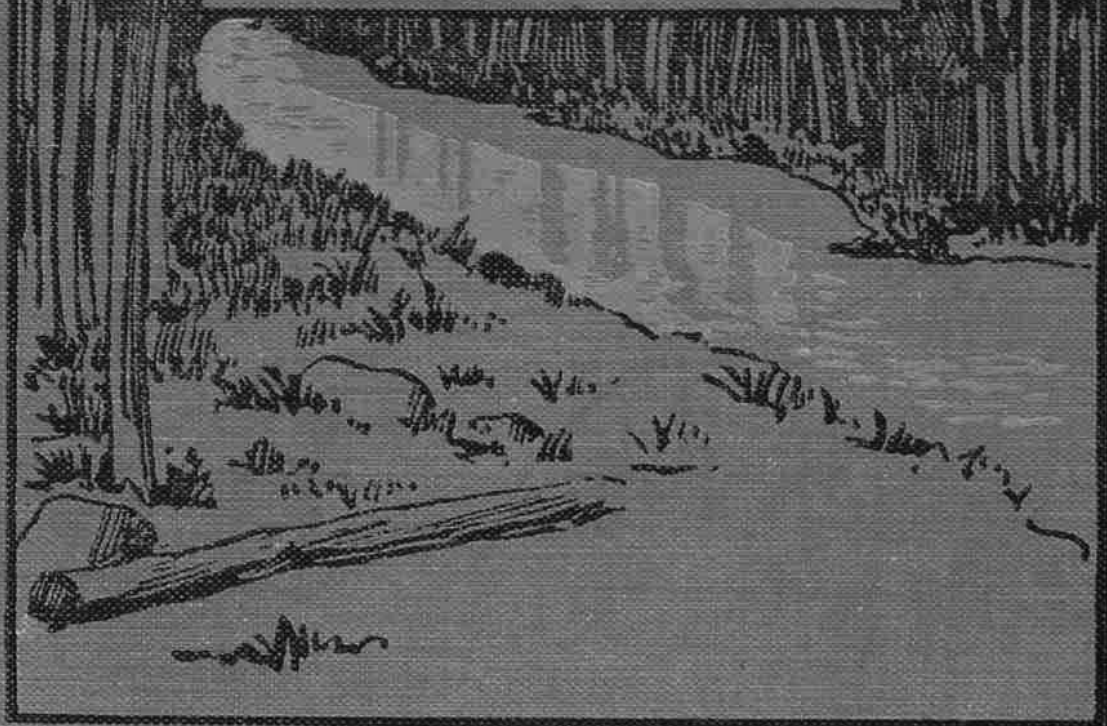


GOOSE
CREEK
FOLKS

By

ISABEL GRAHAM BUSH
AND
FLORENCE LILIAN BUSH

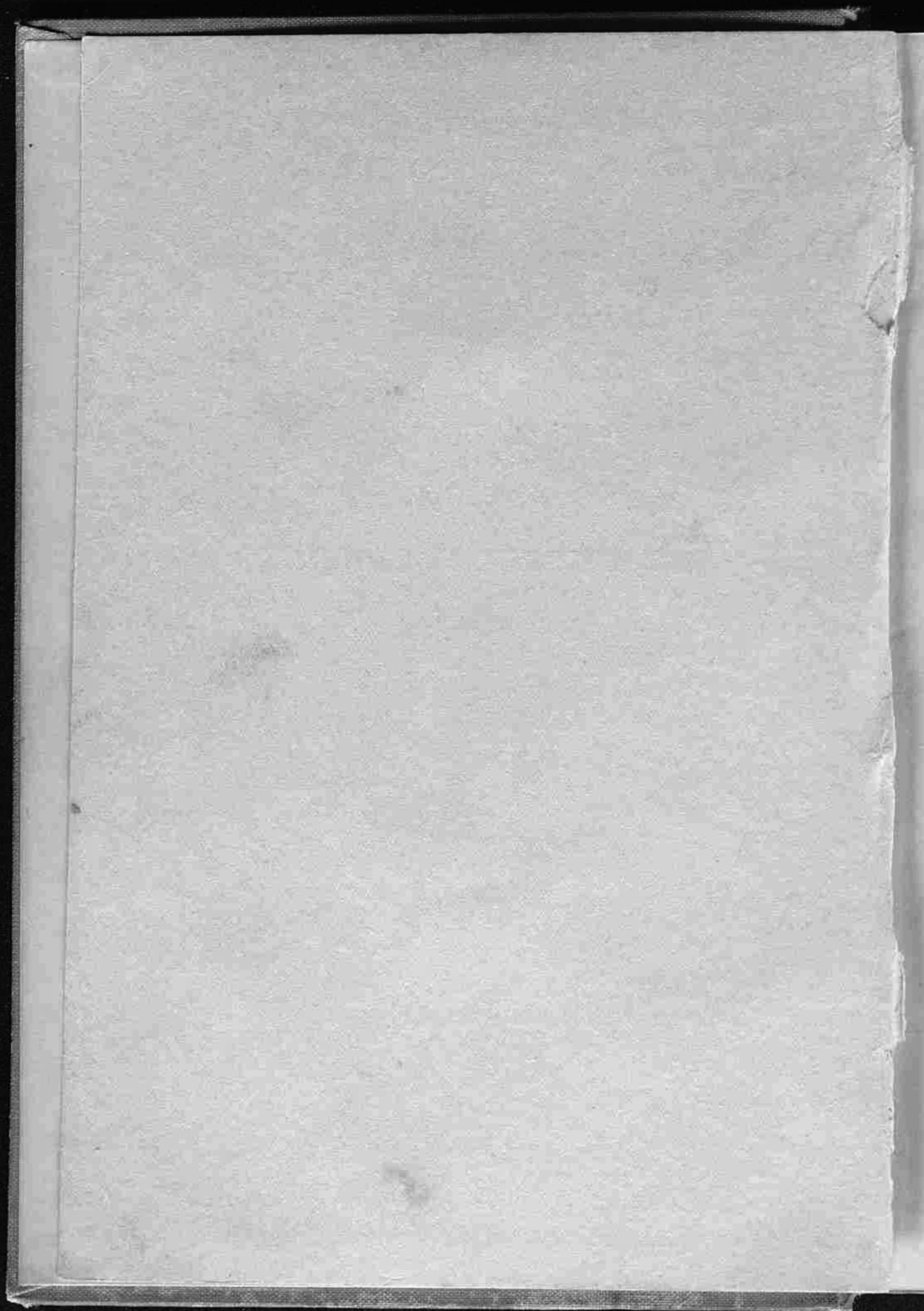


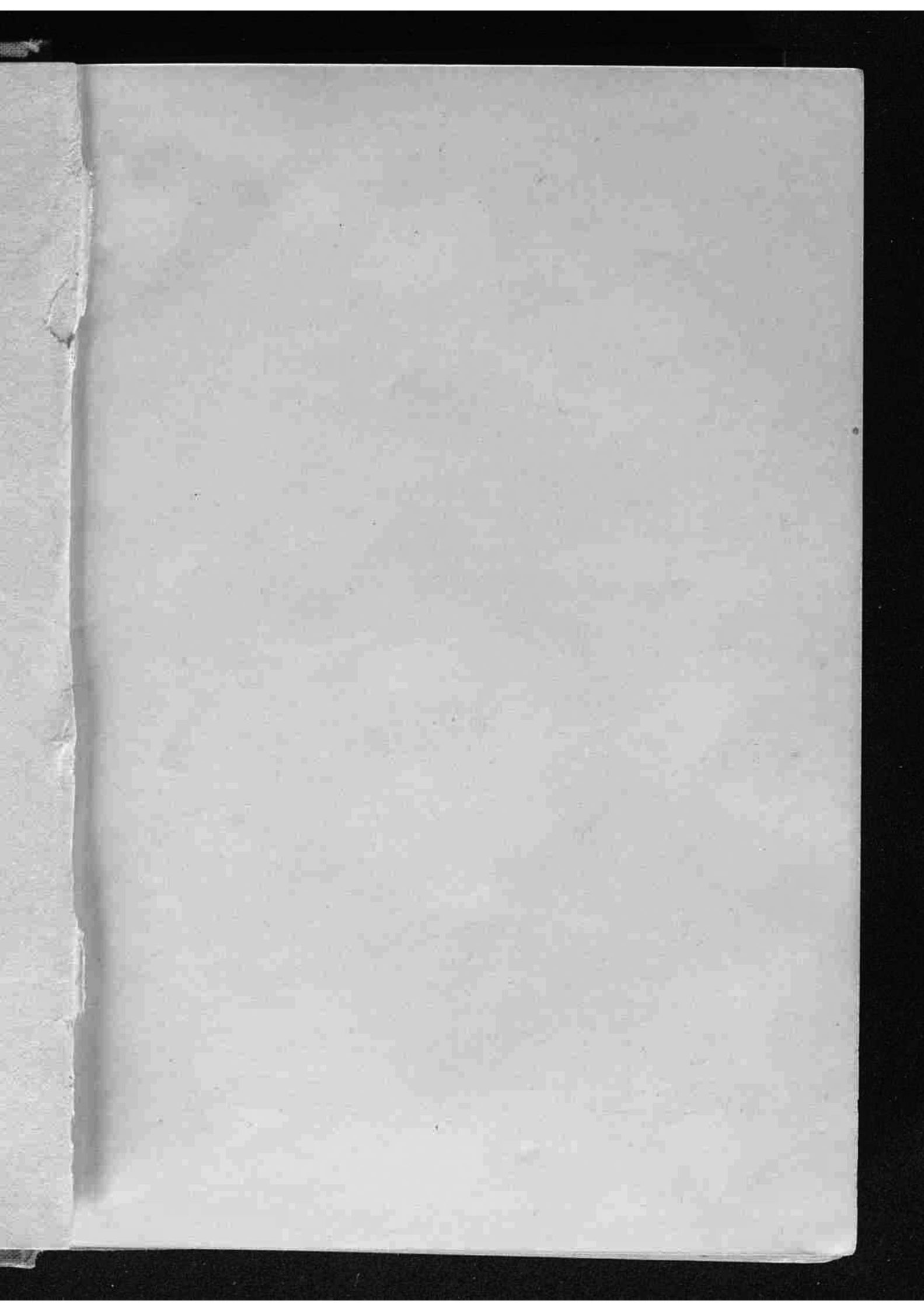
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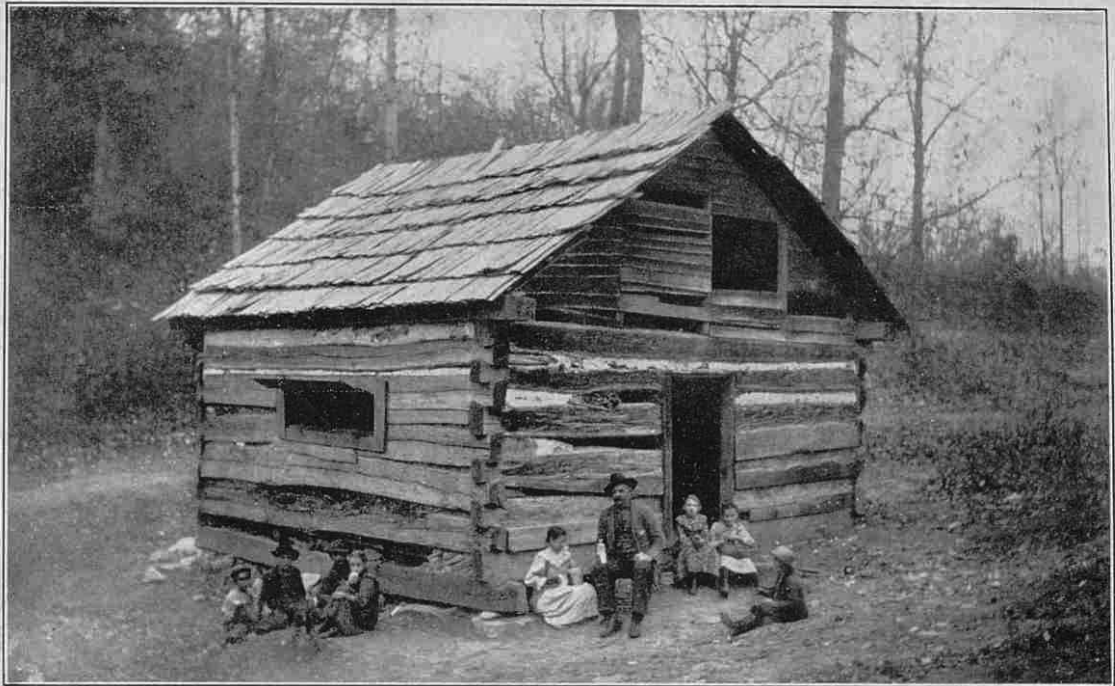


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GOOSE CREEK FOLKS







MOUNTAIN SCHOOLHOUSE

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MOOSE CREEK FOLKS

A Story of the Smoky Mountains

ISABEL DEWEES BUSH

FLORENCE M. BUSH



New York, Chicago, London
Hessing H. Revett Company

FRUITBORN & SONS

GOOSE CREEK FOLKS

A Story of the Kentucky Mountains

By

ISABEL GRAHAM BUSH

AND

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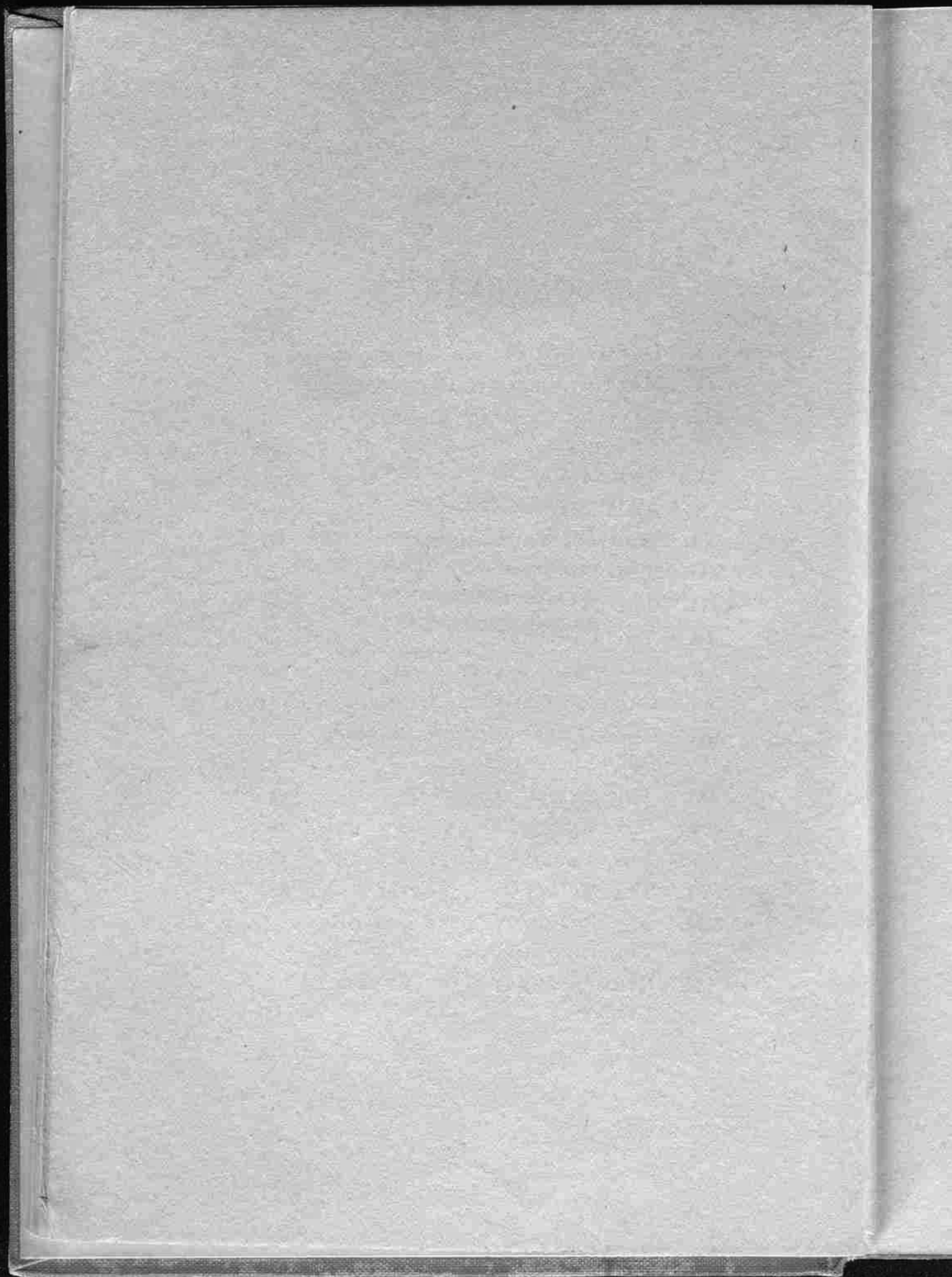
To

ALICE K. DOUGLAS
OF BEREA COLLEGE

*whose helpfulness of spirit and enthusiasm for learning
have inspired many a mountain boy and girl to
a life of broad usefulness, this book
is lovingly dedicated by*

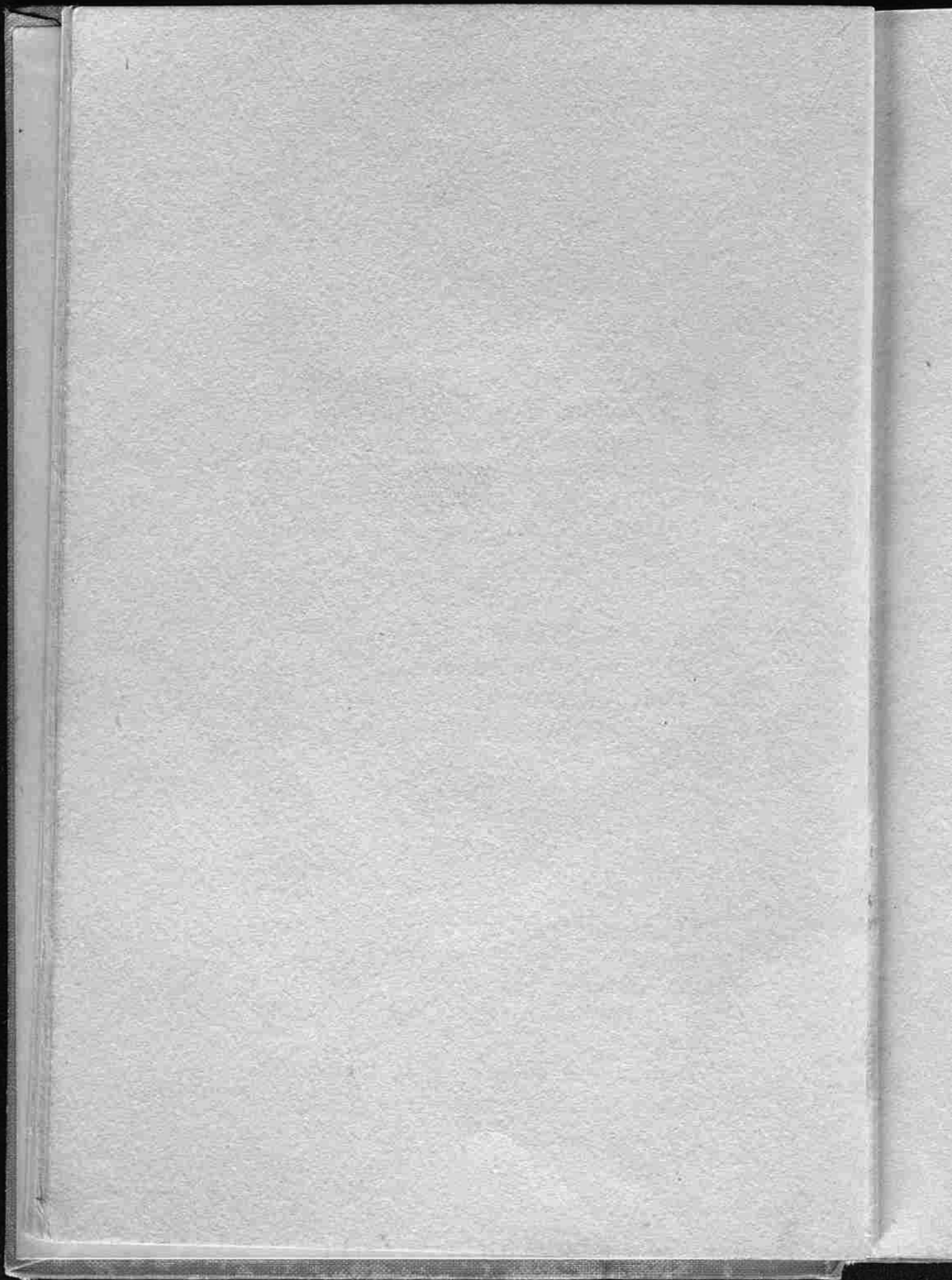
THE AUTHORS

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I

DAN GOOCH MAKES A DISCOVERY

“**D**O you reckon it’ll seem the same?” Talitha, quite breathless with the long climb, stood looking down at her brother, who was following more slowly up the scraggy slope of Red Mountain.

“Why not?” he answered. “But say, are you going to keep up this gait for long? If you do you’ll be plumb tuckered before we get home.”

The girl laughed, and then sighed. “I’m so anxious to get there, Mart; seems like I can’t wait. To think we’ve been away ’most a year! Do you s’pose Rufe and little Dock’ll know us?”

“Like as not they won’t. I’m sort o’ in hopes they’ll think we’ve changed some,” returned Martin. He dropped upon a convenient ledge and pulled his sister down beside him.

“I’m afraid they won’t see much difference in me, but you’ve changed a whole lot,” Talitha declared proudly with a sidewise glance of the brown eyes. “Mother’ll notice it the first thing.”

“I guess you haven’t looked in the glass

lately," scoffed Martin, reddening at the implied praise. "You aren't the same girl who left for school last fall with a pigtail hanging down her back and her dress 'most to her knees."

"I s'pose I looked just as Lalla Ponder did when she started in this spring, and she's changed a sight." Talitha put up her hands to smooth the soft roll of wavy hair which had taken the place of the tight, girlish braid. A year had never made so much difference before.

"I'm going back in the fall," suddenly announced Martin. "Aren't you, Tally?"

"So far as I know, I am, but it all depends on mammy. It'll be harder for me to leave than you, I reckon." Talitha rose to her feet and adjusted her bundle knapsack-fashion across her shoulders. "We'll make it before dark, I should say," thinking of the rough mountain way yet to be traversed. They had left the train early that morning, and walked steadily since sunrise. Now it lacked a half-hour of noon.

Another steady climb and a descent, and the two found themselves on familiar ground. At their feet Goose Creek crept sluggishly. A footpath followed on the low, sloping bank like a persistent shadow until both were lost to sight in the curves of the foothills. Here in the cool shade of a tangled growth, close to the stream, brother and sister paused to eat

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their lunch, which Martin produced from his bundle. They would be at home in time for supper.

"I wonder if Si Quinn is going to teach the Goose Creek school this term?" Martin helped himself to a sandwich.

"I reckon so, but I wish he could go to Bentville long enough to get it out of his head that the earth is square. To think of his teaching us such foolishness!"

Martin shook his head. "It wouldn't be of any use; he's the greatest person to argufy. He's got it all figured out that if the earth is round we'd all be rolled off into nothing. It would be 'onpossible' to stay on it."

Talitha dipped her hands in the creek and wiped them on her handkerchief. "I wish——" she began, then stopped suddenly. Martin looked up and his eyes followed hers.

Around the farther curve of the creek path appeared a horse's head; then the animal and its rider came slowly into view. "It's somebody from Stone Jug, I reckon," said Martin, "only it rides like Dan Gooch."

"It is Dan Gooch," decided Talitha under her breath. "Wait and see if he knows us, Mart."

The old sorrel plodded dejectedly along the path. The man on his back was as loose-jointed and angular as his steed. An ancient broad-brimmed hat slouched over his face to keep out the bright sunlight. If the two seated at the creek's edge imagined he was about

to pass them unnoticed, they were immediately undeceived, for the man raised his head and eyed them as though he had come for that express purpose.

"Howdy!" said Martin with the tone of one stranger saluting another.

"Howdy!" responded the man, still staring. His horse had already stopped and was nosing the herbage. "Hit ain't Mart Coyle and Tally?" exclaimed Dan Gooch after a speculative silence.

"It is." Talitha sprang up with a laugh. "But you didn't know us right off, though."

"I 'lowed 'twas you and agin I 'lowed 'twas furriners. I never seen young-uns change so in sech a few months. You'd better let me go ahead and tell your mammy thar's comp'ny comin' fer supper." The man slipped from his horse with a chuckle. "If you've walked from the Gap, hit's been a purty stiff climb. Crawl up on the beastie, Tally, I'll keep Mart comp'ny."

After much demurring the girl mounted the sorrel and soon both were lost to sight around the bend.

The sun, a huge, fiery ball, was poised on the bare summit of a peak in the west, when Talitha reached the edge of a cove on the mountain-side. Curling indolently upward, the smoke from a cabin chimney was lost among the trees crowding the slope beyond. In spite of her haste, she halted the not unwilling

Dan Gooch Makes a Discovery 13

sorrel and sat for a few moments gazing at the place she called home. The picture in her memory supplied all invisible details.

The cabin was small, one-roomed, with a loft above, the rough, unbarked logs brown as a beech nut. The mud and stick chimney at one end looked ready to collapse at the first brisk wind. There was no glass in the two shuttered openings which served as windows. The interior of the cabin was scarcely more attractive. Wide cracks showed in the puncheon floor, the walls were smoke-stained. In a corner near the fireplace,—there was no stove,—were several rude shelves filled with coarse, nicked dishes. The loom, warping bars, spinning wheel, a deal table, with three or four chairs and a couple of benches, nearly filled the room. A row of last year's pepper pods and a bunch of herbs still hung from the dingy ceiling.

Outside, two children romped among the geese and chickens. Presently a woman, spare and stooping, appeared, and toiled springward for a bucket of water. Tears filled Talitha's eyes as she went on. Her mother was not old, yet she was as careworn and bent as women twice her age in the village. To the girl, Bentville stood for the world which lay beyond her mountains, and the longing to transform her home life into something like the comfort and harmony of those she had just left was almost overwhelming.

Talitha rode up to the door amid the joyful shrieks of the children and the squawks of the fowls as they flew precipitately in every direction. Dismounting, she released herself as soon as possible from small embracing arms and hurried to her mother who had set down the bucket and was eyeing her daughter perplexedly.

"Hit 'pears ter me you've growed a heap sence you war gone," was all the comment Mrs. Coyle made upon Talitha's changed appearance. "Whar's Mart?" with sudden misgiving as the girl picked up the bucket of water and stepped briskly along at her side.

"He's coming. Dan Gooch gave me a lift on his sorrel and he footed it with Mart."

Talitha went on into the cabin, but her mother lingered outside. She had caught sight of a young, stalwart figure beside their neighbour. She smoothed her old homespun gown with worn, calloused hands, and wished she had the "tuckin' comb" Talitha had sent her for Christmas in her hair.

"Hello, mammy!" Martin put his arms around his mother and kissed her awkwardly.

After Dan Gooch had accepted the hospitable invitation to stay for supper, the three repaired indoors. Talitha had rallied the younger members of the family to her assistance, and was already dishing up the evening meal. A fresh cloth had been laid, and a handful of mountain laurel, in a tin can on the

Dan Gooch Makes a Discovery 15

window-sill, transferred to the centre of the table. At this juncture Sam Coyle appeared from the "fodder patch." After a hasty greeting he retreated to the basin of water outside with a bewildered, company feeling he had not experienced since a college settlement worker had visited them the year before.

At the table he listened with silent pride to the answers which Dan Gooch's volley of questions elicited. He learned that a mountain farm could bring its owner a good living if rightly cultivated, that Talitha had made with her own hands the dress and apron of "store goods" she was wearing. Perhaps his wife had been in the right after all when she insisted on the two older children going to school, although it was against his judgment.

"And you-uns hev been a-larnin' carpenterin'?" continued their neighbour, addressing Martin.

"Yes, I've been working at it all the year, out of school hours," was the reply.

"Then thar's a job waitin' fer you at Squar' Dodd's. His house ain't big 'nough ter suit him, and he's bound ter hev a po'ch and a lean-to on thet place of his'n."

"Thank you ever so much. I'll see Mr. Dodd about it to-night." Martin's eyes kindled at the thought of putting his knowledge to such immediate use.

"I reckon thet school'd be a fine place fer my Abner and Gincy," mused Dan.

"Oh, it would," urged Talitha delightedly. "And Gincy could room with me if I go back next year," with an appealing glance at her father.

Sam Coyle frowned. "I reckon a year's schoolin's 'nough fer any gal. Hit's a sight more'n I ever had," he said surlily.

His neighbour gave a derisive laugh. "Can't neither of us read or write no more'n if we war blind as bats. I hain't any mind ter stand in the way of my chil'ren gettin' larnin', 'specially if hit ain't costin' me nothin'."

The thrust went home, as the speaker intended, for it was well known that Martin and Talitha had paid for their year at school by their own exertions. Also that Sam Coyle had taken little of the added burdens—during their absence—upon his own shoulders.

"Gincy would like it ever so much," pursued Talitha, anxious to preserve peace. "She'd especially like the singing."

"She would, I reckon," agreed her father proudly. "Gincy has a purty ear for a tune, and I'm aimin' ter give her a chanct if I didn't hev one myself," he said, rising to take his departure.

Martin watched him disappear down the slope in silent astonishment. He had supposed Dan Gooch would be the last one to see the "needcessity of larnin'," and here he was the champion of their cause against their own father.

Dan Gooch Makes a Discovery 17

Talitha was briskly clearing away the supper dishes when a couple mounted on one horse rode up to the door. "Howdy!" greeted Sam Coyle, lounging forward with a show of cordiality.

"Shad 'lowed he seen a gal and boy trompin' 'cross the mounting this mornin', and I sez hit wan't nobody but Mart and Tally," said the old woman, slipping cautiously to the ground.

"You war a true prophet fer once, Ann, but I'd be bound nobody'd known 'em anywhere else," declared her brother.

"Plumb spiled, most likely," grumbled Ann. From the depths of her black, slatted sunbonnet the gimlet eyes keenly scrutinized her nephew and niece. "Well, you air growed up fer sure, and I reckon you know more'n the old schoolmaster hisself. Thar ain't nothin' like the insurance o' young-uns thet's got a leetle larnin'," pursued the old woman with acerbity. "Now what I want ter know is, what kin you do thet the gals and boys what never seen Bentville, can't?" Ann Bills had seated herself before the fireplace, removed her sunbonnet, and was lighting the pipe she had taken from her pocket.

"Lawsy, Ann," protested Mrs. Coyle indignantly, "their pappy and me air terrible pleased with what they've larned, and I don't see no call fer you ter be so powerful ornery. If all your six boys hed been gals I'll be

bound thar couldn't one of 'em make a gown like thet Tally's wearin', and she tuk every stitch herself. As fer Mart, you'll know what he kin do 'fore long, I reckon."

Mrs. Coyle and her sister-in-law did not agree on the subject of education. The latter's family of boys had grown to man's estate and married without having mastered the second reader. For once Sam Coyle did not come to his sister's aid. Although he had no intention of allowing his children to return to school, he was swelling with pride at their changed appearance and his tongue was ready to wage a sharp battle in the cause of "larnin'."

