

A Mystery Story for Girls

The
Silent Alarm

Roy J. Snell

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Adventure Stories for Girls

**The
Silent Alarm**

By
ROY J. SNELL



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THE SILENT ALARM

CHAPTER I

THE PRISONER IN A LONE CABIN

In a cabin far up the side of Pine Mountain, within ten paces of the murmuring waters of Ages Creek, there stood an old, two roomed log cabin. In one room of that cabin sat a girl. She was a large, strong girl, with the glow of ruddy health on her cheeks.

Her dress, though simple, displayed a taste too often missing in the Cumberland Mountains of Kentucky, and one might have guessed that she was from outside the mountains.

If one were to observe her, sitting there in a rustic splint bottomed chair; if he were to study her by the flickering firelight, he might have said: "She is a guest."

In this he would have been wrong. Florence Huyler was virtually a prisoner in that cabin. As she sat there dreamily gazing at the flickering fire, a man did sentry duty outside the door. He seemed asleep as he sat slouched over in a chair tilted against the cabin, but he was not. Nor would the occupant of that chair sleep this night.

Yet, had you said to Florence, "Why do they hold you prisoner here?" she would have replied:

"I'm sure I don't know."

That would have been true, too.

"What can they want?" she asked herself for the thousandth time as she sat there watching the coals of her wood fire blink out one by one. "Are they moonshiners? Do they think I am a secret agent of the revenue men? Do they want this," she patted a pocket inside her blouse, "or have they been hired by the big coal company to hold me until the secret of the railroad is out?"

When she patted her blouse there had come a crinkling sound. Ten new fifty dollar bank notes were pinned to the inside of the garment.

“If that’s what they want,” she said to herself, “why don’t they demand it and let me go?”

She shuddered as she rose. The room was cold. She dreaded facing a night in that cabin.

Having entered the second room, she closed the door softly behind her, then sat down upon the edge of the bed.

After removing her shoes, she glanced up at the smoke blackened ceiling.

“Hole up there,” she mused. “I wonder if.... No, I guess not. Never can tell, though.”

At once her lithe body was in motion. With the agility of a cat, she sprang upon a chair, mounted its back, caught the edge of the opening above and drew herself up into the attic, then dropped noiselessly down upon a beam.

“Whew! Dusty,” she panted.

Five minutes later she found herself staring out into the moonlight. At the upper end of the cabin loft she had found a small door that opened to a view of the mountain side. Having found this she opened it noiselessly. It would be an easy matter to hang by her hands, drop to the ground and then attempt her escape through the brush. This she was about to do when something arrested her—a very small thing. On a narrow level space where the grass had been eaten short by cows or wild creatures, three young rabbits were sporting in the moonlight.

“Shame to spoil their fun,” she whispered to herself. “Time enough.” She seated herself close to the opening.

A moment later she was thankful for the impulse that caused her to wait. In an instant, without a sound, the rabbits disappeared into the brush.

With a little gasp the girl closed the small door. Ten seconds later, by peering through a crack, she saw a man cross the small clearing. It was her guard.

“Thanks, little rabbits,” she whispered. “You did me a good

turn that time.”

A moment later the man returned across the patch of short grass and once more the girl set herself to listening and watching.

“When the little gray fellows come back to play, I’ll risk it,” she told herself.

As she sat there waiting, feeling the cool caress of the mountain night air upon her cheek, listening, watching, she allowed her eyes to wander away to the half dozen little peaks that formed the crest of Pine Mountain.

“How dark and mysterious they seem in the night,” she thought to herself. “How—”

Her meditations were suddenly cut short. Her eyes had caught a yellow gleam that had suddenly appeared on the very crest of the highest peak of the mountain.

“Wha—what can it mean?” she whispered. “It can’t be—but it is!”

Even as she looked, the yellow gleam blinked out for a second, glowed again, only to vanish, then to glow steadily once more.

The girl’s heart grew warm, her cheeks flushed. Whereas only the moment before she had felt herself utterly alone in an unknown and hostile world, now she knew that on the crest of yonder mountain there stood a friend, her very best friend, Marion Norton. Between her and that peak lay many a long and tangled trail. What of that? That golden glow spoke warmly of friendship.

“The Silent Alarm,” she murmured as she hastily drew from her pocket two dark cylinders. One of the cylinders she placed before her on the window ledge. The other she grasped at either end, drawing it out to four times its original length. The thing was a pocket telescope such as is often carried in the mountains. From the ends of this she unscrewed the lenses. After that, lying flat upon the dusty floor that was all but level with the sill of the small shuttered door, she glanced along the tube of the dismantled telescope. Slowly, surely, as if the thing were a rifle, she aimed it at the distant yellow gleam. Then, without allowing the tube to move, she picked up the other shorter one which had all this time rested on the window sill. Having placed the end of this against the end of the hollow tube, she pressed a button, and at once a needle point of

glowing light shot forth into the night. The second cylinder was a small but powerful flashlight.

“The Silent Alarm,” she whispered once more.

She had kept the small flashlight aimed at the distant yellow flash of fire less than a moment when, with a suddenness that was startling, the glow on the distant mountain crest vanished. It was as if someone had thrown a shovel of earth or a bucket of water upon a small camp fire.

The little tableau was not at an end. Florence, by moving her hand before her tube, sent out successive flashes, some short, some long. Now a short one, now two long ones, now three short; so it went on for some time.

“The Silent Alarm,” she thought. “I only hope she gets it right. She might try to come to me. That would be too terrible.”

This had scarcely passed her mind when, of a sudden, from that same distant hillside there gleamed a star. Or was it a star? If a star, then a tree branch must wave before it, for now it appeared, only to disappear and reappear again.

It was no star. At once, with a pencil and a scrap of paper, the girl was marking down dots and dashes, taking the message being sent by signal code from the distant mountain crest.

As she scratched down the last dash, the star vanished, not to reappear. Once more darkness brooded over the foothills of Pine Mountain and the somber peaks beyond were lost in the glooms of night.

For a time, by the steady gleam of her flashlight, the girl studied her dots and dashes. Then, as she closed her tired eyes for a moment, she murmured:

“Oh! I had hoped for a real message, a message that would mean success.”

As she opened her eyes she glanced down to the spot of golden moonlight on the grass. The rabbits had returned to complete their frolic.

“Time to try it,” she whispered as she drew herself up on her knees.

CHAPTER II

STRANGE SENTRIES

“Thanks, jolly little friends,” she whispered to the rabbits.
“Sorry to disturb you, but it really has to be done.”

Clutching at her heart in a vain effort to still its wild beating, she slid slowly out of the window. A gripping of the beams, a swinging down, a second of clinging, a sudden drop, a prayer of thanksgiving that her alighting place was grass cushioned and noiseless, and the next instant she was lost from sight in the brush whither the three rabbits had fled.

For a full moment she crouched there motionless, scarcely breathing, listening intently.

There came no sound. Her guard was dozing in his chair.

Her mind was in a whirl. Now that she was free, where should she go? Where could she go? Home, if she could find the way, or to Everett Faucet’s cabin. Everett lived at the back of the mountain.

Yes, she might go to either place if only she knew the way. Truth was, she didn’t know the way. She had been carried about on horseback by her mysterious captors, covering strange trails, and at night. She was lost. Only one thing she knew—she was still on the back of Pine Mountain. The way home led up this side of the mountain and down the other.

A great wave of fear and despair swept over her. The whole affair, she told herself, was a useless adventure.

“I’ll go back home to our cabin; give it up,” she declared.

She began the upward climb. Beating her way through the brush, she struggled forward. It was heart-breaking work, making her way through brush and timber. Here a dense thicket tore at her, and there a solid wall of rock blocked her progress.

“Ought to find a trail. Have to,” she panted.

With this in mind, she began to circle the slope. She felt the need of haste. Night was wearing away. The early morning would soon reveal her, a lone girl in a strange and apparently hostile country.

Panic seized her. She fairly flew through the brush until, with a sudden compact that set her reeling, she came upon a rail fence.

Beyond the fence was a narrow trail. To her immense relief she found that this trail wound away up the mountain.

That mountain trail was the longest she had ever taken. It wound on and on, up and up until there seemed no end.

The cool damp of night hung over everything. The moon, swinging low in the heavens, cast long, deep shadows far down the trail. Now a startled rabbit, springing into the brush, sent the girl’s heart to her mouth. Now the long-drawn bay of a hound at some distant cabin sent a chill running up her spine. Frightened, alone, quite without means of protection, she hurried on.

Then suddenly, as she rounded a corner, she caught the sound of voices.

“Men,” she said to herself with a shudder.

The next instant she was silently pushing herself back into the depths of a clump of mountain ivy that grew beside the trail.

The men were coming down the trail. Now their voices sounded more clearly; now she caught the shuffle of their rough shoes, and now heard the heavy breathing of one as if carrying a load.

As they came abreast of her, she saw them dimly through the leaves. Then for a second her heart seemed to stop beating.

“A dog,” she breathed. “A long-eared hound!”

As the hound, with nose to the ground, came upon the spot where she had left the trail, he stopped short, gave a loud snort, then started straight into the bush.

“Come on, you!” one of the men grumbled, seizing him by the collar. “It’s only a rabbit.”

The dog struggled for a time, but a kick brought him back to his place behind his master and they traveled on down the hill.

“Saved!” the girl breathed as she dropped weakly upon the ground.

“And yet,” she thought as strength and courage came back to her, “why should I fear everyone here behind Pine Mountain?”

Why indeed? The experiences of the past hours had made fear a part of her nature.

Once more upon the trail, she hurried on more rapidly than before. Dawn was on its way. The jagged peaks of the mountain ahead showed faintly gray against the dark sky.

“Have to hurry,” she told herself. “Have to—”

Her thoughts broke short off and once more she sprang from the trail. Other men were coming. The night seemed filled with them.

This time, finding herself in a narrow grass grown trail that led away at an angle from the hard beaten main trail, she hurriedly tiptoed along it.

“Not another narrow escape like the last one,” she thought.

She had followed this apparently deserted trail for a hundred yards when suddenly she came upon a cabin.

Her first thought was to turn and flee. A second look told her that the place was abandoned. Two panes of glass in the single window were broken and before the door, displaying their last fiery red blossoms, two hollyhocks did sentry duty.

The door stood ajar. For a moment she hesitated before the red sentries.

“Oh, pshaw!” she whispered at last. “You dear old-fashioned guardians of a once happy home, I can pass you without cracking a stem or bruising a blossom.”

Putting out her hands, she parted the tall flowers with gentlest care, then stepped between them. For this simple ceremony, inspired by her love of beauty, she was destined in not so many hours to feel supremely grateful.

Inside she found a lonesome scene. The moon, shining through

the single window, struck across a rude table. A dark cavern at the end spoke of a fireplace which once had offered ruddy comfort.

A ladder leading to the loft stood against the wall. Without thinking much about it, she climbed that ladder. Somewhat to her surprise, she found the attic half filled with clean, dry, rustling corn husks.

“Someone stowed his corn here. Husked the corn and left the husks.”

“How—how comfortable,” she sighed as her weary body relaxed upon this springy bed.

“I’ll rest here for a moment,” she thought, “rest here for a—for a—rest—”

The next moment she was fast asleep.

Hours later she awoke with a start. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. Then, catching the rustle of corn husks, she remembered where she was.

“Must have fallen asleep,” she said, a feeling of consternation coming over her. “And now it is—” She gazed about her questioningly.

“Now it is daylight,” she finished as she noted a bright bar of sunlight that fell across the floor. “Here I stay until dark.”

Here she remained. Once she left the cabin for a moment to slake her thirst at a spring that bubbled out of the rocks just back of the house. Both in coming and going she reverently parted the hollyhocks before the door.

“Probably some childish hands spilled the seed that started them growing there,” she told herself. “I wonder where that child may be now?”

The attic was silent, too silent. In one dark corner a fly, caught in a spider’s web, slowly buzzed his life away.

There was time now for thinking. And she did think, thought this whole adventure through from its very beginning.

It is strange, the unusual opportunities for adventure and romance that come to one in out-of-the-way places. Florence, with her chum, Marion, had been invited by Mrs. McAlpin,

Florence's aunt, to spend the summer in the mountains. They had come, expecting fishing, swimming and mountain climbing. They had found time for these, too; but above all, their summer had been filled with service, service for those whose opportunities had been far fewer than their own.

The one great service they had been able to render had been that of conducting a summer school for the barefooted, eager little children who swarmed the sides of Big Black Mountain. It had been a real pleasure to teach them. Strange to say, though there was a public school at the mouth of Laurel Branch, little was ever taught in it. The teacher, who knew nothing of grammar, geography or history, and little enough of "Readin', 'Ritin' and 'Rithmetic," took the school for no purpose save that he might draw the public money. The school, which was supposed to last six months, he brought to an end as speedily as possible. If no children came he could go back to his farm work of putting away his corn crop or rolling logs to clear land for next year's harvest, and he could do this and still draw his pay as a teacher.

The schoolhouse, a great log shack with holes for doors and windows, was without either doors or windows to keep out the weather. Before the cold autumn rains the little group of children who came to drone out words after their disinterested teacher vanished like blackbirds before the first snow, leaving the teacher free for other things.

Now all was to be changed—at least the girls hoped so. They had been teaching the summer school for six weeks when Ransom Turner, a sincere and ambitious man who had the good of the community at heart, had come to them proposing that they remain through autumn and early winter and teach the public school.

Here was an opportunity to make a real contribution, to set a model for all time, to give these simple mountain folks an idea of what school should be.

"Of course," Ransom Turner had said, "we'll have to elect you a trustee."

"A trustee!" they had exclaimed in unison, failing to understand his meaning.

"Of course. You don't think that worthless scamp that's been drawin' the pay and not teachin' any could get the job unless he'd elected a trustee, do you? But leave that to us mounting

folks. You jest say you'll take the school an' we'll elect you a trustee."

"But the schoolhouse!" Florence had remonstrated. "It's bad enough now—flies, and all that—but in cold weather it would be impossible."

Ransom's face had clouded. "Can't be helped none, I reckon. They hain't no funds fer hit. Doors and windows cost a heap, havin' to be brought in as they do. Us mounting folks are most terrible poor, most terrible."

The two girls had considered the proposition seriously. They were not yet through the University. It seemed a little hard to give up the first half of their school year. They caught visions of great buildings, swarming students, laughing faces, books, libraries, all the good things that go to make University life a joyous affair. Yet here was an opportunity for an unusual service. Could they afford to refuse? They had talked it over. In the end Florence had said to Ransom:

"If you can manage the trustee and we can get some money to fix up the schoolhouse, we will stay."

To this Marion had given hearty assent and Ransom Turner had gone away happy.

Money for the new school! It had been their desire for just this that had put Florence in her present strange and mysterious predicament.

It had been a very unusual proposition that Mr. John Dobson of the Deep Rock Mining Company had made to them, a proposition that held great possibilities.

They had gone to him to ask him to help them with money for the school. He had told them that his company had no fund for contributions such as they asked. He had not, however, turned them away entirely without hope.

"The company, of which I am President," he had said, "is a comparatively small one. The stock is not owned by any one rich man, or by a group of rich men. It is owned by a number of men who own a little property and who hope to improve their position by wise investment. These men look to me to bring about the success they hope for. Unfortunately, at the present time we are short of coal lands. The railroad up this way has been built for several years. The coal land that lies along it has

been bought up by rich companies, principally the Inland Coal and Coke Company, which is so large that it has come to be looked upon as virtually a monopoly in these parts.

“There is but one field left to us.” His eyes glanced away to the crest of Pine Mountain. “At the back of that mountain there is coal, plenty of it. Land is cheap. At present there is no railroad, but there is a persistent rumor that the M. and N. proposes to build a spur up that creek. They will build it. But when?” He had risen to pace the floor of his small office. “When? That’s the question.”

“The directors of the railroad,” he had gone on after a long pause, “are to hold a meeting next week. They may decide upon the spur at that time. If it is to be built within the next year, there is a tract of land back here that we want—want badly. It is owned by a man named Caleb Powers. The price is twenty-one thousand. Needless to say, our rich rival will want it. They may be able to secure advance information regarding the coming decision of the Directors of the M. and N. In that case we are defeated. If they do not, we have a chance. The first person to get to Caleb Powers after the spur has been decided upon, will get the land.”

Here he had paused and looked Florence squarely in the eye.

“That’s where you come in,” he had said steadily. “That is, if you wish to. I am to be away in another section of the mountains next week—can’t be here. You want money for your school?” He had stared hard at the girl.

“Y-es, we do.”

“Well then, here’s your chance. One of you go back behind Pine Mountain and there keep in close touch with Caleb Powers. The other must remain here until news of the decision regarding the proposed spur comes. I will arrange for a messenger at the rail’s end. As soon as the messenger arrives you must make all haste to reach Caleb Powers. I will give you the earnest money—five hundred dollars. If the spur is to be built and you succeed in purchasing the land, I will pay you a commission of ten percent.”

“Think of it!” Florence had exclaimed. “Twenty-one hundred dollars! All that for the school!”

Visions of a warm, cozy school room, brightened by many happy, glowing faces, passed before her mind’s eye.

“Of course we’ll try it,” she had said with quiet resolution.

“Of course,” Marion had echoed.

“And now it has come to this,” Florence said to herself as she stirred upon the rustling corn husks of her bed in the deserted cabin which formed her temporary hiding place.

Once more her mind went back to the broken sequence of events. It had been agreed that she should cross over the mountains and stay with a friend of Mrs. McAlpin who lived at the back of Pine Mountain.

“And I will keep you posted by means of the Silent Alarm!” Marion had exclaimed.

Until now the Silent Alarm had been little more than a plaything. Now it was to be of some real use. Florence’s older brother, who had been in the great war, had told her how, by the use of signal lamps, flashlights and the Continental code he and his comrades had been able to signal to one another even across a point of the enemy’s trenches. He had explained the matter to her in detail, had also taught her the code. Often at night, from some distant hillside, with a flashlight and the barrel of a dismantled shotgun, Florence had signalled to Marion at the cabin. And Marion, with some similar simple apparatus, had signalled back.

The simple-minded, superstitious mountain folks, having seen these strange stars blinking away against the mountain, had whispered weird tales of witch light and of seeing old women riding a cloud at night. All this had greatly amused the girls and they kept their secret well.

“Now,” Marion had said to Florence when she started on her mission, “when you get to your destination back there, I’ll climb this side of the mountain to the crest and we’ll get in touch with one another by signal fires. After that, when the big news comes, I’ll climb the mountain again. If it comes in the daytime I will use a heliograph; if by night, some form of tube and a flashlight.”

As you have already seen, by the aid of Marion’s beacon fire on the mountain’s crest, they had established communications. But under what unexpected conditions this was done! Florence had been the prisoner of strange men whose motives in holding her were unknown. This she had flashed back to Marion. She had added a warning not to try to come to her.

Bearing this startling news, Marion had retraced her steps to Mrs. McAlpin's cabin.

"And here I am a fugitive," Florence sighed as she sat up among the corn husks. "A fugitive from whom? And why? The message will come and I will not be able to deliver it. The coal tract will be lost to the Inland Coal and Coke Company and our hopes for a schoolhouse will be blighted.

"But no!" she clinched her fist. "It must not be! There is yet a way!"

The message did come, a message of great good news. It came on the wings of the wind, came to Mrs. McAlpin and Marion, late that very afternoon.

In the meantime, on the mountain-side near the cabin in which Florence was hiding, strange things were happening. Florence was wondering about the identity of the rough mountain men who had made her prisoner. Were they feudists? Or moonshiners suspecting her of being a spy? Or real spies themselves, employed by the great mining corporation to trap her? Or were they just plain robbers?

Such were the thoughts running through her mind when she caught the sound of a cheery note outside the cabin. It was the *chee-chee-chee, to-wheet, to-wheet, to-wheet* of a mountain wren. The song brightened her spirits and allayed her fears.

"As long as he keeps up his joyous notes I need have no fear," she told herself. "The appearance of someone near would frighten him into silence.

"Dear little friend," she whispered, "how wonderful you are! When human friends were here you came each year to make your nest in some niche in their cabin. Now they are gone. Who knows where? But you, faithful to their dream of happiness, return to sing your merry song among the ruins."

Even as she whispered this, her ear caught a far different note, a dread sound—the long-drawn note of a hound.

As this grew louder and louder her heart beat rapidly with fear.

"On my trail," she thought with dread.

As the sound began to grow fainter she felt sure that the hunters, if hunters they were, had passed on up over the main

trail. Hardly had the hope been born when it was suddenly dashed aside. The solid thump-thump of footsteps sounded outside the cabin, then ended.

For a moment there was silence, such a silence as she had not experienced in all her days. Flies had ceased to buzz. The little brown wren had flown away.

Then a harsh voice crashed into that silence.

“Reckon she are up thar, Lige?”

“’T’ain’t no ways possible,” drawled the second man. “Look at them thar hollyhocks. Narry a leaf broke. Reckon airy one’d pass through that door without a tramplin’ ’em down?”

“Reckon not.”

“Better be stirrin’ then, I reckon.”

“Reckon so.”

Again came the solid drum of feet. This grew fainter and fainter until it died away in the distance.

“Good old hollyhocks! Good little old sentries, how I could hug you for that!” A tear splashed down upon the girl’s hand, a tear for which none should be ashamed.

Even as the footsteps of the men died away in the distance, Florence felt the shadow of the mountain creeping over the cabin.

“Soon be dark,” she breathed, “and then—”

She was some time in deciding just what should be done. Her first impulse was to take the up-trail as soon as darkness had fallen and to make her way back to her friends.

“But that,” she told herself, “means the end of our hopes.”

At once there passed before her closed eyes pictures of brave, laughing little children of the mountain; ragged, barefooted, pleading children, walking miles over the frosts of November to attend their school, the first real school they would have known.

“No!” She set her teeth hard. “There is still a way. I will wait here for Marion’s signal. It will come. If she has news, good

news, somehow I will find my way to Caleb Powers.
Somehow the race must be won!”

CHAPTER III

A DARTING SHADOW

That same evening, just at dusk, Marion came upon a fresh and startling mystery. She had climbed the hill at the back of the ancient whipsawed cabin which was occupied by Mrs. McAlpin and her friends.

Beside the bubbling brook that sang so softly, she had found she could think calmly. There was reason enough for calm thinking, too. They had entered into this business of buying the Powell coal tract, expecting only mild adventure and possibly a large profit. Mysterious things were happening to Florence. She was sure of that. By the aid of the Silent Alarm she had received a message from her. The message had warned her to retreat, to return to the whipsawed cabin and wait. She had obeyed.

It was indeed very singular.

“What can have happened?” Marion now asked herself for the hundredth time. “Wherever she may be, she can hardly be out of reach of the Silent Alarm. Darkness will find me again on the trail that leads to the crest of Pine Mountain.

“She must succeed! Must! Must!” she told herself. “And I must let her know. I surely must!”

That very afternoon she had received information of tremendous importance.

In the whipsawed cabin was a small radio receiving set. The long twilight of the mountains often slipped away with a score of mountain people sitting on the hillside listening to the sweet strains of music that came from this radio and floated through the open windows. At times, even in the afternoon, they tuned in on Louisville that they might catch some news of the outside world. On this particular afternoon, wearied from her long hike of the previous night, Marion had been lolling half asleep on

the couch when of a sudden she sat upright, wide awake. Her ear had caught the words, "M. and N. Railroad."

