

MARK GILMORE'S
LUCKY LANDING

PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

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SUDDENLY A FLARE WAS RELEASED.

MARK GILMORE'S
LUCKY LANDING

By
PERCY KEESE FITZHUGH

Author of
THE TOM SLADE BOOKS
THE ROY BLAKELEY BOOKS
THE PEE-WEE HARRIS BOOKS
THE WESTY MARTIN BOOKS
THE MARK GILMORE BOOKS

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MARK GILMORE'S LUCKY LANDING

CHAPTER I

STUDE

Two circumstances influenced Mark's transition from that of a student flier in the New Jersey flying school of the East Coast Airlines to that of a skilled instructor in their isolated branch school at Greeley, Kentucky. One factor was Mark's level-headed heroism and the other was Lieutenant Peter Hammil, his instructor.

It had its beginning when Lieutenant Hammil took off with Mark one balmy spring morning on a sort of farewell lesson flight. Sitting in the observer's seat, Mark had some fleeting concern as the smart little plane left the field behind and soared toward the sun. This concern had to do with the state of health of his instructor who had reported for duty that morning with "jest a cold" as he himself remarked.

But manifestly this tall, raw-boned Kentuckian had more than a cold, Mark was quick to observe. The blue, usually sparkling eyes looked dull and feverish and his breathing was difficult even as he spoke. Yet in spite of Mark's protests he insisted on giving the farewell lesson.

"Fer why should I make yer wait jest cause I have a little cold," he countered with a weak smile. "I mebbe hev soaked up a heap of new ways livin' hyah in the no'th so long but I hain't come ter gittin' in bed fer a cold. Now come 'long, Brother Mark, an' after I show yer a last dive, yer kin climb in back an' try it 'fore we come down, hey?"

Mark decided that the lieutenant must know how he felt and allowed himself to be taken from the field. But now,

somehow, as they kept gaining altitude, he was not a little worried about the instructor for his deep voice sounded small and weak as it came over the phone.

“Jest goin’ ter let her climb ten thousand an’ then I’ll let her smack into it,” he was saying. “I’ll give you the word, then you kin watch and when we’re on level keel, climb back and try it.”

“It’s O. K. with me, Hammil,” Mark shouted back, “and if you want, I’ll try it right now. You sound as if you’re kind of choked up or something. Think you want to go on?”

“Sho. It’s jest the altitude chokes me a bit, Brother Mark. I’m fine an’ what’s more I’m anxious ter show yer this trick fer the last time.”

Mark smiled and felt of his safety belt to see that it was secure. Lieutenant Hammil scorned such protective measures, of course, but then he was a veteran flier. Still with the vertical dives he executed, a little precaution was necessary, but he always insisted that he could balance himself with the ship. He didn’t need any namby-pamby safety devices—not while he had his senses; not this son of the hills!

“Here’s hoping he’ll always have his senses,” Mark chuckled, and his eyes swept the fast disappearing green of earth beneath them. Every moment seemed to snatch it further away. He glanced about the observer’s cockpit and heartily wished that the plane had dual controls. It struck him as singular that he should wish it at this late lesson. He had, at every other lesson, been thrilled when the lieutenant’s deep drawling command sent him climbing out of his own seat and back along the fuselage to his instructor’s cockpit. This exchange of places in mid-air held such an element of

danger that it kept his nerves tingling. It had been half the fun of his ‘stude’ experiences! But now it gave him not a little anxiety. Every ship should have dual controls, he told himself, especially while there existed Lieutenant Hammils!

Mark smiled as he thought of his pleasant training experience with the good-natured Kentuckian. That alone had been worth his father’s disapproval of a contemplated air career. Not only had Hammil been an efficient teacher—he had been Romance and Adventure also, with his background of native mountain lore and his subsequent war life.