Failing to secure an ally, the old dame prudently changed her tactics. "Hit air purty fair work," she admitted in a conciliatory tone, scrutinizing the hem of Talitha's gown. "But I don't set much store by thet kind o' goods; hit can't hold a candle ter homespun when hit comes ter wear. If I war you, I'd put Tally ter the loom; she air old 'nough ter be larnin' somethin' of more 'count."

Talitha turned back to her dishes with a sigh. Martin had escaped Uncle Shad's equally acrimonious tongue and gone to interview Squire Dodd. He did not return until the old couple had taken their departure.

Gincy Gooch came over the very next afternoon. The dinner work was out of the way and Mrs. Coyle was spinning while Talitha

Dan Gooch Makes a Discovery 19

sat on the doorstep at work on the "store goods" Martin had brought his mother for a new gown. Gincy watched the deft fingers wistfully.

"Pappy says you-uns hev larned a heap of things," she remarked. "And you've changed a sight; 'most 'pears ter me you ain't Tally Coyle any more."

Talitha laughed. "Well, I am, and when you've been to Bentville a while you'll change, too."

"Kin you reely read books right off 'thout spellin' out the big words?"

"Yes," Talitha nodded, remembering her shortcomings of only a year ago. If she never went back to school how many things she had to be thankful for. "You'd like the singing, Gincy," she said abruptly, "it's so different from any music you ever heard."

"Diff'runt, how?"

"Well, I'll show you. Just begin some song and don't get off the tune no matter what I sing."

"I ain't never got off the tune yit," reproved Gincy. She began in a clear, sweet voice "The Turkish Lady," an old English ballad (one of many preserved for generations among the mountaineers). It ran thus:

"Lord Bateman was in England born,
He thought himself of a high degree;
He could not rest or be contented
Until he had voyaged across the sea."

Talitha joined Gincy in a mellow alto, and together the two sang verse after verse. The spinning wheel ceased to turn while the spinner listened to this new blending of voices, for the mountain people only sang the air. At the edge of the slope Sam Coyle heard it in amazement. The old ballad was familiar enough, but it had never sounded so beautiful.

Gincy showed no surprise at the innovation. Her hands clasped in her lap she looked with large, dreamy eyes off to the green-topped hills lying peacefully against the shining sky. The echoes crept out of the silences and chanted the words softly over and over again.

When the song was finished, Gincy hardly paused to take breath before she swung into another familiar melody and Talitha followed, her work forgotten. They had hardly reached the third line when a bass voice joined them, and Martin dropped down on the doorstep beside the two girls.

Below, on the creek path, a sorrel horse and its rider had halted. "Thet air Gincy's voice fer sartin. I reckon the Coyles air a-singin', too, but hit sounds diff'runt'n I ever hearn 'em afore; somethin' like them a-choirin' up yander, I reckon," glancing upward. With a regretful sigh he heard the last echo die away.

"Gincy's goin' ter hev a chanct ter git larnin', thet's all," declared Dan Gooch as he jogged slowly homeward.

II

MARTIN SURPRISES GOOSE CREEK

THE next day, Martin began work on the addition to Squire Dodd's cabin. Sam Coyle, much elated at his son's success in securing the job, hastened thither and planted himself in the shade to watch its progress. He was not without company. There were a number who considered the squire had shown undue haste in giving so important a piece of work to a "striplin'," and had gathered to note proceedings and proffer advice.

Martin listened in silent good humour to the wagging tongues. That his employer had confidence in his ability was enough, and he worked with unceasing energy. At the end of the second day the critics were silenced, and before the week was over it had been noised abroad that Sam Coyle's son had come back from school with a trade at his "finger ends 'sides a heap o' book larnin'." The Settlement store was, for the first time in many months, nearly destitute of loungers.

Instead of the intended lean-to, a one story frame addition was built across the front of

the Dodd cabin, shutting the original completely from view of the traveller on the creek path. A wide porch increased the magnificence of the structure, and when a coat of yellow paint with trimmings of a brilliant red denoted the completion of Martin's contract, the spectators were unanimous in agreeing that the mountains had never seen anything quite so grand. The peaks looked down at the innovation with a new dignity—so it seemed to the young carpenter. He had been learning the value of simplicity, and he realized how little his handiwork harmonized with the beauty around it. But he had only carried out the wishes of the squire, and he dismissed the subject from his mind for something more weighty was upon it.

"I've been thinking ever since I came home," he said that night to Talitha, "of something Professor Scott said: 'It isn't enough to get good things for ourselves, we must pass them on.' I wish I could take some of the boys back to school with me."

"I think you can reckon on Abner Gooch and the three Shackley boys already. I call that a pretty fair beginning. And there'll be more. I heard that Dan Gooch said yesterday over at the Settlement, 'If you want ter know what thet school down below here kin teach your young-uns, jest look at Squar' Dodd's manshun yander.'"

Martin laughed grimly. "If they do go

they won't think it such a work of art when they come back."

"When they get back they'll have learned enough to understand, I reckon," responded Talitha. "The thing is to get them there. You ought to see how Gincy's working, and the whole family too, for that matter. I actually believe they've picked most of the berries for ten miles around here. They are at it now. Just think of Dan Gooch going berrying!"

"He has some backbone after all. It's such a pity he couldn't have had a chance when he was young. And that reminds me, I met Gincy 'way over in Bear Hollow yesterday morning at sun-up with a bucket. After berries, I suppose; but I don't see how they're going to eat 'em all."

"Eat 'em! They don't, they're drying 'em to sell. The Settlement store has promised to take every pound. Then Mrs. Gooch is reckoning on her geese feathers, too. If Gincy can only get money enough for a start, she'll find work to help her through the year."

"I reckon so," assented Martin. "They're mighty friendly folks at the school."

"You've saved enough now, haven't you?" Talitha's mind suddenly reverted to her brother's prospects.

"Yes, I'll make it do with the odd jobs I can pick up; but I misdoubt father's being willing for me to go back. He thinks I know

a sight now. He's running all over the country trying to get me another job, and here's the crop going to waste. I reckon I'm needed at home for a spell, anyway," and Martin went gloomily out to work in the much neglected field.

He had seen thrifty orchards and gardens in the little sheltered coves of those great hills near Bentville, and he had often pictured his own home with such a background. Disheartened, the young fellow regarded the task before him for a moment, then rallied his two younger brothers. With the promise of a reward they attacked the weeds among the corn while Martin went on to the little orchard. It was thick with dead wood, and he fell to pruning the branches energetically. With the knowledge he had gained what a change he could make in the place even in the two months left of his vacation.

Over in the garden he could hear Talitha and her mother. Tending garden and milking the cow was as much woman's work, according to the Kentucky mountain code, as washing dishes or making bread. The sound of a sturdily wielded hoe in the earth spurred him on. "I'll go back some time, anyhow, if I live," he declared, striking deep, vigorous blows into a lifeless tree trunk.

Had Martin and Talitha only known, their energy spoke volumes for the Cause lying so near their hearts. A new interest had been

suddenly awakened in the Coyle family. The slightest pretext took their less ambitious neighbours along the creek path curious to see "what Mart Coyle was up ter now." A wide, roomy porch across the front of the cabin—which Martin had skilfully contrived at little expense—served as sitting-room during the warm weather. Here Talitha's wheel whirred diligently in the shadow of the vines which had taken kindly to her late transplanting.

The Coyle enterprise was contagious. Dan Gooch, with a new-born enthusiasm, valiantly led his sons forth to produce order from the confusion around the exterior of the cabin. Inside, Gincy and her mother worked with tireless energy and bright dreams of the future.

From the first Sunday of Martin's and Talitha's return, the Gooch family had taken to "jest droppin' in," during the afternoon, until it had become a settled custom followed by one neighbour after another. Part singing was a novelty of which they never tired. When the blacksmith's eldest son found that he was the possessor of a richer, deeper bass voice than Martin's, his delight was unbounded. There were others besides Gincy who could successfully hold their own in the air in spite of the other parts, although Gincy's clear, bird-like tones rang above theirs on the high notes.

And so the summer wore away, and the heralds of approaching autumn sounded a

warning note in the breezes and fluttered their signals from the mountain slopes.

It was only a week before the time for their departure that Sam Coyle gave a reluctant consent to Martin's and Talitha's return to school. Two others besides Abner and Gincy were to accompany them—Peter and Isaac Shackley, sons of the blacksmith at the Settlement. Peter was to take his horse, a handsome bay of which he was very proud, the fifty miles to Bentville, and then sell it to defray his expenses at the school. It had taken him a long time to determine on the sacrifice, and his was the only sober face in the merry little company which set forth that September morning.

The night before, the other members of the party came to the Coyle cabin in order to make an early start. That six young people were to leave for Bentville the next morning made a stir at Goose Creek. They were favourites in the mountains, and during the evening a dozen families called with some parting gift or admonition. They were not all wisely chosen, but the kindest intentions prompted each offering. From the younger ones there were various gifts of fruit and flowers. Ann Bills had so far relented as to present her niece with two pairs of wool stockings which Talitha could not refuse however much she would have liked to do so. Mrs. Twilliger brought several strings of

freshly dried pumpkin which she much feared Gincy might "git ter hankerin' arter." The Slawson boy, who was "light-minded," brought his pet coon and wept bitterly when Abner gently but firmly refused it. Little Tad Suttle was equally persistent in forcing on them his dog Wulf, who was warranted to keep the bears and painters at a proper distance when the company crossed the mountains.

The Bills family were inclined to consider the occasion a mournful one. If the young people had been going to the ends of the earth instead of but fifty miles away, they could not have been more pessimistic. That Martin and Talitha had returned unharmed seemed to have no weight with them.

"Sho, now," objected the blacksmith jovially, "I ain't goin' ter cornsider my young-uns as lost ter the mountings. I 'low they're jest goin' ter git some larnin' and come back ter help me."

"Book larnin' ain't goin' ter give 'em muscle," objected the elder Bills.

"Law, no, they've got 'nough of thet now. I ain't raisin' a passel of prizefighters. If Kid stays home ter help me one blacksmith's 'nough in a family, I reckon. I've heerd the Bentville school is great on idees, and thet's jest what these mountings air needin' bad."

"You talk like we war plumb idjits, Enoch Shackley," cried Ann Bills, her black eyes

snapping angrily. "I've heerd tell o' folks you'd never 'low had any head stuffin' till their skulls got a crack and you could git a sight of their brains, but I never heerd as this part of the kentry war noted fer sech. Me and my fambly hain't never had ter go borrowin' fer idees."

"Lands, no," said Mrs. Twilliger. "Hold up your head with the best of 'em, Gincy; Goose Creek folks hain't never took a back seat fer nobody."

At last the callers melted away and the weary people they left behind hurried to bed to get what sleep they might before time for their early departure.

As the little party started down the slope the next morning, a wonderful light quavered above the mountain-tops for the most part covered with a thick, gorgeous leafage of crimson, green, and gold flaming out among the duller browns. Now and then a rough, scraggy peak like Bear Knob showed grimly against the sky. Below them the mists lay huddled asleep awaiting the coming of the sun. The cool smell of the night was still in the air. Down where the creek path trailed out of sight came a jubilant chorus of bird voices.

A strange feeling made Gincy's heart beat faster, and a lump rose in her throat. But what might have happened did not, for Talitha, with foresight, reached up and laid a rough,

brown hand tenderly over the one on the pommel of the saddle. Gincy looked down into the blue eyes smiling encouragement and was herself again.

A straggling little procession, they followed the slim stream which curved around the base of the hills. At noon the party stopped to eat their lunch on its banks, and then they left it for a steep climb up the mountain.

An hour before sunset they had made good progress, coming out suddenly upon a cleared cove halfway down the mountain. At the farther side, against a background of pines, stood a large, well-built cabin. Vines tinted with autumn colouring clambered over the broad porch. The space in front was cleanly swept. Back of the low palings in the rear was a large, thrifty garden, and fragrant odours of ripening fruit came from the small, but heavily-laden, orchard.

"You can tell that a Bentville student lives here, all right," said Martin. "This is where Tally and I stayed over night on our way to school last year."

Their approach had been discovered, for two hounds ran around the house barking a joyful greeting. Then a tall, muscular young fellow hurried out of the door, followed by other members of the family.

There was no look of dismay on Joe Bradshaw's face at the size of the party. With

true mountain hospitality they were given a hearty welcome.

Inside the house Gincy looked around curiously. The two rooms were better furnished and neater than even Squire Dodd's, which represented to her the height of elegance. In the living-room the supper was cooking over a stove; the fireplace was not even lighted. A white linen cloth of Mrs. Bradshaw's own weaving covered the table, and there seemed to be plenty of dishes without the makeshifts common in her home and those of other mountain families she knew. True, it was only coarse, blue earthenware, but in her unaccustomed eyes nothing could be finer.

In the next room were two beds covered with blue and white "kivers," also the product of the loom which stood in the corner of the living-room. Pinned on the walls were a half-dozen prints and bright-coloured pictures. Cheesecloth curtains were looped back from the windows, and on the mission table, of Joe's making, was a store lamp with a flowered shade, and more books than Gincy had seen in all her life before.

That night she could hardly sleep for thinking of the wonders awaiting her on the morrow in the promised land of which she had dreamed through all the toil of the long summer days.

III

TALITHA SOLVES A PUZZLING PROBLEM

JOE BRADSHAW was a member of the little party which set forth early the next morning with renewed expectations. Not a cloud hovered in the deep blue of the sky as they followed the devious trails across the mountains and along the foothills, valleyward. At the end of ten miles they reached the railroad. It was the first all but three of the party had ever seen. The horse the two girls were riding shied in terror at sight of the monster puffing forth clouds of smoke and steam. The passengers in the coaches looked curiously out at the bright, young faces shadowed by white sunbonnets. Gincy clung to Talitha and drew a long breath of relief as bell and whistle sounded and the train swept on, its rumble and roar re-echoing among the hills.

After that, the rest of the way seemed short indeed, so near were the travellers to their journey's end. Every few miles now were homes which bore evidences of a thrift and energy which had not yet penetrated far into

the mountains. One by one the stars came out, and a full moon climbed over the ridge and made a silvery, elusive pathway across the foothills. Another turn in the trail, and presently the foot-sore pilgrims came to a smooth pike. A half-hour later they looked upon shadowy roofs among tall trees where lights twinkled faintly in the radiance of the moon.

Martin and Joe hurried ahead along the street sure of a welcome, and they were not disappointed.

"Here are our two standbys again, and they didn't come alone, either," greeted the secretary with a hearty shake of the hand as the boys entered the office.

The girls were taken in charge by the dean, who whisked them off to the dining-room for a late supper. After that, with much contriving, they were stowed comfortably away for the night.

"You'd better go straight to sleep," admonished Talitha. "Half-past five will come before you know it and then the rising bell rings. I expect we'll feel pretty stiff for a day or two."

Gincy only murmured a drowsy reply. She was already dreaming a beautiful dream, quite unaware of what Mrs. Donnelly, the dean, was saying to Miss Howard, her assistant.

"I don't see how we can keep the girl who came with Talitha Coyle. We are overflowing

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already. Two beds in every room upstairs——”

“Can't we manage some way?” urged Miss Howard for the tenth time that day. “She's a bright little thing. If she were only a boy now, and yet the boys are coming in at a great rate this year; it's wonderful!”

“Let me think.” The dean's smooth forehead wrinkled in perplexity. “Well,” with a sudden inspiration, “if that girl from Kerby Knob doesn't put in an appearance—she wrote me that her mother was sick and she was afraid she couldn't—I'll keep Gincy, but if Urilla does come back we shall be obliged to give her precedence because she will be a junior this year.”

So the matter rested, and blissfully ignorant of the fact that her good fortune was another girl's misfortune, Gincy arose in the morning supremely happy. She was not to remain long a stranger, for Talitha was a person who made friends—hosts of them—she had such a way of forgetting Talitha Coyle, and in a few hours they were Gincy's also. She laughed and chatted among the girls as she helped wipe the great stacks of dishes after the early breakfast. There were no lessons yet, but when the morning's work was done and the services at the chapel over, Kizzie Tipton proposed a walk.

“You know the dean said you needn't hurry to get registered,” added her new friend. “I'll

meet you on the front porch in five minutes," and Kizzie ran to her room.

Gincy opened the hall door also in haste. She had thought of something she wished to say to Talitha—who was just going down the steps with her books—and nearly ran against a tall, pale-faced girl carrying a heavy hand-bag. "Oh!" Gincy ejaculated with a swift glance at the wan face. "Jest let me ketch a holt. I 'most tuk you down, I reckon."

The weary eyes brightened. "You're a new girl," asserted the late arrival confidently as Gincy deposited the baggage in a corner of the hall.

"Yes," she nodded, "I reckon I be, but I don't seem ter sense hit much. Hit's the nicest place I ever see fer findin' friends," and Gincy disappeared with a parting smile.

The newcomer sat down in thoughtful silence, forgetting that she had not made known her arrival to the dean. But that lady chanced to espy her from the top of the stairs and slowly descended, inwardly determined that her face should not reveal her embarrassment.

"Well, Urilla, you succeeded in getting here after all," she said with a smile.

"Yes, ma'am," answered the girl, rising respectfully. "Mother's able to sit up most of the time, and she wouldn't hear to my staying home now Sally's big enough to help. If I

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can only manage to stay another year." Urilla gave a long sigh.

The girl was sent to her room to get a little rest before dinner, and Gincy, returning from her walk in a high state of exuberance, was called to the office.

Two hours later, Talitha came unexpectedly upon Mrs. Donnelly. "I have been looking for you," said that lady soberly.—It was a very difficult thing she had to do.—"I am very sorry to be the bearer of such bad news, but we shall be obliged to send Gincy home——"

"Send her home!" echoed Talitha in amazement, turning pale and trembling.

"Yes, Urilla Minter has come back, and there isn't room for both of them; we're crowded beyond the limit now. I've done my best, but not a place can be found for her. I'll keep her name on the books so she will have an opportunity to come back next year." Mrs. Donnelly's heart was sore at parting with one of her flock who was so eager for an education. There were tears in her eyes as she turned away.

Talitha wandered out to a seat on the campus to think over the dreadful tidings. Gincy going home after working so hard all the summer to come! This would be her last chance, for Dan Gooch would never get over her being sent back, and he would hate the Coyles because Gincy would not have thought of attending the school had it not been for

Talitha. All the beautiful, rosy clouds which had glorified the morning sky faded, leaving it dull and grey.

Gincy must not go home; that Talitha instantly decided, but—— The girl sat for a long time struggling with herself, her hands clasped over the precious little pile of books in her lap. She was in a far corner, unnoticed by the merry bands of students passing back and forth. She could hear their laughter and happy chatter. Oh, it was hard, so hard!

At last, Talitha rose quickly as though she were afraid her courage might vanish, and hastened to the hall and straight to Mrs. Donnelly's room. "I've come to tell you," she began breathlessly, with a little tremor in her voice, "that I've—I've decided to go home. Gincy can stay, then. She mustn't go, Mrs. Donnelly, she's been workin' and lottin' on it all summer and her folks wouldn't ever let her come back again. I'll go and you'll give her my place, won't you?"

The dean never forgot the pleading face lifted to hers. It was white and the lips were trembling, but the light of a heroic, self-sacrificing spirit shone in the dark eyes. "Oh, my child," protested the woman, "I can't bear to think of your going home. If I could only plan some way, but I've tried and tried."

"I know it," nodded Talitha, "but I never once thought there wouldn't be room for everybody who wanted to come. Anyway, I'm glad

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Gincy's going to have a chance. You ought to hear her sing, Mrs. Donnelly. And if you'll sort o' mother her a little I'll be real thankful. Gincy's never been away from home before, and her folks were going to feel so easy because I was with her. Don't feel bad, it couldn't be helped, I reckon, and maybe I'll come back next year."

Talitha's heart was heavy indeed as she climbed the stairs to her room. She found Gincy in a corner weeping piteously over the few belongings gathered in a little heap. Talitha knelt beside her and put an arm tenderly around the thin, bowed shoulders.

"Put your things right back, Gincy," she said, "you're going to stay after all. I've just seen Mrs. Donnelly."

Gincy looked up in astonishment that at first was too great for words. "You don't mean hit?" she gasped at last, clutching her friend's arm.

"Sure I do," Talitha nodded with a smile. Her own burden lightened wonderfully at the sight of Gincy's radiant face and suddenly dried tears. She left the girl putting her belongings back in drawers and closet with a joyful haste. Gincy had not even inquired how this transformation had been wrought; it was enough for her to know that she was not to be sent home.

Talitha's next duty was to find Martin and make known her resolution. After a long

search he was discovered in the library with a pile of reference books before him. He looked up with shining eyes. She knew how he rejoiced in the opportunity for another year's work. It would take away half his pleasure to learn that she would not be there to share it, still she was confident that he would see the wisdom of her resolve. At a sign from her he followed wonderingly out back of the building to a seat under one of the large trees of the campus where they would be unnoticed.

"How's Gincy coming on? She isn't getting homesick a'ready, is she?" he inquired.

"Gincy! Not much; she's pleased as can be with everything here. That's what I came to see you about." Talitha paused and looked down at her folded hands, while Martin sat staring at her in bewilderment. "Mrs. Donnelly came to see me this morning," she went on presently. "She told me that Gincy must go home, that there is no place for her. So many girls have come this fall the rooms are crowded."

"Go home!" repeated Martin indignantly. "Oh, we can't let her; she mustn't."

"Of course not. She's been crying till she's 'most beat out, but I've been thinking it over and Gincy's going to stay. I've just seen Mrs. Donnelly again——"

"Well, I'm mighty glad!" Martin gave

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a long breath of relief. "How did you manage it, Tally?"

"I'm going home instead," she answered calmly.

"You!" Her brother sprang up excitedly. "Tally, I won't hear to it!"

"Yes, you will. Sit down, Mart, you'd do the same thing if you were in my place, you know you would. I'm not going to be selfish. Gincy's never had any chance and I've had a whole year here. Maybe I can come back again some time, but if I knew I couldn't I should go just the same."

"But you can't go home alone," Martin objected.

"Yes, I can. I'll take the train to the Gap and I'm not afraid to walk the rest of the way."

"Well, Tally, I suppose you're right," her brother said at last, "but it'll take the sunshine out of the whole year for me, to know that you're missing all this. And I'd counted so on the good times we'd have together."

"Now, Mart, don't you worry about me one minute. I reckon it's all for the best. Maybe there's something special in the mountains for me to do; I'm going to try to think so anyway."

"What reason are you going to give the folks for going home?"

"I'm going to tell them the truth—that there wasn't room for so many girls. I shan't

say a word about Gincy only that she's well and having a fine time."

That afternoon while Gincy was out of the room, Talitha removed the tiny wardrobe she had brought, to make room for Urilla's. Long before light the next morning, while Gincy slept soundly, all unaware of her friend's sacrifice, Talitha boarded the train which could only take her so short a distance toward home. She sank into a seat timidly. She had never travelled alone before, and when she reached the Gap the loneliest part was yet to come.

As the train pulled out she tried to wave a cheerful good-bye to Martin, who stood disconsolately outside in the darkness. The coach was full of people who had evidently travelled all night, for they were in all sorts of positions trying to get a little sleep. Talitha's eyes were sleepless, although she had hardly closed them that night. It was disagreeably warm and stuffy. She longed to open the window, but the girl beside her was propped comfortably in the corner of the seat, oblivious to her surroundings.

Talitha looked at her curiously. She was a mountain girl, that was evident, but not from Goose Creek nor the Settlement—possibly from Redbird. She might be kin to the Twilligers, there were legions of them scattered through the mountains, and she favoured them wonderfully, now Talitha thought of it.

Suddenly the girl opened her eyes and stared

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at Talitha. "I reckon I must hev been asleep," she said with a wide yawn. "Whar did you git on?"

"At Bentville."

"Bentville! What kind of a place is hit? I come purty nigh goin' thar onct and then I changed my mind. I couldn't pin myself down ter book larnin' nohow."

Talitha viewed the speaker with astonishment. "What's your name?" she inquired coldly.

"Piny Twilliger."

"Did you know that Gincy Gooch is going to school at Bentville?" asked Talitha.

"Law me, why Gincy's my cousin. Whatever put hit into her head? I wouldn't hev thought hit of her."

"Then you don't know Gincy," was the retort. "She's as ambitious as can be and loves to study. She's going to be somebody, I tell you. Abner's at school too, and their folks are so proud of them."

"Law me," said the girl again. "I never heerd of any kin ter the Twilligers takin' ter larnin' afore," and she relapsed into silent amazement. She had not recovered speech when the small station at the Gap was reached.

"Ter think I never asked her name!" murmured Gincy's cousin in sudden dismay as Talitha left the car.

IV

THE STORM

WHEN Talitha alighted from the train the sun had not yet risen, but the rosy banners which heralded its coming floated wide across the eastern sky. It was on a morning like this that she and Martin had started homeward with such elation of spirits, such hopes for the coming year. But then summer was just begun; now it had gone and her hopes with it.

She started across the foothills and up the long mountain trail, the old elasticity gone from her step, the hardness of her lot weighting her down. It seemed as though her feet could never carry her the long, weary way home. Upon a jutting crag she stopped and looked back. Far in the distance, cradled among the foothills of the Cumberlands, it lay, the place of her heart's desire. Would she ever see it again?

Talitha looked at the sky. The breakfast bell would be ringing by this time, and happy, laughing faces gathered around the long tables. Her head bowed as though she could hear the fervent grace, and a sob rose in her throat.

Suddenly the petition of a young leader at prayers, the night before, came to her: "Wilt Thou give us strength and courage to meet bravely the trials and temptations of each day." How full of meaning they were to the one who uttered them Talitha well knew. Owen Calfee's face showed with what high courage he was meeting the hardships which had beset his path from early youth.

Talitha fiercely blinked back the tears. "I'm plumb spoilin' everythin' by my foolishness," she thought aloud, unconsciously relapsing into the speech of the mountains. "I reckon hit ain't pleasin' ter the Lord—my thinkin' sech sorry thoughts. I've clean forgotten that I'd ought ter be thankful that Martin could stay and that Gincy's havin' a chance. My, but if she isn't the happiest child!" Talitha rose reluctantly. "I shouldn't like to be caught in the dark, and that's what I'm bound to be if I stop here any longer." She stretched out her hands toward the valley with a wistful gesture of parting. "I'm so glad you're there, Gincy," she whispered. "I wouldn't have you home for nothing."

Through the long forenoon's weary climb up the mountain's interminable slope and over its craggy crest to the other side, she resolutely laid aside all thoughts of her disappointment and began making plans to be put into execution as soon as possible after reaching home.

At noon she was almost thankful that she had not reached the creek where the little party had lunched so happily two days before. Now she spread her simple fare upon a smooth ledge and watched the varied light and shadow across the fast changing foliage as she ate. The birds fluttered and sang in the pines above her head. Now and then one grew bold enough to fly down for the crumbs she scattered upon the ground. Over the opposite edge of the flinty table a pair of bright eyes peered longingly. Talitha laughed as she flung the bushy-tailed visitor her last morsel, and rose to resume her journey.

She planned to reach home by supper time, but it had not been so easy to travel without the aid of a strong arm over the roughest places. No thought of fear had entered her mind until that moment; now the prospect of being alone at night on those wooded heights where the darkness was dense under the thick branching trees made her shrink.

The afternoon was half gone when Talitha dropped down at the foot of a pine, tired and footsore. She was not yet rested from the journey of the two days previous, and it seemed as though her aching feet could never carry her home that night. She sat debating with herself as to the possibility of finding a nearby shelter. Not a cabin was in sight. She looked around anxiously, shading her eyes with her hand, to peer along the ridges. A

broad shaft of sunlight lay across the leafage of the opposite mountain. How vividly it brought out the autumn tints which flecked the green like rich tapestry. Then, with a frightened gasp of dismay, she noticed for the first time the pile of threatening clouds in the west, and the long, deep shadows which lay in the hollows of those great hills.

Over the highest peak of the ridge beyond, they were coming—the slim, mist-coloured lances of the storm. Down the mountain-side they marched, legion after legion. A swift line of fire zigzagged above their heads, and suddenly the sky seemed filled with the rattle of musketry.

Talitha fled, at the first sign of approach, to the shelter of a thick cluster of oaks. She reached it trembling and breathless only to see a cabin a few rods beyond. Without waiting to speculate who its occupants might be, she ran to it, the storm at her back, the wind contesting each step over the rough slope. Her little bundle was a cumbrous weight upon her shoulders.

At the door the girl knocked hurriedly. Her heart was beating fast. It was twilight around her, and the voice of the storm came up with a terrible roar. There was no answer from within the cabin and the door did not open, but in her great stress Talitha entered timidly.

The wind closed the door violently behind

her before she realized that the place was not empty. The feeble flame in the fireplace left the one room mostly in shadow, but it revealed the occupant, a weazened old man, wrapped in a faded quilt, sitting before the hearth. Talitha felt a sudden relief that she was not alone while such a storm raged outside. A man sick and perhaps in need of care was not to her an object of fear even though a stranger.

"I declar' if hit ain't Tally Coyle!" came in wheezy tones from the depths of the bed-quilt. "I 'lowed you war off ter the valley school long 'fore this."

Talitha could hardly find her voice so great was her astonishment. She had gone farther out of her way than she knew to stumble upon her old teacher's cabin. "Why, howdy, Mr. Quinn, you aren't sick, are you?" she said, throwing down her bundle and shaking the raindrops from her moist skirts.

"Jest ailin' a leetle mite. I hev'n't been what you mought call robustious the hull summer, and last week I was took with a mis'ry in my chist. I've been honin' the hull day ter see some one and here you've come. I reckon the Lord sent you." The old man broke into a wheezing cough which left him panting.

Talitha went to the fireplace and piled on fresh wood with a lavish hand. There was a brisk crackling as the flames shot upward

merrily. "I'm going right to get supper," she declared, forgetful of her weariness.

Si Quinn spread his hands before the blaze with a sigh of content, and watched the girl as she bustled about the cabin. There was much to do before even a simple meal could be prepared, for the schoolmaster's housekeeping even in health was sadly at variance with the methods Talitha had learned at school the past year.

She brushed the floor as best she could with the stubby old broom, and then attacked the pile of soiled dishes energetically. Outside, the storm raged with fury, and a little rivulet trickled from under the door across the rough boards of the floor. Later the corn pone was set to baking, while the girl fried a platter of bacon and a dish of potatoes. In a corner of the fireplace, on a few coals among the hot ashes, the coffee pot sent forth an odour delightful to the nostrils of a half-famished man. Si Quinn sniffed it eagerly.

"I hain't set down ter sech a meal o' vittles sence I war ter your house," he remarked gleefully as he drew his chair to the table and helped himself liberally to the homely fare. "A squar' meal will do me a heap more good'n medsun. If I war reel sodden in selfishness, I'd wish you hadn't any kin and could stay right along here with me. But I ain't, I'm thankful you've got a better place'n this ol' shack."

Talitha looked at him curiously. She had never seen her old schoolmaster in such a kindly, paternal mood. In her younger days, the lean, spectacled face had inspired her with awe and a kind of terror. But since her return from Bentville she thought of him with pity, not unmingled with contempt, at his ignorance and dogged belief in the strange theories which still prevailed in the isolated portions of the mountains. She looked at the haggard old face that showed unmistakable signs of past suffering, with a troubled conscience.

At last Si Quinn leaned back with a long sigh of satisfaction. "I reckon you've 'bout saved my life, Tally. I war beginnin' ter feel hit warn't much use ter hold on ter this world when thar warn't nobody seemin' ter care speshul. Then you came along jest as though you'd been blowed acrost the mountings. I'm mighty cur'us 'bout hit, Tally. Only a couple o' days ago, Dan Gooch looked in and said you-uns, and Ab and Gincy, hed started fer school. Did the folks down thar reckon you'd hed 'nough larnin' and send you back?"