Here might be important news. It was important, for the announcer, after a brief pause in which he had perhaps referred to his notes, had gone on:

"At a meeting to-day of the Board of Directors of the M. and N. Railroad, it was decided that a spur would be built along the south slope of Pine Mountain. This work, which is to be rushed to completion within a year, will tap vast tracks of valuable coal land."

Marion had risen trembling from the couch. She had wanted to cry, to laugh, to shout. Here was great news indeed. Coming right in from the air, it had beyond doubt given them many hours of advantage over their rival, the agent of the Inland Coal and Coke Company.

But she had not shouted, nor had she cried nor laughed. She had climbed the hillside and had stretched out on the leafy slope by the murmuring brook to think.

She had decided to wait for darkness. Then she would hurry away over the four miles that led to the crest of the low mountain. Once there she would kindle a beacon fire.

Down deep in her heart she prayed that Florence might catch the gleam of that fire as she had the one of the night before, and that having caught her joyous message, she might be free to act.

"If only it would hurry and get dark!" she whispered to herself. "If only it would. Then I could slip up there and send the message."

But what was this? Of a sudden this all important problem was driven from her mind. From out the clump of mountain ivy that skirted the hill above the whipsawed cabin there had darted a shadow.

Who could it be? No mysterious persons were known to be about, but she could not be sure. Men hid out in these hills—rough, dangerous men who were wanted by the law.

The cheery lamplight that suddenly burst forth through the small square window of the whipsawed cabin below reassured her. There were friends in that house, her friends Mrs. McAlpin and little Hallie.

Even as she settled back again to think of their great problems, she was given another start. Outside the window, into the square of light that poured forth from it, there had crept the face of a man. It was not a charming face to behold, but rather an alarming one. Beneath bushy eyebrows gleamed a pair of beady black eyes. The nose was hawk-like and the cheeks and chin were covered by a stubby beard.

It was a face to make one shudder, and Marion did shudder. She drew back as if to bury herself in the giant chestnut at her back. Even as she did so she saw the man start, saw an unuttered exclamation spring to his lips. What had he seen? What had he hoped to see? There was mystery enough about that whipsawed cabin. Once there had been gold in it—much gold. Preacher Gibson had hinted that it might still be there. It had been brought there many years before, just after the Civil War. Jeff Middleton, who with the help of a neighbor had built the cabin, had died suddenly in a feud. The gold had vanished. No one, so far as was known, had ever found it.

Who was this man at the window? Did he at last have a clue to the whereabouts of the gold, and had he come to search for it, only to find the cabin occupied?

Little Hallie, too, was quite as mysterious as the whipsawed cabin in which she lived. She had been brought to the cabin door on a stormy night—a beautiful eight year old child, unconscious from an ugly blow on her head. While she was being cared for, the man who brought her had vanished. He had not returned. That was three weeks ago. Efforts to discover the identity of the child—other than the name “Hallie,” which had come from her own lips—had been unavailing. Her memory appeared to have gone with the blow on her head.

Fortunately, Mrs. McAlpin had studied medicine in her younger days. Under her efficient care Hallie had become the cheery joy of the whipsawed house.

Did this mysterious man know something about little Hallie? Or was he just some wanderer looking for food and shelter? This last seemed the most probable.

Yet, as Marion came to this conclusion, she suddenly learned that this man knew something about one member of the household, for even as she sat there he passed close enough to touch her, mumbling as he passed:

“Hit’s her. Hit shorely are!”

The girl's heart went into double-quick time as the man came near to her. It slowed down very little as he vanished into the night. Questions were pounding away at her brain. Who was this man? What did he want? To whom had he referred? To Mrs. McAlpin? To Hallie?

"Must have been Hallie," she told herself. "And now perhaps he will steal upon us unawares and carry her away."

Even as she thought this she felt that it was a foolish fear. Why should he?

Then of a sudden, as a new thought struck her, she sprang to her feet. A cry was on her lips, but it died unuttered.

It had suddenly occurred to her that if this man knew something about this mysterious little girl he should be called back and questioned.

She did not call him back. She was afraid, very much afraid of that man.

"Anyway," she reassured herself, "he probably didn't mean Hallie at all. Probably meant Mrs. McAlpin. She's been here three summers, and has been up every creek for miles around."

With this as a concluding thought, and having caught the delicious odor of spring chicken roasting on the hearth, she hurried down to supper.

As she entered the cabin, Mrs. McAlpin, who was a famous cook, lifted the lid of the small cast-iron oven that had been buried beneath the hearth coals for an hour. At once the room was filled with such delectable fragrance as only can come from such an oven.

Since the cabin had been purchased by its present owner, it had not been disfigured by a stove. An immense stone fireplace graced the corner of each of the four rooms. The cooking was done on the hearth of the room used as kitchen and dining room.

"Isn't it wonderful!" Marion exclaimed as she hung her sweater on the deer's antlers which served as a coat rack. "Just to live like this! To be primitive as our ancestors were! I shall never forget it, not as long as I live!"

Supper was over. Darkness had fallen "from the wings of night" when Marion slipped alone out of the whipsawed cabin.

As she entered the shadows that lay across the path that led away from the cabin, she caught sound of a movement off to the right.

Her heart skipped a beat, but she did not pause. The message she had to send could not be longer delayed. And yet, as she hurried on, she could not help wondering who might have been behind the bushes. Was it the prowler, he of the beady black eyes and hooked nose, who had peered in at the cabin window? If it were, what did he want? What did he mean by that strange exclamation: "Hit's her?" Had he seen Hallie? Did he know her? Would he attempt to carry her away? She hoped not. The little girl had become a spot of sunshine in that brown old cabin.

Two hours later the proceedings of the previous night were being re-enacted. Marion's beacon fire appeared on the mountain's crest. Florence caught it at once and flashed back her answer. There followed a half hour of signaling. At the end of this half hour Florence found herself sitting breathless among the husks in the cabin loft.

"Oh!" she breathed. "What news! The railroad is to be built. I wonder if the land is still for sale?"

"And I," she exclaimed, squaring her shoulders, "I must be afraid no longer. Somehow I must find my way down this slope to Caleb Powell's home. I must buy that land."

She patted the crinkly bills, five hundred dollars, still pinned to the inside of her blouse. Then, slipping quickly down the ladder, she stepped into the cool, damp air of night.

Yet, even as she turned to go down the mountain, courage failed her.

Above her, not so far away but that she could reach it in an hour, hung the mountain's crest. Dim, dark, looming in the misty moonlight, it seemed somehow to beckon. Beyond it, down the trail, lay home, her mountain home, and loving friends.

She had experienced thus far only distrust, captivity without apparent cause, the great fear of worse things to come.

"No," she said, "I can't go back." Her feet moved slowly up the trail.

"And yet I must!" She faced the other way. "I can't go back and

say to them, ‘I have no money for the school. I went on a mission and failed because I was afraid.’ No, No! I can’t do that.”

Then, lest this last resolve should fail her, she fairly ran down the trail.

She had hurried on for fully fifteen minutes when again she paused, paused this time to consider. What plan had she? What was she to do? She did not know the way to the home of her friend, nor to the home of Caleb Powell. Indeed, she did not so much as know where she was. How, then, was she to find Caleb Powell?

“Only one way,” she told herself. “I must risk it. At some cabin I must inquire my way.”

Fifteen minutes later she found herself near a cabin. A dim light shone in the window. For a moment she hesitated beside the footpath that led to its door.

“No,” she said at last, starting on, “I won’t try that one.”

She passed three others before her courage rose to the sticking point. At last, realizing that the evening was well spent and that all would soon be in bed, she forced herself to walk boldly toward a cabin. A great bellowing hound rushed out at her and sent her heart to her mouth. The welcome sound of a man’s voice silenced him.

“Who’s thar?” the voice rang out.

“It’s—it’s I, Florence Huyler.” The girl’s voice trembled in spite of her effort to control it.

“Let’s see.” The man held a candle to her face. “Step inside, Miss.”

“It—I—I can’t stop,” she stammered, “I—I only wanted to ask where Caleb Powell lives.”

“Hey, Bill,” the man turned to someone within the cabin. “Here’s that girl we was lookin’ for this evenin’.”

“Naw ’t ain’t. Don’t stand to reason.” The man’s feet came to the floor with a crash. The girl’s heart sank. She recognized the voices of the men. They were the men who had visited the deserted cabin. The hollyhock sentinel had done their bit, but

all to no purpose. She was once more virtually a prisoner.

“Guess you come to the wrong cabin, Miss. We are plumb sorry, but hit are our bond an’ duty to sort of ask you to come in and rest with we-all a spell. Reckon you ain’t et none. Hey, Mandy! Set on a cold snack for this here young lady.”

Florence walked slowly into the cabin and sank wearily into a chair. Her head, which seemed suddenly to grow heavy, sank down upon her breast. She had meant so well, and this was what fate had dealt her.

Suddenly, as she sat there filled with gloomy thoughts, came one gloomier than the rest—a thought as melancholy as a late autumn storm.

“Why did we not think of that?” she almost groaned aloud.

She recalled it well enough now. Mrs. McAlpin had once told her of the queer mixing of titles to land which existed all over the mountains. In the early days, when land was all but worthless, a man might trade a thousand acres of land for a yoke of oxen and no deed given or recorded. “Why,” Mrs. McAlpin had said, “when I purchased the little tract on which this cabin stands I was obliged to wait an entire year before my lawyer was able to assure me of a deed that would hold.”

“A year!” Florence repeated to herself. “A year for a small tract! And here we are hoping to purchase a tract containing thousands of acres which was once composed of numerous small tracts. And we hope to get a deed day after to-morrow, and our commission a day later.” She laughed in spite of herself.

“If we succeed in making the purchase, which doesn’t seem at all likely, Mr. Dobson may be two years getting a clear title to the land. Will he pay our commission before that? No one would expect it. And if we don’t get it before that time what good will it do our school?”

“No,” she told herself, facing the problem squarely, “there must be some other way; though I’ll still go through with this if opportunity offers.”

In her mental search for “some other way” her thoughts returned to the ancient whipsawed house on Laurel Branch. She had heard old preacher Gibson’s story of Jeff Middleton’s return from the Civil War with a great sack of strange gold

pieces.

“Hit’s hid som’ers about that ar whipsawed cabin,” the tottering old mountain preacher had declared, “though whar it might be I don’t rightly know. Been a huntin’ of it right smart o’ times and ain’t never lit onto narry one of them coins yet.”

“If only we could find that gold,” Florence told herself, “all would be well. That is, if we win the election—if we elect our trustee.”

She smiled a little at this last thought; yet it was no joking matter, this electing a trustee back here in the Cumberlands. Many a grave on the sun kissed hillsides, where the dogwood blooms in springtime and ripe chestnuts come rattling down in the autumn, marks the spot where some lusty mountaineer lies buried. And it might be written on his tombstone, “He tried to elect a trustee and failed because the other man’s pistol gun found its mark.” Elections are hard fought in the Cumberlands. Many a bitter feud fight has been started over a school election.

Surely, as she sat there once more a prisoner, held by these mysterious mountaineers, there was enough to disturb her.

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE ESCAPE

Morning came at last. Florence stirred beneath the home woven covers of her bed in the mountain cabin. Then she woke to the full realization of her position.

“A prisoner in a cabin,” she groaned. “And yet they do not treat me badly. For my supper they set on the table the best they had. It meant a real sacrifice for them to give up this entire room to me, yet they did it. I can’t understand it.”

“But I must not let them defeat me!” She brought her feet down with a slap upon the clean scrubbed and sanded floor. “Somehow, by some means or another, I must make my way to Caleb Powell’s home to-day.”

Her eyes lighted upon an object that hung above the fireplace—a long barreled squirrel rifle with a shiny new cap resting beneath the hammer. “Loaded,” she thought. “Cap wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t. They left it hanging there because I am a girl and they were certain I couldn’t shoot. Hump! I can shoot as straight as any of them.”

For a moment a wild vision whirled before her—a vision of a girl bursting from a room, yelling like a wild Indian and brandishing the long rifle above her head.

“No,” she smiled. “’Twouldn’t do. It would be very dramatic, but it would probably end in tragedy, and I have no desire to act a part in such a tragedy.”

She dressed quickly, then stepped into the other room of the cabin where she found crisp, brown biscuits, wild honey and fried eggs awaiting her.

She ate a hearty breakfast. “Who knows what strength I may need for this day?” she thought to herself as she spread honey on her third biscuit.

After that, knowing from past experiences what her limitations would be, she did not attempt to go many steps from the cabin but contented herself with sitting outside the cabin door in the sun.

“Such a lovely scene,” she sighed as she looked away and away to where the peaks of Pine Mountain blended with the bluer peaks of Big Black Mountain, and all at last were lost in the hazy mists of the morning.

“So peaceful,” she thought, “you’d think there had never been a bit of trouble since the world began. And yet, right down here in the mountains there is more trouble than anywhere else in the country. Some men say that Nature, God’s open book, will make men good and kind. It takes more than that. It takes—it must take God inside their hearts to accomplish that.” So she mused, and half the morning slipped away.

From time to time her eyes left the mountain tops to follow the winding stream that, some fifty feet down a gentle slope, went rushing and tumbling over its rocky bed. Above and beyond this creek bed, at the other side of the gorge, ran a trail. Down that trail from time to time people passed. Now a woman, leading a lean pack horse laden with corn, shambled along on her way to mill. Now a pair of active, shouting boys urged on a team of young bullocks hitched to a sled, and now a bearded mountaineer, with rifle slung across his saddle horn, rode at a dog trot down the dusty trail.

The girl watched all this with dreamy eyes. They meant nothing to her; were, in fact, but a part of the scenery.

Still she watched the trail, taking little interest in the people passing there until suddenly she came to life with surprising interest. A person of evident importance was passing up the trail. He sat upon a blooded sorrel horse, and across the pommel of his saddle was a rifle.

“Who is that?” Florence asked, interested in the way this man sat his horse.

“That? Why, that are Caleb Powell.” Her guard, who sat not far from her, had also spoken without thinking.

“Caleb Powell!” The girl sprang to her feet. In an instant her two hands were cupped into a trumpet and she had sent out a loud call.

“Whoo-hoo!”

Caught by rocky walls, the call came echoing back. The man on the blooded horse turned his gaze toward the cabin.

“Here, you can’t do that away!” The guard put a rough hand on her shoulder.

“I can, and I will!” The girl’s tone was low and fierce. “You take your hands away from me, and keep them off!” She jerked away. “I came back here to see him. He’s a man, a real man, and he—he’s got a rifle.”

Cowering, the man fell back a step.

Again the girl’s hands were cupped.

“Mr. Powell! Come over!” she called. “I have something important to tell you.”

The man reined in his horse, stared across the gorge in apparent surprise, then directed his horse down a narrow path that led down one side of the gorge and up the other.

Standing there, leaning against the doorpost, the girl watched him with all the fascination that a condemned man must feel as he sees a man approaching with a message commuting his sentence.

The man who, a few minutes later, came riding up the steep trail to the cabin, was quite as different from the average mountaineer as Florence had, at a distance, judged him to be. His face was smooth shaven and his gray suit, his tie, his leggings, his riding boots, all were in good order. When at last he spoke it was not in the vernacular of the mountains, but of the wide world outside.

“You—you have some coal land?” she hesitated as he asked what he might do for her.

“Why, yes, little girl,” he smiled as he spoke. “My brothers and I have several acres up these slopes.”

Florence stiffened at his “little girl.” She realized that he had used the term in kindness, but he must not think of her as a little girl. She was for a moment a business woman with an important transaction to carry through.

“You want to sell it?” she said briskly.

“We have offered to sell.”

“For twenty-one thousand?”

“About that.” He was staring at her now. He stared harder when she said: “I am authorized to buy it at that price.”

For a moment he did not speak; just kept his keen grey eyes upon her.

“I am waiting,” he said at last in a droll drawl, “for the smile.”

“The—the smile?”

“Of course, you are joking.”

“I am not joking.” She was tempted to be angry now. “Here—here’s the proof. It’s the—Mr. Dobson called it the earnest money.” She dragged the five hundred dollars in bank notes from her blouse.

For ten seconds after that her heart fluttered wildly. What if this whole affair were a game played by these men at her expense? What if this man was not Caleb Powell at all? The thought of the consequences made her head whirl.

But no, the guard of a half hour before was staring, popeyed, at the sheaf of bills.

“That looks like business,” said Caleb Powell. “Your Mr. Dobson—I know him well. So he made you his agent? Well, well! That’s singular. But men do strange things. I suppose he sent a contract?”

“Yes, yes.” She was eager now. “Here it is.”

“Well,” he said quietly.

Then turning to the former guard, he said; “You’ll not be wanting anything further of the girl, Jim?”

“Reckon not,” the man drawled.

“Then, Miss—er—”

“Ormsby,” she volunteered.

“Then, Miss Ormsby, if you’ll be so kind as to mount behind

me, I'll take you down to the house. We'll fix up the papers. After that we'll have a bite to eat and I'll send you over the mountain."

The hours that followed were long-to-be-remembered. The signing of the papers, the talk on the cool veranda, a perfect dinner, then the long, long ride home over the mountains on a perfect horse with a guide and guard at her side, and all this crowned by the consciousness of a wonderful success after days of perils and threatened failure; all these seemed a dream indeed.

One thing Florence remembered distinctly. She had said to Caleb Powell:

"Mr. Powell, why did those men wish to hold me prisoner?"

"Miss Ormsby," he said, and there was no smile upon his lips, "some of our people are what you might call 'plumb quare'."

That was all he had said, and for some time to come that was all she was destined to know about the reason for her mysterious captivity.

Only one thought troubled her as she neared the whipsawed cabin, and that, she told herself, was only a bad dream.

That it was more than a dream she was soon to learn. Two days later Mr. Dobson, having dismounted at their cabin, smiled with pleasure when he was told of the successful purchase of Caleb Powell's coal land. Then for a moment a frown darkened his face.

"I—I hate to tell you," he hesitated.

"You don't have to," said Florence quickly. "Please allow me to guess. You were about to tell us that it is necessary to spend a great deal of time looking up records and getting papers signed before you have a clear title to this mountain land, and that we can't have our money until you have your title."

"That puts it a little strongly," said Mr. Dobson, smiling a little strangely. "As fast as we can clear up the titles to certain tracts my company has authorized me to pay that portion of the commission. I should say you ought to have your first installment within four months. It may be six, however. Matters move slowly here in the mountains."

“Four months!” exclaimed Marion.

“Not sooner, I fear.”

“Four—” Marion began, but Florence squeezed her arm as she whispered; “It’s no use. We can’t help it and neither can they? There must be some other way. Besides, we haven’t yet elected our trustee.”

CHAPTER V

SAFE AT HOME

That night, for the first time in many days, Florence found herself ready to creep beneath the hand woven blankets beside her pal. Ah, it was good to feel the touch of comfort and the air of security to be found there. What did it matter that after all the struggle and danger she had found her efforts crowned only by partial success? Time would reveal some other way. New problems beckoned. Let them come. Life was full of problems, and solving them is life itself.

The whipsawed house in which the girls lived had been built more than sixty years before. The heavy beams of its frame and the broad thick boards of its sheeting inside and out had been sawed by hand from massive poplar logs.

The walls of the room in which the girls slept were as frankly free of paint or paper as when the boards were first laid in place. But time and sixty summers of Kentucky mountain sunshine had imparted to every massive beam and every broad board such a coat of deep, mellow, old gold as any millionaire might covet for his palace.

Heavy, hand-cut sandstone formed the fireplace. Before this fireplace, on a black bearskin, in dream-robcs and dressing gowns, sat the two girls curled up for a chat before retiring.

Then it was that Marion told of the mysterious stranger who had peered in at the window at dusk.

“That’s strange,” said Florence as a puzzled look knotted her brow. “Who could he have meant when he said, ‘Hit’s her’? Could he have meant Mrs. McAlpin?”

“Maybe. She’s been around doctoring people a great deal. He might have seen her somewhere; might even have needed her services for his family and been too timid to ask for it. You know how these mountain folks are. But—” Marion paused.

“But you don’t believe it was Mrs. McAlpin,” prompted Florence, leaning toward the fire. “Neither do I. I believe it was little Hallie, and I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” said Marion with a sudden dab at the fire that sent the sparks flying. “I—I suppose we ought to want her identity to be discovered, want her returned to her people, but she’s come to mean so much to us. She’s a dashing little bit of sunshine. This place,” her eyes swept the bare brown walls, “this place would seem dreary without her.”

“Marion,” said Florence, “will we be able to elect our trustee?”

“I don’t know.”

“Al Finley and Moze Berkhart taught the school last year. They taught a month or two; then when it got cold they discouraged the children all they could, and when finally no one came they rode up and looked in every day, then rode home again, and drew their pay just the same.”

“We wouldn’t do that.”

“No, we wouldn’t. We’d manage somehow.”

“Marion,” said Florence after they had sat in silence for some time, their arms around each other, “this building belongs to Mrs. McAlpin, doesn’t it?”

“Surely. She bought it.”

“And everything inside belongs to her?”

“I suppose so.”

“Old Jeff Middleton’s gold—if it’s here?”

“I suppose so.”

“Then, if we found the gold we could use it to buy repairs for the schoolhouse, couldn’t we?”

“Yes,” laughed Marion, “and if the moon is really made of green cheese, and we could get a slice of it, we might ripen it and have it for to-morrow’s dinner.”

“But preacher Gibson thinks it’s hidden somewhere about here. He saw it, over sixty years ago. When Jeff Middleton came

home from the war he came from Georgia driving a white mule hitched to a kind of sled with a box on it, and on the sled, along with some other things, was a bag of gold. Not real coins, Preacher Gibson said, but just like them; ‘sort of queer-like coins,’ that’s just the way he said it. There wasn’t anything to spend gold for back here in the mountains in those days. He built this house, so he must have hidden the gold here. He lived here until he was killed. The gold must still be here.”

“Sounds all right,” said Marion with a merry little laugh, “but I imagine the schoolhouse windows will have to be patched with something other than that gold. And besides—” she rose, yawning, “we haven’t even got the positions yet.”

“You don’t think they’d refuse to hire us? Just think! Those boys who tried to teach last year couldn’t even do fractions, and there wasn’t a history nor a geography in the place!”

“You never can tell,” said Marion.

In this she was more right than she knew.

A moment later Florence crept beneath the homewoven blankets. A little while longer Marion sat dreamily gazing at the darkening coals. Then, drawing her dressing gown tightly about her, she stepped to the door and slipped out. Like most mountain homes, the door of every room in the cabin opened onto the porch.

Stepping to the edge of the porch, she stood there, bathed in moonlight. The night was glorious. Big Black Mountain, laying away in the distance, seemed the dark tower of some clan of the giants. Below, and nearer, she caught the reflection of the moon in a placid pool on Laurel Branch, while close at hand the rhododendrons wove a fancy border of shadows along the trail that led away to the bottom lands.