Hammil had emerged from the wild fastnesses of the Kentucky hills and enlisted in the army during that turbulent year of nineteen hundred and eighteen. His story of how he got into the aviation service was one that Mark liked to recall in an idle moment. Also it was pleasant to reflect on their many talks in which the Kentuckian declared he would never go back to his native hills.

“Yer see my kin hain’t never going to understand why I stick to flyin’ up no’th here instead o’ goin’ back home an’ gittin’ in the same old rut as they,” he would tell Mark. “I jest made up my mind after the war that I’d stick to aviation instead of spendin’ the rest o’ my life pickin’ fights with the Riggses—they’re enemies of my folks.”

Mark admired him for breaking away from such tradition and following a clean, wholesome career in the air. None of the Hammils had ever done so before and it was easy to understand why the lieutenant did not have any wish even to go to Greeley, Kentucky, where the East Coast people were intending to establish a flying school. “To help the lonely mountain people come more in contact with the world” was

one aim of this famous commercial air concern. “And what better way than the air—to teach them to fly!”

What better way indeed! Mark envied the veteran flier who would be chosen for that post despite Hammil’s assertion that the East Coast people were crazy. He knew the country around Greeley, he had said—it was not many miles from his boyhood home. What was more, he knew the people and what would be their attitude toward such a project. “Thar ain’t goin’ to be many applicants ter fly—if any!” he had declared. “They don’t *want* to come inter contact with the world and most of ’em, including my own kin, are suspicious o’ fliers an’ flyin’ an’ that takes me into account too.”

Mark reflected upon all this and supposed that Hammil knew just what he was talking about. Still there was something fascinating in the thought of a flying school in that isolated place. To try and recruit the rugged, warring clans into airmen would be a novel experience. But it would not be for him, he mused. A month perhaps before he had his license, and then the East Coast company would find a post for him as an inexperienced pilot. Well, he would make the best of it. The thrills and glory of the air did not come all at once.

Mark had reason presently to remember that thrills and glory, especially thrills, had a way of sneaking up on one unsuspected. Lieutenant Hammil had startled him, so wrapped was he in his own thoughts, by calling out, “Here we go, Brother Mark!”

Mark grinned and sat back tightly. Then as he felt the ship’s nose tilt, he peered over the edge of the cockpit, intent upon observing every detail of Lieutenant Hammil’s dive. To be sure, he had seen many of them, but this one was

important to observe not only because it was the last lesson, but because he was determined to execute his with the same skill when the control of a ship was in his hands alone.

The plane plunged straight through a film of clouds without a quiver. “Gee, that’s swell, Hammil!” Mark breathed into his phone.

They kept on plunging, however, and Mark shouted questioningly into the instrument. Wasn’t it dangerous to let her out that much? He was beginning to get a glimpse of the spring-green earth. Would it be wise for him to take a long dive like that too? Mark screamed the question into the phone.

Lieutenant Hammil made no reply whatsoever. They kept on plunging at a terrific rate of speed. Mark felt suddenly chilled and turned as best he could to see the pilot’s cockpit. At first he could not quite make out what it was that he saw, but in another second he realized that the Kentuckian was not in control of the ship—he was unconscious, slumped down behind his controls.

Mark got free of his safety belt in a flash and was scrambling like a monkey upon the fuselage. He writhed and wriggled across it, unmindful of his precarious position. A slip and ... well, there was the earth yawning and rocking below. Time was precious and he couldn’t think of the ifs—all that mattered was to get his hands on the stick.

A well-timed pull and he brought himself to the pilot’s cockpit. One long arm reached, strained, and he felt the stick. One thrust of his hand sent it back and with soul-satisfying ease, the plane roared out on an even keel not five hundred feet above the airport.

Mark wriggled himself into the cockpit, half-sitting on the lieutenant's still prostrate form. Hammil half-opened his eyes, however, as they swiftly circled the field.

Mark smiled. "Excuse me sitting on you, Hammil," he said, "but I guess you fainted. I'm making for the runway in a sec so keep your shirt on."