Talitha hesitated. She wisely felt the need of being very cautious as to the report which would go abroad. "We did go," she acknowledged, "but the Girls' Hall was full—just running over, the dean said—and the folks around had taken all they could. There wasn't another one could be squeezeed in, so I came—

back," she concluded, a renewed sense of her disappointment nearly overwhelming her.

"Whar's Gincy?" demanded the old man keenly.

"Oh, she stayed. She hasn't ever had a chance, you know. She'd have been terribly disappointed to have had to come home, and so would her father; he's been lottin' on it all summer. I'm so glad they let her stay," Talitha added, fervently hoping that her secret had not slipped out unaware.

"Hit's cur'us, mighty cur'us," mused Si Quinn, looking off into the fire as though he had not heard a word Talitha had been saying. "Here I'd been askin' and askin' the Lord ter send you here, then Dan Gooch comes 'long and 'lows I won't set eyes on you agin till next summer and here you be. Ain't hit cur'us?"

"I never heard you were sick," faltered the girl. "I'd have come before if I'd only known."

"That wan't hit," rejoined the schoolmaster. "I've allers done fer myself, sick or well. I hain't ever been used ter bein' coddled afore, that ain't what's on my mind, Tally. I wanted ter tell you thet I've been a sorry teacher, but I never sensed hit till you-uns came back from Bentville. I never had no sech chance ter git larnin', and hit seems a turrible pity you couldn't hev stayed, but I know 'thout your

tellin' me that you-uns came back ter give Gincy a chanct——”

“Oh, you mustn't tell,” implored Talitha. “Father'd be so angry.”

“Hit shan't git no further, but hit war jest like Tally Coyle ter do hit, and mebbe the Lord had a hand in hit, too. I cal'late He knew jest how much the Goose Creek school needed a teacher, fer I ain't ever goin' back thar agin, Tally. My teachin' days air over, but my heart hones fer those pore lambs that's so set on gittin' larnin'. I want you ter take 'em and teach 'em all you kin. Mebbe next year you-uns kin go back ter Bentville. Hit seems queer they couldn't hev put up some kind of a shack fer the gals ter stay in. A lot of strong, young fellers like Mart, now, could hev taken holt.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” agreed Talitha, “but it would take money to make it comfortable, and the Bentville folks haven't any to spare.”

The old man nodded thoughtfully. “Hit's mighty strange when I've heerd thar's folks livin' in cities that's more money'n they can anyways spend. And here's the mounting boys and gals a-thirstin' fer the larnin' they can't git.” The girl crouched before the fire puzzled over this new problem, while Si Quinn creaked back and forth in the old rocker.

Suddenly it stopped. “I wish you'd git the Book, Tally, over on the chist, and read a spell; you do hit so easy-like.”

Outside, in the wild night, the wind wailed loudly along the wooded ridges of the great hills and hurled itself in angry gusts against the little cabin unnoticed, as Talitha read chapter after chapter in clear, unfaltering tones. The old man looked fondly down at her with a paternal pride. His heart was at peace, for he had bequeathed his life work to younger, more capable hands, and he rested content.

V

AN UNEXPECTED RIVAL

THE consternation at the Coyle cabin was great indeed when midway of the next afternoon Talitha appeared, after making the old schoolmaster as comfortable as possible. Although Sam Coyle had given but a grudging assent to his daughter's return to Bentville, he now loudly bewailed the necessity which prevented her from "gittin' more larnin'."

His wrath cooled, however, when he learned that Si Quinn, who was highly esteemed by the dwellers around Red Mountain, had abdicated his place in the Goose Creek school in Talitha's favour. It was an unprecedented honour, as "gal" teachers were not looked upon favourably among the mountaineers. It being the prevailing opinion that only a man could fill the position with the requisite dignity and severity.

Remembering the tradition, the beginning was an ordeal from which the girl inwardly shrank. She had never felt so helplessly ignorant in all her life, although she had so often smiled with her brother over Si Quinn's incompetency.

It was soon rumoured that the old man had sent for Talitha Coyle to come home and finish the remaining school months. In the mountains, school begins the first of July and ends the last of December; when the heavy rains and snows make travel well-nigh impossible. For a week the little flock of pupils had been teacher-less, and Talitha was admonished to make all haste to pass the required examination and begin her duties. The county seat was twenty-five miles away, and she made preparations to start for it the very next morning, her father accompanying her. Fortunately, that night Dan Gooch brought word to the Coyle cabin that Mr. Breel, head of the board of examiners, was at the Settlement and would willingly give Talitha an examination if she could be on hand the next morning.

With fear and trembling she set forth at dawn the next day to return at night in triumph. It had not proved so terrible an ordeal as she had imagined. Mr. Breel had been very kind and wished her success in her undertaking.

Before Monday morning came, which should see Talitha installed as mistress of the little school, complications arose in the shape of Jake Simcox, a tall, fiery-headed, raw-boned youth. Noting the old schoolmaster's growing infirmities the past year, he had resolved to secure the place. That it was about to be wrested from him by a "gal" proved too much

for human endurance. Laboriously he travelled from one mountain home to another pleading his cause. But unfortunately for him, his first call on Dan Gooch made an implacable enemy, for he thoughtlessly mentioned the Bentville school in terms of derision, further adding that "Si Quinn, the smartest man in Goose Creek, didn't need ter chase off ter git larnin'."

But Jake departed, feeling that he had failed miserably in making the desired impression. He would have felt still more convinced that the fates were against him could he have known that Dan Gooch immediately mounted his horse and set out with all possible haste to thwart the new candidate's efforts.

Dan secretly surmised the sacrifice Talitha had made that Gincy should have her chance, and his gratitude gave him a ready tongue in the former's behalf. It was late that night when he and his jaded steed returned victorious, for every member of the board and a number of patrons of the school had been surprised at the Settlement store, and there Jake Simcox's cause was lost, it being the opinion of the trustees that the old schoolmaster had a right to name a substitute for the remainder of the term.

Jake Simcox did not take his defeat kindly, and to be beaten by a "gal" was the bitterest drop in his cup. He had a brief pleasure in knowing that when Talitha began school a

number of children whose parents were his adherents would be absent.

The young teacher was gathering her courage to meet the conditions to which she had been accustomed all her life; suddenly they appalled her. How could she make that bare and desolate place cheerful and inviting to her pupils?

Early that Monday morning, long before the time for her scholars to arrive, she started for the schoolhouse. Halfway up the slope she paused to consider it—a small log cabin set in the midst of blackberry vines and tall, brown weeds which reached to the eaves. A narrow, worn path led through the tangle to the low, front door. Talitha hurried on breathlessly and opened it. The shutter over the one glassless window at the rear was also thrown back to let a draught of fresh air through the damp, musty place. In one corner was a rusty sheet-iron stove, near it a number of plank benches without backs; while on the opposite side a rude desk and a single chair completed the furnishings. There were no blackboards, no maps. The walls were as bare and uninteresting as when Si Quinn sat in the seat of authority and ruled his little flock—she the most timid and shrinking of them all—with a rod of iron.

She sat for a long time thinking until a certain project entered her mind. It was something to be carefully considered. She sprang

up and filled a tin can with water for the flowers and reddening vines she had gathered on the way, and placed it on her desk. Next, a large picture calendar was pinned to the wall and several pictures from a newspaper supplement—a part of her possessions acquired at Bentville.

A stream of sunlight through the open window lighted the gay colours on walls and desk. The children hovered about the door in amazement until they were bidden to enter. They were all small but Billy Gooch, the eldest, who was short and stocky for his fourteen years and quite prepared to be his young teacher's most zealous champion.

The feeling of timidity with which Talitha began her duties vanished before the morning was over; and in its place was a great anxiety to help her pupils and make more attractive the cheerless place which only a wide stretch of the imagination could call a schoolhouse. The latter seemed an impossibility, but when she reached the creek path that night on her way home, she found Dan Gooch waiting for her, eager for the earliest news of the day's proceedings. To this sympathetic listener she told her needs and plans. He heard her to the end with a silent gravity which gave little sign of encouragement, but at dawn the next morning, Dan was in the saddle wending his way to the Settlement store. The fitch of bacon in his saddlebag had been secretly purloined

from the family's scanty store to be bartered for a few lengths of sawed timber and a small quantity of black paint. Dan correctly surmising that the storekeeper, being a patron of the school, would add his own contribution in the way of generous measure beside the nails and loan of a hammer.

A few days later when Talitha entered the schoolroom, two large blackboards nailed securely to the rough walls met her astonished eyes. Si Quinn had never been able to evoke the interest which had so suddenly been aroused in the Goose Creek school.

The secret which the young teacher had so patiently guarded for weeks was at last revealed in the shape of maps and several much needed books. A bundle of papers and magazines from the Bentville school was a welcome addition to Talitha's slender stock of material. A lump rose in Dan Gooch's throat as he helped her unpack the box from the city publishing house and hang the maps where the best light from the window would fall upon them. No words were needed to tell him that a large part of the money, hoarded so carefully for Talitha's expenses at Bentville, had been spent in their purchase, and three of his children would be benefited by them. Mentally he resolved that it should all be returned to her some day in good measure.

Si Quinn was not ignorant of his former pupil's successes. As often as his health per-

mitted he hobbled up the winding path and sat contentedly, like a happy child, listening to the young teacher explaining things of which he had never heard. At times he would shake his head in bewilderment, but he never disputed her word, even when his most cherished theory—that the earth was square—was disproved. His dulled brain failed to grasp the explanation, but the bigoted faith in his own meagre stock of knowledge died pitifully away.

Jake Simcox also was not unmindful of his rival's success as a teacher. With increasing anger he heard her praises sounded. Already his friends had yielded to their children's entreaties and sent them to school. Jake kept aloof from the place until one day, wandering idly across the foothills, he came suddenly in full view of the schoolhouse perched on the side of Red Mountain. Its worn, weather-beaten logs looked ancient enough against the autumn-tinted foliage. As he looked, the scowl on his face deepened. He hesitated a moment, then took the trail toward it. The place would be deserted for it was long past school time; there was not a house in sight, still he approached it cautiously with sly, furtive glances around.

Before he reached the building he could see that the weeds and blackberry bushes had been exterminated, and in their places were broad-leaved ferns planted close to the rough sides,

and a healthy ivy that in another year would give both grace and beauty to the walls. Jake eyed these changes with a sneer. He tried the door; it was locked, an unheard-of thing which he also resented. After much effort he unfastened the shutter, threw it back, and sprang into the room.

The light of the setting sun streamed in broad shafts over the crest of the mountain straight into the schoolhouse and illumined it to the farthest corner. The autumn flowers and vines on the desk glowed crimson. The blackboards, maps, and pictures had transformed the place; it was bare no longer. A pail of water on a box, with a basin, towel, and soap, was another innovation.

Secretly, Jake Simcox felt himself dwindle and grow small before such superior knowledge, yet it only served to rouse him to greater indignation that a "gal" should be better qualified to teach than he. Striding to the desk he turned the leaves of the text-books Talitha cherished so carefully, with a rough hand, shaking his head over the bewildering pages. Naturally impetuous, his fiery temper once thoroughly aroused swept him away in unreasoning wrath. At last he dropped upon a bench, moodily taking note of every object around him until they seemed seared into his memory.

The sun sank behind the mountain's crest

and the long shadows deepened down the slopes. They crept silently in at the open window and filled the room with gloom, and still he huddled there frowning until only a faint, grey light struggled at the square opening. Then Jake moved slightly. Two forces were wrestling within him—one very feebly, now worn out with the unequal conflict. He sprang up, and, listening at every step, closed the shutter cautiously and struck a match. There was a basket of pine cones and crisp leaves behind the stove. He lifted the lid and thrust them in. Another match and the mass was ablaze. Recklessly the wood from a generous box full was thrown upon it, and then in the midst of this furnace of flame hastily, as though his conscience would smite him in the act, he caught the books from the desk and threw them upon the pile. The pictures from the walls followed, the maps—what he could tear off in great clinging shreds—were also added to the holocaust.

The stove was red hot by this time and roaring like a young volcano. The miscreant burned his fingers putting on the cover, and then it glowered at him like a red monster as he watched it. Already his rage was somewhat cooled; the provocation which had led to such a deed began to look miserably small. He looked around at the bared walls and wished he could put everything back as he found it.

But instead of dying down the fire seemed to wax hotter; there was a snapping and crackling in the short length of pipe. A strange smell suddenly pervaded the place which the frightened Jake knew was the mud and stick chimney. It was afire, and while he stared in consternation, he heard it crumble and fall.

For a moment the young fellow stood rooted to the spot. In his thirst for revenge he had committed a most serious offence, for which the mountaineers—a law unto themselves—would not hesitate to mete out a swift punishment. The cabin was doomed. The flames had leaped to the roof; the stovepipe reeled and hung tipsily, ready to drop in a moment.

Terror stricken, Jake Simcox flung back the shutter and leaped out into the darkness. Like some wild thing of the mountains he fled down the slope, on and on, only looking back once to see forked tongues of light against the sky reaching higher and higher, until a swift, illumining flash told that the great pine behind the little schoolhouse had caught fire, and like a signal torch was blazing his shameful deed to all the mountains. Where could he go to escape the consequences?

He turned toward a thicket of young trees to aid his escape, but as he reached it a lumbering body emerged and proceeded leisurely toward the creek, the measured jingle of a bell marking every step.

VI

HUNTING A VARMIN'T

SUPPER was late at the Gooch cabin. Brindled Bess, who daily supplied a large portion of the evening meal, had strayed farther away than usual. For more than an hour Billy and his sister had been searching the mountain-side.

From his doorstep Dan looked gloomily forth into the fast gathering night. If the animal, suddenly startled at the brink of a ledge, had leaped over, it would be a sore calamity to the family. Dan listened to the clatter of dishes inside the cabin until hunger and suspense overcame him. He started up and with rapid strides disappeared across the mountain in a haste entirely foreign to his habits.

Both eye and ear were keenly alert. There was a strange, coppery glow on the eastern horizon. It reached far above the treetops, lurid and threatening against the soft blue of the evening sky.

"Some foolish feller's let his bresh fire git away from him, I reckon," commented Dan. But he went on without hearing a sound save those of the night.

Suddenly, there was a crackling of bushes above the creek path, the thud of hurried, stumbling steps. They came nearer until he could hear panting breaths, and Sudie was flying past him white-faced, wild-eyed, her hair streaming out like a frightened dryad of the mountains.

Dan caught roughly at her arm, and but for his grip she would have fallen in terror. "What's the matter? Whar's thet cow critter?" he demanded.

Sudie struggled with her sobs. "Oh, pappy, the schoolhouse is afire! Hit's all-burnin'-up!" she gasped.

"What!" ejaculated her father in amazement.

"Hit shore is," asseverated Billy, coming up red-faced and panting. "We war a-headin' the cow critter this way when we seen the fire a-bustin' out'n the roof. Hit's——" But Dan had not waited to hear more. He was sprinting in the direction of the schoolhouse like a boy. His children watched him for a moment in open-mouthed astonishment at such unheard-of alacrity on their father's part, then followed.

A good quarter of a mile brought him in plain sight of the burning building, where he could plainly see the futility of further effort. The little schoolhouse was a mass of flame, but the old, well-seasoned logs would burn for hours yet. Fortunately the heavy shower of the morning prevented the flames from

spreading, the weeds and bushes had been so thoroughly cleared away. Only the sentinel pine at the back of the cabin was doomed.

Sudie clung to her father, sobbing wildly. "What'll Tally say? We can't never go to school no more," she wailed.

"Hesh, honey, hit don't do no good ter take on thet a-way," urged Dan. "Somebody must hev been mighty keerless with matches or the like ter hev fired hit. I reckoned Tally'd hed more sense."

"Hit warn't her," Billy burst out, anxious to vindicate his teacher. "Hit war thet Jake Simcox, I'll be boun'. Jest as we hove in sight of the place I seen him a-scootin' fer the pines like a painter war after him."

"The low-down, sneakin' varmint! Thet's jest who did hit, and he 'lowed not ter git ketched in the night time. He'll git larned better. The dark'll kiver a heap o' things, but no sech deed as this." All the fierceness that lies smouldering in the nature of the average mountain man leaped into as fierce a flame as that consuming the little schoolhouse. His younger children's opportunities had been snatched from them by this miscreant. He should not escape—a swift, deserved punishment should be meted out to this offender as only mountain men could measure it.

"Run home, Sudie, and tell your mammy she'll hev ter tend ter the cow critter ter-night,

me and Billy won't be back fer a spell. Thar's a heap ter be done before mornin'."

His father's ominous tone startled Billy. It brought to memory stories he had heard of the Twilliger and Amyx feuds—his mother was a Twilliger. He trembled.

"Son," said Dan as Sudie disappeared, "do you 'low you can make the Coyle place ter-night?"

"I reckon so," answered Billy, bravely trying to forget that it was long past his supper time. Mountain justice never waited on hunger.

"Clip up thar and back as soon as you kin, and tell Sam Coyle fer me, thet we shall expect ter see him at the Forks ter-morrow mornin' by light, ter hunt varmints. They may hev left the kentry, but we'll smoke 'em out if they're ter be found. Kin you remember?"

"Yes, pappy."

"Well, I'm goin' ter the Twilligers. I kin git the boys ter push on to the Settlemint, and then the news'll carry fast enough, I reckon," and father and son parted.

At daybreak the Forks was the scene of an assembling of the clans. Old scores were forgotten. They were meeting in a common cause which had suddenly endeared itself to all. Not one of the older men but had children among Tally's flock, and they had begun to realize what the school had meant to them.

Nearly all of the company were horseback, but every member carried a "shooting iron," a fact which had its own significance.

"If we could hev took after that varmint last night, I reckon we could hev treed him," said Eli Twilliger. "But he'd be a plumb fool if he warn't out of the kentry by this time. Hit's a mighty good thing he hasn't any kin in these parts."

"Them long legs of his'n could take him cornsiderable fur, but he hasn't any hoss critter ter save his strength. I reckon he ain't out of reach yit. He never war no great hand ter exert hisself, Jake warn't," drawled the blacksmith.

"Well, he's gittin' further off while we're argefyin'," objected Dan Gooch testily. "I 'low hit's time we war gittin' down ter bizness. Some of you fellers take the trails 'tween you, and Sam and I'll go 'long the creek. We'll meet whar the old schoolhouse war, and if you've run down any game you kin bring hit along."

At nine o'clock the party straggled in from different directions empty-handed. Eli Twilliger was the last one. His had been a hard, rough climb. Thin and wiry, sure of foot as a wild cat, and as ready to pounce upon the object of his search, not a man knew so well the hiding places those mighty hills afforded. His shirt was torn, his hands and face bore scratches received in a careful search through

the narrow subterranean passages which honey-combed the cliffs. Tired and hungry, he was in an ugly mood as with long strides he made toward the group gathered at the edge of the pine thicket.

Dan Gooch turned toward him with a warning finger which he resented. "What's doin'?" he growled. "Hev you caged the varmint and air makin' a show of him?" He peered curiously over the intervening shoulders and was suddenly silenced.

In sight of the charred, smouldering ruins from which still issued little puffs of smoke, Talitha, nothing daunted by her ill fortune, had gathered her little flock. Smiles had begun to cover their tear-stained faces. It was a delightful novelty to sit on that mossy, sun-flecked bank and prepare the day's lessons. Billy Gooch shared his large slate with the youngest of the Twilligers, and two small girls bent industriously over the same book.

The eyes of the rough mountaineers moistened, their hands tightened upon their rifles ominously. There was a stir among the foremost, and Si Quinn faced them. His face was like a thunder cloud. One crutch waved so threateningly that those nearest shrank back. "What air you goin' ter do 'bout hit? That's what I want ter ask. You might hev knowed you couldn't ketch that feller; he wan't brung up in the mountings fer nothin'. Hit was as big a piece of devilment as I ever

heard of, but mebbe hit won't be the worst thing could hev happened, except fer the leetle gal losin' the money she put inter hit. Let's go ter work and put up somethin' thet won't shame us. You-all know thet old shack warn't no way fitten fer a schoolhouse. I can't help you ter cut a stick of timber much as I'd give fer the strength ter do hit, but I'll give 'nough ter make up fer all Tally lost——"

"Sho now, Si, we ain't goin' ter let you do hit," interrupted the blacksmith. "We'll jest count your advice wuth thet much, and I reckon hit air. If we ain't robustious 'nough ter put up another schoolhouse and git what Tally needs for our young-uns, I 'low we're a sorry lot——"

"How you do go on, Enoch," jibed Eli Twilliger, pushing his way to the front. "Air you intendin' ter take the stump fer the next 'lection? Let's git down ter bizness. Thar ain't nothin' I can see ter hinder us from startin' ter-morrow mornin', and if the weather is fair Tally shall hev her schoolhouse in two weeks. Ain't thet so, boys?"

For answer, a shout went up that started the echoes from their hiding-places in the hills. Talitha and her flock looked up at them wonderingly. She was too far away to comprehend what good fortune was to be hers, but she could rejoice that something had restored the men to good humour. Greater than sorrow at the frustrating of her plans and the

loss in which her small savings had been invested, was her horror at the revival of the old feud spirit. She had learned at the Bentville school the terribleness of it. In agony she had watched her father the previous night as he cleaned and loaded his rifle. Jake Simcox had done a despicable, cowardly thing, but she could not wish him dealt with according to the code of mountain justice.

At noon she sent the children home and walked slowly beside the schoolmaster. There were many questions she wished to ask him, but she kept silent, knowing that he would speak of his own accord or not at all.

"Hit war jest as I 'lowed," he said at last. "Jake took time by the forelock and mighty well he did."

"Oh, I'm so glad they didn't find him!" exclaimed Talitha in a tone that struck the schoolmaster oddly.

"What's thet, leetle gal! Mighty queer talk fer the gran'darter of a Bills." The faded eyes twinkled.

"I can't help it, it isn't right; and it's a terrible thing for folks to remember all their lives!"

"Pore leetle gal," the old man nodded understandingly. "You warn't bigger'n Sudie, I reckon, time o' the Amyx shootin'. 'Twar a shame ter saddle you with sech mem'ries. I never did hev much use fer sech doin's, and I said so, but hit warn't a grain o' use. You

might jest as well talk ter a passel of hounds arter a Bushy tail. But chirk up, you won't see Jake in these parts agin. What we're most consarned 'bout now is whar you're goin' ter keep school when the ugly weather comes on."

They had come to the parting of the ways, and here Talitha left the old man hobbling painfully toward his cabin.

Si Quinn's progress homeward was slow. He stopped now and then to regain his breath and chuckle feebly to himself. "I reckon she thinks I've a heart of stun ter take hit so ca'm, but I 'low Jake Simcox didn't do sech a bad thing. Hit war worse fer hissself than fer Goose Creek. Law, what'll the gal say when she hears of hit! I reckon I'd better be sendin' fer them school fixin's ter-morrow." He had reached the cabin door, and now he shuffled inside, closing it carefully. Shadowed by pines, the place was always gloomy enough even at mid-day with the shutters thrown wide. Now he uncovered the coals on the hearth, laid on a few small sticks, and swung the battered old tea kettle over the blaze. Then he drew up his chair cosily before it, and thrusting his hand into his trousers' pocket brought forth a small leather bag. From it he counted a number of bills, smoothing each one tenderly across his knee.

"She shall hev 'em," he said aloud. "I'll do without somehow, and hit won't be fer

long. The old man's nearin' the end of the trail——" He glanced around uneasily, with a vague consciousness of something—he knew not what. In the far corner of the cabin a pair of eyes, bloodshot and wild, glared at him from under a thatch of red hair.

The old man grasped the money. It disappeared in his shirt as he staggered to his feet and faced the intruder.

"You needn't be afeard, I ain't goin' ter tech hit." The figure issued from the corner lamely. In the light it was still more forbidding. A bruise on the forehead made a disfiguring, parti-coloured lump on his otherwise pale, drawn face. "I ain't teched a thing, not even a crumb, tho' I'm 'most famished," he growled.

"Hush, you crazy loon!" Si Quinn raised a warning finger.

"Aw, yes, I know," sneered the young fellow recklessly. "The dogs air arter the wolf and they kin hev him." He threw up his arms wildly.

"Set down in thet cheer and be still," commanded the old man.

Jake dropped obediently into a seat.

"I 'lowed you war out'n the kentry. Why didn't you make tracks when you had a chanct?"

"I did aim ter," answered Jake Simcox, "but I fell, crawlin' over thet ledge by the Gulch, and I didn't know nothin' till this

mornin'. I could hear the men thrashin' the bushes all 'round me, but I was jest out of sight of 'em. I wish fer the land they'd tuk me then and thar and done with hit."

"The way of a transgressor is shorely hard," exclaimed the old man pityingly.

"I didn't go fer ter fire the place, Si, I shore didn't. I jest thought ter burn the books and sech. Oh, I don't know what made me do hit, 'less I was plumb crazy!" Jake bowed his head in his hands and groaned in agony.

The schoolmaster set the coffee pot upon the coals, where it simmered gently. "Sho now, Jake," he said kindly, "you're all beat out. Draw up and hev a bite; hit ain't much but hit'll put some heart in you. I don't cornsider thet jest burnin' thet old shack war sech a turrible sin; hit war the sperit you done hit in. You did 'low to burn all thet pore gal spent most of her savin's on, and thet was the meanest part of the hull bizness. I allers said thet temper of yours would bring you ter grief. Hit's like a skeery hoss critter; when hit gits loose you never can cal'late on all the didos hit's goin' ter cut up. Do you think thet if you hed another chanct you hev got grit 'nough ter turn 'round in your tracks?"

Jake reached a hand over the table and grasped the hard, shrivelled one. "Oh, I shore would if I could only hev hit," he an-

swered humbly. "I shore would, but hit's too late."

"Hit ain't," contradicted the old man cheerfully. "So long as you see the error of your ways, I'll see thet you git out of this bizness hopin' hit's a lesson you won't forgit."

Until Jake Simcox was able both mentally and physically to make the journey, he remained in the schoolmaster's cabin, hiding away in the little loft at the least sign of danger.

Late the third night after a hearty supper, Si Quinn filled his knapsack with provisions and slung it across the young shoulders. "Hike over the Ohiar line as quick as you kin," he admonished, "and then find a job near a school whar you kin git some larnin'. I'm goin' ter give you this," putting a bill in the young fellow's hand. "Hit'll help you out till you git work, if you're savin'. I'd make hit more, but most of the rest is goin' fer books and maps fer Tally's new school-house they're buildin' fer her."

Jake looked up shamefacedly; the money seemed to burn his hand, but to what straits might he be brought if he refused it. "I'll pay hit all back—every cent," he faltered, "and I shan't ever fergit what you've done fer me." Then he was swallowed up by the darkness.

VII

THE JAM SOCIAL

THE tiny, blue calcimined room with one window looking southward seemed almost palatial in comparison with Gincy's humble home quarters. Instead of the overhanging mountains were the foothills and the college gardens.

She tried to picture the scene back home without her at this early hour. Her mother milking Brindled Bet, Billy feeding the pigs, and her father—she couldn't be thankful enough he wasn't like Sam Coyle—getting ready to gather the "crap" in the south cove.

There was a slight stirring in the lower berth of the double-decker. "Talitha," she called out softly. "Air you awake?" But the voice which answered was not Talitha's.

"It's Urilla," it said hesitatingly.

Gincy leaned over and her eyes sought the occupant of the cot below. Propped up on the pillow was the pale face of the girl who had arrived yesterday. The solemn brown eyes looked straight up into hers inquiringly as though not at all sure of a welcome. "I reckon you're some surprised," she said.

"You were asleep when I came in last night and I aimed to keep pretty still."

"Yes," answered Gincy rather dazed. "But whar's Talitha?"

Urilla shook her head. "Mrs. Donnelly sent me here—I had this room last term. I reckon Talitha's on this floor, though. The first and second year girls are mostly together."

Gincy swung down and began dressing without another word. She would interview Talitha at breakfast; perhaps they could arrange to room together after all. Urilla looked too sober for a roommate. "Whar you from?" Gincy asked finally, rolling up her hair.

"Jackson County," Urilla answered promptly. "I rode twenty miles yesterday and the road was might rocky. Where'd you come from?"

"Over in Clay," Gincy smiled into the tired face as she answered. "I should think you'd be plumb tickled to be back. Seems like you couldn't stay away from here nohow, but I heerd you say your mammy war sick," she added, anxious not to appear lacking in friendly interest.

"Not bed sick, or I couldn't have come. She's up, but I keep studying about her and wondering if Sallie—that's my next sister—will keep her from working. Mother's had a spell of fever and don't seem to get strong."

Apparently, Urilla was fumbling in the little trunk on the floor for some article of wearing apparel, but Gincy saw the teardrops, and instantly her tender heart warmed. She stooped over and took the pale face between her two hard little palms. "You mustn't fret, honey, mammy had the fever a couple of years back, and she's robustious as kin be now."

Urilla looked the thanks her lips were unable to speak. In a minute she had regained her composure, and by the time the breakfast bell sounded, her few belongings were carefully hung in her half of the little closet, the bedclothes airing, and the tiny dresser in perfect order.

Together they went down the long flights of stairs, but not to the same dining-room. Gincy had been assigned to a table in the Annex where Martin and Talitha ate, but the latter had not arrived. Silently she waited for the blessing, and then catching Martin's eye, "Whar's Talitha?" she inquired.

"I don't know—exactly," he answered with hesitation and truthfully, he thought. She might be anywhere between Clover Bottom and Lost Creek by this time.

Gincy ate her oatmeal without suspicion. Why should Martin know after all, when he roomed halfway across the campus? Another thought came to her. Perhaps Talitha had volunteered to go to one of the cottages that

she might stay in the hall. It was just like her to be so unselfish.

This was the morning for registering, and Gincy felt very new indeed. In the absence of Talitha, Urilla and Kizzie Tipton offered to act as escorts. It seemed hours before her end of the line reached the desk and she was assigned to an examination in the Industrial Building a block away. Her sunny face was quite woe-begone as they started.

"Don't you fret," admonished Urilla. "I know just how you feel, but you needn't be afraid."

"I'm plumb 'shamed of my ignorance. I won't be nowhar 'side of you-all," Gincy answered disconsolately.

"You'll be just where I was last year," consoled Kizzie.

"Do you reckon so? Well, I'm bound ter work every minnit now I've got started." Gincy's mouth showed an even line of determination. She looked around curiously as they entered the big, brick building. On either side of the wide stairway were the rooms for cooking and sewing. Students were passing in and out.

"I've had cooking," said Urilla, "and I've taught Sallie to make good bread."

"I'd rather take sewing; it's easier." Kizzie's black eyes twinkled.

"If I had my ruthers it would be cookin',"

declared Gincy. "I could help mammy a heap; hit's better to move 'round some, too."

A crowd was constantly passing up and down the stairs leading to the second floor. Some of the boys and girls had yellow slips in their hands; a few looked worried. In the large, upstairs classrooms there was a sprinkling of parents. Many had come a score of miles with ox teams and stood around anxiously awaiting the result of the examination.

All new pupils were assigned to Room 2, and here Gincy discovered Abner, his yellow head bent over a sheet of paper covered with figures. Gincy regarded him with confidence. Abner was strong in arithmetic—the one study the mountain teachers had impressed upon their pupils. For herself she was not so sure. Her knowledge of geography was hazy. In grammar the parts of speech had been carefully reviewed, but she was in doubt about parsing, and diagramming looked to her like a jumble of words tumbling over a precarious footing of loose boards. She dropped into a vacant seat near the door while Urilla looked for a teacher who was not too busy to interview her. Presently, she returned, and Gincy found herself shaking hands with an attractive young woman whose near-sighted brown eyes held the friendliest look in the world.