As the girl stood drinking in the splendor of it all, she gave a sudden start, then shrank back into the shadows. Had she caught the sound of shuffled footsteps, of a pebble rolling down the steep trail? She thought so. With a shudder she stepped through the door, closed it quickly, and let the heavy bar fall silently into place. Then, without a word, she crept beneath the covers. As an involuntary shudder seized her she felt her companion’s strong arms about her. So, soothed and reassured, she rested there for a moment. She and Florence had been pals for many long months. Strange and thrilling were the mysteries they had solved, the adventures they had experienced. What would the

morrow bring? More mystery, greater adventures? At any rate, they would face them together, and with these thoughts her eyes closed in dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER VI

CONFEDERATE GOLD

“So you’re thinking of going into politics?”

Ralph Cawood, a frank-faced college boy of the mountains, who had become a friend of the two girls, brushed the tangled locks from his eyes and laughed a merry laugh as he repeated, “Going into politics! You two girls!”

“I didn’t say that,” said Marion with a frown and an involuntary stamp of her foot. “Teaching school isn’t going into politics, is it?”

“You just better believe it is! Anyway, it is if you’re to teach here in the mountains and draw your pay from the State. You’ll have to elect you a trustee, that’s what you’ll have to do. It’s always done. And believe me, that calls for a right smart of a scrap!”

“But Ralph!” Marion exclaimed. “Don’t you know we’ve nearly finished college, that we are better qualified than most of the teachers in the Mountain Academy at Middlesburg, and that the teachers they’ve had before scarcely knew how to read and write?”

“Yes,” said Ralph, his face suddenly growing sober, “they know all that, and more. But think of the money! This school at the mouth of Laurel Branch pays over seven hundred dollars. Last year Al Finley was head teacher. He paid his assistant twenty dollars a month. School lasts six months. That left him nearly six hundred for six months work, and he didn’t work half the time at that. If he’d worked at freighting, logging or getting out barrel staves, he couldn’t have earned that much in two years.”

“But the children!”

“Yes, I know,” said Ralph still more soberly, “but nobody

thinks of them; at least not enough. I never got much good out of country school. Nobody expects to. My brother, who'd been outside to school, taught me."

"But why shouldn't they get good out of it? What do they think the school is for?" Marion's brow was knit in a puzzled frown.

"For drawing the State's money, I guess. Anyway, that's what it's always been for. But you just go ahead," he added cheerfully. "Try it out. See if you can elect you a trustee. Ransom Turner is for you from the start, and he counts for a lot. A good many folks believe in him."

"We'll do it!" said Marion. Her lips were set in straight lines of determination. "If we must go into politics in order to do the right thing, we will!"

It was a daring resolve. Life surely is strange at times. Very often the thing we did not want yesterday becomes the one thing we most desire to-day. It was so with Marion and the winter school. There had been a time when it took a hard fight to bring her mind to the sticking point where she could say: "I'll stay." Now she suddenly resolved that nothing but defeat could drive her away.

And yet, as she sat quietly talking to Florence a half hour later, the whole situation seemed incredible. It seemed beyond belief that men could be so selfish as to draw the money that rightfully belonged to their children and to their neighbors' children, with no notion of giving any service in return for it.

If the girls lacked proof that there would be a fight, they were not long in finding it.

"We'll go down to Ransom Turner's store, and ask him about it," said Florence.

"Yes, he'll tell us straight."

Before they reached Ransom's store they learned much. News travels fast in the mountains. This was mill day. All the mountain folks were at the mouth of the creek with their grist of corn to be ground into meal for corn bread. Some on horse back, some on foot, and one or two driving young bullocks hitched to sleds, they came in crowds. One and all talked of the coming school election and how Al Finley and his political backer, Black Blevens, were likely to have a race worthy of the name. Ralph had told someone of his talk with Marion. That

person had told two others; these others had carried the news to the mill. Now all knew and already they were lining up, on this side or that, for the coming battle.

As the girls passed through group after group, they felt that the very atmosphere about them had changed. It was as if a threatening storm hung over the mountain top. Everyone smiled and spoke, but there was a difference. One could scarcely tell what it was; perhaps an inflection of the voice, perhaps the tightening of the muscles about the mouth. Whatever it was, Marion, who was a keen student of human nature, felt that she could say almost to certainty: "That one is for us; this one against us."

There were few doubtful ones. Mountain folks are quick to make decisions and slow to change them.

A little lump came to Marion's throat as she realized that the people they passed were about evenly divided.

"And to think," she whispered with a little choke down deep in her throat, "only yesterday they were all so cordial. They praised us for the education we were giving their children. They've all asked us out to dinner many times. 'Come and stay a week'—that's what they said."

"Yes," Florence smiled without bitterness, "but this summer we have been teaching their children for nothing. We are about to ask them to let their State pay us the money coming to them for teaching their winter school. Black Blevens has always controlled that. He's unprincipled, but he's rich and powerful as mountain folks go. He's given work to many of these people when they needed it badly. Many of them are kin to him—belong to his clan. As they would say, they are 'beholden' to him. Whatever his battle is, they must fight it. They're living back in the feudal days. And that," said this big strong girl, swinging her arms on high, "is what makes me love it. I'd like to have been born a knight in those good old days.

"“Scotts wha hae wi’ Wallace bled,
Scotts wham Bruce has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victory!””

She threw back her head and laughed. "I'm going to get out my 'Lady of the Lake' and my 'Lays of the Last Minstrels' to-night. And in the fight that lies before us I'm going to live over those days of old."

“‘What! Warder Ho! Let the portcullis fall’,” Marion murmured with a smile. “Here’s Ransom Turner’s store. ‘Dismount, and let’s within’!”

The low board shack which they entered did little to carry forward the illusion of castles, moats and drawbridges. From within, instead of the clang of armor, there came the sound of a hammer bursting in the head of a barrel of salt pork.

The man who stepped forward to greet them carried little resemblance to a knight of old. Ransom Turner was a small man, with close cropped hair and grimy hands. And yet, who can judge the strength and grandeur of a soul? There was a steady, piercing fire in the little man’s eyes that was like the even flow of an electrical current through a white hot wire.

“Heard what you said to Ralph this mornin’,” he said quietly. “Reckon that means right smart of a scrap, but I ca’culate we’ll lick Black Blevens and his crowd this time. Leastwise, it looks thataway. Folks have took to believin’ in Mrs. McAlpin, an’ in you two—took to it a heap.

“But looka here,” he drew them off into a corner. “Don’t you think hit’s goin’ to be easy! Talk about Brimstone Corner! Hit’ll be worse ’an that afore hit’s finished! Gun play, like as not, and people drove off into the hills. Mortgages foreclosed on ’em as don’t aim to vote to suit old Black Blevens. But you’ll stay? You ain’t afeared, be y’?” The fire seemed to fairly shoot from his pale blue eyes.

“No,” Florence said quietly, “we’re not afraid.”

“That’s right. You needn’t be. You don’t never need to be. There’s mounting folks, an’ heaps of em’, as would leave their firesides an’ fight for them that comes here to help their children out of the ignorance we’re all in. You believe that, don’t you?”

“We do,” said Florence. The sound of her voice was as solemn as it had been the day she joined the church.

As the two girls left the store they felt exactly as they might have done had they been living hundreds of years ago, and had come from a conference with their feudal lords.

“Do you know,” whispered Florence as they passed around the corner and out of sight, “I believe I’m going to like it. Fighting just because you’re naturally quarrelsome is disgraceful. But

fighting for a cause, that you may help those who are weaker than yourself, that's glorious." She flung her arms wide, "That —"

She stopped short. Only by a narrow margin had she escaped enfolding in those outflung arms a curious little old man who had just emerged from a bypath.

Dressed in loose-fitting homespun jacket and trousers, with shoes that were two sizes too large and hard enough to stand alone either side up, and with a home tanned squirrel skin cap that had shrunken to half its size in the first rain it encountered, this man formed a ludicrous figure.

The girls did not laugh. This was Preacher Gibson. "Uncle Billie" many called him. He it was who had told them of old Jeff Middleton.

"Ho-Ho! Here you are!" he exclaimed. "I been lookin' for you all. I got a notion about that ar gold. Hit war Confederate gold that old Jeff brought back from the war. Reg'lar old Confederate gold hit war fer sure."

"But Uncle Billie, how do you know the Confederates coined any gold money?"

"Pshaw, child!" Uncle Billie looked at her in shocked surprise. "Didn't Jeff Davis take the mint at New Orleans? An' waren't there a power of gold in that there mint? Hain't there powers of hit in all them mints? In course of reason there are. Hit's what mints are for."

"But Uncle Billie, Jeff Middleton wasn't a Confederate soldier, was he?"

"Never hearn that he were," Uncle Billie's face fell for a moment. Then his countenance brightened. "But you can't never tell 'bout folks, kin you? Jeff came home dressed in brown homespun and drivin' a mule hitched to a sled, the all-fireddest kickin' mule you ever seed, and on that ar sled war that sack of quare gold. Jeff was plum quare hisself. Who knows but he fit the Union arter all, and got that ar gold fer his pay?"

"That doesn't seem very likely," said Marion. "The Confederate soldiers weren't paid when the war ended. But the gold might have been plunder. Jeff may have been a Union soldier with Sherman on his march to the sea. There was plenty of plunder then."

“So he might. So he might,” agreed Uncle Billie.

He sat down upon a flat rock and appeared to lose himself in deep thought.

“Do you know,” he exclaimed, leaping to his feet, “if you all had that gold right now you could do a power of good!”

“Sure we could,” agreed Florence. “We could have the schoolhouse windows and doors put in.”

“Yes,” Uncle Billie said, with a scratch of his wooly head, “but ’t’wouldn’t be no use unless you come out on top in that ar school election. I’ll tell you,” he moved close and whispered in the girl’s ear. “There’s some no ’count folks livin’ up on Shader Branch that’s mighty nigh got no sense. Them folks allus sells their vote to the one that pays ’em most. If’n we had that ar gold we’d put a piece whar they all could find it and they’d come down an’ vote fer our trustee.”

“Oh no, we wouldn’t!” said Florence emphatically. “That’s bribery. It’s unlawful.”

“Why, so it is,” agreed Uncle Billie, “but so’s a heap more of things.”

“Anyway, we wouldn’t buy a vote,” said Florence. “Not if we had all the gold in the world. Our trustee will have to win fair and square, or not at all.”

“Most likely hit’ll be not at all,” grumbled Uncle Billie as he went stamping away. It was plain enough that he did not understand that fine point of ethics.

Above the whipsawed cabin, a few hundred paces up the side of Little Black Mountain, a brook emerged from the dark shadows of its closely thatched roof of rhododendrons. Coming in shadows from ice cold springs above, the waters of this brook were always chilled. As they rushed downward toward the river they spread about them a refreshing coolness that defied the hottest summer sun.

Beside this brook, Marion loved to sit and think. The feel of the cool, damp air was like the touch of a calm personality, the murmur of the brook was like the voice of a calm, counselling friend.

On the evening of the day into which so much surprise and

excitement had been crowded, she took little Hallie by the hand and together they scrambled up the steep mountain side until, flushed and quite out of breath, they threw themselves down on a bed of moss beside the cool stream.

Hallie did not remain long in repose. Restless as a bee, she was soon up and away. First she chased a chipmunk to his rocky lair, then she busied herself in the engrossing task of hunting the peculiar “sang” leaf which might mark the hiding place of a treasure of ginseng roots. Dressed as she was in a bright yellow dress, she reminded Marion of a yellow butterfly flitting from leaf to leaf, from blossom to blossom.

All too soon she was quite forgotten, for as the shadows lengthened Marion thought of the problems and possibilities that lay before them. They had decided to help elect a school trustee. Ransom Turner would run. Many people believed in him. Were there enough to elect him? She hoped so, yet she doubted. Florence had said they would not buy votes, and they would not. But how about Black Blevens? He would force men to vote for him as trustee. He would use every means, fair or foul, to win. “And what of the free school we are teaching now?” she thought. “Will he try to interfere with that?” She decided it would be well to be on guard.

“Surely,” she thought to herself, “there are thrills and adventures enough to be had down here in the Cumberlands. Yes, and mystery as well—even the mystery of Confederate gold.”

She was thinking of Uncle Billie Gibson and what he had said about the gold that haunted the whipsawed house. She found it hard to believe that the Confederate States had coined gold, and harder still to think that there might be a quantity of it hidden away in the old house.

“But if there should be,” she caught her breath, “if we should find it! Each coin would be worth a fabulous sum. Every museum in the country would want one, and every private collector. If it were only true,” she whispered low, and the brook seemed to murmur, “true, true, true.”

Then of a sudden, rudely awakened from her dreams, she sprang to her feet. A piercing scream had struck her ears. This was followed by another and yet another.

“Hallie!” she exclaimed, too frightened to move. “Hallie! What can have happened to her?”

At that instant there flashed before her mind a picture of a face in a square of light, an ugly face with bushy eyebrows, unshaven cheeks and beady eyes—the face of the strange man she had seen at the cabin window.

CHAPTER VII

MYSTERIOUS FOOTSTEPS

Scarcely a moment had elapsed after Hallie's last scream when she sprang sobbing into Marion's arms. Without a question regarding the cause of her fright, the older girl gathered her up and went racing down the mountain. It was a headlong flight. Now they were in danger of a plunge down the steep slope, and now, having stepped upon a round pebble, Marion rolled twice her length to land against a stout sapling that saved them from dashing over a cliff. Yet, somehow, at last they found themselves safe in Marion's room, seated by the fire, with the door securely bolted behind them. Then, and only then, did Hallie cease her sobbing to sit staring round-eyed at the fire.

"What frightened you?" Marion asked.

"A man," the little girl shuddered.

"Did he try to catch you?" Marion was eager now. She was sure she could describe that man.

"No. He only stood and stared at me."

"Then why were you afraid?"

"He was a very ugly man, and—and it seemed like I had seen him before in—in—" she hesitated, "maybe in a bad dream."

"Oh!" Marion was excited. Perhaps here was a clue to the little girl's lost identity. Perhaps she had seen the man before in that other life lived before the blow on her head.

"If only I could find that man, perhaps he could tell me," she told herself. Yet she knew right well that nothing could induce her to return to the mountain that night to search for him.

"Did he say anything?" she asked after a moment's silence.

“Yes,” the little girl spoke quickly. “He said: ‘Hit’s her. Hit shorely are’!”

Marion started. What further proof did she need that this was the man she had seen peering in at their window? One more thing was certain, too; it had been the little lost girl he had thought of when he said, “Hit’s her.”

At the fireside council that night all the events of the day were discussed. Mrs. McAlpin approved to the fullest extent the girls’ resolve to make a stand in the interest of the mountain children and to do all in their power to elect a school trustee who had the children’s interest at heart. She would do all within her power to help win the election.

In regard to the mysterious man and little Hallie, it was decided that should the man be seen again, every effort would be made to obtain information from him regarding the identity of the child.

“In the meantime,” said Mrs. McAlpin, “we must keep an eye on the child every moment. It is one thing to find her parents, quite another to have her spirited away by one who may have no claim whatever upon her. At school, at home, at work, at play, she must be carefully guarded.”

With this the council broke up and a few moments later Marion found herself beneath the homespun coverlids, staring up at the brown beams and dreaming that they were being slowly transformed into shining trenches filled with Confederate gold.

Black Blevens was not long in carrying his election war into every quarter. The summer school at once became a center of fire. At this time the free summer school was more than half over and, though neither Florence nor Marion had taught in day school before, they had met with singular success. They had found these young feud fighters regular storehouses of explosives, but once the children came to know that their teacher meant to deal justly with them and that they had a deep and abiding love for them, they had settled down to hard study in a way quite remarkable.

Now, on the Monday after the election struggle had been determined upon, there came a new pupil to the school. With two battered books and a half of a tablet under his arm, he marched to the teacher’s desk and announced his intentions of going to school.

His manner was meek enough to disarm the most wary of teachers. He was sixteen. He was not badly dressed and an attempt had been made to comb his unruly locks. Only in his restless blue eyes did there lurk a warning signal of danger.

Florence's lips trembled ever so slightly as she asked his name.

"Bud," was the answer.

"Bud for Buddington, I suppose?"

"No'm, jest Bud."

"All right, Bud," Florence's smile was a doubtful one. She was beginning to suspect the truth.

"Bud Wax," the boy added reluctantly.

Florence started. She had feared this. Bud Wax, known as the most troublesome boy on Laurel Branch, a boy who had been known to ride through the settlement at midnight shouting like a wild Indian and firing his pistol in air. And worst of all, he was a distant relative of Black Blevens and lived at his cabin.

What could be the answer? There could be but one; he had been sent to make trouble. If Black Blevens could break up the summer school he could all the more easily convince doubtful voters that these girls from the outside were unqualified to handle the school.

For a moment she wavered. She could refuse to admit him. The control of the summer school was in her hands. Yet there was no real reason to offer. Bud was larger and older than most of the other children, yet there were a few older than he.

"And besides," she told herself as she set her lips tight, "to refuse to admit him is to surrender without a battle. I won't surrender."

All this thinking took but a half dozen seconds. At the end of that time she favored the boy with her very best smile and said:

"All right, Bud, you may have the seat by the back window on the right side."

For a moment the boy stared at her in silence. A seat by a back window is at once a much coveted place and a spot quite advantageous for mischief making. Bud knew this; yet this girl

teacher gave him this place. Just what his conclusions were regarding this move Florence could not even guess.

Every hour of that day seemed the hour before a thunder storm. Every child in the room knew why Bud was there; and while as a whole they were friendly to their teachers, they were at the same time normal children. And where is the child who does not long for excitement.

The day passed as others had. The slow drone of bees outside, the murmur of voices reciting lessons, loud shouts of play at noon and recess, then the glad burst of joy as the sixty children went racing home.

"Bud was just like the rest," Florence said to Ransom Turner that evening. "Perhaps there's nothing wrong after all."

"Just you wait!" Ransom said with a shake of his head. "Old Black Blevens ain't sendin' that boy to school fer book larnin'. Hit's time for layin' by of the corn. Took him right ouden' the field, he did. Don't make sense, that ar don't, unless he hopes Bud'll make trouble."

Florence went to bed with a headache. Doubtless Ransom was right. She was tempted to wish that they had never started the fight, that they had left Black Blevens and Al Finley to collect their ill gotten school money.

"And the children without an education!" she whispered fiercely. "No! Never! Never! We'll fight, and by all that's good, we'll win!"

A whole week passed and nothing unusual happened. If Bud Wax and Black Blevens meant any harm they were taking a long time to tamp powder and lay fuse. All Ransom would say was:

"Jest you mind what I say. That Black Blevens is a plumb square worker, but he's always at hit."

Two little rumors came to Florence. A small child had told her that Bud carried his pistol to school. An older boy had said that Bud was trying to pick a quarrel with Ballard Skidmore. Ballard was larger and older than Bud, a big, slow-going, red-headed fellow who somehow reminded Florence of a St. Bernard dog. She put little faith in either of these rumors, and as for picking a quarrel with this slow-going fellow, she did not believe it could be done.

On Saturday something vaguely disturbing occurred. There were many squirrels on the upper slopes of Little Black Mountain. Ralph had taught Florence how to shoot with his long barreled .22 pistol. She decided to try her hand at hunting. Had it not been Marion's day for helping with the work she would have asked her to go along. As it was, she struck away alone over the tortuous cow path that led to the upper reaches of the mountain.

Having donned a pair of canvas knickers, high boots and an old hunting coat, she was prepared for a free, rough time of it. Free and rough it was, too. Brambles tore at her, rocks slid from beneath her feet to send her sprawling, a rotten tree trunk over which she was climbing suddenly caved in and threatened to send her rolling down the mountain. She enjoyed it all. A typical American girl, strong and brave, born for the out-of-doors, she took the buffets of nature and laughed in its face.

As she reached a higher elevation the slope became gentler. Here she found an abundance of beech and chestnut trees, and higher up a grove of walnut.

Hardly had she reached the edge of the walnut grove when she caught a flash of red, then a scolding chatter from a tall tree.

"A squirrel," she breathed as she silently lifted the hammer of her long pistol. "I wonder—I just wonder—"

Her wonderings were cut short by a sudden thud close by, then another. Two frisking squirrels had come to the ground within a dozen paces of her. Like a flash of light they were away over the moss and up another tree. This tree was not large and the leaves were scanty. On tip-toe she stalked it.

Gazing intently upward, she discovered a pair of small black eyes looking down at her.

"There's one."

She lifted the shiny barrel, but at that instant the eyes vanished.

Off to the right she caught a chatter. Then, just as she went tip-toeing away, a half-grown walnut dropped at her feet. She picked it up. The shell had been half eaten away.

"You saucy things!" she exclaimed, shaking her fist in mock anger at the frolickers.

With eyes wandering everywhere, tip-toeing, listening, pausing for a moment to start quickly away, she at last crossed over into a grove of chestnuts.

All this time the inside of her pistol's barrel remained as shiny as when she started. Always, as she prepared to shoot, she caught a shrill chatter or saw the flash of a bushy tail. It was great fun, so she went on with it until at last, quite tired out, she flung herself down beneath a great chestnut tree to half bury herself in green and gray moss as soft as a velvet cushion. There, flat on her back, breathing the fresh mountain air, listening to the songs of forest birds far and near, catching the distant melodious tink-tank of cow bells, squinting at the flash of sunlight as it played among the leaves, she at last drifted off into a dreamy sleep.

She did not sleep long, but when she awoke she was conscious of some living creature near her. Then she heard a thump-thump among the leaves, followed by a scratching sound. Without the least sound, she moved her head from side to side. Then she saw him, an inquisitive red squirrel. He was sitting on a stump, not ten feet away, staring at her. Instantly her hand was on her pistol, but she did not lift it. Instead, she rolled over and lifted up her head to look again.

The squirrel had retreated a little, but had mounted another stump for a second look.

"How easy!" she thought, silently gripping her pistol.

There came a rustle from the right, then one at the left. The ground was alive with squirrels who had made a party of it and had come for a look at this sleeping nymph of the woods. She caught the gleam of their peering eyes from leaf pile, low bush, stump and fallen trees.

"No!" she whispered at last. "I couldn't kill one of you. Not one. But it's been heaps of fun to hunt you."

At that she sat up and began shaking the dead leaves from her hair. Instantly her furry visitors vanished.

But what was that? She caught a sound of heavier movements in the leaves.

Instantly she was on her knees, peering through the bushes. What could it have been? Surely not a squirrel. Too heavy for that. There it was again! Rustle! Rustle! Rustle!

Then again there was silence, a silence that was frightening. The girl felt the hair rising at the back of her neck. She was alone on the mountain. Was it a bear? There were bears on the mountain. Was it a man? An enemy?

As she glanced about she realized with a little burst of fright that, like sparrows at sight of a hawk, the squirrels had vanished. This indeed was an ominous token.

Springing to her feet, she thrust her long barreled pistol into an inside pocket of her jacket, where it could be snatched out at a moment's notice. Yet, even as she did this, she realized how absurd a weapon is a long barrelled .22 when one faces real danger.

For a moment, standing like a wild deer, poised on tip-toe ready for instant flight, she stood there listening. All she heard was the wild beating of her own heart and the faint tink-tank of cow bells in the valley below.

The sound of these bells increased her fear. Their very faintness told her the distance she had wandered away over the mountain.

The next moment, walking on tip-toe, scarcely breathing, with her pistol snugly hidden in her coat, she was making good her retreat.