Hammil nodded weakly and murmured something about Mark trying it.

"A dive—*now*?" Mark asked. "Not just now. There'll be plenty of other times—when you're better."

The Kentuckian seemed to understand then just what had happened. His feverish eyes lighted up with admiration and he put up a trembling hand, pressing Mark's arm gratefully.

"Good work, Brother Mark," he mumbled hoarsely. "Yer took a terrible chance fer me an' I won't fergit it!"

Mark shook his blond head. "Forget it, Hammil," he said, modestly. "It was nothing—absolutely nothing!"

And though Mark meant what he said, he had the feeling as he brought the plane safely to the field, that the incident *was something* if only because it had established him as a capable pilot in the eyes of Lieutenant Peter Hammil.

For to Mark, Hammil's opinion was the opinion of the world.

CHAPTER II

QUALIFIED

During the month following, Lieutenant Hammil was confined to bed in a nearby hospital with pneumonia while Mark confined himself to the serious business of getting his government license. When he had accomplished that he set out one morning to pay a visit to his former instructor.

“Got lots to tell you, Hammil,” he said after the nurse had shown him into the sunny room.

The Kentuckian was sitting up in bed, comfortably convalescent. He smiled. “Got yer license, Brother Mark?”

“Yep,” Mark answered happily. “And more than that, I got the promise of something I never expected.”

Hammil laughed aloud. “Yer had a interview with Manager Summers, hey?”

Mark’s face lighted with understanding. “Hammil, I do believe you had something to do with Summers calling me into the office for that interview. Of course you did!” he said emphatically, noting the flood of color in his friend’s face. “You’re an old rascal, Hammil, but gee, you’re swell to speak for me like that—gosh....”

“Least I could do ter speak fer you when I knew how gosh-all bad yer wantin’ ter git down an’ try yer hand at Greeley,” Hammil said seriously. “An’ let me tell you, Brother Mark, I don’t feel as if I’m doin’ yer any favor by gittin’ yer down thar either. I don’t trust my own home folks that much to see a nice kid like you given the cold shoulder. I’m givin’ yer fair warnin’ they don’t take kindly ter flyin’

an' I've had letters from my pap where he said the hill folks jest laugh at that sign Summers had put up at the Greeley field saying how the East Coast people are openin' up a flyin' school June fifteenth."

Mark was not to be discouraged, however. "Only fifteen more days then," he said as if to himself. "That'll give me enough time to shinny up to Kent's Falls, New York to see mother and flaunt my license before dad. Then I'll be ready to pick you up and take you down to your native hills. Summers said the East Coast people thought you needed a rest at home. Boy, I hope I can whoop up business for them down there so that they'll think as well of me as they do of you."

Hammil grinned. "I whooped up business up here for 'em, Brother Mark," he said. "I'd never git anywhere if I tried in Greeley. The Riggses don't fergit I'm a Hammil even if I have stayed away so long and sort of cultivated furriners' ways as they say."

"But you haven't completely lost your hill dialect—not by a long shot," Mark laughed. "The mountaineer in you jumps out with every word. Well, anyway you can introduce me around to all the Hammils and from all I've heard you say there's plenty, huh? Enough to give a fellow a fair chance of making some of them converts to the air, huh?"

Hammil was laughing. "Yer ought ter round up a few anyhow, Brother Mark, fer yer got enough faith in flyin' ter make a mule want ter take ter the air."

"Oh, it's not going to be as difficult as that," Mark protested. "Summers told me yesterday that he thinks it will completely revolutionize the lives of your hill people, Hammil. He says you're biased because you're one of them."

Probably you are. Most of us are inclined to give our folks credit for a lot of faults they haven't got, huh?"

