' rock bigger'n two houses had fell down right onto the little hole a-leadin' into the mine. It had fell down sometime into the winter while I was a-makin' fun o' 'God willin'.' An' it jest kilt the onliest chance of ever gittin' into that mine."

"What's more, that rock warn't an overhang, li'ble to fall any time. 'Twas a great big wedge o' straight-up-an'-down rock that got pried out, some way, from the side o' Dickie Barre to fall onto that one place. When I studied it all out I—wal, Hard, I got kind o' shivery. I ain't never been nigh the place sence. An' I don't make fun o' 'God willin'' no more."

His companion stared at him. Steve's quiet confession was impressive. Soon, however, a mirthless smile quirked Hard's mouth.

"A good stiff snort o' giant powder 'd fix yer 'God-willin'' rock, I bet."

The other tolerantly shook his head.

"Nope. It'd fetch 'bout a thousand ton more rock a-smashin' down. I thought o' that myself. The place is right 'tween two walls o' rock, an' one of 'em's jest a-waitin' for some fool to shoot a blast into

there. The man ain't a-livin' that'll ever git into that mine now. It's lost for good an' all."

Hard meditated.

"Wal," he said at length. "It's kind o' funny. But I'm still a-lookin' 'round to see who put this 'judgment' onto me. An' I still kind o' think that any rocks I run into can be fixed with some powder."

"Mebbe."

Hard picked up the empty dinner pail and led the way back into the woods-path by which they had come. After a period of silent walking he paused.

"Look a' here, Steve," he demanded, "d'ye b'lieve right into yer heart my house got burnt by lightnin' or mice?"

Steve met his eye.

"Nope," he admitted. "I dunno as I do."

"Nor me neither. Who d'ye s'picion?"

"Wal, if I was s'picionin' anybody, I guess 'twould be the same folks ye're a-thinkin' 'bout, yer own self."

"Thought so. I notice us two fellers think alike, mostly. An' seems to me I heard one time that the reason Bad Bill Cooper can't go down into the valley is 'cause he got into trouble there a few year back, 'long o' stealin' an' burnin'. Ain't that so?"

"I guess mebbe 'tis. Still an' all, that don't prove nothin'."

"Nope. It don't *prove* nothin'. But there's somethin', somewhere, that'll prove somethin', an' I'm a-goin to find it, 'God willin', an' the — not objectin'."

With a harsh chuckle he resumed his way. Steve, following, said no more; but his look was grave.

CHAPTER VII

THE WILDCAT

A GRAY, dull day dawned on the Traps. Hard Wood, smoking an after-breakfast pipe on the porch, studied the sky. When the pipe was smoked, he lounged out to the road and looked up and down it as if at a loss as to what to do with himself. Presently he turned westward.

"Goin' a-walkin' awhile," he vouchsafed.

Steve, shrewdly watching from the steps, answered—

"Want company?"

"Nope. Jest a-goin' over Peters Kill way. Want to kind o' study 'bout things."

He loafed away. Uncle Eb, coming from the barn, spied him and watched his going with puckered eyes.

"Where's he goin'?" he demanded, as he reached the porch.

"Jest trompin'," Steve responded, easily. "Ain't took his gun or nothin'. I ain't worried."

The old man pulled one end of his drooping mustache, peered again after the non-chalant figure, and turned indoors with a relieved air.

"Good 'nough," he acquiesced. "He ain't fool 'nough to go nigh them Cooperses 'thout his gun. An' he's a-headin' the wrong way. The time when we've got to look out for him is when he takes his gun an' starts right down the road. He's awright now."

Wherein both Uncle Eb and his foster-son were neatly hoodwinked. Hard's casual departure westward, his abandonment of his gun, his deceptive excuse, all were dust in the eyes of his friends. By a roundabout route, he was on his way to the Cooper place.

Gradually he increased his stride, and as soon as he was out of sight he began walking at full swing. Before long he reached Peters Kill; but he made no stop there. Instead, he bore off to the left and began clambering up the boulder-strewn slope of Minnewaska. A stiff climb brought him out at length on the wooded cliffs enclosing the little lake. There he paused, recovering wind and looking about him.

He was already a mile to the southward of the road forming the deadline, and thus within the region which Bad Bill had snarlingly designated as Cooper country. But no menace showed. No sign of life, except that of birds, was visible around the rocky rim. In later years, as at Mohonk, hotels were to rise upon these stark crags. But now nobody lived here. The roving gaze of the solitary man encountered only green water, gray cliffs, gloomy timber, and dull sky.

The Cooper place, he knew, must be somewhere to the eastward, near the base of the Minnewaska plateau. He knew, too, that the lake below him was the source of Coxing Kill; and he surmised that the Cooper house would be not far from the stream. So, picking his way along the edge, he sought the outlet of the still water.

At the extreme southern end he found it. Too, he found an enemy: A thick, hideous

copperhead, coiled between a couple of stones. Keeping an eye on the venomous thing, he cut a stout club. This he maneuvered to goad the reptile into striking, which it speedily did. A swift swing and a crushing blow killed it.

Watching its post-mortem writhings, he muttered:

"I s'pose ye're one o' the Cooper tribe. An' ye jest struck at a stick o' hard wood. An' look at what the hard wood done to ye!"

Leaving the spotted death still squirming, he went on down the tumbling little stream. As he went he kept a sharp lookout for other snakes and carried the cudgel ready for service. But no other reptile showed itself. Downward, ever downward led the ravine, the water rushing noisily over the rocks between bushy shores. For about a mile the infant creek fussed and fretted. Then, reaching a level, it became silent, flowing smoothly and swinging gradually toward the north. Thick brush still bordered it, and along it was no sound of life save an occasional bird call.

Hard paused, mopping a broken spider-web from his cheeks and listening intently. Soon, from some point downstream, floated the crow of a rooster. The fowl was some distance away. The listener nodded, studied the ground within his limited scope of vision, and took to the left shore. The steep descent now had given way to a gentle grade, whereon grew trees large and small, and where rested boulders of all sizes. Through this cover stole the spy, stealthy now as a hunting Indian.

Yard after yard he traversed, working from tree to tree, from rock to rock, pausing frequently to listen and look. Still he saw no house, no clearing. All at once, however, he found himself in a path. Along this he trod with every sense alert. Suddenly he froze.

Before him opened a straight stretch of the path, and along it was coming a girl.

She was moving slowly, but with no hesitation. She was coming directly toward him, her head up, her gaze apparently on him. He made no move; he was almost concealed by an intervening chest-high stone, and he felt no inclination to take to thicker cover because of a mere girl. Narrowly he watched beyond her to detect the presence of any accompanying man. There was none. She was alone.

Slender, fair-haired, rose-cheeked, blue-

gowned, barefoot, and about seventeen—these were the first swift impressions of the watcher. She moved with such graceful ease that she seemed to drift along the path, rather than to walk. Her eyes remained fixed on him. He held his position, but he was convinced that she saw him, and wondered that she showed no hesitation in continuing her approach. Yet she gave no indication of perceiving him.

As she came nearer, her expression showed that she was totally unconscious of his presence. Her gaze appeared to go past or over him, rather than to meet his. Her lips were parted in a little smile, and she seemed to be listening for some expected sound—a bird song, or something equally pleasant.

With a sudden sense of shock the explanation came to him. This girl was blind! She was the blind Jane—the one girl of the Cooper tribe; the girl to whom the birds came.

It couldn't be so. Blind folks had to have other folks lead 'em, or mebbe a little dog—they had to have a stick or something, anyway. Blind folks couldn't walk like that. Of course she could see. Not very good, mebbe, but—look at there, now!

She had swerved a little to one side, and, with calm certainty, sat down on a log beside the path. She touched it first with her hands, to be sure, but she showed no hesitation in seating herself. That story about her blindness was all a lie. So was the other one, about birds and animals coming to her. Just Cooper lies. Well, he'd stay here awhile and see what she did. Stealing forward, he reached the boulder, rested his arms on it, and watched.



FOR a long time she did nothing. She simply sat there on her log, some twenty yards away from him. She seemed to be listening; listening for something to move. Perfectly still, she sat; hands resting loosely on her lap, head lifted in that same expectant way. And perfectly still remained Hard Wood, leaning against his boulder, seemingly a part of the stone.

In the long, quiet interval he had plenty of time to study her profile. As he did so, wonder grew in him. Was this a Cooper? The Coopers whom he knew were coarse of nostril and cruel of mouth. Her nose was delicate and regular, her lips curving and sweet. And her hair, lying in twin golden

braids down her shoulders—that did not look like the coppery Cooper mop. Only her color was that of the Coopers; they were a red-faced lot, and this girl's cheeks were flushed. Yet even in this similarity she differed from her brothers; her high color was not a thick-skinned floridness, but a clear, clean glow.

"By mighty, if she takes after her mother, like folks say, ol' Mis' Cooper must of been powerful pretty once," the watcher caught himself thinking. Then he scowled. "But she's a Cooper," he reminded himself. "There ain't a decent one into the lot. Can't be."

All at once his gaze sharpened. There was a bird, a little wild bird, on her lap! It couldn't be so—but it was. And she was actually stroking it. Not with her hand; just with one finger, touching it so gently that the light caress did not alarm it. Hard could just see that finger move. He saw, too, that the little fellow remained quiet, enjoying the soft rubbing of its downy breast.

But not for long. From somewhere another feathered visitor darted to rest on her knee. The first comer chirped indignantly; then, hopping forward, pecked at the intruder. The latter retaliated. Squawking, they joined combat, tumbling off her lap; broke away from each other while still in air, and wheeled into the thicket beyond. Hard chuckled soundlessly.

"Sassy little varmints!" he thought. "Jest as jealous as if she was a-feedin' 'em."

Neither of the birds returned to her lap, although several others flitted close to her and chirruped. The next visitor was a chipmunk, which came zigzagging yellowly toward her with the quick movements of its species, affecting extreme industry and utter unconsciousness of her presence, yet all the time drawing nearer. Soon, cocking a bold black eye at her, it voiced a piercing chirp.

The girl smiled, leaned smoothly forward, and answered with lip-sounds soft as the ghosts of kisses. Chippy squeaked in reply. Slowly she extended a hand and held it low, near the ground. After a minute of diffidence, the little forager slid forward and touched a finger with its black nose; then sat up and curled its forepaws around the finger. The pair seemed to talk to each other; the girl continuing her tiny kiss sounds, the squirrel squeaking gently

in response and rocking a little on its haunches as the finger tips tickled its furry stomach. And the man stood and marveled.

Suddenly, with a shrill chirp of alarm, the little creature sprang away. In less than a second it was halfway up a pine, scolding at something below. From the woods had come a larger animal, moving with leisurely but clumsy hops, its long ears alternately flopping along its back and standing erect. It was a rabbit. Rolling an indifferent eye at the vociferous squirrel, giving its ears a humorous waggle suggestive of derision, it moved toward the girl, pausing now and then to nose at the ground. Listening intently, the maiden on the log seemed to recognize the character of the big-hipped newcomer. Again she smiled; and, for the first time, she spoke.

"'Lo, little rabbit," she crooned, her voice gentle as the murmur of the brook. "'Lo, little rabbit. Come, little rabbit. Come, little rabbit."

Over and over she chanted her coaxing song. And the rabbit came. With none of the busy importance of the squirrel, which now was edging down again and watching in envious assumption of indifference, the hare took half a dozen lazy lunges and squatted beside the inviting hand.

This time the whole hand, not merely a finger-tip, stroked the caller. It passed again and again along the sleek back, as if petting a cat. And, with all the confidence of a contented feline, the wild thing nestled on the grass and stayed there, only one long ear swaying erect from time to time.

At length the girl's position seemed to grow strained, for she lifted her hand and sat up, bending backward from the hips. The rabbit also sat up; turned its large eyes around; then arose and went nosing along near by in search of some green tidbit. It had moved perhaps ten feet from the girl when death struck it.

A brown streak shot through the air. A big body blotted the rabbit from sight. One terrified scream—one bestial snarl—one brief struggle—and the hare dangled quivering from murderous fanged jaws. With another lightning movement the destroyer faced the girl, who had started up.

For a few seconds none of the living creatures in that little theater moved. The man, petrified, saw a red-brown cat, spotted with darker brown on the sides, streaked

with black down the back, tuft-eared, stub-tailed, flame-eyed and ferocious. He knew it for a bobcat, a creature combining the physical characteristics of both lynx and panther, and no less wicked when cornered or maddened by fresh blood. He knew more than one sturdy woodsman who had been not only put to flight, but pursued, by one of these animals on such occasions. This one was a good yard in length and heavily built; and now, with the blood of its victim in its mouth, it was savage.

An instant the brute stood glaring at the girl. Then, sensing her lack of vision, it acted with contemptuous indifference. Fixing its claws into its prey, it began rending it apart.

Smoothly, stealthily, but swiftly, Hard Wood emerged from his concealment and stole forward, gripping his club. The cat, tearing at its meat, failed to detect his approach. Then the girl moved.

Pale, alarmed, she extended both arms into the air before her. Breathlessly she appealed to the last thing she knew to have been near her.

"What—what's happened? Little rabbit! Rabbit, where be ye? What's 'come of ye?"

A horrible snarl from the cat was her answer. Infuriated, it crouched, watching her. "Oh, my lord!" she cried piteously. "What's here? What—what—"

Her voice failed. Groping, wavering, she stepped forward.

"Stan' still, for God's sakes!" hoarsely called Hard. "Don't ye move—I'm a-comin'."

She turned quickly toward him. At the sudden movement a malevolent grimace flickered across the fierce face of the cat. An instant later it sprang.

Hard Wood, now running at top speed, desperately hurled his club. He threw it even before the destroyer left the ground—threw it with all the power of his powerful body. The flying bludgeon collided violently with the upshooting cat. Knocked aside in midair, the brute flew past the helpless girl, struck broadside against a tree trunk, and tumbled to the ground.

Dazed, it rolled to its feet and stood on spread legs, gasping and glaring dizzily around. With the marvelous toughness of its kind, it had withstood a blow that would have killed or badly injured a weaker creature; and it still was able to do battle. The

man, dashing toward it, swooped up his club from the ground as he passed the girl. She seemed frozen.



MOVING more slowly and warily now, he advanced upon the cat, club raised for instantaneous work. Already the beast's dizziness was leaving it, and its malignant gaze was concentrating on the man. Its bloody lips writhed farther back from its reddened fangs. Eye to eye, tense and ready, the pair of killers fronted each other.

Both struck at the same instant: The cat with a lightning leap, the man with a lightning blow. The blow landed on the brute's left shoulder, smiting it earthward with stunning force. But, as it fell, its fore claws reached the man's legs, clawing them from thigh to ankle. With a wrathful grunt he again swung the club. This time it fell across the animal's neck. The cat flopped sidewise and lay limp.

Glowering down at the furry huddle, Hard gave it a tentative kick. There was no response. Stooping, he lifted it by the stub tail, feeling the neck with the other hand. Satisfied, he dropped it, glanced down at his raked legs, muttered something, and turned to the girl.

She still stood with arms half extended, her face turned toward the spot where the conflict had raged. Her breath was coming fast, but the terror of helplessness had faded, and her color was stealing back. Her ears had interpreted every sound, and she knew that the danger was past.

For a moment her rescuer stood looking straight into her eyes. After what had passed, there could be no question that she was sightless. Yet he was astonished to find that her eyes showed no trace of it, except a certain blankness. Knowing nothing about amaurosis, he had always supposed that blind people had whitish films over their pupils. These pupils were velvety, and the irises were a deep, clear blue.

Questioningly they remained on him, directed at about the level of his shoulders. When he spoke, though, they lifted, and her head tilted a little back.

"Awright now," he growled. "Ye better git home—an' stay there."

At the sound of his voice an odd look flitted over her face, as if those tones puzzled her, yet made her sure of something.

"What—what was it?" she asked.

"Bobcat kilt yer rabbit. Come nigh climbin' ye, too. Stay closer to home from now on."

"Oh!" She paled again, knowing now what that horrible presence had been. "Bobcat! An'—an' you kilt him. Who be you, stranger?"

He stared. So she, who could not see, knew him for a stranger. He did not realize that his voice had confirmed a suspicion which, in some intangible way, had come to her while he stood looking into her eyes.

"Nobody," he answered, speaking more gruffly than before. "Jest a stranger a-trompin' 'round. Git back home!"

She hesitated. Her hands stole out farther, uncertainly.

"I—I dunno which way's home, stranger. I'm—kind o' turned 'round, like."

Sudden pity swept him. He stepped forward and gently took one of the questing hands.

"Over here," he said. "Leastways that's where ye come from. I s'pose that's home, ain't it?"

"It's the onliest home I've got," she answered, with a little smile. "Will ye stand still jest a minute?"

Puzzled, he acquiesced. Her free hand rose and glided over his face, moving with the same feathery touch which had caressed bird and squirrel. It passed down his throat, across one shoulder, down his arm. A queer thrill passed through him, and his face felt as if tickled by a gossamer thread. He drew his free arm roughly across it to rid himself of the sensation.

"C'm'on!" he ordered, drawing her along the path, then releasing her hand. "Now keep a-goin'. Ye're headin' right."

Without another word she went quietly away. But after a few steps she slowed.

"Much 'bliged, stranger," she called back.

He made no answer. She resumed her way, proceeding now with the same sure ease with which she had come. He watched her until she passed around a bend in the path and disappeared.

"Wal, by mighty!" was all he said, looking absently along the empty path. Then he recalled himself; glanced warily about; stepped to the cat, slung it over one shoulder, picked up his club, and withdrew up the brook.

Glancing down after a few strides, he found that he was leaving a red-spotted trail; his torn legs were slowly oozing.

Forthwith he swerved to the brook and waded into it. As he clambered back up the ravine he stayed in the water at all times, leaving no trace to be spied later by hostile eyes. Unthinkingly he was also giving his injuries the best possible treatment. By the time he reached the lake, the pure water had cleansed them so thoroughly that any chance of infection from the cat's claws was gone.

To this, of course, he gave no thought. He did not realize how serious such "scratches" might easily become. Nor, though he thought about it, did he realize just why the girl had passed her hand over him. He did not know that, through those delicate touches, she had learned his features and his physique almost as well as if she had seen him. Still less did he suspect that, instead of informing her "tribe" of the presence of a mysterious stranger, she was keeping the morning's events to herself.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAVE MAN

THE wanderer's return with a dead wildcat and a pair of lacerated legs created some commotion in the Wilham household. Uncle Eb was astounded, and even the woods-roving Steve was surprised. Killing a wildcat with a stick, although not unprecedented, was decidedly unusual.

"I never heard o' nothin' like it, 'ceptin' once," declared the old man. "That was 'bout twenty year ago, when Jake Van Hooven done the same thing. Jake had a dawg, though, an' the dawg put the critter up a tree fust. The tree was off by itself, like, an' there warn't no place for the varmint to go after he got into it. Jake, he cut a good stout stick an' clumb up an' kilt it. Leastways, he knocked it outen the tree. I've allus kind o' thought the dawg done the real killin' after the cat tumbled down, but o' course I dunno. But to go right up to one o' them things onto the ground an' kill it, without no dawg or nothin'—I never did hear o' the like!"

"What s'prizes me," commented Steve, "is a bobcat a-jumpin' right front o' ye like that—specially this time o' year. They're awful shy critters; ye don't hardly never see 'em, though everybody knows they're 'round. If 'twas into the winter, now, an' they couldn't git much to eat, 'twould be

different. Ye must of been a-settin' awful still, an' he couldn't of winded ye. Right 'longside the crick, did ye say?"

"Uh-huh." Hard had neglected to mention that the creek was Coxing, not Peters Kill. "Standin' still an' watchin' some birds an' things. All at once this varmint was there. So I hit him."

"An' lost most o' yer pants for doin' it," chuckled Uncle Eb. "By gorry, son, seems like everything's pickin' on to ye lately, don't it? Next thing we know, a hawk or sumpthin'll be flyin' off with yer shirt, an' then we'll have to chain ye into the barn till we can git ye some clo'es."

"Long's I don't lose my health an' my gun I can stand the rest of it," smiled Hard.

Further conversation was cut short by a peremptory summons from Mis' Wilham, who ordered him to rub salve on his wounds. By the time this more-or-less infallible healer had been applied and a whole pair of nether garments—donated by Uncle Eb—had been donned, dinner was ready.

During the meal Hard was even more taciturn than usual; for his mind was where his body had so recently been, and he was seeing again the queerly trustful birds and animals and the odd girl who petted them. It was with some difficulty that he refrained from speaking of the matter to Steve, who, he knew, would be intensely interested in the behavior of those little wild things. But he was quite aware that Steve would be even more interested in the disclosure that he had been reconnoitering Cooper land, and this he purposed to keep to himself.

Besides, and the thought halted his jaws a moment, was it not quite likely that Steve himself had at some time observed the girl and her way with animals? More than likely. Steve went where he willed and knew many things which he did not reveal. Hard nodded to himself. He would continue to keep his own mouth shut.

So engrossed in his thoughts was he that he forgot all about his ripped legs, and, at the end of the meal, arose with his customary alacrity to get his pipe. A badly gouged knee gave him a twinge that made him wince and halt. Mis' Wilham, watching, reproved him.

"Land's sakes, Hard," she expostulated, "can't ye show no mercy to yerself, even? Did ye think them legs 'd git well while ye et? It's 'bout time ye got a little sense,

seems like. Git up an' down a little easier."

Hard's eyes narrowed a trifle. He knew the admonition was prompted entirely by concern for his own welfare, but he did not quite relish the way in which it was delivered. Mis' Wilham, although as good-hearted as Uncle Eb, was a bit sharp at times in her tone, and in the motherless youth such a tone instinctively aroused antagonism. His mother had always spoken quietly. Uncle Eb, too, had a different way of expressing himself; he might have used those identical words, and barked them out as if about to bite off the listener's ear, and yet they would have evoked only a grin from the man addressed; the old man's personality would have robbed his apparent reprimand of all sting. Mis' Wilham did not possess that personality.

Hard made no reply, but got his pipe and filled it, frowning down at the sore knee. He foresaw several days of inaction while the injuries healed, and inaction was not welcome to him. Neither, in his present mood, was the prospect of further "fussin'" by the mistress of the house. In that moment was born in him a distaste for remaining longer under the Wilham roof.

Nor did that feeling pass off. Rather, it grew stronger within the next few days. He became not only restive because of his temporary disability, but increasingly conscious of the fact that his housemates were keenly interested in what he considered his private affairs. Nothing was said about the Coopers, or about the burning of his home; but he was aware that a casual oiling of his gun caused an exchange of significant glances, and that conversational pauses occurred at moments when it would be appropriate for him to speak of any plans he might have.

Rightly or wrongly, he began to feel that he was under surveillance, and his independent spirit rebelled. Too, it went against the grain of the Wood pride to be obligated to any one for food and shelter and, though he still had some money, he knew it would be a mortal insult to offer to pay Uncle Eb for his hospitality. So, for all these small reasons, the house became more and more repugnant to him. The obvious solution was to leave it.

Giving no sign of his thoughts, he next considered the problem of where to live. The answer came quickly, and with it a grin. He certainly could be independent in that

place! Free alike from friends and enemies, able to come and go unobserved, proof against fire or buckshot. The only question remaining was that of food and similar necessities. And, since he had the money to pay for them, this was hardly a puzzle. Surreptitiously pinching the thin packet of bills hidden in his waistband—his hiding-place for his small savings ever since he had taken to rambling—he laughed silently. Until that was gone, he need not be beholden to anybody; and when it was gone, he could earn more.

His new place would even be well suited to an easier and more lucrative, though more hazardous, industry than millstone work. He had no real intention of taking up that occupation, but he recognized the possibility and played with the idea. After he had found and settled with the destroyer of his home—that, of course, must be attended to first—then he could try that line of work, if he felt so inclined. At any rate, he would be absolutely free to do so.

With this new liberty beckoning to him, he became more cheery and more conversational. And, with the possible new trade in mind, he guardedly sought information concerning it one night after the household had retired.

"Where d'ye git yer licker, Steve?" he asked his bedfellow. "Don't make it yer-self, do ye?"

"Nope. Too much work into makin' yer own. I'd ruther buy it. Why? D'ye want some?"

"Wal, no. Not now. I was jest a-wonderin' what a feller had to pay."

"Uh-huh. I can git all I want for fifty cents a quart. Kind o' dear, but it's good stuff. I leave it 'lone most o' the time, anyway. I've got to. My temper ain't none too good, an' a bellyful o' licker don't make it no better. It's powerful good medicine when a feller needs it, but he'd better leave it 'lone when he don't."

"Mebbe so," acquiesced the younger man. "Still an' all, there's lots o' folks that want their medicine kind o' regular, like. Ought to be good money into makin' it."

Steve turned on a side, and the other felt his eyes peering through the dimness. It was a minute or so before the reply came.

"There's money 'nough if a feller goes 'bout it right an' don't git caught. But he's got to take it outside to sell it—he

couldn't make much money onto it here—an' then he's got to look out for the revenoo men. An' when they git him he goes into the pen. An' if ye knowed what that was like, Hard— Wal, I don't want no more of it! An' if any friend o' mine was a-thinkin' o' 'stillin', I'd tell him to forgit it quick."

"I don't see no crime into it," maintained the seeker after knowledge. "Ye can take out yer corn an' sell it, an' nobody cares. If ye 'still the corn an' put it into jugs, an' folks want to buy it, whose business is it? It's jest as honest one way as t'other."

It was the old, old argument of hillmen; and Steve answered like a hillman.

"'Course. Everybody knows that— 'ceptin' the gov'ment an' the revenoo men. But they've made a law ag'in it, an' what can ye do? They can make it a crime to spit or blow yer nose if they want to, an' if ye go down 'mongst 'em they've got ye. Best thing for us mountain men to do is stay into our mountains, an' not sell licker or nothin' else to them people outside."

Hard was silent. After awhile he yawned, turned over, and went to sleep. His hazy idea did not look so attractive as it had.



TO THE more immediate and important plan of changing his habitation, however, he clung unswervingly. And when, toward the end of the week, Uncle Eb hitched up his old white horse and mounted his weather-beaten wagon for his regular drive to High Falls, his guest astonished him by handing him a list and quietly requesting—

"Git me them."

Much perplexed, the old fellow glanced down the column of wants—ax, blanket, powder, shot, lantern, oil, matches, cooking utensils, and various food ingredients—gave his mustache a twitch, and squinted frostily at Hard.

"What ye want them for?" he demanded. "Ain't a-leavin' us, be ye?"

"Guess so," nodded Hard. "I'm 'bliged to ye for takin' me in, Uncle Eb, but I'm a-gittin' kind o' restless, an' I've got a place into mind—"

"Grrrup! What's to hender ye stayin' here nights an' goin' where ye like day-times, same's ye've been doin'? We ain't puttin' no chains onto ye, be we?" The old man was waxing indignant.

"I'm a-movin' somewheres else," was the calm but inflexible response. "Did ye ever

stop to think this house 'll burn as easy as mine did? An' that the feller that burnt me out once might do it twice? Seein' I ain't got him yet, I'm a-livin' into 'nother place till I do git him. Le's not fight 'bout it."

A startled look shot across the wrinkled face, and the blue eyes swerved to the house. Indeed, Uncle Eb had not thought of that; and the sudden vision of his home destroyed by a firebug staggered him.

"By mighty!" he snapped. "If anybody ever done that— But, pshaw, nobody would!"

"Ye can't tell. An' I'm a-movin'. Git me them things."

One more searching look convinced his host that argument was useless. He slapped the horse with the reins and rolled away. On his return he brought the required articles and accepted payment without protest.

During his absence, Hard journeyed to the spot he had in mind, his legs now being so far improved that he walked without much difficulty. After studying it anew for a time, he returned, well pleased. And that night, despite pointblank questioning, he declined to reveal the whereabouts of his projected new home.

"Jest a little place over yender," was all the indication he would give, moving his head toward the butte of Dickie Barre. "I've had it into mind quite a while."

When, the next morning, he slung a bulky pack on his back and trudged forth with gun in one hand and ax in the other, Steve made no effort to trail him. Walking with only a slight stiffness, the departing guest swung down the road to the old "cross-cut," turned toward the north, and disappeared in the brush.

For more than a mile he plodded along the gently rolling path; then, swinging to the left, began to climb. Presently he entered the labyrinth of boulders, among which towered trees standing at queer angles, but giving welcome shade from the hot eastern sun. Threading his way with sure steps, he soon reached a bold jut of the cliff, split by a fissure. At the dark rift he stopped, unslung his pack, and passed a hand across his streaming brow. He was at the doorway of his new habitation, the "hide-out" which he had discovered in his aimless ramblings weeks ago, and which had so much interested him then and later.

It took him some time to lift all his equipment in through the high entrance hole, lower it to the inner room, and stow it along the cliff wall in accordance with his desires; to make a stone fireplace, and to bring in fuel and bed material. But by sundown all was ready, and a kettle of beans and bacon was bubbling merrily on his improvised stove. Sitting on a flat block, he smoked and looked around him with vast content.

Snug against the cliff lay his bed—a deep, springy couch of hemlock limbs and tips, on which was his blanket. Beside it, his long gun leaned against the rock. At his feet burned the fire, cooking his frugal meal and throwing fantastic gleams around the darkened chamber; and a yard or two away ran the quiet, friendly little spring which would never bother him with talk. Overhead hung the wide natural roof, and around stood impregnable walls. Outside the only sounds were a whisper of breezes in tree-tops and the faint, far-off insect chorus, so vague as to pass unnoticed.

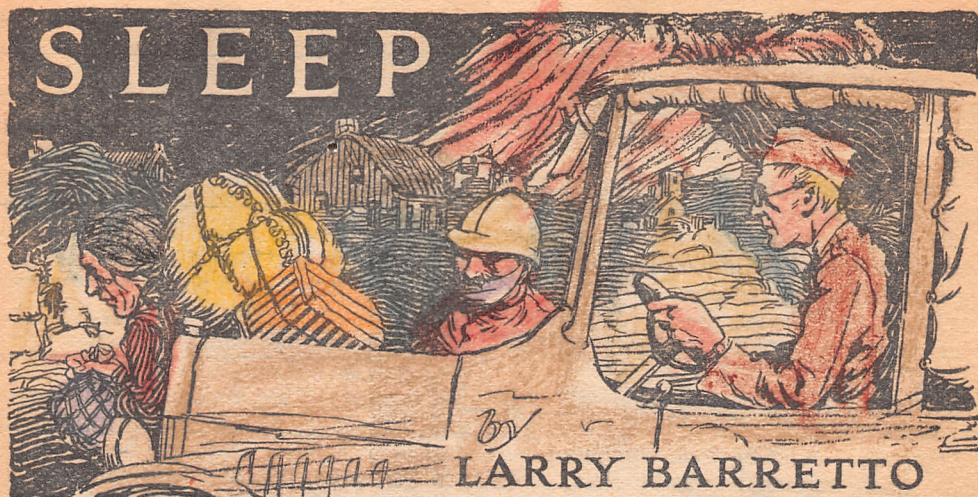
"This is home," he murmured, his gaze resting on the tons of rock overhanging him. For a time he lay quiet, instinctively listening for some sound. None came, save the distant chant of a whippoorwill.

His thoughts drifted to Steve's tale of the rock which had fallen on Ninety-Nine's Mine, and he peered again at the roof, faintly illumined by the dying glow of the fire. Massive and menacing it hung there, seemingly ready to crash down at a breath. Yet he grinned.

"Jedgment!" he scoffed. "If 'twas a jedgment that throwed down that rock o' Steve's, an' jedgment that burnt my house, now's a good time for 'nother jedgment. Why don't ye fall down, up there, an' mash me to nothin'? Mebbe if ye don't I'll git to 'stillin' some day an' bust the law. Come on, jedgment—I'm a-waitin'."

The rock remained unmoved, as it had for untold centuries. He laughed scornfully, yawned, and let his lids droop.

The fire died. Velvety dark enwrapped the cavern. The little night winds flowed over the stony barrier, eddied around the sleeper, and veered away again. Through the gap above, between roof-edge and farther wall, shone the bright eyes of the heavens: The stars, drifting ever westward, and, one by one, peering down into the rift to smile at Hard Wood—cave man.



Author of "*Mute and Inglorious.*"

WHEN Peter Fallon stepped off the train at Meaux on that hot May morning he was a dejected and battered figure. His uniform was the worse for wear and weather, but its deficiencies were covered by a rain-coat, several sizes too large, which flopped about his ankles. His hob-nailed shoes were badly worn and cracked and the spirals wound about his thin legs were loose and mud-caked.

It was his face, however, which showed the depths of his degradation. No razor had touched that freckled surface for days, and a large bruise adorned and discolored the right eye. Above it rust-colored hair thrust out from beneath the monkey-like overseas cap which perched on one side of his head with an effect of jauntiness. No officer would have passed him on parade; an inspection would have involved grave penalties. Even his own mother might have turned from him with some aversion could she have seen him now.

The French transportation officer in a neat blue uniform and gay yellow boots who sat behind the desk in one corner of the station eyed him with disfavor as he approached.

"*Que voulez-vous?*" he demanded, and peered at Peter's collar insignia, making sure that this was indeed one of the mad Americans with whom he had to deal.

"I want," said Peter in the inaccurate French which six months of bitter neces-

sity had taught him, "to find the American Ambulance Section 5, attached to the 34th Division, French."

He had no particular expectation of finding them here or anywhere, but four days of asking made the words automatic.

The lieutenant pursed his lips over this and studied a complicated chart.

"*Ahl Division Savatier!*" he exclaimed at last. "It is at St. Dizier. You should go there. I will make out travel orders. The next troop train——"

"You will not!" Peter interrupted with force. "I've just come from St. Dizeer and they ain't there."

The Frenchman knitted his brows.

"But the 34th, the division of General Savatier, is at St. Dizier. Look, it says so here." He pointed triumphantly at some figures on his chart. "I will make out travel——"

"Oh, help me make this boob understand his own language," Peter prayed. "No. No. No!" He thrust his face closer and raised his voice to a higher pitch. "Not the French division—*pas division française*. American Ambulance Section attached to it—*effecté avec*— Oh, —, what's the word. Listen, Jack, I've been sick in a French hospital at Beauvais with gas. Me, *le gaz*. Three weeks." He tapped his chest. "*Savez?* Now I'm well and I want to find my outfit. For four days I've been riding on troop trains and I'm tired and hungry. You birds have sent me to

May 20. 25



HARD, WOOD

A THREE - PART STORY

PART II

by Arthur O. Friel

Author of "Cat o' Mountain," "Mountains of Mystery."