It was not until Monday morning that the real truth of this mountain experience came to her. Then it came with a suddenness and force that was strong enough to bowl over even a man of strong heart.

She was on her way to school when Ransom Turner, having called her into the store and closed the door, said in a low husky tone that told her of deep feeling:

“There’s a warrant out for your arrest, but don’t you care narry bit!”

“For my arrest?” Florence stared. “What have I done?”

“Hit’s for carryin’ concealed weapons, a pistol gun, I reckon.”

“Why, I never—”

The girl paused and caught her breath. It all came to her like a flash. Those stealthy movements on the mountain had been

made by some of Black Blevens' men. They had been spying on her. She blushed as she realized that they might have seen her sleeping there in the leaves. But her face was flushed with anger as she realized that, having seen her pocket that all but harmless pistol, they had taken a mean advantage and had sworn out a warrant for her arrest.

"Don't you keer," said the little mountain man, putting a hand on her arm. "Don't you keer narry bit. This store's mine, an' all them goods. I'll mortgage hit all to go your bond. You go right on teaching your school. We'll take keer of old Black Blevens and all them of his sort."

Quick tears blinded her, but she brushed them away. It was hard to be treated as a criminal in a strange land and by the very people you were trying to help.

Quickly, instead of tears, there was a gleam of battle in her eyes.

"We'll beat it!" said Ransom, clinching his fists hard. "Down here in the mountings law's a club to beat your enemies with. Hit's quare, but hit's true. We'll git a lawyer from the court house. We'll beat old Black Blevens, just you wait and see!"

Three times more that morning Florence was reduced to tears by rough-clad, shuffling mountaineers who came to knock timidly at the schoolhouse door and to assure her that they had heard of her plight and were ready to go her bail and to help in any way. "If hit takes the roof off from over my ole woman an' the last hog shoat I got runnin' in the branch," as one of them expressed it.

It is always good to know that one has friends, and when one is among comparative strangers it is gratifying indeed.

And yet, as the day came to an end and the sudden mountain darkness fell, it found Florence with a heavy heart. To be tried by a Justice of the Peace for a crime, this was a cross indeed.

"Tried by a Justice," she thought to herself. "Who is the Justice? Pellage Skidmore! One of Black Blevens' henchmen! It's a plot. They'll fine me and let me go; perhaps give me ten days in the county jail. Ten days in that place!" Her heart stopped beating. She had seen that jail—a dark and dirty place full of vermin.

"Oh, I couldn't!" she breathed.

Then of a sudden a new thought came to her. The least fine that could be imposed was twenty-five dollars; one of the men had told her that.

“In the Constitution of the United States,” she whispered to herself, “it says that in trials over matters amounting to twenty-five dollars, or over, the defendant may call for a jury. I’ll call for one. If I must have a trial, I’ll have a real one!”

At that she stamped the ground with her foot and felt immensely relieved. There is a great comfort to be had sometimes when one has something to say about his own hanging.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SILENT WATCHER

Troubles never come singly. Florence's second shock came close on the heels of the first. Having decided to make the best of a bad situation and to allow her friends and fellow clansmen to arrange the legal battle over her trial for carrying a concealed weapon, she went to her work next day with a brave heart.

With all her strong resolves, the look on the faces of her smaller charges came near melting her to tears. All knew of the impending trial. A few greeted her with a glassy stare. These were children of her enemies. For the most part they looked at her with such a sad and sorrowful longing as one might expect to find on the face of a mother whose son has been ordered shot.

"Surely," Marion said to her, "being tried by a jury in the mountains must be a solemn affair."

"It is," said Florence, swallowing hard, "and Ransom Turner told me last night this was the first time in the history of the mountains that a woman has been tried for carrying concealed weapons."

"It will be a great occasion!" Marion could see the humor of the situation. "When is it to come off?"

"Ransom says that the judge has set the trial a week from next Monday."

"That's school election day. All Laurel Branch will be there!"

"Let them come!" said Florence, a gleam of fire in her eye. "I haven't done anything to be ashamed of! They want a fight. We'll give them one—a battle royal! They've already lost one point; they must give me a jury. We'll make them lose some more. I shouldn't wonder if the tide would turn and the power

that is higher than I would turn this bit of meanness and trickery to our advantage.”

The forenoon of that day passed much as had the earlier hours of other days—study and lessons, recess, then again the droning of voices blended with the lazy buzzing of flies and the distant songs of birds.

In spite of the quiet smoothness of the passing hours, there was in the air that ominous tenseness which one feels but cannot explain.

This was heightened fourfold by a strange occurrence. Just as Florence was about to ring the bell after the noon hour, Marion drew her to a gaping window that looked out on the upper landscape and pointed with a trembling finger to a solitary figure perched atop a giant sandstone rock that lay in the center of a deserted clearing a few hundred yards above the schoolhouse.

The figure was that of a mountaineer. At that distance it would have been difficult to have told whether he was young or old. Something about the way he sat slouching over the rifle that lay across his lap reminded Florence of Black Blevens. An involuntary shudder shook her.

“On Lookout Rock!” she breathed.

The story of that rock they knew too well. In earlier days, when a deadly feud was raging up and down the creek, this rock had been the lookout for Black Blevens’ clan. There, on top of the rock, with rifle at his side, a clansman would watch the movements of his enemy. Smoke curling from a distant chimney, a woman hoeing corn in the field, the distant boom of a rifle, all were signs that he read and passed on by signals to his distant clansmen.

“There hasn’t been a watcher on that rock for years, they say,” said Florence. Her teeth were fairly chattering.

“See! He’s looking this way. Seems that he must be expecting something to happen.”

“Wha—what could it be?”

Florence stood trembling, all unnerved for one instant. Then, having shaken herself as one will to awaken from an unpleasant dream, she became her brave self again.

It was well she regained her courage. Fifteen minutes later, while Marion was outside beneath a great beech tree, hearing a lesson, Florence sat watching over a study hour. On hearing a sound of commotion she looked up quickly to see her fifty children running for doors and windows. In the back of the room Bud Wax and Ballard Skidmore stood glaring at each other and reaching for their hip pockets.

One instant the teacher's head whirled. The next that dread rumor sped through her brain: "Bud has been carrying his pistol gun to school."

Then, like a powerful mechanical thing, she went into action. One instant she had leaped from the platform; the next found her half way down the aisle. Before the slow muscles of Bud's arm had carried a hand to his pocket, he felt both wrists held in a vice-like grip and a voice that was strange, even to the speaker herself, said:

"Ballard Skidmore, leave the room. All the rest of you take your seats."

Had Bud Wax possessed the will power to struggle, he would have found himself powerless in this girl's grasp. Nature had endowed her with a magnificent physique. She had neither neglected it nor abused it. Gym, when there was gym, hiking, climbing, rowing, riding, had served to keep her fit for this moment.

As Bud sank weakly to his seat he felt something slide from his pocket.

"My pistol gun," his paralyzed mind registered weakly. The next moment he saw the teacher gripping the butt of that magnificent thing of black rubber and blue steel and marching toward the front of the room.

"James Jordon," she said as she tried to still the wild beating of her heart, "go bring me two sandstones as large as your head."

"Yes, mam." James went out trembling.

Florence calmly tilted out the cylinder of the gun and allowed the cartridges to fall out. After that she stood with the weapon dangling in her hand.

When the rocks had been placed on her desk she laid the pistol

on the flattest one, then lifted the other for a blow.

She did not look at Bud. She dared not. When a small child she had possessed a doll that was all her own. A ruthless hand had broken the doll's head. No doll ever meant more to a girl than his first gun meant to a mountain boy.

Without looking, she felt the agony on the boy's face as the stone descended. Without listening she heard him crumple in his seat as the rubber grip broke, springs flew and the barrel bent.

When there remained only an unrecognizable mass of broken and twisted steel, she walked slowly to the open window and dropped it out. Turning, she looked them all squarely in the eye (all but Bud, whose face was down on his desk) and said in her ordinary tune of voice:

“You may resume your lessons.”

In one corner a fly, caught in a spider's web, droned complainingly. From a nearby bush there came the liquid notes of a wild canary, while faint and from far away there came the low of a cow. Save for the occasional swish of a turned page, no other sound disturbed the Sabbath-like stillness of the school room. And, as Florence's glance strayed to the hillside and sentinal rock, she saw that the silent watcher was gone.

Had Florence been able to open the book of the future and to read there an account of the far reaching events that were to come out of the moments that had just passed, she would have been surprised and startled. As she could not, she could only wonder, and in her heart there was a feeling of dread.

The hours that followed were filled with a strange, subdued silence. The careless rustle of pages was gone. Gone, too, was the uneasy shuffle of feet on the plain board floor. Children recited in tones little above a whisper. It was as if the room were empty; no children there. And yet, there they were. Florence saw them with her eyes, but when she closed her eyes she was subject to an illusion, a feeling that they had vanished.

When the last long hours had dragged its way to a weary end, the children crept silently away. On the soft soil their bare feet made no sound, and from their lips there came never a whisper.

Bud Wax was the last to leave and looking neither to right nor left, with his head upon his breast he disappeared at once in the

shadows of a paw-paw thicket.

Marion had gone ahead with some of the younger children to help them across the river.

Florence remained behind. As the last child disappeared from sight, she left the schoolhouse to strike off up the leafy bank and on up the hillside until, quite out of breath from climbing, she threw herself upon a soft bed of ferns to bury her face in her hands and burst out crying.

As she lay there pressing her throbbing temples, it seemed to her that all worth while things in the world had passed away. Being only a girl, she could not fathom the depth of emotion nor measure the flood tide of bitterness that flowed over her soul. She only knew that at last memory came to her rescue, the memory of an old, old story in the Bible of a man who, having won a marvelous victory over great odds, had gone far away into the wilderness to at last throw himself prostrate upon the ground and ask that he might die.

As the girl recalled the story she felt that she had much in common with this old prophet of Israel. The enemy of her school had tried to destroy it. She had defeated his end. How long she would remain victor she could not tell. She only knew that to-day she had won.

“And to-day,” she assured herself stoutly, “is enough. Let to-morrow care for itself.”

Then of a sudden she recalled a promise. She had told Jense Crider, one of her most promising pupils, that she would come to her house and stay the night. She must be away at once.

An hour later found her on the shake roofed porch of a two room cabin far up on the side of Big Black Mountain. The light faded from the tallest, most distant peak as her tiny young hostess bade her shy welcome.

To one accustomed, as Florence was, to the homes of rich and fertile valleys, this mountain cabin seemed strangely meager. Two rooms, two beds, a table of pine boards, a fireplace hung with rows of red peppers and braids of onions, three splint bottomed chairs, a pile of home woven coverlids in the corner, a box cupboard nailed to the wall, a few dishes in the cupboard, that was all.

And yet it was scrupulously clean. The hearth had been

brushed, the floor scrubbed and sanded, the coverlids on the beds were spotless and the few cheap stone dishes shone like imported china.

“It’s something that people from the outside don’t realize,” Florence told herself. “Many of these mountain folks, living here shut off from the world, with few tools and many difficulties, would put to shame many of those whose opportunities have been great. Surely their children should have a chance! And they shall!” She clenched her hands tight as this thought passed through her mind. She was thinking of the coming school election and of the things they would do if they won.

“If we win?” she whispered. “We will win! We will!”

One incident of the evening in that cabin remained long in her memory. They were at supper. Since there were but four plates and four chairs, the two younger children must wait while Jense ate with her teacher and the father and mother.

The meal was simple enough—corn bread baked on the hearth, fried string beans, a glass of wild cherry jelly and a plain cake with very little sugar. The luxury of the meal was a plate of boiled eggs. On the rich, broad-sweeping prairies, or in cities, one thinks of eggs as staple food. In the mountains they are hoarded as a golden treasure, to be traded at the store for calico, shoes, and other necessities of life.

But this night, in honor of the guest, Jense had served six shining white eggs. Florence saw the faces of the children glow with anticipation.

“Probably haven’t had eggs for months,” was her mental comment.

As she took her egg and cut it in two with her knife, it was like the breaking of bread in sacrament.

As the meal was eaten she watched the eager eyes of the two waiting children. Then, of a sudden, in the eyes of those little ones, a near tragedy occurred.

“Have another egg,” said the hostess to Florence, passing the plate as she did so.

Without thinking, she put out a hand to take one. Then, of a sudden, the youngest child threw herself flat on the floor while

her little form shook with silent sobbing.

“No, I don’t think I care for another,” Florence said quickly, drawing back her hand just in time.

At once, with face wreathed in smiles, the little one was on her feet.

“They do this for me,” thought Florence, swallowing hard. “What must I not do for them?”

Nine o’clock found Florence safely tucked away in the bed which occupied a corner of the small living room. In the kitchen-living room slept her host and his good wife, while from above her there came an occasional rustle or thump that told plainer than words that the three children, having given up their bed to the teacher, had gone to sleep on the floor of the attic. Here was one more token of the unusual hospitality of these kindly mountain people.

The ceiling, at which the girl lay staring with sleepless eyes, was strange indeed. In some way Jeff Crider had obtained enough mill sawed boards to cover the rough hewn beams. Some way, too, he had obtained enough paint to cover the boards. Then, that he might produce a decorative effect, before the paint was dry he had held a smoking, globeless kerosene lamp close to the paint, and, moving about in ever widening circles, had painted there black roads that led round and round in endless ways to nowhere.

As the girl stared at this fantastic ceiling it seemed to her that these tracings should mean something, that they led to an important truth, a truth that she should know, and one of vast importance.

Then of a sudden it struck her all of a heap. This cabin had an attic. Mrs. McAlpin’s whipsawed cabin must have one, too. There was no entrance from below. She was sure of that, but the attic was there all the same.

“Confederate gold,” she whispered. “It must be hidden there.”

So intense were her convictions on this subject that she found herself unable to sleep.

At last, having wrapped a homespun blanket about her, she stepped into the crisp air of the night.

The moon was just rising over Big Black Mountain. It was lighting up the scenes of another entrancing mystery, which Florence had stumbled upon a few days before.

“Who lives at the head of Laurel Branch?” she had asked Ransom Turner.

“I don’t rightly know.”

“Don’t know!” she exclaimed.

“I reckon there ain’t nobody that rightly knows except them that lives there.”

“But—but where did they come from?”

“Peers like there don’t nobody rightly know.”

“How very strange!” she had exclaimed. “When did they come?”

“Mebby two years back. Came from somewhere away over back of Pine Mounting. Quarest people you most ever seed. One man half as big as a mounting, and no arm except one. Mighty onfriendly folks. Coupla men who went up thar huntin’ got scared off. Quarest folks you most ever seed.”

“Perhaps that’s where little Hallie came from.”

“Might be. But if I was you I’d never go near thar.”

Ransom had gone on to tell weird tales of these strange people, a dozen families in all who had leased land from a coal company and had gone up there beyond a natural stone gateway which appeared to shut them from the rest of the world. He had told how they had stayed there, never coming down to the settlements for barter and trade, and how they kept other mountain people away.

Other tales he had told, too; tales that had made her blood run cold. There was the story of a peddler with a pack who had gone up there at nightfall and had never been seen to return, and a one-armed fiddler who had never come back.

“But couldn’t they have gone out some other way?” she had asked.

“Narry a pass at the head of this branch, narry a one. Jest rocky ridges, so steep an’ high that if you was to drop your hat from

the top it would blow back up to you. No, Miss,” he had added with a shake of his head, “don’t you never go up thar!”

And yet she had somehow felt that she must and would go through the natural gateway to the little known valley of mystery.

Now, as she stood looking at the moon that shone down upon it all, she felt the lure stronger than ever.

“Some day,” she whispered, “I will go up there. I feel sure that I must.”

Little did she dream, as she stood there until the chill night air drove her inside, that in less than a week up there at the head of Laurel Branch she was to enter upon the strangest, most mysterious adventure of her young life.

Before she fell asleep she wondered a little about the strange experiences that had come to her on Ages Creek. Would she ever know why they had made her prisoner there? When would the title be proved up on the Powell coal tract? Would it ever be? Would they get the commission?

CHAPTER IX

BEYOND FORBIDDEN PORTALS

“Uncle Billie, has the whipsawed house an attic?”

Florence asked the question eagerly as she met her venerable friend on the creek road next day.

“Sure enough! Now has it? I most forgit.” The old man scratched his head.

“It hasn’t a stairway, nor an opening for a ladder, but there must be space up there, and if there’s space there must be something there.”

“Shore there are. Cobwebs, dust, an’—an’” the old man, startled with a sudden thought, almost lost his balance and fell over, “an’ of course that ar Confederate gold. Shore enough. Whar else could it be?”

“You come over at five this afternoon and we’ll explore that place,” smiled Florence. “That is, if Mrs. McAlpin will permit us.”

“I’ll shore be thar at the apinted hour—sun time,” Uncle Billie beamed like an excited child.

“Plum quare gold it were,” he added as Florence hurried away to school.

At sight of the old log schoolhouse, all thoughts of the fabled gold were driven from her mind. The responsibilities of the day came flooding in upon her. What had been the results of yesterday’s affair? She had asked Marion to visit Ballard Skidmore in his home and get his story of the quarrel with Bud Wax. She did not doubt but that Bud had been entirely in the wrong, and hoped Ballard would return to school. Bud, of course, she would never see in her school room again. Somewhat to her surprise, she found herself regretting this.

There was much good in the boy. She had grown rather fond of the sight of his restless blue eyes.

“If only he did not belong, body and soul, to Black Blevens,” she told herself, “one might make something of him.”

Again her mind went to work on the problems directly before her. How had Black Blevens taken the affair yesterday? Had he been the silent watcher on Lookout Rock? What had this setting of a watch meant? What would his next move be?

And what of the coming election? Would there be enough voters to enable them to win? Ransom Turner had promised to make a canvas of the community and tell her how matters stood.

Her trial? Her heart sank at thought of it! To be tried by a jury with all the mountain people looking on!

“But it’s all for them, for the little ones,” she whispered, and was comforted.

Imagine her surprise when, upon entering the school yard, she saw Bud Wax with the larger boys, pitching rocks at a stump.

“I—I didn’t think he’d come back,” she whispered to Marion.

“Neither did I.”

“Is Ballard coming back?”

“Yes.”

“Will they fight again?” Florence’s heart was in her throat. She felt that another day such as yesterday would prove her undoing.

“Ballard said he’d do his best. Bud had been teasing him for a long time. He called him a name that no mountain man or boy will allow himself to be called. Then Ballard struck him in the face.”

For a time Florence pondered the problem of further punishment for Bud. In the end she concluded that any punishment after the destruction of his pistol would be anticlimax.

“We’ll let bygones be bygones,” she told Marion. “But keep your eyes open for further trouble. Why did he come back

anyway?”

“Who knows?”

That day Bud was a model pupil. Quiet, far too quiet for comfort, he studied hard and recited perfectly. The day passed as a model in the history of the school. Florence went home more puzzled than ever. On the doorstep of the whipsawed house she found Uncle Billie Gibson. He was smiling his brightest smile and glancing up at the eaves as if he expected a shower of gold to come rattling down from the shingles.

A moment later two breathless young ladies were eagerly begging Mrs. McAlpin for permission to remove a board from the ceiling of their room that they might explore the attic of that venerable house.

Consent of the good lady was readily obtained and in a twinkling, armed with a wood chisel and hammer, they were at the job.

Have you never entered an old house whose attic has remained unexplored for years? Then you have never enjoyed the exciting dreams that come with thoughts of treasures that may be found there. Chests filled with curios from many lands; ancient trunks packed with rare old laces; a grandfather's clock; rare old books worth a fortune; period furniture that a millionaire might covet. Indeed, who knows what rare treasures may be hidden there?

As for the two girls and Uncle Billie, they were looking for but one treasure—a stack of yellow gold.

As Florence inserted the chisel in a crack and gave it a pull there came such a screech from the ancient hand-hammered nails as brought a scream of fright from Marion. The next moment the board gave way with a suddenness that all but knocked Florence from the chair upon which she was perched and showered her with an accumulation of aged dust. With a shrill cry she leaped to the floor.

Over their heads, as they regained composure, they saw a broad, black, gaping hole.

“Dark up there,” said Marion with a little shudder.

“Have to use a flashlight.” Florence dug down into her trunk.

“Here it is.”

“But it won’t work.”

“Battery’s dead. Have to use a candle.”

A candle was brought. Then while Marion sat on the chair, Florence climbed the back of it and thrust her head and shoulders through the hole.

“See anything?” Marion asked breathlessly.

“No, not a—yes, there’s something, a black bulk over there in the corner. It’s a—”

“A chest, of course!” Marion was quite beside herself with excitement. Without thinking she sprang to her feet. The next instant the chair toppled over and Florence, lighted candle and all, came crashing down upon it.

“Wha—what did you do that for?” she demanded, once she had regained the breath that had been knocked from her by the fall.

“I—I forgot!” said Marion. “Truly I’m sorry. Let’s try again.”

“Not that way,” said Florence, rubbing her bruises. “The bed will be better. Come on, let’s push it over.”

The bed was soon under the hole and a moment later the two girls, closely followed by an agile old man, were creeping from beam to beam toward the bulk in the dark.

“I know it’s the chest of gold,” whispered Marion.

“I—I—some way it don’t look right.”

“Phoo-ee!” chuckled Uncle Billie. “That ain’t no chest. That’s a poundin’ mill. What hit’s doin’ stored up here is more’n I know.”

“A pounding mill? What’s that?” demanded Florence as she held her candle above a great cylindrical block of wood on which there rested a similar block of smaller dimensions.

“A poundin’ mill’s used for poundin’ out corn meal. They ain’t used now on account o’ water wheels, but they was a powerful help in their day. You all never seed ’em work? Well, hit’s this way.”

Uncle Billie lifted the smaller cylinder and dropped it into a hole in the larger block, which was some three feet high and

four feet across.

“You put your corn in that there holler, then you tie this block to a saplin’ to help you teeter hit up an’ down, an’ you pound your corn until it are meal. That’s all there are to hit.”

“That’s a powerful heavy block!” he exclaimed, trying to tip it. “Must be made out o’ first growth hickory, as sizeable as hit is.”

“But where’s our gold?” asked Marion. Her voice dropped off into a little disappointed wail.

“Peers to me like we’d been barkin’ up the wrong tree,” said Uncle Billie with a sad shake of his head.

“Might be hidden around somewhere among the rafters,” said Florence. “Let’s have a good look.”

They explored the attic thoroughly. Not a pile of dust but was disturbed that day. Their only reward was a rusty Civil War canteen that, as Uncle Billie expressed it, was “as empty as a bear after a winter’s sleep.”

Just as they were preparing to descend, Marion made an interesting find. Having noticed a circular spot on the dust covered boards that might have been a knot, she put out a hand to pick up a circular disk.

“What’s this?” she exclaimed excitedly. “How heavy it is! It—why, it must be gold!”

“Hit shore are!” exclaimed Uncle Billie, taking it from her and rubbing it clean on his ragged trousers’ leg. “Hit sure are. Hit’s one of them are pieces of Confederate gold.”

“But it doesn’t say Confederate,” whispered Florence after examining it closely. “It says on one side ‘Georgia gold’, and on the other—let’s see.” With a trembling finger she rubbed away the last vestige of dust. “It says: ‘T-e-m-p-l-e R-e-i-d. Temple Reid, Ten Dollars’.”