"I'm so glad to meet you, Miss Gooch; you're from Clay County? You'll find a good

many boys and girls from there. Urilla told me all about you at breakfast time and we're going to help you get acquainted. You'll be one of my specials on the third floor, I can tell that by looking at you."

Gincy's heart took sudden courage. If all the teachers were going to be like Miss Howard she certainly would be a "special" if she had to study all night to accomplish it. Miss Howard sat close and questioned her softly, not seeming to mind when she stumbled or failed entirely. Gincy had a musical voice and read the easy selections in a way which pleased the teacher, for she recommended elocution and sub-normal arithmetic on the little slip which Gincy bore away an hour later. The other studies were not wholly settled, but it seemed like a good beginning.

"Be sure to come to the Jam Social tonight," had been Miss Howard's parting words, and Gincy had promised readily, although not feeling at all sure what a "Jam Social" really was.

She wandered around from one building to another, nowhere encountering Talitha or any one who had seen her. Once inside the Hall again she went straight to the office to question Mrs. Donnelly.

From behind a desk piled high with mail, the dean answered, "She's gone home, Miss Gooch."

"Gone home! When?" Gincy's voice sounded strange to her own ears.

"About two o'clock this morning. She slept with me last night and Martin saw her off."

"But why? Was any one sick—or?" The dean shook her head and began to open her mail. Suddenly Gincy knew it all. Talitha had gone that she might stay. After working so hard, too. What would Sam Coyle say to her? Not willing to make any sacrifices himself—for his children's good—he would be angry to have them generous with others. Gincy turned and went up to her room. How could she accept such a sacrifice? She wrestled with the problem for hours, then in despair thought of Miss Howard. The little teacher listened patiently with one soft hand covering the girl's work-roughened one. When Gincy had ended with a sob in her voice, Miss Howard's arm stole around her and held her close.

"Don't worry, dear, Talitha will come back to us some time. She's determined to have an education. She has chosen to give you your chance now; make the very best of it. It would be foolish for you to start home and disappoint her—it would be useless, too. She's going to write you in a day or so."

Somewhat comforted, Gincy went back to her room. On every side doors were ajar and girls unpacking. There was the merry

chatter of friends long separated, and those newly found, which sent a delightful glow through the heart of the mountain girl. Few and far between were the opportunities for sociability back in the hills, and as she realized what she was gaining, a keen sense of Talitha's loss smote her.

"You'd better get ready for the Social before dinner," a voice called out from behind, and Kizzie overtook Gincy. "I'll call for you and Urilla promptly at seven."

"I'd forgotten hit, sure enough," answered Gincy, quickening her steps.

Early in the evening the large chapel blazed forth a welcome to the returning students from its many windows. From every direction they came—in groups or singly. Above, was a starlit sky, and the air was full of a soft, sweet melody unlike anything Gincy had ever heard before. Her ears, used only to the thrum of the banjo, or a crude performance on a small reed organ, were thrilled with delight as the college band finished the overture from "William Tell."

She glanced shyly at Urilla to see if her emotion was shared, but the quiet face betrayed nothing more than deep satisfaction at being once more among her beloved schoolmates.

The great auditorium was filling rapidly. Happy faces peered down from the galleries, girls and boys elbowed their way past, calling

out hearty greetings to those they recognized. There was a short lull when the president made his welcoming speech; after that, it seemed to Gincy a thousand hives had swarmed. Abner and Martin caught the spirit at once and moved constantly from one group to another shaking hands, exchanging jokes, and growing merrier each moment. Gincy watched them astonished. Abner's light hair was tossed back like a mane, his cheeks were rosy, his eyes alight with fun. Martin took it more quietly, but never had she seen such a look of pleasure in his face.

Gincy forgot her plain dress—plain even in comparison with the simple clothes around her—and the fact that she was surrounded by hundreds of strange faces. The spirit of youth—so often quenched in these young mountain people before it fairly shows itself—was clamouring for expression. She drew a long breath and decided to be one of the gay company.

An hour later as the three girls emerged from the building which the bell in the tower had suddenly hushed, Gincy felt that she had come into her own. Her timidity had vanished, and a pleasant presage of popularity made her innocently merry and once more her own natural self.

VIII

THE MASTER KE

IT was nearly time for the rising bell, and Gincy propped herself up on one elbow to watch the light creeping above the foothills and the ox teams crawling along Big Hill pike.

Suddenly, she remembered her new duties as monitor of the third floor. It was so hard lately to keep order during study hours and after the last bell at night. Gincy could not help connecting it in some way with Nancy Jane Ping and Mallie Green, the two recent arrivals from her own county. They had been reproved time and again for an untidy room, but it seemed to do no good.

"They're always studyin' up some foolishness to keep things upset," she declared disgustedly. Gincy had been feeling particularly lonely now that Urilla had gone home for a whole week; things had been happening, too. Miss Howard was at her wit's end to discover the offenders, so sly were they, but Kizzie Tipton and Lalla Ponder were always the victims.

Sometimes the bedding was piled in a heap

in the middle of the floor, or Lalla's school hat was filled with water and her best dress missing only to be found later folded under the mattress. The vandals covered their tracks very neatly, and Miss Howard, knowing the excitable temperaments around her, kept the matter as quiet as possible.

Gincy thought it over carefully until breakfast time, then decided to do some special detective work for the reputation of the Hall. "Some fracas between their kin, I reckon." Gincy was used to the mountain feuds, which, like a slumbering fire, always broke out in unexpected places. "Mallie's been left to run till she's no 'count; why don't she study to get some learnin' stid o' hatchin' up deviltry? Nancy Jane and she make a team; looks like they don't show good sense." Gincy shook her head sadly, thinking how hard she had worked for the privilege which others esteemed so lightly. School had meant for her sacrifice, and long hours of toil.

Saturday was a busy day in the Hall. Its many corridors were thoroughly swept and mopped, the rooms carefully cleaned. Gincy was here and there and everywhere on the third floor. By lunch time there was a sharp twinge in her left ear which sent the blood throbbing to her temples. Her own room was spotless. Urilla's family photographs were tucked in the wire rack where they would show to the best advantage, the ugly ink spot

on the chenille table spread was turned to the wall, and the small stove was shining. But the occupant was not tempted by odours of fresh gingerbread or turnip salad coming from below. Her work for the day was done. She had counted on going to Lee's Knob with a walking party for a picnic supper. Suddenly, all ambition had left her. When she awoke from her long nap her earache was gone, but there lingered in her memory a curious dream. The room key had been stolen and Miss Howard was in trouble.

Another bell rang. This time it was for dinner, but Gincy still felt little inclination to move, and a curious absence of hunger. There were loitering feet, then hurrying, then the distant clatter from the Annex announced that the meal was in progress. Gincy surveyed the tired face in the glass as she brushed her hair and resolutely choked back the homesick hunger which the free life of the mountains had fostered.

"I might jest as well walk down that way and see if things air all right." How loud her steps sounded on the bare corridor floor. Gincy paused before trying the door of Number 16. She did hope that Lalla and Kizzie had left it locked. But no, here was the key, and on the outside, too. "I call thet plumb shiftlessness," she told herself disgustedly. The girls certainly needed a lesson. Gincy stuck her head in, carefully surveyed the

room, and then locked the door, slipping the key into her pocket. Let them go to Miss Howard when they wanted to get in. She came back to her own room and sat down by the window. In a few minutes the evening song, in one harmonious chorus, was wafted to her ears, then snatches of it floated up the stairs as the girls returned to their rooms. Some one tapped lightly, then turned the knob, and peered in. It was Mallie Green, and Gincy fancied she looked surprised to see her.

"Howdy! I was passing and I thought—I'd see—why—you wan't at dinner." Mallie blurted it out in her usual explosive fashion, her gaze shifting evasively.

"I didn't feel to want any; my ear aches," answered Gincy with a sudden accession of coolness toward the small, shrinking figure. She had been a target for Nancy Ping's ready wit many a time, but to-day Mallie seemed far less likable. Every minute her suspicions grew stronger. Why was Mallie poking into people's rooms and pretending—Gincy felt it to be mere pretending—to be friends? It was more than mere prankishness to put wet towels on a pile of freshly-ironed clothes, it was malicious, especially as the girls were all trying to economize as much as possible.

A few minutes later Gincy presented the key of Number 16 to Miss Howard. "They haven't asked for the master key," said the latter, "so they must be downstairs in the

parlour. Sometimes they don't come up until the study bell rings."

"Let's go back and see if there is any one hanging around the door," suggested Gincy.

To their astonishment they found Lalla and Kizzie entertaining callers. Gincy stood for a moment dumfounded, then dragged Miss Howard to a quiet corner of the hall. "I know," she whispered, "some one left that key in the door. They heard me coming and didn't have time to get it out. We'll keep hit, then I'd like to see them get in."

"Do you really think it's Mallie?" asked Miss Howard soberly. "I can't see any reason for her doing it."

"Nor I, only the Greens and Ponders never did get on back yonder, and Lalla's always ahead of Mallie—she's a year younger, too."

Miss Howard stopped suddenly, she had started back to her room. "No, Gincy, it wasn't Mallie; she went into the dining-room ahead of me this evening and gave out a notice for the basket ball team. I remember now. Besides, she and Nancy Jane both wipe dishes and are never upstairs until a half-hour after meal time."

For almost a week after that the upper corridors were peaceful. No one but Gincy doubted that they would remain so. Saturday evening, when Miss Howard was making her tour of inspection, she met Lalla and Kizzie going to choir practice. "I'll look into your

room just the same, girls," she said. "You don't know how good it seems, though, to get over dreading it."

Kizzie sighed. "I couldn't have stood it another day. It was getting positively ghost-y, having such things goin' on."

Miss Howard sighed too as she fitted the master key into the door of Number 16. Had she a real traitor in the house, or was it some prankish girl who had gone too far and was now thoroughly frightened? The room was in perfect order. How well the two had learned their lesson of neatness. It rested the tired little teacher just to look at the clean floor, the fresh curtains, and orderly books. She went over to the window and looked out. Beyond the roof of the new dining-room was a long, regular pile of wood, then the tennis court framed by huge oaks, and still beyond, the mountains.

Miss Howard stood lost in thought for a moment. Each day brought its problems. She was roused by a light footstep, there was a quick click of the lock, and the master key was pulled out from the other side. She was surely a prisoner. Thoroughly impatient at her own stupidity, Miss Howard tried the window. She could only pull it down a few inches from the top. This was the cleverest, most daring piece of lawlessness which had ever occurred in the Hall. With the master key gone all kinds of vandalism were possible

in that room and every other. She dropped into a chair irresolute.

A party of seniors had the east parlour until 7:30, which almost emptied the corridor. One might call incessantly and not be heard, unless by the wrong girls—the very ones from whom she wished to keep the matter a secret.

The chapel bell rang for chorus practice. The outer world began to grow dusky, still Miss Howard sat perfectly quiet, apparently reading. She was thinking of a mystery story which led through a labyrinth of baffling events to a most simple solution. She grew more and more doubtful of her ability as a detective.

Presently, two people stopped outside the door for a little chat. It was Martha Spellman—on her way to the linen closet—and Lalla. Miss Howard waited patiently now that immediate release was certain, until the door opened.

Lalla's face was the picture of astonishment as she noticed the occupant of her room. "You'd better not speak of it, Lalla," cautioned her teacher after describing the manner of her incarceration. "The girls know enough already; they'll be going home next thing. No one likes to feel that she's at the mercy of some lawless person."

However, Miss Howard made an exception of Gincy, who seemed a link between herself

and the mountain people. Besides Gincy's position as monitor demanded greater confidence. "Whoever it was, knew I was there," she concluded.

"They were after the key, they didn't care who was in there," said Gincy grimly. "Hit ain't likely they'll come again very soon, though, after this."

But the very next evening Number 16 was again invaded. This time Lalla's little silver pin was missing, and her school books hidden in the woodbox.

"Shall we search Mallie's and Nancy Jane's room?" asked Miss Howard as Lalla stood before her after making her final complaint. "This matter is growing serious."

Lalla hesitated. "You wouldn't be likely to find anything. They're both too smart for that. We might watch them a spell longer."

"Besides," continued Miss Howard, "Mallie and Nancy Jane are nearly always busy when things happen in your room."

Lalla shook her head as though unconvinced. "I reckon hit's jest one person. I ain't sayin' who."

"Lalla," interrogated Gincy shrewdly, "who do you reckon's so plumb foolish as to sneak into your room whenever you go out for dinner?"

"Mebbe you can tell me," answered Lalla with a flash of temper. "I'm goin' home next week if hit keeps on."

"Wait a while," encouraged Gincy, ignoring the insinuation. Personally, she was not fond of Lalla, whose keen wit never spared any one, but of all the mountain pupils she was the most talented—so the teachers had said—and Gincy was working for the good of the school."

"I've got hit to work out and I'm goin' to do hit," she said to herself that night. "I reckon Lalla's plumb out of patience or she wouldn't be so touchy."

She took a firmer grip on the baffling mental problem, her detective instinct now fully aroused. Things happened at dinner time. Mallie and Nancy Jane were nearly always at meals—and yet—Gincy thought over every other girl in the Hall; not one seemed to have either the disposition or the ability to carry on, undetected, such a warfare.

At six o'clock that evening, she was behind the door of Number 16, the new master key showing temptingly in the lock. She had figured it all out; the room must be watched from the inside. This time both window and door were to be reckoned with. She raised the former to further her scheme, and told no one except Miss Howard, who promised to bring Gincy's dinner to her own room that she might eat it later.

It was a weary vigil, but Gincy worked out some problems and waited patiently. The hour was almost gone when a slight tap came

at the door. She crowded behind a dress in the corner and listened eagerly. The door swung slightly and Nancy Jane Ping looked in. Her small, inquisitive eyes seemed to pierce every corner, and Gincy had a breathless moment of expectancy. Kizzie's yellow muslin was a feeble barrier for the gimlet glances to penetrate.

For a moment, the intruder stood keenly surveying the room, then withdrew and walked slowly down the hall. Gincy waited, but she did not return. After all, the evidence was very incomplete. Anybody might have looked into a room whose door was slightly ajar. It didn't matter how much inward conviction one had if she lacked tangible proof. The whole baffling pursuit had to be begun again, and Gincy united her Scotch persistency and Irish wit afresh.

For a week she was absent from the dining-room at the dinner hour, the most sociable time of the day. It had not been necessary to tell Kizzie or Lalla, or, in fact, anybody, as she sat in the Annex dining-room, and they rarely saw each other.

Still nothing happened, and Gincy went on studying her arithmetic and planning her work for rhetorical. She did not forget to keep the window open, however, and the shining new master key in the door as a bait. "Whoever hit is won't resk coming in at the win-

dow, they'd be suspicioned sure if any one should open the door."

She reasoned it all out as she sat motionless on the fifth night of her vigil. Almost at that moment the event which she had been anticipating happened. The key clicked in the lock and she was shut in. For one instant she listened to hear in which direction the retreating footsteps were going—there was a telltale squeak which betrayed it—then Gincy bounded across the room and slipped out of the window. She ran noiselessly to where the halls crossed and a door led to a back stair landing. Gincy knew that she could see from there any one who came down the main hall, while the dark corner was a safe hiding-place for herself.

She had barely gained the desired spot, when some one vaulted past and out upon the roof. It was Lalla Ponder who stole cautiously along and deposited a small, shining object in a convenient niche near the cornice. Gincy could hardly believe her eyes, but when Lalla turned her back, she looked into the main hall and saw that it was entirely empty. She knew that Lalla would not attempt to gain her room by the window, but would come back into the hall and either go down the back stairs or come up boldly and unlock her door. Gincy pounded on a nearby door vigorously, knowing that its occupant was probably taking care of the lamps in the

lower hall, then she walked noisily to meet Lalla, who had regained the hall when her back was turned.

"May I borrow your dictionary?" she asked in the grip of a sudden courage. "Mary must be out; she doesn't answer when I knock."

"Of course you may," Lalla answered, but Gincy noticed how her hand trembled as she unlocked the door with her own key which hung on a narrow plaid ribbon at her belt. She hesitated before stepping in, and gave a little start of surprise when she saw an empty room. "I'm losing my nerve, I reckon, with all the queer doin's 'round here lately."

Gincy's face hardened. Could Lalla be crazy? She watched the girl narrowly as she searched the closet, peered behind the door with every sign of anxiety, and gave a sigh of relief when she found nothing out of order.

Once in possession of the dictionary, Gincy hurried to Miss Howard with her story.

"Have you been dreaming, child?" the latter asked in astonishment. But Gincy shook her head.

"I've been studyin' 'bout hit since I found her out. Hit's that feud business and she's trying to fasten hit onto Mallie. The girls will believe hit too, Mallie's so ill."

Miss Howard from her own conviction felt that they would. She followed Gincy to the end of the hall; they slipped out upon the roof and found both keys securely hidden

from any casual observer just where Lalla had concealed them five minutes before. Silently the two filed back to Miss Howard's room. Gincy felt the little teacher's inward struggle to readjust her point of view. Mallie was not a favourite, while Lalla had quite a following and was counted unusually bright.

"Hit's this way," Gincy explained to the bewildered teacher. "The Greens and Ponders have warred hit for years back there in the hills, and they aim never to forget hit. Most of the young folks see how foolish hit is, but they're a sorry lot."

Miss Howard sighed. "I must have time to think it over. I'm rather upset this evening, Gincy. Thank you for helping me. Please don't say anything about it until I see you again. I can't see why Lalla should want to injure her own clothes to get Mallie sent home, though."

After Gincy had left, Miss Howard sat for a long time, her hands toying idly with the two keys. If the dean knew of the trouble, Lalla would be suspended at once as she richly deserved. She would go back to the poorest of mountain homes and the bright, keen mind, undirected and bent on mischief, would soon bring the girl to grief.

The next day, at her first opportunity, she called Gincy into her room. Carefully she approached the subject. "What kind of a home did you say Lalla had, Gincy?"

"Mighty pore," was the answer. "They're the illest kind of people."

Miss Howard pondered a moment over the next question. "What do you suppose will become of her when she gets back in the mountains?"

Gincy shook her head gloomily.

"Don't you suppose it will be worth while for us to try reforming her?" Then Miss Howard explained the probation plan. "Only you and I know that she is the mischief maker. If nothing more happens the pupils will soon forget it. Of course everything depends on how she acts. She must contradict the report about Mallie and promise better behaviour in the future."

Gincy's face showed an inward struggle; this was so unlike the code of the mountains. "I'm afraid I couldn't trust her," she said at last, "but I'm willing to do anything you say."

"I'm going to have a long talk with her this afternoon," Miss Howard continued, "and find out the reason for her conduct."

There was a light tap at the door, then it was pushed open and Lalla walked in. Her eyes had a sleepless look, her face was colourless. Instantly the two knew her errand. She talked very rapidly, as if fearful of losing her courage. "I started at first to fool Kizzie—she said no one could do it—then I remembered something pretty mean Mallie did to me back home and it seemed like my time had come

to get even. When you wanted to search her room I got to studying about it. I was taking away her chance for learning, and she needing it mighty bad—as bad as any one could. I was letting you think her a thief——” Here Lalla broke down completely. “I reckon you’ll have—to—send me h—ome, I’m plumb bad, and——”

Gincy waited for no more. She flung her arms around the weeping girl with sudden tenderness.

“I am glad you were brave enough to confess your wrongdoing, Lalla,” said Miss Howard, much relieved. “I think you deserve another chance, and Gincy and I are going to see that you have it, too. We don’t propose to tell anybody about this, so you’ll have nothing to live down. Just show us a clean record from now on.”

“You don’t mean——” and here the magnitude of Miss Howard’s generosity seemed to transform Lalla’s whole being. She stood up tall and straight before the two. “You’ll never be sorry for trusting me,” she said. “And I reckon if you can forgive me for worrying you so, I ought to forgive Mallie and help her to be a better girl, too.”

IX

THE BAPTIZING

GINCY worked hard every day. Each night she went to bed weary in mind and body, but the morning found her anxious to begin again. Saturday afternoon was free for long walking trips to Cowbell Hollow, Blue Lick, or the nearby peaks. Already an early frost had touched the tulip trees with spots of gold, the sumac showed a fiery rim, and Nature was doing her best to woo attention. Gincy and Urilla did not need the lure, their hearts were longing for the hills.

Miss Howard must have read their thoughts. Early Saturday morning she tapped at their door. "Girls, wouldn't you like to go out to the bungalow on Indian Mountain this afternoon? The college team will take us and we can come back by moonlight to-morrow evening."

"Of course we would!" both girls exclaimed. Then Gincy hugged the little teacher until she laughingly slipped away, admonishing them to be ready soon after lunch.

"We'll get the room straightened out in a jiffy," said Urilla before the door had fairly

closed. "I'm so glad we're going, honey, it'll make you over."

Gincy had never seen her calm room-mate quite so enthusiastic—her cheeks were flushed with excitement and she rushed around dusting the furniture with a vigorous hand. "I'd better clear out right away," she laughed, "and see if there's any mail. There won't be enough left of me to go if you keep on the way you've started; you suck up the dust like a cyclone."

"Bring me a letter from Talitha," Urilla called after her.

It was four miles to Indian Mountain, the last two a steady climb—steep in places and sidling—but the five did not mind it. Zack and Zeke, the two fat mules belonging to the college farm, took a steady jog-trot until they reached the foot, and then slowed down for the long, hard pull. Lalla Ponder was poised recklessly near a mound of provisions guarded by some extra quilts. Her light curls and nimble tongue were in constant motion.

"I like tippy places and caves," she said. "There's one back in Clay that's haunted, they say, but I've been in it and never cared a rap."

"You're never afraid of anything," remarked Kizzie, looking up at her roommate admiringly. "I don't know where you haven't been that's crawl-y and creep-y."

"Well, there's one place on this mountain. I've never been all the way through Fat Man's Misery."

"Let's all try hit," Gincy proposed recklessly. "If hit can be done."

"The boys often do it, but it's a pretty hard climb for you girls," said Miss Howard who sat with the driver.

"I'm going to build a fire in the fireplace and pop some corn," Urilla suddenly remarked.

"Perhaps Gincy will help me sweep the bungalow before she goes exploring," ventured Miss Howard with a twinkle.

"I reckon I will," assented Gincy, catching the look of mischief. "You-all no 'count folks kin go on and have your fun; you'll be back comin' meal time."

The wagon suddenly lurched, checking the chorus of protests. Lalla lost her balance, falling on Urilla. The basket of fruit and vegetables overturned and the driver halted for repairs. "Hit's only a rock that big storm onsettled t'other night. Them ornery mules jest nachelly struck hit," he said.

Back and forth the road wound, continually disclosing new vistas. In the coves farmers were gathering the "crap." There were pine-capped crests, bare, tumbled rocks, stream beds showing traces of tempestuous high water, threaded now by tiny, twinkling rills. Beyond, and still beyond, reared peak after peak of the Cumberlands. Gincy looked eagerly toward the southeast. For a moment she almost imagined she could see the tiny cabin perched above Goose Creek.

After a hard climb of almost two hours, the level space on the mountain-top was reached. From a thicket of young trees they emerged into a cleared space where stood a long, red bungalow apparently without doors or windows. Built at the edge of a cliff, it commanded a wonderful view of the surrounding mountains and the Blue Grass country.

"Oh! We're here at last!" Gincy tumbled out hastily. "Whar do you git in?"

"Down the chimney, of course," laughed Urilla. "Look for the ladder under the bungalow."

"You might watch and see how I do it," said Miss Howard, producing a key and going around to the rear of the building. Presently she pushed up sections of the side—one by one—and lastly threw back the wide front doors.

Gincy stood for a moment enraptured. Below for miles was a fair, level country dotted with towns—another world of which she knew nothing. The sun was dipping westward toward a bluish-purple horizon.

By five o'clock everything was in order. "Not a lazy bone among you," Miss Howard assured them. "Now scatter and have a good time."

They needed no second bidding. Lalla led off at a break-neck speed. "We'll start in at the cave and come back by Fat Man's Misery; it'll land us right in front of the bungalow."

Urilla groaned. "Sh-h-h," warned Kizzie,

"we're going to initiate Gincy; none of us are fat enough to get stuck, so you needn't worry."

"I'm not worrying," answered Urilla reproachfully. "I'm tired after all my work this morning, but I'm not going to back out."

The path to the cave led through a grove of young oaks. There were tall ferns and rhododendrons, and mountain laurel. Lalla paused at an immense fallen tree which seemed to block the way; its great roots hung over the yawning space below. Nimbly she sprang upon the giant trunk and disappeared on the other side, calling for the rest to follow.

When the three had done so, they caught a vanishing glimpse of Lalla descending hand over hand on the strong branch of a mammoth grapevine. Thirty feet below she landed upon the level surface of a mossy boulder. Gincy followed Kizzie, and Urilla came last. Before them was the large opening of the cave—a favourite haunt of the students, who from time to time occupied the college bungalow. At its rear, a long, wide crack in the solid rock led in a zigzag direction for twenty rods or more. The path was extremely narrow, and sloping at a sharp incline. Kizzie dodged ahead and Gincy was close behind. Each moment the former grew more reckless; she gathered her skirts around her and slid down a swift descent, the others following.

"Whew! but it's dampish!" said Gincy. "Hear that water?"

A steady drip, drip, drip came from the walls. In the cracks were long fronded ferns, moss, and here and there wild geraniums. A cool draught struck them. At the farther end the rocks seemed almost to touch, and only a tiny thread of light showed from above. Gincy was close to Kizzie when they reached the narrowest part and began the long, tortuous climb.

"We'll be ready for hot coffee by the time we get to the top," called Urilla from the rear.

"I hope Miss Howard won't fuss; I kin eat anythin' I'm so hungry," said Gincy.

"Of course she won't fuss," panted Kizzie. "She's a born manager; she'll have everything on the table in great shape and a picture painted to boot."

Up, up, with a scanty, stony foothold, Gincy followed close behind Kizzie, her face growing redder, her breath shorter. The crack of blue was broadening, roots and stocky ferns afforded a surer grasp.

"We're almost there!" Kizzie exulted. "What on earth are you doing with that stick, Gincy?"

"Watch me and see!" Dexterously Gincy inserted the short, stout stick crosswise above her head and swung up a long step to safe footing beside her leader. "Why, we're up, aren't we?" she said, astonished as her eyes caught a glimpse of the foundation of the bungalow a few yards away. The four pulled

themselves up the few remaining feet and dropped down in a weary, silent row on a big, flat stone which commanded a glorious view. Even Lalla's twinkling eyes had lost their usual expression of mischief, and she sat soberly viewing the scene before her.

"Look, Kizzie," exclaimed Urilla, pointing back to the open bungalow, "Miss Howard's been to the spring for water, the table's all set, and I can smell the chicken."

Nancy Jane was up at sunrise the next morning. She and Mallie stole out of bed noiselessly and started for the spring—it was their turn to get water. There had been a heavy dew, but neither girl wore rubbers. "Another fine day," said Mallie, stepping high. "Just look at the hills! We're the highest."

The winding footpath near the cliff's edge gave a magnificent view of the peaks which formed a huge semicircle around Indian Mountain. "I'd almost like to live up here," said Nancy Jane. "It's more sightly than back in the hills and so near Bentville."

The two stood near the sagging gate of a yard which had been swept clean as a floor. A few long-legged chickens stepped about gingerly. On the very edge of the cliff stood a low frame house, and near it a corn crib set high to keep out the rats. The path to the spring led through the yard.

"The Haggis family live here," announced Mallie as she held the gate open. "Miss How-

ard told me about them last night—they're awfully poor."

A small, fat boy wearing a single loose garment was busily playing in the rain barrel. He had a gourd with which he dipped the water out into a pail, sprinkling himself plentifully meanwhile. In the house breakfast was over, and Mrs. Haggis walked around heavily as though her night's sleep had failed to rest her. She looked old from sickness and overwork; but the girls knew that look—nearly all the mountain women had it—and judged her to be about forty-five.

"Howdy," she said, beaming at them as they approached the house. "I'm proud ter see ye. I was a-feelin' jest as down-sperited an' lonesome when ye druv up yistiddy, an' all of a suddint the chickens begun ter crow like they knew you'd come. How's Miss Howard? I think a heap o' seein' her every year."

"She's well," smiled Nancy Jane, "and coming over to see you to-day. We were all pretty tired last night and went to bed early."

"I hope our cow didn't keep ye awake; Job found her thar come light this mornin'. I reckon she's proud you've come—like we-uns."

The girls laughed merrily. "Urilla drove her off in the night. She was browsing around the bushes ringing her bell like a fire alarm; it was too funny!" Mallie ended the recital with such evident enjoyment of the situation that Mrs. Haggis joined in the laugh.

"Hit's comin' two weeks sence a soul war on this mounting," sighed the woman, "an' I'm too porely ter travel any. Didn't you never feel like you'd jest got ter talk to some one 'sides your own folks? When I'm shet of the men folks fer the day an' can't even see 'em workin' in the cove or hear old Barb's bell, thar ain't a human ter talk to 'cept Elam, onless my Rodie comes up from the Hollow an' packs her baby up these yere rocks."

Mrs. Haggis was walking along with them toward the spring, talking eagerly. Little Elam had grabbed Nancy Jane's proffered finger and was trotting by her side; with his other hand he held his dress up as he had seen his mother do. Both the girls noticed how clean the faded blue calico was, and that the back yard was swept as carefully as the front.

"Why, Mrs. Haggis," said Mallie, "you don't look strong enough to do so much work; you're wearing yourself out cleaning like this."

The woman sighed. "'Pears like when I don't work, I git ter studyin' 'bout the chil'ren—I've buried seven of 'em. That's when we lived over in the fur aidge o' Jackson County. Thar's only three left 'sides Elam; two are up in Indiany—married—an' Rodie's man works the college farm below here. I don't see her none too often; she helps tend the crap."

The bushes and saplings hedged their path for several rods, then they came to a tumble

of rocks on the very edge of the cliff. A skeleton pine whose roots still clung in the crevices between the rocks, stood out bare and white. At its base was a windlass, and to the bare trunk were attached wires which slanted down into the treetops below. Mrs. Haggis fastened the pail the girls had brought to the upper wire—a block of wood and a pulley kept it upright—and started it on its way.

“My,” exclaimed Mallie, looking down at the tops of the tulip trees, “it’s a long way to go for water. Is there a spring at the bottom?”

“Yes, nigh fourteen hundred feet down,” said Mrs. Haggis. “You-all hang onto Elam, he’s crazy ter look over the aidge o’ things.”

“Let us do it,” protested Nancy Jane, alternately watching the slender, bent figure and the pail bobbing down the wire.

“’Tain’t nothin’, doin’ this; hit’s the washin’ wears me out.”

“You don’t mean you have to pull it all up from down there and then carry it to the house?” Mallie inquired in astonishment.

“What I can’t ketch when hit rains. Where’d ye think I got hit?”

“I didn’t think,” said Mallie soberly, tugging at Elam. “You say your daughter comes up this way. I wonder if we couldn’t find the path and go to her house some time?”

“In course ye could. She’d appreciate a visit from you-all the best kind. Hit’s mid-

dlin' steep, though, an' a power o' work climb-in' back, but I reckon ye wouldn't mind."

Nancy Jane insisted on bringing up the water; it was quite an effort for even her strong, young arms. Then they hurried back to the bungalow to find Gincy frying bacon and the rest making beds. "I knew you'd be coming along pretty soon," she said, dropping the eggs into the skillet. "Miss Howard wants to ask you something."

"How would you like to visit Miss Clark's school to-day, it's only a little piece from the foot of the mountain near the pinnacle? We can walk it in an hour and a half."