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form:

WHEN Harry Wood and his mother first went to live in "The Traps," up in the New York hills, he fell foul of Jerry Cooper, and thrashed him so completely that he earned for himself the name of "Hard Wood." Steve Oaks bestowed the name on him, and Steve was a good judge of men. The same day Jerry Cooper was nicknamed "Copperhead," for he tried to strike from behind, without warning.

The whole Cooper tribe, there were seven of them, took up the feud but, thanks to Steve's intervention, a deadline was drawn—Hard Wood agreed to avoid the Cooper clearing, they agreed to keep away from the Wood homestead.

So matters drifted on for four years. Hard Wood grew to manhood. He became, indeed, hard, grim and quiet, swift to anger. The Traps people feared him and he had but two friends; Steve Oaks and old "Uncle" Eb, with whom Steve lived.

Then Mrs. Wood died. After the funeral Hard Wood left the Traps and tramped away through the woods, wandering from village to village as far as Kyserike. Here the memory of his mother's death was brought back to him when, on a scrap of newspaper, he read an account of a cure performed by a New York specialist on a wealthy inhabitant of Kingston. If he, too, had had money perhaps his mother might have been saved!

Eager to see his home again, he hurried back,

only to find the house burned down. Instinctively he blamed the Coopers. His conviction became a certitude when he failed to find in the debris any trace of his mother's brass-bound chest.

He went to live with Uncle Eb and some days later, armed with a club, he slipped away to reconnoiter the Cooper clearing. When near the cabin he saw a girl coming toward him. It was Jane Cooper. He saw that local gossip was right: The girl was blind.

Unaware of his presence she sat down on a fallen tree-trunk and at her call birds and small wild creatures came to her. Suddenly Hard Wood saw a bobcat strike down a rabbit which had been close beside the girl. Terrified, she stood motionless, while the bobcat, maddened by the taste of blood, crouched, ready to spring. Hard Wood leaped forward and dispatched the animal with his club.

In its death agony the cat mauled Hard Wood's legs so that he was compelled to go back to Uncle Eb's and remain inactive for several days. During this period the shrill presence of Uncle Eb's wife so exasperated him that on recovery he went to live alone in a well-hidden cave in the hills, where he decided to stay until he could square accounts with the Coopers.

In his rocky home he slept soundly for the first time in weeks.

CHAPTER IX

A LESSON IN ETIQUETTE

IN THE brilliant sunshine of a new day, Hard stood on the brink of Dickie Barre and looked abroad. He had found, a few rods to the north of his covert, a difficult but passable route to the top of the cliff; and now, squinting against the dazzling light, he was surveying the entire eastern panorama of the Traps.

The southern and western triangle was blocked from his view by a tree-clad rise on the summit at his right.

He had made the ascent, not to gaze at scenery, but to pass over to Peters Kill by the shortest route. Yet the view visible from this point had compelled him to pause for a time. The long, densely wooded sweep of Mohonk, the little farm patches and doll houses along the creek, the thread-like road, the southern swing of the gray rock-rim

enclosing all, and, beyond, the glimpses of the farther hills rolling away to merge into misty blue sky—these held him quiet for unmeasured minutes. At length he drew a slow, deep breath.

"It's God's country, sure 'nough," he muttered. "Onliest thing the matter with it's some o' the varmints that live into it."

He scowled toward the south as he spoke; toward the south, where, beyond the intervening rise, dwelt the Cooper tribe. His hand closed a bit more firmly on his gun. His objective that morning was that Cooper land, and he intended to go armed with something better than a club.

After a moment, however, another expression came into his face. The scowl faded. His eyes roved slowly back along the vista.

"Think o' livin' into all o' this an' never seein' it!" he thought. "Never even seein' the crick, longside o' yer own house, or the birds that come to ye, or the squir'ls—or nothin'. Nothin' but jest black. By mighty! It's like Steve says. I'd ruther be dead, ten times."

Another thoughtful period. Then his back stiffened, and he swung about. Into the wilderness of trees and underbrush he strode, heading southwest.

Some time later he emerged from the brush beside noisy Peters Kill, a little north of the road. As he worked along the stones, a glint of sunlight flashed from his swaying gun-barrel into his eyes. He blinked, frowned, stopped.

"I dunno," he reflected, studying the weapon and moving it about. "That'd be a dead give-away if it happened over yender. Sun's too darn bright— There!" Another gleam had darted from the steel. "That's twice in a couple o' minutes. Hum!"

He considered briefly; then picked a nearby scrub pine, went to it, and laid his gun in the branches. The firearm would be more or less in the way, anyhow. His present purpose was not to attack the Cooper house, but to "git the lay" of the place, which he had failed to do previously, and to gain whatever information he could. Although he supposed the Cooper girl had "blabbed" about his previous visit, he saw no reason to expect discovery by her men today, so long as he kept under cover. She knew nothing of his identity.

So it came about that he again crossed the deadline unarmed.

As before, he skirted the upland lake and descended the brook ravine without meeting any sign of man. This time not even a snake disputed his approach; and he cut no club. Once more he found the little path and stole along it, eyes and ears alert for any lurking form or stealthy movement behind tree or stone. He detected none. Nor was the girl again at her log or anywhere along the track.

Soon he rounded the bend where she had faded from view. There he slowed. Only a short distance farther on, the path crossed the creek by a short bridge and opened into a cleared space; and some way off, beyond a couple of sprawling rocks, was visible the roof of a house.

From behind a bush at the end of the path he scanned the clearing. It was rocky, like all Traps farms, but fairly level, and, if worked faithfully, would have made a productive piece of ground. Yet, with five men available for its cultivation, it looked unkempt. Most of it seemed to be devoted to the growing of corn, but the maize, though thick, was straggling and weedy; and none of the five men for whom it grew was in sight. The only moving creature visible, in fact, was a gangling black colt, grazing near the house. The house, so far as could be seen from this point, was a paintless, drab structure of a story and a half, backed by a dingy red barn.

It stood only a stone's throw from the trees clothing the Minnewaska slope. Toward that slope the observer began moving through the scrubby cover. Within a few rods he was ascending the grade, and soon he turned again to the north. A little later he stopped beside a tremendous boulder, which bulked high from the steeply slanting earth and was nearly surrounded by shaggy pines. The Cooper dooryard was directly opposite him.

Still nobody was visible. But for the facts that the colt and the fowls were outside and the front door stood open, the place would have seemed utterly deserted for the day. After a short period of watching, the scout moved around the huge rock, making sure that no man was on or near it. In so doing, he learned that it was split apart as if by a gigantic ax, forming a miniature cañon some ten feet wide, facing toward the house. The same force which had smitten it asunder had also thrown queer blocks of detritus between the severed halves. In

among these he crept and, picking the best vantage point, settled down to watch and listen. He had a feeling that the house was not empty.

As he lay there, slowly surveying the shiftless buildings and the ill-kept corn, a vague suspicion which he long had held grew into a practical certainty. These Coopers never worked outside; they evidently worked little here; yet they owed no money, so far as he knew, and seemed to get along. They certainly did not starve. All the men were beefy and strong, and the girl, though slender, was healthy and evidently well fed. How did they do it? Not by selling an occasional wagon-load of charcoal. And what did they do with so much corn? Put it into jugs, of course. They were moonshiners.

This answer made perfectly plain both their ability to live without the usual forms of toil and their hostility toward visitors. It made plainer, too, the reason why Bad Bill had so phrased his warning on drawing the deadline—the warning delivered in the hearing of Steve Oaks. Those words still stuck in the watcher's memory; and he could see now that, for Steve's ears, they were meant to excuse the Cooper gun-play on the ground that he, a newcomer, was "sneakin' round." He remembered also that Steve had allowed the incident to rest there and had virtually supported their dictum against crossing the line. Although Steve was not in league with the Coopers—the thinker felt sure of that—he undoubtedly knew their trade.

So far as moonshining was concerned, Hard still held his previous views. It was honest enough, despite city-made laws to the contrary. But he now felt a sudden prejudice against it because the Coopers were engaged in it. If "them Cooper varmint" were the kind of folks that made 'shine, he wanted nothing to do with distilling. If ever he sunk so low that he was no better than a Cooper—

Further meditation was stopped by the appearance before him of a Cooper varmint.



INTO the blank, darksome doorway came the graceful figure and the sunny head of Jane. With face tilted a little upward and wide eyes lifted toward his rock, she seemed to be looking directly at him. For a second he half expected to see her wave a hand in

greeting. But then, as her expression remained unchanged, he realized afresh her inability to see. Too, he noted that her finger-tips rested on the door casing, and that one bare foot was feeling with a slight uncertainty for the edge of the sill.

She paused there, slowly moving her head from side to side as if listening for sounds of bird or beast. Presently she stepped out and, with no further hesitation, moved a few steps to her left, pausing again beside a rose-bush. On that bush several pink blooms were open, but Hard had not previously noticed them. The sightless girl, however, was well aware of their existence. With gentle motions her hands stole over the flowers; then they seemed to seek new buds, touching the stems so lightly that no thorn wounded the exploring fingers. Nor did the bees humming about the bush resent her quest. They buzzed a little more deeply, perhaps, but none turned on her.

At length she walked back to the door stone, carrying with her the largest rose; and, sinking on the step at one side of the door, she lifted the flower to her face. After several deep breaths she let it sink to her breast, where her fingers stroked its velvety petals caressingly. On her lips rested the same little smile with which she had talked to the squirrel in the woods.

Up on the rocks, the man who hated all Coopers swallowed a lump in his throat.

"By mighty, it's a shame!" he growled to himself. "Never to see even the flowers a-growin' into yer own yard—have to feel of 'em to know what they're like—an' live along, all yer life, that way! It's a rotten shame!"

While the thought still was in his mind he witnessed a worse shame.

In the doorway loomed another figure: A frowsy, shambling, heavy-eyed creature which came lurching out as if just awaking from drunken slumber. Apparently it was heading for the creek, perhaps intending to plunge its head into the cold water and disperse the alcoholic fumes still befogging it. Sober, it would have been Jed, next to the youngest of the male Coopers. Now it was only a sodden-faced brute.

Jed did not see the girl resting beside the doorway. But she heard him. As he stepped out, she sprang up. With a startled grunt, he jerked aside; missed his footing, lost balance, toppled off the door stone, and sprawled at full length on the ground.

He arose with a vicious oath, turning a rage-bloated visage to the innocent cause of his mishap. Mouthing invectives, he lunged at her.

"Wha'd'ye mean, ye no-good blind fool ye, a-trippin' me up like that?" he bellowed. "I'll learn ye, ye sneakin' rat!"

"I never, Jed—I never touched ye—ye fell by yer own self!" she cried. "Don't hit me—I didn't— Oh! O-o-h!"

Deliberately, cruelly, he had struck her in the face.

Shrinking back, she turned and tried to find her way in at the door. He seized her hair and yanked her backward.

"I'll learn ye!" he yelled, with another yank that threw her off the step. "Git into my way, will ye! Waller onto the ground yerself, ye squallin' hussy, an' see how ye like it!" He began dragging her mercilessly along, both fists locked in the golden hair.

She did not scream. She only moaned, in helpless terror and pain, striving meanwhile to ease her punishment by crawling toward him on hands and knees. Then suddenly the torment ended. The brutal hands opened and jerked away, and an alarmed oath blended with a loud splash in the creek, followed by fiercely pounding footsteps.

Hard Wood had bounded out of his covert, and now he was leaping at Jed Cooper in a black tempest of wrath. So frightful was his face that for an instant the torturer stood paralyzed. Too late he threw up his fists. Vengeance was upon him.

With no slackening of his pace, Hard launched both fists into the lowering visage fronting him. The blows cracked like cleavers mauling a side of beef. And like a lump of beef Jed thumped on the ground and lay still. Only his hands quivered feebly.

"Ye lousy skunk!" grated Hard, his voice appalling in its concentrated fury. "Ye greasy, swillin' hawg! Ye——"

He gulped and was silent. Jed could not hear his denunciation, and he meant to be heard. Stooping, he grabbed the supine man's ankles; turned, and dragged him to the creek. There he heaved Cooper in bodily.



DURING the second or two before his prisoner began to squirm, he scanned the house for more Coopers. None appeared. Jane had arisen, but was not moving. With one hand pressed to her head, she was recovering

from her shock and trying to interpret the sounds from the creek.

"Who—who be ye?" she asked, her voice barely reaching her rescuer.

"Stranger," was the gruff answer.

Then Jed, head down in the creek and half drowned, began to struggle. His captor yanked him back on shore.

For a moment Jed strangled, coughing out water and a couple of broken teeth. Then he tried to get up, one hand involuntarily pawing his smashed nose. Through swelling lids his bloodshot eyes glistened fear and hate.

Before he reached his feet a kick on the shin put him down again. Then into his red mop twisted Hard's strong fingers. He found himself being yanked along the ground by the hair as he had dragged his sister—and learned how much it hurt.

"Ye ain't fitten to live, ye varmint," rumbled his master, "but ye ain't fitten to die neither—not jest yet. If ye was dead ye couldn't feel nothin', an' ye're a-goin' to feel somethin' 'fore I git done with ye! Waller 'round now yerself an' see how ye like it!"

Straight to the girl Jed was forced to crawl, the hands twisting his hair until he whimpered. And then, without relaxing his grip, Hard spoke to Jane.

"Too bad ye can't see him, gal; but he's down onto his hands an' knees an' gittin' his hair pulled, an' a-whinin' 'bout it. Hear him snuffle? An' he's a-goin' to use ye right all the rest o' his mis'erable life. Ain't ye, Jed? Will ye ever lay a hand onto her ag'in?"

Maddened and desperate, Jed found courage to retort.

"I'll do what I want! She's my kin an' she ain't no good—an' I'll git ye, blast ye—I'll fix ye— Ow-oo!"

One hand had left his hair and gone to the back of his neck. And now the steel muscles and iron fingers developed by years of millstone work contracted in a grip of sheer torture. Thumb and fingers sank into him like blunt hooks, rolling his neck-tendons against one another and away from one another in an agony from which he almost fainted. One minute of that was worse than a dozen knockouts. Frenzied efforts to break free only made it more unendurable.

"Will ye leave the gal alone?" demanded the inexorable voice above him.

"Oh, my Gawd—yes! Leggo! Leggo!" screamed Jed.

"Sure ye won't forgit?" Another roll of the thumb.

"No — no! Oh, Gawd — Hard, gimme mercy!"

Jane herself, now pale and shrinking away, added her plea. The anguished tones were more than she could stand.

"Stranger, leave him be! I ain't hurt. Leave him go—please!"

"Awright." The grip relaxed, but did not altogether release its victim. "Now jest keep it into mind, ye cuss, what this feels like. An' next time ye use any woman mean ye may git wuss'n this. Ye will if I see ye; an' I'm liable to see ye any time. Only for her speakin' up for ye I'd give ye some more. Now where's the rest o' yer tribe?"

The last words stuck in his throat. Another figure had appeared in the doorway; a gross, disheveled figure which gaped amazingly at the tableau outside; the barrel-bellied figure of Old Bill Cooper himself, evidently just aroused from a stupor deeper than Jed's. He said no word. He stared, turned, and, with clumsy haste, retreated. But his going was purposeful, and the unarmed spy understood.

With a shove and a kick he sent Jed sprawling to one side.

"G'by, both o' ye," he said, a grim smile quirked his harsh mouth. "Mebbe I'll see ye ag'in when ye don't expect me."

He turned to go.

"Stranger, who be ye?" the girl asked again.

"Name's Hard Wood," he flung over his shoulder. "Yer wust enemy, mebbe. Now hate me good!"

With a short laugh he was speeding away. Through the brook he splashed, and up into the rocky cleft he bounded. Scrambling over a jag of stone, he threw himself down on the farther side of it. As he did so there came a vicious rattle and whine among the rocks, instantly succeeded by the double roar of a gun. He had beaten out Old Bill's shot by a hair's breadth.

Leaping up again, he laughed savagely down at the bloated old miscreant whose red face glowed angrily through a haze of powder-smoke and whose gun still was at his shoulder.

"Go soak yer head, ye ol' —!" he jeered. "Mebbe if ye got sober once ye

could hit somethin'. G'by—till I call ag'in!"

A bellowing curse from Old Bill, another from Jed, an answering sneering laugh, and he was gone; jumping from rock to rock, out of the little cañon, and then rapidly working upward and away in the dense cover.

CHAPTER X

A GUNSHOT AT DUSK

ONCE more Hard swung along the Minnewaska upland; heading toward Peters Kill, keeping his back covered by tree or stone, and glancing occasionally to the rear. Although wary and alert for sounds of possible trailers, he traveled without undue speed or furtiveness, and at times he laughed as he glanced down at reddened knuckles. Old Bill Cooper was too heavy to climb the precipitous declivity in pursuit, Jed was too thoroughly cowed to do so at once, and the other three had not been in sight when the unwelcome visitor departed. So, still aglow with the joy of literally making an enemy crawl, that visitor chuckled as he went.

Before he reached the road, however, his smiles gave way to frowns. Something was gnawing at his mind. It bothered him all the rest of the way to the pine where he had left his gun. When he had withdrawn the weapon from its concealment, he stood once again, thinking. Then he faded into the undergrowth, heading in the general direction of Uncle Eb's home.

Emerging later into a small field across the road from the Wilham place, he strode straight to the house. Uncle Eb, seated on his porch step, was pottering away at the job of tightening up the bottom of a small wash-tub. As his caller crossed the stone wall he looked up.

"Now I wonder," he remarked jestingly, "who's this ga'nt black-headed desperado a-comin' at me with a gun an' all. I bet he's the wild man that lives over 'round Dickabar somewheres. What ye want, mister? I ain't got nothin' but some tobacker."

"I'll take some," grinned Hard. "But what I come after was some words. I want to talk to ye 'bout somethin'."

"Good 'nough. Set down. Got yer pipe? Awright, here's yer tobacker." He produced a flat yellow can. "An' I'll give ye all the words I've got on to hand. If they don't

suit, mebbe I can git some more after I smoke awhile. Gorry, boy, what ye been a-doin' to yer hand? Looks like sumpthin' bit ye. Ain't been a-puttin' salt onto 'nother bobcat's tail, have ye?"

"Nope." Hard sat down and began filling his pipe. "'Twas a skunk that done this. Is a skunk-bite p'isonous, d'ye s'pose?"

"Depends onto what kind of a skunk 'tis." Eb squinted shrewdly at the cut knuckles. "I used to git them same kind o' marks onto my hands when I was a young feller, 'long o' hittin' skunks into the mouth. Two-legged skunks, they was, without no tail to speak of."

"Same kind of animil," nodded the other. "Name o' Jed Cooper."

Uncle Eb started slightly and eyed him with a keen gaze. Hard lighted a match and puffed at his pipe. Absently the old man did likewise, his eyes straying to the gun. When his tobacco was burning freely he asked—

"Is Jed still a-livin'?"

"I reckon so. Guess mebbe he ain't got as many teeth as he used to have, though."

Eb cackled suddenly. Hard grinned.

"Wal," pondered Uncle Eb, "seein' 'twas that kind of a critter, mebbe 'twouldn't do no harm to wash the place that got bit. Ye can't never tell. Come on in, an' I'll git ye some good strong soap. Then—" with a sidelong glance—"mebbe we'll go talk into the barn, where we can be kind o' private, like. Steve, he ain't here—gone trompin' 'round somewheres into the woods—so we'll have the hull barn to ourselves."

He arose zestfully, eager to hear the laconic story which he felt to be coming, but determined to have the washing attended to first. Hard lounged in after him, nodded to Mis' Wilham, and carelessly laved his hands in order to satisfy the old man. But he was not to escape so easily from friendly offices. Mis' Wilham, spying a long rip down the back of his thin old coat, pounced on him.

"Land's sakes!" she snapped. "What ye been a-doin' to tear up yer clo'es so? Fightin' ag'in, I s'pose. Take that coat right offen yer back, now, an' let me have it. I'll fix it first thing after dinner."

"Oh, nev' mind," he protested. "It's awright."

"Take it off! Ye pore raggedy, if yer mother knowed ye went 'round lookin' so she wouldn't rest easy into her grave. I de-

clare to gracious, ye're a disgrace to her, her that allays kep' things so neat."

Hard took off the coat without another word. And without another word he walked out. Eb, following, cast a frowning glance at his spouse, but said nothing. The young man and the old one trudged silently to the barn, where they sat on a meal-chest and smoked until their pipes expired.

"Wal," vouchsafed Hard then, "I been over to Coopers's, kind o' layin' low an' seein' what was what. Ye know what I went there for; I can't prove it onto 'em yit, but I ain't through. But while I was a-layin' 'round I see this:

"That blind gal o' theirn come out an' set onto the step, an' Jed come out an' she jumped up quick, an' he fell down. 'Twarn't her fault, but he blamed it onto her. An' the cussed varmint hit her into the face an' then drug her 'round by the hair, onto her hands an' knees. It maddened me some, an' I went over an' learnt him some manners. But I dunno how long he'll stay learnt, an'—"

"How did ye learn him?" Uncle Eb was not to be robbed of this detail.

"Why, I kind o' knocked him down an' throwed him into the crick an' drug him 'round by the hair an' kicked him a little an' squeezed his neck an' so on, an' I made him crawl onto his knees an' promise the gal he'd leave her 'lone. That's all. But—"

"Haw haw!" exploded Eb. "That's *all*! Oh, my gorry, I wisht Steve was here to listen to this! Jed Cooper a-crawlin' 'round an' gittin' throwed into his own crick—right into his own yard—an' gittin' mauled all up by Hard Wood—ah ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, my gorry!" He slapped his knees and rocked to and fro, his mouth wide open. When he recovered his breath he queried: "But where was the rest o' the tribe! Warn't nobody else 'round?"

"Ol' Bill. He got his gun, an' I went away kind o' s'pry. I'd left my own gun back a piece into the woods. I dunno where the rest of 'em was, an' I don't care. But now what I've got onto my mind, Uncle Eb, is this: Them varmints ain't fitten to have a gal 'round their place, 'specially a blind one that they use wuss'n a hoss. Course, she's their own kin, but that don't give 'em no right to be p'ison mean to her, seein' she can't help herself. She'd ought to be took care of by somebody decent. Ain't there no way she could be?"

The old man nodded, then shook his head, almost in the same movement. Tapping his dead pipe against the chest, he stared soberly at the farther wall.

"I dunno o' no way at all," he reluctantly admitted. "I agree with ye, her folks ain't fitten to have her. Marthy an' me, we've talked 'bout it more'n once, but I dunno what we can do. I dunno what anybody can do. Ye see, they wouldn't never let her go anywheres else, an' as likely as not she wouldn't go herself, even if she was ast to. An' there can't nobody go into 'nother family an' take a gal outen it when they ain't willin', 'specially that Cooper family. Anybody that tried it wouldn't live long.

"An' besides, I dunno o' no place she could go to. Everybody 'round here has got all the family they can take care of, an' some's got too many. An' besides that, I don't hardly b'lieve she gits used so bad all the time. Ye dunno Joe Cooper, do ye?"

"Only by sight."

"Ye dunno much 'bout him, I mean. Wal, I hear he kind o' stands up for the gal an' don't let nobody pick onto her when he's 'round. I guess he's the best o' the lot 'mongst the boys. That ain't sayin' much, but still I hear he kind o' takes after his mother, though nowheres near as much as the gal does. It's a funny thing 'bout families, the way they run. There's Bad Bill, a reg'lar limb o' the —, an' wuss than his ol' man. Then there's Joe, pretty rough, but stiddier than the rest of 'em, an' with some heart into his body. An' then comes Jed an' Jerry, both of 'em p'ison mean—wuss than Bad Bill, even. An' then the gal, so dif'rent ye wouldn't know she b'longed to 'em. Leastways that's what I hear.

"Mebbe if she had her eyesight an' could git 'round like other gals she'd go 'way an' find 'nother place for herself, git married or sumptin', prob'ly; I hear she's awful pretty. But bein' the way she is, she's jest got to stay with her own folks, same as if she was foolish or paralyzed or sumptin'. It's misfortunate, but I dunno what anybody can do 'bout it."

Hard scowled at the floor. He knew Uncle Eb was stating the blunt truth concerning the girl's hopeless future, but what he had seen that morning rankled in his mind. Still, if she had one defender among her surly brothers, her lot was not quite so bad as it might be. He remembered Joe as a ruggedly-built individual who looked quite

capable of holding up his end of any brawl with his relatives.

"Mebbe," the old man added with a quizzical glance, "if ye call 'round there every so often an' lick 'em one or two to a time, they'll git real mannerly to her."

Hard met his sidelong look, and a slow flush mounted to his raven hair. He slid off the chest.

"That ain't what I'm a-goin' there for," he tartly retorted. "Coopers are Coopers, an' no friends o' mine. I'd git jest as mad if I should see a—a blind bird gittin' tormented, as a Cooper gal. Or any other gal."

"O' course," assented Eb, though with a light twinkle under his lashes. "Don't git yer mad up at me, son, or I might pile into ye an' show ye what a real good maulin' feels like. I'm feelin' pretty spry this mornin'. But speakin' serious, Hard, ye'd better go mighty cautious-like from now on, if ye go back to Coopers's. They'll be a-layin' for ye now. I think ye're a fool to go there at all, if ye want to know it. But ye're young an' headstrong, an' ye'll do what ye like, I s'pose. Wal, it's 'most time for dinner. Le's go an' git ready."



THE youth's momentary irritation had died before his senior finished speaking. But his distaste for the undiplomatic remarks of Mis' Wilham remained unabated, and he felt no inclination to listen to more of them at the dinner table. Wherefore he declined the invitation.

"I'll be movin' 'long," he evaded. "See ye some other time."

"Wal, do what ye like. But Marthy ain't fixed yer coat yit, so ye better stay. She won't let go of it till it's sewed up."

"Then I'll leave it till the next time I come 'round. I only wear it 'cause the pockets are so handy."

And leave it he did. First, however, he took from it his matches, powder, and shot. With these in his remaining pockets, and gun once more dangling in one brawny fist, he recrossed the road, leaving the aged couple to discuss him and his ways at their leisure.

On his way back to his cavern home he kept an eye open for Steve, who might perhaps be rambling in this vicinity. But that young man apparently was elsewhere, for no sign of him was evident in this vicinity. Crawling through his hole in the wall, the

cave-dweller descended into his outer room by lowering himself to a crude stone platform which he recently had built, and thence stepping down equally crude stairs composed of rock blocks. At their base he paused, surveying for the hundredth time his impregnable fastness; then grinned sardonically southward toward the Cooper clearing. Those foes of his probably were still cursing him and telling one another, with vindictive rage, how they would "git" him. Quite likely they would invade this Clove country in a relentless hunt for his lair. Let 'em come!

Methodically he went about the preparation of his somewhat belated midday meal. After it was eaten he sat for a long time smoking and brooding. When at length he looked up it was in answer to a sound above him, a soft *yarrup* from the throat of a bird.

Perching on a sprig which protruded from the face of the cliff, a yellowhammer was peering down, cocking its head from side to side as it brought one bright eye after the other to bear on him. From time to time it voiced its inquiring note, as if seeking to learn the cause of his reverie. At length, tiring of the silent man's steady regard, it launched itself off the bough, swung about on gently murmuring wings, and drifted away to vanish in the tree tops beyond.

"Ye're nothin' but a bird," soliloquized the watcher. "Ye don't amount to nothin' an' nobody cares whether ye live or die. But ye're a lot better off than some folks. Ye go where ye like an' ye see everything there is, an' nobody abuses ye, an' ye're happy an' free. Why ain't we all like that?"

A moment longer he sat. Then, as if the bird's easy flight had made him restless, he arose and went forth. Outside he warily scanned rock and tree; then worked downward among the blocks and began threading the forest, drifting toward the site of his old home.

When he reached the three maples, the shadows were long and gradually creeping higher on the slopes at the east. As usual, the spot was deserted. He sank again on the old seat, leaning forward, his gun-barrel slanting upward across his chest, his black slouch hat pulled well down. And for another long period he sat thus, the steady eyes under his hatbrim fixedly regarding the half-moon stone.

"Mom," he muttered, "can a Cooper be

any good? Ain't a she Cooper 'bout as ornery as a he one?"

As ever, no answer came from the stone. The shadows slipped higher, higher, mounting the farther incline. The cheeping of the crickets increased in volume and deepened in tone, betokening the approach of the dusk. Under the maples the air grew cool. The coatless man twitched his shoulders to throw off a slight chill.

"Wal," he murmured, "'tain't nothin' to us, is it, mom? Coopers are Coopers, an' we ain't got nothin' to do with 'em—'ceptin' to pay 'em back what we owe 'em, when we can git the proof. That's right. I'll be goin' 'long now. 'Night."

Swiftly he strode away through the woods. By the time he had struggled up among the stones the dusk had deepened until all about him was indistinct. It was only through his familiarity with the spot that he managed to locate his crevice of entrance. There he paused a moment to recover breath before climbing in.

"Coopers are Coopers," he repeated.

As if in answer, a sullen sound from the southward came rolling along the cliff-wall. Distant, but unmistakable and sinister, it struck all creatures hearing it motionless. Birds, beasts, and men, far and near, turned their heads toward the spot whence it had come. It was a gunshot.

The grim noise was not repeated. The listening men and animals of the Traps relaxed. The cave-dweller, who had momentarily held his breath, released it and began climbing up into his rift.

"Somebody killin' a skunk, most likely," he told himself. "Wish 'twas a two-legged one, down Cooper way. But 'twarn't fur enough off."

It did not occur to him that the skunk, instead of being shot at, might have done the shooting.

CHAPTER XI

STEVE TAKES THE WAR-PATH

THUS far the life of Hard Wood had been much like the flowing of the creek which he liked best, the hill-born Peters Kill. There had been periods of peace, during which he drifted easily along, swayed unconsciously by minor events as the stream was turned here and there by the configuration of its bed, but ever moving toward some

goal beyond. There had been brawling intervals in which he hurled himself fiercely at ugly things which aroused his wrath, and, having mastered them, passed on with a growl and left them behind. There had been a time of nagging away at hard rock, and other times of aimless wanderings which seemed to get him nowhere. And now, as Peters Kill at one point plunges abruptly over a precipice into a caldron and then swings in a new direction, he came to the day when he was to drop into sudden turmoil and swerve into an undreamed-of channel—with more turbulence ahead of him.

Despite his satisfaction with his rock-bound den, he had no intention of skulking in it while his foes sought him. Carrying the war to the enemy was his habit. So, on the morning after his second visit to the Coopers, he started for the third time into their country.

As before, his primary intention was to spy rather than to attack; to see or hear something which would confirm his suspicion that they were the destroyers of his house. But, if further hostilities should develop, he meant to be prepared for decisive action this time. His gun held extra heavy charges of buckshot, and it would go wherever he went; his trousers pockets, too, bulged with reserve ammunition. There should be no further reconnoitering with hands empty.

This time, too, he purposed to approach by another route and to use different cover. Instead of traveling the roundabout Minnewaska course, he intended to take the more direct, though obviously more hazardous, way of the Coopers' own road; and, if he met no obstacle, to conceal himself in the Cooper corn. That corn grew to within a short distance of the house, and he might by careful movements reach a point whence he could see and hear all that went on. He felt that the place would not be so quiet this morning as yesterday; that more of the "varmints" would be at home, and there might be much loud talk.

The likelihood that some of the clan might be out gunning for him in his own region was not absent from his mind, and he journeyed to the road with every sense alert for lurking danger. But he met no man. At the roadside he paused a few minutes amid the brush, awaiting the passage of a wagon whose axles he heard squeaking a little way off. When it had

gone by and he had noted the identity of the driver, one of the numerous Van Hoovens, he crossed the road and took a short-cut to the creek. There again he paused, narrowly scanning the farther shore, then surveying the rocky stream in both directions.

Satisfied, he quietly descended the low, brushy bank and stepped out on a stone. There was no reason to suppose the Coopers to be on watch at this point. If they were in ambush anywhere, their post probably was at the juncture of the path with the road, which was a quarter-mile away at his left.

He had hardly stepped on the first stone, however, when he checked. Darting another glance upstream, he had spied another moving figure. It had emerged from cover at the next bend just as he left his own. It, too, was crossing to the Cooper side. A second later it halted short like himself. A gun swung toward him, but stopped. His own weapon, instinctively lifted, also hung without aim. For an instant the two men stood peering at each other.

Recognition was mutual. The other prowler was Steve Oaks.

Steve jerked his head toward the farther bank and resumed his crossing. Hard also moved forward, inwardly grumbling. Steve was altogether too fond of snooping around here just when Hard had business with the Coopers. Why couldn't he keep himself somewhere else and mind his own affairs?

Steve climbed the bank and disappeared. Hard knew he would be waiting, though, and he swung on determinedly. Nobody should turn him back now.

He soon learned, however, that Steve had no intention of playing the rôle of peace-maker. He found him waiting beside the path, half hidden by the thickly needled branches of a low pine, his gun forward and his eyes glittering icily under his low-drawn hat brim.

"What ye doin' here?" demanded Steve, low-voiced.

"Pickin' posies," sarcastically. "What 'bout you?"

"Killin' snakes!"

Behind those two words was a concentrated ferocity which startled Hard. The voice, though hardly more than a whisper, was virulent as the hiss of a serpent. The face was not that of the drawling, philosophic Steve whom he had always known.

It was that of a snarling wolf, baring its teeth for the kill.

For an astounded moment Hard stared dumbly into that deadly visage. Then, recovering himself, he responded:

"So'm I, mebbe. But what d'ye mean?"

"Heard 'bout Uncle Eb?"

Again Hard stood voiceless. And, as he probed the face under the pine, he chilled.

"No," he jerked, with an effort. "What—what 'bout him?"

"Jed Cooper shot him las' night."

Hard staggered. Uncle Eb shot by Jed Cooper! Uncle Eb, universally liked—not even the Coopers had been enemies of his. It was unbelievable. Yet, echoing in his mind, sounded again the distant gunshot he had heard at dusk.

"Good God!" gasped Hard. "Dead?"

"'Tain't Jed's fault he ain't! He done his——"

"He ain't dead?" the other broke in.

"He ain't— Is he a-dyin'?"

"Nope. Shot went low an' hit his legs. But——"

Hard gave a gusty sigh of relief. Only shot in the legs! That wasn't much, though of course Uncle Eb was old, and old folks sometimes died from injuries not very serious. Then sudden rage flared red in his soul. The dirty, low-down varmints! Every last one of 'em ought to be wiped out. They'd get all the shooting they wanted now!

Steve, in that low, repressed tone, was talking. He forced himself to listen.



"'LONG 'bout dark, 'twas, an' Uncle Eb he took the notion to go down an' see Davy McCafferty 'bout somethin'.