“Georgia Gold. Temple Reid. Ten Dollars!” exclaimed Marion. “What nonsense! How could a man coin money? Money is made by nations, not by men.”

“But that’s what it says,” insisted Florence.

“Well, anyway, it isn’t Confederate gold,” said Marion,

disappointment creeping into her tone. There had been a glamor of romance in her hope of finding some coins struck by that long since dissolved government.

“You can’t most always tell,” said Uncle Billie with a wise shake of his head. “That ar’s Georgia gold. But hit’s jest one. There were a hundred, mebbby four-five hundred. Stands to reason some was Confederate, fer hadn’t Jeff Middleton come from right down thar whar that sort of money were made?”

Uncle Billie’s logic seemed weak, but, that they might not hurt the feelings of the good old man, the girls let it pass. They all adjourned to the rooms below. Dust and dirt were scrubbed off, the hole was nailed up, and there the matter stood, closed for the time being.

One thing was decided upon. The strange gold piece was to be sent to a curator of Field Museum, who was a friend of Marion. He would be able to tell them the origin of the piece, and its value.

“That one coin may be of considerable value,” said Marion. “There are coins worth hundreds of dollars.”

“Yes, and it may be worth just exactly its weight in gold,” laughed Florence. “But send it along. It will do no harm.”

That night the bit of gold went North in the registered mail pouch, and the girls, forgetting their disappointment as quickly as possible, set about two important tasks that lay just before them; the winning of the school election and preparation for Florence’s trial.

It was five days later. It was evening, but there was no sunset. Dull, gray clouds had hung low on the mountains all day. Dull clouds of disappointment and defeat hung heavily on Florence’s spirits. She had taken a long, long walk up Laurel Branch. Her hopes that this walk would revive her drooping spirits had proven vain. Each leaden mile had found her head drooping more and more.

“It’s lost!” she murmured as she marched stolidly on.

It was true; at least Ransom Turner had assured her it was. The school election was lost. Each side had begun work early. The canvass had been taken; the line-up, in so far as anyone could tell, was completed, and at the present Black Blevens and his choice for teacher, Al Finely, were eight votes ahead.

“Eight votes!” she had said to Ransom. “How can we overcome that?”

“Hit can’t be done,” Ransom had said. “Hit’s a fact. That Black Blevens is the election fightenest man I most ever seed. We’re jest as good as licked right now.”

“And yet,” Florence said to herself as, undecided whether to pause for rest or to wander aimlessly on, she paused beside a great flat rock, “it does seem that there is a way to win if only we knew it.”

Just as if in answer to her worrying problem, the fog lifted, revealing before her in startling clearness the natural gateway that led to the horseshoe valley at the head of Laurel Branch.

“The gate,” she breathed. “The gateway to that mysterious valley where strange people live without visiting the outside world, the valley from which men do not return!” Her heart was all a-tremble. Her shaking knees obliged her to drop suddenly upon an inviting rock.

At once her keen mind was at work. She had come farther than she thought and she should turn back at once. Then, too, that gateway held for her an irresistible fascination. Did she hope from this point of vantage to catch some glimpse of the life of those strange beings who lived beyond the gate? Was some good angel whispering to her soul some of the hidden things of the future? Who can say? Enough that she sat there alone while the dull shadows deepened.

It did not seem strange to her that her thoughts at this moment should turn to the little girl, Hallie, who had been so mysteriously thrust into the life that centered in the old whipsawed house. Indeed, she had often enough associated her with this same stone gateway and had wondered if after all she had been brought through this very portal to the outside world.

Wherever she may have come from, Hallie had grown to be the life of that old brown cabin. She had come to them dressed in a water-soaked scarlet dress and a mud smeared tam that shone bright even in their terrible disarray. The bright colors had suited her so well that they had dressed her so ever since. Closing her eyes, Florence could see her now.

“Like a scarlet bird fluttering from branch to branch of an old tree,” she mused as she saw her moving from room to room. “How we’d miss her if someone came for her!”

Imagine her surprise when upon opening her eyes she saw, not twenty yards before her, down the creek, the very person of whom she had been thinking.

Suppressing a cry of surprise, she waited and watched. Walking slowly, as if in a trance, Hallie passed within four feet of her without seeing her, then marched straight on toward the rocky gateway that lay between her and the hidden valley.

At once Florence's mind was in a whirl. Her lips parted to call the child back, but no sound came forth.

What should she do? Evidently something had happened to the child. She was in a daze again. Perhaps the old fever that had wiped out her memory had returned. Had memory accompanied it? Was she now groping her way back to her own home?

"Home!" Florence spoke the word softly. Home had meant so much to her. Like a moving panorama she saw before her twilight scenes at home by the fireplace, bed time and prayer beside her bed with her mother bending over, joyous mornings and sunny afternoons. Home! Ah, yes, home! And perhaps this little girl was going home. Could she stop her? And yet, could she allow her to wander alone in the gathering darkness through those forbidding portals?

The answer came quickly. She dropped down into the path, turned toward the stone gateway, then marched steadily forward until both she and the child were lost to view beyond the rocky pillars.

Had Florence chanced to look behind she might have caught sight of a person following at a distance. A skulking figure it was that moved by quick starts and stops from shadow to shadow. And, had her backward glance been rightly timed, had it come as a sudden last feeble burst of sunlight illumined his face, she would have seen that this person was Bud Wax.

Had she seen him her heart would doubtless have been filled with misgivings and wild questions. Why was the boy following her? Was this a trap? What did he know about little Hallie? What of the land beyond the forbidden gateway?

Since she did not look behind her, but walked straight on, she asked herself no such questions. So the three passed into the mysterious beyond, the child as in a dream, the teacher sturdily on duty bound, the boy skulking from shadow to shadow. Hardly had they disappeared when sudden night came down to

close the gate with a curtain of darkness.

CHAPTER X

A MYSTERIOUS PEOPLE

Have you ever stepped out into a night so dark that you could scarcely see your hand before you, and have you, after taking a few steps from your own doorstep, tried to imagine that you were alone in the dark in lands that were strange to you? If you have, then you can imagine the feeling of Florence as she moved forward into the unknown. Scarcely had the second hand on her watch ticked round three times than she found it necessary to follow the child by sound rather than by sight. Such is the darkness that at times fills rockbound mountain valleys.

So, tripping over rocks, splashing into spring fed pools, slipping on damp moss, she made her way forward. Always following the child, always followed by the skulking figure of the boy, she came at last to a sudden turn in the road, and there, just before her, shone a mellow square of yellow light.

“A home!” she breathed.

At that instant there came the baying challenge of a hound. He was joined by two others, and at once the hills were roaring with echoes of their clamor.

For a second Florence stood there trembling, irresolute. Her mind worked rapidly. To flee would be folly. There was no escaping those roaring beasts. The treatment she might hope to receive from her bitterest enemy would be better. At once, having decided this question, she dashed toward the light.

Hardly had she gone a dozen paces when, with a little cry of surprise and terror, she stumbled over something soft and yielding, then went down sprawling.

At once she was on hand and knees, feeling for the thing that had tripped her. In a second her hands were upon it. Not another second was needed to tell her what it was.

“Hallie,” she whispered. “Hallie! What has happened? Hallie! Get up!”

But the form beside her neither answered nor moved.

In desperation she groped about her for a stone. Having found two of the right size, she crouched there like a panther beside her wounded young. At the same time, in as steady a tone as she could command, she shouted:

“Hey there, you! Call off your dogs! Do you want them to murder an innocent child?”

One instant there came a flood of light from a large door, the next the light was blocked by the form of the largest man Florence had ever seen, and there came such a giant’s roar as quite drowned the baying of the dogs and set the rocks fairly shaking with echoes.

The echoes died away and the dogs were silent. The giant did not speak again, but stood there peering into the darkness. The girl caught the snap-snap of a bat’s jaws as he flew over. She heard the steady tick of her watch. Then of a sudden there came a movement close behind her. Wheeling about, she tried to peer into the darkness but saw nothing. There came no other sound.

So a moment passed on into eternity, and yet another. Then the giant’s voice boomed again:

“Whoever y’ be, come! Them hounds won’t harm you narry bit. There’s chill and right smart of mounting fever in the night air.”

Rising unsteadily, a great fear tugging at her heart, Florence lifted the child in her arms and stumbled along toward the doorway.

As she came nearer, the man turned to speak a word to someone inside and at once the light from within brought out his profile in clear relief. A massive, full-bearded face it was, with a powerful jaw, a large hawk-like nose, and a full forehead. All this was crowned by a tangled mass of iron gray hair.

Two other facts the girl noted with a shudder. The giant’s right sleeve hung limp at his side; in his powerful left arm he held a rifle of gigantic proportions which might suit equally well for either firearm or club.

“It’s the one-armed giant that Ransom Turner told about!” she whispered to herself, more frightened than ever.

Yet, mindful of the good of the child who lay limp in her arms, she trudged sturdily on until the light from the doorway fell full upon her.

Instantly, at sight of them, a change came over the man’s face. The ruddy touch to his cheek turned to ashen. He tottered as if for a fall but, gripping the doorpost, he held his ground and continued his glassy stare until at last words escaped his lips:

“Hit’s Hallie!”

Then, and not till then, did Florence know that she had brought the child to her home.

But the giant? The moment his force of will had loosed his tongue, like some lion who stunned by a shot comes back to life, he became a terrifying creature of tremendous action.

“Hit’s her!” he roared. “They killed her!”

“She’s not dead,” said Florence in as calm a tone as she could command. “Let me by.”

Mechanically the giant moved to one side.

As Florence stepped into the room she took in the interior at a glance. It was the largest room she had seen in the mountains and its walls were of logs. The cracks were well chinked. The floor was clean and the wooden table, on which rested three large candles, was scrubbed to a snowy whiteness. Two beds in a corner were well in order. A burned down fire glowed dully in a broad fireplace.

In the corner by the fireplace stood two women; one tall and young, with the sturdy erectness of her kind; the other bent with age. They had risen from their chairs and were pointing at the child in her arms.

“They’ve killed her!” the giant roared again. The working of his face in rage or sorrow was a terrible thing to see. “You have killed her. Hit’s enough. Give her to me.” He gripped Florence’s arm in a way that brought white lines of pain to her face.

At that instant an astonishing thing happened. A body hurdling

through the doorway struck the giant amidship and sent him bowling over like a ten-pin. As he fell he crashed into the table and overturned it. The three candles cut circles through the air, then sputtered out, leaving the place in darkness.

At once Florence's head was in a whirl. What should she do? Try to escape? Perhaps. But where was the door? She had lost her sense of direction. As she took a step forward her foot caught in some garment and, loosing her hold on the child, she fell heavily.

Stunned by the fall, she lay motionless. As her wandering senses returned she became conscious of the beings about her. She caught the heavy breathing of the old man. No sound came from the corner by the fire. Like all those of their race, the mountain women were neither whining nor sobbing over this sudden commotion in their home, but stood stolidly waiting the next surprising turn of fortune's wheel.

Darkness continued. Two red coals on the hearth glowed like eyes, but gave forth no light.

Suddenly, as Florence listened, she heard the sharp drawn breath of one in pain.

Who could this be? The person who had leaped through the door? Perhaps, but who was he?

All these wandering thoughts were put to flight by the sudden wail of a child.

"Hit's Hallie," said a woman's voice from the corner. "She hain't dead. Not near. Betsy Anne, make a light."

Florence heard a shuffle in that corner, sensed a groping in the dark, then saw a trembling tube of paper thrust against one of the live coals. At once the coal began to brighten.

"Someone blowing it," she thought.

Five seconds later the tube burst into bright flame, throwing fantastic shadows over the room. A few seconds more and a candle was found. It illumined the cabin with a faint but steady light.

Scarcely knowing whether to flee or stay, Florence glanced hurriedly around her. The giant, having risen to his knees, was bending over the child who was now silently sobbing. The two

women were standing nearby and in the corner was the last person Florence had expected to see.

“Bud Wax!” she exclaimed.

Then catching the look of pain on his face, she said with a look of compassion.

“You’re hurt!”

“I—I guess it’s broken,” said the boy, touching the arm that hung limp at his side.

“But why—”

“I—I thought he’d hurt you, and I—I couldn’t—”

“You did it for me! You—” Florence was beginning to understand, or at least to wonder. Bud had done this—Bud, of all persons. Kin of her bitterest enemy, the boy whose choicest possession she had destroyed! And how had he come to be here at that moment? Her head was in a whirl.

“There’s right smart of a rock right outside the door,” the boy grinned. “I were a watchin’ from up there an’ when I seed him grab yore arm I just naturally jumped. I reckon hit were to far.”

“But if your arm is broken, it must be set.”

“Yes’m, I reckon.”

At that moment there was a sound of shuffling feet at the door. Turning about, Florence found herself staring into the face of a man, a face she recognized instantly. The beady eyes, hooked nose, unshaven chin—there could be no mistaking him. It was he who had twice frightened Marion and at one time all but driven little Hallie into hysterics.

“What more could happen in one crowded night?” she asked herself, deep in despair.

Strangely enough, Bud Wax was the one person in the room who brought her comfort. Oddly enough, too, the person she feared most was the one she saw for the first time that very moment, the man at the door.

Even as she stared at this man with a fascination born of fear, the man spoke:

“What you all so shook up about?” he drawled.

“Hit’s Hallie,” the grizzled old man said, running his hand across his brow. “She’s come back. They brung her back. Might nigh kilt her, I reckon, then brung her back.”

Florence’s lips parted in denial, but no words came out. Her tongue seemed glued to the roof of her mouth. There she sat, staring dumbly, while a cheap nickel plated alarm clock on the mantelpiece rattled loudly away as if running a race with time, and faintly, from far away, there came the notes of some bird calling to his mate in the night.

* * * * *

At this moment, back in the whipsawed cabin, Marion found herself at once highly elated and greatly depressed.

“If only we can find the rest of them—a whole sack of them!” she whispered excitedly to herself one moment, and the next found herself pacing the floor, murmuring: “Where can they have gone? Why don’t they come back?”

There was no connection between the two emotions which she was experiencing. The first had to do with a letter which had just been brought to her from the little postoffice down the creek; the last with the mysterious disappearance of Florence and Hallie.

The letter was from her friend, the curator at Field Museum. It read:

“Dear Marion:

You have made quite a find. How did you happen upon it? But then, I suppose one may find many rare articles back there in the Cumberlands so far from the main channels of commerce and life.

The gold piece you sent me is not properly a coin, but a token minted by a private individual. There are enough such tokens in bronze, but the gold ones are rare. Just why any were made is hard to tell. We know they were made, however. Two kinds are known to exist; one made in Georgia, the other in North Carolina.

You may not know it, but way back in 1830 gold was

mined in Lumpkin County, Georgia, and Rutherfordton, North Carolina. Temple Reid, of Georgia, and a Mr. Bechtler of Rutherfordton, made their gold into tokens and the specimen you have found is a true sample of Georgia gold, very rare and quite valuable. Should you care to sell this one, and should you find others, I have no doubt they might be readily disposed of at something like sixty or seventy dollars for each piece.”

“Sixty or seventy dollars!” Marion exclaimed as she read the letter for a third time. “At that rate a mere handful of them would be worth quite a small fortune, and even the price of one is not to be sneered at. It would help toward repairing the schoolhouse.”

“It wouldn’t go far,” smiled Mrs. McAlpin. “That schoolhouse needs a new roof, a new floor, doors, windows, blackboards and seats. Otherwise it is a very good schoolhouse. But then, what is the use of your dreaming about that? Ransom Turner says the election is lost, and he should know.”

“Yes, he should.” A cloud spread over Marion’s face as she sat down. The cloud was replaced by a frown as she sprang to her feet to pace the floor and exclaim for the fourth time:

“Where can they have gone? Why don’t they come back?”

“Have no doubt,” said Mrs. McAlpin, “that they went together to a cabin for supper or to spend the night.”

They—Florence and Hallie—had indeed gone to a cabin to spend the night; but such a cabin, and such a night!

Marion knew that Mrs. McAlpin did not feel half the assurance she tried to express. Little Hallie had disappeared, leaving no trail behind. Florence had left the whipsawed cabin, saying she was going for a walk but would return for supper. She had not returned. Darkness had come, supper time had passed. Their supper stood untouched and cold on the table.

“I still have hopes of finding the rest of that Georgia gold,” said Marion, talking more to herself than to Mrs. McAlpin. “Perhaps it isn’t all Georgia gold. There may be some Confederate gold mixed in with it. One never can tell. It certainly would be thrilling to discover some real Confederate gold. I’m not at all satisfied with our search of the attic.”

“Was there anything up there beside this one bit of gold?” On Mrs. McAlpin’s face there was such an amused smile as one might expect to find there had a child told her he meant to go in search of the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow.

“Nothing but a heavy old pounding mill,” replied Marion.

“Why should one wish to store a pounding mill in an attic? They are always used out of doors.”

“I don’t know,” said the girl thoughtfully. “Might be sort of an heirloom.”

“Rather ponderous I should say.”

Marion caught her breath. Uncle Billie had said that old block of a pounding mill was uncommonly heavy. Here was food for thought. The first thing in the morning she would go up there. She would—

At this moment her thoughts were cut short by a sudden burst of thunder that went rolling and reverberating down the mountain.

“We’re in for a storm!” she exclaimed, dashing toward the door.

They were in for a storm indeed; such a storm as had not been known on Laurel Branch in years. For an hour Marion sat by the doorway watching the play of lightning as it flashed from peak to peak on Big Black Mountain. The deafening peals of thunder, like the roar of gigantic cannons in some endless battle, came rumbling down from the hills to shake the very cabin floor. Through all this one thought was uppermost in Marion’s mind, one question repeated itself again and again:

“Where is Florence and little Hallie?”

CHAPTER XI

THE GUARD OF THE STONE GATEWAY

At the very moment when Marion was wondering and worrying about her pal, Florence was learning how truly one might trust the providence of God.

Being cornered, with the grizzled giant before her accusing her of “might nigh killing” little Hallie, and with the beady-eyed individual, whom she feared most of all, blocking the door before her, and with Bud Wax, whom she had always thought of as a member of the enemy’s clan, groaning with pain in the corner, she had reached the point of utter distraction when of a sudden the man in the doorway spoke.

He had just been told that little Hallie had returned home, “might nigh killed.”

“T’ain’t so!” he exclaimed, looking first at the one-armed giant and then at Florence. “Hain’t narry a word of truth in what you just been saying, Job Creech. Them thar folks never hurt Hallie. They never teched one hair on her head. They was plumb kind an’ gentle with her. I been watchin’. I knowed whar she was. She was so pert and contented hit were a shame to tote her away.”

Nothing could have more surprised Florence than this speech; nothing could have more quickly released her pent-up powers and set her brain working on the needs of the moment.

“Hain’t nobody been totin’ Hallie back,” grumbled the giant. “This here fureign lady brung her back.”

Florence did not hear this speech. She was already bending over the silently sobbing child. After loosening her clothes, she chafed her cold hands and feet until a warm red glow returned to them; then, picking her up, she placed her on the bed and

covered her in home woven blankets. In less than a minute Hallie fell into a peaceful sleep.

“She’ll be all right when she awakens,” Florence smiled reassuringly at the younger woman, who she thought might be the little girl’s mother. “When she wakes up she may even recognize you all. I hope so.”

The woman stared at her as if she had spoken to them in a foreign language.

Disregarding this, she turned to the man at the door. “This boy has broken his arm,” she said, nodding at Bud. “It will have to be set. Have you anything that will do for splints?”

“I reckon thar’s right smart of shakes outen the shed.”

“Will you get me some?”

The man disappeared.

After a search she found in the corner an old, faded calico dress which was quite clean.

“This will do for binding,” she said, looking at the women. “You don’t mind if I use it?”

“’T’ain’t no account noways.”

“All right. Thanks.”

She was obliged to hurt Bud severely while getting the bone in place and binding it, but the boy uttered never a groan.

By the time this task was completed, finding herself quite shaky and weak, Florence somehow made her way to a splint-bottomed chair by the fire. Fresh fuel had been put on. In spite of the deluge of water that now and again came dashing down the chimney, the fire burned brightly. The thunder storm was now in full progress. Florence was surprised at noting this.

So preoccupied had she been with her errands of mercy that she had neither heard nor seen anything of it until this moment.

Strange indeed were her thoughts as she sat there staring at the fire. At times it was the fire itself that held her attention. Led on by the challenge of wind and storm, it went roaring and laughing up the chimney, for all the world as if it meant to dispel the damp and cold from every cabin in the mountains. A

moment later, slapped squarely in the face by a deluge of rain, it shrunk down within itself until the whole cabin was in darkness.

“It—it’s given up,” Florence would whisper to herself with a half sob. “But no! There it is rising from its own blackened ruins to roar with cheer again.

“It’s like life,” she told herself. And, indeed, how like her own life it was. Only a few days before she had been fired with hope and desire to be of service to these mountain people. Now, with hopes drowned and courage well nigh gone, she waited only to battle her way through the coming trial and the election that seemed certain defeat. A lump rose in her throat at the thought.

But again, as the fire battling its way once more up the chimney flung free its challenge to the elements, she was driven to believe that courage, hope and desire to serve would again burn brightly in her heart.

“Hope!” she whispered. “What hope can there be? The election is lost! The winter school a thing of the past. How can it be otherwise? And yet I do hope!”

These thoughts passed. She had become suddenly conscious of her immediate surroundings. She was well within the natural stone gateway through which entrance had been forbidden heretofore. She was in the midst of a strange and mysterious people, in the very cabin of their leader. Of this last she felt sure.

She recalled with a sudden shock the weird tales she had heard told of these people, of the peddler with his rich pack of linens and box of jewelry, and of the one-armed fiddler who had passed this way to be seen no more.

“And now I am here,” she whispered, her limbs trembling with terror. “And on such a night!”

Even as she spoke there came such a rolling crash of thunder as set the dishes in the little wall cupboard rattling and brought a huge cross-log on the fire down with a thud and sputter that sent sparks flying everywhere. She caught the rush of water outside, not alone the constant beating of the rain, but louder and more terrifying than that, the mighty rush and roar of a cataract. Swollen to twenty times its natural size, Laurel Creek had become a mighty Niagara.

Turning about, she allowed her gaze to sweep the room. In one corner on a bed little Hallie slept peacefully. In the opposite corner the man with the hooked nose had thrown himself across the other bed. The two women had vanished, probably into the other room of the cabin. In the corner, with head pillowed on his uninjured arm, Bud Wax slept.

“He doesn’t look to be such a bad fellow,” Florence told herself. And so he didn’t. On his face there was such an expression as one might expect to find upon the countenance of one who, having lived through a long and hard fought battle for self and self interests, had at last found peace in service for another.

Florence read the look pictured there, but she could not account for it. She could not guess why the boy was there at all, nor why he had made the attack that had resulted in the broken arm. It was all very strange and puzzling.

Strangest of all was the thing the one-armed giant was engaged in at that particular moment. On a small chair that emphasized his hugeness, with head bent low and lips constantly moving, he sat whispering over an old Bible, spelling out the words one by one. As the fire regained courage to do its best, lighting up his aged face with a sort of halo, the girl thought she had never seen upon any face before a look so restful, benevolent and benign.