"But it's Sunday!" exclaimed Mallie. "How could we?"

Urilla laughed. "Isn't Sunday a good day to go to Sunday-school, honey? You must be dreaming. Wake up!"

"Oh, that's it. I never thought of a Sunday-school out here; of course I'll go. When do we start?"

"Just as soon as the dishes are done. We'll put up our dinners and walk back just before sunset. We must allow two hours for the climb, anyhow." Miss Howard began planning for the luncheon.

By eight o'clock the little party were on their way. Mrs. Haggis came out to the gate as they went by. "I wish I war goin', too," she said wistfully, "but pore folks has ter work. I couldn't tromp 'round the mountings

an' git my meals. You-all go on an' I'll wash some dishes; I couldn't run 'round nohow an' let Job do hit."

The visitors waved a good-bye and started on. A mountain bluebird darted hither and yon, a cardinal shot like a bright gleam through the gay foliage. The dew was still heavy in the shady places, but they followed the deep wagon track caused by heavy loads of picnickers from the college, and parties at the bungalow. The season was almost over for these, and then the long winter's isolation began for the Haggis family—an isolation shared by thousands over this great mountain region.

Every downward turn revealed a glimpse of beauty which the girls had not noticed going up. From the coves where the men had been ploughing for fall crops came a fragrant, earthy odour. Off to the southeast range after range rose blue against the sky. At last they reached the pike which led past the little settlement at the foot of the pinnacle. A number of people passed them on horseback with the usual greeting; otherwise the stillness was Sabbath-like.

A turn in the road disclosed the church house, a neat log building near a little spring, and overshadowed by a turreted-topped mountain. There were other buildings in the same yard, and probably a dozen scattered around in sight. The girls noticed that they were

of a better type than those back in the hills at Goose Creek, for only one was windowless.

Two vehicles were approaching. The driver of the first was a tall, pleasant-faced, youngish-looking woman who nodded at them with a smile of surprised recognition as she checked the sleek chestnut.

"Why, good-morning, Miss Howard! Had you started for my place? We're not going to have any Sunday-school to-day—there's to be a baptizing in the afternoon—and I promised to attend services at Bentville this morning. It's the only chance I've had for a year."

"I wouldn't have you miss it for anything, Miss Clark; go right on, all we want is permission to eat our lunch in your yard," said Miss Howard, smiling. "You'd like to stay to the baptizing, wouldn't you, girls?"

There was an enthusiastic affirmative from every one. Nobody in the mountains ever missed a baptizing if it were possible to get there.

Miss Clark leaned forward. "Go right into the dog-trot at my house; my raincoat is hanging on the right—near my bedroom door; under it you will find the key. Make yourself perfectly at home until I come back. You'd better make some coffee on the oil stove; there's cream in the spring house. I'll come back early."

"Thank you ever so much, but don't hurry

back!" urged Miss Howard. "You need the change, and we'll get along splendidly."

"I'm so glad we came!" exclaimed Urilla. "A baptizin' is lots more interesting than a Sunday-school. So that's Miss Clark; I never saw her before."

"Nor I," said Kizzie, "but I'm sure I shall like her. They say she's helped a good many girls to go to Bentville after they've finished out here."

"And boys, too," added Miss Howard. "She's changed the whole neighbourhood. If you could only hear her tell of some of her thrilling experiences during the last twelve years—of the shootings, and brawlings, and fightings. To-day the people go to her for everything. She teaches them to sew, and cook, shows them how to care for the sick and the babies. Oh, Miss Clark is a wonderful woman!"

"She must be," said Gincy soberly, thinking of Goose Creek and its needs. The second team was passing them and she looked up quickly as a familiar voice called out:

"Hello, what are you-all doing out this way?" It was Joe Bradshaw and his roommate, Raphael Sloan.

"What are you?" she retorted.

"Raf lives out here at Pigg Branch and I've been visiting him. We thought you were up at the bungalow and we'd drive up for two or three hours."

"Awfully sorry," said Lalla, "we brought our dinners, and——" Then she looked at Miss Howard. That lady smiled.

"You'd better come back with us—we'll have plenty for two more—then we can all see the baptizing this afternoon."

The boys needed no second invitation. "We were coming down for that anyhow," said Raphael, as they turned around.

Miss Clark's home was close to the church house. It was a log house, built Virginia style, with a wide, covered porch through the centre separating the two sides. This dog-trot was a cool place in warm weather, a place to churn, and wash, a place to visit, and sew, or even take a nap. Mallie sank down upon the old-fashioned couch and looked off toward the cabins across the road. They were scattered up the branch, and on beyond, one perched high in a patch of ploughed ground on the opposite mountain.

"Isn't this a lovely place!" she exclaimed, glancing back at the trellised nasturtiums and morning-glories against the kitchen windows. "I think Miss Clark is great! Look at those ducks in the branch, and such a lot of chickens. How can she find time for everything?"

"Of course she's great!" Raphael Sloan sank down on the floor cross-legged. "She can do everything—play the organ, preach a sermon, knock a bench together better than the boys, and ride any horse around here. She

rode the most ornery mule in these parts one night. Ever hear about it?"

There was a chorus of negatives, and Raphael's dark eyes lighted over the prospect of thrilling the company. "It was about five years ago when the Bennett and MacGowan feud was stirring things up 'round here and everybody seemed bound to take sides. Miss Clark tried to keep out of it, for there were children from both families in school. One morning Hugh MacGowan came over to borrow a big needle to sew up his mule's shoulder—some one had cut a long gash in it the night before. You just ought to have seen her eyes flash—I went to school to her then—and she everlastingly told us what she thought of a man or boy who would hurt an animal because he hated the owner. Of course the Bennett children went home and told it, and——"

"I thought they all liked her," interrupted Gincy.

"They did, but the old folks didn't relish being criticised even though no names were used. Miss Clark found a note pinned to her door the next morning telling her to mind her own business or she'd get into trouble.

"Things were quiet for a while, then one time about midnight, she heard some drunken men going by shouting and singing—then four or five shots. It was bright moonlight and Miss Clark could see that one was wounded and swaying on his mule; the rest galloped

off. Izzie Gray was staying with her then, and begged her not to stir outside, but do you suppose she'd do anything of the kind? Not much. She sailed out and found Lem Bennett bleeding to death—his arm all shot up."

Raphael stopped suddenly with dramatic effect. His audience was plainly excited and expectant. "Go on, Raf!" commanded Joe impatiently. "What next?"

"Well, Miss Clark rode that mule clear into Bentville and got a doctor, or the Bennett youngsters wouldn't have a father to-day, I can tell you."

"Did it stop the fighting?" asked Gincy, jumping up suddenly. She fished the key from under the long raincoat and fitted it into the lock.

"Yes, I really think it did. She told Lem Bennett—he was the worst of the crowd—that she saved his life so he could have a chance to be a better man, and that she loved his children and wanted them to have a better father. Then she had a long talk with the MacGowans. After that the county went dry—she had a hand in that, too—and there wasn't any more trouble. Oh, Miss Clark is fine, I tell you!"

"I should think she was," said Nancy Jane, her eyes open wide with admiration. "Come on, let's go in and see how she lives."

Gincy was already inside. The rest followed. There was a large bookcase filled with

books and magazines, a piano, a big fireplace with a comfortable seat and chair near it.

"Miss Clark made that seat," said Raphael. "We boys made the chair, and the piano was sent her by some rich people up north. We helped her paint and varnish the floors, too."

"She has some new rugs," said Miss Howard. "They're like those made down at the loom house."

There were three made of rags with patterns in the borders. They were blue and white. The curtains were white cheesecloth with a blue, stencilled pattern across the bottom. A few water colours and Hoffman's Christ were the only pictures.

"Come on back and help me find the oil stove; I'm getting hungry," called Kizzie from the dining-room. "Isn't this cosy?" she asked, pointing to the long, built-in cupboard and the little square table in the centre of the room.

Beyond, was the kitchen. A large range occupied one corner near the sink. "We've made candy and popped corn here many a time," said Raphael. "Miss Clark has a cooking class every week this year for the older people."

The oil stove was soon discovered and the coffee over. They ate their dinner in the dog-trot and the crumbs went to the chickens who were sociably inclined. Then they started for the church house, going through the garden and a long arbour.

"What lovely flowers!" Mallie stopped to admire the larkspurs and fall roses until the rest had disappeared inside the church, then she followed.

It was a T-shaped building, one upright being used for the day school and the other for the Sunday-school and monthly preaching. In case of a crowd the two rooms could be thrown into one. A tiny, portable organ occupied the space near the pulpit. Various mottoes, picture cards, and Bible charts adorned the walls. There were a large fireplace and a small sheet-iron stove, a dozen long benches which could be stacked at one side when they met for sociability, and a little Sunday-school library sitting in neat uprightness on the open shelves.

Miss Howard played a half-dozen hymns and they all sang, then Gincy, in a clear, sweet voice, read the lesson. Miss Howard was explaining it when the people began to gather for the baptizing. They came on horseback, in jolt wagons, and afoot. Not far from the house the branch widened until in spring it was almost a pond. Here, under the shade of a dozen walnut and tulip trees, a motley crowd was assembling and the folks inside the church house hurried out to join them. Once outside, they saw Miss Clark coming up the pike, her horse trotting briskly.

They waited at the gate. It wanted only a few minutes of the time and the horse must

be unharnessed. Joe dropped the bars and Rachel helped Miss Clark out of the carriage. "You go on with the rest," he said in a low tone, "we'll be along after a bit."

Together they went down the little slope, its edge crowded with women and children. One lone cottonwood shadowed the pool in its deepest place, stretching mottled arms almost to the opposite bank. Half its roots were bare and white, washed by the spring torrents.

Each moment the gathering was augmented by fresh arrivals. Joe and Raphael came up silently and stood near Miss Clark. A gaunt mountain preacher whispered a few words to her, his face showing some perplexity. She turned to the boys.

"Raphael, won't you and Joe run up to the house? In the woodshed you will find a shovel and hoe. Bring them here as quickly as you can."

Five minutes later the boys came panting back, bearing the required utensils. Two brawny mountain men took them, waded out into the shallow water, and began digging.

"They're making it deeper," said Nancy Jane. "My, but won't it be roily!" X

While the men worked the strange audience waited. Near the water's edge stood the candidates for baptism—two girls about seventeen, a woman, and a middle-aged man with wiry black hair and dark, smouldering eyes.

He was short and stocky, a man of force, and—if roused—of fury.

A long carryall was toiling up the hill. Joe saw it first. "It's the college team," he whispered to Miss Howard. "There must be a dozen people."

The teacher nodded. "Professor Butler's going to do the baptizing; the rest came along to sing."

Already they could hear the strains of "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me," the rich, full tones swelling through the quiet autumn air as the people in the carryall approached. One by one they joined the waiting crowd. The digging had stopped and there was a hush of expectancy as the minister made his way toward the waiting candidates. He spoke to them quietly, then turned until his glance swept the assemblage.

Gincy never forgot that day. The frightened girls in the foreground, with their coarse, white dresses; the children, their faces curious and alarmed; the sunbonneted women; the row of men on the fence in the rear—sallow, sunburned, and some bearing the marks of dissipation. But what impressed her most was the exalted look on the face of the man when he emerged from the water.

"Who is he?" she whispered to Raphael Sloan.

"Lem Bennett," he whispered back, "and the woman is his wife."

X

SI QUINN REVEALS A SECRET

ONLY that one forenoon did Talitha hold school in the hollow. The very next day the weather took a turn, a cold wind blew up, and for more than a week a lowering sky gave promise of rain it failed to fulfil—except now and then in spiteful gusts. Her hopes, to which she had clung with a brave persistence, vanished with the sunshine.

She was greatly puzzled at the indifference her family displayed over the loss of the school-house and its contents. Evidently the school must be discontinued until another year at least. It was getting too late in the season to hope for more than a few days—at a time—warm enough to hold the session out of doors. She had thought some place might be opened to her, but the cabins were small and already overcrowded. When she suggested that the children meet at her own home for a few hours each day, her parents decidedly objected. Even Dan Gooch seemed to forget his anxiety to have Billy and Sudie “git larnin’,” and, although she had offered to assist

them with their lessons, along with her own brothers, they had not put in an appearance.

Now that her plans for helping the young people of Goose Creek had failed, Talitha felt more keenly than ever the disappointment of returning home. She took all the heaviest work of the household upon her strong, young shoulders. The spinning wheel whirred through the long afternoons which otherwise would have been dull and dreary enough. She had no heart to call on neighbours or kinfolk; they did not need her. Si Quinn had also lost all interest in school matters, or she had failed to meet his expectations. It was strange she had not known it before, and yet she had done her best.

She had time now to notice the change that had come over her father. Every morning he went off, his axe over his shoulder; such forehandedness in getting the winter's wood was unusual in him. When Martin was home it was he who saw that they did not lack for fuel when the cold weather came on.

At the end of the second week she received a letter from her brother. It was the first he had ever written her, for they had never been separated before. Talitha puzzled over its pages, growing more and more bewildered at their contents: "Si Quinn wrote me about the schoolhouse. Isn't it great! Jake always was heady, he could work up that temper of his until he was worse than a hornet. I hope

this'll be a lesson he'll remember. I'm just as proud of you as I can be. Everything has worked out for the best after all, hasn't it? Gincy is studying like a whale. She was mightily disturbed when she heard you'd gone home on her account and I had all I could do to keep her from tagging along after you. But Gincy has a heap of good sense. She's Miss Howard's right hand man; I don't get a sight of her except at meal times, but I can hear her voice on the high notes 'way above the rest come Harmonia nights.—Oh, Gincy's making good, all right, and I'm glad as can be, but I do miss you awfully, sis——”

Talitha finished and then her eyes wandered back toward the beginning. “I don't understand it one bit,” she thought. “Mart doesn't seem to care at all that the schoolhouse burned. He writes as though it were almost a joke.” The tears rushed to Talitha's eyes. “I'm going right over to the schoolmaster's, maybe he can explain it,” she decided at last. “I do wonder what he wrote Martin.”

The girl snatched up her sunbonnet and hurried out of the door, the letter in her hand. Half-way to the old man's cabin she met him hobbling cheerfully along by the aid of his crutch. The satisfied smile on his face brought Talitha's grievance freshly to mind; she almost resented his unusually jovial greeting.

“Halloo, thar, Tally; you shore air lookin' robustious——”

"Good-morning," responded Talitha coldly. "I've just got a letter from Martin, and—and I've been wondering what you told him. He writes as though it wasn't—well, he almost joked about the schoolhouse being burned." The girl's lips quivered.

"Law, now, did he?" considered the old man, evading the look of reproach in Talitha's eyes. "I didn't go fer to give him any sech idee. Hit war a powerful mean thing fer Jake Simcox ter do, and I aimed ter lay thet out plain ter Mart. S'pose you jest walk along with me ter the ruins. I thought a sight of thet old shack; hit's whar I spent considerable many years. I like ter think of you-all a settin' on them benches. You war a powerful bouncin' leetle gal, Tally, and I war an ill enough teacher, but I done the best I knowed then."

Talitha's anger had suddenly vanished. There was something pitiful in the schoolmaster's fondness for recalling the past. After all, he felt the loss of the old place more deeply than he would have people think. "You mustn't say that," she insisted. "Of course you did the best you could, but I know just how you feel; I wish I'd done more when I had the chance."

"Law, now, Tally, you're jest a colt, as hit war, and thar's plenty of chances comin' fer you. Hit ain't as if you war sech a broken-down hoss critter as I be."

"But I can't bear to give up the school!" cried the girl. "I've been trying so hard to think of some way, and nobody seems to have the least interest in it any more."

"Don't they now?" said Si Quinn with recovered cheerfulness. Then stopping suddenly, "'Pears ter me suthin's been goin' on up this a way." They had come to where, through a cleared space among the trees, a blackened heap was visible—all that was left of the poor little schoolhouse.

But Talitha hardly noticed it. Something beyond had caught her eye—a substantial yet picturesque structure of logs, the rough bark still covering them and adding a beauty in harmony with the surroundings. The carefully laid chimney at one end was receiving the last finishing touches at the hands of a capable mason from the Settlement. A dozen men stood about watching him admiringly.

The old man saw Talitha's eyes widen in amazement.

"Why, what is it?" she cried suddenly. "I don't understand!"

"Well, well, honey," chuckled Si Quinn, "I reckon thet's the joke Mart writ you 'bout, and I declar' if hit ain't the biggest one I ever heerd tell on. Hit's goin' ter be all ready fer you ter begin school Monday, and nobody war goin' ter say anythin' ter you 'bout hit till thet time; but I see I jest had ter, you war frettin' so."

The new schoolhouse was a most pretentious affair in the eyes of its builders. The logs were carefully chinked to keep out the cold, and the three good-sized windows contained shining panes of glass. Inside, there were backs to the rough benches. Desks, the amateur carpenters had felt unable to cope with, but there was a little platform with a rude table for the teacher. A large sheet-iron stove gave promise of warming the farthest corners of the room.

It was all so far beyond Talitha's most ambitious dreams that she sank upon a seat and burst into tears. The men looked at her abashed.

"Law me, Tally," expostulated Sam Coyle, "hit looks fairly ongrateful fer you ter take on that-a-way."

"Now shet up, Sam," commanded the schoolmaster with his old authority. "Tally's jest as tickled as anybody, but hit's all come so mighty sudden she's kerried plumb off her feet."

"I should say I was!" laughed the girl, wiping her eyes. "I never dreamed of such a thing."

The next Monday morning Talitha sang all the way to school. The air was frosty and a nipping wind reddened her cheeks and made her fingers tingle, but she laughed a merry defiance at the cold. How warm and cosy the new schoolhouse should be when the children

came trooping in. A turn in the worn footpath and there it stood before her, new and inviting, beckoning her on. Some one had been there before her, for smoke came from the chimney. The young teacher hastened her steps. The door was unlocked and she entered. The place was empty but warm to the farthest nook, and Talitha rubbed her eyes. There were familiar looking books on the table and maps on the walls beside the wide stretches of blackboard. There were pictures also, not just such as she would have chosen, but how they brightened the place! "If hit's picters Tally wants, why hit's picters she shall hev," declared the storekeeper at the Settlement. And forthwith he had gathered his accumulation of calendars, chromo advertisements, and picture cards to beautify the schoolroom.

For a time Talitha's heart was as light as a feather, then something began to trouble her. Quite by accident she discovered that Si Quinn's funds were getting low. How little he could afford to replace the books and maps which had been destroyed she did not imagine. She only knew that he seemed to have grown paler and thinner each time she saw him. He had a habit of dropping in at the school almost daily, and when a week passed and he did not appear, Talitha called at the cabin.

She knocked, but there was no response and she opened the door with misgiving. The old man was not there. She looked curiously

around; the remnants of a scanty meal were on the table, and with a sudden inspiration she began to investigate the condition of his larder. The girl stood amazed at the result. She knew he had not been able to cultivate his little garden patch the past summer, but because of the small sum he had earned for years in the Goose Creek school, Si Quinn had been looked upon as a well-to-do man in the community.

Much troubled at her discovery, Talitha set her wits to work. The old man was too proud, she knew, to accept any offers of assistance. Suddenly a plan entered her head. Christmas was only three weeks distant—that was her opportunity, only something must be done meanwhile. Where could he have gone? The girl ran to the door and looked out. There he was now coming along the creek path. She hurried out to meet him.

“Howdy, Tally!” he called, a smile brightening the wan, haggard face.

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” cried the girl. “I’m going to take you home with me for supper and I know father and mother won’t hear to your coming back to-night.”

The old schoolmaster needed little urging to accompany her, and he did ample justice to the supper Talitha cooked with her own hands. The next morning a drizzling sleet prevented him from leaving. It was almost

a week before he finally took his departure, and then it was to respond to an urgent invitation from the Gooch family to visit them. The Shackleys would also be offended if they were neglected, so before the rounds were made, Si Quinn's face lost its pallor and he was quite like himself again.

One morning Pom Ethers, the wagoner, stopped at the schoolhouse with a goodly sized wooden box. "Talitha Coyle" was painted on it in large black letters. The children gathered around while the man, with much curiosity, opened it.

"Laws-a-massy!" exclaimed Pom Ethers as the cover came off. "If they ain't all books! What'll ye ever do with sech a heap of 'em, Tally?" There were two dozen volumes in neat but cheap bindings; some new to the young teacher, and others she had read over and over in the school library at Bentville.

"Read and study them of course," she answered. "They're just what we've needed all the time. Who could have sent them?"

"Hit beats me," said the wagoner. "Thar ain't nothin' ter show whar they come from; mebbe the schoolmaster can tell ye."

Si Quinn did not seem to know who the unknown donor might be, although he might have surmised, for the very next day he received a letter containing five dollars wrapped in an unsigned epistle, stating that the sender

had found a place at good wages. After Christmas he was going to school—working evenings for his keep.

The schoolmaster smiled and nodded knowingly as he read it over and over to himself, then laid the sheets on the flame in the wide fireplace and watched them turn to ashes.

It took a great deal of scheming on Talitha's part to bring her plans to maturity. Billy Gooch was her right hand man, who could keep a secret better than some of his elders. Her younger brothers, Rufe and Dock, were too small to be of much service, while most of her other pupils lived too far away to help her after school hours.

Christmas Eve there were to be exercises at the schoolhouse, which was to be trimmed with evergreen and holly for the occasion. Talitha had heard of Christmas trees, although she had never seen one, but they meant candles, glittering trimmings, and little gifts far beyond the reach of her small purse.

The schoolhouse looked like Santa Claus' bower when the last decoration was in place. From every available spot glowed the red berries of the holly, with their shining green leaves against a background of pine and fir. At last she was free to go. With one last look of satisfaction she locked the door, and, accompanied by Billy and Sudie, took her way to the old schoolmaster's cabin. She did not see the faces peering excitedly out at her

from behind the pine thicket where, on that memorable night, Jake Simcox had thought himself safe from detection.

Si Quinn had not finished his stay at the Shackleys, so the coast was clear. The Saturday before Talitha, with the aid of Billy and his sister, had given the cabin such a scrubbing as it had never known. The fireplace was newly whitewashed and filled with odorous pine and balsam boughs. There was also a huge pile of wood in one corner of the room. Only the finishing touches were lacking to make the preparations complete for the great surprise to be precipitated upon the schoolmaster, and in these all his former patrons were to have a hand.

The children had brought their arms full of holly and pine, and now they ran out for more while Talitha tried to give a festive air to the poor little place. She smiled to herself as she did so, wondering meanwhile what the old man would say to such "vanities"—as he would have called them a year ago.

Presently there was a heavy step at the door, and Pom Ethers staggered in, his arms weighted with bundles of all shapes and sizes. There was a veritable Santa Claus twinkle in the grey eyes under the shaggy eyebrows.

"Thar's a heap more things in the wagon, Tally. I couldn't git hit nearer'n the big rock, but I can pack 'em up easy 'nough, I reckon. Law, but Si'll think hit air Chris'mus fer sure!

Thar's three fitches of bacon and a ham, and Mis' Spurlock's sent one of her puddin's," enumerated the wagoner as he deposited the offerings upon the table. "The Shackleys and the Twilligers hev fairly outdone theirselves. What I'm afeard of is thet now the school-master'll be gittin' the dyspepsy; too much eatin' air right down onhealthy—so I've heerd. But I'd be willin' ter take the resk if hit war me." The grey eyes twinkled again.

Billy and Sudie came in with another armful of greens and hurried to Pom Ethers' assistance. In a comparatively short time the contents of the wagon were neatly stowed away on the shelves, the bed made up with the new blankets and blue coverlet, and the table set in Talitha's most approved fashion with some of the choicest goodies surrounding a large bunch of holly.

"When the fire is burning and the candles lighted it'll look real Christmas-y," decided the young teacher as the finishing touches were completed. "I shall have to run ahead and see to that. How I wish Martin were here to-night," she sighed as she started homeward.

XI

CHRISTMAS DOINGS

THE dusk of Christmas Eve had gathered when Talitha set out for the schoolhouse, leaving the rest of the family to follow later. The place was already warm, but the candles must be lighted; the company would gather at an early hour. Already there was the sound of wheels, the tread of oxen on the wagon track, and the chatter of voices. Every man, woman, and child in Goose Creek, able to hobble forth, would be present.

As she neared the place she saw that light already flamed from the windows. Her steps quickened into a run; she reached the schoolhouse quite breathless. The door was ajar. Talitha pushed it open and entered. At first she was only aware that something very puzzling was going on. She rubbed her eyes—they were dazed with the light—and looked again.

On the platform was a Christmas tree, so tall that the flame of its topmost candle barely escaped the ceiling. The twinkling lights, the glittering tinsel, the toys, made it the most beautiful thing Talitha had ever seen. Several people were moving about it lighting more can-

dles and hanging small, red stockings, with bulging sides, to the lower branches. Did her eyes deceive her? Was one of them—yes, it was really Martin, and there was Miss Howard, and Abner, and Gincy!

The latter rushed forward and caught Talitha in her arms. "We've been planning for it ever so long; I was determined to come home with the boys and surprise you," laughed Gincy with a hug. "Then we coaxed Miss Howard to come too, and when the Bentville folks heard about the school and what you'd done, they wanted to help, so there's something on the tree for every pupil."

"Hello, Tally," Abner interrupted excitedly. "This is a dandy schoolhouse! I should think you'd be awfully 'bliged to Jake Simcox for burnin' that old shack——"

"Sh!" Talitha held up a warning finger, for a crowd was flocking in at the door. Foremost were the Shackleys with Si Quinn. At first the company looked about bewildered, then their tongues suddenly loosened and the din was deafening.

"Fer the land's sake!" exclaimed Ann Bills, with a violent poke of her elbow in her husband's ribs, "jest look at thet pine, will ye, all rigged out with poppets and sech. Whar d'ye s'pose Tally got all thet plunder?"

"I reckon hit war packed all the way from Bentville," Shad Bills answered shrewdly. "Thar's Miss Howard over yon—and—I'm

blest if hit ain't Mart and Abner lightin' them candles! The young-uns hev come back fer Chris'mus, Ann——" But his wife did not hear, her keen eyes had spied Gincy, and she was already elbowing her way through the crowd in a masterful fashion.

Half-dazed, the aged schoolmaster glanced around; it was all very strange—and beautiful, too. His faded old eyes winked and blinked at the unaccustomed twinkle and glitter. It almost took his breath and he dropped trembling, into a seat. How could Talitha have thought of all this! Did they have such things at Bentville? All the years of his teaching he had never once dreamed of celebrating Christmas in this fashion. He eyed the tree—what he could see of it over the heads of the crowd—with all a child's delight. How shining and stately it looked! Its tallest candle glittered like a star, while those among the holly and pine, around the room, shone back bravely as though they were not to be outdone. And how the folks chattered!

Talitha slipped away to find Martin. She wanted to meet him alone, although that seemed an impossibility, but she darted around the tree and caught him tucking away a parcel under the branches at the base. How tall and manly he looked.

"Oh, Tally!" he exclaimed, beaming at her. "Did we surprise you?" He stooped and kissed her.

Talitha only nodded; she could not trust her voice.

"I can see now why you came back, Tally," Martin began, but he did not finish, for the two were suddenly besieged by Abner and Gincy and dragged before the surprised company who had not yet discovered Martin.

It was quite a few minutes before the excited audience settled into quiet, and then it was as decorous and interested as one could wish. Miss Howard could hardly have presided with more dignity than did Talitha, and the exercises went off better than either could have believed possible with those alluring gifts before the children's eyes.

The dialogue between the Twilliger twins went smoothly without prompting. The youngest Dodd boy—small for his ten years and one of the brightest pupils—recited "The Night Before Christmas" like a general, and received long and vociferous applause, as did also the song by little Polly Suttle. Billy Gooch came in for a large share of approval at his rendering of Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg; there was a marching drill in which Rufe Coyle beat the time on an old drum of his grandfather—who had been through the war. The vigorous rat-a-tat-tat set the men's restless feet tapping to the great delight of the children. The exercises were at last concluded with the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner" by the school, the younger

pupils waving small flags through the chorus.

At the close of the song, Miss Howard, with the aid of Martin and Abner, began to distribute the gifts from the tree. Minta Bills was the first name called, but the child failed to understand and hung back timidly.

"Don't ye hear Miss Howard callin' ye? Go 'long, honey," coaxed her father, giving the child a gentle push. He did not comprehend just what was wanted, but the young woman from Bentville must be obeyed.

"Minty! whar's yer raisin'?" reproved Ann Bills, turning sharply to her granddaughter. Minta edged shyly toward the tree, and Miss Howard put a stocking full of candy and a small but gaily dressed doll into her arms, watching the look of astonishment and delight grow in her face. At the sight of the latter all the mother instinct was aroused, and she stumbled back to her father, hugging her precious burden close. All Goose Creek watched her. The big blue eyes were fastened on the doll, and the long yellow curls fashioned a sort of halo for the sweet, childish face.

Ann Bills' hard mouth twitched and she gave Minta a kindly pat as she bent over to view the gift at closer range. "Hit do beat all," she told her son in an audible whisper. "Thet thar poppet fairly looks like a human."

For a few minutes Minta was the envy of the school, but it was soon discovered that none of the pupils had been overlooked—that

even their teacher had been remembered with enough "store goods" for a new gown, the package Martin was hiding under the branches.

"I declare, if I didn't forget all about the schoolmaster," Martin whispered to Talitha. "I'm so sorry——"

"Oh!" his sister gave a start. "And I did too. Martin, I'm going right over to speak to Enoch Shackley, and in ten minutes you must follow me. Just slip away without any one seeing you; I'll be waiting outside."

Halfway across the room Talitha was waylaid by a tall, black-eyed girl with a conspicuous pompadour. "I reckon you don't know me, I 'lowed you wouldn't—at first sight, anyway, but I war on the train the mornin' you come from Bentville and you told me 'bout Gincy's goin' ter school. I didn't find out your name, but when I heerd 'bout a gal comin' back here to Goose Creek to teach school I pieced hit all together and I knew hit war you."

"This is Piny Twilliger?" inquired Talitha politely.

"You're jest right. I've had a powerful fine time, and I've been a-tellin' Gincy thet I'm goin' ter Bentville too, next term. I've changed my mind 'bout gittin' larnin'."

Talitha made her escape as soon as possible, although Piny would have liked to prolong the conversation. With a whispered word in Enoch Shackley's ear she slipped out of the door unnoticed.

XII

GOOSE CREEK PLOTS AGAINST THE SCHOOLMASTER

“**H**IT air gittin’ powerful late,” admonished Enoch Shackley, rounding up the last of his brood. “I can take you-uns along ter your place,” he said to the schoolmaster. “I reckon you’re honin’ ter git home.”

The old man’s face suddenly fell. Never within his memory had he spent so festive an evening, and now to go from it to his cold, comfortless cabin. The blacksmith observed the look with an unfeeling smile, and attempted to hasten his offspring’s preparations for departure.

“Hurry up thar, chil’ren. Law me, your teacher’s gone ’fore this. She’s glad ’nough ter git shet o’ you fer one spell, I reckon.”

It certainly was a mystery where Talitha and Martin had so suddenly disappeared. Even Abner and Gincy looked puzzled, finally accepting Mr. Shackley’s offer—made with a knowing twinkle of the eye—of a “couple of cheers” in his wagon.

The company flocked out of the schoolhouse

with their perforated tin lanterns like a swarm of fireflies dodging hither and thither among the trees. Saddle horses were mounted, and the patient oxen again yoked to the wagons filled with chairs.