He'd got a little ways down the road, an' he thought he heard somethin' a-movin' toward him into the brush, but he didn't stop; kep' right on a-goin'. Nex' thing he knowed, the buck-shot hit him an' he heard the gun. He tumbled right down, o' course, but he turned over an' looked back. An' 'bout a couple o' rods back, Jed Cooper jumped outen the brush an' stood an' looked at him. Uncle Eb see him plain.

"Uncle Eb, he hollered to him an' ast him what he meant a-waylayin' him like that. An' Jed he made a kind of a funny noise into his throat, an' he jumped back in the brush, an' he was gone.

"Andy Mack, he was a-comin' up the road a little piece beyend there, jest 'round the turn, an' o' course he heard the shootin' an' Uncle Eb a-hollerin', an' he come a-runnin'. He's strong as an ox, ye know, an' he picked up Uncle Eb like he was a baby, an' put for the house. They stopped the bleedin', but they couldn't git the shots out—there was five of 'em, 'way in deep. So Andy went home an' harnessed up an' drove clear to High Falls for the doctor. Doctor took out all the balls, an' he says Uncle Eb'll be awright after awhile. But that ain't a-goin' to do Jed no good!"

The last words came with a click of teeth, and Steve turned a malevolent gaze along the Cooper path. Hard nodded grimly. But he scowled in a perplexed way.

"But I don't see no sense into it, Steve," he puzzled. "Why would Jed shoot him? An' why would he shoot so low? Coopers don't shoot to hit legs!"

"Ye bet they don't. That must of jest been Uncle Eb's good luck. Mebbe Jed's foot slipped or somethin', or a bug bothered him. I mind one time I shot at a bird, an' jest as I let go a bug flew in my eye, an' it started me so I missed the bird by three foot. Must of been somethin' like that that throwed Jed's gun down. Jed was a-shootin' for the back. An' I reckon the reason why he shot at Uncle Eb's back, Hard, was 'cause your coat was onto it. But that ain't no excuse."

"My coat?" repeated Hard, blankly. "Ye mean Uncle Eb was wearin'——"

"Your coat. Seems ye left it to the house yest'day, an' Aunt Marthy she sewed up a hole into it. An' when Uncle Eb started down the road 'twas gittin' a little cool, an' yer coat was handy, an' he slipped it on. It's kind of a yellerish coat, ye know, an' there ain't 'nother one like it into the Traps. An' Uncle Eb's hat is same as yourn, kind o' black an' floppy, an' he had it onto the back of his head, a-coverin' up his white hair. An' the Cooperses prob'ly dunno ye've gone a-livin' by yerself over to Dickabar—we ain't said nothin'.

"So I figger Jed was a-workin' toward the house to see if he could git ye—through a winder, mebbe—long o' yer lickin' him yest'day. An' he see this coat through the brush, or hearn Uncle Eb a-walkin', an' he come through; an' the light was kind o' bad, an' like as not he had some lickin' into him, an' he took Uncle Eb's back for yourn. So

he shot quick. An' then when he see who 'twas, he run."

"The sneakin' snake!" Hard's voice shook with rage. He saw it all now, and knew well that the shot from the brush had been fired in deliberate assassination. The fact that it had struck down Uncle Eb made the crime far more heinous than if it had hit Hard himself.

"I warn't to home las' night," Steve concluded, "or I'd of got goin' 'fore now. I slep' out into the woods, an' didn't know nothin' 'bout this till jes' now. Uncle Eb, he says, 'Ye go find Hard if ye kin, Steve, an' tell him to look out, 'cause they're after him. Don't ye worry 'bout me. I'm awright.' Says I, 'Awright,' an' I got started. But I didn't waste no time lookin' for ye, o' course. I've got business over here fust. An' now I'm a-goin' to 'tend to it. Keep back till I git done."

He moved to step around the pine. Hard halted him.

"Keep back?" he blazed. "Me? Who d'ye think ye're talkin' to? Keep back yerself! I'm a-fixin' this thing!"

Steve wheeled on him. His voice came chill, metallic, unhuman.

"Shet up! Keep out! I'm short o' temper this mornin'. I'm a-killin' Jed Cooper. Any man that comes 'tween me an' him gits hurt. Hurt bad. I'm a-warnin' ye."

Hard Wood, hard as he was when aroused, nearly gave ground. He knew now why men stepped wide of this vengeful killer. For the first time in his life he felt the numbing clutch of Fear close around his heart; fear, not of man, not of death, but of something in those basilisk eyes; something appalling, abysmal as some horrible monster lurking in the uttermost depths of a sunless sea; a cold-blooded, clammy thing which knew no emotion, no instinct save the will to slay.

Yet, after a frozen instant, he mastered himself and combated the lethal will opposing his own.

"An' I'm a-warnin' ye back," he growled. "Ye've been a-meddlin' into my business too much, an' ye can't do it no more. Ye've been a-tryin' to hold me offen them varmints when I had a lot more ag'in 'em than ye've got now—an' now ye think ye can steal my own fight right out o' my teeth, do ye? Jed Cooper's mine, an' I'm a-goin' to git him! 'Twas me he was a-shootin' at last night

when he hit Uncle Eb, an' it's me he'll settle with now!"

With that he stepped out into the path, his gaze still locked with that of his erstwhile friend. Steve stood a second, his jaw-muscles bulging with the strain of hard-set teeth, his cavernous eyes seeming to glow green with fury. Then, with a choking curse, he sprang out and confronted Hard at close quarters.

"Ye fool!" His breath whistled through his teeth. "Ye——"

Sudden as a lightning-flash came an interruption. A few feet away sounded two clicks and an incisive voice.

"Drop those guns! Hands up!"

CHAPTER XII

STRANGE ALLIES

IN THE path stood three men. They had come from the direction of the road, walking so quietly that the pair talking under the pine had not sensed their approach. Now two of them, standing with rifles leveled at the hip, were covering the young hillmen who had so suddenly emerged from the brush. The third, unarmed, stood with hands dangling before him.

At the impact of that voice and the menacing gun-clicks Hard and Steve had whirled, instinctively swinging their own weapons toward the danger. Now, however, they stood bewildered, staring at the newcomers. They were not Coopers. At least, the riflemen were not; they were strangers, steel-eyed, grim-jawed, city-garbed except for broad belts bristling with cartridges. The unarmed man was Joe Cooper, the one who habitually defended his blind sister.

On Joe's face now was a heavy, hopeless expression. And on the thick wrists which hung so uselessly in front of him glinted steel manacles.

After the first shock of surprize, the truth became evident to the puzzled pair. Joe was under arrest; the other two were officers; and all three were on their way to the Cooper place.

"Drop 'em!" came a second sharp command.

The speaker, a tall, lean fellow with hawk features and chill gray eyes, lifted his rifle a little higher, its muzzle centering on Steve's chest. His mate, shorter and stockier

but none the less bleak of countenance, also raised his gun, which grinned coldly at Hard's head.

"I ain't a-droppin' my gun for nobody," rasped Steve. "S'posin' ye drop yer own an' tell us what ye're a-tryin' to do."

There was a silence. The outsiders searched the faces fronting them. The avengers of Uncle Eb scowled belligerently back, their half-raised guns gripped in ready fists, their thumbs on the hammers.

"Pretty fresh, ain't you?" jarred the tall one. "What's your name?"

"Oaks. What's yourn?"

Another second of probing. Then the inquisitor flung a question at Hard.

"Who are you?"

"Name's Wood, if it's any o' your business."

The thin mouth of the interrogator narrowed a trifle more at the truculent retort. But his next words were directed, not to the antagonistic couple, but to his prisoner. Without moving his watchful gaze, he demanded—

"That right, Cooper?"

The manacled man grunted a sullen assent.

"They in with your crowd?"

"Naw," mumbled Joe.

The riflemen relaxed a bit. Their guns slowly sank, though the muzzles still pointed forward.

"All right—" the tall man began, when Steve broke in.

"We ain't into your tribe yit, Joe no. But we're a-goin' to git into 'em soon's we git into gunshot of 'em! Good thing for ye ye're tied up tight, or ye might git the same dose."

"Wha'd'ye mean?" snarled Joe.

"That cussed skunk of a brother o' yourn, Jed, shot Uncle Eb las' night. That's what I mean. An' I ain't partic'lar what Cooper I shoot at this mornin'."

Joe stared. The officers exchanged glances.

"It's a lie!" Joe disputed. "Jed never 'd shoot Uncle Eb! 'Less'n, mebbe, he was awful drunk an' didn't know what he was a-doin'. Ain't none of us got nothin' ag'in Uncle Eb."

"Uncle Eb see him plain," retorted Steve. "Nev' mind why Jed done it. Ye're a-goin' to lose one o' yer family right quick, mebbe more'n one. The three o' ye better stay right here awhile."

Joe glowered, licked his lips, but seemed

to find no answer. The shorter of the officers, who hitherto had not made a sound, chuckled softly.

"Looks as if we'd tumbled into somethin' good, Rob," he commented. "These billies might help us some. What d'yuh think?"

Rob considered. Hard Wood forestalled his answer.

"We ain't helpin' nobody but ourselves. We're a-mindin' our own business—you 'tend to yourn. We got here ahead o' ye an' we're doin' our business first. But 'fore we go, Joe, I want to ask ye one question. I ain't had a chance to ask it from any Cooper 'fore now. Wha'd ye burn my house for?"

The tone of that question made it a savage accusation. Joe licked his lips again.

"I never burnt yer house," he denied.

"Mebbe *you* didn't. But who o' yer tribe done it?"

Joe's gaze wavered.

"I dunno nothin' 'bout yer rotten ol' house," he mumbled.

But his denial was half-hearted and unconvincing. Again the officers exchanged glances.

"Ye're a liar. Steve, come on. Le's git to goin'."

As one man, the pair who so recently had been riven apart by anger turned to go. With the arrival of those outsiders they had instinctively united; and now, their fierce disagreement totally forgotten, they moved unitedly to complete their grim mission before these meddling strangers could upset their plan. But the strangers meddled again immediately.

"Hey, you! Halt there!"



THE sharp voice of the tall Rob penetrated like a knife edge; and, involuntarily, the hillmen obeyed. Rob's rifle again covered them, and over its barrel Rob gave them their orders.

"You'll go the other way," he clipped. "We're handlin' the Coopers ourselves. You git out o' here or we'll put yuh under arrest. G'wan!"

"Shut up yer bellerin'!" fiercely countered Hard. "Want to tell everybody ye're a-comin'? An' ye ain't got nothin' to arrest us for—not till we've done somethin'. An' ye'll have a healthy time a-doin' it then! An' ye dasn't shoot that gun o' yourn now, ye fool, for two good reasons: Ye can't shoot

us into the back when we ain't committed no crime, an' ye don't want Coopers to hear ye shoot. Put that into yer pipe an' smoke it. Come on, Steve."

Steve came, but slowly and warily, half turned toward the menacing Rob. He was not so sure about what those officers might do; he had bitter memories of penitentiary ways and deep-rooted distrust of all hounds of the law. Nor was Hard, for all his external assurance, unaware of the fact that the situation was decidedly precarious. Those rifles *might* strike them down, and Cooper guns might riddle them from the other direction; there was no knowing what lay just around the next bend.

The shorter officer chuckled again, and again he spoke.

"Go slow, Rob. They've got us stumped. We didn't come here to fight these fellers. Hey, wait a minute, you two, and let's talk sensible. 'Twon't hurt yuh any, and it might help all around. Just wait where y'are."

He dropped his muzzle carelessly toward the ground, nudged Joe, and walked confidently toward them. Rob also came on, though with a less amiable expression.

"Ye can stop 'bout six foot away," warned Steve. "We ain't deaf, an' ye needn't git no nigher to us."

"Oh, all right. Pretty suspicious, ain't yuh, for a couple of honest boys that ain't doin' anything except kill a man or so? Huh-huh!" Again the chuckle. "But we'll make it six foot if yuh like. S'posin' we step off the path a little, where we'll be more out o' sight. Rob, keep an eye skinned while we're talkin', so nobody will come along and give us a surprize party. Here's a good place. Come on, boys, we'll chew it over right here."

He stepped aside into a little natural gap, shouldering Joe in ahead of him. Hard and Steve, approaching suspiciously, stopped facing him. Rob, a little behind his mate and the prisoner, took his stand at the edge of the brush, where he could see and hear all while watching the path.

"Well, boys," resumed the stocky man, his face now good-humored but his tone crisp, "let's understand each other. First, this pal o' mine is Roberts, and I'm Parker. We've got some business with these Coopers that's more important than yours. Ours is for the government, and yours is only personal; and what's more, if the Cooper crowd

has been shootin' and burnin' like yuh say they have, the law'll make 'em sweat for it better'n you can. See? Better let the law handle 'em, boys, and stay on the right side o' the law yourselves. It pays.

"Yuh were talkin' about killin' a feller, now. But d'yuh bear in mind that when yuh kill a man he's dead and out of it after that? But if yuh let him live and spend a few years in prison, he's payin' yuh a long time for what he did. A prison ain't a pleasure resort. Did yuh ever think about that, Oaks?"

His face suddenly hardened into a stern mask. Steve made a hoarse sound and stepped back a pace.

"Your first name's Steve, maybe?" Parker pursued relentlessly.

"Mebbe," jerked Steve. "What 'bout it?"

"Oh, nothin'. Only maybe I've heard about a Steve Oaks, and I know he stands all right with the law right now, but maybe he knows how it feels to be cooped up. 'Tain't so funny, is it? You bet! Well, then, if yuh've got somethin' against a feller, yuh're gittin' back at him a good deal harder by puttin' him into a lot o' trouble than by puttin' him out of all his troubles, ain't yuh?"

"Git right down to business!" interrupted Hard. "What ye here for? Who d'ye want? What's Joe done?"

He felt that he already knew the answer to his questions, but he wished to make sure. The reply was virtually what he expected.

"Well, we're makin' a clean sweep. It's been a long time comin', but we've got the goods now, thanks to Joe here." Joe winced. "We want old William Cooper, and young William Cooper, *alias* Bad Bill—he's been wanted quite a while—and Jed and Jerry Cooper, besides our friend Joe. And we want to destroy their still."



THERE was a silence. Hard and Steve eyed Joe, who looked miserably down at his handcuffs. When Hard spoke his voice was stony.

"Ye're revenoo men. Wal, I want to tell ye, these Coopers are my wust enemies, but I'd never lift a hand to help revenoo men git a feller for 'stillin'. Law or no law, a feller's got as good a right to make his own licker as to make his own coffee. An' I——"

"Now wait a minute, Wood, wait a minute. Yuh're gittin' off on the wrong foot.

Makin' your own, and sellin' it against the law, are two different things. It's all right to sell it, too, if yuh meet the requirements of the government. What the government is after is these fellers that peddle this wild-cat stuff—rotgut—that ain't manufactured right in the first place and is smuggled in the second place and poisons men so they commit murders and all kinds o' crimes in the last place. If you fellers want to make that stuff and drink it yourselves, all right—we don't care; it's your own funeral. But yuh've got no right to feed poison to other men, and yuh've got no more right to rob the government of the legal revenues than yuh have to rob a man of his legal property.

"Well, that's what this crowd's been doin'. They've been at it a long time. They've been bringin' it down hid in wagon-loads o' charcoal. The charcoal was a blind. It was only to cover up kegs o' moonshine. They've sold it to some shady saloons, and the saloons doctored it up and sold it over the bar. There's no knowin' how many murders have been committed and how many women and children have suffered on account o' men drinkin' this Cooper stuff when they'd paid for honest drinks. It's been covered up so neat that it's taken us a mighty long time to trace it back to the source, but we've located the spring now, and it's goin' dry.

"We caught young Joe, here, with the goods, down below, and we finally persuaded him to cough up the whole works. We brought him back to show us the way, and we're goin' to give the old man and the rest o' the boys a ride, and yuh won't see 'em again for quite a while.

"Now yuh know the whole story, and yuh can do one of two things. Yuh're a couple o' spunky lads, and we can maybe use yuh. So if yuh want, yuh can help us to round up the gang. Or if that don't suit, yuh can go back and leave us. Yuh can't stop us or beat us to it. If yuh try it yuh'll be interferin' with officers of the law in the performance o' their duty, and that'll give us a right to shoot yuh with no more warnin'. I'm tellin' yuh all this so yuh'll know just where yuh stand. Now it's up to you."

As his rapid talk ceased, the spot seemed very still. Low-toned though his words had been, they had come with the purring strength of mighty machinery running under smooth restraint; and now it was as if the driving energy had been momentarily

suspended, letting empty silence rule for a brief interval. In that pause there came to the listening hillmen a formless feeling that they faced a vast, inexorable power before which they were as pigmies; that Roberts and Parker, too, were merely small visible symbols of that power—but that behind them pressed a stupendous force which could utterly obliterate any man or men who dared defy it.

To Steve, who once had endured the soul-strangling grip of the steel and stone of prison cell and wall, that power was more real and awful than to the unconfined Hard Wood. But stronger even than the dread vision of that man-crushing "pen" was the implacable demon within him which would be sated only by revenge. Mighty though law and government might be, this thing was mightier. Stonily he still refused to swerve from his fixed purpose.

"Speakin' for myself," he asserted, "I don't do neither o' them things. I don't turn back an' I don't help ye. Nor I don't hender ye. I'm a-doin' what I come here to do. Ye can do the same."

"An' speakin' for myself," echoed Hard, "I say the same. But I don't see no need for you an' us to fall foul of each other. From what ye tell, ye want to arrest all the Coopers for 'stillin'. One more or less don't make no difference to ye, long's they're all cleaned up. An' Jed Cooper b'longs to me! Ye can have the rest of 'em, the hull kit an' b'ilin', for all I care—if ye can git 'em. They ain't a-goin' to git down on to their knees to ye. But ye keep it into mind that Jed Cooper's mine!"

The hawk-faced Roberts moved impatiently and voiced a sneer.

"Talk, talk, talk! Look here, feller, all Coopers look alike to us, see? Yuh can have your Jed Cooper after the law gits through with him, and not before. We're goin' to clean up and take 'em all. That's all there is to it. Come on, Park, cut out the argument and let's move."

Parker scowled, both at the recalcitrant youths and at his uncompromising partner. But he spoke again—and, in speaking, cut the Gordian knot.

"Yuh're a couple o' fools, and I'm another to argue with yuh!" he growled. "But, say, listen. We're all countin' our chickens before they hatch. We've got to git our Coopers first. Now if there's any fightin'—if, mind yuh—and if that pet o' yours,

the one yuh call Jed, gits shot while resistin' arrest, I don't know as we'll cry much about it. But if they surrender peaceable, we'll talk about it later on. First thing to do is to round 'em up."

"Now yuh're talkin' sense," approved Roberts.

Steve suddenly nodded assent. Then he looked down at his gun to mask a sinister gleam in his eyes. *If* there should be fighting. Did these fools actually think to round up the Coopers without a fight?

Hard Wood, with the same thought in mind, bit back a sudden impulse to grin. Parker, after all his talk, had unwittingly, or so it seemed, surrendered.

"Suits me, mister," he said.

With a sidelong glance at Steve, he stepped again into the path.

Steve turned with him. The pair swung along, watching the brush and trees lining the narrow way, their weapons ready. Behind them, Parker grinned at Roberts, who still scowled.

"Got 'em with us," he muttered. "We're liable to need 'em."

"Watch 'em," grumbled Roberts. "I don't trust 'em."

"They're all right," asserted Parker. Then, to Cooper: "Come on, you! No hangin' back!"

Joe, after a desperate look around, sullenly obeyed. With the officers a pace behind him, he slouched along toward the father and brothers whom he had betrayed by his confession down in the valley—a confession which, no doubt, had been wrung from him only by "third degree" methods, but which now hung heavier and blacker in his mind at every step nearer home.

Hard halted.

"Want to tell ye," he warned, "there's a gal over here. She's blind. Be mighty sure ye don't make no mistake an' hurt her."

In his voice was an unmistakable threat of dire consequences in case of any such mistake. Parker nodded, his expression unchanging. Joe's florid visage reddened further with sudden rage.

"Yup!" he rumbled. "If ye hurt Jane I'll kill the both o' ye, if it takes me a hundred year!"

"Shut up!" snapped Roberts, shoving him onward.

Hard lengthened his stride to catch up with Steve. Nobody spoke again. Gliding

along the grassy track with no sound save the almost inaudible tread of feet, the queerly allied band moved forward, intent on what waited beyond.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PROOF

AT THE edge of the Cooper clearing, the hunters of the Coopers paused by tacit consent to estimate the situation.

Nobody had intercepted them. Nobody was on watch even here, at the end of the woods. And nobody was in sight beyond. The absence of human life, the stillness brooding over the place, were ominous.

The lower part of the squatty house was not visible from this point, being screened from view by intervening corn. Only the blank, dingy roofs of house and barn, broadside on, were to be seen above the maize tops. But a part of the yard next to the dwelling lay open to the eye, and it was empty. Not even a hen moved there.

"Skipped!" growled Roberts. "Likely as not they had a spy out, and all this fool talk o' yours back yonder, Park, gave 'em time to take to the woods."

"Nope," contradicted Steve, positively. "They're there. I feel 'em."

"Huh! Wha'd'yuh mean, feel 'em?" sneered Roberts.

"If ye lived into the woods most o' the time, like I do, ye'd know," retorted the rover, contemptuously. "Take you city fellers offen yer streets an' ye dunno nothin'. I *feel* them varmints over yender. An' I know why they're a-layin' quiet. They're expectin' me to come an' settle with 'em for Uncle Eb. They know me an' they know what I'll do."

"Layin' in the corn, I bet," guessed Parker, eyeing the dense green.

"Naw," disputed Steve. "Corn ain't no cover. The second ye move the corn moves with ye an' gives ye away. An' they dunno which way I'm a-comin' from. I'm liable to hit 'em from any d'rection. So they're right 'round the house, prob'ly into it, a-waitin' for me to come into sight."

Both of the sleuths studied him a moment, then nodded acceptance of his logic. Roberts gave his belt a hitch. Parker reached back to his right hip pocket and loosened something which bulged his coat a trifle. Joe, the somber flame of desperation

deepening in his eyes, set his teeth harder. Then spoke Hard Wood.

"I'll be leavin' ye. You fellers ain't goin' to git 'em without fightin'. It'll pay ye to wait 'bout ten minutes till I git into the place I've got into mind."

"Where's that?" demanded Steve.

"Up into the rocks front o' the house. Somebody else had better git 'round back o' the place. That'll cover both doors, front an' back. By rights, the other two o' ye ought to git onto each side so's to cover the winders. But do what ye like. I'm a-goin'."

Roberts turned on him with eyes narrowed to slits.

"Look here, feller!" he warned. "Don't try double-crossin' us after yuh git away! This rifle o' mine will shoot a lot faster than your gun and carry a lot farther, and I know how to use it. See?"

Hard flicked a glance down at the big-bored Winchester and started a hot retort.

But Parker interposed.

"Shut up, Rob!" he clipped. "Don't be a fool. Git goin', Wood. We'll wait just ten minutes for yuh—unless somethin' starts before then. Hustle up!"

With a final glare at Roberts, the hillman wheeled and strode away, masked by the corn, toward the Minnewaska slope. Steve, watching him, smiled dourly.

"Good 'nough," he commented. "'Less'n I'm foolish into the head, Jed's a-goin' to come a-sneakin' outen the back door when he knows there's a gun a-layin' for him in front. I'm takin' that back door."

He turned in the opposite direction, vanishing into the brush. Parker, with another keen glance toward the apparently lifeless house, drew out a watch.

"Ten minutes for the two of 'em," he said. "Let's git back a couple o' steps and wait."

Muttering something, Roberts acceded. They backed into a bit of shade and stood there, the tiny ticking of the watch and the occasional chirp of a grasshopper alone breaking the sinister quietude of the place.

On the eastern edge of the clearing, Steve drifted with uncanny skill through the brush fringe, the leaves and branches betraying no sign of his progress. On the western side, Hard leaped across the little creek and was gone among the trees and rocks. Less cunningly than the wolfish Oaks, but quietly enough, he stole along until he saw looming ahead the great split boulder whose gap commanded the front of the house.

Crouching lower and moving more cautiously, he crept around the curving side of the stone, ready for instant action against any one who might already be ambushed there. As he reached the rear of the opening he moved by inches, scanning every bump of rock in the cleft. No man lay there. He slipped in, hugging the left inner side, which slanted a bit to the right before him. A minute later he peered out and down at the house.

The place was not deserted.

The scene was strikingly similar to the one last photographed on his mind at this spot. Two of the three Coopers who had been there when he left were there again this morning: Old Bill Cooper and Jane. Old Bill was in the exact spot where Hard had left him yesterday—in the open doorway; but now he was seated in a chair, his heavy body slouched forward, his puffy eyes seemingly dwelling on nothing in particular.

Jane was standing on the door stone, her head turned toward her father, who was rumbling some remark which the listener could not catch. But Jed, who yesterday had been rising from the ground to bawl a curse through the powder-smoke; Jed, who, above all, was most wanted now, had disappeared. He was not in the yard, nor in the doorway, nor at a window. If he was here at all, he was under cover.

Hard's eyes roved swiftly back and forth, seeking him. Then they centered again on the pair at the door. His mouth opened for a yell—and froze in that position. His breath stopped. His gun almost slid from his grasp. For a moment he stood thus. Then a red wave shot to his hair, and his loose jaw snapped shut like a steel trap.

Jane Cooper was wearing his mother's dress.

There could be no doubt of it. It was that flowery dress which had been the last work of the woman who now lay under the half-moon stone. Its colors, its flowers, were stamped indelibly on Hard's mind. Had he not admired it when she was making it? Had he not stared with grief-stricken gaze at it after she died? Moreover, there was no possibility that the Coopers could have bought material from the same piece of goods. The peddler who sold it to Mis' Wood had possessed no more of it, and he had been coming from the north, not the

south, when he reached the Wood home; also, no peddler was allowed on Cooper grounds. Finally, the fit of the dress showed even to a masculine eye that is never had been made for its present wearer. It hung baggily on her slender figure: a garment made for a mature woman, put on a slim-hipped girl.

And Jane Cooper, whom Hard had twice recklessly rescued, who owed to him her very life, now flaunted in his face a dress stolen from his mother. And the presence of that garment here explained conclusively the absence of the bronze chest-metal from the débris of his home; it explained also the destruction of that home. This Cooper tribe had not only burned that house, but looted it first. They had carried away the chest with them. They had robbed his dead. They were ghouls.

All the sympathy, all the pity he had felt for that girl was now obliterated from his soul as by a searing flash of flame. Grave-robber, daughter and sister of thieves and worse than thieves! In the same instant vanished the slight hesitation, inculcated by Uncle Eb, which had hitherto restrained him from shooting at Cooper varmints. But for the fact that a female of the Cooper species was in the way, he would have shot Old Bill then and there. As it was, he furiously swung his gun half-way up; then checked the movement and again opened his lips to yell. Before, he had meant to demand that Jed be sent out. Now, he would roar to Old Bill to yank that brat aside and stand up like a man.

But, before he could voice the order, Old Bill anticipated it. His apparently sleepy eyes had caught the movement of that gun among the rocks. With astonishing speed for so heavy a man, he started up, snatching his own gun from some spot beside him. And then blind Jane got in the way.

Unaware of what was imminent, she moved a little nearer to her father. The movement blocked his rising gun. Too, it made impossible a shot from the vengeful Hard. Rumbling a throaty oath, Old Bill darted a thick hand at her shoulder and made to drag her into the house. But the hand stopped as if paralyzed.

Shrill, piercing, keen as a razor-edge, a whistle cut the air. It came from the spot where the officers waited. Once more it sounded—and was cut short as if by a blow.



BACK at the path, Parker had put away his watch and nodded. At that final moment Joe Cooper had made his last desperate effort to be true to his clan. Lifting his shackled hands and pressing fingers to teeth, he had sent that danger-call screeching across the corn. So quick and unexpected had been his action that he sounded the warning twice before the officers flung themselves on him. Then he was handled with merciless efficiency.

For a second Old Bill stood as if rooted to the floor, his gaze riveted on the now fully revealed figure in the rock-rift, but his mind on that whistle. He knew every one of his sons was—except Joe: Joe, who had gone out with a load of 'shine two days ago and had unaccountably failed to return. And, knowing where the rest of his boys were, he knew this warning could come only from Joe. He knew, too, that it portended something more serious than the presence of the one man whom he could see: Hard Wood. Wherefore—

Instead of shoving the girl behind him, he backed and drew her in before him, shielding himself from Hard. He made her find and shut the door and bolt it. And Hard, grinding his teeth, stood impotent. To shoot into that door would be worse than useless. Old Bill would not be standing behind it now. The only one likely to be hit was Jane.

Then, behind a dirty window at one side of the door, a face showed vaguely, peering upward. Whose it was, Hard could not discern, but it certainly was not that of the girl. A blind girl obviously would not be peering from a window, anyway. With a savage hiss, he leveled his gun and fired—both barrels.

Even as he drew the triggers, the face slid aside, and he knew he had missed. But the kick of his weapon, the crash of its double discharge, the smash of the window, were satisfaction in themselves. He had thrown off all restraint. He had shot into the lair of his enemies. He had fired the first gun of a battle which now would not end until he or they were shattered.

Never before had Hard Wood shot at a man. He never had needed to; his sledge-hammer fists had been fearful enough. But now that he had done so, fierce exultation flooded his soul. The explosion of that powder had been also the explosion of the wrath consuming him, and it had blown

away a hot mist which seemed to have come before his eyes. Now he felt curiously cool and clear-sighted, albeit recklessly exhilarated. Poising among the rocks he laughed, a roaring, reverberating laugh which echoed out in the wake of his gunshot. Then, drawing his ramrod, he danced lightly back into better cover to reload.

In the bare nick of time he glanced behind him. Out through the shattered window was darting a gun-barrel, and behind it flamed the red face and coppery hair of his initial enemy—Copperhead. Quick as light, Hard dodged down behind a rock block. The little cañon bellowed with the shock of Copperhead's return fire. Buckshot sizzled, spat, screamed around and above. Hard's hat flew violently from his head, carrying with it a long black lock of hair. Straightening up, he laughed again.

"Copperhead! Yah, Copperhead!" he taunted. "This time I'll git ye—an' yer hull — tribe with ye!"

Copperhead replied with a torrent of obscenity. He was a bigger, heavier, more brutal-looking Copperhead now than on that long ago day when he had earned his name, and both his hatred and his tongue were, if anything, more virulent than ever. At his foul invective Hard's grin left his face and his jaw clamped into its usual grim set. Stepping down another yard into invulnerable cover, he fell to work with powder, wads, shot, rod, and caps.

The charges he rammed home were even heavier than before. As he was completing his rapid work, he cocked an ear toward the clearing. There had been no more firing, and now a sharp voice was shouting authoritatively.

"William Cooper! You and all your sons! Walk out here and surrender to the United States Government!"

Dead silence. Hard swiftly slid the rod down its groove, adjusted the caps, and ascended his bulwark. At the front of the house nobody was in sight. Stepping to the right wall of his rift, he peered out to the left.

Near the corn, and also near the side of the house, stood Roberts and Parker and Joe. Clutching their prisoner firmly by either arm and holding him slightly ahead of them, they were facing windows behind which they evidently saw some one. Joe slouched more than ever, thoroughly beaten; indeed, he was half stunned from the man-

handling he had just received. It was the snappish, morose Roberts who was doing the talking.

"Don't make any resistance!" he commanded. "If yuh do yuh haven't got a chance. We've got yuh surrounded. Your game's up. Walk out here with your hands empty! Lively!"

Another silence. The position of the officers protected them. No buckshot could be fired at them without hitting Joe, as they well knew. But there was no sign that the Coopers were obeying.

Then, slowly, came the voice of Old Bill. Evidently he had appeared at an open window. His tone and his words astonished the listening Hard.

"What say, mister? I'm a little hard o' hearin'," he whined. "Can't hear ye. What ye a-doin' to my boy? Leave him be!"

It was a weak, quavering voice, hardly recognizable as that of the bull-necked Old Bill. And Old Bill was no more deaf than was Roberts.

"Come—out—here!" bellowed the tall sleuth. "Yuh're — under — arrest! Hear that?"

Another brief pause, as if Cooper were trying to understand. Then, in the same whining voice:

"Can't ye speak a little louder, mister? I don't quite understand ye."

The old reprobate was leaning out a little now, one hand cupped behind an ear, the other grasping the sill; both obviously empty. Hard could not see this; but, impelled by hatred, he shouted—

"He's lyin'! He can hear——"

His warning was drowned by a sudden blunt bang, not the roar of a shotgun, but the report of a single-shot rifle. It did its work. Roberts, impatient, exasperated, and contemptuous of the stupid old fool, had involuntarily stepped a little nearer. It was only one step, but his legs were long, and it moved him clear of Joe. Instantly the bullet, fired by some one concealed behind the old man, sped on its way.

Roberts staggered. Automatically his rifle lifted and spat one shot in return. His lever-hand jerked down—and stayed down. For an instant he stood braced, motionless as a statue, his gun open. Then, still rigid, he pitched forward and lay lifeless.

Old Bill Cooper slumped on his window sill and hung there, humped over like a great

toad. He had not had time to throw his gross body back before the retaliating bullet caught him. He had not lived long enough even to grin over the success of his trick. Roberts, dead on his feet, but fighting with the last reflex action of his muscles, had shot him through the head.

CHAPTER XIV

BULLET AND BUCKSHOT

NOW Parker moved.

With the speed of a pouncing hawk he jerked Joe before him, dropped his rifle, drew his revolver. And while Joe stared stupidly at his dead father, Parker's handgun spouted a vengeful stream of lead past him and above the grotesquely humped figure on the window-sill.

As his last shot cracked out, his captive tried to jerk aside and turn on him. Parker instantly hit him over the head with his empty weapon. As Joe sagged forward, the officer stooped and recovered his rifle. Straightening, still holding his prisoner with a mighty clutch, he backed and swerved into the corn.

There, without a second's delay, he tripped Joe and fell on him; twitched from a pocket a stout cord, and lashed his prisoner's feet together. Swiftly reloading his revolver, he pocketed it, again grabbed his rifle, and ducked onward for a few feet through the corn. Then, turning houseward, he dropped prone and wriggled to the edge of the maize-patch.

As Steve had foretold, the corn betrayed his movements, quivering above him as he progressed. Now the single-shot rifle banged again, and its heavy bullet ripped through the stalks nodding above the officer. It was so accurately placed that, had he been standing, it would have dropped him. But it passed a yard too high, and Parker's rifle began to crack in response.

Had the Coopers known that Joe was not close beside the officer, a spreading charge of buckshot might have finished Parker as soon as he paused to reload. But they did not know that; and, for fear of killing their brother, they confined their return firing to their rifle. While the Winchester was pumping they had scant opportunity to retaliate, for it swung back and forth, raking the windows on that side of the house. And when Parker had to sus-

pend firing he was too canny to remain where he lay; he sprang up, dived aside and to the rear and, hugging the earth between weedy furrows, recharged his repeater while lying on his back. So, although the occasional slugs of the besieged men whizzed dangerously close to him, they continued to miss.