At that moment a hand touched her shoulder. She turned about and found herself looking into the wrinkled face of the old woman.

“Thought y’ might like to lay down a spell,” she said, jerking her thumb toward a door that led to the other room.

Without a word Florence followed her and, fifteen minutes later, buried beneath a pile of home woven coverlids, she lay lost in dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

Marion sat upon a bed of moss well up the side of Big Black Mountain. Three days had passed since the mysterious disappearance of Florence and little Hallie, three days of tormenting anxiety. Every creek and runway had been searched, but to no purpose. They had vanished as completely as they might had the earth swallowed them up.

Only one spot remained to be searched—the head of Laurel Creek, beyond the natural gateway.

“They can’t have gone up there,” Mrs. McAlpin had said in a tone of deep conviction. “Florence knew well enough the reputation of those strange people. Nothing could have induced her to pass that forbidden barrier.”

Not satisfied with this, Marion had gone to Ransom Turner about it.

“Hit’s past reason!” he said emphatically. “Them’s the killingest folks in the mountains. That’s a fact, though they’ve never been made to stand trial. She’d never dare to go up there. An’ besides, if hit were best to go there to search, you’d have to git you up half the men in these here mountains, and there’d sure be a big fight right thar.”

So the other hillsides had been searched and the tongues of local gossipers had wagged incessantly. Bitter enemies had it that, seeing herself defeated in the coming election and being ashamed or afraid to stand trial for carrying concealed weapons, the girl had fled in the night and had taken the child with her to the “Outside.” All this, they argued, was known well enough by Mrs. McAlpin and Marion, but they did not care to admit it.

In spite of all this, Ransom Turner and Marion had continued, almost against hope, to carry on the election fight. Black Blevens had sent word to Lige Howard up on Pounding Mill Creek that his mortgage would be foreclosed if he and his three boys did not promise to come down on election day and vote for him as trustee. Ransom Turner, on hearing this had sent word to Lige that his mortgage would be taken care of—that he was to vote for the best man.

Mary Anne Kelly, a niece of Black Blevens, who lived down at the mouth of Ages Creek, sent word to her fiance, Buckner Creech, that if he did not vote right she would break her engagement. That had put Buckner on the doubtful list. Pole Cawood’s wife, who was a daughter of Black Blevens, threatened to leave him and his four small children if he did not vote for her father.

“Such,” said Marion, rubbing her forehead with a groan, “is a school election in the Cumberland. Nothing is too low or mean if only it helps to gain an advantage. We have fought fair, and lost, as far as I can see. Ransom says we will lack ten or

twelve votes, and he doesn't know where we can find a single other one."

And yet, with the cheerful optimism of youth, the girl still hoped against hope and looked forward with some eagerness the coming of to-morrow and the election.

Needless to say, with worry over Florence and Hallie, and interest in the election, she had found neither time nor interest for further exploration of the attic nor a search for Jeff Middleton's treasure.

* * * * *

Strange were the circumstances that had held Florence within the forbidden gates these three long days.

She had wakened with a start on the morning following the storm and her strange experiences in the cabin. The sun, streaming through a small window, had awakened her. At first she had been utterly unable to account for her strange surroundings. Then, like a flash, it all came to her. The aged giant, Bud Wax with his arm in a sling, the women, the other man, little Hallie, the storm,—all the strange and mysterious doings of the night flashed through her mind and left her wondering.

The very window through which the sunlight streamed suggested mystery. Whence had it come? These mysterious people who lived beyond the stone gateway had come from below, had travelled up Laurel Creek and had not come back to the settlement. Where had the glass for the window come from? Had it been taken from some older cabin? This log cabin seemed quite new. Had these strange people some hidden trail to the outside world? Ransom Turner had said there was no mountain pass at the head of Laurel Branch. Could it be possible that he was wrong?

All the wondering was cut short by thought of little Hallie. How was she? Had consciousness returned? Perhaps she needed care at this very moment.

With this thought uppermost in her mind, Florence sprang from her bed, drew on her outer garments, then pushed open the door that led to the other room.

She found Hallie feverish, and somewhat delirious. Upon discovering this, without begging leave of her strange host and

with not one thought for her own safety, she set herself about the task of bringing the bloom of health back to the child's cheek.

The people about her brought the things she asked for, then stood or sat quietly about as they might had she been a doctor.

During the course of the day some twenty men and women, and quite as many children, came to peek shyly in at the door, or to enter and sit whispering together.

“More people in this neighborhood than one would think,” was Florence's mental comment.

A day came and went. Hallie improved slightly. The next day she was so much better that Florence took time for a stroll out of doors. It was then that she received something of a shock. Having wandered down the creek trail until she was near to the stone gateway, she saw a tall, gaunt, young mountaineer step out into the path. With a rifle over his arm, he began to pace back and forth like a sentry on duty.

“I—I wonder—” she whispered to herself, “if he would let me pass?”

She had no desire to leave without taking Hallie, she did not try, but deep in her heart was the conviction that for some strange reason she was virtually a prisoner within those gates.

At once her mind was rife with speculation. Who were these people? What had they to fear from contact with the outside world? Were they moonshiners? She had heard much of mountain moonshine stills before she came to the Cumberlands. If they were moonshiners, where had they sold the product of their stills?

“No, it couldn't be that,” she shook her head.

Were they a band of robbers? If so, whom did they rob? She thought of the peddler and the one-armed fiddler, and shuddered.

Still, as she thought of it now, she had seen very little in these cabins that could have come from a peddler's pack. The bare-topped wooden tables were innocent of linen. Towels were made of coarse, hand-woven linen. The women wore no jewelry such as might have come from a peddler's black box.

“It’s all very strange and mysterious,” she said with a shake of her head.

Only one thing came to her clearly as she returned to the cabin—she must remain beside little Hallie until she was out of danger.

“After that—what?”

This question she could not answer.

CHAPTER XII

THE MYSTERY TRAIL

As Florence halted in her upward march she felt herself overawed by a terrible sense of desolation. For an hour she had traveled over the most silent, lonely trail her feet had ever trod. Little more than a footpath, possible mayhap to a sure-footed horse, the trail wound up and up and up toward the point where the green of forest ended in massive crags of limestone. She was now among the crags.

Far away on the opposite mountainside the sun was still shining, but on this trail there fell neither sunlight nor form of shadow. The north slope lay bathed in the perpetual chill of a cheerless autumn. No sound came to her from above, not a whisper from below. Beneath her feet was solid rock, above her more rock.

“What’s the use?” she asked herself as she stood there irresolute. “There couldn’t be a pass. There just couldn’t. Yet it seems there must be! And some way, some way, I must escape! To-morrow is my trial. To fail to appear is to face disgrace. Besides, there are my faithful friends, my bondsmen. I must not fail them!”

Once more, with an eagerness born of despair, she pressed forward.

It was, indeed, the day before the trial. Three days has passed since she had entered the forbidden portals of the rock made gateway. Little Hallie was now so far recovered that she at this moment sat wrapped in a blanket, smiling at the flames in the great fireplace. Yes, Hallie was all right now, but she, Florence, was in trouble. It was necessary that she return to the settlement. But how was she to do it? Three times that day she had approached the stone gateway. Each time the silent sentinel had appeared, treading his monotonous watch before the trail. She had not mustered up the courage to ask him to let her pass.

“There must be another trail, a pass over the mountains at the head of the creek,” she had told herself. So, before the day had half gone, she had walked slowly up the creek trail until far beyond sight of the farthest cabin. Then she had quickened her pace almost to a run.

One thing she had seen in passing the cabins had surprised her not a little. As she rounded a corner she had caught a gleam of white and had at once recognized the forms of three persons standing in the shadows of a great pine. Two were men, one a grown boy. That boy, there could be no mistake, was Bud Wax. The white she had seen was the wrappings on his arm, which was still in a sling.

With his back to her he was so engrossed in the conversation which he was carrying on with the other man that he did not so much as see her.

From that distance she caught only fragments of the talk. As the boy’s voice rose shrill and high, almost as if in anger, she heard:

“Hit’s your bounden duty. That’s what hit are! Look what she’s been doin’. Look—”

But here she passed behind a clump of young pines which muffled the sound of his voice.

As she pushed on through the deepening shadows she thought of this and wondered deeply. Bud had disappeared before she was up that first morning. She had always supposed that he had escaped to his home in the darkness of night and storm. But here he was. What was she to make of that? Why had he come in the first place? Why had he stayed? Was he, also, virtually their prisoner? Or had he gone out and returned for a reason? What was his feeling toward her? There had been times during that last week of school that she had surprised on his face a look almost of admiration. The look had vanished so quickly that she had doubted its existence.

And that night? Why had he leaped at the one-armed giant when he put out a hand to seize her? It looked like a desire to protect her. But why? Was he not from the camp of the enemy—Black Blevens’ camp? Had she not destroyed his most priceless possession, hammered it to bits between two rocks? What could she think?

Her thoughts were suddenly cut short. Before a wall of stone

that towered a hundred feet in air, she had come to the end of the trail.

* * * * *

In the meantime, all unknown to Marion and Mrs. McAlpin, a clan was gathering at the mouth of Laurel Branch. It was Ransom Turner's clan. A strangely silent, uncommunicative people, the mountaineers of the Cumberlands seldom confide fully in those who have but late come to live among them. Ransom Turner and the men of his clan had not confided their suspicions, nor even all that they knew about Florence's strange disappearance, to either Marion nor Mrs. McAlpin.

Having always suspected that the mysterious child, Hallie, had somehow strayed beyond the portals of the gate that led to the head of the creek, and that she belonged to that silent, forbidden land beyond, they had assumed that she had found her way back to her home.

That Florence had followed Hallie beyond the gate, they had suspected at once. As time passed and she did not return, this suspicion, aided by certain rumors that came to their ears, became a conviction.

"Hit's up there she are!" Ransom Turner had been heard to whisper more than once.

"Hit certain are!" came with a nod of wise heads for answer.

Now it was the day before Florence's trial, and the school election as well. Ransom's men did not like the stinging remarks that came from the camp of Black Blevens.

"To-morrow's the trial," Ransom had said. "She's bound to be here. Go tell the boys to git up their rifles an' pistol guns an' come here at sunset."

This was said to a trusty henchman, who was away at once. In a small clearing a little way up the side of Big Black Mountain, a clearing completely surrounded by thickets of laurel and mountain ivy, the men were now straying in to drop silently down upon the grass.

A grim, silent group they were. Here was a lanky, long-bearded patriarch with a squirrel rifle that stood as tall as he, and here a boy of sixteen with a shiny modern rifle. Here were dark-bearded, middle-aged men with leather holsters buckled to

their belts.

Conversation was all in whispers. One caught but fragments of it.

“Hit’s whar she are.”

“Hit’s plumb quare about Bud Wax.”

“Will they fight, you reckon?”

“Sure they will.”

“Bud’s been home once, I hearn tell. Hit’s what Bud said that made Ransom so sartin about her bein’ up thar.”

So the whispering went on and more men straggled in as the shadows fell.

The people at the mouth of Laurel Branch had always resented the presence of their mysterious neighbors beyond the stone gateway. To a certain degree, also, they had feared them. Things mysterious inspire terror. Tales of their strange doings had not grown smaller in their telling. The one-armed giant had become a veritable Cyclops. The beady-eyed stranger, who had once or twice been seen beyond the gates, was a man of strangely magic power. Such were the yarns that had been spun.

To-night, however, all these spells must vanish before the demand of cold steel. To-morrow was trial day and election day. Florence was needed. She must be at the mouth of Laurel Branch at sun up. They meant to bring her home. As soon as darkness fell these grim warriors of the hills meant to march past that stone gateway. If a sentry attempted to stop them he would be silenced. They would ask the release of their teacher, the one who had dared to stand and fight for their rights and the rights of their little ones. If they could secure her release by peaceable means they would do it. If it meant a fight, then a fight it would be.

And so, at the very hour when Florence trudged up the dark and shadowy trail, the clan was gathering.

As for Florence, as has been said, she had come to what appeared to be a sudden end of the trail. Before her was a towering wall of rocks.

But a well trodden path, beaten hard by the tread of hundreds

who have passed that way, does not end so abruptly. Like the current of a sunken river, it must always go somewhere. By a careful examination of her surroundings, the girl found that certain sandstone boulders that lay in jagged heaps to the right of her were worn smooth. These smooth spots, she reasoned, had been made by human feet.

At once, with a bound, she was away up this natural stairway. Up, up, up she climbed till her heart thumped wildly and her head whirled. Then, to her vast surprise, just as she reached the topmost pinnacle she came upon a black heap of coal and directly before her a coal shaft yawned.

“A coal mine!” she exclaimed in disgust, sinking down breathless upon a rock. “I have come all this way to find only a coal mine!”

In these mountains, this was no discovery. The mountains were full of coal. There was wanted only a railroad to make the country rich. But to think that she had come all this way in the hope of finding a way out, only to find there was nothing left but to retrace her steps and to choose between taking the desperate chance of slipping past that pacing guard in the dark or remaining quietly within the gates until something happened that would set her free.

“And that last,” she groaned, “can never be. Never! I must escape! I must not miss my trial!”

In the frenzy of this resolve she sprang to her feet. But what was this? The moment’s rest and the cooling breeze had quieted her heart. She could think more clearly. This was no coal mine; could not be. A coal mine at the top of the mountain, a mile by trail from the nearest cabin? What folly! There were veins of coal lower down. She had seen them, and open coal mines, too, almost at the cabin’s door. What, then, could this mean? Here was coal, a coal vein, and an open drift, and yet it was not a mine.

Boldly she set a foot inside the dark opening. At once her foot shot from beneath her and she went sprawling. Only by a desperate clutching at the ragged rocks at her side was she prevented from gliding downward into a dark, unknown abyss.

Frightened, with hands lacerated by the sudden gripping of the rocks, and with heart beating wildly, she clung there panting until her head cooled and she realized that she was resting on a rocky step.

Drawing herself up, she found she was able to sit in a comfortable position and gaze about her. Just before her was utter darkness; behind her was the fading light of day.

Groping about in her pocket, she found a box of safety matches. Having lighted one of these she held it far out before her. At once her lips parted in an exclamation of surprise.

Before her, leading down, down, down, was a rude stairway cut in solid rock. On either side of the stairway were mine props, and back of these were black walls of coal.

It was all clear to her in an instant; not all, perhaps, but much. There were many just such veins of coal as this in the rockiest portions of the Cumberlands. She had heard of them. After the ages had passed when coal had been deposited upon the surface of the earth and strata of earth and rocks piled upon them, there had come some tremendous disturbance of the earth's surface which had tilted rocks and coal deposits as well, and this was just such a vein.

There was nothing so strange about that, but it was strange to find this natural stairway leading downward to some regions unknown.

Just as her match flickered and went out her eyes caught the gleam of something white in a niche of the rock at her side. At once she was fumbling eagerly for another match.

To her consternation, in her excitement she let the box drop from her fingers.

Bump, bump, bump, it went down the steps. For an instant her heart stood still. Had it gone on down? Was she left without a light? She thought it had stopped on the third step, but could not be sure.

Slowly, carefully, she felt her way over the damp and slippery steps. One step, two, three. She felt them over carefully. No matches. Her heart sank. One more step, a hasty groping in the dark, then a cry of joy. She gripped the box.

The next moment the place was alight with a reddish yellow glow, and the next instant, standing up, she was grasping the white object that had caught her eye. It was one of four tallow candles that lay in a rocky niche.

Holding her match to it, she had the joy of seeing its wick

sputter, then flame up.

One moment she hesitated. Then, putting one of the candles in her pocket, and holding another well before her, with a firm and steady step she began the descent into the mysterious cavern.

CHAPTER XIII

A TENSE SITUATION

It was mysterious, haunting, spectral. "Like going down into the tomb of some ancient Egyptian king," Florence told herself as, with candle held well out before her, and every step carefully poised, she made her way down the long stone stairway.

Black walls of coal were on either side. Before these the mine props stood like grim sentinels. The shadows of these, cast by the flickering light of the candle, appeared to take on life as they leaped, swaying and dancing, against the dusky walls.

Suddenly the girl caught her breath. A puff of air had all but extinguished her candle.

"And it came from below, not from above!" she breathed.

Scarcely had she made this astonishing discovery when she rounded a curve in the stairway and came in sight of a square of light. This distant illumination, the natural light of day, coming from the outside, seemed to beckon her on.

Then of a sudden it all came to her. "A tunnel!" she exclaimed. "Not the entrance to a mine, but a tunnel, a tunnel through this narrow peak of the mountain. Oh, joy! I've found the way out!"

In her eagerness she plunged down the stone stairway at a rate which threatened to send her pitching headlong. But sure-footed athlete that she was, she kept her balance and in another moment, panting, quite out of breath, she threw herself upon a huge flat rock that, lighted by the last rays of the setting sun, seemed a nugget of pure gold.

The scene her eyes gazed upon was of matchless beauty. The crests of the mountains, still beamed upon by the setting sun, glowed like so many domes of fire, while farther down the lower hillsides and valleys were shrouded in impenetrable shadows broken only by the silver thread of a stream that idled

down a valley.

Suddenly the girl sprang to her feet. The whole thing had come to her in a flash. Wishing to be left alone, the mysterious people at the head of Laurel Branch had cut a pass through the solid mountain peak at a narrow place. They alone knew of it. Through this pass they carried the produce from their rough little farms to the coal mines far, far below. There they bartered them for shoes, salt, calico, and whatever their meager existence demanded.

“And this,” she told herself, “is the way the missing peddler and the one-armed fiddler have gone. Being wanderers by profession, they have gone through this pass and never been seen again by the people at the mouth of Laurel Branch.

“And that,” she exclaimed, quite overcome by the thought, “that means that these people at the head of Laurel Branch are honest folks. They are not robbers and murderers. I had hoped it might be so. It did not seem possible that old Job could sit there by the fire, spelling out the words of his Bible, then lay the grand old Book aside to go out robbing and killing.”

Then the girl did a strange thing. Relighting her candle, she picked her way over the rocks back to the entrance to the tunnel, then slowly, with thoughtful mind and careful tread, began ascending the stone stairway. She was going back.

* * * * *

In the meantime, down at the mouth of Laurel Branch, in the heart of the laurel thicket, the low murmur of voices increased in volume. They were coming—the clan was gathering. Gaunt old men with white beards were there, men who had fought in the Civil War; middle-aged men who had packed a gun in the Anson-Rankin feud of twenty years before; and beardless boys who had never fired a shot except at squirrel or possum. One name was on every tongue, that of Florence Ormsby.

As for Florence, while the night shadows darkened she was making her way down the mountain trail, back to the cabin of old Job, the one-armed giant.

Once there, she threw off her hat and coat and drew up a chair to the fire.

“Et?” the giant asked from his corner.

The girl shook her head.

“Want a snack?”

Another shake, then again silence.

For a long while the nickel alarm clock above the mantel raced against time and its constant tick-tick was the only sound that disturbed the Sabbath-like stillness.

At last the aged giant cleared his throat with surprising difficulty, then spoke:

“I reckon it peers plumb quare to you all that we all stay up here in these here mountains this away?”

Florence did not answer. She merely bent forward with an air of great expectancy on her face.

“Hit might be quare. Then again it mightn’t. Listen, Miss, hit’s like this.”

Then for fifteen minutes, in his inimitable mountain dialect and drawl, the old man poured into her eager ears a story of such bitter battling for life, such a tale of feud fighting, as she had never before dreamed of hearing from human lips.

There were tales of stalwart men shot down on their very doorsteps, of battles in the night, of men carried from their homes to be seen no more.

All this had happened somewhere in the mountains, back of Big Black Mountain, beyond Poor Fork, over Pine Mountain, then back and still back.

When there remained but a remnant of what had once been a powerful family, the old giant, having heard of this vacant land at the head of Laurel Branch, had at last persuaded his followers to come here to live. And that there might be no more battles and bloodshed, they had shut themselves completely out from other people of the mountains. Only by a secret passage had they come and gone, to trade and barter in the valley below.

How strange life is! Even as this old man was telling of their long search for peace and how at last they had found it, forty men and boys, grim, determined mountain folks with rifles in hand, were marching upon the stone gateway which had

heretofore held them back. It was Ransom Turner's clan.

"And what's this I hearn tell about?" the old giant exclaimed in a rumbling tone of anger. "What about them sorry people at the mouth of the crick takin' you up fer gun totin'?"

Florence started. So intense had been her interest in the story that she had quite forgotten her own troubles.

"They—they're to try me to-morrow," she faltered.

"Fer gun totin'?"

"Yes."

"A woman? Fer gun totin'!" he mused. "Mounting folks have come tew that!

"And this 'lection, this school 'lection," he rumbled with a sudden change of subject. "How do you reckon about that?"

"That is to-morrow, too, and it's lost."

"So I hearn tell," the old man mused. "So I hearn tell. But you can't always reckon right about these here things, kin you?"

There was almost jocular freedom in the old man's tones, something quite different from his Moses-like dignity of other times.

Again his tone changed. It was tender now.

"You've been mighty nice and a right smart help to us with little Hallie. I reckon she's might nigh well now. I reckon as how you might—"

The old man paused as if reluctant to say the words that had forced their way to his lips. Leaving the sentence unfinished, he fumbled about in the corner for a poker. Having found it, he gave the fire such a jabbing as sent the sparks dancing by thousands up the chimney.

There were watchers who saw those sparks soaring skyward and wondered at them—forty watchers, the men of Ransom Turner's clan.

At that very moment, too, the guard behind the stone gateway, catching the shuffle of feet behind the thicket of paw-paws that grew just outside the gate, caught his breath hard and, shifting

his rifle to the other arm, dropped back into the deeper shadows.

“As I was about to remark,” the old man turned to Florence with a look of resolution on his face, “’t’ain’t no mite o’ sense in keepin’ you here, not narry ’nother minute. There’s little Hallie, she’s might nigh well. There’s that sorry trial to-morrow, an’ that ’lection. They’ll be ailing fer you down there at the mouth of the creek, plumb ailin’, so it’s fittin’ that you’d go. You tell Zeb Howard down thar by the gate that I sent you, and I reckon he’ll let you by.”

Florence caught her breath. She had heard the old man’s story. She was free. She might go. For a moment, as a wild bird, made captive for a day and then set free hesitates before his first free flight, she sat there in silence. Then, as if impelled by the sense of impending peril and a great need, she rose and hurried away.

Need enough there was, too. Her fleet feet could not cover that distance too quickly, for at that moment hot words were passing thick and fast before the stone gateway.

As she paused in her sudden flight she caught the sound of these angry voices. At first indistinct, then growing louder as she rounded a curve, she caught fragments of sentences:

“Narry a step.”—“Hit are!”—“Hit are not!”—“Drop down the barrel of that ar gun!”—“Hit’s plumb unnatural!”

Then, having caught a hint of the meaning of it all, she paused to strain her ears to catch the lowest word. At that moment there came the ominous click of a cartridge being thrown into its place in a rifle barrel. This sound came from within the gate.

“The guard,” she whispered.

“I tell you all plain,” there came from the same spot a second later, “we all don’t mean you all narry bit of harm. You all go on back down that crick. The land down thar belongs to you all. Up here it’s ourn. Don’t let’s have any trouble.”

“’An’ I’m tellin’ you, stranger,” came in an equally insistent voice, “we all are goin’ through. You are got someone up that we want and are goin’ to git!”