Strange to say, many of the folks were taking the same road—following a short distance behind the Shackleys. The sound of their voices and the twinkling lights in the rear at any other time would have aroused Si Quinn's curiosity, at least. Now he was too much occupied with the thought of his own failures and the future which loomed before him more dismal than ever. Lost in revery he failed to notice when the oxen stopped at the footpath leading up to his cabin, until the blacksmith's voice roused him.

"Here you air, Si! Jest let me ketch a holt of you. Middlin' dampish, ain't hit? I 'low Abner better go 'long with the lantern. I'll wait fer him."

Had the two looked around as they slowly climbed the slope, they would have seen the shadowy company following at a little distance.

"I'll stop and start a fire for you," offered Abner, with a great feeling of pity for the old man who leaned heavily on his strong, young arm. "If you haven't been home for a week it ain't a fit place for you to go into."

"Thar won't be a live coal," panted the schoolmaster.

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"I've matches in my pocket, but it'll take a considerable spell to drive out the cold and damp." The boy eyed the dim outlines of the cabin with misgiving. It looked gloomy and unhomelike as possible.

Once at the door—guiltless of fastenings—Si Quinn drew a long, reluctant sigh.

His hand on the latch, Abner heard sounds of feet close by. He looked around; there were strange, moving shadows on the path. He was not slow-witted; it was Christmas Eve and a suspicion of something flashed across his mind. One glimpse of the already lighted room and he turned, helped the old man in, and hastily closed the door just as there came a tugging at his coat. A score of Goose Creek folks were behind him.

"Oh, what did he say?" whispered Talitha excitedly.

"He hadn't got that far," grinned Abner in sudden comprehension.

"Let's give three cheers for the schoolmaster," suggested Martin.

Such a demonstration was new to the mountain people who had not been to Bentville, but they listened with appreciation and joined in most lustily when it ended with: "A Merry Christmas! Wish You a Merry Christmas!" And then the company quietly dispersed.

"We made a power o' racket," said Dan Gooch as later he entered his own cabin. "But I'd like ter hev seen how the old man looked

when he war fairly inside. We did a toler'ble job, chinkin' up them crannies. You'd never hev suspected what the place war like," he chuckled. X

As more than one of the company around the little old cabin that night had surmised, the schoolmaster's face, as he gazed about the room—only a few days ago as cheerless as it could well be—was worth seeing. The pine boughs in the fireplace crackled and snapped merrily as the flames leaped upward and sent a delightful glow through the place. A half-dozen candles twinkled out from bunches of holly and pine. The bed with its warm, new covering was like a gay flower plot; shelves and table bore unmistakable evidences of Christmas cheer.

The faded eyes grew misty as they caught sight of a card on the shelf above the fireplace. It bore, in large letters: "A Merry Christmas from the Goose Creek Folks."

The old man's knees suddenly weakened and he dropped into a chair. He heard the cheering and tried to rise and open the door, but he could not summon strength. As the last echo of "Merry Christmas" died away across the mountains with the sound of retreating footsteps, the tears trickled down his cheeks. It was the happiest hour of his whole life. His poor efforts had been appreciated after all; he was not to be forgotten in his old age.

Until a much later hour than usual lights

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shone from the little homes about Goose Creek. The young people had loitered along the way from the schoolhouse, there was so much to talk over. Miss Howard was to stay all night with Gincy. The Coyle and Gooch families were to spend Christmas at the home of the former. It was to be a great day for the two households, and Talitha's head was awlirl with excitement. She had unselfishly worked hard to bring happiness to others, and the greatest surprise had come to her. She was going back to Bentville the day after Christmas, with Miss Howard, and Martin, and the rest. Gincy, hawk-eyed where her friend was concerned, had rushed to the dean when she discovered that two of the students were to leave, and engaged a place for Talitha. Piney Twiliger had been fortunate enough to secure the other.

Sam Coyle made no objection, he was secretly bubbling over with pride at his daughter's success. There could be no more school that winter; besides, he was beginning to feel that an education was something to be really desired.

By dawn on Christmas day two households at least were astir. The air was unusually mild with the fresh smell of a recent shower. The sun rose and beamed down with the warmth of May. By the time the Coyle family had breakfasted, Gincy and Abner were on hand to assist in the preparations. The loom,

warping bars, spinning wheel, and a rude chest were turned out of doors to make place for the expected guests.

"We're real lucky to have such weather," said Talitha. "I don't know how we would ever have managed with the table if we couldn't have cleared things away. As it is there won't be room enough for the children——"

"I'll knock something together that'll be nearer their size," comforted Martin.

"Good boy," smiled his sister, much relieved. "I was thinking of setting them in a row on the floor. That wouldn't be very Christmas-y, would it? But a table of their own will pleasure them mightily." Talitha hustled back into the cabin; there was an unusual amount of work for even her capable hands. Besides assisting in the preparation of so elaborate a meal, her belongings were to be made ready for her departure early on the morrow. It was too late in the season to risk further delay. Any day now, winter might rush upon the mountains with icy wind and sleet or a blinding snowstorm, making the rough roads altogether impassable.

"This air a weather breeder," observed Sam Coyle pessimistically. "I'd feel a sight easier if you-uns hed a-started this mornin'."

"An' miss their Chris'mus turkey," reproved his wife. "Jest be thankful hit air fine 'nough ter turn things out'n doors, 'though Tally 'lows now, hit would hev pleased the comp'ny

more ter hev set the table 'long of them pines."

"Hit air not so much 'count whar hit's set as what's set on hit," retorted Sam jovially. "Thet air the main thing; the scener-y hain't needed ter give me an appetite. The smell o' them turkeys air gone to my stummick a'ready, an' I reckon I sh'll hev ter take ter the crick ter git out'n reach of hit if the dinner's later'n common."

"Be keerful you don't fall in," warned Mrs. Coyle sarcastically. She paused in the midst of her egg beating to look about for Dock, her youngest, who was prone to get into mischief if unwatched.

By ten o'clock the company had arrived. It included the Bills family, as being next of kin, and Miss Howard who had waited to come with Mrs. Gooch and the younger children. Martin and Abner made themselves as useful as possible by taking the smaller members of the assembled families a short distance along the mountain-side in search of the hickory nuts which might have escaped their eyes at nutting time.

The company sat out of doors and visited with the host, while Talitha and her mother, with Gincy's aid, completed the final preparations for the Christmas feast. The children's table was laid beside a clump of laurel. When the youngsters appeared, they were immediately set down before well-filled plates while

their elders gathered in the cabin. The family table had been lengthened by Martin's skilful contriving and placed cornerwise across the room. Even then it took some managing to get the guests properly seated.

Mrs. Coyle surveyed the feast with pardonable pride; it would have done credit to more notable housewives. Not since the early days of her marriage had she had the opportunity to show such hospitality. Two of the largest, plumpest turkeys in her flock graced the centre of the board in company with a fat, wild goose, potatoes, turnips, beans, squash, dishes of pickle, a salad—Talitha had learned to make at Bentville—besides the usual Christmas pies, and a large black cake Gincy had trimmed with a wreath of holly. Both front and back doors were wide open, and a gentle breeze cooled the heated room where both the new stove and the fireplace had been doing extra duty.

Around the little cabin rose the great sheltering hills, their peaks a misty purple in the soft haze of a belated Indian summer. Below, Goose Creek, still little more than a rivulet, basked lazily in the sunshine.

At first the appetites were too keen to allow of much conversation, but at last Shad Bills laid down his knife and fork and looked around with a grin. "Has anybody heerd how the schoolmaster's feelin'?" he suddenly inquired. "I 'lowed a-toppin' off the Chris'mus doin's

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with thet surprise war a leetle too much fer the old man."

"I seen him this mornin'," said Dan Gooch. "He war as peart as a Juny bug. The Twiligers give him an invite to eat turkey with them. Yes, sir," he smiled reminiscently, "I reckon Goose Creek never see no sech doin's as we had last night. I don't rightly know as we'd ought ter let Tally slip off this-a-way without writin' out a promise thet she'll come back and teach the school next year."

Sam Coyle grinned appreciatively. Not one of the men in the company could read or write. "I reckon her word of mouth'll do. Tally's boun' ter come back all right," her father declared.

"She can't always be comin' back to teach," put in Gincy. "If you go to Commencement next spring maybe you'll want Tally to have a diploma, too."

Sam Coyle wisely refrained from a reply. That he had not looked with favour upon his daughter's ambition to get an education was well known, and now that he had been proved in the wrong he did not propose to lay himself open to further criticism. However, he inwardly determined that Talitha should keep the Goose Creek school. The money was a great help to the family, and Dan Gooch would like nothing better than to have a chance to secure it for Gincy, he reasoned selfishly. Miss Howard shrewdly read the man's thoughts,

but she said nothing, although she inwardly resolved that Talitha should have her chance with the rest.

After the dinner was over and the dishes cleared away, the young people went to the schoolhouse. The maps and pictures were to be brought home for safekeeping, although there was no probable danger of their being molested. Besides, the young teacher wanted to see the place again before leaving for Bentville.

There was a strong odour of pine as Martin flung open the door. The despoiled tree still stood on the platform. Miss Howard had put the tinsel trimmings carefully away for future Christmases.

"It certainly looks as though we had had a good time last night," said Talitha, glancing around. "Billy, I think I'll let you and Sudie sweep out when you have a chance. You may keep the greens up as long as you choose; they'll last some time. Good-bye until next summer," she said to herself as she reluctantly turned away.

They stopped a moment at the little heap of ashes and charred logs below the new structure. "It's a fitting monument for the old shack we used to call a schoolhouse," said Martin reflectively. "When I remember the days we spent in it, I——"

"Don't," said Talitha gently. "The schoolmaster did the best he knew. He can see his

mistakes as well as anybody now." Miss Howard was silent, but she thought of the many such places scattered over the mountains, some of them presided over by just such teachers as Si Quinn had been.

Early that evening Martin and Talitha slipped away to the old schoolmaster's cabin to say good-bye, for they would start by light the next morning.

"I 'lowed you'd be 'long," he said, beaming down at them. "I came home early so's not ter miss you."

"Oh, we wouldn't have gone away without coming to see you," Talitha assured him, drawing up a stool before the bright blaze in the fireplace. Martin seated himself upon an old chest in the corner and looked around. He had been curious to see how Talitha had managed to rehabilitate the dingy place of which he had such disagreeable recollections.

"You wouldn't know my old shack now, would you?" Si Quinn noticed the young fellow's survey of the room. "You kin lay the hull thing ter Tally, I'll be boun'——"

"Oh, no, no," protested the girl, blushing. "I just——"

"Don't I know your sly tricks? You started hit an' did a heap besides. Not that Goose Creek folks ain't the frien'liest, best-hearted critters in the hull mountings."

"Just think what you've done for me!" cried Talitha in a low tone. "Those books

and maps—I couldn't have replaced them this fall—and that box was such a godsend! Billy's going to see that all the children have a chance to read the books this winter. They'll be learning a lot and the days won't seem so long. I'll send them a package of papers and magazines in the spring."

"Law me, Tally, hit war little 'nough I did. I'd hev done a heap more, but I couldn't. Hit'll seem mighty lonesome with you-uns gone, but I'll git some comfort thinkin' of the chanct you're havin'."

The call must necessarily be a brief one. Talitha was very tired and there was a long ride before them on the morrow. But as the two rose to go the old man caught at the girl's sleeve. "Martin, you jest g'long and bide fer Tally by the big tree. I've somethin' special ter say ter her."

Martin looked surprised, but he obeyed.

"I war told ter keep hit a secret, Tally," said Si Quinn as the door closed behind her brother. "But I couldn't let you go 'way a-thinkin' I sent you thet box, fer I didn't. I'll trust you never ter speak of hit long as I live if I tell you. Hit war Jake Simcox——"

"Jake——!" Talitha stopped short in amazement.

"Yes, he's repented of his folly and is turnin' over a new leaf. He air a good piece from Goose Creek and he's got a chanct ter work an' go ter school. What's more, he

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'lows ter make up—some time—fer all the mischief he done. But he war sech a pore ignorunt feller—I reckon you've fergiven him, Tally, hit worked out a sight o' good fer you and fer Goose Creek."

"Yes, yes, indeed!" cried the girl, the tears in her eyes, "and I'm so glad he's having a chance. I wish you'd tell him so."

"'Tain't likely I'll ever see him agin, but he's goin' ter make a man of himself yit, I reckon." The schoolmaster looked down at his favourite pupil and there was a smile on his face that softened the plain, rugged features like sunshine from within shining outwardly. Standing in the glow of the firelight with the Christmas holly and pine on shelf and wall, the twinkling candles—he had lighted in honour of his guests—the white-haired, white-bearded man seemed like the memory of an old-time Christmas that had slipped back to its mountain home for a brief renewal of past pleasures.

Talitha carried the picture away with her as she went thoughtfully down the path toward the big pine where Martin waited.

XIII

THE "STILL" CAVE

BY dawn the next morning, the little party set forth for the return trip across the mountains. The four had come the distance to Goose Creek on horses and mules hired from the school farm. Talitha was mounted on Dan Gooch's sorrel he had unselfishly lent her, her father firmly refusing to allow his one mule to be taken from the place.

"I 'low they'll find room on the farm fer the beastie, a spell," said Dan, anxious to show Talitha a favour. "I'm reckonin' on gettin' down ter Bentville myself, come spring, ter see what the school air like and what you're doin' thar."

"I wish you would make us a visit, Mr. Gooch," urged Miss Howard, "and then come back and tell the Goose Creek folks all about it and bring them to Commencement."

"You'd never know whar ter stow 'em all," Dan smiled broadly.

"We'll put up some tents on the campus," put in Gincy. "You ought to see what a splendid, big place it is with such lovely trees——"

"It's time we were starting," called Martin in front, and the little cavalcade moved away. The sorrel was in the rear, but the faithful old beast did his best, and Talitha resolved that on reaching Bentville he should have a well-earned rest until his master came after him.

There was a wintry chill in the air, which was not surprising at that early hour. If the sun came out it would be delightful travelling. Martin watched the sky a little anxiously while the others laughed and chatted on unheeding. At last, over the bald peak of the mountain, the sun looked down at them through a veil of mist which gradually disappeared. A cool wind was all that prevented the day from being as delightful as the previous one had been. But their progress would necessarily be slow, for the sorrel proved to have little endurance. Talitha favoured him as much as possible by keeping behind the others and slipping down occasionally to walk beside him with encouraging pats.

"We can easily get as far as Joe Bradshaw's," said Martin. "They'll be looking for us about sundown."

The gorgeous colouring of autumn had gone from the mountains, but there was still the holly with its scarlet berries, the green of the laurel, the fir, and pine, and here and there, on hickory and oak, a patch of colour where the leaves still clung.

At noon the party stopped for dinner in a hollow shielded from the wind. They spread out the eatables which they had brought in their saddlebags, on the thick, green grass. The horses and mules were tethered to graze, after being watered at a trickling rill which filtered out of the rocks close beside them.

After lingering longer than usual to give the sorrel a chance to rest, the company started on. Miss Howard looked at her watch; it was half-past one. "We'll just about make it and that's all," she commented to herself cheerfully.

For some time after leaving the hollow they followed the dry bed of a stream. The rocky bottom was covered with loose stones, and now and then a small boulder jutted out from the bank. They were in shadow, for hedging them in on either side, rose the mountains thickly covered with pine. At last they left the stream bed and turned into a trail leading over the mountain. Rising above it was the ridge of still another which they must cross before the Bradshaw home could be sighted.

In the effort of guiding their animals into the trail, they did not at first notice the change in the sky until suddenly Martin, ahead, looked up. The sun had disappeared, and a grey mist clung to the tall peaks. The air had grown cold—a sudden drop of the temperature—which was an unmistakable sign of the ap-

proaching storm. He did not call out to startle those in the rear, but on reaching a small cove he turned the mule he was riding into it, and beckoned to the others. They were coming up Indian file, and one by one halted beside him—all but Talitha. Martin could see her some distance below them. Something had happened to the sorrel, for his sister had dismounted and was leading it with difficulty.

"There's a storm coming up." Miss Howard shivered and looked around anxiously. "It's growing colder every minute, I do believe; I never knew such a sudden change."

"It must have been coming on since noon only we were so sheltered we didn't notice it," returned Martin. "Just hold Jack and I'll go back and help Talitha," slipping the mule's rein into Abner's hand.

The sorrel clung to the trail with three feet; the fourth was evidently disabled. The animal's ears were laid back and there was a despairing look in his eyes. Vainly Talitha tugged at the rein while she gently urged him on.

"What's the matter?" Martin inquired.

"Well, he's all tuckered out for one thing, then he's got something in his foot—a sharp stone, I reckon, for he's limped ever since he left the creek bed. Poor thing, I might have known he couldn't stand such a jaunt."

With difficulty Martin got down and examined the injured member. It did not take him

long, with the aid of his jack-knife, to extract the offending stone, which had cut an ugly gash. "There, that feels better, doesn't it, old fellow? Just see if you can't step along now." He stroked the animal's nose coaxingly. "You'd better go ahead, Tally, and we'll follow." The tired sorrel plucked up courage and limped after.

When they reached the cove Abner silently pointed to the peaks on the opposite range, and Martin saw with dismay that they were nearly buried in a storm of flying snowflakes which was gradually drawing nearer. The boys' faces whitened as their eyes met. If they had been alone it would be serious enough with the prospect of a heavy snowfall to wipe out the trail, but with Miss Howard and the girls to look after—Martin felt a shiver, which was not from the cold wind, creep over him. It was Miss Howard herself who finally spoke with a calm decision.

"Boys, have you plenty of matches?"

"Yes," they both answered.

"And we have enough left from our lunch to make quite a respectable supper. Well, it's perfectly useless to think of going on to-night, I can see that; the sorrel can't endure it for one thing and the storm would overtake us before we were halfway down the mountain. We've got to camp out for the night——"

"But where?" inquired Talitha, looking around in bewilderment. How bleak and

lonely the mountains looked, how shadowy they were growing already!

"There, there, girls, we're not going to worry," Miss Howard said cheerfully, noticing the troubled faces. "I've discovered that this is the very place where we were caught in a heavy rain storm when I was out on extension work with Professor and Mrs. Denny, and we found such a nice place to spend the night. If I'm not mistaken I can go right to it——" A snowflake struck Miss Howard's cheek, another and another. "We haven't any time to spare. Come on and don't lose sight of me for a minute."

"Wait, please, Miss Howard," called Martin. "Tally must ride Jack and I'll lead the sorrel." He helped his sister mount, and then the teacher turned her horse toward the farthest side of the cove, the others following. Martin saw one rider after another disappear, for the moment, over the edge of the slope as though they had mysteriously slipped from sight. He went on with a shamefaced feeling that he was not the one to find shelter for the little company—he was older than Abner. But as well as he knew the caves and passages around Goose Creek, these were strange to him; he had never once thought of the possibility of some time needing shelter among them. Although there was no way to help himself he felt very uncomfortable. He pulled his hat brim low to shade his eyes—the snow

was coming faster—and watched the last of the straggling line that in spite of his efforts was getting farther and farther away, winding down around huge boulders and clusters of laurel and pine. Miss Howard had been the first to vanish, now Talitha on the submissive Jack was also out of sight. He urged his reluctant beast forward, several times nearly missing his footing.

Miss Howard had not been mistaken. As her friends said, her bump of location was well developed. Just as the dusk and the storm were closing down upon them, she led her followers into a narrow passageway between rocky walls, and stopped at the large, black mouth of a cave.

“Here we are,” she called back. “Where are your matches? I’d like to see if the place is already inhabited.”

“I have some.” Abner sprang to the ground, handed the mule’s rein to Talitha, and came to the teacher’s side.

“Feel on the ground just inside the cave and find me some dry twigs or splinters, if you can; we must be careful of the matches.”

The boy fumbled about on his knees for a moment. “Here are some and they feel real tinder-y, too. Let me go ahead.” Abner struck a match and applied it carefully to the pine twigs he had bunched. It made a fine torch, revealing what at first appeared to be a small cave, but which gradually widened as

they went on to one of considerable dimensions.

Several times the boy stopped to renew his torch. Fortunately there was plenty of material—a litter of pine, balsam, and fir boughs, as though the place had been recently occupied. There were no signs of the presence of wild animals as the young woman had secretly feared, but suddenly Abner stopped in astonishment. He instantly recognized the dark object at the farther end of the cave and shivered, remembering certain events of his boyhood days.

"It's only an old still that's been there for years," reassured Miss Howard, failing to understand. She slipped from her horse. "Now we must have a fire the very first thing. That's the place," pointing to what seemed a natural fireplace in the rocky wall where lay a heap of ashes. "There's a kind of chimney above it, so we won't be smoked out."

"Why, there's a fine bed of coals!" Abner presently exclaimed, uncovering them.

"That's fortunate; it'll be such a saving of matches. I think we can pick up plenty of stuff to make a good fire, then we must go out and forage for enough to last through the night." Miss Howard seemed as cheerful and matter-of-fact as though she were in her own home, while in reality she was much perplexed at the unmistakable evidences that the place had, very recently, been inhabited. It was

much too late in the season for surveyors, or parties in search of botanical or geological specimens. They might have been hunters lured to the mountains by the unusually pleasant weather and the prospect of returning with a full game bag. She tried to think of the latter possibility; at any rate the young people's suspicions must not be aroused.

In a few moments Abner and Gincy had a brisk fire burning. Talitha was feeding the horses and mules some corn she found in the saddlebags. "They'll have a pretty slim supper, I'm afraid, and they're so hungry—I wonder why Martin doesn't come," she broke off, looking anxiously toward the entrance. "Do you suppose he could have missed the way?"

"I think more likely the sorrel is having a hard time to get along," said her teacher. "But if he isn't here soon Abner and I will go to meet him."

The glow of the fire lighted the cave, and the young woman glanced around with apparent carelessness, but her eyes were keen and watchful. Behind the old still she picked up a man's coat. It had not lain there long, for it was only slightly damp and no musty smell clung to it. She quietly tucked it into a niche of the wall. Over by the fire the girls were examining the contents of the saddlebags in an effort to eke out a respectable supper. "I wish I hadn't eaten so much at noon," she heard Gincy say. "I didn't need it and I feel

just as hungry as though I hadn't had a bite of breakfast or dinner, either."

Miss Howard did not allow herself to think of the consequences should they find themselves hemmed in by snowdrifts the next morning, but she was again reminded that Martin had not yet appeared. Something must be done immediately. She hurried over to the young people, and with their help two large torches were made. One was lighted. "We may not need the other, but we'll keep it for an emergency," she said. "Stay right here and don't worry; we'll be back soon." Miss Howard and Abner hurried out of the cave.

How dark it had grown! The young woman was startled as, with torch held aloft, she peered out at the end of the passageway. There were no signs of Martin anywhere.

"You'd better call to him," she said to Abner.

"Halloo! halloo!" the lad repeated again and again, and then they both listened. The echoes died away in the hollows of the great hills, but no answering call came back to them.

XIV

LOST ON THE MOUNTAINS

MARTIN saw the last of his party through a cloud of whirling flakes. He followed as fast as the lame and now nearly exhausted horse would allow him, but not a trace of them was again visible. Even the tracks of the animals were obliterated by the fast falling snow. He did not lose courage, however, although the trail itself grew fainter and fainter in the deepening twilight. But finally his steps grew more halting and doubtful; twice he barely saved himself from slipping over a rocky ledge. At last he paused in bewilderment.

Shading his eyes with both hands he looked around. He could not see two rods before him. Which way should he go? Where had the little company disappeared? He hated to call and bring Miss Howard back to show him the way—or perhaps she would send Abner. At any rate he must have help as soon as possible, and lifting up his voice he shouted with all the strength of his lungs, then waited in vain for some reply. The old horse whinnied inquiringly and rubbed his cold nose against

Martin's shoulder. It brought the young fellow's grievance to mind afresh. If his father had not refused to let Talitha ride Cain—a biddable young mule—although there would be no work for the animal until spring, he would not be in this plight; the whole party could have made much faster progress and perhaps have reached the Bradshaw place in spite of the storm. But there was no time for bitter reflection; he must keep moving. Evidently his companions were already beyond the sound of his voice—call as he might.

In that partially sheltered place he could feel the air growing colder—a wind swept through the pines above his head and sent down light clouds of snow. Martin shivered helplessly, then in despair made a plunge forward, the sorrel stumbled after; both slipped—it was a misstep—and went down, down, the young fellow still clinging to the bridle with one hand while the other caught at bush and sapling to break his fall. Every moment he expected the horse would descend upon him. It was so close he could hear its frightened snorts as it crashed downward.

Martin's head grew dizzy, a weird light whirled before him; strange cries echoed in his ears, and he felt numb in a helpless fright. Then he suddenly stopped with a jolt and jar that opened his eyes. Still that glow, brighter than ever, was before them.

"Lands!" shouted a voice, "be careful or that critter'll tromp on you!"

"Why, the poor boy, he must have slipped over the bank and the horse after him. It's a miracle they were not killed!"

Martin tried to speak, but he was too dazed to put the words together.

"Abner, see if he's hurt anywhere. I do hope there are no bones broken. We shouldn't have let him get so far behind," Miss Howard was reproaching herself severely.

"I reckon he's stunned more than anything else," decided Abner wisely, after helping Martin to his feet and brushing off the snow. "But if the sorrel ain't used up it'll be a wonder. He air too old fer such servigrous exercise."

Although the animal floundered about excitedly, his fright was partly due to the flaming torch which Miss Howard held above her head. Abner soon quieted the frantic creature. They were near the passageway leading to the cave and shielded from the fury of the storm.

"Soon as you can, fasten your horse to that pine and help me get Martin in by the fire; we'll come back after it shortly."

Together, the two helped the young fellow along the passageway. The torch had suddenly flickered out, but a pale light showed the entrance to the cave. Two heads were thrust anxiously out, then the watchers ran to meet them.

"Is Martin hurt?" exclaimed Talitha as she caught hold of him.

"I don't really think so," assured her teacher, "but he must be chilled through. We must get him in by the fire—not too close—and rub him well. I wish he had something hot to drink."

Gradually Martin came to himself, although he seemed much exhausted. He lay propped up near the fire, the girls hovering over him while Miss Howard and Abner again disappeared. Presently they returned with the sorrel.

Except for numerous bruises and being badly shaken up, the old horse had escaped injury, but it was plainly evident that he would not be able to carry Talitha farther on her journey.

None of the party were thinking of that now, they were too thankful to be together once more. Fortunately the cave was large enough to allow of the animals being tethered near the entrance and leave room about the fireplace for their riders to spread the scanty supper. It was meagre enough, and the party thought hungrily of the bountiful dinner they had eaten that noon—it seemed like yesterday. If the weather permitted them to go on the next morning there would be several hours' journey before they could get anything more to eat, and if they were obliged to stay longer— That was too serious to think

about and they tried to help Miss Howard make as light of the situation as possible.

"I saved an ear of corn for the sorrel," whispered Talitha to Abner. "It's in Jack's saddlebag." It was terribly hard to see the faithful animals nosing about on the ground for a bit of provender—much worse than going without herself, Talitha thought. Abner nodded and slipped away. After a time he returned with an armful of sticks and threw them down before the fire.

"I can easily find enough to last through the night, and perhaps I can get a little fodder if I look around. It doesn't seem to be snowing quite so much, but I can hardly tell, it's so sheltered here," he said, choosing some dry pine for another torch.

"If you are going to start out foraging I'm going with you," Miss Howard declared. "I don't want any more people getting lost. I'm sure that Martin wouldn't care to repeat his experience."

The young fellow shook his head. "I'll be all right come morning, though," he announced confidently.

"Let us go along and help Abner, then we can get all that is needed in two or three trips," begged Gincy.

The young woman hesitated. "I don't know but it might be a good plan," she answered finally. "But Martin must stay right where he is and try to get rested."

Miss Howard halted at the entrance to the passageway, holding the torch aloft and keeping a sharp eye on her charges. She might have been Liberty enlightening the mountains as she stood there—the light flaming out over the white slopes beyond. The snow was still falling upon them, but in more scattering flakes as though the storm had spent its force.

Suddenly, she saw—with a start—little gleams of light flash far upon the opposite mountain-side. They vanished and again appeared in another place as though people—there were certainly more than one—were moving about. She thought of the coat she had found in the cave, and her old anxiety returned. Talitha and Gincy coming up—their arms heaped with firewood—wondered at her pale face.

“I reckon you’re plumb tuckered out,” said the latter sympathizingly. “My, what a pile Abner’s got! Don’t you ’low it’ll do us to-night if we’re careful?”

The teacher surveyed it with doubt, but she only said calmly, “I’m sure it will last a long time, and if we should need any more it can be easily gathered.”

“If I only had a hatchet I could get some big sticks down in that holler,” panted Abner. “I picked up a little green stuff for the beastes to nibble at, it’ll make ’em more content, but it’s mighty poor feedin’.”

Entering the cave they found Martin asleep

by the fire. Quietly they moved about, making themselves comfortable as possible for the night and were soon dozing around the fireplace.

Miss Howard did not allow her eyes to close. She watched and listened, alert to catch any unusual sound, while the young people around her slept fitfully.

Late in the night she heard voices, then a wild shout and the crunching of hoofs in the snow. The mules did not stir, but the horses became restless and one of them whinnied. The sleepers awoke suddenly and sat up. Miss Howard looked at her watch, it was nearly twelve o'clock. She smiled at them sleepily.

"Don't you want to sing something?" she inquired. "Perhaps the night won't seem so long if we do."

Talitha rubbed her eyes. It was a strange request at that late hour and in such a place, but she cheerfully joined in with the others when her teacher began the old choral so familiar to Bentville pupils:

"A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing—"

The strong, young voices filled the cave with strange echoes which penetrated into the night. The singers caught the spirit of the song as they went on and on. All their fears for the morrow had vanished. The dumb creatures looked around at them in astonishment.

Miss Howard was keeping her eyes on the entrance as she sang. Over the animals' heads she could see a light coming along the passageway. It grew brighter and brighter as it neared the cave opening. Her charges did not see it; Martin was singing with closed eyes, and the two girls were watching Abner pile fresh sticks upon the fire. She knew how superstitious were the mountain people, especially the lawless ones who were fugitives from justice because of their propensity for appropriating their neighbours' horses and cattle. Was it possible that after all her little party was to be molested?

As the last note died away, a man's head, covered with a coonskin cap, was thrust inside and then as suddenly withdrawn. "Come on, Joe, Gid, here they are safe and sound!" shouted a bluff voice, and the Bradshaws—father and sons—hurried into the cave.

With delighted shouts the wayfarers gathered around them.

"We've been beatin' 'bout these here mountings sence nine o'clock," said the older man, "and we war jest ready ter give up when we heard the singin'. Hit war powerful deceivin' at first—a-comin' up out'n the ground that-away, till I 'lowed you war nowhar but in that old still cave."

"Then it was the light from your lanterns I saw when the young people were gathering the firewood. Didn't you see my torch?"

Joe Bradshaw laughed while his father and brother looked sheepish. "Yes, we did see it, but Pappy and Gid 'lowed it was a harnt. At first it looked like a fire from where we were, and then it disappeared so suddenly it really was mystifying."

"'Twas the singin' thet fetched us," persisted the elder Bradshaw. "We'd been expectin' you sence before sundown, and when hit went on nine o'clock and war dark and snowy I 'lowed you war lost and we jest set out ter sarch. Thar war a passel o' hoss thieves in these parts a leetle spell back, and we 'lowed, too, thet mebbe they'd got a holt of your beastes and left you ter foot hit. Thet's the reason we didn't sarch here fust thing. This has been the place ter find sech as them, and we warn't nowise anxious ter make their 'quaintance."

"Gid has some corn in the saddlebags for the beastes," said Joe, "and I have something for your supper that mother sent. You must be nearly starved."