Now from Joe, reviving and assailed by a new fear, broke a stentorian yell.

"Jane! Take keer o' Jane!" he bellowed. "Put her down cellar! Don't let her git kilt!"

A growling answer rolled from within the house.

"She's awright. Git that detective!"

"Git him yerselves, ye whinin' pups!" raged the captive. "I'm tied hand an' foot. Can't ye hit nothin', ye ol' women?"

A curse echoed dully in response. At a corner of a window-sill a gun-muzzle glimmered and flamed toward the spot where Parker had last been seen. While its blue smoke still hazed the sill, a retaliating crack broke from the point where Parker really was. A sharp grunt and a jerky disappearance of the Cooper gun was followed by a clattering thump inside. Parker had hit something—man, gun, or both.

Meanwhile, to east and west of the house, there was no shooting. At the rear, where Steve ought to be, there had been none whatever. At the front, Hard found himself without a target. The entire defending force seemed to be concentrating its attention on the feared and hated government man in the corn.

From his position, Hard could see the prone body of Roberts and the rapidfire flashes of Parker's repeater, but nothing of the side windows where the Coopers fought. He knew nothing of the death of Old Bill. He saw nothing of Jed, of Copperhead, of Bad Bill. His vantage-point seemed useless. With a new purpose in mind, he began swiftly descending the cleft. He would rush the house at the front and get his enemies on the flank.

He was half-way down when a foot slipped. He sat down hard. One finger involuntarily jerked a trigger, and one barrel vomited a load which flew wild. With a wrathful growl at the mishap, he got to his feet. As he arose, some small object dropped behind him and then, with a metallic rattle, went bumping down into a crevice among the rocks.

Clapping a hand to his right hip pocket, he muttered in dismay. Once more he had lost a powder-flask. He had shoved it into that rear pocket. The sudden fall had knocked it out. Now it was gone among the crevices. A swift scrutiny of the hole into which it had disappeared showed no sign of it.

An instant of indecision—then he sprang on downward. He still had one shot, and that one could do vast damage from the right point. He must get Jed, anyhow.

As if in answer, the face of Jed himself suddenly appeared at one of the two front windows. It was a wild, hunted face, pallid beneath the discolorations left there yesterday by Hard's punishing fists. Haunted by fear of deadly vengeance ever since his mistake in shooting Uncle Eb, he now had lost all courage under the hail of bullets fired by the revenue officer, and he was frenziedly seeking the shortest line of escape to the woods. At sight of the merciless Hard Wood again bounding toward him, he sprang back with a scream. A gun in his hands jumped and discharged wildly through the sash.

Like a swift, compact swarm of bees the buckshot hummed above Hard. In mid-stride he leveled his own piece and fired. Came another scream, a bump, the clatter of running feet. Jed might be hit, but not too badly to run. And now Hard possessed only an empty gun, with no means of reloading.

To enter that house now would be only insane suicide. Hard halted on the edge of the brook, wavering between the horns of a dilemma. He was unprotected, in plain sight, and far enough from his rocks to make retreat almost as dangerous as advance.



IT WAS keen-eyed Parker, carrying on his lone-handed battle with utmost coolness and seeing everything while he fought, who solved his difficulty. Parker knew nothing of the loss of the powder-flask, of course, but he knew how slow and clumsy was any muzzle-loader compared to a Winchester; and just now he wanted all the help he could get. Wherefore his incisive voice snapped across the open.

"Drop that blunderbuss and come git a real gun! Git Roberts'. I'll cover yuh. Look alive!"

Hard hesitated only a second. Then he made the dash. Dropping his useless piece, he pelted at top speed toward the dead man. As he came, Parker resumed his accurate sniping at the windows, driving his bullets so shrewdly that no counterfire was possible. He now was lying beyond Roberts, so that Hard did not have to run through his fire. The runner slewed to a stop beside the lifeless officer, seized the weapon, straightened up; then stooped again and unbuckled the cartridge-belt. With his new battery he plunged into the corn near Parker.

Parker chuckled. Hard answered with a reckless laugh. Then the officer commanded:

"Come here quick! Gimme that gun! You load this one!"

Hard obeyed without question. A repeating rifle was altogether new to him, and he did not understand its manipulation. As he reached Parker, the latter snatched the fresh rifle from him, but suspended firing, watching the windows for the first sign of a motion within. Crisply he instructed his recruit in the method of loading and ejecting, meanwhile never letting his gaze swerve from the house. As he finished speaking he shot again at something he had spied.

"Gimme my own gun back when she's loaded," he added. "It fits me better'n this. You scoot through the corn and git back to the front and hammer 'em hard."

Crash-crash!

The double report thundered from the left; from the rear of the house, whence no explosions had hitherto sounded.

"Your pardner's come to life," continued Parker. "About time! Got the hang o' your gun now? Then——"

Rrrripl! Bang! Crack!

Through the stalks hurtled a Cooper bullet, so close that shreds of leaf fell on Hard. The blunt report and the return shot from Parker almost blended.

"—then git goin'," finished the officer. "Don't let 'em skin out the other side, and we've got 'em!"

As he spoke, he passed back Roberts' rifle and seized his own, now reloaded. Without a word Hard arose and dashed down a furrow, heading creekward again. The corn was not tall enough to hide his head. He had gone only a couple of rods when two things occurred simultaneously.

A squash-vine amid the corn tripped and threw him headlong. At the same instant a charge of buckshot slashed through the spot where his shoulders had been. From the house roared a deep-throated gunshot.

Scrambling forward on all fours, he seized his fallen rifle and arose. Something warm and wet was trickling down his back, and something burned across his shoulder-blades. One of the flying shot had grazed him as he fell, and only his providential stumble had saved him from the rest of them. Across the corn he now saw a figure on the doorstone, protected by the corner of the house from Parker, peering toward him and lowering a gun from its shoulder. It was Copperhead.

With awkward speed Hard shot. The queer new gun seemed too short and all out of balance, and he fumbled over the levering of a fresh shell from the magazine. But he got away two bullets before Copperhead plunged indoors; and at the second shot, to his intense joy, his enemy lurched as if hit. Then Copperhead was gone. Exultant, Hard dashed onward.

Behind him, Parker's weapon sniped at quick, irregular intervals. From the rear of the house, where those two sudden roars had sounded, came no further noise.

Once more across the creek and among the trees, Hard pressed fast toward the big boulder; but he paused several times to snap a bullet at the front door or the windows flanking it. He saw nobody there, but it was a joy to fire on the Cooper lair with this quick-acting, hard-hitting weapon, even though it did feel odd at his shoulder; and he had plenty of ammunition. As soon as he reached his objective he would riddle the front as Parker was raking the sides, and between those crossfires the "varmints" soon would be in desperate straits.

But it was not to be. A silence fell, while Parker made another of his quick shifts and reloaded. Then from the house came a hoarse shout.



"MISTER! I give up! Don't shoot no more!"

Hard leaped to the edge of the trees. Nobody was in sight. The front door was open, but no man stood there. Nor was any man at any window. Old Bill, first of the Coopers to fall, had long ago been dragged inside by somebody crouching below the sill. The only human

thing visible was rigid Roberts, face down in the grass.

"Mister! I got 'nough!" begged the voice. "Can I come out safe?"

"Who are yuh?" countered Parker.

"I'm young Bill. I'm the onliest one left here. I want to git'outen here!"

Panic was in the hoarse tones. But Parker, with his partner lying dead before him as an example of Cooper methods, was not to be lured forth.

"Where's the rest of yuh?" he demanded.

"Pop's dead. I'm hurt. Jed an' Jerry, they run. Ye've got Joe. That's all of us — 'ceptin' Jane. She's down cellar. Promise me ye won't shoot no more? I'm givin' up, I tell ye!"

"Yuh can come out—with your hands in the air," conceded the hidden officer. "But if this is another trick, look out!"

Bad Bill wasted no time. Through the window he came, struggling out with such haste that he tumbled in a heap on the ground. Scrambling up, he lifted one hand high and began walking toward the corn.

"Put 'em both up!" snapped Parker.

"I can't, mister," whined Bill. "T'other arm's dead. Ye hit me."

The other arm was his right, and it dangled lifelessly beside him as he moved.

"All right. Come here to me. And the first funny move yuh make, I'll drill yuh."

Hard emerged from the trees. Bad Bill stopped short, eying him apprehensively. No doubt he recalled the day when he and Copperhead had menaced the stripling Wood with their guns at the creek and jeeringly prepared to murder him. Now that the tables were turned—

"Keep comin', you!" commanded Parker. "Wood, he's my prisoner!"

"Ye can have him," retorted Hard, contemptuously. "I'm a-goin' to look 'round over yender."

And he stalked onward, watching the house for any movement, any glint of steel. Bad Bill moved on with accelerated pace toward the protection of the man whom he had just tried so hard to kill. The fear of death was so strong upon him that even the waiting prison seemed a haven of refuge.

It was evident, both to Hard and to Parker, that Bill spoke truth in at least one respect: He was hurt. The dangling right arm was red from the shoulder. The left hand, above his head, also was crimson. And the left side of his face was dyed from a

groove along his cheekbone and through the ear. He was as thoroughly shot up as he cared to be, and totally unable to handle a gun.

But what of Jed and Jerry? When and where had they run? Neither had been seen to leave. Jerry—Copperhead—had fired only a few minutes ago, and had lunged inside as if wounded. These thoughts excluded all others from Hard's mind. The gouge across his shoulders, rankling like the welt of a whip, goaded his hatred of that pair into fresh flame. And, with hammer drawn back and finger on trigger, he advanced to the front door.

The narrow hallway was empty. So were the rooms on either side. He looked through each window and made sure. Rounding the corner beyond, he checked.

There was another window, open to the southward; and on its sill was a red splotch. On the short grass beyond it were tiny red stains, leading away in a line to the south. That side of the house had been beyond the view of both Hard and Parker after Hard left his rock. Copperhead could have run from the door to that window, flung himself out, and made for the woods unseen—except by Steve. Certainly somebody had run here, somebody wounded.

Where on earth was Steve? Except for one double-barreled discharge, he had done nothing whatever. With another glance southward, Hard swung along the side of the building to complete his circuit.

At the next corner he again checked. Lounging along toward him from the direction of the barn came the missing Steve. Once more he was the old Steve, nonchalant, lazy, inscrutable, his double hammerless swaying carelessly from the crook of one arm as he walked. He was even smoking his pipe!

"Lo, Hard," he drawled.

"Where ye been all the time? Thought ye was dead!" growled the other. "Seen Jed or Jerry?"

"Yup. Jerry, he run. Over yender." A jerk of the head toward the south.

"An' ye let him git away?"

"'Course. He never done nothin' to me," Steve answered equably. "So I didn't do nothin' to him."

"Huh! What 'bout Jed?"

"He run too."

"Where?"

"Not very fur."

Steve was close at hand now, and in his calm eyes was something that caught the other's tongue. Steve puffed a couple of times, removed his pipe, spat, and moved toward a small woodpile near the back door. Hard followed.

On the other side of the pile, still clutching his gun, but lying flat on his back and staring dully up at the sky, lay Jed Cooper. Steve's double shot and Steve's present peaceful expression were explained. Jed was completely riddled.

"I figgered he'd come outen the back door," drawled Steve. "An' he did."

CHAPTER XV

THE LAST OF THE COOPERS

HARD WOOD wheeled and strode away, seeking anew the red thread upon the green which formed the trail of Copperhead.

Inwardly he raged at Steve for allowing that "varmint" to flee unhindered. Yet he realized that it might have been expected. Steve's inflexible purpose had been to slay Jed, and upon the fulfilment of that purpose had been concentrated the entire force of his nature. With the fall of Jed, the lethal demon within him had been instantly and completely satisfied; and with that appeasement he had reverted to his normal, casual, imperturbable self. Although Hard knew nothing of psychology or of dual personality, he sensed that within Steve abode two utterly different forces, and vaguely understood the motives which had impelled him to blow one Cooper to perdition but to watch unconcernedly the escape of another.

To Hard, however, the end of Jed was not the end of the Cooper affair, and upon the blood-trail of his bitterest personal enemy he now pushed forward with determination. It was not very easy to follow: A thin streak at first, and then merely a succession of spots. It led straight to the edge of the woods beyond the house—and then disappeared.

After a little casting about, however, he found it again. Once within the shelter of the trees, Copperhead had turned sharp to the right and headed for the creek. At the water's edge his trail vanished for the second time.

Hard understood. The fugitive, realizing that he was leaving telltale stains, had

taken to the water. Apparently he was not badly hurt, not so badly as his brother Bill, for instance. But the tracker pressed hopefully on, jumping the stream and advancing along it by the path whereon he had first met Jane.

At the end of the path he stepped into the stream, and rapidly he climbed the steep ravine. Once, and once only, he found a red spot on a rock. Other rocks, though, showed splashes of water, indicating that Copperhead had kept going. At length even these failed as signs. Yet the trailer could discern no place at which his quarry had veered into the brush.

Panting, he emerged finally at the lake. There, after circling about both sides of the stream and searching the farther shores with his eyes he grudgingly abandoned his hunt. Copperhead had vanished without a trace. To seek him in the rugged wilderness stretching away for miles on every hand was sheer idiocy. The quickest way to find him would be to let him alone; for, if he remained in the Traps region—and it seemed decidedly unlikely that he would venture into the valley—he must soon appear somewhere in a quest for food. Hard resolved that he should find no food at the home which he had deserted.

As he wended his way back down the ravine, a metallic sound of irregular blows was wafted vaguely to him from some point below and off to the right. The noise soon died out. It brought him to a stand for a few minutes, listening and puzzling. Then the explanation occurred to him, and he resumed his progress. Parker had made his work complete: He had forced his prisoners to reveal the whereabouts of their still and to wreck it.

When he again reached the path beside the stream, all was quiet. In previously following this track, he had concentrated every sense on the hunt for his enemy. Now, his quest abandoned, he glanced at the well-remembered boulder whence he had once watched the blind girl; and, for no apparent reason, he again paused there and gazed ahead at the log whereon she had sat. Here the wildcat had sprung forth, and here he had knocked it aside as it leaped to rend her. And his reward was to see her wearing his mother's stolen dress—the dress which now, no doubt, had become soiled by cellar dirt and cobwebs. His hard mouth hardened still more. Steely pin-points glistened

in his eyes. He swung forward again with sudden determination in his stride.

Emerging into the open, he heard angry voices and saw, in front of the house, the four men remaining from the fight. Steve, hands in pockets and shotgun idly drooping, and Parker, rifle still ready for use, stood a little apart from the two Coopers, saying nothing. The loud talk came from the prisoners, who were glaring at each other and exchanging most unbrotherly epithets. Bad Bill, last to quit the fight, was reviling Joe, first to be caught; cursing him as a traitor, a quitter, a killer of his own father. And Joe, already worn to the breaking-point by the torture of his own thoughts, was frothing furious invectives in return. Parker, shrewdly listening, was letting them have it out.



HARD quickened his pace to a lope. As he approached, he noted that Bad Bill had been bandaged, his broken arm now hanging in a sling and his shattered hand being wrapped in a wad of cloth. He observed, too, that Joe was filthy with dirt from the corn-field; evidently he had rolled and writhed in desperate efforts to free himself while Parker perforce neglected him. Parker himself was as little cleaner, his face and hands being so smeared with mingled dust and sweat that he resembled a streaky mulatto.

"Killer yerself!" blared Joe. "Ye kilt this feller out into the grass! The rifle's yourn, blast ye, an' ye used it onto him! An' ye'll swing for it, an' I'll spit on to yer grave!"

Bad Bill jerked back a step and stood rigid. Infuriated though he was, he recognized the deadliness of the accusation in the presence of Parker.

"Ye lie!" he burst out. "'Twas Jed done it! He scrooched behind pop an' shot under his arm. Pop told him to, an' he done it. 'Twarn't me."

"Liar yerself! Ye done it, an' ye're a-lay-in' it onto Jed 'cause he's dead!" raved Joe. "Ye'll swing—yah! Rope 'round yer neck an' rag 'round yer eyes— Ye killer! Ye burner! Ye stealer! Ye——"

Bill swung. He had only one movable hand, and that one was smashed; but he drove that hand into Joe's face so hard that his brother nearly fell. With a choking snarl Joe sprang back at him, raising both fettered wrists to dash the steel cuffs down on his antagonist's head. But Parker intervened.

Seizing Joe's shirt-collar, he yanked him back, tearing the shirt half off.

"That'll do, yuh mad dogs!" he snapped. "You, Joe! Stand back here or I'll clip yuh one! Now you, Bill, talk straight! Did yuh kill Roberts?"

Bill, his face contorted with pain from his own blow, gulped.

"Mister, I didn't!" he denied, earnestly. "If I had I'd never of give up to ye. I'd ruther be shot than hung."

His tone carried conviction. Parker, after a piercing look, nodded slightly. Then Hard, now standing grim and cold and watching, spoke out harshly.

"Bill! Wha'd ye burn my house for?"

Bill started, wheeled, and tried to outface his accuser. But after meeting the full force of the younger man's glare he swerved his gaze guiltily aside. Joe, with a note of savage triumph, seized his chance to denounce his accuser again.

"That's right, Hard! He done it. I wouldn't tell ye before, but I don't keer now, cuss him! 'Twas him an' Jerry—the yellor rat! They burnt ye out an' they stole from ye."

"I knowed some o' you varmints done it. 'Twas Copperhead too, hey? I'll git him yit. Wha'd ye do it for, ye snake?"

With a swift stride Hard thrust his face close to that of the incendiary. Bill flinched and fell back, throwing up his one good arm to shield his jaw. Then, as no blow came, he mumbled:

"We—uh—I dunno. We had some lickor into us. Jerry—the stinkin' sneaker, he run an' left me here 'lone!—Jerry, he dast me to go burn ye out, an' I was pretty full, an' I went. An' we—uh—we set it afire."

"Did ye know I warn't to home when ye went there?"

"Wal—no—not when we set out. I was pretty full, an' I didn't think much 'bout it till Jerry got the fire goin'. He made it ag'inst the back o' the house. An' then I got scairt—burnin' a man into his bed was too much for me. I might shoot a feller, mebber, but I can't burn nobody alive. So I throwed some rocks into the winders. An' when ye didn't come out we see ye couldn't be to home, an' we—uh—"

"Ye stole mom's chest, ye dirty grave-robbor!"

"We—uh—wal, the fire was a-goin', an' says I, 'Le's grab somethin' while we kin', an' we busted out a sash an' I crawled in.

An' I run 'round quick, an' I couldn't see nothin' good but a chest. So I drug it outen the winder, an' we lugged it off. 'Twould only of burnt if we'd of left it there. It's into the house here now. Take it if ye—want it."

As he finished, he swayed on his feet, his leathery face turning gray. Hard, his fists twitching and his neck-veins swollen, was about to loose upon him a searing blast of verbal wrath; but at the sudden change in his foe the words stopped, unspoken. Bill was past caring what was said or done to him just now.

"I'm dizzy—sick," he croaked, and collapsed.

Wounds and reaction and hot sun had caught him all at once. He lay in a huddle, a pallid wreck. Hard turned from him with a growl.

"I can't do nothin' to *that*," he grumbled. "I'll wait till he gits out o' the pen."

"Yuh'll be gray-headed by that time," was Parker's significant comment. "Dis-tillin' ain't all he's wanted for. What about that other one—that Jerry feller? I didn't hear yuh shoot."

"Nothin' to shoot at. Couldn't find hide or hair of him. But ye can leave him to me, mister. I've got more ag'inst him than you have."

The officer looked dour.

"I ain't in the habit o' losin' what I go after, whether it's one or a dozen," he grumbled. "But the way it lays, I've got pretty near a load to handle now, with Rob out o' the game." He considered a moment. "Yep, I'll have to travel. That feller that's still loose don't amount to much alongside these other fellers, and maybe I can pick him up later anyway— Hey, you! Come out o' that!"

His rifle muzzle darted toward the door, beyond which he had detected a movement. But then, as the heads of the other men jerked in the same direction, he let the weapon sink.

"Oh. Guess that's the girl they put down cellar," he said, in a milder tone. "Come on out, sister. The war's over."



SLOWLY, from the shadows within the portal, came Mis' Wood's flowery dress and the girl who wore it. Pale to the lips now was Jane; pale not with fright, but with shock and nameless dread. Already she was aware

that her father was dead, for she had just stumbled over his body and ascertained whose it was. Too, she had caught Parker's last speech and learned from it that most of her brothers must be captives. Now, pausing on the doorsill with fingers against the casings, she stood forlorn, facing she knew not what. Slowly she turned her fair head, vainly striving to locate her brothers.

"Joel!" she called. "Where be ye, Joe? What's 'come of ye?"

"I'm here, Sis," gulped Joe. "But I—I got to leave ye. The revenooers have got me. I—I can't look out for ye no more. The onliest one of us that ain't caught is Jerry."

Now fear did dart into the sorrowful face in the doorway, swift, unmistakable fear.

"Jerry?" she cried. "Jerry! Oh, my Lord! I can't—I can't stay here with him! Ye know——"

She caught her tongue. But the unfinished sentence was eloquent. Joe turned suddenly, fiercely, to Hard and Steve.

"For God's sakes," he implored, "see that she's took keer of! An' if either o' ye sets eyes onto Jerry, shoot him like a rat! Don't let him git a holt o' Jane. There ain't nothin' that he wouldn't do, now that me an' pop's gone. He's rotten—rotten 'way through! Do ye understand me?"

The pair whom he addressed stared at him. Then their mouths hardened. Steve nodded. Parker, frowning, eyed the helpless girl, then spoke.

"Guess I'd better take her along. There's institutions where she'll be safe and——"

"No!" snapped Steve. "I know what ye mean. Them places ain't much better'n jails, 'specially for hill folks that can't stand livin' into a coop. She'll stay here. Us hill folks takes care of our own."

Parker probed his aggressive eyes, then nodded. He had no desire to encumber himself with the girl if such action was unnecessary.

"An' lemme tell ye somethin' else while I'm a-talkin'," pursued Steve. "This feller Joe, he's the best o' the lot, 'ceptin' the gal. He never done no harm to nobody. Outside o' sellin' a little 'shine there ain't a thing ag'inst him nowheres. If ye'll kind o' keep that into mind an' try to git him off light, ye'll be doin' right."

"I ain't the judge and jury," countered Parker. "But I don't think he'll draw a

heavy sentence. You'll look out for the girl, then, will yuh? All right. You, Bill! Git up and travel! You can walk. No more layin' down! There's a wagon waitin' for yuh at the road, and from there yuh can ride. Up with yuh!"

Under the lash of his voice, Bad Bill struggled groggily up and stood, haggard and swaying, but keeping his feet. Parker turned a speculative gaze on Joe.

"Somebody's got to tote Roberts to the road, and it's a long carry," he meditated aloud. "He's bigger'n this feller, and—How about yuh, Oaks? Will yuh lend a hand? Yuh haven't overworked yourself, so far. Wood here has been doin' the leg-work."

"Wal, seein' that it'll be helpin' Joe, meb-be I might," drawled Steve. "Hard, ye want to git at that chest o' yourn, I s'pose. Wal, I'll go 'long. When I git back we'll take Jane up to Uncle Eb's."

Hard made no reply. Reluctantly he extended the rifle to Parker.

"Here's yer gun, mister," he said. "I'd admire to git me one like it sometime."

The officer opened his mouth to reply, but, for a moment, said nothing. He squinted at the rifle, eyed the tall young mountaineer quizzically, and gave a short chuckle.

"Tell yuh what I'll do," he decided. "I don't want two guns to look out for right now, with prisoners and drivin' on my hands. So I'll lend yuh the gun until—well, until I see yuh again. That is, providin' yuh'll promise one thing: That if yuh run across this Jerry feller yuh'll either hand him over to the law or drop him for keeps. How's that suit yuh?"

Hard smiled broadly.

"Suits me, mister, suits me fine. Only don't lay awake nights waitin' for me to fetch him in alive."

"I won't." Parker's right eyelid flickered, and he turned away. "Come on, Oaks. Git goin', you two!"

Bad Bill staggered away, without a word for the forlorn little figure in the doorway. But Joe, before obeying the command, took one long look at her and murmured huskily:

"G'by, Janie. I'll be a-comin' back, soon as I kin."

"G'by, Joe," she mournfully returned.

As his footsteps receded in the grass she turned her wide eyes after him. Then her

lips quivered, and all at once she leaned against the door jamb and sobbed.

Across to the body of Roberts passed Joe; and there, with a sharp warning to try no tricks, Parker unlocked his handcuffs. Meanwhile Steve, slinging his gun across his back by loops in his suspenders, stepped to the house and unhinged a shutter. This he dragged to the spot where waited captor and captives; and on it, with Steve ahead, Joe behind, and Parker vigilantly following, the sleuth who had paid the penalty of one false step was borne away. Led by the reeling Bill, the funereal little procession trudged around the near corner of the corn field and was gone from the sight of the one fighter remaining behind.

Slowly that man belted with a dead man's cartridges and gripping a dead man's rifle, let his gaze rove over the scene. The corn, rustling in a soft breeze, nodded and whispered mysteriously to itself. The bullet-splintered house gloomed dingy and deserted, save for one quietly weeping girl at its main portal. Within it, a gross huddle of whisky-soaked flesh, lay its master. Behind it, at the woodpile, sprawled one of the two brutes who had abandoned it in fear of death, only to meet his doom within a dozen steps. Beyond it, somewhere—perhaps far, perhaps near—skulked the other of those two, wounded by the lead of the man who now eyed it with hostile gaze. The den of the Cooper varmints had failed to save them at the end; and in Hard Wood's mind the doom of the den itself was already sealed.

His gaze swung onward, searching the treeline, and came back to dwell once more on the house. Then, gripping his gun a little harder, pressing his lips a little tighter, he advanced inexorably toward the last of the Coopers.

CHAPTER XVI

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

JANE lifted her head and straightened up, her tear-filled blue eyes turned toward the oncoming man. Involuntarily he slowed, smitten by a qualm at sight of her grief. Then his eyes slipped from the flowery face to the flowery dress which was not hers, and his mouth again became stern.

"Set down an' keep quiet," he ordered.

Extending a hand, he grasped one of hers and swung her outside on the door-

stone. She clung to that strong guiding hand after he had moved her aside, and he had to twist it a little in order to free it.

"Ye're Hard Wood—my 'stranger,'" she breathed. "Ye've been my friend—but ye ain't friendly-like now. I feel it. Have ye been killin' my folks, Hard?"

"Been a-tryin'. 'Tain't my fault I didn't kill the hull o' ye."

He strode inside, leaving her alone.

Into each of the front rooms he shot a glance, finding no sign of his chest. The one at the right was small and sparsely furnished as a bedroom—Jed's and Jerry's, perhaps, for it was here that Copperhead had first shown his face and later escaped. The other was the living-room, and larger; littered with masculine things, hats, pipes, greasy cards on a disordered table, and so on, and furrowed and splintered by Parker's bullets and Hard's buckshot. Passing onward, he found two more rooms opening off each other; and in the right-hand one was what he sought.

This, too, was a bedroom, and far from clean. Tobacco ashes, dried mud on the floor, an old coat, dirty boots, all showed it to be a male sleeping-place. Beyond the unmade bed, under the window, stood the chest with the bronze fittings—scratched and sullied, and punctured in several places by spent bullets. With a growl, he strode in and lifted its lid.

The sight of its contents evoked a fiercer growl. It was packed now with Cooper winter wear, overcoats, mufflers, and similar things, put away to avoid moths. As he yanked the clothing out, he found no trace of his mother's treasures.

Throwing aside the Cooper clothes, he lifted the empty chest, gave it a swing, and heaved it through the window. Then he stamped into the other room, where he halted short. This was the spot where the fiercest of the fight had centered, and where, on the floor at one side of the window, still lay Old Bill. The open eyes of the corpse were staring toward the invader.

This was the first time Hard had seen the head of the Cooper tribe since his death, and momentarily he stood stock still, held spell-bound by that dire stare. Then, advancing and shifting his gaze, he surveyed the thoroughly wrecked room. It evidently was the kitchen. Except the stove and the wood-box, virtually everything was overturned or smashed. A wood-cased clock on a shelf,

however, though nicked by several shots, still was intact and industriously measuring off the minutes. On that clock Hard fixed his gaze for a moment, noting the time—a quarter to ten. Mentally he made a rapid calculation. It was two miles from here to the road, and Steve would hardly reappear in less than an hour. There was plenty of time for what Hard had in mind.

Three more doorways opened into this room. From one, dark and cavernous, floated the damp odor of the cellar. The one beyond it seemed to lead into another room. The third, in the rear wall, opened outdoors, and through it he glimpsed the woodpile beside which lay Jed. Tramping over the broken glass, spilled powder, undried blood, and other vestiges of the fight which littered the floor, he went to the middle door, and found himself peering into the room of the blind girl.

It was the poorest in the house, yet the neatest. A mere cubby of a place, it held only a narrow bed, a small stand on which lay a hairbrush, and a curtain hanging from a shelf across the farther end. But the bed was made up and the floor far cleaner than any other he had seen here. An apron, hanging across the footboard, showed clearly whose room it was.

Soft footsteps approaching from the front of the house drew him sharply around. Then came a voice, low but anxious; the voice of Jane.

"Hard, where be ye?"

"Here. Into the kitchen."

"Oh." Her voice was relieved. "I—I can't set out there all alone now. Seems as if I feel things a-crawlin' up to me. What was that bumpin' I heard into here?"

She was in the kitchen now, moving with the ease of long familiarity, yet shrinking toward the inner wall as if she could see or feel the grisly stare of her father. The broken glass littering the floor seemed not to injure her bare soles.

"'Twas me. A-throwin' out my chest. Wha'd yer tribe do with mom's things?"

"Do with what? What ye talkin' about?"

"Aw, don't try to be so innocent!" he snapped. "Ye're a-wearin' my mom's dress—stole from a dead woman!—an' ye know it as well as I do. An' ye know what they done with the rest o' her things. Where be they? Where's her gold pin an' all?"

She stopped, her color deepening, her

hands going to her dress. With a flash of spirit she retorted:

"'Tain't so! This dress is my own! Pop, he bought it for me down to New Paltz—this an' some more with it. I never heard of a gold pin. Ye're crazy. Bill, he brought home an old chest from somewheres awhile ago, but I dunno what ye mean by sayin' it's yourn. Don't ye 'cuse us o' stealin'!"

His lips curled. Cooper lies! As if she had not heard the whole matter discussed time and again! And she had the gall to try to outface him.

"Think I'm a fool?" he demanded. "Show me them other dresses!"

She confronted him defiantly. But then, with a sigh, she moved past him and went to the curtain pendent from the shelf. Pushing this aside, she passed her hands over garments hanging from pegs on the wall.

"Here they be," she said. "An' they're mine, no matter what ye say."

Stepping toward her, he took one quick survey. One of the garments hanging there was indubitably his mother's—the white one in which she had been married. About the other feminine things he was not so sure.

"An' yer pop give 'em to ye, did he?" he mocked. "Wal, now I'll give ye one that fits ye better—this one here." He twitched loose a faded blue frock which he knew had never belonged to his mother. "Now ye git outen that one an' into this one, an' hurry up! Mind what I tell ye!"



WITH that he stalked out. Returning to the front, he stepped outside and keenly scanned the surroundings; for somehow the girl's statement that she had felt things "crawlin' up" bothered him. Nothing new could be discerned. He turned back, and was about to reenter, when a gliding shape on the ground near the house caught his eye. It was a snake.

A closer look told him that it was only a "striped adder," or non-venomous garter snake. But it was a large one, and, with natural loathing for all its repulsive class, he killed it by a blow from his rifle. As he returned within doors he pondered on the girl's sensitiveness. Something *had* been crawling to her; something which would alarm any woman, even though it was harmless. Her perception of things which she could not see, and could hardly be expected to hear, seemed uncanny.

Up the narrow stairway he climbed, entering the last room of the house—an attic which, like most of the other rooms, seemed to be a sleeping-place. Various dusty odds and ends of furniture, besides the bed, were ranged carelessly along under the eaves. One, less dusty than the rest, was a long chest; larger than his own, though of much cruder workmanship. Trying to lift the lid, he found it locked.

Stepping back a pace, he leveled his rifle at the key-hole and shot. The heavy slug smashed the lock and split the surrounding wood. His next tug at the lid lifted it with little difficulty, and he tumbled the contents out on the floor.

They consisted mainly of spare bedding; quilts and blankets. Wondering why such articles should be kept under lock and key, however, he sorted them over. Out from among them tumbled a tin box.

It was an oblong tobacco can, large enough to hold a pound of slice-cut. Around it was a strong cord, frayed from many unties and reknottings. On removing this and turning back the lid, he found the tin nearly full of money.

"M-hm!" he grunted. No wonder this was kept locked up! It was Old Bill's bank.

The money was all in notes. As Hard counted it, his eyes widened. It totaled nearly eight hundred dollars. Eight hundred dollars, at a time when hard-working men counted themselves well paid at a dollar a day, was a small fortune. Old Bill had accumulated a handsome profit from his "charcoal" business.

The thought brought a sardonic smile to Hard's face. Replacing the bills in the box and retying the cord, he commented:

"Thank ye. I'll jest take this 'long to pay for the charcoal-burnin' ye done down to my house. When I git ready to build me a new place, this 'shine money'll build it an' leave some over for fixin's. Much 'bliged!"

Back to the stairs he went, and, descending, back to Jane's room. He found her sitting on the bed, gowned now in the worn frock he had handed her, but holding on her lap the flowery dress and stroking it with her sensitive finger tips. Down her cheeks were slipping two big tears.

She spoke no word. Spying the tears, he frowned again. Bruskiy he told her: "I'm a-goin' outside. Git yer things together—'specially them dresses—on to the bed. After ye go 'way from here ye ain't comin' back."

Again he went out. Again he saw nothing new. Walking around to the chest, he got it on his back and trudged away toward the Minnewaska slope. After an arduous portage he set it under a shelving rock and returned to the clearing, where he retrieved his abandoned muzzle-loader from the grass beside the creek.

Thereafter he worked fast. Ascending once more to the attic, he picked out the best quilt and blankets, and these he carried down to the door. In Jane's room he gathered up the pitifully small heap representing all her possessions and bade her follow him. Mindful of the broken glass, he led her through the back door, and thence around the house. On the front doorstep he laid the feminine things on the blankets. Then, going to the barn, he got rope, and with this he returned and corded all the cloth into a compact bundle.