Lieutenant Hammil smiled as if to say he didn't know about that. He knew what he knew. "Still, I got a heap o' respect fer Mr. Summers, Brother Mark," he went on to say. "It takes kindness in a feller ter establish a flyin' school like he's doing in Greeley. It's a one horse town—the steppin' off place fer mountain folks. They do their marketin' there an' such things, and on Sat'days an' holidays the place is crowded with folks from as far as fifty mile or more. It's the county seat too, an' that makes a difference. Anyway, the town was mighty glad to rent part of the fair grounds to the East Coast Airlines fer an airport."

Mark was intensely interested. "What put it into Summers' head to do this?" he asked.

"The East Coast people have had the idea fer a year or so," Hammil answered. "Yer see they've been shippin' freight thar an' it's a mighty convenient station fer hill folks. Saves them the trouble o' goin' ter Lexington fer their goods. But that ain't tellin' yer 'bout Summers decidin' on this flyin' school business, hey? He and I have been pretty good friends ever since I wandered into his company after the war. I natch'erly got to talkin' lots o' my home an' the folks an' he got interested. He got sentimental over their isolation an' finally come to this idea o' tryin' ter get them to be interested in flyin'."

"And I think it's a swell idea too!" Mark said vehemently. "There's no reason, Hammil, why they wouldn't want to learn and get out of the rut they've been in for centuries. Why, gosh, they'll be able to go places and see things that they'd never be able to do otherwise. With planes at their

disposal they'll come to learn civilization as we live it, don't you think so?"

"Maybe they don't want ter learn civilization," drawled Hammil. And ambiguously he added: "You've got a lot to learn 'bout hill folks an' I reckon you'll learn it quick."

Mark wondered just what he meant.

CHAPTER III

FRIDAY, THE THIRTEENTH

Mark Gilmore ended a triumphant visit to his parents at Kent's Falls, New York, and turned a radiant face toward Jersey. There at the East Coast Airlines office he had an inspiring interview with Mr. Summers, the manager, and before it had ended he was feeling more than ever the spirit of the pioneer missionary.

“You are to have full charge of the school, Gilmore, because you will be the only instructor,” Mr. Summers told him. “We have a few mechanics and our regular manager there, but in you the East Coast Airlines repose the full responsibility of their flying school. Your failure or success will determine whether or not my confidence in these hill people is justified, for it was upon my request that my superiors agreed to this project. They are an uneducated, ignorant and suspicious people for the most part, these mountaineers—they have little or no means of transportation into civilized communities and in my opinion, flying will be a salvation to them. It will bring them into immediate contact with the whole world.”

Mark was proud that he had felt the same way about it. “It's sort of going to be like changing a whole century of customs and habits overnight, huh?” he interrupted smilingly.

“Exactly,” the kindly manager agreed. “And Greeley's such an excellent spot, Gilmore. Fine field in the heart of the mountain country and yet accessible to twenty or more of those remote districts. That's the kind of base needed and I

hope they'll take to our plans for them and keep it permanently. Well, son, it's up to you to go there and recruit with a Daniel Boone enthusiasm. *Make, them air-minded!* You can do it, if anyone can. That's why I jumped at Lieutenant Hammil's recommendation of you. Aside from your merit he said you had sympathy for his people. Well, that's the prime factor needed in this rather unique project. Go to it, Gilmore, and good luck!"

Mark left the building with a light step and crossed the sunny field, whistling. His trim little cabin plane, the Kent D-2, spread its gleaming wings across the runway and inside he found Lieutenant Hammil warming up the motor for him.

The lieutenant looked up and smiled. "Yer two days ahead of time, Brother Mark," he said. "Aimin' ter sort o' look around Greeley before gettin' down ter actual business?"

"You guessed it, Hammil. I want to see what kind of a country I'm going to teach in. Besides, I have to look around and see where I'm going to eat and sleep."