“Hain’t narry one up yonder that’s not aimin’ to stay.”

“Come on, boys!” Florence caught these words spoken in low tones by a voice that sounded familiar. The voice was terrifying in its seriousness. “We got to go in thar. Hain’t no other way. When I say the word start comin’ on an’ firin’ as you come. He can’t git all of us. Mebby he won’t get airy one. ’T’ain’t no use a talkin’ to him nohow.”

Florence caught her breath. Her heart paused for a second, then went racing. Her knees trembled. She had heard much of mountain feud fights. Now she was about to witness one. Worse than that, she must be directly in the path of the bullets. At realization of this she wanted to flee, but her feet would not obey her. So there she stood as if rooted to the spot.

Though her feet were still, her brain was racing. She had recognized the voice of the last speaker, Ransom Turner. A good man does not start a feud fight over a trifle. Why had they come? Who was this person they had come to demand? Was it a friend, or some outlaw fleeing from justice? She did not have long to wait.

“Just a minute, strangers,” came in calm tones from within the gates. “You kin get me maybe—seem’s how there’s a army of you—but count on it, I’ll get a lot of you first. I’m the shootinest man as I reckon has most ever made a crop on Laurel Branch. But I’m plumb peaceably minded, too. Hain’t rarin’ up fer no killin’. Now what I wants to know is, who might that air person be that you all come after?”

“You know well enough,” drawled Ransom Turner. “But so’s you’ll know agin’, I’ll tell you. Hit’s our teacher, Florence Ormsby.”

Florence Ormsby! The girl’s own name sounded strange to her. So they were risking their lives to save her! And she was an outsider! A great wave of dizziness came over her. She fought it off. She tried to speak. Her tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. Powerless to move, she stood there gasping.

“Come on, boys! ’T’ain’t no use foolin’ further.”

The grim tones of the doughty little leader loosed the girl’s tongue. Then, with tones that were little less than shrieks, she cried:

“Ransom! Ransom Turner! Don’t! Don’t do it! I’m here. It’s all right. I’m coming out.”

After this shouted speech that awoke shrill echoes along the mountain side, there fell a moment of breathless silence, such a silence as is perhaps seldom felt save on a battlefield after the declaration of a truce.

Then, in a tone that told of deeper emotional struggle, there came from Ransom Turner's lips:

"Are you shore, Miss Florence? Are hit all right?"

"Quite all right," she said in as steady a tone as she could command. "See! I am coming down."

Moving quietly, she passed the last tall pine, the last clump of rhododendrons within the gate, then the massive portals, and a moment later found herself among her own people, free.

Free! How good it seemed! And yet, as between two silent mountaineers she walked back to the settlement and the whipsawed house, she felt the burdens of these simple people come back to her shoulders like a crushing weight.

"To-morrow," she whispered. "The trial and the election, and then what?"

Later that night, after a joyous reunion and a splendid supper in the whipsawed cabin, she lay once more in her own bed, staring up at the ceiling where the flashes of a dying fire played. Then it was that she noted something strange. The board they had once taken from the ceiling that they might get into the attic had been once more removed, then replaced. She knew this, for this time it had been put back with the ends reversed.

Vaguely her mind played with this thought. Who had been up there? What had they found? Georgia gold? Confederate gold?

She wondered about the election; her trial; Bud Wax. Wondered a little about Marion, who had gone down the branch to stay all night with Patience Madden, the oldest girl in their school. Was she sleeping safely in Patience's cabin? In this strange community no one seemed quite safe.

She wondered a little about the deed for the Powell coal land and the commission they were to receive—sometime. When would that be? She wondered if she would ever see any of the men who had kidnapped her. Her mental picture of them was very vivid.

“If I ever saw them again I would know them,” she told herself.

At that she turned over and fell asleep.

The adventures of the night for Florence were done; for Marion they were now about to begin.

CHAPTER XIV

HALLIE KIDNAPPED

Marion was wide awake. She lay beneath home-woven blankets in Patience Madden's cabin. The room was dark. It was night; time for sleep. The mountain side was very still. Even the stream, Pounding Mill Creek, tumbling down Little Black Mountain, murmured softly.

"I should sleep," she told herself. "To-morrow is the big day. Election. Trial. One big day. Twenty-for hours must decide all."

Do coming events truly cast their shadows before them, and do their shadows disturb us, rob us of our sleep? However that may be, Marion could not sleep.

At last, rising noiselessly, for Patience slept peacefully in the narrow bed next to her own, she threw a blanket over her shoulders and stole out upon the porch. Here she dropped into a rustic chair to sit staring dreamily at the moon.

"Old moon," she whispered, "what do you see to-night?"

Had the moon answered her question she would have sprung to her feet in alarm. As it was, she sat quite still, sat there until with a sudden start she caught the slow and steady tramp of horses on the trail below.

"Who—who can that be?" she whispered as she shrank far back into the shadows.

She was soon enough to know. Two horses swung around a curve in the trail not five rods from the cabin. At that instant the moon, coming out from behind a filmy cloud, shone full upon them.

"A tall slim man and a short one," she thought to herself. "Sounds vaguely familiar. Where have I—" She started

suddenly. Florence had told her of them. These were the men who had held her prisoner when she had gone to the back of Pine Mountain to get an option on the Powell coal tract.

A second shock following this one came near knocking her from her chair. The tall man carried a bundle—something wrapped in a blanket.

“A child,” she whispered. A chill ran up her spine. She hardly knew why.

A second later she knew. As the horses wheeled sharply to avoid a great boulder that lay against the trail, the face of the child, lighted up by the moon, became plainly visible.

“Little Hallie!” Marion exclaimed under her breath.

In an instant she was out of her chair and in the room shaking the mountain girl and whispering hoarsely:

“Patience! Patience! Wake up! They’ve kidnapped little Hallie!”

“Wha—where? Why?” the mountain girl stammered, still half asleep.

Sinking down upon the bed and burying her face in her hands, Marion tried to think. Little Hallie had been kidnapped. Why? For ransom? Nothing seemed more absurd. Who would pay? The child had been poorly dressed when she was brought to their cabin.

“And yet,” Marion thought, “what do we really know of her?”

She caught herself short up. This was no time for speculation. What was to be done? There were no men in the cabin. She was alone with the sixteen year old mountain girl. The nearest cabin was a half mile down the creek.

“Patience,” she said suddenly, “there are no men here to follow them. They have kidnapped little Hallie. They can’t mean her any good. Shall we go?”

For answer the mountain girl sprang out of the room and went racing down the stairs.

A lamp was lighted. Rough, serviceable garments of khaki were scrambled into, shoes were hurriedly laced. They were ready to go when Marion thought of food. They might be away

for hours, perhaps days.

Snatching down a bag she raced to the kitchen, there to fill the bag with corn pone, cold sweet potatoes, crackers, cookies and cheese.

When she returned, to her astonishment she found Patience calmly ramming home a charge in the long-barreled squirrel rifle which had hung over the fireplace.

“Will—will it shoot?” she faltered.

“Awful straight.”

“Can you shoot it?”

The mountain girl gave her a look of scorn. “In the mountains everyone shoots.”

“Good! I’m glad!” There was warmth in the girl’s tone. There was comfort in knowing that though there was no man in their party, there was a rifle carried by a girl who knew well how to handle it.

A moment more and they were feeling the damp night air upon their cheeks. It was a narrow trail they were following. Now and then as they hurried forward the dew drenched branch of dogwood or rhododendron slapped them full in the face. Here and there some wild creature, frightened from the trail, went bounding away into the bush.

It was spooky enough, this climbing higher and higher up the side of Little Black Mountain in the dead of night. Spooky and dangerous, too. What if those men, catching the sound of their footsteps behind them, should draw aside from the trail and waylay them? Marion dared not dwell on this. One thing was uppermost in her mind—the saving of Little Hallie. How was this to be done? She could not tell. The answer would be there when the time came. At all hazards the men must be followed.

So, drenched by dripping dew, torn at by out-reaching brambles, catching the faint tinge of waters in the gulch far below, they ascended higher and higher until at last they had reached the crest.

“See!” whispered Patience as they rested here. “There are Hallie’s footprints!”

It was true. Having dismounted, that they might rest their tired muscles, the men had lifted the child to the ground.

Marion found comfort in this. "They can't be entirely bad," she told herself. "They think of the child's comfort."

A moment's rest, and they were away along the trail that followed the ridge for some distance.

They marched along in silence until they came to the spot where the trail left the ridge to plunge down the steep slope on the other side.

"Listen!" Patience whispered, suddenly gripping her companion's arm.

As they listened, breathless, from somewhere far below there came the deep, drawn-out bay of a hound.

"See!" exclaimed the mountain girl, pointing to the ground. Where the trail left the ridge, a fresh track had joined that of the kidnappers. It was the trail of a man and two huge dogs.

"Hounds!" whispered Patience. "They have hounds. Against these we have no chance. They will smell us a long way off. They will come after us. I can shoot but one. The other—" she paused to shudder.

"And yet we must go on! Think of little Hallie!"

"Yes," said the brave mountain girl, "we must go on!" Turning, she led the way down the mountain.

CHAPTER XV

BY THE AID OF A COON

Climbing up the mountain side without making a sound had not been easy. Going down it was doubly difficult. Now a rock, slipping from a ledge at the side of the trail, went crashing down through the sloping forest. Now a pebble, rolling beneath Marion's foot, sent her with a thud to the ground. And now the dead branch of a tree, clung to for a second's rest, gave way with a screaming snap that must have been heard a mile away.

A half mile down the trail they came upon a cabin. A mere shack built of logs with a low chimney, with one door and no windows, it could hardly be called a human habitation.

Yet there were people sleeping here, Marion did not doubt.

"Sha—shall we?" she whispered as she stood near the door.

"'T'wouldn't do narry bit o' good. No 'count folks," whispered Patience.

They were about to pass on when the rattle of a chain caused Marion to start and shudder.

"Coon, pet coon," whispered the mountain girl, pointing to a dark corner where a coon, chained to a low shrub, was standing on his haunches and eyeing them curiously.

"That coon," whispered Patience slowly, "might be some good to us."

Marion did not see how it possibly could, but she did not answer.

As they passed on down the trail Patience paused often to study the hoof marks in the soft earth. Once, at the juncture of a small stream with the larger creek, she paused for some time, only to shake her head and murmur:

“No, they have gone on down.”

At the next turn she paused again. This time she did not go on, but, pointing up a grass grown trail to the left, said.

“They’re gone up to yonder clearin’. Camp there, I reckon. Wish we had that coon.”

“Why? What would we—”

But Patience was already too far up the new trail to catch Marion’s whispered question.

As they rounded a clump of pawpaws Patience whispered: “They’re camped up yonder. I saw the light of their fire.”

“Good!” whispered Marion. “Perhaps we can turn the tables and steal her back.”

“But the hounds!” said Patience.

“Oh yes, the hounds,” Marion repeated wearily.

“That coon, now,” said Patience thoughtfully, “he might be a heap of help to us.”

“How?” said Marion.

Patience did not reply. When she at last spoke, it was to suggest that they make their way up the far side of the slope that they might be sure the ones they followed were camping there. Wearily they followed the creek and at last began the ascent.

Not a word was spoken as they trudged cautiously forward. Every care was taken not to cause the least sound. Hounds, they knew all too well, have sharp ears. So, darting from bush to bush and from tree to tree, they came at last to a spot directly over a cliff where, by parting branches, they might get a fair view of the deserted cabin and the clearing.

“Someone there,” whispered Marion. “See! There’s a wisp of smoke curling from the chimney.”

For a time they sat silently intent.

Suddenly Marion’s heart stopped beating! Had she caught the low cry of a child? Yes, there it was again.

“Hallie,” she whispered, springing to her feet. “I must go to

her.”

“No! No!” Patience whispered tensely. “They are bad men. They would kill you.”

“But Hallie.” The girl’s heart was wrung by the thought of the innocent child’s suffering.

“Hallie’s all right for now. You have heard her cry in that way often before. It’s just a fretful, sleepy cry. She will soon fall asleep.”

It was true. Even as they waited and listened the crying ceased and over the hills and the forest there fell the hush of night.

Into this hush Patience burst with an exceedingly strange whispered remark:

“If only we had that coon. Marion, have you any money?”

“Five dollars.”

“Oh! Good! They’d sell it for that, I am sure. But we won’t ask them; just pin the money to the coon’s box.”

“But it’s all we have. We will need food. The kidnappers may go to the railroad. We will need money. Anyway, why the coon?”

Patience did not answer. Snatching the money, she was away in the night, leaving Marion alone in the dark and with the strange men scarcely more than a stone’s throw beneath her.

Who can tell what this city girl’s thoughts were as she sat there alone with the silence of night hovering over her? Whatever the thoughts might have been, they were at last broken in upon by the low rattle of a chain. Beside her stood Patience and in her arms, cuddled up like a kitten, was the pet coon.

“Now what in the world did you do that for?” demanded Marion as, having picked up Patience’s long squirrel rifle, she came trudging after her.

“Wait and see!” she panted.

Very weary and very skeptical, Marion waited. Having once more reached the crest of the cliff, Patience felt her way about until she had located a tall young hickory tree with branches some six feet from the ground.

Placing the coon on the ground and handing the chain to Marion, she whispered: "Give me a lift to the first limb. Then hand me the coon."

Having complied with her request, Marion leaned wearily upon the rifle while she listened to the sound of her companion scaling the tree, branch by branch.

Presently she heard Patience coming down. When at last Patience caught the lowest branch and swung herself down Marion saw that her hands were empty.

"C'mon!" Patience whispered hoarsely as she dragged her companion through the brush.

In silence they skirted the mountain side until they were almost directly above the cabin.

"Hist! Listen!" Patience came to a sudden standstill.

"Wha—what is it?" the other girl breathed.

"It's the sound a coon makes when he's lonesome. But listen!"

A new and louder sound burst upon their ears. There was no need for asking what this was. Marion knew all too well. It was the booming baying of a hound. The next second he was joined by his companion.

"Are they coming this way?" asked Marion, while a cold chill shook her from head to foot.

"No." There was a quiet assurance in Patience's tone. "We've made no sound. It isn't us they hear. It's that coon. They'll race over to that tree and bay up at it if the men'll let 'em, and I think they will."

"And then they'll get on our scent and—and it will all be over!" Marion's teeth were chattering in spite of her.

That this was a possibility she had not thought of was told by the long moment of silence before the mountain girl spoke.

"Well, they might," she whispered, measuring her words, "but a hound's a hound, and all hounds love to bay a coon tree. We'll just have to wait and see."

Waiting out there in the dark forest with every least sound, the flutter of a bird or the movement of some small living thing in

the grass at their feet giving them a start, was not the easiest thing in the world. Indeed, Marion found it almost the hardest.

Now and again there came the call of the coon, then the booming of the hounds.

“Why don’t they let them go?” Patience murmured impatiently. “If they don’t; if—”

She paused in the midst of a sentence to listen. Then in a joyous whisper she exclaimed:

“There! There they go!”

It was true. As Marion strained her ears she caught the sound of the hounds tearing away through the brush.

But even as she listened her heart suddenly went wild. What if the hounds had somehow gotten scent of them and were coming their way? How terrible that would be! They were sure to be great, gaunt, vicious beasts.

In the darkness it was impossible to tell what direction they were taking. Aided by her heightened imagination, she fancied the sound of their rush through the bushes growing louder, seemed to catch more plainly their hoarse breathing.

Wildly she strained her eyes in the dark, searching for a tree that she might climb, but in vain. The trees were either too large, with branches twenty feet in air, or too slender to bear her weight. In her wild terror she was about to flee when again Patience whispered:

“There they go!”

“Who?” Marion whispered back.

“The men. They are all alike—hounds and mountain men. They can’t stand the call of a coon. Oh, thank God! Our chance is coming. See!”

As she looked toward the cabin Marion did see. Not alone did she see the men, but saw their faces plainly. By the glaring light of a burning pine knot held aloft by one of the men, faces of three tall, gaunt, stubby-whiskered men were silhouetted against the shadows of night.

“Know them?” Marion whispered as they disappeared behind a clump of trees.

“Narry a one.”

“I guess that’s all of them,” Patience whispered a moment later. “Away, now, for little Hallie. We’ll have to take a chance. C’mon, and remember—not a sound. Not a snap of a twig, not a breath!”

The next moment found them silently sliding down the mountain. Now pausing, holding their breath to listen, they caught the roar of the hounds, the crash of the men making their way through the brush. Now they came to a dense thicket of briars that tore at their clothes. Luckily they were clad in suits of stout khaki. Now they plunged down a deep ravine that threatened to be their undoing. At last they were up the other side and nearing the cabin.

“Have to work fast!” panted Patience. “Find—find her! Pick her up. Don’t wake her! Don’t let her cry! Then go down the mountain—fast—fast as we can!”

Then they caught sight of the dark bulk of the cabin ahead of them. A faint light shone in the open doorway.

“A—a light—” faltered Marion, drawing her companion back. “Maybe a man has been left behind.”

“Just the fire on the hearth, I guess. Anyway, we have to risk it. C’mon.”

Again they crept forward. Now they were a hundred yards away, now fifty, now twenty-five, and now, with hearts beating wildly, they were skirting the cabin.

Dropping to the ground, Patience crept to the doorway. One glance within and she was up on hands and knees, creeping rapidly forward.

One moment of tense silence and she appeared at the door. In her arms was a large bundle.

“Got—got her,” she breathed. “Now go! Go fast! C’mon.”

Once more they crept forward through the dark. A moment passed, another, and yet another. A hundred yards below the cabin they were making rapid progress in spite of fallen logs, brush and the dark, when Patience suddenly stopped and gripped Marion’s arm.

“Listen!” she breathed.

“Wha—what is it?”

“The hounds! They’re baying!”

“They’ve been baying for a long time.”

“It—it’s different now. They’ve got our scent. They’re on our trail. C’mon! We’ve got to go fast!”

“Where to?”

“I don’t know, but come on!”

* * * * *

What was happening during all this time at the head of Laurel Branch beyond the natural gateway? Had old Job and his followers discovered that little Hallie had been stolen? And were they hot on the trail of the kidnappers? Would they arrive in time to save the little captive and her brave deliverers?

They had indeed discovered their loss and were mourning it bitterly. As old Job sat in the chimney corner reading his well worn Bible, from time to time a tear fell upon the faded pages. But the search had not begun; might not begin for several days. Such are the slow and silent ways of mountain folks. Besides, no clew had been left for them to follow. The kidnappers had entered the valley on foot. Fortune had favored them. It was during the excitement over the narrowly averted raid by Ransom Turner’s men that they had slipped into the cabin and had carried away the sleeping child.

On the rocky creek-bottom road the shoes of the kidnappers made no imprint. It was only after walking two miles that they mounted horses, concealed all this time in a paw-paw thicket, and rode away. No aid could be expected from old Job’s men.

CHAPTER XVI

A PERILOUS GLIDE

As she dashed after her companion, Marion felt a dizzy wave of faintness sweep over her. With her knees all but refusing to support her, she seemed in danger of plunging head foremost down the mountain side. By a supreme effort she regained control of herself and, still gripping the long squirrel rifle, followed on as best she could.

After stumbling through brush and over logs, with the baying of hounds growing louder in their ears, they came to the bed of a small ravine. There was water here and it offered better going. Besides, it might throw the hounds off the trail. So, sometimes to their ankles and sometimes to their knees in water, they plunged forward.

“Keep the rifle dry,” Patience panted back. “We may need it.”

“Would—would you shoot?” Marion asked.

“I’d shoot anything to save Hallie.”

The child, now half awake, was crying softly to herself.

Suddenly Patience came to a standstill.

“Listen!” she whispered.

Marion did listen, and what she heard caused her to shrink back in fear. Above the baying of the hounds and the shouts of men who had doubtless discovered that Hallie was gone, came the sound of water as it rushed over the cliff to dash upon the rocks far below. So near did it seem that Marion shrank back in fear lest she be washed over the precipice.

“Blocked!” she whispered.

“Here,” said Patience, “you take Hallie. Give me the rifle.

Now come on. It may not be too late.” She went scrambling up the bank of the ravine. Twice she slipped and seemed about to fall back, but each time grasped the friendly branch of some shrub for support. Many times she held out a helping hand to the other less experienced climber.

At last with a deep breath, Patience leaped upon the crest of the ridge.

“Listen!” she whispered. “The hounds! They’ve lost the scent. The water did that. There’s a chance yet. C’mon!”

So weary were her limbs, so spent her strength, that Marion felt she would rather lie down and die than to go on, but the thought of the innocent child she protected gave her new strength. So down the other side of the ridge they dashed.

“Here’s hoping for better luck this time,” sighed Patience as she parted the bushes that lined the next ravine. Hardly had she thrust her right foot forward than she slipped, then started gliding downward. Only a fortunate grab at an overhanging bough saved her from a fall.

“What is it?” asked Marion.

“It’s a skidway for logs,” whispered Patience, struggling to regain her footing. “It’s our chance. We’ll have to be careful, awful careful, but it will take us to the river. Mebby down there in the bottoms there’s some one who’ll help us.”

With a few well chosen words she explained to her companion that when the white wood timber had been cut down from the mountains some years previous the woodsmen had felled trees into the ravine and having trimmed the branches from them had formed of them a steep chute down which thousands of logs had been sent gliding and booming to the river.

“It’s slippery,” the mountain girl warned, “but if we are careful we can make it. Hold Hallie with one hand, hug the bank and cling to branches with the other. I’ll go before you. If you slip I’ll try to stop you.”

Then in silence, foot by foot, yard by yard, rod by rod, they made their way down the treacherous pathway. Now they came upon a moss-grown portion that was safe as a sidewalk, and now there lay before them the shining whiteness of logs over which water had run until they were smooth as polished mahogany. Gliding, climbing, faltering, they made their way

downward.

“Listen!” whispered Patience at last. “The hounds! They’re on our trail again.”

Then sudden disaster from a new field threatened. At a slight bend in the ravine they came upon a log chute. A great quantity of debris—twigs, rotten limbs, leaves and dead grass had collected in the chute and the whole lay directly in the path. As they climbed confidently upon it the whole mass broke away and the next moment, like children on a pillow in a play chute, they were gliding downward.

Faster, faster, with fear tugging at their hearts, they flew downward. With no power to help themselves, dumb with apprehension they sat there, sensing brush and trees rushing past them, feeling the sharp cut of leaves on their cheeks until Marion found her tongue to scream:

“Patience, are we going into the river?”

“If—if nothing happens first,” stammered the mountain girl, for the first time truly frightened.

“Can you swim?”

“Yes, can you?”

“Yes. Listen, Patience. We are older, we can stand much. Hallie is a small child. The cold of the river will kill her. Take off your cape and make it into a ball. Try to keep it dry. I’ll do the best I can to protect her. Somehow we’ll make shore. We —”

At that instant her lips were sealed by the sight that burst upon her startled eyes. Apparently directly beneath them, its silently sweeping waters yellow and swollen by recent rains, lay the river and upon it, having just emerged from behind a cloud, shone the moon.

The perils that lay before the two girls and their small charge, though great enough, were not so imminent as they had appeared. A sudden turn in the chute brought them to a more gradual slope. When at last their cushion of debris floated out upon the river, so slight was the splash it made that it seemed hard to believe that they had reached the end of their perilous glide to safety. But there was still danger, for all too soon their frail raft was water-logged and sinking.