"Now come over here a little ways," he directed.

Again, unquestioning, she followed the faint rustle of his footsteps in the grass. He took her to the edge of the corn, and there he dropped his bundle and told her to sit on it while he stepped back to the house.

"Hard," she said then, low-voiced, "tell me jest what's 'come of all of us. Bill an' Joe's gone with——"

"A revenooer," he supplied. "Yer pop an' Jed got shot. Jerry, he run. You're goin' to—'nother place. Now set still."

Back to the barn he loped, seeking livestock. Only pigs and fowls were there, shut in the cellar; for the horses had been seized with the "charcoal" wagon at the time of Joe's arrest, and the cows and the colt had been driven early to pasture, farther back in the woods. Hard shooed out all the fowls, which departed with angry squawks at his roughness; and then, opening the hog-pen, he evicted the porkers by kicks and blows. Emerging, he shut the doors, drove the pigs farther away, and strode to the house.

At the woodpile he stooped and, with a grimace, gripped Jed by the arms. Through the back door he dragged him, to drop him beside his father. Then from behind the stove he lifted a big oil-can and some kindlings.

"If ye shot me," he addressed the pair on the floor, "would ye bury me? Not much, ye wouldn't. No more will I bury you."

And he stalked past them, left the room, and laid his tinder at the foot of the stairs; drenched the stairs with kerosene; tossed the can aside, lighted matches, and set the flames to work. With a hiss they swept up the staircase.

Once more he ran to the barn. In its hay he started another fire. When it was well under way he loped to the corn.

"Another o' them 'jedgments' folks talk about," he muttered as he went. "An eye for an eye, an' a tooth for a tooth, an' a burnin' for a burnin'—that's 'jedgment!' An' I ain't through jedgin', neither."

Again he looked grimly into the questing face of the last remaining Cooper, sitting mute at the edge of the sword-bladed maize. Then he spoke to her.

"We'll be a-goin'. Straight through the brush. Lemme git that bundle onto my back."

"Where's Uncle Eb live? Nigh?" she questioned, rising obediently.

"Right north. That's the way we're a-goin'—right north."

From the house came a slight crackling sound, but she did not hear it; for a lusty breeze was blowing now, from the north, and the loud rustling of the corn-blades filled her ears. Yet she lifted her face, in that odd way of hers, and held her eyes toward the dwelling where she had always lived.

"Will they be good to me at Uncle Eb's?" she asked, hesitantly.

"As good as Jed or Jerry was to ye here." His tone was sarcastic. Her face clouded still more.

"I s'pose I've got to go there," she sighed. "An' it's been pretty bad here since mom died. But this is the onliest place I ever knowed, an'—an'—I jest hope they'll be good to me at Uncle Eb's. I—I ain't much good to work."

Again he was assailed by a twinge of pity and doubt. But it passed. He twitched his shoulders to settle the roped pack, shut a fist around the barrels of both his guns, grasped her nearer hand with the other, and gruffly commanded—

"Come on!"

Along the edge of the corn he led her to the creek. There he picked her up and carried her across. On the farther side they resumed their tandem formation; the man ahead, carrying pack and guns, the tobacco-box bank bulging his shirt at one side, his

gun-hand shoving aside branches or bushes, his other extended backward to the girl; Jane behind, responsive to the guiding of those sinewy fingers, her feet feeling their way past root and stone, her entire consciousness concentrated now on the task of progress. Except for occasional directions, no more words were spoken.

Slowly they passed onward and were gone. Behind them, a gradually thickening cloud of smoke was beginning to befoul the clear blue sky—a sinister smudge which soon was to bring hurrying toward it half the men of the Traps, who now were excitedly discussing the prolonged gunfire which had echoed far and wide from the Cooper place. Before them, invisible at the north, lay the little yellow house of Uncle Eb, where the unfortunate girl hoped to find a new home whose habitants would not be harsh. But many a long day was to pass before the people of the Wilham household were to see this hard youth or the girl who now followed him.

CHAPTER XVII

JUDGMENT

BETWEEN the home of Uncle Eb and that of his nearest neighbor, the sandy hill-road of the Traps made several slight bends. It was midway of this section, and out of sight from any house, that Hard and his convoy chanced to emerge from the brush. Determined and defiant toward all his world, he was making no particular effort to evade observation; but neither was he parading his purpose before inquisitive eyes. And now, finding the road empty at that point, he made an odd move.

Before stepping into the highway he turned to Jane, who had stopped when she felt him pause. Briefly informing her that he would carry her a few steps, he lifted her in his arms and walked backward across the sand. On the farther side he smiled slightly as he surveyed the tracks he had made. To anyone who might notice them later, those footprints would not advertise the fact that here a man and a girl had gone toward Dickie Barre. On the contrary, they would indicate that a lone man had journeyed toward the Cooper place, where dense black smoke now was streaming southward on the wind.

Toward that smudge his gaze now lifted, and for a moment he stood watching it with

savage satisfaction. Then, setting the girl on her feet, he grasped her hand again and guided her along a grassy lane into a hummocky field. Beyond, they traveled along the sides of the knolls, without attempt at concealment on his part, but without attracting observation; for by this time the interest of everybody thereabouts was centered to the southward, and, with the news beginning to fly about that some of the Coopers had been shot and others arrested, virtually all outdoor work was temporarily deserted. When the leader and the led left the field it was to enter a bypath, and along this they traveled for some time in silence. As before, Jane was so intent on her movements that she had little thought to spare for other matters.

At length, however, she called a halt. Unused to walking any great distance, and tired as well by the strain of constant attention to her footing, she now was thoroughly fatigued.

"Wait!" she panted. "I'm tuckered out!"

A few feet farther on stood a knee-high, flat-topped stone. Without comment, he led her to it and released her. She felt the stone with her hands, than sank on it. Resting his guns on the ground, he squatted, without removing his pack. He felt a bit leg-weary himself after his active morning.

Squatting there, he frowned as he observed that her feet were bruised from contact with stones. He had led her as skilfully as he could, but he now realized that he had walked too fast. Yet she had made no complaint; nor, despite the mute evidence of the reddened toes, did she make any now. A grudging admiration stirred in him. She was no whining sniveler.

When she had rested a little, she asked again:

"Ain't we 'most there? Seems like we've come 'most a hundred mile. How fur is Uncle Eb's?"

"From your place to Uncle Eb's, through the brush, is two mile," he answered coolly. "'Tain't much farther now to where ye're a-goin'. Seems an awful long ways to you, o' course, 'cause ye ain't used to walkin'. An' we've had to travel slow."

Literally true, yet deceptive. They had already walked more than four miles, and were not yet at the end. But to untraveled Jane a mile had always been a vague, very long distance, and she accepted his state-

ment without suspicion. Curiosity prompted her, though, to ask:

"What was that place where ye carried me? An' why did ye stop?"

"'Twas a place I didn't want ye to step on to," was his noncommittal reply. "An' I was a-lookin' at—at a hornets' nest that a feller burnt. When ye're ready we'll go 'long."

With a little difficulty she arose, wincing a bit at the twinges of her sore feet, but making no whimper.

"Then le's go an' git it done. I'm ready." And, without hesitation, she extended her hand.

He eyed her soberly, wavering a little in his purpose. He glanced back along the way they had come, biting his lower lip and rubbing his jaw. He could turn her about and lead her to Uncle Eb's, after all, without her knowledge of where she had been. But—

His eyes went to the contused toes. His memory went to sharp-tongued Mis' Wilham, who now would be far from gracious in her remarks anent any Cooper. His hand went to meet Jane's, and his feet moved forward on the way he had been traveling. What he had begun in a spirit of uncompromising retaliation he must finish.



NOW, however, he moved more slowly and carefully, and saw to it that the following feet stubbed against no more stones. And when he forsook the path and began the stiff climb leading to the rock blocks at the left, he went still more carefully, holding bushes aside until she could pass, and warning her of every obstruction. On reaching the jagged boulders themselves he followed a roundabout course which made the going easier for her, and in some spots he lifted her bodily upward or across the safe footing.

"For the Lord's sakes!" she expostulated. "Where be ye a-takin' me, Hard? This is awful! There can't be nobody a-livin' into a place like this!"

"It's kind o' rough into here," he admitted calmly. "But ye've got to climb up jest a little more, an' then ye'll be there."

She listened a moment. Then she turned to him a face in which he read open suspicion.

"There ain't no house here!" she asserted. "There ain't a sound of a house or a field—not a hen, not a grasshopper! We're into the woods an' the rocks—Hard! What be ye doin' with me?"

"Don't argue 'bout it! Ye're a-goin' where ye're a-goin', an' ye can talk later on."

She tried to draw away from him. The effort was futile, for he tightened his grip and held her powerless. Laying his guns on a rock, he swung her off her feet and carried her on toward the rift in the stone marking his portal. And there, breathing hard, he set her down and spoke again.

"Ye're a-goin' up through a hole here an' down on t'other side. If ye do jest what I tell ye, ye'll be all right. If ye do any other way ye'll git hurt bad."

"Git hurt bad," she repeated. "What'll hurt me?"

"Rocks. Ye'll fall."

"Oh. An' s'posin' I don't fall—then what'll 'come of me?"

"Then ye won't git hurt. No way at all."

She was silent a moment, turning this over in her mind. Then, with a tremulous little smile:

"All right. I'll do like ye tell me."

"Ye'd better."

It was no easy feat to pass her safely through the one small, high opening, but he managed it. First he told her exactly what she must do, and made sure that she remembered his instructions. Leading her then into the rift, he braced his feet firmly, squatted, and gripped her ankles. Slowly, smoothly, he straightened up, while she balanced herself with knees rigid and hands creeping up the stony wall. Reaching his full height, he raised his hands chest-high, lifting her without slip or loss of equilibrium to the brink of the entrance hole. There she could aid herself. Obediently she drew herself through the gap, felt her way straight ahead along the shelf, and lay still.

Climbing after her, he then lowered her to the rock platform, and, again following, guided her down his rough-and-ready stairs. On the lowest step he seated her and left her while he went back to retrieve his guns. When these and the bedding roll were passed in, he once more traversed shelf and stepping stones and stood beside his prisoner in his primitive fortress.

"Now, Miss Cooper," he said sternly, "ye're at the end. Ye're a long ways from Uncle Eb's or anybody else's, an' it won't do ye no good to holler. Ye're into a pen—a stone pen, like Bill an' Joe are a-goin' to be. They're a-goin' to stay into their pen till they've paid for what they done, an'

ye're a-goin' to stay into yourn till ye've paid for the clo'es ye stole."

Her color ebbed. Then it flowed again hotly, and she sprang up, heedless of what the footing might be.

"I stole? I never! I've told ye——"

"I ain't forgittin' what ye told me. It's lies. Ye never went to my house an' stole them dresses, but ye knowed they were stole an' ye used 'em; an' anybody that takes things that have been stole is as bad as the stealer. Ye knowed Bill an' Jerry stole them things—ye must of heard 'em crowin' 'bout it, an' 'bout how they burnt me out. Don't try to tell me no dif'rent. If ye hadn't had no other clo'es, an' wore them stole dresses because ye had to, there'd be some excuse for ye. But ye've got other clo'es—ye've got 'em on now—an' they fit ye a lot better'n my mom's, too, an' they must be more comf'table. So there ain't no excuse for ye at all, an' ye'll serve yer time."

His tone was cold, dispassionate, inexorable as that of a judge in court solemnly pronouncing sentence on a convicted criminal. Again she paled, staring blankly toward him, various emotions flitting over her face—bewilderment, doubt, dread. Once she tried to smile, as if feeling that this must be some practical joke; but the effort failed. Then some inner strength rose to her aid, and she became steady and calm.

"Hard Wood," she said, "I ain't goin' to argue with ye. I've heard 'bout ye. I know ye ain't got no mercy on to man or woman when ye're mad, an' 'tain't no use to say nothin' more to ye. But I'm a-sayin', jest the same, that ye're wrong, awful wrong, an' sometime ye're a-goin' to know it. How long be ye goin' to keep me here?"

"Till I git ready to let ye go."

"That means till ye git over yer mad an' git 'shamed of yerself. I don't think that'll be very long, Hard Wood. Be ye goin' to leave me here all 'lone with the snakes an' things?"

"There ain't no snakes into here. But I ain't leavin' ye 'lone. This is where I live. Yer sneakin' brothers put me into this rock-hole, 'long o' burnin' my house. An' I might as well tell ye now that I've paid 'em up for that. I set yer hull place afire 'fore we come away, an' by now it's burnt to the ground, same as my house was."

Again she paled. For a moment she stood motionless. Somewhere above sounded a

long sigh of wind among pine branches. Unconsciously she echoed it, drawing a deep breath of mute farewell to the roof which had always been her shelter.

"So everything's gone," she murmured. "Everything. Mom an' pop, an' all the boys, an' the house—an' everything. An' I'm here into the rocks, lost. But I ain't afraid o' ye, Hard Wood. I ain't to blame for what's come. An' ye're goin' to be 'shamed of yerself, Hard, awful 'shamed. I know it."

He made no answer. He stood regarding her steadily, stonily, yet with involuntary admiration and a vague misgiving. This slip of a girl, homeless, helpless, sightless, possessed a courage deeper than his own, a resolute confidence before which he felt abashed. The walls of the natural dungeon to which he had brought her, the austere sentence he had pronounced on her, could not crush her spirit. Rather, they seemed to strengthen it. Instead of cringing before his ruthless judgment she met it with prophecy. And, despite himself, he knew that that prophecy would prove true.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DUNGEON

HARD WOOD was glum. Sweet though revenge had been when he fired the house of his enemies, the taste of his retribution upon Jane Cooper now was sour in his mouth. Sour, though she had served only three days of the indeterminate sentence which he had imposed on her. So sour, indeed, that it jaundiced his sight and transformed his care-free cavern into a cheerless dungeon to which he had committed not her alone—but himself.

In all his unrelenting life thus far, he had never failed to exact whatever reparation he deemed due or to derive complete satisfaction from such retaliation. Whatever punishment seemed fitting at the time had been meted out in full, and thereafter no twinge of regret had troubled him. But now, for the first time, he was repenting at leisure a hasty action.

His suddenly conceived and inflexibly executed plan of imprisoning the last of the Coopers for receiving and using stolen goods had almost lost its savor before he actually reached the rocks of expiation; but he had carried it through. Now he would have

given the looted tobacco-box bank and all it contained to obliterate his harsh judgment of three days ago. Jane's prophecy was already fulfilled. He knew he had been wrong, and he was ashamed.

In these three days she had not pleaded with him, had not argued with him, had not sought to soften his will by tears. With innate stoicism she had accepted the situation, and, with a serene confidence incomprehensible to him, she awaited the end of her durance. But she had again denied the guilt of which he accused her; denied it with a quiet sincerity which convinced him despite himself. Too, she had steadfastly maintained that the new dresses had been given her by her father; and this also he was forced to believe.

"I never heard nothin' 'bout yer house bein' burnt," she declared, "nor 'bout things bein' stole. I never listened to what was said 'mongst the men 'ceptin' at the table or times when I couldn't help it. After mom went they were always cussin' an' talkin' rough, an' I didn't like it, an' I left 'em 'lone all I could. I even used to put my head under the pillar when I went to bed, so's I wouldn't have to listen to 'em!

"Ye say Bill owned up to ye, 'fore he went away, that him an' Jerry burnt yer house an' stole things. I didn't hear that, but if ye say he did, I s'pose it's so. But if they done that, they done it without pop knowin'. Pop, he never wanted the boys to go meddlin' with nobody; he told 'em 'twould only make folks come snoopin' 'round our place, tryin' to hit back. Pop says:

"'Ye leave folks 'lone, an' make 'em leave ye 'lone. If anybody comes 'round here make 'em git out an' stay out, but long's nobody bothers ye, don't ye bother nobody. If ye do I'll handle ye so's ye won't forgit it.'

"An' about them dresses, it's jest like I told ye. Pop, he went down to the valley, an' the next day when he come back I was up into the woods a little ways, an' he was to home awhile 'fore I come in. An' when I did come in he was a-fightin' with some o' the boys. I guess Jerry was one, 'cause I heard him a-screechin' awful, an' pop a-yellin', 'I'll learn ye!' An' I went back into the woods till 'twas quiet down there to the house. An' when I went to set down into my chair to eat, there was some dresses onto it. An' pop says:

"'I got ye some new clo'es, gal, down to

the village. Yer old ones are gittin' kind o' wore out, an' seein' yer mom ain't here no more to make 'em for ye I got some store dresses. See how ye like 'em.' An' when I put 'em on they were too big. But pop says, 'I got 'em kind o' big, 'cause ye might grow bigger to fit 'em.' An' I was awful pleased—they're the onliest store clo'es I ever had. An' they're mine, like I tell ye. Pop bought 'em an' give 'em to me, an' they can't be yourn."

Hard made no retort to this. Her tone, her words, rang true, and her quiet air carried conviction. Pondering over her account of the circumstances connected with her acquisition of the new dresses, he saw them from an entirely different angle.

The fight of which she spoke probably had been caused by Old Bill's discovery of the chest, and, through it, of the deed committed by his sons in his absence. His rage and his violence would be due, not to any regret for the crime, but to the fact that they had disobeyed his orders. Having wreaked his anger on his insubordinate offspring, he would then think how to make use of the proceeds of their theft; and the logical use for dresses would be to give them to his girl, meanwhile posing as a thoughtful father.

He had not given her the gold-and-ame-thyst brooch, for he could make money on that. No doubt he had sold it for what he could get when he took his next cargo to town. The people with whom he dealt would not ask too many questions.

Yes, that would be the way of it. But the thinker made no attempt to argue these details with Jane. The one important matter was not what she believed, but what that belief proved. In the end he had to concede that it proved her innocence. Therefore she was unjustly condemned and serving an undeserved sentence.

This conclusion, however, was not reached immediately. The youth who never before had felt himself to be in the wrong, who had ruthlessly punished every man incurring his wrath, and who had virtually defied his God, could not at once reverse himself now. Within him wrestled two mighty forces: His headstrong will and his sense of justice. Hitherto these twain had always worked together; now they turned on each other. Until one of them triumphed he could know no peace nor order the way he should go.



SO, FOR three days Hard and Jane lived a strange life. He, the jailer, found himself serving his captive. She could do no cooking on his crude rock stove; to attempt it would be to endanger her life, since a treacherous tongue of flame might at any instant seize upon her dress; and thus he must perforce prepare the meals and put them before her. Utterly unfamiliar with her new surroundings, she could not even walk about in safety; and he worked to make the rough floor more passable, carrying stones and trying to fill in the inequalities. At first he even had to make her bed, giving up to her his couch of bough tips and spreading thereon the bedding he had taken from the Cooper attic.

He himself moved to the extreme outer edge of the roofed room and, rolled in his blankets, slept uncomfortably on bare rock. Because of her, he could not rest well by day or by night. In the dark hours he often started awake, listening tensely until he caught the barely audible sound of regular breathing and knew that all was well. In the daytime he was much less at ease; for then there gnawed at him a subconscious fear lest, in moving about, she might meet some calamity.

Some deadly snake might creep in here and strike her. She might injure herself badly on the stones. Something might fall; he caught himself staring apprehensively at the overhang which he had once derided, but which looked dangerous now that she lay beneath it. Never before had he feared anything, real or imaginary. But now, somehow, it was vastly different. Everything was changed. His cave grew odious to him. Yet he could not leave it for more than a few minutes at a time.

Curiously enough, he felt no desire to go to the three maples and consult the silent half-moon stone, as he had previously done when troubled or perplexed. Several times the idea arose vaguely in his mind, but instinctively he shied away from it. He did not know why; did not clearly realize even that the thought was there. The fact was that deep down in his soul he was ashamed to go to that spot, ashamed to face the invisible presence of his mother while he was holding this girl in bondage.

There was little talk between the two. With unbroken patience, she calmly awaited his admission that he was wrong. With

increasing impatience he grappled with himself, seeking adjustment. Unanalytical, unintrospective, he did not know just what was taking place within him. He knew only that he was not ready to release her and that he was mentally miserable while holding her.

Several times, as a surcease from struggle, he forced his thoughts into another channel. Taking the tobacco box from the crevice where he had stowed it away, he counted the money and visioned the new house which he would eventually build with it, a brand new house, spick and span, solid and comfortable—a better home than he had ever known since coming to the Traps. Sometimes he fancied it on the site of his old one, sometimes he played with the thought of erecting it somewhere along Peters Kill, where the brawling water delighted him and the rhododendron bloomed wondrously in July. Seven hundred and eighty-seven dollars, that box held. With his own labor, he could build a Traps palace on that money, or so he thought. And on Cooper money! Old Bill had 'shined and smuggled and saved and gotten himself shot—all to build a house for an enemy! Ha!

But the vision always ended in the same way. He was back in his rocky dungeon, somberly eying the last of the Coopers, dwelling on the patient face which yet was so aloof. Then he shut up the box and resumed his struggling.

Another apparition arose to confront him. It was the Future; and a grinning, grisly phantom it was. He would have to let her out, of course. He had never intended to hold her here permanently. But then, he supposed, she must go to Uncle Eb's; and, though Uncle Eb himself would be unfailingly kind to the waif, his wife would be more than likely to hurt her cruelly with thoughtless, tactless words. Yet this was not what made the specter grin so mockingly. Mis' Wilham's tongue, though cutting, was not wilfully malicious or mean; but there were plenty of other tongues which were both. How they would hiss and clack over the fact that Jane had lived for days in the woods with a man! That was a fact which could not be gainsaid, and they would make the most of it. Not even Hard Wood could still them. They would sneer behind his back at the helpless victim. The very ones whose own reputations were far from unsmirched would be worst in their slurs.

He, who had set himself up as judge, had

unwittingly condemned her for life. He grated his teeth and writhed.

And now it was afternoon on the third day. And, whether he would or not, he must go outside. His small fuel supply was exhausted, and he must cut more wood. Only a short distance from his portal, he knew, lay a fallen tree, and a few of its branches would suffice for cooking the next two or three meals. The excursion would not take long. Saying nothing, he took his ax and slid out through his hole.

A few minutes of quiet work gave him the limbs he needed. Without taking the time to shorten them, he piled them in his arms and picked his way back among the rocks. At his portal-crevice he laid them down, grasped the top one, and stepped within to lift it to the hole and shove it through. But then, with hands raised and stick resting on the edge of the rock overhead, he halted movement. From inside the dungeon came a voice.

It was her voice. She was talking softly to something—or somebody. What she was saying he could not understand. Very quietly he lowered the stick; stole out and got his ax; shoved it under his belt, returned, and climbed. Reaching the shelf, he crept on hands and knees to the end and peered down. Then he relaxed.

Jane was receiving a visitor. But that visitor was not human. It was a yellow-hammer; perhaps the same one which had previously perched above to watch the lone cave-man, perhaps one of its kin. There were several such birds dwelling along here. None of them, however, had ever dared descend into the cavern while he was present. But now that she—the girl to whom the birds came—was alone there, this handsome creature had floated down.

Resting on a stone just beyond her reach, it was bobbing its scarlet-splashed crown to her and murmuring softly, a little too shy to permit her touch, yet eager to be friendly. And she was talking to it, coaxing it, murmuring wordless sounds in response, while she leaned forward with lips parted and hands invitingly open. The watching youth above them felt an unaccountable pang of jealousy.

He moved a little more. This time the caller caught the movement. With a startled note and a quick flirt of wings it whirled away and shot into the trees beyond the cavern. For a couple of seconds Jane

sat motionless, a blank expression obliterating her smile. Then she started up.

"Birdie! What's 'come of ye?" she called anxiously. "What scairt ye? Where——"

Then she fell.

She had taken a quick step forward and stumbled. She pitched headlong and struck a rock.



WHETHER Hard jumped the whole distance, or scrambled over and dropped, he never knew. He was lifting her, holding her close, when her lids fluttered open and she stared dazedly at him.

"Lord!" he gasped. "Ye're a-livin'! I was—I was 'fraid ye'd kilt yerself!"

Still she stared. Into her face came a strange, startled look of wonder and joy.

"I can see ye!" she cried. "I can see ye! My eyesight's come——"

She faltered. The joyous look faded. Her expression became strained.

"No—it's a-goin'. Ye're a-fadin' away—Oh, hold on to me—hold tight! Don't go 'way like that— Oh! Ye're gone!"

Frantically she threw her head forward. Her forehead struck against his chest. She threw up one hand to his jaw, drawing back her head again and staring upward with fierce intensity. Then hopeless misery swept over her, and she drooped in his embrace and burst into tears.

"It—it—ain't no use," she sobbed. "It—it never lasts. Oh, God, if I could—only git my sight—an' keep it!"

Dumb, astounded, he looked blankly down at her. She had seen him? She, blind, had actually *seen* him? She said "it" never lasted. It? What? Her sight? Had she ever seen before? What on earth——

"Say!" he broke out. "Wha'd'ye mean? Can ye see things sometimes?"

The fair head against his breast nodded convulsively. She tried to speak, but choked. After a moment she straightened up and sought to draw away from him.

"Crybaby!" she scolded herself, trying to wipe the tears away. "I—it come so sudden I lost my holt. Le' me go. I want to lay down. My—head aches."

"But tell me," he insisted. "I want to know. Can ye really see once in awhile? What do I look like to ye?"

"Ye're black-headed. Black eyes, too. An' there's a—a black smudge onto yer nose. Ye look hard—but ye don't look

mean. Oh, le' me lay down! My head's splittin'."

In a daze he led her to her couch. As he did so he ran a finger down his nose. True enough, it brought away a sooty stain. The smear must have come from his cookery at noon—he had not known of it until now—and it was proof positive that she had seen him. When he had set her down he stepped mechanically to the spring, sopped a handkerchief in the cold water, and laid it on her forehead. She was lying supine now, and for a little time she spoke no word.

"That's awful good," she said then, removing the handkerchief. "Will ye wet it some more?" When he had done so, she added: "There's been times—jest a few times—when I could see real plain for a minute. There's been other times when I could tell light from dark—when the sun was shinin'. But it's only once in a long, long time, an' it never lasts. I can remember a little 'bout how things looked 'fore I lost my eyesight, but not much."

"Then ye ain't always been that way? I thought ye was borned so."

"No. When I was a baby I could see like anybody. But——" She hesitated—"wal, I s'pose mebbe I'd better tell ye. 'Twas Jerry that done it. I was 'bout two year old, an' he was 'bout six, an' he got mad an' hit me onto the head with a poker. I guess he 'most kilt me. He did kill my eyesight. I've been this way ever since."

He straightened up with a growl. That damnable Copperhead! If only Hard's last bullet had wounded him mortally! If only he could get his fists on him now! But he'd get that varmint sometime, and when he did he'd get him good!

He muttered something to that effect. Then, to her, he added vaguely:

"Wal, that ain't as bad as if ye'd never been able to see. Mebbe 'twill come back to ye, all of a sudden, an' stay."

"No," she sighed. "I don't b'lieve it. I've been this way 'most sixteen years. There ain't nothin' that can make it better now. I've jest got to stand it."

He stood staring blankly. Something about her words had loosed the spark of an idea which darted through his mind and was gone. What was it? He had not quite grasped it.

His head moved. His gaze focused on the tobacco box in which lay nearly eight hundred dollars, the money which was to build

him a new house. Then all at once he staggered as if from a blow. The fleeting spark had been followed by a dazzling flash, a veritable lightning-stroke amid darkness, lighting up a strange, undreamed-of scene.

Like a night-bound traveler suddenly beholding a weirdly radiant country ahead, he gaped at the vision. Then he drew a long breath. Abruptly he burst into a laugh, a joyous, rollicking laugh that reverberated upward and outward beyond the dungeon walls. It ceased as suddenly as it had started. But the light which had leaped into his eyes still shone there as he looked down once more at Jane.

Her lips quivered again, and she threw an arm across her eyes.

"Don't laugh at me!" she choked. "I *can't* stand that!"

"I ain't!" he denied. "I—I jest got my sight, too, Jane. It come to me as sudden as yourn done—an' it ain't leavin' me, neither. I can see somethin' so good that I don't dast tell ye 'bout it yit. I'm only a-hopin' it's true!

"Listen, Jane. I've been mean to ye. I'm 'shamed, like ye said I'd be. An' I ain't goin' to be mean no more. Come mornin', I'm goin' to take ye outen here an' to a better place. It's goin' to be quite a walk——"

"Ye mean to Uncle Eb's?"

"Nope. Not yit. I—uh—I've got a place into mind that I think will be a hull lot better'n Uncle Eb's. If I find out it ain't, I'll fetch ye to Uncle Eb's then. We've jest got to go an' find out 'bout it. I can't promise ye nothin' jest now—'ceptin' this: I promise ye I ain't tryin' no more tricks onto ye. I give ye my word on to it. Ye'll jest have to trust me—if ye can. I ain't given ye much reason to."

She was silent a moment. Then—

"I guess I can trust ye, Hard."

Again he was amazed by her quiet confidence. He did not know that she had read the honesty of his tone. As he stepped out, however, a smile was on his face, a smile of content and hope. His dungeon was a dungeon no longer. He had found the way out.

TO BE CONCLUDED





Hard Wood

A Three Part Story, Conclusion

by Arthur O. Friel

Author of "Cat o' Mountain," "Mountains of Mystery," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

WHEN Harry Wood and his mother first went to live in "The Traps," up in the New York hills, he fell foul of Jerry Cooper, and thrashed him so completely that he earned for himself the name of "Hard Wood." Steve Oaks bestowed the name on him, and Steve was a good judge of men. The same day Jerry Cooper was nicknamed "Copperhead," for he tried to strike from behind, without warning.

The whole Cooper tribe, there were seven of them, took up the feud but, thanks to Steve's intervention, a deadline was drawn:—Hard Wood agreed to avoid the Cooper clearing, they agreed to keep away from the Wood homestead.

So matters drifted on for four years. Hard Wood grew to manhood. He became, indeed, hard, grim and quiet, swift to anger. The Traps people feared him and he had but two friends: Steve Oaks and old "Uncle" Eb, with whom Steve lived.

Then Mrs. Wood died. After the funeral Hard Wood left The Traps and tramped away through the woods, wandering from village to village as far as Kyserike. Here the memory of his mother's death was brought back to him when, on a scrap of newspaper, he read an account of a cure performed by a New York specialist on a wealthy inhabitant of Kingston. If he, too, had had money perhaps his mother might have been saved!

Eager to see his home again, he hurried back, only to find the house burned down. Instinctively he blamed the Coopers. His conviction became a certitude when he failed to find in the débris any trace of his mother's brass-bound chest.

He went to live with Uncle Eb and some days later, armed with a club, he slipped away to reconnoiter the Cooper clearing. When near the cabin he saw a girl coming toward him. It was Jane Cooper. He saw that local gossip was right: The girl was blind.

Unaware of his presence she sat down on a fallen tree-trunk and at her call birds and small wild creatures came to her. Suddenly Hard Wood saw a bobcat strike down a rabbit which had been close beside the girl. Terrified by the unseen danger, she stood motionless, while the bobcat, maddened by the taste of blood, crouched, ready to spring. Hard Wood leaped forward and dispatched the animal with his club.

In its death agony the cat mauled Hard Wood's legs so that he was compelled to go back to Uncle Eb's and remain inactive for several days. During this period the shrill presence of Uncle Eb's wife so exasperated him that on recovery he went to live alone in a well-hidden cave in the hills, where he decided to stay until he could square accounts with the Coopers.

In his rocky home he slept soundly for the first time.

THE following morning, while reconnoitering on the outskirts of the Cooper homestead, he saw Jed strike the blind girl. He dashed from his hiding place, and so savage was his assault that Jed cried out for mercy. His screams brought old man Cooper to the door, armed with a shotgun, and Hard Wood retreated hastily.

Later he met Steve, not the old easy-going Steve, but a new man, changed overnight into a killer. Uncle Eb, he said, had been shot from ambush by Jed Cooper, and he was going to "get" Jed. They set out together, only to be halted by two revenue officers. The latter had captured the younger Cooper on his way to town with moonshine whisky hidden beneath a load of charcoal. He had confessed, and the revenue men had come to arrest the whole tribe.

The four joined forces and attacked the house.

One of the revenue men was killed before the fight was over. Both Jed and his father died.

When the others departed Hard Wood found Jane hiding in the cellar. All feeling of pity vanished when he saw that she was wearing one of his mother's dresses, looted from his own house before it was burned. She swore she had no knowledge of the origin, but he would not believe her. He searched the house and, after taking a roll of bills which he found in a locker, set the place on fire. Then he took the girl to his cave where, he declared, he would imprison her for her share in the robbery.

Though protesting her innocence, she followed him without resistance. In the cave she tripped on a

loose stone and fell, striking her head on the ground. When she arose, for a fraction of a second, she was able to see! But the light dimmed and went out, and again she was blind.

But Hard Wood, impressed by her sudden burst of emotion, at once repented his brutal resolution. A daring plan occurred to him and he decided to act upon it.

In the morning, he said, they would leave the cave for a place that was a "hull lot better" than Uncle Eb's.

And the girl, sensing the honesty of his tone replied—

"I guess I can trust ye, Hard."

CHAPTER XIX

UNDER THE MOON

"**H**ARD WOOD! Ye dirty dog! Come outen that an' stand onto yer hind legs!"

Ice-cold, the voice dropped from the brink of Dickie Barre. Squatting beside his evening cook-fire, Hard started and threw a look upward. Then, as the epithet sank home, he grew hot and sprang to full height. Seizing his rifle, he swung in two strides to the edge of the outer room.

"Hey?" he snapped. "Say that ag'in!"

"Ye bet I will!" came the instant retort.

"Ye dirty dog! What ye done with that gal?"

Hard's weapon twitched, but he did not raise it to an aim. He had marked the spot whence issued the voice, but he could see nothing there except the usual brush. Besides, he burned to punish that reviler with his fists rather than with a bullet.

"Show yer face, ye skulkin' coward!" he snorted.

"I'll show it soon 'nough," grimly. "I'm out as fur's I can git without slippin'. This ground's loose. But ye'll see me yit. I'm Steve."

"Steve!"

"Steve. Thought ye'd lost me, didn't ye? Ye pore fool! 'Fore ye try hidin' out ye'd better learn how to make a fire that don't smoke. Now ye tell me what I ast ye. What ye done with Jane Cooper?"

Hard flung back an angry laugh.

"What's that to you?" he jeered.

"Ye know mighty well. She was put into my care by Joe. Ye burnt the house while I was 'way an' snuck out. Wha'd ye do with that gal?"

The fierce intensity of his tone sent a slight chill over the man below. It was the voice of Steve the killer. But Steve was

talking now to Hard Wood—to a Hard Wood rankling under that name of "dirty dog." And the answer he got was what might be expected.