"Yer don't have ter look around fer that, Brother Mark," Hammil chuckled. "My mother and father would disown me completely ef I didn't bring yer home. It's settled fer yer ter stay with 'em while yer in Greeley. We only live 'bout eighteen mile from town—Horse Run's where 'tis, and there's my Lizzie ter drive back and forth in even after my vacation's over an' I come back here. Pap don't drive it much. He'd rather plug inter town on one o' the mules any time."

Mark smiled. "That's great, Hammil, and gosh, I appreciate it, but I can't expect to be a non-paying guest all the time I'm in Greeley. I don't even know how long I'm going to be there!"

“Yer terrible ignorant o’ hill folks an’ our ways,” Hammil said chuckling. “Yer see, my folks know how yer saved me last month, and thar ain’t any two ways about our gratitude. ’Nother thing, Brother Mark,” he added smiling, “it’s a downright insult to protest against a hillman’s hospitality whether it’s fer one night or one year—see?”

“In other words, I’m squelched,” Mark laughed. “Well, you win, Hammil, and I’ll stay, but I give you fair warning that I’ll find some way to square myself with your people.”

Hammil waved a large, lean hand deprecatingly. “Yer not puttin’ my folks out ’tall, whether yer stay forever, Brother Mark. Pap’s doin’ well with mule raisin’ an’ the folks are right comfortable. Now with the Riggses it’s different—dependin’ on their stills fer a livin’.”

Mark eased himself into his seat. “Oh yes, they’re your enemies, huh?”

“We-all are *their* enemies,” Hammil corrected gently. “Back fifty years they started and kep’ it up. ’Cause the Hammils don’t keep stills they think we’re gov’ment informers, but we ain’t. ‘Live an’ let live’ is what my pap says about ’em, but they jest laugh an’ wait ter git us pinned down ter somethin’ actual. An’ they’ll do it!”

“Well, they can’t do that when none of you are guilty of anything.”

“Yer don’t know the Riggses,” was Hammil’s quiet reply.

Mark agreed that he did not and after a moment’s assurance that the gauges were all in perfect order, he took off under Hammil’s critical supervision. They roared up the runway and climbed toward an azure blue horizon. Fleecy clouds enveloped them and soon they were part of that vast nothingness—space.

Sublimely happy, Mark felt that the world was centered in Greeley, Kentucky. A roseate stretch of blue grass country nestling against the green mountains. June, eighteen and a good job—what more could he ask! His air career had started, despite his father’s declaration that he would never make good in flying. Well, he had shown them already and he would show them still more at Greeley. Why, it was going to be a cinch, this teaching flying to mountaineers! Hammil’s voice brought him out of his brown study.

“Did yer know ’twas Friday, the thirteenth, Brother Mark?” he asked soberly.

“Sure. What of it?”

“Nothin’, ’cept that I don’t much like startin’ something new when the thirteenth falls on Friday. Mebbe yer don’t feel that way, hey?”

Mark decidedly did not. Friday the thirteenth, was a day just like any other day. Superstition hadn’t any place in his scheme of things. In fact, nothing could daunt him that day. Good fortune had smiled on him enough to lift him from the status of modest student to that of instructor within a few months’ time. What then, had one mere day to do with the continuation of his present success?

Hammil, however, was still debating that it *had*, when they reached Greeley.

CHAPTER IV

HILLSMEN

Two crude hangars and a small wooden shack stood back a few feet from the field and as Mark brought the Kent D-2 to a full stop he was impressed with the desolate aspect; desolate from a human standpoint, for but two rustic looking mechanics and the local manager, also a native Kentuckian, stared them a welcome.

Greeley itself, as Hammil pointed it out, was a complete disappointment. Though picturesque enough, snuggled against the green mountainside, it was nothing more nor less than a cross-roads settlement; a few crude buildings and a small stone structure that was used to dispense both religion and education.

Hammil chuckled. "Greeley'll seem bigger when you get used to it. It's 'count o' the hills jest at fust glance that makes it seem so little, Brother Mark. Come 'long over ter the office. I got a spot o' our Lizzie and there's pap a-talkin' ter Manager Rose."