But Talitha agreed with her teacher that it would be better to wait until morning and have a hearty meal before continuing their journey. Relieved of the necessity for watchfulness, Miss Howard was soon asleep. After talking a little longer her charges followed suit while the Bradshaws kept careful guard.

It was later than usual when the little company breakfasted the next morning. There

was no finer cook in all the mountains than Mrs. Bradshaw. A large loaf of light bread and a bag of crullers were a welcome addition to the potatoes Joe had put roasting in the ashes at an early hour, and the bacon, eggs, and coffee served in true camp fashion. As they ate they could hear the melting snow dripping from the rocks. The sun was shining and sent splashes of light into the passageway. They could not be otherwise than merry, although they listened with a shiver to Martin's account of his experience the previous night.

"It seemed as though I slipped miles—that I should never get to the foot of this awful mountain. And I could hear the old sorrel tearing along after me. Every minute I expected he'd land on top and I'd be crushed to a pulp——"

"But he didn't," Abner chimed in. "The old beastie is sure 'nough game. I've seen him slide down into the holler from Red Mountain when it was icy, and he just put his legs together stiff and slipped along as slick as——"

"You'd better ride my hoss critter the rest of the way," Gid offered with true mountain hospitality. "I'll lead the sorrel home and keep him 'til he's called fer—thar's 'nough stable room."

Talitha felt as grateful for this proposal as Abner and Gincy could possibly have done, for she knew the animal would have the best

of care and a long rest. Dan Gooch would not be able to come for him until spring opened.

Before leaving the cave Miss Howard brought out the coat she had tucked away. The elder Bradshaw examined it closely, while the others watched his face, which wore a mysterious expression. "I'd best pack hit 'long with me," he said presently. "I might happen on the owner; I reckon he war in haste ter git away or he'd never left sech as this behind in the ol' still cave. I call hit downright onlucky."

"I never knew before there was a still in these parts," said Martin. "I thought it was over by Pigg Branch."

"Mebbe you'll find one thar now if you'll take the resk of sarchin' fer hit, but this here one war put out o' business a cornsiderable spell back." The man chuckled with such evident amusement that all but Miss Howard and his two sons stared in surprise.

"I think you'd better tell them," urged the former, "it is a very interesting story."

"My mam war sure 'nough peart," grinned the old man. "Lish Dumley kep' this still when I war 'bout Joe's age, and pap and I uster come up and call on him oftener'n war fer our good. Hit made mam mighty sober-sided, but we never paid no 'tention ter anythin' she said. One day she tuk hit inter her head ter go ter the Gap ter see Lizy Sneed—

they war gals tergether—and left pappy and me ter tend the young-uns.

“That night this ol’ still war raided and Lish Dumley and his men caught red-handed. Hit’s the last they seen of the mountings fer many a year, ’cept mebbe what they could view through the bars.”

“I ’low your mammy was mightily pleased to have the stillin’ stopped,” said Gincy innocently.

Mr. Bradshaw smiled broadly. “Law, yes. When mam undertook a thing hit war good as done. She never said nothin’ ter nobody, but the sheriff let hit leak out; he war thet pleased mam war so gritty. Pappy ’lowed Dumley’d burn our cabin once he got out’n the pen, but I reckon he war too broken-sperited ter take revenge thet’d only shut him up agin.”

“I ’low our mammy’d do the same thing if thet still war a-runnin’ now,” said Gid proudly. “She air mighty servigrous when hit comes ter whiskey and sech, and pappy air jest as set agin hit, too.”

The little party looked with a new interest around the cave, and at the dark silent object which the sheriff and his men had wrecked that it do no more harm. If it only had a voice how many strange tales it could tell them.

Out on the trail once more with the sun shining above their heads, they made more rapid progress than the day previous. Gid

was far in the rear leading the sorrel. Not more than a quarter of a mile from the cave, Mr. Bradshaw, who was ahead, stopped suddenly. As the rest of the party came up he pointed into a sheltered hollow shut in by rocky walls.

"See whar those fellers stopped last night. Hit's a wonder they didn't rout you out of thet cave and take your beastes." A heap of ashes and the much trodden earth showed where the desperadoes had camped. Gincy and Talitha were pale with fright. How near they had been to danger after all!

Because of their late start, the party did not reach the Bradshaw home until nearly noon.

"I 'lowed you'd come," Mrs. Bradshaw declared. "The boys and their pappy generally gits what they go after. Only I reckoned they might hev fetched along a couple or so of them hoss thieves, the sheriff and his men hev been a-sarchin' fer, seein' thar war sech a comp'ny of you," she added.

"I hev found whar they war last night," exclaimed Pappy Bradshaw triumphantly. "And I hev somethin' ter remember the leader of the gang. He may be a-callin' fer hit some day." The man chuckled loudly to himself, but Miss Howard instantly changed the subject.

In good season the next morning the party were once more on their way and reached Bentville early that evening.

XV

THE WALKING PARTY

SPRING came on apace. There was a lingering perfume from the apple blossoms in the air when Lalla proposed a walking party. "We'll go to the Crater, have our supper, and come back by moonlight. Miss Howard's going with us—isn't it grand?"

"Splendid!" said Gincy. "I reckon Miss Howard's planning to let some one else inspect the rooms and hall this afternoon; she knows I can't squeeze in another thing and go. I'm worn out already trying to plan for my work, and lessons, and music."

"That's all arranged," said Lalla, "we're to start promptly from the front steps at two o'clock. I'll help you put away the towels; I'm all ready this minute!"

Gincy looked at Lalla's short, brown skirt and percale waist as she was counting the sheets. "Well," she said at last, "I don't believe I've a thing to wear—climbing's terribly hard on clothes."

"I've another old skirt you're welcome to; it's a fright, though."

"Bring her along, I'll be plumb tickled to improve her looks," agreed Gincy gaily.

Lalla ran off and soon reappeared with a bright homespun. "That's what I wore for the first three months. I thought it was pretty then; I never saw such a thing to wear, you can't tear it to save your life!"

"I'll be a regular beacon light, we won't need the moon coming back," said Gincy as she flew around to finish her morning's work. "I'll put a twist of red ribbon around Abner's old hat. I've a piece that's almost a match."

When the four girls gathered on the front porch of the Hall, there sat Miss Howard with her folding easel and box of paints. "Girls," she said, "suppose we change our minds and go to Slate Lick this afternoon, then I can do some sketching."

"Good!" exclaimed Gincy delightedly. "I haven't been out that way at all."

"It's mighty pretty, and not so hard walking," said Kizzie, and the rest seemed equally pleased with the change.

"We'll go down Scafflecane Pike and cut across to the railroad, it's a good deal shorter." Miss Howard gathered up her belongings and started off ahead at a brisk pace. At the gate they met Mallie and Nancy Jane, the latter had been crying.

"Let's ask them to go with us," said Miss Howard, turning suddenly. There was a brief consultation behind the cypresses, then Lalla sped back after the two.

"Tell them to come just as they are!"

called Urilla. "Thank goodness, they aren't dressed up."

"What a queer looking bundle," remarked Mallie as the two joined the waiting group.

"Isn't it?" responded Gincy, patting a bulky parcel. "Shooting irons come handy whar thar air dangerous animals," relapsing into her former vocabulary.

Nancy Jane brightened visibly. "I'm glad some one feels funny; I've been too homesick for anything all day. I haven't had a letter this week."

"You'll get one on the evening mail," Gincy assured her. "No news, good news. I belong to the Don't Worry Club; you'd better join."

"Guess I will. I've got to scratch around and find out about a lot of new birds before I see Professor Lewis again. I don't know any, for sure, except robins and buzzards. This will be a good time to get information."

There was a general laugh in which Nancy Jane joined, her sorrows for the moment occupying the background. They filed down the long, straight road and crossed Silver Creek. There was a substantial bridge—built for high water—but Lalla and Mallie preferred the rickety foot-bridge farther down which trembled at every slight bit of weight imposed upon it. Miss Howard watched rather anxiously, but was soon reassured. They reached the farther end safely and started off across the fields toward the railroad.

The foothills seemed a vast, undulating semi-circle. One bold knob higher than the rest, with precipitous sides patched with pines, stood out with more importance; but it lacked their allurements of tender colouring.

Straight into the heart of the range, the railroad cut its way, and a long, creeping freight train trailed by just as they turned to follow the track. A shower of cinders deluged Mallie and Lalla; they wheeled and walked backward until Gincy and Kizzie caught up. Nancy Jane panted close behind.

"I've got a monster in my eye!" moaned Mallie, plucking at the offender. Her efforts were vain, and each girl, in turn, was rewarded in the same way. Urilla and Miss Howard, far in the rear, were talking too earnestly to make much progress, or notice the group ahead.

"I'm so glad your mother's better," the teacher was saying. "I know you want to stay, and we can't spare such girls as you very well."

Urilla's face beamed. "Oh, Miss Howard, do you really mean it? I feel that I'm improving, I was so stupid at first—now I can see through things better. Gincy's helped me, she's always saying something nice and encouraging."

"Gincy's a treasure!" said Miss Howard warmly. "But where are the girls, they were on the track a minute ago?"

Another train thundered by. "I wish they

wouldn't keep so far ahead, that's the 3:15, and it goes like lightning when it's making up time," Urilla remarked uneasily.

They hurried along, scanning each clump of bushes and stack of grain, but no one was visible. "They couldn't have gone in here!" exclaimed Miss Howard, looking at a little weather beaten cabin very near the track. Then she listened. Yes, there were voices that sounded familiar. Through the half-open door, the two caught glimpses of Gincy's bright skirt and gay hat.

"I wonder what they're doing, and why we didn't see them when they turned off the track," said Urilla as they opened a rickety gate and went into the yard. "What a dreadful place to live!"

Miss Howard agreed as she looked at the forlorn and desolate little cabin with not one home-like feature; even the yard was bare and wind-swept.

"Why, there's Talitha!"

"What?" The two pushed up eagerly.

"Mrs. Donnelly told me this morning she had gone to see some of her kinfolk, but I didn't know they lived here," said Urilla, looking curiously at the bare little cabin.

Standing just inside the door, the missing girls were talking to Talitha, who, with her dress pinned up around her and a towel over her head, was busy cleaning. Three small children played near the fireplace, and beyond,

propped upon an old pillow, her bright eyes watching the newcomer, was the tiniest woman they had ever seen.

"Have you had measles?" asked Talitha, waving her broom at them. "If you haven't, stay out."

"Of course," answered Urilla scornfully, "years ago; but I don't see any."

Another wave directed them to a small bed near a darkened window. Two flushed faces peered above a ragged quilt.

"Why!" gasped Urilla, taking in the situation. "But how did you know? I thought——"

Miss Howard suddenly interrupted with, "This must be Mrs. Gantley. I intended to find you yesterday, but I thought you lived on the Big Hill pike. Are you feeling better?"

The little woman shifted her position slightly, a shadow of a smile flitting across her face. "Yes, since Tally came I'm easier in my mind. The children ain't bad sick—jest feverish and powerful troublesome; I couldn't keep 'em from ketchin' cold no way, out o' bed."

Gincy and Talitha were having a quiet conference in another part of the room. "I found out this morning that she's kin on mother's side—way back," said the latter in a low voice. "They used to live in Cowbell Hollow, but he ran away and left them a month ago."

Talitha looked unutterable things as she re-

ferred to the recreant Mr. Gantley. Accustomed as she was to the delinquencies of the mountain men, the desertion of a helpless family seemed the blackest of crimes. She glanced meaningly in the direction of a large basket in the corner, and whispered, "They were almost starving. Martin helped me or I couldn't have got it here—Mrs. Donnelly gave me so many things, but——"

"See here," said Gincy, slipping an arm around Talitha's waist, "I'm going to stay and help; I can go for a walk any Saturday. We'll scrub the children, gather wood, and cook. Won't it be fun!"

"Are you sure you want to?" asked Talitha, her tired face brightening.

"Of course; the rest can trot along just the same."

"Dear me," grumbled Lalla as they proceeded without Gincy, "I'd like to get hold of that man. Do you know anything about the family, Miss Howard?"

"Not much, only he's fond of moonshine. He sold the home about three weeks ago—told her he was getting ready to come to Bentville, where there was a good school for the children. When she found that he had really gone, she thought he might be here and followed him." Miss Howard walked on with her head held high; she did not want the girls to read in her face the fulness of disgust which she felt for a man of that type. There were

others like him whose sons and daughters were working their way through school, trying to redeem the family name and become worthy citizens.

"It's a shame!" said Mallie. "They ought to catch him and make him work good and hard—beat him if he didn't—and give all his wages to his folks. I'd teach him to run away from those pretty children, and——"

"There isn't a chair in the house," interrupted Nancy Jane, "and I didn't see a dish. That poor woman might just as well chase a Bushy tail; she'll never see him again—not until the children grow up, then he'll come back and live on them."

"I should be glad to get rid of him," said Urilla conclusively. "I've seen men like that before."

There was silence for a moment, and the group became more widely scattered. Lalla forged straight ahead until she was several rods in advance. She scanned the great slate boulders on either side and listened. There were voices, familiar ones, then all was quiet. Everywhere the foothills hemmed them in. Suddenly a rock crashed in front of her. Looking up she saw Abner's shock of light hair as, flat on his stomach, he peered over the edge of the cliff. The head disappeared and an improvised mask took its place.

"Halt!" commanded a muffled voice which closely resembled Martin's. Lalla threw up

her hands in mock fright. "Come around behind that pine tree, we're laying for some of our crowd. There's something in the wind today, for Raphael Sloan and Joe Bradshaw sneaked off without letting us know—dropped out all of a sudden. Keep your eye peeled for them, won't you? Likely they're up at the springs."

"Don't let the rest know we're here," warned Abner, peering over Martin's shoulder, "it might spoil the fun."

"I guess not," agreed Lalla with her old love for a joke. "Go ahead and have your fun; but what if they go back the other way?"

"You mustn't let 'em. Think up some scheme; you can do it." Both heads disappeared as Nancy Jane's voice was borne to them from below.

Lalla picked a few violets and walked on carelessly, looking up at the mountains on the opposite side. "Hurry up or we'll never get there!" she called back, waving her flowers; "there'll be heaps of these at Slate Lick."

The gorge widened. A trickling, shallow stream crept through the bed. The foothills seemed suddenly to have become mountains and surrounded them, making a basin-like valley. On the opposite side, sheltered by walnuts, stood a few deserted houses and a building which seemed halfway between a store and a peanut stand.

"There's quite a colony here in summer," said Miss Howard, when at last they stood in front of the spring house and fitted the long key into the padlock. "The sulphur water calls them, and the view. Isn't it beautiful! I want to get the Knob painted in while the haze is over it. You young folks run along and do your climbing; I'll whistle for you when it's time to go back."

"If Talitha and Gincy were only here!" sighed Kizzie after the first long climb. Together they stood panting for breath and watched the scene below.

"Where's Lalla? She beats everything for disappearing right before one's eyes," Nancy Jane frowned.

"Couldn't lose her though, that's the beauty of it," remarked Urilla as they looked around behind the trees and boulders. Below, Miss Howard sat intent upon her canvas. A tinkling cowbell was the only sound which greeted their ears. "I'm for going on. It's one of Lalla's tricks; she's a good deal nearer than we think—probably laughing at us this minute."

But Lalla, when she dropped behind the rest, had taken a trail leading off to the left. She was sure that it came back to the main trail again, and it would give her a splendid opportunity to pop out and surprise them. She soon found that it led around an immense boulder, that it was steep, and grew steeper.

As she paused quite breathless, the sound of men's voices came from behind the rock.

A clump of small evergreens made a convenient hiding-place; behind them Lalla listened. She was not in the least alarmed, only curious. The voices grew louder, one of them seemed to be chanting or reciting something; it was hard to tell which. Lalla stole out a little farther and crouched close to the rock, listening breathlessly.

"Louder, Raf, so I can hear you at this distance." Lalla fancied she could have touched Joe Bradshaw had not the rock projected a thin edge between them. She sank noiselessly into a bed of tall ferns. So here were the truants! Martin and Abner should hear about them; she would jump out and give Joe the scare of his life.

On and on went the voices, the nearer one correcting and halting the speaker from time to time.

Lalla listened intently; her eyes grew larger. What was Raphael saying! She sat perfectly rigid as the truth flashed upon her. It was his speech for the Mountain Congress, and he was to speak against Abner. No wonder they stole away from the boys.

For some minutes Lalla sat undecided. Raphael Sloan was a formidable opponent, and Abner new at the business of debating. If she could only give the latter a hint—she wouldn't tell right out. How proud Gincy

would be to have her brother win the debate. Her heart beat fast and she listened as she had never listened before; not a word must be lost and she must not be discovered now for the world!

"You'll have to be ready for the rebuttal; they'll get you on that point—Abner's working like a tiger." And then there was an audible movement on the other side of the boulder which made Lalla's heart beat like a trip-hammer. To her infinite relief, Raphael Sloan moved on up the trail and Joe after him. She could hear their voices growing fainter and fainter each moment.

Cautiously she slipped from her hiding-place and retraced her steps to a point lower down. There was a way to cut across the other trail, but it was through blackberry bushes, wild grapevines, and a tangle of underbrush. Lalla did not hesitate, however; slipping and sliding, she fairly rushed forward, not stopping for scratches nor even bruises. From the thicket she suddenly emerged into a small opening—hardly a clearing—in which was a tiny shack of logs. To all appearances it was deserted, but Lalla decided to avoid it and come out just beyond. A gun sounded very near; a hound bayed. She shrank back where the shadows were deep, and silently threaded her way in the direction of the old trail. It could not be many rods farther on.

For fully a half-hour she stumbled along,

then she heard Nancy Jane's voice, and the girls fell on her with loud reproaches.

"I was exploring," Lalla said with shining eyes, and then she told them about the cabin. "It's mighty secret; I'd never found it only for taking the short cut. Folks could do stillin' and no one be the wiser."

"I wonder if they do make moonshine there," said Mallie after a pause. "We heard that shot and were worrying about you. Don't you run away again."

Lalla smiled, but did not answer.

A long whistle came from below. It was repeated. "That's Miss Howard!" exclaimed Kizzie. "She wants us right away; see how late it's getting."

All the way down Lalla was very quiet. Her head was full of plans to help Abner and find out more about the mysterious cabin. Mystery appealed to her vivid imagination and stimulated her to immediate action.

A thin trail of smoke came up to them as they made the last steep descent into the basin. "Oh, Lalla, Miss Howard's getting supper and I'm so hungry," said Kizzie. But Lalla was thinking of the two boys—which way could they have gone home?

XVI

THE MOUNTAIN CONGRESS

IT was several days before Lalla saw Abner alone. He was certainly working like a tiger. He rushed over to meals, and when the boys were dismissed, was gone like a shot, not waiting to join the groups who visited in the yard.

It wanted a week of the Mountain Congress when she followed him into the library one day and straight back to the stack room. There was a long table in one corner and piles of reference books on it. Abner had snatched his cap off and was digging for the bottom one of the nearest pile when Lalla touched his shoulder.

"Working on your debate?" she whispered. "I hope you'll win."

Abner looked up gratefully. "I don't reckon on it much—Raphael's an old hand, they tell me—but I'm learnin' a lot, that's one sure thing."

"I've thought of some points which will be likely to help you." Lalla pushed a sheet his way. "You can never tell what they're going to spring on you just at the last."

Abner took it with a look of surprise. "I didn't know that you even knew the subject of the debate; we've tried to keep it a secret." Lalla reddened—she had not thought of this emergency. "Of course I told Gincy," Abner continued, "and I know she trusts you, so it's all right."

He had misconstrued her evident embarrassment, and was trying to reassure her. For one moment Lalla's courage failed, but she was sure Abner stood little chance of winning without some help, and there was almost no risk of discovery, not even if Gincy told her brother that she had kept the secret.

Lalla's impetuous nature was capable of a good deal of self-sacrifice—mistaken at times, but nevertheless genuine in motive. She had a warm feeling of gratitude toward the girl who had not, by even so much as a look, hinted at her adventures with the master key. Indeed, Lalla felt that Gincy had entire confidence in her assurance that she would be perfectly straightforward from that time on.

It was the mountain warfare over again, and Lalla did not feel any real compunction about the methods. She knew instinctively, however, that Gincy and Abner would look at it differently and was prepared for questions.

However, they did not come. "These seem like dandy points; they might do me a heap of good when it comes to the final touch-down." Abner showed her the result of his

digging for the last few weeks—a whole tablet full of notes, disorderly enough but right to the point.

Lalla glanced over them with a shrewd eye, and nodded. "Abner, they're splendid! But won't you be scared half to death in front of that crowd?"

He shook his head resolutely. "I'm going to bluff it if I am; it doesn't do to show one's feelings."

"No, and Goose Creek folks aren't the scary kind."

"You bet they aren't—not the girls, anyhow." Abner spoke with conviction.

Devotional exercises the next morning were brief. Then the excitement began. Banners went up all over the chapel, and nominations were made for governor of Appalachian America. There were speeches and special music to arouse enthusiasm for the Mountain Congress.

The girls from Clay sat in the gallery—a row of bright faces keenly watching every movement below to see what counties were represented.

"There's Pike, and Letcher, and Magoffin!" whispered Gincy excitedly.

"And Floyd, and Knott, and Breathitt!" added Talitha.

"Perry, Harlan, Leslie, and—Oh, look at Clay! Goody! Goody!" Mallie almost lost her balance and fell into the crowd below.

Nancy Jane pulled her back and kept a firm grip on the excited girl for some time.

"It's awfully interesting!" sighed Lalla, her eyes growing bigger as she watched the platform. "But I suppose the congress itself will be twice as exciting."

There were funny speeches from the candidates, each vying with the other in promising favour to his particular section of the country. The applause was frequent, and the college band played "Dixie." Every one filed out full of enthusiasm; they would know the result of the election by evening.

Lalla and Gincy walked over to Memorial Hall behind Abner and Martin. There was a grand rally out in front—practising yells and singing class songs. The noise was deafening.

"I'm saving my voice until Friday night," Lalla told Abner in the first lull. "I know you're going to beat and then you'll hear me yell!"

Gincy smiled happily. "Abner's going to do his best; that's the main thing. I'm proud to think he's even got a chance to do it, without his beating."

"Of course it's an honour to have the chance," said Lalla, "but, Gincy, just think how proud Goose Creek will be to have Abner come home with the medal."

In spite of himself Abner flushed with pleased anticipation. He was making the fight of his life for a public honour and did not

intend to be beaten. Every word of his speech was photographed upon his brain, ready for instant use, if—and here was the hard part—if his opponent did not think of some entirely new line of argument.

Friday evening found the Hall alive with excitement. The girls were divided into factions. Raphael Sloan was the best debater Bentville had had for some time, and while Abner was popular, he was too new to inspire general confidence. Nearly everybody—except the Goose Creek folks—was sure of the boy who had never been defeated.

The chapel was in an uproar when the girls arrived. Occupying the centre and front were delegates from each county to the Mountain Congress. Class colours were everywhere in evidence. Pennants were fluttering, and yell after yell went up when the Governor of Appalachian America—one of the senior boys—took his seat on the platform.

Afterwards the whole thing seemed like a dream to Lalla. Raphael, tall, dark-eyed, with the flush of anticipated victory on his face. Abner, intense, pale at first and somewhat hesitating, but warming up with fiery eloquence toward the last and meeting every argument with growing confidence.

Not once did he fail in the rebuttal, nor even hesitate, and Lalla saw an amazed look creep over Joe Bradshaw's face as Abner answered with a glibness born of knowledge,

sweeping the very foundation from under his opponent's feet.

There could be but one verdict, and the Goose Creek girls saw Abner hoisted upon strong, young shoulders and borne in triumph around the room. Once more the pennants waved and pandemonium broke loose. This time they joined in the yells. Lalla, in the centre of the circle of girls, never stopped until her voice gave out.

Joe Bradshaw took his roommate's defeat quite philosophically. He was fond of Abner and Martin, but somewhat puzzled at the former's quick replies to every argument. "You did splendidly!" he said, wringing Abner's hand. "Clay County is right to the front to-night."

Abner gave Lalla a quick glance of gratitude. She was watching him as he talked to Joe and the surrounding boys, not forgetting to wave at the home girls who found it impossible to reach him. Gincy's eyes were full of tears—proud ones. If her father and mother could only have been here to see Abner beat the best debater in all the mountain counties. It would have rewarded them for every sacrifice.

There was to be a spread in the Industrial Building for the winner. Talitha and Martin held frequent conferences all the next day, and by four o'clock a constant procession of boys and girls were busy carrying parcels,

bunting, and branches of pine for decoration, and making the rooms of the Agricultural Department attractive for the evening crowd. It was to be a great event for the Goose Creek folks, and they had prepared accordingly. Pete Shackley guarded the chickens. "I knew Abner'd beat, those roosters have been crowing under my bed for two nights. I toted the box into my room the minute I bought them; there's no telling where they'd be to-day if I hadn't."

Gincy and Mallie kept the door of Number 4 securely locked, but that precaution did not prevent savoury odours from escaping which the boys sniffed eagerly.

"Cake!" exclaimed Martin delightedly. "Tally said Miss Browning was going to let them use the cooking room all day. I smell fruit cookies, too. My, but it's going to be a spread! I wonder what Piny Twilliger's doing 'round here; she likes good eating, I suppose."

"Of course, but didn't you know she's Abner's cousin from Redbird?" and Isaac Shackley grasped a big pot of ferns and moved on, leaving Martin staring in astonishment.

Piny was so tall and snappy and altogether loud—such a contrast to Gincy—Martin had taken a special dislike to her the very first time she came to Harmonia. That was at the opening of the spring term and now it was getting pretty well along toward Commence-

ment. But the girl's voice did not seem to improve—it was still coarse and penetrating—she wore the gayest colours, and—— Martin couldn't enumerate all the reasons why he disliked her, but he did.

It was growing dusk when everything was ready for the spread. They were to serve it in the Domestic Science room at eight o'clock. Nancy Jane had the key and was instructed to remain in charge until the ice cream arrived, then hurry over to the Hall to dress. Nancy Jane turned on the lights and surveyed the room with satisfaction; there was a good deal to show for all their work. The cake was delicious, the chicken fried to a turn. There were great plates of rolls and plenty of pickles. The long table down the centre of the room was decorated with Abner's class colours, while all around, in festoons, were the orange and black of the Mountain Society—the first typifying the brilliant autumn colouring of the hills; the second, the wealth of coal found in their mines.

The building was far from deserted. There was a clatter of feet up and down the bare stairs—fully a dozen boys roomed on the third floor—and Nancy Jane locked the door to secure herself from unceremonious callers. "They'd like to play some game on us—those seniors," she thought. "They're pretty sore because a new pupil carried off the honours."

It was seven o'clock, but the cream had not

come, and Nancy Jane was in a quandary. Some one rattled the door knob. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Piny, Piny Twilliger. Let me in; I've come to take your place and let you get dressed. Martin had a message that the cream wouldn't be here for half an hour yet. There wasn't another soul ready, so Gincy asked me to come."

Nancy Jane unlocked the door to let in—was it really Piny? The tall figure was attired in a bright red muslin much beruffled. A brilliant bow with generous outstanding loops surmounted the dozen or more puffs of hair, and excitement lent additional colour to cheeks that were always flushed.

Nancy Jane hurried over to the Hall and up to her room. She didn't even take time to ask Gincy why she had sent Piny Twilliger to guard the precious cream. It wouldn't do to say much about kinfolk. But all the time she was hurrying into her white dotted lawn, she wondered if anything would happen to their eatables. Surely some of the girls would be ready in a few minutes.

It was almost a quarter of eight when Nancy Jane ran down the front stairs. She rapped lightly at several doors, but there was no response. Evidently everybody who belonged to the Mountain Society had gone. It was only a short distance to the Industrial Building, and she ran across the campus to-

ward the lights. There was the buzzing of excited voices—the front walk seemed thronged with students. What could have happened? Nancy Jane felt an awful premonition of disaster. Of course it was the cream. Piny must have left her post and some of the boys carried it off.

“Is that you, Nancy Jane?” It was Mallie’s voice. “The cake’s gone—every scrap! Some one rapped on the door and Piny went out; it was the boys with the cream, and while they were talking some one tore the screen and jumped in the side window and took every smitch of cake off the table. Piny’s rushing ’round like a hornet and vows she’ll find out who did it before she sleeps a wink to-night. But I don’t believe she can; it’s either eaten up or hidden by this time.”

Nancy Jane listened in dismay. All their lovely frosted cake gone! She ran into the room looking for Piny—somehow she wanted to hear the whole story from her lips.

But among the babel of voices Piny’s could not be heard. She had disappeared completely and did not hear Martin’s angry comment. “I shouldn’t wonder if she had hidden it herself; she’d think that was a great joke.”

“Hush, Martin,” said Talitha, “Piny isn’t mean if she is fond of a joke.” But Martin’s eyes continued to flash as he walked out into the dark, around the building, and looked up at the outside stairs. They were built more

as a fire-escape, but the boys on the upper floor often used them. Martin stood in the shadow of the wood-working department and eyed the row of lighted windows. A dark object was crouched on the upper step and as he eyed it intently, it rose and began a noiseless descent.

Martin edged as close as he dared. It passed the lower window and he saw, to his utter amazement, that it was Piny Twilliger, who seemed in great haste to get down. He intercepted her as she reached the ground. "What is it, Piny?" he whispered.

"I've found them!" she gasped, "and the cake isn't eaten yet. Get all the boys together you can. Some will have to watch the door of their room—it's Seth Laney and that crowd. You'd better get the Shackley boys and go up on the outside—that's the only way you'll get in. While the rest are making an awful racket in the hall to attract their attention, you can climb in the window."

"You do beat everything!" exclaimed Martin, quite conscience-smitten to think he had ever suspected Piny. "You're a regular general! You bet we'll get that cake," and he ran around the building and into the big front entrance like a shot.

It took only a minute to plan the campaign as outlined by Piny. There was an instant siege—within ten minutes an unconditional surrender—and the cake was saved. Borne

down in triumph by Martin and Abner, they paused in front of her with a low bow. "Madam," they said, "the honour belongs to you. Have a piece."

But Piny laughingly refused to be made a heroine of, and waited until every one else was served. She blushed furiously when they toasted her in lemonade for her presence of mind and courage. "I reckon hit wan't much," she said, modestly disclaiming all honours. "I'd promised to watch things, an' I wan't goin' to be beaten nohow."

The spread was a great success. Afterwards, Abner walked back to the Hall with Gincy and Lalla. "You helped me a lot," he assured the latter. "I worked up all those notes you gave me and they seemed to strike the nail on the head. I don't see how you ever thought of them."

"That wasn't anything," said Lalla, "you had a dozen points a good deal better than mine. I'm glad the decision was unanimous for you, though; it was a bigger honour."

"I didn't know you helped Abner," remarked Gincy as they sat in her room waiting for the warning bell to ring. "I'm so proud of him and grateful to you. Miss Howard says you do splendidly in your work this term, Lalla."

"You always say such nice things," answered Lalla, evading Gincy's eye. "There isn't another girl in Bentville who has encour-

aged me the way you have. I guess I remember, and——” She broke off suddenly. Perhaps after all she would better tell Gincy the truth about the debate.

Gincy listened, her hard-working hands tightly clasped, and a sinking at her heart. It was just plain cheating and the Gooch family had never done anything like that. Of course Abner didn't know or he never would have used the paper Lalla gave him—that was one comfort. Then Gincy thought of Raphael. Perhaps after all the medal really belonged to him; but how could she straighten it all out? Why were there so many tangles in life, anyhow?