"Ye bet I burnt it. I'd of burnt it if ye'd been there—an' throwed ye into it if ye didn't like it! An' the gal, she was put into my care as much as yourn, an' she's into better hands than yourn. Now what d'ye think o' that?"

Came sounds of a quick movement; a sudden scramble; a cascade of loose dirt and some bushes into the rocks. Steve's temper had slipped, and he with it. But he had stepped back in time. The narrow escape cooled his reply, but made it all the more menacing.

"I think this about that. Ye've been a friend o' mine, but ye ain't no more. Ye ain't a man. Ye're a dirty dog that run a pore blind gal into the rocks 'stead o' protectin' her. I'm a-goin' to give ye the same dose I'd give a sheep-killin' dog, soon as I git my sights onto ye. Then I'm a-goin' to git her outen there an' take her to Uncle Eb's, where she b'longs."

Hard stood mute. So Steve had turned utterly against him. Steve thought the same thing that the malicious gossips would think—except that he blamed the man and not the girl.

Then the jailer went hot again. Even now, there was time to explain, and Steve, despite his denunciation, would believe him. But he did not think or care about that. He answered with reckless defiance.

"Ye'll have a healthy time doin' all that. An' if that's the kind of a friend ye are, ye can come a-shootin', an' the quicker the better. Or will ye lay hid somewheres an' git me into the back? That'd be more like ye!"

A wordless growl from above. Then, in tones cold and controlled:

"Ye'll git all the shootin' ye want. Git this into yer head. That gal is a-goin' to where she b'longs. It ain't jest me that says so. It's the hull Traps that says it. The Traps is mad.

"The minute I start a-shootin' there'll be fellers a-comin' here from all 'round. There's some way into that hidey-hole o' yourn, an' it's a-goin' to be found. That gal's a-comin' out, an' you ain't.

"If ye're even half of a man ye'll give the gal a chance. Ye'll put her outside where she won't git hurt. It's 'most dark now, an' too late to git her outen the rocks tonight. But I'm a-stayin' right here, all night, with my ears open. Come mornin', I'm movin' down into them rocks. Ye can bring her out. After that I'll settle with ye.

"If ye don't fetch her out I start a-shootin'. An' we'll git her out. This thing is goin' to a finish—your finish. Now I've said all I'm a-goin' to."



A LITTLE more dirt dribbled down. Steve, still unseen, was moving back to safer footing. And then Jane, who had made no sound to show that she actually was there, cried out.

"Steve! Steve Oaks! You git out an' stay out, an' keep quiet 'bout us! Hard's been good to me. I'm stayin' here 'cause I—I want to!"

Hard wheeled with a wrathful grunt. If only she had kept still, Steve would have had no actual proof that she was there; and it might have been possible, somehow, to save her from future odium. Now she had damned herself completely. And Steve was in nowise moved by her command.

"I know better," came his answer. "He ain't got no more mercy than a rock. Ye're a-sayin' that 'cause he's makin' ye. Don't ye worry. We'll git ye out."

"It ain't so!" she contradicted. "I'm all right an' I don't want—"

"Keep quiet!" Hard broke in.

"But—"

"Keep quiet, I tell ye!"

She obeyed. Frowning, he watched the upper edge awhile, then returned gloomily to his cooking. He knew there was little danger from above, since the character of the ground along the brink, steeply slanting and treacherous, prevented any one from reaching the verge of the cliff; he had long ago made sure of this. Nor could any

one come out on the roof of his inner room, for all approach was blocked by a yawning crevasse a few rods behind it. Yet it was possible, at one spot, to cover with a gun the outer end of the shelf terminating in his entrance hole; and he felt in his bones that Steve would find that coign of vantage—probably had already discovered it. Thus the usual exit would be blocked. And in the morning—

Another grunt erupted from him. Silently, mockingly, he grinned up toward the invisible watchman. There was a way to elude his vigilance: a way by which, with luck, the whole Traps might be outmaneuvered.

For a little time, however, he was tempted not to take that way, but to stick and fight all comers. Steve, with the best shotgun in the Traps, and all the rest of them with their slower but no less deadly weapons—let 'em all come! His fast-firing new rifle would make 'em all sick! He'd lick the whole outfit. Vengefully he visioned a roaring battle in which he broke his assailants and drove them scuttling from his stronghold.

Yet he knew that it could not be. For one thing, they would not rush him—they could not; his fortress was too strong. They would cannily, relentlessly, besiege him, wearing him down until they got him in the end. His food supply was very low. He could get no more firewood. He must sleep sometimes. And, curse them though he might, he knew they were right. Though many of them would take a vindictive satisfaction in cornering and annihilating the youth whose fists had disfigured them or their relatives or friends, their basic motive would be vengeance for his cruelty to a helpless girl.

Yes, they were justified. So was Steve, though it cut the thinker keenly that his best friend had turned on him. That very fact, too, showed him how strong must be the mob wrath now seething outside. Steve, he had to admit, would have been slow to take the war-path against him. Now that he had done so, however, he would be as implacable as usual. Yet Hard Wood realized that he himself could not shoot Steve, not even in self-defense. Steve had been too good a pal.

Far more important than any of these considerations, however, was the glorious new vision which so recently had flashed upon him. To stay and battle his enemies

would be to cast away all hope of ever attaining the actuality of that dream. For the first time in his life he must sneak away from a fight. And, now that he had thought out the matter, he did not care. Indeed, he chuckled.

"Hard!" came a whisper from the couch. "What be ye goin' to do?"

Jane now was sitting up, and the faint sheen of the tiny fire revealed the anxiety in her face.

"Tell ye later," he replied, low-voiced. "Wait till I git this cookin' done."

By the time it was done the cavern was dusky, and outside the shades of night were growing more dense. Leaving his lantern unlighted, he laid on the fire another small stick to furnish the vague illumination necessary for movement. Then, as usual, he put into her lap his plate, heaped high; gave her a spoon, and set beside her a cup of fresh water. While she ate, he whispered what she needed to know of his plan for escape.

"We'll have to move slow an' patient, an' not say a word, till we git clear," he concluded. "Then it'll be easy. Mind, now, that ye don't forget. Now don't say nothin' more. When ye've et, put on the shirt an' overhauls. An' then lay down an' rest while ye can."

While she ate, he unrolled from a corded bundle the overalls of which he had spoken, and, with his knife, shortened the legs to an approximate fit for her. In one of the remnants he wrapped up the packet of Cooper money, tying it with cord; and then, with a huge blanket-pin, he fastened it securely inside his shirt. With a short piece of rope he then made a gun-sling. Finally he strapped on his cartridge-belt. He was ready.

Squatting near the fire with back turned to her, he devoured his own meal. When it was finished she had donned the masculine garments and was lying down. He stepped quietly toward her, found her discarded dress, and folded it up. For a moment he stood still, frowning; then moved to her little clothing-roll and drew from it the fateful flowered dress which had brought her here. This also he folded, then wrapped up in the other one. Both were tucked inside his shirt and the shirt securely buttoned.

"Be we a-goin' now?" she breathed.

"Nope. Lay quiet. The moon ain't up yit."

And he filled his pipe and sat down.

Presently something occurred to him. Chuckling, he got a stub pencil and a fragment of paper; wrote a few words; laid the paper in the big empty tobacco-tin; placed the tin, with lid opened, near the fireplace; and resumed his patient waiting.

His pipe went out, and he did not refill it. His wee fire died, and the cavern became black. From the crest of the precipice came no sound; but he knew Steve was there. From across the room sounded soft, regular breathing. Jane had fallen asleep.

Through the rift overhead he watched the stars creep slowly westward. It seemed that the moon—a late, waning moon—would never come. But at length it did. The sky grew brighter, and down through the opening fell a vague sheen which enabled his dark-dilated pupils to discern dimly the outlines of his surroundings.

Rising, he slipped his gun-sling over his head. Noiselessly he stole across to Jane. A light touch and a whispered word roused her. She took his hand, arose, and followed him.

Without a sound, they passed slowly to the split at the rear, the emergency exit which he knew to be hazardous, but to which they now must trust. Feeling his way, he lowered himself into it. The first few feet of the passage, he remembered, were reasonably safe.

Inch by inch he worked downward, stopping at every foot to guide her after him. The moon gave no help here, and the passage was utterly black. Jagged rock tongues thrust upward from the bottom or outward from the sides. Rattlesnakes or copperheads might lie coiled to strike death into his legs. At any step a sudden slip might hurl them down a steep slope to a bone-breaking impact. Every movement must be cautious and gradual. They crept, crept, crept, with every nerve strained and with countless pauses.

At length his groping foot met nothing. Knowing that they must be down far enough to be lost to sight, he scratched a match. They were on the brink of a crevice, perhaps two feet across—wide enough to swallow them—and of unguessable depth. Picking his footing, he straddled the gap and lifted her across. They passed on safely; but thereafter he proceeded with even more caution, and at every doubtful spot he used a match. As never before, he realized the meaning of blindness.



WHEN, finally, he emerged into rocky débris faintly illumined by the moon, he gave a long sigh of thanksgiving. They were outside the passage, and he was weary from the strain. But they were not yet out of the woods, either literally or metaphorically. He unslung his rifle. With unrelaxed caution he then threaded the stones, took his bearings from the moon, now high in the eastern sky, and worked into the forest at the right. As ever, Jane responded to his every movement.

Holding his course straight eastward, he eventually reached a path. Dim and tiny though it was, it seemed a broad highway compared to the black passage and the bewildering brush. Turning northward, he advanced at better speed, though still observant of stones which might bruise Jane's toes.

"We're out o' the wust of it, mister," he said softly.

She laughed at the title.

"I bet I look awful funny into these pants, don't I?" she asked.

"Sh! Not so loud. No, ye look fine. If 'twarn't for yer hair ye'd be a boy."

A pressure of the hand answered. They trudged on.

The path was the one by which he had walked many a time to his home. Presently they stole out into his clearing, and he scanned everything searchingly. Possibly somebody, knowing his habit of visiting the grave, might be on watch there. But, if such watch was kept by day, it seemed to be withdrawn now. The hour was long past the usual Traps bedtime, and nobody could expect the wanted man to come here so late. They reached the road without a challenge.

"Now," he said, after a quick survey in both directions, "I'm a-goin' to make a boy of ye. Push up all yer hair an' squeeze it tight. Ye're a-goin' to wear my hat."

Obediently she piled her golden tresses high and pressed them down. On her head he put his battered old felt, pulling it low. The crown, hitherto dented in, now swelled as if about to burst from the pressure of her concealed hair. But the headgear completed the disguise afforded by the floppy overalls and the over-big shirt. Nobody spying the pair now would be likely to suspect her sex.

"Good 'nough, mister," he chuckled. "Now we've got a good long walk ahead of

us, but it'll be easy. In to the road, all the way. When we git up yender a piece ye can rest awhile. Till then, don't talk or stop—'less'n ye feel me stoppin' quick."

At an easy gait he swung away, walking now abreast of her. He knew they were leaving tracks behind them, but for that he cared nothing. If they passed undetected through the night, tomorrow could take care of itself.

Steadily they swung along under the moon, treading in soft sand which stretched out ahead in winding, beckoning curves. Cool night breezes played around them, and from empty fields throbbed the monotonous melody of the crickets. A house crept up to them and faded away behind, black-windowed, silent, wrapped in sleep. Another came to them, and at this one a dog barked; but no human voice rang after them. At intervals appeared other dwellings. In one burned a light. Hard slowed, shifting his gun a little forward. But then through an open window sounded the wail of a fretful babe, and he glimpsed a night-gowned woman moving about. He resumed his regular pace.

Through alternate shine and shadow they passed, the road being darkened at times by overhanging trees, while at other times drifting clouds wiped out the moon. At length the road forked. Bearing to the left, he went on for a short distance in order to pass beyond sight of another house. When it was lost behind roadside bushes he halted.

"We'll rest now," he announced. "Lay right down into the road. It's clean sand, an' dry. There's a heavy dew into the grass."

She needed no second invitation. Down she went, to lie and relax every muscle.

"Oh, I'm tired!" she sighed.

"So'm I. But we're out o' the Traps now. We're onto the Rock Hill road, an' bimeby we'll git to Kyserike, 'less'n I'm mistook. I've heard tell that this road goes there."

"Kyserike? Where's that? What is it? Why be ye goin'—"

"Sh! Listen!"

Silence. Then a faint thudding sound. He seized her hand, pulling her up.

"Git up! Foller me, quick!"

They moved fast into a near-by brush patch. The thudding sounded a little nearer. Around the next bend came a horse, a wagon, a couple of late riders. The

horse pounded slowly past. A gruff remark from one man evoked a sleepy grunt from the other. They were gone. Listening a little longer, Hard heard a dog bark to the southward. He laughed. That horse and wagon would obliterate many of the tracks left by the fugitives.

Resuming their way, they kept going with no more halts for rest. Mile after mile crawled endlessly past. The moon reached the zenith and began to float westward. The damp chill of late night, harbinger of gradually approaching dawn, crept over the earth. Still they plodded on, unspeaking, steadily putting one foot before the other.

Finally he paused again, surveying a dark cluster of house-roofs ahead and sniffing the air. The damp odor of a waterway assailed his nostrils. He nodded, glanced around, and nodded again.

"We're there," he announced. "Now ye can take a good rest."

"Thank the Lord!" She drooped wearily against him. "Where?"

"Over here. Come on."

Through a set of bars he led her, and into a close-cropped field where heaps of hay, canvas-capped for protection against possible showers, glimmered ghostly under the moon. Toward the rear of this they trudged. There he pulled off a hay-cap, kicked the hay loose, and bade her—

"Lay down an' take a nap."

Guided by his hand, she crept into the hay. He drew the canvas over her, stepped to the next pile, and sat down with his back against it.

The moon grew pale. The stars faded. Dawn came. Cocks crowed. The sun rose, shot level beams athwart the hills and hollows, began to roll up the blue heights of heaven.

Perhaps that lusty morning sun, looking down on the changes wrought in the night, laughed at what its light revealed. In a hayfield on the edge of Kyserike town it saw a flattened hay-cap, from beneath which peeped dusty toes; and, leaning against the next pile, a lean young mountaineer whose belt bristled with cartridges, whose lax hands held a rifle, whose ears were subconsciously alert for any sound of stealthy footsteps—yet who was totally unaware of the fact that a large fly was jauntily promenading his nose.

And, miles to the south, it saw another

young mountaineer climb into a cranny among huge rocks, warily scout into a cavern, pick up a tin box, stare at a paper within, and hurl it furiously against the cliff; a mountaineer who had gone supperless, sleepless, breakfastless, only to find a trap empty of its prey, a tobacco box empty of tobacco, and a message which read:

Good By Steve, put this in yore Pipe and Smoke it.

CHAPTER XX

A DREAM COMES TRUE

A CANAL-BOAT, Hudson-bound, carried two brothers at whom its crew sneaked frequent curious glances. The elder, a stalwart, stony-faced fellow with a shock of black hair and a fine rifle, squatted most of the time with gaze ranging forward. The younger, and smaller, lay listlessly on the deck and dozed beside his kinsman. Virtually nothing could be seen of his face, for he wore a big hat pulled far down, and his eyes were voluminously bandaged by a huge bandanna. The observers could note, however, that his jaw was beardless, his lips delicately curved, and his hands and feet strikingly small. All other physical details were obscured by hat, handkerchief, and clothes considerably too big for him.

They had come aboard at Kyserike, the big fellow—who called himself Hardy—explaining to the captain that they wanted a lift to Kingston, where he meant to see a doctor about his brother's eyes. This brother, whom he called Jake, had met with an accident, the exact nature of which was left unspecified, and had to reach a good doctor at once. The captain, a rough chap with a heart as big as his fists, had forthwith invited them to come along gratis. And now they were well on their way.

The older one was extremely taciturn, the younger absolutely dumb. So the others had to restrain their curiosity and content themselves with surmises. The impassive manner and natural reserve of the tall one, coupled with his thick black hair and high cheekbones, led them to conclude that he was partly Indian. His clothes and his accent were those of a hill-billy, but his rifle and belt were not. He had something stowed away inside his shirt, but nobody could decide what it was. Together, the pair formed a mild mystery;

especially when an observer noted the huge fists of the one and the dainty hands of the other. Brothers?

It was the jovial captain himself who voiced something of this. He had a habit of noticing men's hands, perhaps because he could swing a wicked pair himself on occasion. At a quiet stretch of the creek, where there was nothing to do, he loafed along with:

"By thunder, you two fellers don't look much alike, do yuh? Put a petticoat on Jake, thar, an' yuh'd have a woman. Haw, haw! Ain't runnin' off with some other feller's gal, be yuh?"

Jake started, and his jaw reddened. His brother's pupils became pin-points. But not a muscle of his face changed. Quietly he said—

"Keep still, Jake."

And then, to the captain:

"Better not say nothin' like that when Jake can see ye, mister. It makes him madder'n a hornet to be called a gal. He takes after his mom in his looks. I'm built like my pop. But le' me tell ye, mister, the boy can handle himself when he's right. Only for his eyes bein' bad, he'd climb ye so quick ye'd think a bobcat had dropped onto ye."

"Haw haw!" roared the captain, tickled at the thought of being attacked by the boy. "Ain't some o' these younkens reg'lar banties, though! I've seen 'em like that myself. They'll spit into a b'ar's eye if he waggles his tail the wrong way—an' darn nigh drown him, too, 'fore he knows what they're up to. Haw haw haw! Wal, Jake, old feller, don't git mad at me. I didn't mean nothin', an' I hope yuh'll git yer eyes doctored neat an' fine. Oh, ther's one thing I wanted to tell yuh, mister. 'Fore yuh git to Kingston yuh'd better put them ca'tridges in yer pockets an' unload yer gun. They're kind o' fussy over thar. P'liceman might git nosey."

"Thank ye." Hardy made no move, however, to act on the advice. After a minute or so the captain moved away.

Along the squirming Rondout voyaged the boat, leaving it from time to time for the canal and the locks, then resuming its creek journey. High Falls was passed, and Creek Locks, and Eddyville, and the last leg toward Rondout town was begun. The Hardy brothers ate bread and cheese from a package produced by the tall one—bought

in Kyserike—but seemed to talk hardly at all. And at length Rondout was reached.

Here the pair departed, following the directions of the captain for reaching Kingston. Rondout was a rough town, of crooked streets and more crooked ways; but the early evening light still was good, the saloons were not yet running full blast, and the Hardys met no trouble. Hand in hand they walked on, followed by curious stares but by nothing worse. The older brother's formidable physique discouraged any thought of rowdysm.

In the dusk they entered Kingston. And there they vanished; one temporarily, the other permanently. A deserted shed swallowed them up, and Jake never came out. The older Hardy did, wearing a hat now, and minus his cartridge-belt. He leaned negligently against the corner for a time, then returned inside. When he reappeared he was leading a fair-haired girl, dressed in a worn blue frock. Jake Hardy, of the masked face and the floppy overalls, never was seen again.



WITH his new companion's hand locked in his, the tall fellow moved on. Now and then he questioned a passerby. Eventually the pair ascended the steps of a mansion set in a large yard where stood iron dogs and deer. With the muzzle of his rifle the man knocked on the door, chipping off some white paint.

A second laceration of the barrier brought a shrewish-looking maid, frowning because the bell had not been pulled. She frowned all the more when she viewed the poorly dressed pair.

"What you want?" she snapped.

"I want to see Mister James B. Thornton," growled the tall one, resenting her tone. "An' I want to see him right away."

The maid glowered. He glowered back at her. Then she caught the glint of the rifle-barrel hanging beside his leg. With a sudden gasp she shoved the door almost shut. Almost shut—but not quite. The rifle had darted forward and blocked it.

Then the door jumped violently open, propelled by the stranger's full weight. The stranger leaped in, his face a thundercloud. To the maid, who had staggered against an ornate hat-rack, he roared—

"Git Mister Thornton an' git him now!"

With a squeal, she fled. He reached out, caught the girl's hand again, drew her

inside; shut the door, and set his back against it. From somewhere within came the maid's cry:

"He's got a gun! He's after Mr. Thornton! Get the police——"

"Norah!" broke in a stern masculine voice. "What's this rumpus? Stop screaming, d'ye hear? Now what is it?"

"A ragged villain with a gun—he's after you to kill you, Mr. Thornton, don't go near him!"

"Bosh! I'll go near him, all right! Quiet, now."

A heavy, determined tread sounded. A heavy, determined man loomed in the hall. A heavy, determined voice demanded: "Well, sir! What's this?"

The ragged villain straightened and smiled slightly. James B. Thornton was a man after his own heart, a square-jawed, powerful-looking man whose keen gray eyes were utterly fearless. Those eyes had swept over him, the gun, and the girl, in one rapid survey, and now were again centered on his own.

"Mister Thornton, was you blind a year ago?"

The master of the house looked puzzled.

"I was, yes. Why?"

"Then ye're the man I want to see. My name's Harry Wood, an' I'm from over yender, into the hills. This gun ain't got nothin' to do with my comin' here, an' I don't mean ye no harm. What I want to see ye 'bout is—this."

He nodded sidewise toward the girl, pointed expressively toward his own eyes, and shook his head. Thornton's brows lifted. He looked again, thoughtfully, at the wide blue orbs which, though steadily directed toward him, did not quite meet his gaze.

"I see. Well, come in."

He led the way into a luxuriously furnished room lined with books, where a large lamp burned on a broad table and a thin haze of cigar smoke hung in the air. With a gesture he indicated a deeply upholstered chair, to which Hard guided Jane. When she was seated the light fell full on her face, and for a moment Thornton studied her keenly. Hard remained standing, his hands now unconsciously turning his hat around. He had left his gun outside in a corner.

"I run acrost a piece into a paper 'bout ye, quite a while ago," he explained. "A

Kingston paper, 'twas, an' I got it into Kyserike. Paper said ye'd been to Noo York city and got an operation that made ye see fine. Said ye'd been blind quite a while, 'long o' gittin' throwed onto yer head when a hoss run away with ye. Said this here furrin doctor done somethin' to yer head an' give ye back yer eyesight. That right?"

"About right. Well?"

"Wal, jest lately I got to thinkin' 'bout it ag'in. Jane, here, got hurt in to the head when she was little, an' she ain't seen much since then. But there's times when she can see for jest a minute. Couple o' days ago, now, she tumbled an' bumped her head onto a rock, an' when she got up she could see me plain. 'Twas only for a second or so, an' then she went blind ag'in. But what I'm a-wonderin', mister, is— Could that doctor o' yourn fix her, d'ye s'pose, so's she could git her eyesight an' keep it?"

With a little cry of astonished joy, Jane half rose from her chair. Both men looked into her pathetically eager face. Thornton opened his lips, closed them, and reached absently to a tray containing a smoldering cigar. At this he puffed several times before replying, his gaze still resting on the tense girl.

"Well, I don't know. If anybody can, he can. Of course, there's some cases that can be cured and some that can't. But I know what he did for me: I was stone blind two years before he got hold of me. And if he could do that for me, I don't know why he couldn't fix up this little lady. But, you know, he's in New York, not here."

"Uh-huh. But he'd come up here, wouldn't he, for pay?"

"No," decidedly. "Folks have to go to him. He has more work than he can do. And he charges a pretty stiff price, too."

The eager hope fled from Jane's face. Despondently she sank back in her chair.

"Wal," countered Hard, "there's ways o' gittin' to Noo York, I s'pose. An' 'bout the price—how much did he charge ye?"

"About a thousand."

Hard's heart sank. But he battled on.

"Wal, s'posin' he got most of it, wouldn't he trust a feller awhile for the rest of it? This gal's eyes have got to be fixed, mister! An' I've got eight hundred dollars, an' I can work to git more."

Thornton stared. His gaze slid again over the ragged clothing of the hillman.

"You've got eight hundred dollars?" he blurted.

"I've got it, mister—got it right onto me now. An' if he'll only give her back her eyesight I'll earn the rest of it."

Once more Thornton glanced at Jane, who now had turned in amazement toward Hard.



"WELL, sir! I shouldn't be at all surprized if your eight hundred would be plenty—more than plenty. Doctor Hamilton—he's not a foreigner, by the way, but an American who studied a long time in Europe—Doctor Hamilton is a good-hearted chap, and if he felt there was hope of a cure he wouldn't let a few dollars stand in the way. He'd charge me a thousand because he knows I can stand it; but in a case like this—

"Hum! Tell you what I'll do, Mr.—er—Wood. Mrs. Thornton and Dorothy, that's my daughter, are determined to do some shopping in New York, and I'd just as soon go along with them. If you like, we'll take your—er—sister right down with us, and I'll see the doctor personally. He'll probably pay more attention to me than he would to you. What d'you think of it?"

Hard grinned widely. Then his eyes narrowed in sudden wariness.

"Ye're a stranger to me, mister," he pointed out.

"Quite true." Thornton looked quizzically at him, but took no offence. "But you can ask anybody here in town about me, and— Dorothy! Come here a minute."

"All right, father," responded a clear voice. Somebody romped down the stairs. A buxom, wholesome-looking girl, of about Jane's age, entered the study.

"Dorothy, I've decided to go to New York with you and mother—"

"Oh! Goody!"

"—and maybe you'll have a companion on the way down. This is Jane Wood, and she needs to see Doctor Hamilton."

Quick comprehension and sympathy darted across Dorothy's expressive face.

"Oh! Howdy-do, Jane. We'll be awf'ly glad to have you with us, and I'm sure Doctor Hamilton will do you lots of good. When do we go, father?"

"As soon as you can be ready. Tomorrow, perhaps."

"I'm ready now!" laughed the girl. "I'm always ready for a trip to New York."

"All right. We'll see what mother says. That's all, for now."

With a nod and a smile Dorothy withdrew. Her father glanced at Hard.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"Yep."

"And if you want to give me the money now, I'll give you a receipt showing just what it's to be used for. You understand that I don't guarantee that Doctor Hamilton can cure this case. But I do guarantee that every penny of your money will be accounted for and everything possible will be done for your sister. Fair enough?"

Hard looked him square in the eye, then reached inside his shirt.

"I'm trustin' ye, mister. An' I'm 'bliged to ye. Ye can gimme that receipt. An' I'll be comin' back later on to find out how things go. Jane, ye want to go to New York, don't ye?"

"Oh, Hard! I'll go anywhere—I'll go through anything—if there's a chance!" Low, vibrant, her voice shook with the intensity of her feeling.

His hand came out with the overalled package of notes, and he stepped to the table. Unwrapping the bills, he counted them out—seven hundred and eighty-seven dollars. Then from a pocket he produced thirteen dollars more. They were the last remnant of his own money, earned by millstone work.

"Correct. Eight hundred," approved Thornton. Seating himself, he rapidly wrote a receipt, reading aloud as he penned the lines:

"Received from Mr. Harry Wood eight hundred dollars to be devoted to surgical and other care of Miss Jane Wood—"

"Cooper," interrupted Hard.

"Cooper? Oh, Miss Jane Cooper. Hum! Of Miss Jane Cooper, as—er—directed by Dr. Leonard Hamilton of New York. Any part of this sum remaining after said surgical attention to be refunded to—" he paused.

"Miss Jane Cooper," prompted Hard.

"Miss Jane Cooper. Right. Signed, James B. Thornton. All right, sir."

Pocketing the receipt, Hard replied grimly: "It'll have to be all right. If it don't come out all right I'm a-goin' to see Doctor Hamilton myself—an' I won't leave my gun into the hall, neither. Wal, Jane, I'll

be a-goin'. But—uh—I brought 'long yer pretty dress—the one we kind o' disagreed 'bout, an' here 'tis. Ye can wear it to Noo York. G'by."

From under the shirt he drew the sadly rumpled flower-dress. Dropping it into her lap, he stepped hallward. A cry halted him.

"Hard!"

She sprang up, her arms outstretched, her lips aquiver, her eyes raining sudden tears tears of mingled joy and sorrow. Groping she reached toward him. When his fingers met hers she clasped both hands tightly over them.

"Hard, where be ye goin'?"

"I dunno. Anywheres—'ceptin' back to the Traps. I've got to leave ye. Ye'll be better off without me now. Jest keep on bein' brave, an' everything 'll be awright.

"I—I ain't sayin' g'by, Hard. Ye're jest an angel! An' no matter what 'comes o' me, I ain't never goin' to forgit ye, Hard—never!"

The hands unlocked, but went swiftly up his arm. They clasped again around his neck, and her face turned up to his. He crushed her to him. Their lips met and clung. Then they drew apart, dazed from the wonder of that embrace.

"Good luck go with ye, Janie!" he murmured huskily.

Slowly turning, he passed into the hall, mechanically picked up his rifle, and went out. The door closed softly behind him. Thornton lowered his gaze from the ceiling, in which he had, all at once, become tremendously interested.

Penniless, homeless, and hungry, Hard Wood stalked away through the shadows, a stranger in a strange land, outlawed from the harsh hills where he had grown, knowing not where to lay his head; yet filled with an intoxicating fire and a giant strength. The dream which had so suddenly arisen in his cavern was true. Nothing else mattered. As he passed on through the night, he trod an enchanted land wherein he was wondrously happy and content.

CHAPTER XXI

MOONSHINE MAKES SUNSHINE

AGAIN Hard Wood began to drift.

His drifting now, however, was not the aimless wandering of the bygone spring. He drifted primarily because he thought of

nothing else to do, but still with a definite aim—to see a little more of the world and to make a little money while seeing it. The canal, which once before had fascinated him, now called to him again. It offered him travel, change of scene, rough fellowship, food and lodging, and dollars.

He could, of course, have gone back to the Traps and made his peace; for he had the Thornton receipt to prove what he had done with his captive. But this he would not do. He would not give the men who hounded him the satisfaction of an explanation. Let 'em cuss and sweat and stub around in the rocks, and maybe get snake-bit! Good enough for 'em!

Moreover, the impelling call which once had summoned him back hillward from the canal was silent now. Then, with his inconsolable grief heavy on his mind, he had felt a vague alarm lest some calamity befall his mother's treasures. Now he knew that there were no treasures, except the old wedding-dress and his father's muzzle-loading gun; and for these he felt no anxiety, since he knew Steve would not harm them. As for the meager furnishings of his cavern, he cared nothing about them. And, finally, the mere thought of living again in that hole among the rocks repelled him. What had been sweet solitude would now be empty loneliness.

Since a man who is hungry and broke can hardly dawdle in finding means of eating, Hard lost no time in landing a green hand's job. And, since the boat to which he attached himself happened to be leaving at once for the long upstream voyage, he was gone from Rondout before the Thornton household had finished its breakfast over in Kingston. So he did not see Jane depart for New York. Perhaps it was as well, for he might have been hurt. Having given her that ill-fitting but treasured flowery dress about which had revolved such a storm, he thereafter pictured her arrayed in it, supremely happy in its undisputed possession and in the hope of regaining her vision. As a matter of fact, she did not wear it at all.

After one glance at the wardrobe of the girl who was to travel with them, Dorothy and her mother had exchanged smiles; and presently Dorothy had driven her light carriage to certain stores, whence she returned with sundry purchases—all charged to her personal account. And the Jane

who started for the metropolis was not the Jane of the Traps. She was a young lady fetchingly gowned, daintily stockinged and shod, and crowned by a little hat of the sunbonnet type which framed her face so winsomely that many a traveler stole frequent admiring glances at her. The garments all were inexpensive, yet not too cheap, and so skilfully selected that they seemed made for her. They were her first real "store clo'es."

Yet the flowered gown traveled with her, for she insisted on carrying it to the great city; insisted, too, that it must be the first thing she would look at if she gained her sight.

"I know it's got flowers onto it," she naively explained, "'cause I was told so. An' I ain't never seen a flower—not to remember—an' I love 'em! I've felt of 'em many's the time, an' of this cloth too, an' wished—oh, so hard—that I could jest see 'em once. An' then there's—there's other things 'bout this dress that ye mebbe wouldn't understand, so I won't tell ye."

Mother and daughter looked pityingly at her. And said Mrs. Thornton:

"You shall have it, my dear—and real flowers too. But the prettiest flower you're ever going to see is your own face."

So Jane sailed away southward, and Hard drifted away southwestward, and for a long time they knew nothing more of each other.

At its own leisurely pace, the blunt craft whereon the young hillman made his temporary home crept up the meandering Rond-out and through the locks. At High Falls, where it stopped for a time to discharge part of its miscellaneous cargo, he scanned the faces of idling men on shore, involuntarily seeking among them that of Uncle Eb; for this town was the weekly destination of the white-haired man and his white-haired horse, and Hard had heard him speak often of watching boats take the locks. But then he realized that the wounded old fellow was not yet in condition to ride.

He wished now that he had asked Steve how Uncle Eb was progressing, and even thought of writing a note of inquiry and mailing it here. Realizing the foolishness of this, however—for such a move would only reveal his present whereabouts, and a reply would be exceedingly slow in coming—he did nothing of the kind.

On his next stop at High Falls, though, he made casual inquiries at a couple of stores and thereby acquired the desired information. Uncle Eb had not recently visited the town, but a "dark-complected feller" had driven the Wilham wagon in and bought a number of things. This fellow, whom Hard judged to be Steve, had said Mr. Wilham was laid up with "roomytiz," but was getting better.



BETWEEN these two calls at High Falls, Hard lost his first job but found a better one. The exchange was due to what his first captain considered a social error. It occurred at Ellenville, a town snuggling in a narrow valley two thousand feet below the western heights of the Shawangunks. Here the captain, a loose-lipped man whose ideas of pleasure consisted mainly of whisky and women, offered to "show the town" to his recruit.

The showing comprised a saloon, where the Trapsman sampled some bad liquor and declined to take more, and a shady resort where he declined to sample anything. Thereupon an extremely short-skirted lady called him a name and his doughty captain called him another. The lady received in return a slap in the mouth, and the captain a punch in the jaw. By the time the ensuing riot was over, the place and several of its habitués—including the captain and the official bouncer—were quite thoroughly wrecked.

Emerging then into a rough-and-ready crowd which had rapidly collected to see "a tough guy cleanin' out the Eel Pot," the disheveled young warrior met a constable who desired to arrest him for disturbance of the peace. A set of skinned knuckles collided so forcibly with the peevish officer's chin that peace was straightway restored to him—the calm peace of unconsciousness. This occurrence delighted the assembled boatmen and other water-fronters beyond measure. Hard returned to his boat not only unhindered, but followed by joyous whoops of acclaim; and the constable, when at length he revived, was so pointedly advised to forget it that he went in the other direction without delay.

When the dilapidated captain limped back on board he found himself confronted by the necessity of paying his punisher the wages due to date, under penalty of being

used as a mop for his own deck. He did so. Then Hard departed to a neighboring boat, found its master aboard, and, by virtue of the experience acquired during his voyage thus far, got a new job at better pay. And his erstwhile boss, after salving numerous lacerations, sought another deck-hand more conversant with the niceties of social intercourse.