“Remember the cape,” cautioned Marion as, with her left hand holding little Hallie tightly upon what was left of the raft, she struck out into the dark, chilling waters.

“Let—let’s keep together,” she called through chattering teeth. “It—it’s going to be hard, but we can make it. Let—let’s try for the other shore.”

Patience struck boldly out before her.

In spite of Marion’s best efforts to protect the child, she was getting wet. She began to cry. The cry wrenched the older girl’s heart. “If the water makes my teeth chatter, what must it mean to her!” she thought.

“Look!” she called to Patience. “What’s that off to the right?”

“Looks like a log, a saw log. Ought we try for it?”

“Yes.”

Instantly the course was changed. A moment later they were clambering aboard a great log of white wood that buoyed them up as easily as a boat.

Sitting astride the log, Marion wrapped Patience’s warm dry cape about the child. Hardly a moment had elapsed before her crying ceased.

Of all the strange experiences that had come to Marion, this was the most weird. To have escaped from hounds and kidnappers with a child, to have come gliding down here in such a strange manner, to find herself sitting astride a huge log surrounded by black, rushing waters, and gliding steadily forward to an unknown destination, this was adventure of the most stirring kind. But Marion found little enough time for such reflections. Now that she had come to a time of inaction she began to realize how cold the water and night air were. She was seized with such a fit of shivering that she feared she would be shaken off the log.

“The wat—the water’s better than this,” she chattered, yet for the sake of the peacefully sleeping child she decided to endure the torture as long as possible.

Trees and bushes along the river’s bank swept by. A dog at some cabin barked. Off in the far distance a light flickered, then went out. The cold was becoming easier to bear. She was

growing drowsy. She wanted to sleep. Sleep—yes, that was what she needed. Sleep, one wink of sleep. Her head fell upon her breast. The cold was overcoming her, but she did not realize it.

She dreamed she had left the log, to find a roaring fire right by the river's bank, by which she was warming herself. Suddenly a jolt which almost threw her from the log rudely brought her back to life.

“Wha—what is it!” she exclaimed, gripping Patience with one hand and clinging frantically to the sleeping child with the other.

“We’ve gone aground,” said Patience. “If we’re careful we can get ashore.”

Three minutes later, beside a clump of paw-paw bushes, they were wringing the water from their garments.

“I saw a light just over yonder,” said Patience. “We’d better try to find it.”

A very few steps and they were out of the brush and on a well beaten road. A quarter mile down this road they came suddenly upon a broad clearing, in the midst of which were three large white buildings.

“A school!” exclaimed Marion. “The mission school! Oh, we are safe!”

For a moment, worn out as she was by over-exertion, excitement and cold, she was obliged to battle with an almost overwhelming desire to drop in her tracks. Her splendid will, however, stood her in good stead and with a firm “Let’s go on,” she led the way.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LAST OF HER CLAN

There was a light in the lower right room of the nearest building. Straight to the door of this room they went and the next second found them blinking at the light and at the same time looking into one of the most saintly faces they had ever seen, the motherly face of Miss Bordell, who had for many years devoted her life to the education of mountain children.

The girls quickly told their story. Almost before they knew it, having been assured that here they would be quite safe from any intruders, they found themselves tucked in between a pair of white sheets with Hallie sleeping peacefully between them.

“We’re safe,” Marion whispered to herself, “but the mystery is not solved. To-morrow—to-mor—” Her thoughts were never finished. Her weary brain had closed shop for the night.

“It’s the most unusual thing I have ever heard of,” said the school principal after she had heard the girls’ story the next morning. “You say they were regular mountain folks?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Patience nodded.

“That’s what makes it so unusual,” said the elderly lady, wrinkling her brow. “Mountain folks aren’t given to stealing and kidnapping. That sort of crime seems almost foreign to their nature. I’ll tell you what we will do. The Circuit Judge, John Bascomb, happens to be down at the village. We’ll go down and talk it over with him. It’s only a mile.”

So down the road to the village they marched, Marion, Patience, little Hallie, and their benefactress.

They had reached the first cabin that stood by the creek road when of a sudden Patience, pulling excitedly at the principal’s sleeve, whispered hoarsely:

“That’s them there! They’re the three men that carried Hallie away!”

A single glance told Marion she was right. So great was her fear of them that her first impulse was to snatch up Hallie and flee. But her better judgment prevailed. Surely here they were safe.

The men, apparently without having seen them, turned up a side path to enter a cabin.

“Are you sure those are the men?” asked the principal.

“Yes, yes!” the girls answered in unison.

“Let’s hurry, then.”

A short time later they were telling their story to Judge Bascomb, a kindly old man.

“First thing,” he said after they had finished, “is to find out who the men are. Come on out and show me the cabin they entered.”

“H’m,” he mused as he sighted the cabin. “Can’t be Long Jim. That’s his cabin. He’s laid up with rheumatism. Must be some of his friends. Here, John Henry,” he called to a barefoot boy. “Who’s visiting at Long Jim’s?”

“Reckon hit’s Black John Berkhart and his brother, Blinkie Bill, and mebbly Hog Farley.”

“H’m,” said the judge. “I know ’em. We’ll just step over there.”

“No, no,” said Marion, hanging back. “I—I couldn’t.”

“That’s all right, little girl,” the judge reassured her. “They’re just plain mountain folks. I can’t understand their actions of yesterday, but that’s what we’re going over there to find out.”

The men in the cabin appeared a little startled at sight of the judge and the girls, but having motioned them to seats around the crude fireplace, they sat there in stoical silence.

“Black John,” said the judge in a friendly tone, “I’m told you took this little girl from her home yesterday and carried her away over the mountains.”

“I ’low you’re right informed, Jedge.”

“Don’t you know that’s kidnapping?”

“You kin name it, Jedge. I ain’t much on larnin’ nohow.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Jedge, it’s this way,” the black-eyed mountaineer settled himself to explain. “That little gal there is the last of her clan, the Cawoods, the fightenest clan that I reckon ever lived in these here mountings. They fit us and we fit them, and I reckon, Jedge, if’n ther’d been more Cawoods and less Berkharts there wouldn’t been any Berkharts left, same’s there’s only one Cawood left, an’ that’s little Hallie.

“Jedge,” the mountain man paused to stare moodily at the fire, “us folks is plum tired fightin’. ’T’ain’t no satisfaction to go out a hoein’ corn an’ makin’ crops on these here rocky hillsides when you know like as not some feller’s lying up there in the bresh above you waitin’ for to put daylight through you. And Jedge, long’s there’s a Cawood a-livin’ in these here mountings, even a little one like Hallie, there’s some one goin’ to rise up to shoot and kill us. So, Jedge, we took her an’—

“No, Jedge,” he protested as he saw the look of horror on the faces about him, “we didn’t aim to kill her. Reckon there ain’t no mounting folk anywhar mean as that. But, Jedge, out of the mountings thar’s places I’ve heard tell of, big places whar they keep orphans. Hallie bein’ a true orphan, we ’lowed we’d jest take her out thar and give her another name. She’d grow up and never know she was a Cawood, and not nobody else’d know, either, and then thar’d be peace in these here mountings.”

For a moment there was silence, then the judge spoke.

“Black John,” he said, “you can’t make right by doing a wrong. Hallie was not kin to you. You had no right to lay one finger upon her. You believe in God, don’t you?” The mountaineer dropped his head. “God never told you that men would be raised up to kill your people for Hallie’s sake. It was the powers of evil and darkness that told you that. It’s not true.

“As for this crime you have committed,” he said in a stern voice, “you are accountable to the law. You should perhaps be bound over to the grand jury, but you did the thing in ignorance—your motives were not criminal motives. If those who were wronged are disposed to forgive you, and if you give me your word of honor that you will never molest the child again, I’ll do my best to see that you go free.”

He turned to Patience and Marion.

“One thing else I want to know,” said Marion, her voice husky with emotion as she turned to face Black John. “Why did you seize my friend at the back of Pine Mountain and hold her against her will?”

“That, Jedge,” said the mountain man, talking to the judge instead of Marion, “was part and parcel of the same plan. Little Hallie were a stayin’ at their cabin then and we thought quite natural we might trade the older girl fer the leetle one that wasn’t only just a mounting girl nowadays.”

The judge looked at Marion as much as to say: “That is explained. Shall we hold them?”

Marion frowned. She knew mountain ways and mountain courts, knew how seldom justice was done. She recalled a word Ransom Turner had let fall. “Reckon a word of honor given by a mountain man’s a heap site surer than a jury trial.”

“I’ll take his word, if he gives it freely,” Marion said.

“Black John, do we have your word of honor?”

“Jedge, hit’s mighty hard to see through; plumb hard, but I reckon hit’s right. I give my word, Jedge.”

The judge bowed. Then, followed by the judge, they all filed out of the cabin.

At ten o’clock, in her room at the whipsawed cabin, with great events hanging in the air all about her, Marion closed her weary eyes for a few winks of sleep. Little Hallie slept peacefully beside her.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STRANGE PROCESSION

When Florence awoke next morning at dawn she stared wildly about her for an instant, then settled back luxuriously among the covers.

“Home,” she breathed. “Back at the whipsawed cabin!”

She lay there gazing dreamily at the time browned ceiling. Suddenly her gaze fell upon the misplaced board that covered the opening leading to the attic.

At once her mind was filled with all manner of wild speculations. Had Marion, in her absence, thought of some new hiding place in that attic? Had she found the Confederate gold? Or had Uncle Billie talked too much about the vanished gold? Had some one, with no legal right to the gold, come to the house while everyone was away? Had he climbed to the attic and plundered it?

She found herself all but overcome by a desire to climb up there and look for herself.

“But this day,” she said, sitting up wide awake, “this day I have no time for treasure hunting. My business to-day is that of being tried by a jury. And after that,”—her thoughts were bitter,—“after that it is to be my duty to show these mountain folks how gamely a girl from the outside can lose an election.”

Strangely enough, at this moment there passed through her mind moving pictures of her experience at the back of Pine Mountain.

“The deed for Caleb Powell’s land,” she whispered. “I wonder when they will have it? Will they have it at all? Will we get our commission?”

“Oh well,” she exclaimed, leaping out of bed, “there’s no time

for such speculation now.”

The trial was on. The house was packed. Lacking a town hall, the Justice had selected the schoolhouse for court room.

To Florence the thing was tragic. To be tried by a jury, a jury of men who two months before were utterly unknown to her; to be tried by a people whose children she had been helping to educate, this was tragic indeed. There were faces in the audience which seemed to reflect the tragedy; seamed faces, old before their time; faces of women who had toiled beyond their just lot that their children might have just a little more than they had enjoyed.

There was humor in the situation, too. To be sitting there in the very chair which she had been accustomed to use in her school-work; to be looking into the faces of scores of children, yet instead of directing their work to be listening to the Justice stumbling over the words of the warrant, all this struck her as decidedly odd, a thing to smile about.

Ransom, too, must have seen the humor of it, for as Florence looked his way she surprised a smile lurking around the corners of his mouth.

The jury was called. Florence, studying their faces as they came shambling forward, was surprised and relieved to find there not a single man who was hostile to her; not one of Black Blevens' men was on that jury. She caught her breath as the true meaning of it came to her. George Sergeant, the deputy, was her friend. He had seen to it that she had the proper sort of a jury. A lump came into her throat. It is good, at such a time as this, to know that one has friends. The very fact that she had demanded a jury trial had perhaps saved the day for her.

The details of the case arranged, a lawyer arose to open the case. It was Florence's lawyer, provided not by herself, but by Ransom Turner and his men.

It was a beautiful and wonderful speech that the young lawyer made. A product of the mountain, born and raised far up in the hills, he had been helped to his earlier education by just such a school as the girls had been teaching.

“An outrage! A shame and a blight to Laurel Creek's good name!” he exclaimed eloquently. “You all know what these summer schools have meant to us and to our children. Good hearted, generous people of education and refinement come to

our mountains to help our children, and how do we repay them? Arrest them for carrying concealed weapons! Arrest a woman for that! And what was it that this lady did? She put a twenty-two pistol in her pocket after she failed to shoot a squirrel. A pistol, did I say? Really a little rifle. A long barrel and a handle. Attach a stock to it and it's a rifle.

"Concealed weapons!" his voice was filled with scorn. "You couldn't kill a man with that! A twenty-two! Concealed weapons! If I were to search this crowd to-day I could find a hundred deadlier weapons on the persons who sit before me!" There was a sudden shuffling of the uneasy feet of startled mountaineers.

"Concealed weapons!" he went on. "I've a more deadly one in my own pocket!" He drew a large clasp knife from his pocket and opened it. "I could kill you quicker with that than with a twenty-two." He put the knife back in his pocket.

"And yet we arrest a woman, a girl really, who has come among us to help us. As a reward we arrest her! Will you honorable jurymen place a blight on the name of such a one by saying she is guilty of a crime? Something tells me you will not."

As the young lawyer sat down there was a stir in the room, a whispering that came near to applause, but the bronze faces of the jurymen never changed. Nor had they changed when, after hearing the Justice give his reasons why the girl should be found guilty, they left the room to retire to the shade of a distant beach tree.

It was a tense situation that followed. There was no conversation. To many in the room a sentence of "guilty" would mean the end of their hopes of a winter school worthy of the name.

"If only we can beat old Black Blevens in this trial," Ransom Turner was whispering to his henchmen. "Hit's likely there's men who'll vote right in the school election this afternoon. It's a chance, though. It's a plumb uncertain one. Can't tell next to nothin' what men'll do."

So, while the distant mumble of the jurymen floated indistinct through the windows, they waited and whispered among themselves.

A moment passed, two, three, four. Then the jurors came

marching back.

In the midst of a silence that could be felt, the jurymen took their seats and the Justice said:

“Gentlemen, what is your verdict?”

“Jedge,” said a tall, lanky woodsman, rising to his feet, “we came to the conclusion that there weren’t no deadly weapons packed, not narry one.”

There followed ten seconds more of silence, then came a rush forward to shake the young teacher’s hand.

In spite of her efforts at self control, Florence felt tears splash upon her hands, nor were hers the only tears shed that morning.

“But I must be strong,” she told herself, setting her lips tight. “The day is but begun. This is the day of the election.”

The time for the election came.

Marion, having finished her short sleep and eaten a hearty dinner, was on hand as fresh and young as if she had not passed through the terrors of the previous night.

To the two girls, born and bred on the plains, the election, which had reached a high pitch of excitement by early afternoon, was indeed a revelation. There were judges of that election who served without pay, twenty or more of them, not legal judges but men who were there to see that their side had fair play. Ten or more of Black Blevens’s men were constantly present; an equal number of the Ransom Turner clan were there. Not a word was said by any of them, but everyone knew that guns, not lips, would speak if things went wrong.

These men meant to see that the men of their side were permitted to vote and if trouble arose they were ready to fight.

All that quiet afternoon, as if before a storm, the air seemed electrified. In every heart deep feelings surged; hatred in some, loyalty in others. To every thinking man the situation held dire possibilities. Here might start a bloody feud that would not end until scores were in their graves.

Men and women stood in little knots. Questions were asked in whispers. Would they vote? Would some of Black Blevens’ men dare to cross his will? Would they dare? Black Blevens

had large logging contracts. He would hire many men during the coming winter. Dared the men, whose very bread and butter depended upon him, desert him?

At three o'clock the question was beginning to be answered. The election appeared clearly lost for Ransom Turner. At three-thirty he was eleven votes behind, and no apparent chance of a rally.

Florence stuck grimly to her post, close to the schoolhouse door. Her heart was breaking. She loved the mountain children, had dreamed of a bigger and better school than Laurel Branch had ever known. That was all passing now. In two or three weeks she would be bidding the valley farewell forever. Yet, with the grim determination of a Spartan, she stuck to her post.

As for Marion, she had learned what seemed to her to be one of the secrets of happiness. When one's greatest hope seems about to fail, it is well to quickly swing one's interests to others, less important perhaps, but not less entrancing. As the election appeared lost, she thought once more of the Georgia gold and the attic of the whipsawed house. She it had been who had removed the board from the ceiling. At that time, however, she had been suddenly called to other tasks and, having replaced the board wrong end to, had left without climbing to the attic at all. "There's time enough now," she thought, "and who knows what I might discover? There's no need to stay here any longer. The election is lost."

Reaching her room, she at once shoved the bed beneath the loose board, and a moment later, candle in hand, found herself swinging along from beam to beam toward the ancient pounding mill in the corner.

"Don't see why it's here," she murmured to herself. "Cumbersome old thing. No good up here."

She put out her hand to touch it. Then she took it away in disgust. It was black with three decades of accumulated dust.

"Ugh!" she grunted. "Wonder if I could tip it over?"

She tried, and failed to move it,—tried once more and failed. Then she looked about her for some sort of a pry. Having secured a loose board, she attacked the task once more.

This time she was more successful. With a thump that shook the solid old frame from sill to rafter, the cumberstone block rolled

over on its side.

As it fell the girl's heart skipped a beat. What was that she heard? Could it have been a metallic clinking? Had her ears deceived her? She hoped not. But if she had heard aright, from whence had it come? From some dark corner among the rafters, or from within the very heart of the old pounding mill?

At that moment there came to her ears the sound of hoarse shouting. What did it mean? Was there to be trouble? Would there be shots? Would women be fleeing, men dying?

None of these. A strange and stirring scene was being enacted at the schoolhouse at the mouth of Laurel Branch.

A short time after Marion left the school building, as Florence stood looking away at the lovely blue of the hills and trying in vain to tell it all an affectionate goodbye, she heard someone exclaim:

“Look a’yonder!”

“Hit’s them quare folks from up yonder beyond the stone gateway,” said another.

At once the girl found herself staring in wonder at a strange procession moving slowly down the road. A score of mountain men and women, some on horseback, most on foot, led by a one-armed giant and a boy with an arm in a sling, were advancing on the schoolhouse.

“Bud Wax!” the girl breathed. “Bud, and the folks from beyond the gates. What can it mean?”

The distance was short. She soon knew. As the giant's huge form darkened the schoolhouse door his deep voice rumbled a question:

“’Lection goin’ on here?”

There came no answer from the surprised onlookers.

“Reckon I’ll vote,” said the giant.

At this move, every man of the watchers grew rigid. Whose man was this? Many a hand shifted to a pistol grip. The election hung in the balance. As this man voted, so would all that motley throng. There was no questioning their right. They lived within the district. Their votes could be sworn in. How

would they vote? They had come with Bud Wax. That looked bad for Ransom Turner's clan. But there had been strange whisperings about Bud. He had been heard to say things about the teachers from the outside that were far from unkind. Could it be that, having been fairly conquered by one of these, he had learned a respect for them that he had felt for no other one?

As for Florence, her heart was in her mouth. Would they do it? Could they crush her hopes after she had done so much for little Hallie? They might. There was no accounting for the ways of these strange people.

There was a hush of silence as the giant, having given his name and sworn in his vote, seized the ballot and made his mark.

Out of the silence there came a whisper:

“Hit's for Ransom.”

The next moment the silence was shattered by a round of hoarse shouts. The election was won by Ransom Turner. The people from “up yonder” had turned the balance.

As for Florence, it was too much for her overwrought nerves. Dashing away into a thicket, she threw herself flat upon the ground to give vent to violent sobs.

A half hour later the two young teachers, each hurrying toward the other, met half way between the whipsawed house and the school.

“Oh, Florence! I've found it!” Marion exclaimed.

And Florence at the same instant cried, “Marion, we won! We won!”

Throwing themselves into each others arms, they laughed and cried together. After that they sat side by side on a log and calmly told their stories.

To Florence, the thrilling climax of the election had been a revelation. Bud Wax had provided the great surprise. Won over by who knows what course of reasoning, he had taken the side of his teachers. Having seen Florence entering the forbidden gateway, he had followed as her protector. While playing this role, he had broken his arm. He had spent the past few days convincing those strange people “up yonder” that it was their duty to come down to the mouth of the creek and vote in the

school election. Convinced by his argument, and Florence's watchful care over Hallie, they had consented to come.

"And just when we thought all was lost," Florence exclaimed, "here they came, everyone of them, to vote for Ransom Turner.

"And now," she hurried on, "they've decided that the folks at the mouth of the creek are not such bad neighbors after all. They're going to send their children down to our school."

"Oh, Florence!" Marion clasped her hands in an ecstasy of joy. "It's going to be such a school! A real new school building with two rooms, new seats and stoves and everything!"

"Why! How—"

"I found the gold!"

"Where?"

"It was in the heart of the pounding mill. I tipped it over, and it sort of clinked. I thumped it here and there until I found that the hole where they pounded the corn had a false bottom. I pried it up and there was the gold!"

"Confederate gold?"

"No, not Confederate gold, but Georgia and Carolina gold. There never was any Confederate gold. None ever was coined. I received a letter about that from the museum this morning. The Confederate States coined a few silver half-dollars. All the rest of their money was paper."

For a moment the two girls sat in silent contemplation of their great good fortune and the joyous future that lay before them.

"There isn't such a lot of gold," Marion said at last. "Forty or fifty pieces, that's all, but each piece is worth several times its value in gold, so there will be enough."

"Quite enough," murmured Florence contentedly. "And we shall have a school! Such a school!"

The schoolhouse was yet to be built. That this might be accomplished, grateful mountaineers sent their teams over the mountains for windows, doors, seats and hardware, while others, manning a small sawmill, got out the lumber. When the time came for beginning the construction, there was a "workin'." Mountain folks came for miles around; men with

hammers, axes and saws, women with pots and pans and all manner of good things to eat. Men worked, women cooked. They made a holiday of it, and before the sun went down that day the two room school building was two-thirds done.

“Hit’s the way us mounting folks be,” said old Uncle Billie, rubbing his hands together. “If’n we all likes you we likes you a right smart, an’ if’n we all don’t take to you, we can be meaner’n pisen.”

The school was a success in every way. Long before the term came to an end Laurel Branch was looking forward to better things.

One day two months after the school began, Florence received a letter from Mr. Dobson, the coal man. With trembling fingers she tore it open. A small bit of paper fell out. Snatching it up, she read:

“Pay to the order.... Nineteen hundred and sixty dollars!”

“Oh Marion! Marion!” she fairly screamed. “Here’s our commission!”

“That money,” said Mrs. McAlpin, as they sat in fireside council that night, “is your own. You earned it fairly. It is no longer needed for the school. If you feel you must give some, give a tenth of it to the school. It is your duty to use the remainder in completing your own education.”

It was some time before the two girls could be brought to see the matter in this light. Perhaps they feared life would lose its thrill if they were no longer dependent upon their muscles and their wits for their living. In the end they yielded. When, after finishing the winter school, they left the mountains for the University, it was with a full purse.

Florence found that the possession of money did not necessarily rob one of the thrills that life should have. Had she not been free to wander about the city she would not have wandered into a curious place back of the Ghetto at 777 Monroe Street. Had she not been possessed of an unusual amount of cash, she would not have made an extraordinary purchase there, and having missed the purchase, would have lost an unusually romantic and mysterious adventure as well. But she did make the purchase and the adventure came—but the story is a long one and will be found in our next book entitled “The Thirteenth Ring.”

THE END

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