“Gincy,” said Lalla, abruptly changing the subject, “that Mr. Gantley has come back. Talitha told me this evening and I forgot to tell you. The college folks found him up in that shack on the mountain, and they told him he'd got to go to work or they'd lock him up, and then they gave him a job in the garden. You needn't worry about the family any more.”

Lalla ran to her room at the sound of the bell, leaving Gincy in a brown study. If she told it might get Lalla and Abner into all kinds of trouble. Perhaps they would even have the debate all over again with a new subject, or Abner might have to give up the medal in disgrace. There were so many terrible possibilities, Gincy slept little that night.

Early the next morning she arose fully decided on a course of action. Miss Howard should settle it; she could hardly wait to find her.

The little teacher listened patiently. "I'll tell you this evening. Come to my room at half-past seven; meanwhile don't worry."

Somewhat comforted, Gincy went about her work. Promptly at seven she presented herself at Miss Howard's door. "I just couldn't wait another minute," she said by way of apology.

"You don't need to," was the assurance. "It's all right. Professor Ames says the decision might not have been unanimous, but Abner would have received the medal anyhow on his main argument. It isn't necessary that anything be said about it except to Lalla. We want her to cultivate higher ideas of honour than those she has been used to at home."

Gincy left the room jubilant; a great burden had rolled off her mind. She could go to bed with a clear conscience and make up the sleep she had lost the night before.

XVII

KID SHACKLEY GETS A GLIMPSE OF THE WORLD

THE Shackley cabin stood high and dry above the bed of Goose Creek; for, while there was nothing to fear from the narrow, trickling stream of summer, the moody, tempestuous torrent of spring threatened everything within reach, and Enoch Shackley was a cautious man.

It was ten o'clock, but the flickering of flambeaux, the sound of hurrying feet over the bare floor of the long living-room, the uneasy tugging of old Bob at his chain, and a saddled mule in front of the door, indicated some unusual nocturnal adventure.

Presently, far in the distance could be heard the creak of a jolt wagon and the sound of voices singing "Sourwood Mountain."

The cabin door suddenly flew open and Kid Shackley appeared. He was a chunky, muscular boy, a worthy successor of his father, when the blacksmith should grow too old to follow his trade. "They're comin', mammy! Good-bye, I'll tell you and pappy all 'bout hit when I git back. Looks like a feller kin hear ter Kingdom Come in the night time."

His place in the doorway was filled by a tall, gaunt figure in a meagre dress of blue calico, who peered out anxiously after him. "Ain't ye hongry, son? Whar d'ye reckon ye'll git yore breakfast?"

"Sam Gooch 'lows we'll be at Redbird some-whar near the Twilligers—Eli's kin. Likely they'll want ter go on 'count of Piny. We'll get ter the Branch 'bout sun-up."

Kid was in the saddle now, facing the newcomers. The jolt wagon with its oxen threading along the stony bed of Goose Creek—a lantern hung in front of the driver—cast long shadows which seemed to multiply like those of a mysterious moving caravan. They filled the gorge.

"G'lang, Billy," and Kid was slowly descending the steep incline to join the travellers who suddenly halted.

"Come on, come on!" chorused the voices from below.

Kid greeted the half-dozen occupants of the wagon in true mountain fashion. "Howdy, Dan Gooch," to the man guiding the oxen, "you're here on time. I heerd our rooster speakin' up a spell back. He reckoned 'twas mornin' by the clatter."

"He'd better watch out or Brer Fox'll get him. Them pesky varmints tuk nigh onto twenty little uns fer us last night. G'lang, Bright!" and the cracking whip and groaning wagon drowned the greetings of the others.

Kid fell in behind. There was no possible chance for conversation, so they sang old English ballads, and "The Old Time Religion," which Talitha had taught them. As they rode along in the damp coolness, Kid watched the lumbering wagon ahead, full of indistinct figures, with a curious feeling of something new and strange about to enter his life.

Right and left, the great pine-covered mountains both guarded and threatened with their looming shapes. The highest part of the creek bed made the only passable wagon road, and that was poor enough. The air was full of moist odours, and above, the deep blue dome was pierced with twinkling points of light.

The night wore on until the twinkling lights were lost, and a greyness settled over the mountain world. They were travelling northwest, leaving range after range of the Cumberlands, broken only by the deep gorge of a river bed, behind them. Ahead, were the foothills, and beyond, Kid had never seen. He only knew from the glowing accounts of Pete, and Isaac, and Talitha—who had made him promise to come to Bentville—that the Blue Grass in all its richness lay very near the college.

Leaving the river bed they struck a mountain road which led, at long intervals, past lonely, unpainted cabins more humble than those in the small settlement at Goose Creek. Early

as it was, people were astir, noisily harnessing their mules, or yoking oxen. Here and there a jaded saddle-horse or spirited colt was being pressed into service. They were all bound for the same place.

“Hit’s like a circus, er buryin’, er baptizin’——” and here words failed him. But he remembered Talitha’s description, and tried to imagine how it would seem to see thousands of people on one level, wooded space.

They had stopped singing now. A faint, rosy glow was spreading above the mountains back of them, and glimpses of a great rolling valley came from the front. The road ran steeply down, causing the occupants of the wagon to sway in their chairs. Dan Gooch plied the brake, vociferating to his oxen: “Hi thar, Bright! Steady, Star! See, yon’s Redbird!”

Sam Coyle straightened an inert figure. He had been half dozing, conscious of little except his broken rest. His journey to Bentville was prompted by a curiosity which had been growing ever since Abner had won the medal. There was a little pricking below the jealousy in his heart when he thought what a “sorry” father he had been. Dan Gooch was growing more enthusiastic every day over “larnin’.” Sam wondered if it were too late—here he glanced at his wife’s worn but radiant face. She was looking in the direction of Redbird, but he knew that her heart was going out

to Martin and Talitha in Bentville, and that she had nothing to regret.

Billy and Sudie grew more excited each moment. "I'm that hongry I could eat a bear; I hope they'll have one fer breakfast!" exclaimed the former.

"More like it'll be a chicken," laughed Kid as he guided Nick nearer the wagon. "I saw Zeb Twilliger in the hen yard a minute ago."

A lank, high cheek-boned mountaineer came slouching toward the gate as they drove up. "Light and hitch," he commanded hospitably. "I reckon yo're bound fer Bentville. Piny's been pesterin' the life out o' us ter come; she sent word agin this week, an' I 'low ef she's honin' fer us, we'd shore ought ter go."

"That's what I told pappy," interrupted Kid eagerly. "He and mammy bide in the Hollow till they're fair mossy. Pete and Ike'll come back plumb shamed of we-uns." And then the boy flushed at what the words implied.

Sam Coyle failed to make his usual sarcastic retort to the thrust at Goose Creek. Indeed he was quite amiable to Kid on their way up to the door of the rather untidy looking cabin. There was plenty of bacon and cornbread, with coffee and fresh buttermilk for breakfast. The chickens were for their dinner and had been cooked the day before. "I never count on eatin' chicken till I get a holt of the drumstick," whispered Billy to Kid, rolling his eyes.

Mrs. Twilliger was large and loud-voiced. The older children had all married and left home except Piny. "We'd planned ter keep her fer a spell yit, but I don't reckon nothin' ever'll suit her 'round here now she's taken ter schoolin'; she air a queer gal."

"I wouldn't let hit fret me," said Mrs. Gooch with unexpected spirit, "the mountings air needin' a few idees; I'm glad Gincy's gittin' 'em. I'm plumb wore out with the old ones. She and Tally'd much better be larnin' out o' books than marryin' some no 'count chap thet goes r'arin' 'round, shootin' up things ginerally."

Mrs. Twilliger bristled up instantly; the description fitted her eldest son-in-law too closely for her liking. However, Mrs. Gooch had an unexpected ally in the master of the house. "Thet's my idee; Piny's harum-scarum 'nough without gittin' in with these chaps 'round yere. We hev 'nough o' them fellers in the fambly a'ready."

Breakfast over, every one hurried to get a good start for the last part of the journey to Bentville. The Twilliger outfit was a span of fat mules and a light wagon. They took the lead, and the oxen were soon far behind.

"You'd better push on, Kid," advised Dan Gooch as the oxen toiled up the last foothill before reaching the valley. "Yon's Bentville—almost in sight. Zeb Twilliger will be thar an hour ahead of us. Nick hez sperit 'nough

ter ketch up ter 'em stid of pokin' 'long so powerful slow."

Kid took the advice. As he reached the top of the hill, he reined Nick in for a moment to look at the panorama of colour which spread below him. There were fields of corn and hemp threaded with a narrow, silver path of water. Beyond the valley, on a little plateau, was the white tower of a chapel. The trees were thick, but they could not entirely screen the angular outlines of the college buildings occupying the highest part of the little town.

The boy's heart beat fast. He had never been more than ten miles away from home in all his life before. Somehow the blacksmith's trade did not seem so alluring as it had yesterday; perhaps Pete and Isaac were right after all. He was proud of them anyhow.

Down, down toward the bridge which crossed Brushy Fork and the Big Hill Pike with the hard part of the journey behind him, Kid overtook the Twilligers. He exchanged a few remarks, then cantered past, and joined the long procession of vehicles and horsemen, all headed in the same direction. This beat a circus, it beat Talitha's description carefully recalled from last year.

Kid was beginning to get excited. He passed team after team with a cheery hail, and forged straight up the hill. Nick did not need to be urged; he galloped directly into the crowd, and then past, only slowing down on the main

street for Kid to gaze with fascinated eyes at the booths of popcorn, candy, peanuts, and ice cream. Everywhere were students spreading their wares in tempting proximity to the passersby. On all sides signs read: "This Way to the Campus." "Visit the Chapel Tower." "See the Industrial Building." "Don't Miss the Homespun Fair!"

Kid looked at everything with eager eyes. How could he ever see it all in a day! So far there were no familiar faces. Nick plodded along in the jam of teams quite subdued. There were lean, spiritless nags drawing "sorry" buggies, jolt wagons and oxen, mules and more mules. Kid watched them all—the black sunbonnets, the over-trimmed hats, the attractive young faces and those lacking purpose. Where were Martin, and Abner, and the rest? He looked up at the big boarding hall set back in a yard full of trees. A throng was pouring out of the side entrance. They were singing a rollicking class song which appealed to Kid's music-loving heart. As they came toward him he saw Martin and Isaac leading the crowd.

Almost at the same instant they discovered him and made a rush forward. "Hello, Kid, you're just in time; we're going over to the Tabernacle this minute!" exclaimed Isaac.

"Didn't any one else come?" asked Martin.

"You'll see later," Kid assured him with a grin, "but what'll I do with Nick?"

They led him into a long, roped driveway which crossed a little rustic bridge. There, in the wooded part of the campus, were hundreds of teams hitched to the trees or eating from the backs of wagons. In a bag thrown across the saddle, Kid had brought feed for the mule. "Here's a good place, it's near the road and shady, too," said Isaac. "We'll come back after a while and find the rest of the folks. Now let's hurry."

The three boys started toward a huge, unpainted building with a large sign across the front, "The Tabernacle," it read. People were standing near the two large entrances which were closed. "We'll go around; I know the way," said Martin. There were several doors securely locked, but one was ajar. The three slipped in. The room was full of piney odours from the banked-up platform. High up behind the seats for the graduates a dozen or more boys and girls were fastening festoons of flowers above a solid wall of green. Kid had never seen anything of the kind before. He stared at the sawdust on the floor which muffled their footsteps, at the semi-circle of raised seats which were soon to be filled with mountain people, then back again to the hurrying boys and girls in front.

"If there isn't Kid Shackley!" It was Abner's voice.

"Why, hello!" called Pete, turning suddenly. "Where are the rest of the folks?"

"Come up here, Kid," called out Talitha. "Here's Gincy and Mallie and all of the girls."

In a moment Kid felt as though he had been in Bentville a week. He was hailed cordially by all of the Goose Creek people and immediately set to work breaking branches for trimming, and hanging banners under the direction of Lalla. "We've got to be awfully quiet," she whispered. "It's only a half-hour before the doors are opened and two of the graduates have to rehearse yet."

From his vantage ground above, Kid looked down at the critics on the front seat and the tall, dark young man who had begun to speak. What a contrast the clear, ringing tones were to those of the mountain orators he had heard. For a moment he almost forgot to help Lalla and stood, his arms full of pine branches, listening intently to the oration.

"Hurry, Kid," reminded Lalla. "We've got to drag this litter out and just rush over to the chapel to see them form in line; there isn't a minute to spare."

The musical peal of a bell and the rat-tat-tat of a drum decided the matter. In less than five minutes the two were crossing the campus in the rear of a number of stragglers who were hurrying to see the long procession begin its march.

XVIII

COMMENCEMENT TIME AT BENTVILLE

TALITHA, from her room in the hall, saw the oxen toiling up the hill just as the chapel bell was ringing. She had rushed over from the Tabernacle to dress and get back before the lines were formed. In fifteen minutes the bell would begin to toll and the procession start. Her father and mother must not miss it. She opened the door and sped down the corridor to Gincy's room.

"Girls," she called out, pounding on the door insistently, "the folks are almost here. Can't one of you go down and bring them up to my room—your mother and my mother, Gincy? The rest can go on; you can tell them where to hitch."

Gincy needed no second bidding; she fairly flew downstairs and out of doors. At the side gate she stood for a moment and peered into the faces of the crowd. Presently she spied the objects of her search. The big red ox and the one with the white star on his forehead were coming her way. Sudie and Billy waved their hands, her father smiled, and

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Sam Coyle's indolent figure seemed to grow in stature. Only the two sunbonneted women on the back seat appeared quiet and indifferent, but Gincy knew that inwardly they were far from it.

"Talitha saw you from her room," she said after the first greeting. "Jump right out and we'll go up there; she's rushing to get ready for the exercises and there are only a few minutes left."

Gincy hurried them through the crowd and into the dormitory hall, which was alive with girls greeting friends and showing them around through the various rooms. Her mother and Mrs. Coyle were allowed one peep into the office of the dean, and the big east parlour with its Colonial furniture and handsome pictures—gifts from wealthy New England people—then they were whisked upstairs and into Number 45 to receive a warm greeting from Talitha.

"How do you like it?" she asked, seating them near the open windows. "You can look all around while Gincy's hooking my dress." Below, were the long, well-watered rows of the college garden—a wonderful sight to eyes accustomed to the small, dried-up mountain patch of vegetables.

"'Tis a sightly place," remarked Mrs. Gooch, her face alive with interest.

Mrs. Coyle nodded. "And fraish air kin pass through ter let out all the odours," her

mind evidently intent on the airy location of the room. Then she glanced at the white tucked dress lying on the lower berth of the double-decker.

Her daughter followed the gaze. "Look at Gincy's; hers has more tucks." Talitha slipped the princess gown over her head, all the while smiling delightedly at the amazement in the faces of her guests.

They plied her with questions. How did she get in all those little pleats? Who helped her cut and fit it? Couldn't they visit the sewing-room? To which Talitha responded as eagerly. "There, I'm almost ready; we'll go on the first stroke of the last bell. After the exercises we'll have dinner, and then I'm bound to show you everything on the grounds."

"Look out of this window," said Gincy, pointing to a stretch of trailing plants on the south side of the house. "Strawberries! Aren't they splendid? Father's got to have some just like them."

"Abner and Martin have learned a lot about horticulture; they'll tend to things," said Talitha, noticing the look on her mother's face which seemed to say as plainly as words: "Your father wouldn't find time for anything of the kind."

At the first stroke of the last bell, the four descended the stairs and followed the crowd going in the direction of the Tabernacle. The college band in bright, new uniforms, was

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playing a lively air near the chapel door. From every direction the people streamed toward it. A long line of the faculty and college graduates was being rapidly formed; each of the latter wearing a band of purple and gold around the left arm. For the most part they were simply dressed, but in their bearing one could detect a vast difference from the raw material that had flocked in to Commencement.

The little group from back in the hills was only one of many who looked with proud, expectant eyes toward the future. It would be a great day when one of their number stood in that long line waiting for the honours which were to crown faithful endeavour. Talitha was glad to discover her father looking with pleased interest at the young faces so full of promise. Her one desire had been to make him see the difference between those who had had advantages, and the boys and girls, who, without education, were living dull, cramped lives in the mountains.

Suddenly the lively air changed, and a hundred young voices took up the refrain: "We march, we march, to victory——"

Mrs. Coyle's eyes filled as the ranks went sweeping by. She could hardly see to follow them, but Talitha's strong arm supported her, and, heading the folks from Goose Creek, they filed into the Tabernacle and sat down with the great crowd who had already assembled.

A great hush followed the prayer. Gincy

watched her father and mother keenly as the Hallelujah Chorus pealed forth; then she gave Talitha one quick, triumphant glance. Their faces were full of wonder and pleasure, and Sam Coyle's stolid countenance wore a look of startled interest, the like of which she had never seen before.

One by one the graduates took their places for the brief time allotted them. They spoke in loud, clear voices, but Sam Coyle seemed hardly to understand, until a dark-haired girl began about "The Land of Appalachia." She gave the history of the mountain people, how, shut back in the hills, they were behind the rest of the world. What wonderful resources were right at hand if they would only wake up and use them. How education meant changing the home life and giving more to the girls and boys which would end in a better life for the parents.

The hungry look on Mrs. Coyle's face fairly devoured the speaker. Already she was reaping her reward, and visions of Goose Creek, alive to its sore need of an education, blotted out the great audience around her. She sat almost motionless throughout the exercises. Children cried, people came and went, the band played "Dixie"; it was greeted noisily. It played again. This time it was "America," and a flutter of white handkerchiefs came from where the teachers sat; then they arose, and somehow in a minute the crowd from Goose

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Creek found themselves standing, too. Mrs. Coyle's eyes were moist, and Dan Gooch swallowed a troublesome lump in his throat. Billy and Sudie looked awed and timid, yet they quivered with delight, and Gincy, her arms resting lightly upon their shoulders, felt the quiver and held them closer.

The crowd poured out and melted into groups which gathered around well-filled baskets, or ate sandwiches, and bananas, and drank lemonade at the big stand near the library. "If we could only invite you over to the Hall," said Gincy regretfully. "We tried to get you in, but Miss Denman says she can hardly find room for the company at the two new tables. Commencement is a great day."

"I reckon we can do what 'most of the strangers air doin'—eat our own vittles; they'll be plumb spoiled if we don't," said Dan Gooch with mock severity. "Come on, children," to Billy and Sudie.

"Hit beats anythin' I ever saw!" exclaimed Sam Coyle, ignoring his neighbour's last remark. "I didn't hone ter come—at fust—that crap in the south cove needs a powerful lot o' tendin', but I 'lowed 'twould be a pritty day, an' Tally'd feel mightily disapinted if I didn't."

"Of course I would, father," said Talitha, her eyes fixed on her mother's face. "You'll not be sorry you came, either, there's so much

to see after dinner." And she started off arm in arm with Gincy, too happy over her mother's evident pleasure and her father's sudden interest to think of that old excuse—the neglected "crap" in the south cove.

"Hold on," called Talitha as Kid Shackley came within hailing distance. "Having a good time?"

"You bet!" was the emphatic response. "I've cut loose and am doin' hit by myself. Seen the folks? They have the stuff to eat."

Talitha pointed back to the throng under the oak trees. "They've just gone. You'll catch them before they get fairly started eating if you hurry."

"Oh, Tally," said Gincy as Kid dodged from view behind the crowd of vehicles, his boyish head held high, "isn't Commencement just grand! I'm so happy over everything—Abner's new suit, and the folks coming, and—honey, your daddy thinks Bentville is all right; he'll never say another word against it, I know."

Talitha nodded. Her face was radiant and she squeezed Gincy's hand. "And there's Kid, he acts so different; just wild over everything here. I'm sure he'll be in school next year, too. That's the five-minute bell now; we'll have to eat fast and get back. I'm just crazy to see father's face when he gets into the Industrial Building."

"And mother's when she sees the Homespun

Fair; she'll go wild over the rugs, I'm sure."

Back under the trees groups of people were refreshing themselves. The sun flecked the broad backs of the oxen feeding from the rear end of the jolt wagons. The mules were sleepily warding off the flies. A few horses stamped restlessly. And on each side of the driveway was a mass of life and colour enveloped in the fragrant air of June. Under its dominating spell, the Goose Creek folks sat until the mass of humanity began to move; only the babies slept, guarded by their mothers.

As though suddenly roused to action, the young people began to walk back and forth through the wooded space, some aimlessly, others with a definite objective point in view. From the chapel tower, the group from Goose Creek could hear a voice inviting everybody to come up and see the surrounding country.

"That's Martin," said Kid. "He's got what he names a megaphone. I'd call hit a horn-a whopper. You kin hear hit a mile, I'll bet; I'm goin' up after a spell ter he'p him out—thar come the gals."

"They're just pouring into the Homespun Fair," said Gincy, coming up breathless. "We've almost run so you wouldn't get crowded out entirely. Sudie and Billy'd better come with me and get some lemonade at the stand; Talitha's waiting over there for the rest of you."

"I'd like ter see some kiverlids thet can beat mammy's," said Dan Gooch as they walked briskly along in the direction indicated by Gincy.

"I don't reckon as how you will," responded his wife. "She was hard ter beat."

They turned into the arched entrance of a big, brick building and elbowed through the crowd toward a large room indicated by the guides. Once inside, Mrs. Coyle drew a quick breath of pleased astonishment. Long tables down the centre of the room were covered with linen squares of familiar patterns. There were also rugs and draperies, and innumerable articles of unique home workmanship. The walls were hung with "kiverlids" and quilts of brilliant patterns. The Rising Sun, Indian Feather, Fruit Basket, and many others showed to the best advantage in the well-lighted place.

Sam Coyle found his way to a table covered with splint baskets. "Look here," he said, beckoning to Talitha and pointing to the price-mark on a medium sized one. "Seventy-five cents is a heap of money fer thet; I reckon they won't sell nary a one."

But Sam Coyle reckoned in vain, for Talitha showed him the little tag marked "Sold" tied to the opposite side of the handle; her eyes sparkling at his look of amazement. "I used ter make toler'ble fair ones myself, years back," he said, examining it carefully.

Mrs. Gooch dropped into a splint-bottomed

rocker in front of a gorgeous red and green quilt. She was studying the price-mark and the pattern. Ten dollars seemed an immense amount of money to pay for it. She beckoned to Mrs. Coyle, who was fingering the linen. "What d'ye think o' thet?" she asked.

Her neighbour stepped back slowly, viewing the quilt from all points of vantage. "Yourn is a heap purtier, but this hez more fine stitches," she remarked at last judicially.

"Mebbe hit hez, but hit tuk more fine pieces fer ourn, an' I'd be proud ter git half as much." Mrs. Gooch was thinking of Sudie and Billy, who would soon be ready for Bentville. Here was an unexpected source of revenue.

One by one Mrs. Coyle examined the squares of linen with a triumphant feeling. All day her heart had been sinking at the thought of her ignorance. She had been bewildered and overwhelmed by this new world of opportunity and knowledge. Now she experienced a quick return of self-respect as she heard well-dressed visitors exclaim in admiration, and saw the ready sale of the linen. She not only knew the patterns, but had worked out some original designs of her own. Here was surely a way to earn more money.

It was fully twenty minutes later when Gincy came panting in without Sudie and Billy. "They've found Pete and Isaac," she announced, "and they're going to the top of

the tower. They'll meet us somewhere near the Industrial Building. Come on."

It was only a short distance, but every step was blocked by groups of visitors, lemonade stands, amateur photographers, venders of patent medicines. A wrinkled, toothless old woman sat close to the path smoking her pipe. She wore a black calico dress and sunbonnet, and black wool mitts. Gincy drew a long breath and thought, for the first time in her life, what it meant to grow old like that.

"Here we are! There's an awful crowd, but we'll manage to see things somehow." People were pushing their way into the long building and filling the rooms on either side of the hall. "Let's show them the cooking first," said Talitha as Gincy started for the sewing department.

Mrs. Coyle edged her way to the glass cases in the centre of the room. They were filled with all kinds of eatables—salads, delicious looking rolls, pies, puddings, and chicken done to a turn. It took some time to convince her that everything was cooked in those queer-looking boxes. "Fireless cookers!" she exclaimed incredulously. "It do beat everythin', Tally, how they do things here."

"I can make one for you, mother, if Martin can't find time; it may not look just like the ones here, but it will work splendidly, I know."

"Shore?" asked her mother doubtfully. "I'd be proud ter hev one."

The men folks seemed equally interested. They gazed at the canned fruit in the open cupboards, at the model table set for four, and were quite unwilling to leave when the boys came to take them to the Sloyd room.

The hall upstairs was crowded, there were so many things to see in the different rooms. Mrs. Gooch kept an eye out for Billy and Sudie, who had not put in an appearance.

"They'll be in the Sloyd room, I know," Talitha assured her. "The Shackley boys fairly live there; Abner and Martin wouldn't be much better if they weren't taking extra studies."

The crowd in the room was beginning to thin a little. A few were still buying book-racks, paper knives, and other small things which were for sale.

Sam Coyle could hardly believe that the students had made everything on exhibition. He halted in front of a big, leather-covered chair. "Look here, you-all," he said, sinking down with characteristic indolence. "Hit sets powerful easy, too. Thet's what I'd hone ter do if I war young; we wouldn't live like we do now, but thet's plumb past mendin'."

"No, it isn't, father, if you'll let Martin help you," Talitha answered decidedly. "I always knew you were handy with tools, and we're going to have some—there's Sudie now,

Mrs. Gooch; they're all over behind that stack of things in the corner. Come on."

"Look, mammy!" announced Billy as he pointed to a small oak table, polished to an astonishing perfection. "Abner did hit, and here's somethin' else," dragging her farther along toward a wide, hanging shelf. "Hit's fer books, and I'm ter have one eend." He fairly danced with happiness, and Mrs. Gooch turned to her husband and son a face full of pride. Not one sacrifice which she had made for her children seemed worth remembering now.

It was Mrs. Coyle's turn for self-gratification when Martin showed her his book-case and seat which were to be carried home in the jolt wagon. "I've some books to put into it, too. Professor Johns is going to let me take charge of the travelling library in a week or two, then we'll have some good times at Goose Creek. Nights, after supper is over, we'll take turns reading. Tally and I have it all planned out."

The Shackley boys were not to be outdone by Martin and Abner. They showed their planting pins, clock case, and umbrella rack with much pride. Kid examined everything carefully for the fourth or fifth time. "I'm comin' ter Bentville next year," he announced decidedly. "I'm goin' ter work in the wood-working department; they want more boys."

Dan Gooch patted the broad back. "See

you do, son. Your pappy kin git plenty of husky fellers fer blacksmithin' 'thout usin' brains, and you've got 'em." Kid blushed and eyed Sam Coyle furtively, waiting for the accustomed gibes, but they did not come. The latter individual was apparently engrossed in a mental estimation of the height of the huge standpipe in plain sight of the back windows.

"If thar ain't the Twilligers!" he said, looking around suddenly. "I'd an idee they'd drapped off'n the fur aidge of the yarth 'fore this, and had a notion ter begin sarchin' fer 'em."

Piny, radiant in a new pink lawn, with her father and mother in tow, bore directly down upon them.

"Here you are!" she exclaimed. "I reckoned the boys had tolled you over this way for the wind-up. Look here, pappy, what do you think of this, and this?" pointing to the various pieces of furniture.

Zeb Twilliger stared open-mouthed to the unconcealed delight of the young folks. It took some time to convince him and his wife that the boys had really done the work. "Wal, wal, I swan!" he ejaculated at last, peering down at each article critically.

"Ye'd better give 'em a lift gittin' hit home," suggested Mrs. Twilliger generously, and Zeb agreed.

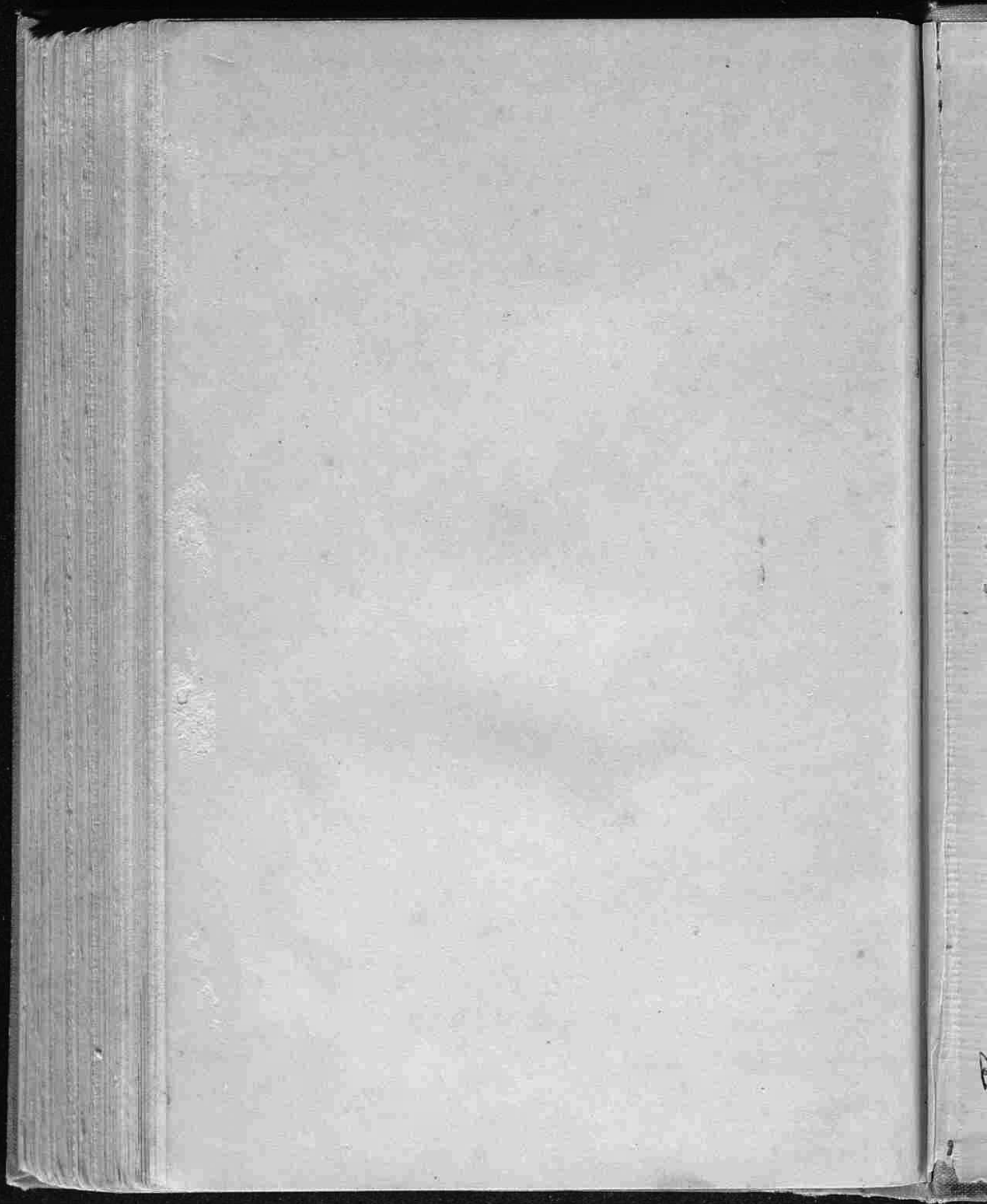
A white cloud of dust hovered over the long

procession which filed homeward, back to the hills. Talitha waved good-bye as, one by one, the college buildings were lost to sight, and Kid—with Abner behind him in the saddle—voiced the general sentiment of the crowd when he turned to shout cheerily:

“Hurrah fer Bentville and the Goose Creek folks who’ll be thar next year!”

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Mrs. W. A. Shelton

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