On his second boat Hard found a more congenial employer, and with that boat he stayed. Cap'n Davis was a quiet, frugal, shrewd fellow whose wanderings and observations had extended far beyond this canal and whose favorite pastimes were checkers and "high-low-jack." He asked few questions, and Hard, or Hardy, as he still called himself, was uncommunicative. Yet they got on together famously, and during the older man's occasional talkative moods the younger caught many a glimpse of places and people beyond the hills and noted many an odd truth concerning life in general.

One of these observations lingered long in his mind. It corroborated an assertion once made by Uncle Eb, but went far deeper; and somehow it comforted him mightily. Davis had just been discussing two brothers whom he had known, one of whom was altogether manly, while the other was bestial.

"And the old folks," he added, "were the finest people you'd ever want to know, and they done their best to bring up both the boys right. It's funny, how the good crops out in some and the bad in others. But I believe it goes away back in families; the father and the mother ain't the only ones that make a child. The great-grand-fathers and the great-great-grand-mothers can live over again in people sometimes. What I mean is, a man may not look, or think, or be, anything like either of his folks. He may be the livin' image, body and mind, of some great-great-grand-pop that's been forgot for a hundred years. And that old feller that he takes after might have been a saint or he might have been a hellion. Understand what I'm drivin' at?"

Hard nodded slowly, adding—

"I never thought o' that, but I guess ye're right."

"Most folks never do think of it, Hardy. Most folks can't see anything but what's right in front of their eyes—and a lot can't

even see that much. Lots of men, now, have left their wives for havin' a baby that didn't look anything like 'em. And chances are that those women were good as gold, and the babies were honest come by. They looked like somebody in the family, maybe on the father's side, maybe on the mother's that nobody knew about. And prob'ly they had the same qualities in 'em. The things that are born in us, Hardy, have got to come out, whether our folks had 'em or not."

Hard pondered long over this. Later on he harked back to the subject.

"S'posin' this," he suggested. "S'posin' there's a man an' woman that have five young ones, an' the man's bad, an' all his boys are bad as he is, or wuss. An' s'posin' the last one that's borned is a gal. An' she's brought up 'mongst 'em, 'mongst a murderin', sneakin' mess o' 'shiners an' house-burners an' so on. Can that gal be real good? Ain't she bound to have some o' them bad things into her?"

"Yes. No," asserted Davis. "She can be real good and she don't have to have any bad. Mostly it ain't so, I'll admit. Most youngsters take right after their father and mother. But not all of 'em. That gal, now, she might jump back in family history to some lady that was a livin' angel, and be real decent and fine. And all the bad that was around her wouldn't change her; it would only make the good in her all the stronger, because it would disgust her with the bad."

"You ain't got any idea, Hardy, how strong the goodness in a real good woman is. You've got to live and learn before you can appreciate it. And if that goodness is born in her it don't make any difference what the rest of her folks are. If I knew a woman like that and I liked her and wanted her, I wouldn't care if her father was Judas and her mother was Jezebel. I'd go git her."

His questioner shot a quick look at him, but Davis showed no indication of suspecting that the hypothetical girl might be real. He proceeded to elaborate his argument at considerable length. But Hard paid little attention to his further remarks on that subject. In memory he was hearing again a soft voice saying:

"They was always cussin' an' talkin' rough, an' I didn't like it. I even used to put my head under the pillar——"



AS HE traveled the long waterway, he saw plenty of women and girls in the towns, and more than one turned to look again at him. Some, indeed, made open advances. But he turned his own head for none of them. They seemed too shy or too bold, too awkward or too prim, too silly or too stuck-up and, one and all, too vain to attract him in the least. He was not aware that he was comparing them with any other girl, but he was quite well aware that they did not interest him.

Nor did the other town attractions for boatmen, saloons and gambling, hold any allurements for him. Not that he dodged saloons; but a couple of schooners of foaming beer were all the drink he cared for, and when he had downed them he went out. As for games, he found far more pleasure in pitting his cards or his checkers against Cap'n Davis than in staking money against the tricks of strangers. In fact, he was keeping a tight grip on his earnings. He might need them at some time in the future.

When at length he was once more in Rondout, he slicked up a bit and strode away to Kingston. For days a burning eagerness for news had been consuming him, eagerness not unmingled with misgiving. By this time Jane's fate must be settled. Would the Thorntons have news of joy, or—He refused to think otherwise. At his best gait he went to the Thornton place.

The house was closed.

Repeated poundings brought at last a surly old caretaker who said the family had left on the previous day for Albany, to be gone a week or more. No, they hadn't left any word. Yes, they'd been to New York. No, they didn't bring anybody back with them. And if any stranger came around here kicking the door like that again he'd get arrested.

Growling, Hard left. There was a grain of comfort in the fact that Jane had not returned with them, but it was too tiny to satisfy him. Why couldn't they have left some word? It was not until he returned to the boat and found Cap'n Davis reading a letter that it occurred to him to visit the postoffice. And Davis quashed that thought before he could act on it. Glancing up, he said:

"No mail for you. I asked. Don't s'pose you was expectin' any, anyhow."

Hard grunted and went to work on the cargo. In four days he was again afloat, crawling up the creek as before. Bitterly he repented not having learned Dr. Hamilton's address. Until he could locate the Thorntons, he must go ignorant of Jane's fortunes.

Weeks snailed away, and again he came into port. During that endless journey he had brooded much, imagining all sorts of evils befalling the girl alone in the vast city. On one point alone was his mind at rest: The character of the people to whom he had entrusted her. Despite his favorable judgment of them, he had taken the precaution, before first leaving Kingston, of asking a number of citizens concerning the reputation of James B. Thornton. The verdict had been unanimous: Thornton was absolutely square. Yet this did not answer the question now hammering at every fibre of his being. What had become of Jane?

This time he made no sartorial or tonsorial preparations for his call. Hardly had the boat tied up when he was off and away, traveling at a lope.

Again the house was closed.

Again he unearthed the caretaker. This time his manner was so fierce that the latter quailed. All the watchman knew was that the family had gone again. They were all the time making trips. He thought they'd gone to Massachusetts this time. They never left any word with him. All he was supposed to do was to keep the house safe. If Hard was expecting word, why didn't he go to the postoffice? Maybe Mr. Thornton had left a note there.

Having ascertained where the postoffice was, the ferocious visitor departed, much to the caretaker's relief. And, having reached the postoffice, he demanded mail in a tone that nearly dazed a somnolent clerk.

"Needn't knock a feller deaf," grumbled the latter. "Yes, there's somethin' for you. Been here so long we're sick of seein' it. Here y'are!"

Hard snatched the large envelop, bearing the name of James B. Thornton in bold type in the upper left corner, and the superscription: "Mr. Harry (Hard) Wood, Kingston, N. Y. Hold Until Called For." And, having grabbed it, he hesitated, turning it over and over.

He looked at the date, and started. This envelop had been waiting here for him at

the time of his last visit. Davis was a liar, he hadn't asked——

Suddenly he realized that Cap'n Davis, knowing him as "Hardy," must have asked for mail so directed.



TEARING off the end of the container, he drew out a large folded sheet and a smaller envelop. The former, when straightened out, revealed the vigorous writing of Thornton. It read:

DEAR MR. WOOD:

I am leaving today for a short trip. This is posted to inform you of the outcome of Miss Cooper's operation in case you arrive in my absence. Dr. Hamilton's report to me is enclosed. I would suggest that his recommendations be followed.

Resp'y yours,

JAMES B. THORNTON.

The enclosure, directed to Thornton, was written in the small, precise hand affected by secretaries in the days before the typewriter came into general use. This was the crucial news. Hardy braced himself as he began to peruse it. It stated:

I take pleasure in informing you that the operation upon Miss Cooper gives every indication of being successful. Since her condition is one of long standing, however, I should like to keep her under observation for a time.

Mrs. Hamilton has taken a fancy to her and would like to have her remain in our home as an assistant in the care of the children. Miss Cooper seems desirous of accepting this offer. This will also enable me to keep informed as to her condition, and I have little doubt that her restoration will thus be made permanent. If this arrangement is agreeable to Mr. Wood, whom I understand to be her guardian, please inform me.

In view of the circumstances explained by you I will set the expense of the operation at \$250. This includes everything. I trust that this figure will be satisfactory. With best personal wishes,

Your obedient servant.

The signature was a cryptic scribble, but sufficiently legible to permit the name "Hamilton" to be deciphered by one who knew what it should be.

Hardy laughed joyously. The miracle had actually come about! The moonshine money so long hoarded in Old Bill's tobacco box had unlocked a door through which sunshine now was streaming into the life of his ill-used daughter. This letter did not say definitely that Jane had recovered her vision, but of course that was what it meant——

"Hey! Here's another letter for Harry

Wood!" the hail of the clerk broke in. The rosy mist dissolved. This might be bad news.

The new envelop, recently mailed, was another of Thornton's. It enclosed, without comment, another note from New York. This message was definite. It stated that Jane's vision now was permanently restored, and that repeated tests showed it to be excellent.

Moreover, she was rapidly learning to read. She was remaining at the Hamilton home, where the children were devoted to her, and seemed very happy. In view of the facts that she had no relatives in a position to provide for her and that Mr. Wood apparently had disappeared, she would undoubtedly continue to reside with the Hamiltons.

The wanderer read it twice, his expression growing more and more sober. Then, noting the office address printed at the top of the sheet, he returned to the window. Having obtained paper and envelopes, he stepped to the designated writing-shelf, and there, curling his calloused fingers awkwardly around a scratchy pen, he addressed Dr. Hamilton as follows:

I just got yore Letters. I am awful Glad about Jane. She is her own Boss and can do what she likes about stayin to yore place. She has got \$550 comin to her from you or Mr. Thornton. I ain't seen Thornton. If you have got that Money see that she gits it. Resply yores,

HARRY WOOD.

To Thornton he wrote a very similar note. Posting both, he lounged away toward the canal, his mood wavering between joy and gloom.

Somehow he felt curiously light, yet weary: as if a great load had been lifted from him, but had left him tired. Yes, moonshine had made sunshine for Jane, moonshine money and a moonlight journey through the night. It was wonderful that she now could see. It was even better that she was so happy and had found a new home with fine people. But now she would not come back. What had she to come back to? Nothing. No home, no friends. She would stay in the city, meet city fellows, marry one of them and have everything fine.

He was glad, mighty glad. She deserved all the happiness there was. Life had been cruel to her, and now she must have the pleasure to which she was entitled. Yes, he was glad.

But he moved with dispirited step, and on his flinty face was no smile.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CALL OF THE HILLS

GRADUALLY, yet all too rapidly, summer faded from the hills.

Dreamy days of sunshine were interspersed by others of fierce storm. The nights grew chill. Here and there along the slopes of the Shawangunks appeared tiny flecks of red, as if prankish Jack Frost had pricked the great green bosom of the mountains with an icy needle, drawing wee drops of blood. Then, almost over night, it seemed, the verdure paled, blushed, or turned to gold. Great banks of monotonous greenery became riotous with scarlet and crimson, yellow and brown, amid which only the conifers clung to their dusky hue. And out of the west and across the deep blue field of the heavens rolled the hordes of gigantic cumuli which, year after year, invariably march over the hills in autumn.

Floating along his winding watery road, Hard Wood noted the changes taking place upon the rolling hills at the eastward and the sterner steeps at the west. And now, for the first time since he had left them, the mountains began to call him back. Twinges of homesickness assailed him, although the uplands no longer held for him a home. More and more often he caught himself thinking of the cavern, wondering whether his abandoned possessions were safe—and then angrily asked himself what harm was likely to come to them.

Too, he thought more frequently of Uncle Eb's little yellow house, and of Steve, and even of the other Trapsmen who had unitedly sought vengeance on him. His enmity for those avengers had long since cooled, for he knew well that he had deserved their hounding. But not until now had he felt the slightest desire to go back among them.

The fact was that traveling in the lowlands had lost its savor. It was the same old story—up and down, up and down; canal and boats, mules and men, towns and cargoes. Excepting Cap'n Davis, he had no friends along the way. And, except for his few personal needs, he had no use for the money he was earning. Jane had more than plenty, there was nobody else for him

to spend his savings for, and he was not inclined to throw them to the saloons and the harpies of the ports.

So far as Jane's finances were concerned, his mind now was at ease. At last he had succeeded in finding Thornton at home, and, from him, had received satisfactory evidence that the moot five-hundred-odd dollars had been deposited to Jane's account in a New York bank. Also, he had been informed of a fact which had not occurred to him: That Jane was receiving good pay for caring for the Hamilton children. Thus she not only had a home far superior to the one she had always known, but was paid to stay in it. Such luck could never befall a girl in the hills. There a waif could expect nothing more than bed and board, an occasional cast-off dress, and endless drudgery.

He had received indisputable proof, too, of the truth of Dr. Hamilton's last report. It was a miracle in itself—at least, it seemed so to him; for it was a letter from Jane, who, until this summer, had never seen a printed word. Inscribed with a pencil, in the childish hand of one first learning to write, it nevertheless was correctly spelled, though with erasures which might indicate that she had asked some one concerning words of whose orthography she was not yet certain. He read it and reread it for many days—until, in fact, it became a blackened tatter from oft-repeated handling. And this was what it said:

DEAR HARD,

This is my first letter. It is so good to be able to see and read and write. I have lots of flowers now and a cat and a bird that sings awful sweet, he is yellow, they call him Canary. They are so good to me here. They put the money into a bank for me, they say it's mine, but I won't touch it, it's yours. What shall I do with it? Where are you and what doing? You have been awful good, I want to see you so much, but I must stay here a while. Write and let me know everything. Good-by.

Your friend,

JANE.

P. S. How old are you, about thirty?

"Think o' that, now!" admired Hard. "My, but she's bright! Writin' all that, all by her own self, so soon. But—gosh!—do I look like thirty year old?"

He did not. That is, not like the hillman of thirty. Yet that strongly delineated countenance of his was, at any time, as mature as that of many a city man of twenty-five; and in sterner mood, when its lines deepened, all youthfulness departed from it.

Moreover, though Jane once had seen him plainly, she was obviously unskilled as yet in judging ages from facial contours. Since Hard himself, however, was unfamiliar with the smooth-cheeked big-city type of face, he studied the question with mingled feelings.

His answer was typical: Brief, and unsparing of himself as he was unsparing of others. Laboriously he scrawled:

DEAR JANE,

I am awful Glad you are so Happy. The money is all yores. I stole it out of yore Attic. You dont owe me nothin.

I am goin on to Twenty year old. I am workin on to the Round Out Canel. I ain't been back to the Traps and ain't seen nobody from there. You better stay in to the City. Hopin you will keep well.

Yores truly,
HARRY WOOD.

Since then, no reply had come from her; and, after a time, he drew his own conclusions from her silence. Now that she knew about the money, she did not feel that he had been so "awful good." And probably some of those slick city fellows were courting her now, and she was forgetting him. She had said she never would forget, but that meant nothing. Then she had been mad with joy and gratitude because of the prospect of deliverance from her black bondage. Now—things were vastly different now. She could not be expected to feel the same.



SO HIS set expression became a shade more somber, and his thoughts turned again to his hills, and he was half minded to go back to their craggy fastnesses. Also, there arose before his mind's eye the evil visage of Jerry—Jerry, whose own brother had implored enemies to shoot him like a rat. Perhaps Steve had attended to Jerry before now; but it was high time for Hard to find out.

Not that he had forgotten the hated Copperhead during his travels. He had piercingly scanned every red-headed man he met, and had followed two of them into saloons in order to make sure of them. But until now he had felt no impelling urge to reenter the Traps and hunt Copperhead down. In his present mood, however, the thought of a finish fight with his ancient enemy appealed strongly. It was hunting-time anyway, and perhaps the season itself aroused his Indian blood.

The final impetus toward the Traps came suddenly and unexpectedly. His boat was tied up at Kerhonkson—in those days known as "Port"—when he was hailed in crisp tones from the bank. There stood Parker.

"Come here!" commanded the officer. "I want yuh!"

For a frozen instant Hard stood dry-mouthed, staring at the indomitable fighter whom he had last seen herding Bill and Joe Cooper toward the penitentiary—just before he fired the Cooper house and abducted Jane. Then sounded the sleuth's jovial little chuckle.

"Come on!" he grinned. "I don't want yuh long. Maybe about ten minutes. I've got a guy I want yuh to look at."

"What for?" demanded Hard.

"Might be a friend o' yours. Red-headed feller. Or do yuh know where that one is?"

"Oh. No. I lost track of him."

"So have I," admitted Parker. "But seein' I don't know his face, and you do, s'posin' yuh come and look at this bird. I don't think he's the one, but I don't want to miss any bets."

Reassured, Hard went with him to inspect a sullen, sandy-haired prisoner guarded by Parker's new partner—a silent, phlegmatic officer much unlike either Parker or the deceased Roberts. The captive, who had been gathered in for smuggling illicit liquor, was a stranger to the Trapsman.

"Uh-huh. All right," Parker nodded carelessly. "But say, what are yuh doin' to earn that gun I lent yuh? Thought I told yuh to go git that Jerry feller, didn't I?"

"Yup. But I've been a-workin' outside to git me some money," drawled the hill-man. "I might be goin' back into the mountains pretty soon, an' I'll kind o' look 'round some more. About the rifle, mister, I'd jest as soon buy it from ye."

"Aw, I ain't in the hardware business. Keep your money. But this Jerry feller hasn't showed up anywhere outside, as far's I know, so he must be up in the hills yet. Maybe he died somewhere, of course. But if he didn't, you go git him and bring him out, without mussin' up his hair or anything. Will yuh?"

"Mebbe. How's Bill an' Joe gittin' 'long?"

"Fine. Joe won't be away but a few years. Bill may not git back at all. He's

got a long stretch, and some more comin' after that. I don't remember just what they got, but that's the way it lays. Say, what became of the girl?"

"She's bein' took care of by friends."

"Uh-huh. Good. The house caught afire, didn't it? I saw a lot o' smoke back there when I was drivin' out."

"Uh-huh. Somebody must of stepped on a match or somethin'. It went up awful quick."

"Uh-huh." Parker rubbed his chin and cocked an eye at the clouds. "Well, you go git Jerry. See yuh later, maybe. So long."

"G'by."

Hard chuckled on his way back to the canal, and Parker chuckled after he had gone. But that sudden meeting had crystallized the hillman's determination. And after one more visit to Kingston, which yielded no tidings from the south, he informed Cap'n Davis that on the next trip he would leave him at Kyserike. To this decision, despite all urgings to reconsider, he adhered. At Kyserike he quit. The next morning, with a pack of food on his back, the cartridge belt once more around his waist, and loaded rifle swaying in one fist, he swung out of the town and headed for the Traps.

He took the Rock Hill road, the road which, on that moonlit night which now seemed so long ago, had led him and Jane to safety. Openly, defiantly, he now trod it again in broad daylight, returning to the hills where men still cursed his name. Passing the little field where the dawn had found the fugitives asleep among the haycocks, he set his teeth a little harder; for its blank emptiness seemed to mock him. But he did not pause. After one glance at it he fixed his eyes ahead and kept them there.

The miles slid away behind him now far faster than on that night journey, for he had no blind companion to shorten and slow his stride. Occasionally he met some one who looked him over curiously, but none betrayed recognition. Nobody living on this highway had ever seen him before. It was not until he reached the Clove road, and had walked some distance along it, that he encountered any obstacle to his progress.

Then it appeared with surprizing quickness. From a house which commanded a good view of the road, but which had shown no outward sign of menace as he ap-

proached, erupted two men armed with shot-guns.



HARD stopped short. His rifle-hammer clicked back, and the gun poised ready, though without definite aim, chest-high. He knew both these men—brothers named Rhodes, who had been neither friends nor enemies. Without preface the elder of the pair immediately hurled at him the question which for months had been tormenting the Traps.

Hey! What ye done with Jane Cooper?"

"What business is that o' yourn? Be you her gardeens?"

"We're a-makin' it our business! An' so's everybody else 'round here, an' ye'll darn soon know it! What's 'come o' that gal?"

Hard held his answer, scanning both with sardonic gaze. They had stopped well out of arm's reach, held their weapons tensely but with muzzles lowered, and, for all their truculence, were at heart afraid of him. He read it in their faces, in the speaker's haste to proclaim that "everybody" was with him in his demand, and in the fact that they had brought their guns. He laughed contemptuously. Yet he gave them the information which really was their due.

"Jane Cooper, ye poor fools, is into a safe place an' well an' happy. She's a long ways from here, an' into a fine home. That's all ye've got any business to know. An' the less ye meddle into her affairs the less liable ye are to git hurt."

"Huh!" grunted the younger brother. "We ain't takin' your word——"

"Ye'll have to. If ye can find a man that ever caught me a-lyin', bring me that man an' I'll show him proof. I've got plenty o' proof; got it right here into my pocket. But it'll take better men than you are to make me show it till I git good an' ready. Put that into yer pipe an' smoke it. An' one thing more—anybody that I hear about sayin' anything nasty 'bout that gal is a-goin' to git hurt bad. Man or woman. Ye can pass that word 'round."

The Rhodes blinked. Their preconceived ideas were severely jolted. Despite themselves, they felt that he was telling the truth; and, if he was, they were decidedly averse to incurring his lasting enmity. Their eyes fell to his rifle, the rifle which, they had heard, had been given him by a law officer. Somehow that officer's gun

seemed to add the weight of authority to his blunt talk.

"Wal—" hesitated the elder Rhodes, "mebbe—uh—" He came to a full stop.

"That's 'nough," clipped Hard. "Nev' mind no more talkin'. Ye can go back into the house. But wait a minute. Is Jerry Cooper 'round here now?"

The pair started slightly. Again their gaze shot to his rifle.

"Why—uh—I jest hearn las' night that somebody thought they see him yesterday," replied one. "Said somebody that looked like him snuck into the brush nigh the Cooper road. Might be somethin' into it. I dunno."

"Thank ye." Hard smiled thinly.

Without another word or look he resumed his way, leaving them staring after him. As long as he was within earshot neither of them spoke again.

At the houses beyond he met with no interruption. No men seemed to be about. A couple of women stared at him, but refrained from speaking. Several children spied him and bolted into their houses to shriek the news of his return. A dog or two barked. But not a word was spoken to him—though many were spoken about him when he had passed. As soon as he was out of sight there began an excited clattering of female tongues.

Once more he entered his own clearing. It now was thigh-deep with uncut grass, above which rose only the gaunt chimney to mark the spot which once had been home. Beyond, the three full-bosomed maples had become lean and yellow. Toward them he trudged, and at the grave he paused. To his astonishment, he found it neatly trimmed.

A space of six feet all around the mound was mowed. And on the mound itself lay a withered bunch of late-blooming black-eyed Susans. Who had put them there, who had kept the grass cut, he could not know. But somehow his thoughts turned to Steve.

For a time he stood there, silent. Then he moved away into the woods. At length he halted again outside his cavern, listening. No sound came.

Unslinging his pack, he laid it noiselessly on a rock. Into the rift and through the hole he crept with equal stealth. At the end of the rock shelf he lay for several minutes, staring in new amazement.

The cavern was empty of life, but some

one had been there and put it in order against his return. On a couple of small rock shelves now rested the ends of a birch pole, and from the pole hung several packages, suspended by ropes. All but one were corded bundles of cloth, bedding and clothes. The odd one was a small wood box, and he guessed that in it he would find the few food supplies which he had abandoned. Everything which could be damaged by squirrels or wood-mice had been hung beyond their reach. The cooking utensils, his ax, and his old gun stood against the farther wall in an orderly row. Everything was far enough in to be beyond the reach of any rain.

Somebody had known that, sooner or later, the hills would call him back.

CHAPTER XXIII

A COPPERHEAD COILS

FOR a day after the wanderer's return the Traps seemed deathly still.

He had come back on a Saturday, and, although no Trapsman was burdened by religious scruples, it was not the custom to work on Sunday. Wherefore the clink of steel on stone was stilled for thirty-six hours following the last sunset of the week, and throughout the succeeding day Hard heard only an occasional far-off cock-crow, a few explosions of hunters' guns, and such small noises as he himself or the other wood-dwellers created. Not even the sigh of a breeze came to him, for the day was utterly windless. To a man whose ears had for months been accustomed to noises and voices, the silence seemed oppressive, ominous, as if the hills were holding their breath preparatory to hurling at him some annihilating calamity.

Night among the boulders was black and bleak. Day was wan and chill, a steely film across the sky turning the sun to a sickly disc devoid of warmth. In every way, the craggy Traps was receiving its returning foster-son with countenance cheerless and inhospitable. And the face he turned back to the Traps was no more warm or soft than its own.

Arising rather late—for, by supplementing his own blankets with the bedding taken from the Cooper attic, he had slept warmly, and the dayshine entering his cavern was too weak to arouse him early—he spent

some time in making a big breakfast. Then, after working the action of his rifle a couple of times to make sure of its readiness, he buckled on his reserve ammunition and went forth to a fruitless day of prowling.

The stillness of the air and the lateness of the season made stealthy movement difficult; for fallen leaves lay everywhere, crackling loudly when trodden upon, and even on bare ground the sound of footfalls was audible. The slight crunch of gravel, the grate of stone against stone, the suck of mud in wet spots, all were telltales to any listening ear. A squirrel scampering among the dead leaves made a racket worthy of a full-grown man, and the tread of even a bird was noisy. Thus it was hardly the day for man-hunting. Nevertheless, Hard had come here to hunt, and he hunted.

Until he had crossed the road forming the now ineffective deadline, he moved with little caution. Thereafter he prowled as stealthily as a hunting panther. Every step was slow, careful, and as nearly soundless as possible. Again and again he started at some sudden rush among the leaves as small animals darted away. Two or three times he jumped as a grouse shot up with an abrupt thunder of wings; and on these birds he heaped silent maledictions, for he knew their precipitate flight would, if heard by Copperhead, put him instantly on guard. His advance was time-killing, nerve-straining work.

At length, however, he reached the Cooper clearing. It was bare. The corn had been harvested and carted off by thrifty Trapsmen who, with none to say them nay, had appropriated it for their cattle. Those same men, however, had not deemed it wise to cut the hay at Hard Wood's deserted field. A slight smile quirked his lips as he thought of this and surveyed the expanse of stubs.

Where the house and barn had stood were only a few charred fragments and the stump of a chimney whose top had collapsed. The once formidable lair of his enemies had become nothing. He wondered where the sole remaining malefactor of that tribe now was sheltering himself. It must be somewhere in the woods, for there certainly was nothing but desolation in this stark field. Perhaps, though, he had made some sort of hang-out in the split boulder where Hard, on that last day, had lost his powder flask. Toward that point moved the hunter, keeping always masked by the brush.

The rocks, too, were empty. So was the path beyond, where Jane had first come into the life of the youth now trying to trail her brother. Circling on beyond the little creek, Hard came to a cattle path leading farther back, and followed this into a small pasture. Nowhere was any sign of his quarry.

At last, with the wan sun sinking westward and hunger gnawing at his stomach, he abandoned the quest for the day. Returning northward, he detoured to the shelving rock where he had deposited his mother's treasure-chest. The chest still was there, streaked by slanting rains, but undiscovered and unharmed. Swinging back to the Cooper road, he went out as warily as he had come in. It was quite possible that his enemy had been outside and now was approaching. But he retraced his way to his cavern without meeting Copperhead or any other man.

On arriving at his den he looked and listened before entering, half expecting to see or hear Steve. The news of his open reappearance in the Traps must have traveled all about by now, and it would be strange indeed if the Wilham household had not heard of it. But Steve had not been here. The cavern was as its master had left it, and seemed colder and lonelier than ever.

So far as visible indications went, Steve and all the rest who had vowed vengeance on the young cave-man were now ignoring his presence and relegating him and his deeds to the realm of things forgotten. As a matter of fact, however, the mountain bowl was seething with the tidings of his coming. Except for two persons, the entire Traps clan had known of it before dark, and many a hot argument had ensued. The more virulent women of the place—notably the sniffling Mis' Becker—were vindictive in their verbal attacks on him and rancorous in their demands that the men now "give him his needin's." Some of the men were quite willing to try—if the rest would back them up. But the rest hung back.

The Rhodes brothers had lost little time in circulating their own budget of news, and most of the men who heard it were inclined to believe that Hard Wood had told the truth. For one thing, it was not his way to take refuge in lies. For another, his bold return was in itself a convincing argument. Considering everything, the majority was willing to go very slowly in calling for an

accounting. There was a general feeling that before very long Uncle Eb Williams and Steve Oaks would have definite knowledge of the Jane Cooper matter, and that until then it was best to wait.

Moreover, the whisper had gone around that Copperhead Cooper was back, and that Hard Wood has asked about him and "grinned kind o' nasty" when told of his enemy's presence. Even the malcontents looked forward with pleasurable excitement to further developments in the Wood-Cooper war.



THE two who were tardy in learning of the event were Steve and Copperhead. Just at present Steve was assiduously hunting 'coons, whose fur now was becoming prime. Thus engaged, he and his mongrel dog had been away from home for the past two nights, hunting through the dark hours and sleeping by day in a little shelter known only to the huntsman. It was not until Sunday sundown that he reappeared, bringing several pelts, and heard the news.

It was at about the same hour that Copperhead received the tidings. Like his enemy, he had spent a bad day at hunting, hunting, however, not for a man but for something to eat. Like his foe, too, he now hunted with a rifle; not a repeater, but a single-shot arm which, with a leather pouch of cartridges, he had brought back with him from that unknown place whither he had fled from the "revenooers." During Hard's search for him he had been away on the Minnewaska tableland, vainly seeking game. And now, desperate from hunger, he had sneaked to the highway and was awaiting darkness. When that came, he meant to steal into Andy Mack's henhouse and snatch a couple of fowls from the roost.

He was a gaunt, savage Copperhead now. He was here only because this hole in the hills was his last refuge. Once before, a few days after deserting his brothers, he had come crawling furtively back, weak from hunger and a bullet-hole through one arm, to find his home destroyed. He had gone away again, dragging himself up over Minnewaska and then, by way of the great Pal-maghatt ravine at the south, stumbling down into a tiny farm-town at the base of the mountains.

There, under an *alias*, he had been befriended by a kindly family—and in the end

had repaid them as a copperhead might be expected to do. Now he was a fugitive, hunted for a crime far worse than moon-shining, and lying very low. His miserable shelter was the ruined still, somewhere to the south of where his house had been. He was as yet unaware that he had been seen and recognized while dodging back into the brush two days ago, and he had no intention of making his return known to the Traps so long as he could avoid it. Until his trailers down in the valley should give up their search, he was hiding from the sight of all men.

With the silent patience of a true copperhead, and the same fierce concentration on the prospect of food, he lay behind a stone wall and awaited his time to strike. The twilight thickened into dusk. The fowls all were in their house, and, presumably, asleep. A little longer, and it would be dark enough for him to creep forward. But then came the slow thump of a horse's feet climbing the hill; a voice drawling "Whoa;" the sound of an opening door, and Andy Mack's voice in salutation.

"H'are ye, Pete. Any more news?"

"Jest a-goin' to ast ye the same thing, Andy. Thought mebbe ye'd seen Uncle Eb. I'd kind o' like to know what he's got to say. Folks is kind o' excited down b'low."

"Wal, Uncle Eb says, 'Leave Hard Wood 'lone.' An' I say the same, Pete. Uncle Eb ain't seen Hard yit, but he says if the boy says the gal's awright, that's good 'nough for him. 'Course, we'd all like to know jest what's what an' how come, but we can hold our hosses till it all comes out."

"M-hm." Pete expectorated thoughtfully. "Wal, that sounds sensible. I wouldn't wonder, though, if we had to wait while Hard gits to Copperhead Cooper an' kind o' squar's up his account. Hard's kind o' like Steve Oaks—ye don't want to git into his way when he's got somethin' onto his mind. Ain't seen Copperhead, I s'pose?"

"Nary a see. I dunno how he lives, 'less'n he shoots his vittles. Sort o' funny, him an' Hard gittin' back so clus together."

"M-hm. An' Hard with a rifle an' a hull pack o' grub, an' askin' right off 'bout him. Looks kind o' like he'd come jest to git him. 'Twon't hurt my feelin's if he does. Copperhead never was no good."

"I sh'd say not! Nor none the rest of 'em—'ceptin' the ol' woman an' the gal, o' course. An' that puts me into mind—I'm a-goin' to lock up the henhouse tonight. Don't want no skunks or weasels gittin' in, or no copperheads neither."

"Huh, huh, huh!" chuckled Pete. "I don't blame ye. I wouldn't trust Copperhead as fur's I can spit. Say, ye dunno where Hard's a-livin', do ye?"

"Same place, I guess. Over 'round Dickabar somewheres. I dunno jest where, an' I dunno as I'd tell if I did know. I think the boy's awright."

"M-hm. Wal, I'll go 'long. Don't forget yer hens. Huh, huh!"

"By gorry, I won't. I'll lock 'em up this minute."

Pete chirped to his horse. The slow thumping recommenced. Before the beat died away up the hill, a metallic snap testified that Andy had put his padlock on the henhouse. The door of the dwelling squeaked once more. All was still.

Behind the wall, Copperhead crept away, mouthing vicious oaths. He'd get a hen at some other house. And Hard Wood was hunting him, was he—with a whole pack of grub—a hide-hole somewhere around Dickabar—

Copperhead stopped. His teeth suddenly bared like fangs. A pack of food, a hide-hole—just what he needed! A bullet in Hard Wood's back—ha!—then drop him down a crevice somewhere, nobody'd ever find him. And he, Copperhead, could hide and eat and sleep for weeks to come, maybe; for awhile, anyway.

So, though he venomously cursed Andy Mack and Pete and the bad luck which had made his presence known to the Traps, he grinned again and again. And within an hour he stole a hen from another roost and hastened with it to his refuge, where he half-cooked it and gnawed it down. Then, huddling beside his smoldering fire, he dozed, first gloating on his dream of revenge, then quaking with a new fear.

The thought came to him that possibly Hard Wood was now a law officer. Hard's last appearance within his sight had been as an ally of "revenooers;" the recently overheard conversation showed that he had been away for awhile; he might have had himself sworn in as a deputy for the express purpose of bringing his enemy to book. In that case his return now might indicate

that he knew of Copperhead's recent crime; and other officers might follow him at any moment.

To the guiltily fearful fugitive this fancy speedily became fact. And, though he shivered and shook, he grew all the more desperately eager to assassinate Hard and seize his food before other law-hounds could come. It was his only hope.

Thus, though the day had been, to the hunter who now slumbered under the Dickie Barre cliffs, as featureless as an unruffled pool, its utter calm had been only on the surface; and under that superficial quietude had squirmed currents and eddies beyond his ken. And even now, while Hard dreamed and Copperhead twitched and Steve smoked thoughtfully in their various abodes, a new cross-current came sliding into the Traps bowl from outside.

Through the jaws of the Gap rolled a wagon containing two men, both armed. At the first house it paused while one of the riders made crisp inquiries. Then it crawled on, climbing the hill, to stop again at the home of Uncle Eb. Steve came forth. After a short conversation, the riders unharnessed, put the horse into the barn, and entered the house. And there, after a lengthy talk, Steve put a little oil on his gun and every one went to bed.

One of the newcomers was Parker. The other was a lantern-jawed, hard-eyed farmer—the constable of the tiny hamlet whence Copperhead had fled back to the Traps.

CHAPTER XXIV

ON THE CRAGS

COLD rain pounded the Shawangunks and swept away eastward, leaving behind it a clean sky and a soggy earth. Stars twinkled brilliantly in the dark blue heavens; faded, vanished, and made way for a glorious dawn. Dismal Sunday was dead; lusty Monday was born.

The creatures of earth and air sprang awake and bestirred themselves in preparing or seeking food. Two-legged or four-legged, winged or wingless, wild or tame, all turned their thoughts and their motions to that one end. The only animate things which did not were legless, loathsome creatures lying torpid in their dens: Snakes, dormant but by no means dead, buried among windblown leaves and untouched by

sun. These, unless aroused, would neither move nor eat again until spring.

Yet there was one copperhead in the Traps which was on the move. Shivering and hungry, it had crept from its lair before dawn; and the first rays of the sun found it at the north of the road and nearing the crags of Dickie Barre. It had legs, and it carried a rifle. When the morning smokes began to ascend from the houses, it was clambering stealthily up a slanting rift in the precipice. It sought to find, somewhere along the fissured brink, a cook-smoke which arose from no house; or, failing that, a habitation somewhere among the trees of the top.

Meanwhile, the very smoke for which this creature hunted was rising from the labyrinth on the eastern face of the butte. But it was invisible to any eyes at the southern end, for between those two points intervened a couple of miles of hummocks and timber. For that matter, that smoke-haze was so thin that it would have eluded the vision of any one much nearer to it. Where it had once taken the woods-wise Steve Oaks three days to locate Hard's cook-fire—and then only by scenting, not by seeing it—Copperhead's chance of repeating the feat was even thinner than the smoke itself.

The cave-man had slept through the night so soundly that he had not heard the rain. But the first peep of day aroused him, and he spent no time lingering in his blankets. Rolling out, he sniffed deep of the damp forest odor, glanced at the clean sky, stretched his powerful arms wide, and grinned like a giant refreshed. This smelled and looked and felt like his own old Traps, not like the bleak rock-hole of yesterday. As he squatted beside his fire and eyed the wet stones outside he smiled again. That downpour in the night, converting the crackling leaves into limp rags, would make for easy stalking today.

He ate rapidly; made a couple of bacon sandwiches with the remnant of a bread-loaf; stowed them in a pocket, armed himself, and left his stony home. Instead of following the same route as on the previous day, he turned cliffward, found the ascent which he had used before, and clambered—with considerable difficulty, for it now was slippery—to the top. Today he meant to detour by way of Peters Kill and comb the Minnewaska upland in the Cooper vicinity.

Since yesterday's scouting at the clearing had yielded nothing, he was going a little farther afield.

At the top he paused to take in the vista. With the change in season, its masses of color now were far different from the swelling greenery which he had last seen from this spot. So clear was the air that rock and house and thin-leaved tree stood out with marvelous sharpness. For a few minutes he stood there, his gaze drifting north and south, and his thoughts reiterating:

"Gorry, if Jane could only git a look at this! The city can't give her nothin' half as pretty as these old hills where she was borned."

Then, in some unexplainable way, that gorgeous countryside seemed to grow blank, empty, a mere mass of colors without sense or feeling. He was lonely once more, lonely and cheerless. He turned his back on the scene.

The loneliness rode away on him, however, and would not be dispelled. His feet veered to the southwest, toward the Wilham home. He forced them to turn westward again, but soon they strayed southerly once more. This time he let them follow their own volition. He would not go to that home, for there lived the man who, at their last meeting, had called him a "dirty dog." But he could go to the southern cliffs facing the little yellow house, and, standing unseen on their brink, could look down at it. It lay less than half a mile from the precipice, and, with the air so crystal clear, he might see Uncle Eb smoking a pipe on the porch. Since he must journey southward anyway, he would lose no ground by yielding to the impulse.



AT THE same moment, on those southern crags, the human copperhead turned and began gliding slowly northward. He had been sneaking along them, peering down into every crevass on the mile-long southwestern front, until convinced that no man now was living there. The next section to spy on would be the long eastern flank, toward the Clove.

Hard Wood, having no reason to follow the raggedly tortuous verge of the butte, swung along inland among scattered trees and brush-patches, traversing the rolling, but smooth backbone of the crest and treading much bare rock. For nearly a

mile he walked thus, advancing rapidly, jumping now and then across some deep but narrow rift whose bottom was buried in blackness. Then he came to a gully which, swinging away to the left, was virtually bare of undergrowth and afforded easy footing, while beyond it grew a dense mass of scrub. Following the line of least resistance, he journeyed along this depression until the scrub thinned out; then climbed a few feet and resumed his original course. He now was quite near both the eastern and the southern brink of the sheer wall terminating the mesa.

Through the woods he strode on, casting a perfunctory glance now and then to right or left. All at once he slowed. Over there at the left front, had something moved?

Something vague—something only half glimpsed—seemed to have passed across a semi-clear space framed between two trees something about as high as a man's head. Turning his gaze full on that spot, he saw mere empty brush, through which sprayed the slanting rays of the ascending sun. No man could be walking there, he decided, without being visible against that strong eastern light. The moving thing must have been a mere phantasm—unless, perhaps, it had stopped behind one of the trees. At this last thought he renewed his narrow scrutiny.

For several yards he advanced very slowly, making out nothing new. Then the phantom reappeared; vague as before, visible through the thin-leaved brush only because of the brilliant sun beyond it, yet unmistakably human. It seemed to be creeping along near the eastern edge of the drop, pausing at every few feet to look or listen. After a minute or so it faded behind another tree.

Hard's first impulse was to smile, his second to scowl; his first thought being that this was Steve, his second that it could not be. Steve knew the location of his cavern, so he would not be prowling at this point in search of it. The prowler was quite evidently hunting for something, and he was too near the edge to be seeking ordinary game. The cave-man's scowl bit deeper. He veered to the left again, directing his course to intercept that of the spy.

Detouring bush-clumps, he traveled noiselessly on bare rock for several rods. Then before him yawned a crevasse. He jumped it. His impetus carried him well

beyond the farther lip and squarely upon a dead, bleached stick, so near the color of the rock that he had not observed it until too late. It broke with a crunching crack.

When he again searched the brush for the prowler, nothing resembling a human form was in sight. For unmeasured minutes he stood there, detecting neither sight nor sound of the phantom. Somewhere near at hand chirped a lonesome bird. Somewhere far away barked a dog. To the listener came no other indication of life.

With utmost stealth he began moving forward again. He did not know who that hidden man out yonder might be—whether he was Copperhead or some Trapsman attempting to smell out his cavern—but his intentions evidently were not friendly. One good glimpse of him would immediately decide the nature of Hard's subsequent procedure. Now he maneuvered to obtain that glimpse.

His uncertainty as to the character, if not the identity, of the other vanished before he saw him. As he descended a slanting slope of stone one smooth-worn heel came down on a wet leaf. The leaf skidded under him so suddenly that he lurched abruptly aside, then slid downward with startling speed. At almost the same instant, from the base of a tree some forty yards away, a flash stabbed toward him.

Bang! Pow-w-w-w!

The gunshot merged into the scream of a bullet glancing off the stone behind him.

Hard's rifle-butt snapped to his shoulder. Once, twice he fired at the spot whence that bullet had leaped.

A brush-patch just behind the tree shook violently. Hard rushed, shooting as he went. A fighting wrath had seized him. He went at this unknown gunman as he would have gone into a fist-fight—headlong, heedless, hitting hard.

No retaliating shot came from the region of the tree. With hammer back and the last cartridge of his string ready in the chamber, he reached the spot and found—nothing. The phantom had vanished again. But the watery marks of its feet were still there in the leaves. It had stood in a waist-deep depression, lying forward on a natural parapet and thus hugging the ground. Now it had retreated southward.

"Ye cussed coward, ye!" roared Hard, his weapon raised. "Stan' up an' fight!"

A shot banged in reply. Hard's coat,

hanging loose, flew back and yanked violently at his shoulders. The bullet had struck it waist-high at the left, missing his body by a couple of inches.

He snapped his remaining bullet at a half-seen head disappearing behind a tree trunk some rods to the southward. The smack of the lead against the tree came clearly to his ears, telling him he had missed his mark.

At once he dropped into the hole which had served his antagonist, and with fast-working fingers he reloaded. The instant his magazine was full he leaped up again, covering himself behind the tree whence the first shot had been fired. Hardly had he risen when splinters flew from the side of that trunk. The glancing bullet snarled viciously past him and plunked into a log beyond.

Hard dropped on one knee, leaned out, and glimpsed a rifle-barrel, a hand working on it, and part of a face topped by a shapeless felt hat. At once he shot for the face. It moved back just as he pulled trigger, however, and his ball merely barked the tree. But he had learned that the other gun was not a repeater—he had seen the reloading. Wherefore he delayed his next shot in order to draw his enemy's fire. In fact, he purposely exposed himself and pretended to be in difficulties with his own rifle, meanwhile watching the other tree. The ruse worked.

The other gun darted to an aim. Just as it flashed he threw himself back. The cold breath of the bullet found his face. Instantly he came forward again, leveled his piece—and involuntarily held his shot. For the first time, he saw all the other's face.

Perhaps Copperhead, a trifle slow of perception, had believed his foe's backward movement to be due to a hit. At any rate, his whole head now was in view, a malicious grin frozen on his lips as he found himself duped. For an instant the pair remained rigid. Then Hard dropped his head a trifle, caught the sights, and shot straight for the forehead.

But at that slight motion Copperhead dodged aside. The bullet missed his brow but tore off the upper half of an ear. The blow, the pain, the rush of blood wrung from him a howl. An answering yell, a fierce whoop of joy and hatred, burst from the tree where crouched his enemy. A crash of breaking brush instantly followed. Hard Wood was rushing again; rushing to the

death grapple as ferociously as any of his Indian ancestors.

Had Copperhead stood his ground, he might have killed his foe then and there. His gun was unloaded, but he could have jammed in another cartridge before Hard could reach him. But the stuff in him was not stern enough to hold him there. As it had been on the day when he fought Hard and the "revenooers," so it was now, a wound struck him into panic, and he turned and fled.



HARD fired as he ran, but so eager was he to close with his enemy that he shot with bad aim. Brush was obstructing him, uneven ground destroyed his shooting balance, and, though he emptied his gun, his bullets did not bring Copperhead down. Yet, by the luck of battle, he hit his foe even while missing him. The last ball ricocheted off a rock and buried itself in Copperhead's right thigh.

He stumbled and fell. But his fear lifted him again and carried him on so quickly that he seemed only to have stubbed a toe. Madly he hurled himself toward the southern cliffs, hoping to find again the slanting rift up which he had come and precipitate himself down it to escape.

After him tore Hard, his speed almost redoubled now that he had ceased shooting. He made no attempt to reload; he was determined to run down the assassin and finish him with gun-butt or bare hands. Smashing through undergrowth, bounding high to clear rock or prone trunk or crevice, swerving around obstructing trees, he hurtled through the wilderness to the southern edge.

There, as he burst out into the open, a yell of savage exultation roared from his throat. Copperhead was cornered.

Out on the naked rock he was, unprotected by the slightest cover, trapped beyond hope of escape. Beyond him, the cliff dropped sheer for a hundred feet to jagged blocks. At the right yawned a crevasse too wide to be jumped. Behind him, his pursuer blocked him from regaining the tree-cover or from running to the left. And, even had the way been open, he could have run little farther. Every step he had taken with the right foot was marked on the bare stone by a red splotch.

Hopeless though his position was, he was

stumping along the verge of the crevasse, frenziedly seeking some miraculous way of escaping across it. As the fierce shout of his Nemesis rang behind him, he jerked about and stood at bay.

So frightful was his appearance now that the vengeful taunts rising to Hard's tongue died unuttered. Blood from his torn ear, lacerated still further in his headlong flight through the brush, smeared one side of his face and dyed shoulder and chest. His mouth and nose, hurt by violent collision with a stone when the rebounding bullet felled him, drizzled more crimson fluid down over his chin. His clothes hung in shreds, and the right leg was saturated.

Yet these grisly externals were as nothing compared to the hideous visage revealing the soul beneath them. Under the unkempt coppery hair clinging greasily to his brow gleamed eyes inhuman as those of any reptile; behind his mashed lips snarled filthy teeth set in a grimace of murderous hate; at the corners of his down-turned mouth a pink froth churned as he panted for breath. Mingling with venomous rage and sickening fear was a haggard, drooling madness, born of haunting guilt and knowledge that at last he was run down.

Eying that demoniac countenance, Hard Wood changed from a man about to battle an enemy to one about to kill a snake. Tense, alert, his expression one of repulsion, his mouth clamped tight and his eyes cold and merciless, he advanced, gripping his rifle-barrel in both fists and swinging up the butt. Somehow the thought of shooting this creature did not now occur to him. It was a reptile, and he would crush it like a reptile—with a blow.

Step by step, yard by yard, steady and inexorable as the pulse of Doom itself, he approached. Eye held eye in a fixed stare. Five yards more, and that reversed rifle would crash down.

Then Copperhead shot.

Somewhere in his flight—perhaps after reaching the brink—he had reloaded. Now, with a gasping snarl horrible more than any words, he fired pointblank.

A terrific shock smote Hard in the chest. He halted short, staggered, nearly fell. All strength vanished. A wave of red and black assailed his brain, blotting out everything. Time, space, light, life, were nothing.

Then he saw again—dimly, through a blur. He was strangling; he coughed up

something thick and salty. His vision cleared. He was still on his feet. Beyond, grinning like a fiend, Copperhead was thumbing another cartridge into the barrel.

A flash of power returned. With all his strength he hurled his rifle. Copperhead, looking down as he snapped his loading-gate shut, dodged too late. Butt-first, the Winchester thudded into his face.

A gasp, a metallic *thwack* as his gun dropped, a futile struggle to recover balance—he was gone. From the crevasse sounded a hoarse croak, a slithering noise—then a crash among dead leaves far below.

So the rifle of dead Roberts, "loaned" by Parker to bring down the sole male Cooper remaining at large, had done its work at last.

Hard pitched forward, coughed, and lay still. On the brown rock before him formed a scarlet stain.

Then from the depths of the crevasse rose a scream. A scream of utter despair, of ghastly fear, of intolerable agony. It stabbed the fading senses of the prone man above like a spur. Reaching before him, he dragged himself forward to the edge. There he looked down.

"God!" he breathed.

Copperhead was still alive, but, broken by his fall and unable to rise, was meeting a death worse than that of blow or bullet. He had struck among leaves which, for numberless years, had drifted down from above to form a thick, slowly decaying bed. That bed had not been overlooked. Now, from under a jutting shelf of rock beside him, had erupted a dozen furious, hideous creatures which struck and coiled and struck again.

Screeching, writhing, thrashing about, Copperhead was dying in a den of copperheads.

With a sick shudder, the man above pushed himself weakly back from the brink. He coughed once more. Then his head dropped hard. All went black.

CHAPTER XXV

A HATCHET IS BURIED

SNOW, floating straight down in myriad fat flakes, blotted out the distances and blurred even the gnarled apple-trees a few rods outside the little window. Within the quiet bedroom prevailed a soft twilight which made vague all things except those nearest at hand.

To the wan-faced youth whose hollow eyes dwelt on the feathery deluge beyond the panes, the dimness seemed in accord with recent events. The things which of late had taken place were as misty in his mind as the more distant trees in the storm; many were as formless as the almost invisible forest on the limited horizon; a few stood out as unmistakably as the nearest branches of the orchard—strongly marked, yet not altogether clear-cut, against the moving curtain of Time. As for time itself, he could no more judge how many hours of it had elapsed than he could determine how many flakes were scooting downward at that moment.

Amid the memory-blur certain faces and voices and words were clear. First, those of Steve and Parker and a third man, a lantern-jawed, bleak-eyed stranger. He was lying on his back on hard rock, with a taste of mingled blood and whisky in his mouth. Parker, kneeling beside him, was working deftly with white cloth at a burning hole in his breast. Steve, his face drawn with anxiety, was stooping over him with a bottle. The stranger, leaning on a gun, was doing nothing but chew tobacco.

"Pretty work, boy, pretty work!" Parker was saying to him. "Got him after all, didn't yuh? It took yuh quite a while, but yuh sure finished him when yuh got to him. Now take it easy. Yuh got bumped a little yourself, yuh know. Don't try to talk. We know all about it. Stood right down yonder in the road and saw yuh. Now we'll ease yuh down to the house and— Hey, Oaks, give him another! He's goin' under again——"

A blank space. Then a sensation of being slowly carried over rough ground, and Steve's voice panting:

"I don't hardly see how he's a-goin' to live—hole clear through him like that—must of tore the lung outen him."

"He's tough," broke in Parker's crisp tones. "Built like a moose. And he looks like he'd always lived clean. That makes a lot of difference. The minute we git him to bed you tear out and git the fastest horse around here, and git for a doctor — for leather. I think I can keep him alive till the doc can git here."

More blankness. Pain. The face and torso of the High Falls doctor, his coat and collar off, a red-stained cloth in his hands. Calm, cool professional tones:

"Steady, Wood, steady! What are you fightin' me for? Just lay quiet, my lad. You'll kill yourself with that wrastlin' around and talkin'. Stop it! Oh, well. Here, drink this. You're thirsty. Drink it. That's right. Now you're goin' to sleep. You're going to sleep. You're goin'——"

More pain. Fever. Headaches. Dreams. Sometimes the face of Uncle Eb; of Steve; of the doctor. Sometimes daylight, sometimes lamplight. At length—a silent room, a snowstorm outside.

He felt incredibly weak, but painless. His brain was clear. His body was deliciously lazy, resting in utter content. He essayed a long breath—then winced. A pain had stabbed his left lung near the heart. another breath, however, a shorter one, did not hurt. He must be a little careful about breathing. Then he would be very comfortable.

A slight sound at the door drew his gaze away from the window. His eyes met those of Steve.

"Lo, Hard," came the familiar drawl. "Feelin' better, I see. If ye'll keep yer mouth shut I'll come in an' talk to ye a minute. But if ye start tryin' to talk yerself, I'll leave ye 'lone. Doctor says ye've got to keep quiet awhile yit."

The invalid made no answer. Steve lounged in, drew up a chair, studied him. Then his sober face lightened in one of his rare smiles.

"Good 'nough! Ye're gittin' 'long fine, spite o' yer foolishness. Ye ain't much good of a sick man, Hard—ye won't lay still. Doctor had to keep ye sleepin' most o' the time. But if ye'll show some sense now we'll have ye up out o' there, 'fore very long."

"Ye've had a narrer squeak, Hard. I swan, I thought ye was a goner, an' ye ain't rightly got no business to be a-livin' now. I dunno what that bullet done inside o' ye, but 'twas plenty. But doctor says ye're out o' danger now, pervidin' ye're mighty careful. So ye be careful! We don't want ye to up an' make a die onto us now—the ground's froze, an' 'twould be hard diggin'."



HE GRINNED again, and a faint smile was reflected on the thin lips of the wounded man.

"Now there's some things ye'll want to know," he went on, "an' I'll tell ye all that's needful for now. Ye know ye're

into Uncle Eb's house, o' course. We brung ye right down here after the fight—me an' that revenooer Parker an' a feller, name o' Brown, from down Rutsonville way. They was up here to git Copperhead, an' we was jest a-goin' down to start huntin' for him when all this shootin' begun up onto Dickabar; so we stopped right into the road an' waited to see if anything come our way, an' somethin' did. We see the two o' ye come out onto the edge an' finish it. An' then we clumb up an' got ye. Copperhead—we left him right where he was. He might's well lay there as anywheres.

"This feller Brown, he's constable down to Rutsonville. Seems Copperhead went down there an' give some other name an' got him a job workin' onto a farm awhile. 'Tain't much of a place, ye know, an' it lays 'way off from any main road, an' nobody knowed him. Wal, bimeby he—uh—wal, he done somethin'—the less said the better. 'Twas a gal, an' I dunno whether she's still a-livin' or not. An' then he stole a rifle an' got outen there.

"Wal, the word flew all 'round, o' course, an' a description an' everything, an' this feller Parker, he got a holt of it; he was over to Gardiner 'bout somethin', I dunno what, when the word come. So he went to Rutsonville an' found out all he could, an' then him an' Brown come up into here. They come to me an' told me 'bout it, an' it maddened me, an' the next mornin' we started out a-gunnin'. But I've told ye 'bout what happened after that.

"Wal, that's 'bout all, as fur's Copperhead's concerned. But I—uh—I want to tell ye—I'm awful sorry, Hard, that I turned ag'in ye. I mean 'bout Jane Cooper. I'd ought to of knowed ye better. But things looked awful bad, Hard, an' the hull thing kind o' made me lose my sense, I guess. One thing that always mads me is seein' somethin' helpless git treated mean. I don't care if it's a blind gal or jest a sick cat, if folks pick onto it I begin to taste blood. But I'd ought to of talked decent to ye when I found ye, an' give ye a chance, 'stid o' callin' ye names an' gittin' yer mad up.

"I know now where she is—I read them letters an' things into yer pocket. Ye told the Rhodes boys ye had proofs 'bout her, ye 'member, an' it didn't look like ye'd live, so I went through them things. It's wonderful, Hard, jest wonderful that ye could git her eyesight for her like that. I can't

hardly b'lieve into it, even now, an' I ain't told folks 'bout it—they wouldn't b'lieve into it at all. I've jest told 'em I've seen the proofs ye carried, an' them proofs show ye told the truth, an' she's safe an' well an' happy; an' they've had to be satisfied with that.

"An' most of 'em is more'n willin' to be satisfied with that. Seems like they're kind o' shamed o' thinkin' so bad about ye; an' when ye git up ye'll find a hull lot o' folks wantin' to be friends with ye. One thing that makes 'em feel that way, mebbe, is 'cause ye give Copperhead his needin's. The hull Traps knows what he done down there to Rutsonville, an' it maddened 'em, an' they're tickled to death over the way ye got him; an' then findin' out that they'd misjudged ye—

"Wal, folks is funny. Ther' ain't a day goes by that somebody don't stop in to see how ye're a-gittin' along; an' when ye git ready to go to work ag'in ye'll find lots o' chances—if ye want 'em. An' if I was you, Hard, I'd kind o' meet folks half-way when they're tryin' to be friends with ye. Ye never know when ye might need 'em."

There was a silence. The black eyes dwelt thoughtfully on the farther wall. To the helpless young giant, now shorn for the first time in his life of his all-conquering strength, the value of friendship was pointedly plain. But for friends, where would he now be?

After a time his lips opened. But Steve cut him off.

"No talkin', I tell ye! 'Bout yer things over into the rocks, now, they're all safe. I went an' got 'em. I've felt kind o' responsible for 'em ever since I drove ye outen there that night; that's why I fixed up everything there so's the animils wouldn't ruin 'em. Yas, 'twas me that done that—after I got over my mad. I kind o' took care o' things down to yer ol' place, too. I knowed ye'd come back sometime. Us hill folks always comes back. An' ther' warn't no sense into lettin' things go to rack an' ruin while ye was gone, even if us two should have a fight when ye did come back.

"An' I never told nobody where yer hide-hole was—didn't even tell 'em I'd ever found ye. So nobody but me an' you knows when the pair o' ye got outen the Traps, or 'bout yer livin' together three days over yender, or nothin'. What folks don't know don't hurt nobody, the way I look at it."



ACROSS the drawn face on the pillow swept pleased surprise. Then, feebly, a wasted right hand came creeping over the coverlet. Steve's darted to meet it. The silent clasp and pressure of those two gun-hands spoke volumes. In Steve's blood, as in Hard's, ran an Indian strain; and now, in silence, a hatchet was forever buried.

The older man relaxed his grip and arose, smiling once more.

"Come to think of it," he jested, "hard wood an' oaks come pretty nigh bein' the same kind o' timber. Wal, now take 'nother nap. See ye later."

Then Hard disobeyed orders and spoke.

"Ye ain't—wrote to Jane?" he whispered.

"Will ye shut up?" demanded Steve, frowning fiercely. "Doctor says— But there, mebbe ye'll rest easier if I tell ye all of it. I—uh—wal, mebbe ye'll say I hadn't no business to, but I did let Jane know. I didn't write to her myself, but I put Uncle Eb up to it. She's got a right to know what 'come o' Jerry, anyway, seein' he was her brother. An' so after awhile I got Uncle Eb to write to her—jest a few lines. But he didn't do it till jest lately, after doc said he was a-pickin' up; so we didn't tell her how bad hurt ye was—jest said ye'd got laid up awhile, but 'twarn't nothin' to worry 'bout."

"Wal, we got an answer back, an' ye can read it yerself bimeby. She didn't say nothin' at all 'bout Jerry, so she ain't feelin' bad about him. Ain't no reason why she should, neither. Le's see—oh, yas, she said she'd wrote to ye a couple o' times quite a spell ago, an' she'd jest found out lately the letters didn't never git mailed; she give 'em to somebody else to mail, an' they didn't do it. An' she was sorry ye'd got hurt, an' if 'twas real bad we'd got to let her know. An' she said she was a-goin' to come up here in the spring, anyway, an' mebbe stay here. Said she'd got tired o' the city; folks was too cooped up there, an' she couldn't git 'nough air, an' so on. 'Twas quite a long letter."

"Uncle Eb, he wrote right back to come an' live 'long of us, like she was s'posed to do when Joe give her into our charge. So, come spring, she'll prob'ly be here to stay quite awhile. I ain't a mite s'prized that she's got sick o' city things. She's a hill gal, an' it's like I said: Us hill folks always comes back. An' mebbe——"

He paused, eying the convalescent quizzically.

Hard, his gaze riveted to the brown eyes, said not a word.

"Wal, mebbe ye'll want to be buildin' ye a new house 'fore another winter," Steve slyly concluded. "An' now I ain't a-goin' to say no more to ye. G'by."

Rapidly he stalked out. The door shut firmly behind him, and Hard was once more alone. So abrupt was the visitor's departure that the invalid scowled. There were things he wished to say, doctor or no doctor; and, for the moment, he was angered by the thwarting of his desire. But presently his eyes wandered again to the window and the falling snow, and a wan smile lightened his sulky expression.

Good old Steve! Fierce and rough and deadly dangerous at times, yet paradoxically loyal to a friend even while hostile to him, shielding him from others even while hunting him; taking care of his abandoned possessions in the face of every evidence of guilt and a taunting farewell; and, best of all protecting the reputation of a girl who had recklessly flung it away in an attempt to save her own abductor. A queer, inconsistent creature whose motives and acts would be inexplicable to most folks, yet were perfectly plain to Hard Wood; just as some of Hard's own deeds would be incomprehensible to the average Trapsman but entirely understandable to Steve. As Steve had said, these two were of the same kind of timber.

And Jane was coming back in the spring—to stay! Glory! The slick city fellers hadn't gotten her after all. She didn't like the city. She was a hill girl. She was coming back to see her native land and its people; to walk with confident step and clear vision, joyously viewing everything with the sight given her by one Hard Wood.

Yet, after all, had that black curse been lifted from her by Hard Wood? Or had he merely carried out the unspoken, uncomprehended bidding of some mysterious power greater than himself? Was he, who, in his harsh pride, had set himself up as Judgment and Fate, as omniscient and omnipotent as he had seemed to himself? In his present helplessness and solitude he felt far otherwise. And now his thoughts went back to the day when he had wrathfully arraigned his God, and to the days that had followed; and in retrospect began to form a strange sequence of events.

Roving aimlessly and bitterly, he had

strayed to Kyserike and the canal; and, returning, brought with him a discarded newspaper telling of the marvelous operation on James B. Thornton. The destruction of his house had led him to the Cooper clearing, and so to Jane. The theft of his mother's dress had brought Jane into his clutch, and so to that stark cavern. And there among the rocks she had fallen and regained her sight for an instant; and that chance-received, chance-read newspaper—gone but not forgotten—had become a miraculous key opening the black doors which had confined her.

Even the wrath of Steve had fitted into the queer plan of things—forcing them to go at once, at a time which proved opportune both for unhindered escape and for finding the wandering Thorntons at home. Then he had voyaged up and down the canal, learning more about life, absorbing the wisdom of Cap'n Davis, broadening his narrow mental horizon. And at last he had come back—to find his errant feet turned toward Copperhead on Dickie Barre, to destroy him, to be himself laid low, and thereby to be made to realize the love of man for man; more, to glimpse dimly the majesty of a supreme power which, at its own time, shaped human lives aright.

Had a single link of that odd chain been missing, everything might be far different now. Jane might still be blind, and wretchedly unhappy; Copperhead still alive and working evil; Hard himself dead. What mind had directed all these apparently disjointed happenings to the present end? And why?

For a long time the convalescent lay there, his gaze dwelling on the moving curtain of whiteness beyond the panes. At length, though his lips did not move, his mind spoke to the invisible ruler of the universe.

"God," it said simply, "mom used to say, 'Ye move in a mysterious way, Yer wonders to perform.' An' she said ye was a God o' love, long-sufferin' an' patient an' kind. I ain't b'lieved into that lately. But I guess she was right. She 'most always was. An' I guess mebbe Ye know what Ye're a-doin', an' 'tain't for us critters to try an' tell Ye what Ye'd ought to do. An' so I take back all I said to Ye awhile ago, an' ask Yer pardon for sayin' it. I guess I was wrong."

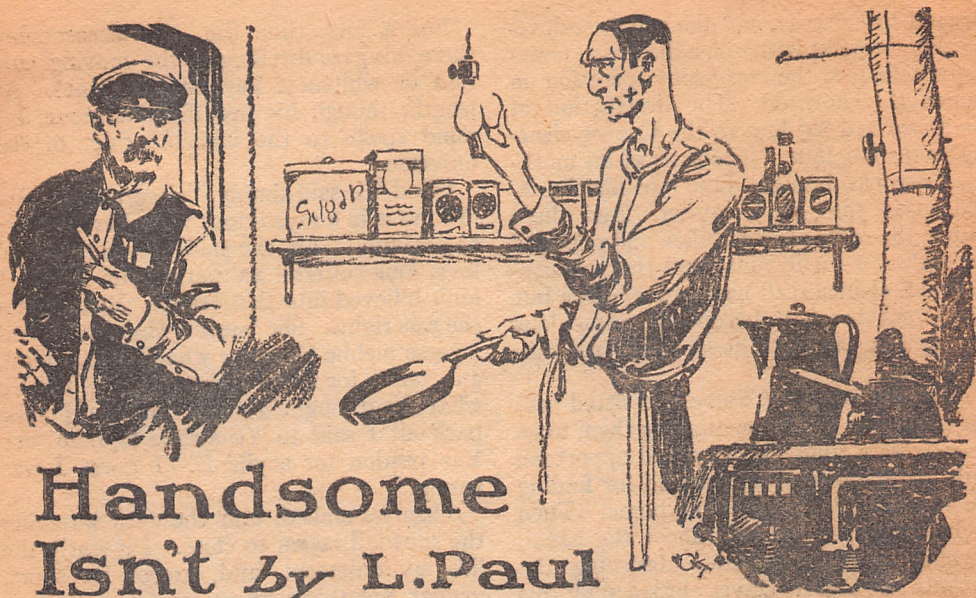
Then he smiled, and the eyes watching the snowfall began to close. Presently the lids lay quiescent, and, except for short, regular breathing, there was no sound or motion in the storm-shadowed room.

On the peaceful face of the youth who rested there still remained the little smile. He was wandering in a land where cold and winter were not. And he was not alone. Beside him walked one whose eyes had been opened to the beauty of the hills in the summertime, and who now beheld the gray and the green and the blue of stone and forest and sky, the countless hues of flower and bird and butterfly. And, as they drifted onward, somewhere far off echoed words which, spoken by a saturnine wolf-man and killer, yet were magic that had caused the portals of dreamland to open:

"Us hill folks always comes back."

THE END





Handsome Isn't *by* L. Paul

Author of "Stummicks," "Rabbit Foot," etc.

CAPTAIN SALEM walked uncertainly into the Excelsior Towing Company's offices. Here he was, only a month in command of one of their tugs, and coming to register a kick already. And behind that month of command lay years of work, when, as spare captain, he had waited for the chance of promotion.

Captain Salem was getting on in years, and he didn't like the idea of looking for a new billet. But things had got so that something had to be done about them.

"It's that there he-cook, Lemuel," he told the manager. "'Course I ain't the kind to kick over trifles like a soggy pie or a bit o' burnt beef, so long as a man can fill up otherwise. But this here Lemuel that you have wished on to the *Viking*, mister, is too danged consistent. Any time he don't cook a thing bad he cooks it worse."

The manager, a thin energetic man and a shark for efficiency, smiled coldly.

"Let me see. Captain, you have had command of your tug, the *Viking*, for a month. No longer. Now you come in here and raise a howl about the grub, and all the time, if you only knew it, that cook, Lemuel, whom you slander, is helping your reputation with the company."

"He may be helping my rep. with you folks, but he ain't addin' to his own 'board ship. And if we've run the old *Viking*

proper, well, 'tis but the shadders of our old selfs is doing it."

Salem tried to state his case calmly but the manager's manner was getting under his skin.

"You can't run no craft with living skeletons, mister, and that's a fact. But that's what we'll come to aboard the *Viking* if this here Lemuel keeps on workin' his will on us."

The manager reached for a sheet of paper on his desk.

"Here's what I mean," he explained. "That cook, Lemuel, costs us less per man per month than any other in the fleet. And when a boat is run cheaply the captain shares in the credit. Lemuel puts grub on the table for twenty-six cents per man per day. The next best is thirty-seven, and, of course, your record is helped by that as well as his."

"And fine it will look on my tombstone, 'He saved the comp'ny money,' " old Cap'n Salem complained. "Oh, 'tis not a groucher I am, mister, but if ye sot in just once to what Lemuel calls dinner——"

"If you can't see which side your bread is buttered on——" the manager picked up another sheet of paper—"here are the applications we received this month for jobs. Know any of them? Skilled captains, every one. Now let me hear no more grumbling. Sailors have to grouch once in so often and