Mark took his eyes from the laurel-sheathed ridges surrounding the settlement and soon discovered the lean, lanky figure of Old Peter Hammil standing beside the shack. Except for his white hair and wrinkled weather-beaten face, he was just an older edition of the son—kindly, and welcoming them with his gray smiling eyes.

Mark liked him at once and during a pleasant talk with Manager Rose his former high spirits returned. While they neither encouraged nor discouraged his glowing hopes for

the school, both agreed that “it’d be wuth tryin’ jest ter see haow folks talk ’bout it.” And so Mark had to be content with this native philosophy and let the future rest in the lap of the gods.

Buck Rose, as he was popularly known, advised Mark to be on hand the next day. “Folks come in fer su’plies termorrer, son, an’ not Monday,” he said. “Better be ’round hyur ter git ’em interested like an’ show ’em some o’ them fancy stunts what yer read ’bout some o’ them flyers a-doin’. Kin you do ’em?”

“*Can he do ’em!*” Peter Hammil interposed, chuckling. “Can a race hoss trot, Buck? Yer want to see Brother Mark a-climbin’ over the fuselage in mid-air when a ship’s in vertical—then yer won’t ask, *can he do stunts!*”

Buck Rose looked nonplussed at this unfamiliar jargon. He was merely a timekeeper and shipping clerk for the East Coast Airlines and knew no more about the air than did the rest of the folk in the Greeley district. However, he gave Mark the benefit of the doubt in deference to young Hammil’s enthusiastic recommendation and promised to boost the flying school and its young instructor to all who inquired and to the rest who did not.

So Mark climbed into the front seat of the flivver, content, and smiled gratefully at young Hammil beside him. Old Peter occupied the rear seat after having announced decisively that he drove the “rattlebox” only when he *had* to. The road to Horse Run, he informed them, was bad enough on a mule, but in the Ford it was wearing.

Mark soon found that this was no exaggeration on Old Peter’s part. The road was no more than a deep rut that billowed in places looking like an interminable stretch of

dirty canvas ribbon. On either side, however, the thickets of laurel were enchanting, interspersed now and then with dense growths of cedar and balsam.

Their journey was uphill all the way and Mark found himself listening with interest to Old Peter who proudly gave a lengthy account of his son's taking up "furrin ways an' sech like." "Yer see Peter's mammy hain't frum Horse Run," he told his guest with sobered eyes. "She hails frum Greeley an' she's got a leetle more eddication than me. That was how she cum ter git it inter her head ter send Peter outer the' hills an' larn sumthin'. Wa'al, sir, he did! He drapped fust thing inter th' army an' told em he was eighteen when he wuzn't but just shet o' fourteen—that's how big a boy he wuz. Then after a leetle he gits mixed up with the air bizness an' afore we knowed it he writes hum that he got promoted fer bravery."

Mark poked Hammil in the ribs playfully. "Hey," he said admiringly, "you never told me a thing about all this! That how you came to capture the Lieutenant?"

"I got it after the war," Hammil answered modestly. "I stayed in the army mos' two years after. Then I came to the East Coast people."

"Stead o' comin' back home ter help his pappy raise mules," Old Peter said softly. Mark saw that his gray eyes gleamed humorously. "Still I cain't say I blame him fer wantin' ter stay shet o' the hills. Leastways that's what his mammy got me ter thinkin'. She says thar is jest as good air in flyin' as he gits ter hum an' I guess she's right."

Hammil was grinning at Mark's serious expression. "I told yer yer had a lot ter learn, didn't I, Brother Mark? Hill people think different 'bout most everythin'. Even 'bout their

sons goin' 'way from the hills. I jest happened ter have a maw that had courage enough ter help me break away. I'm away, too—fer good. It's nice ter come back and visit, but that's all."

"An' I guess it's a case o' yer havin' ter stay 'way now, Peter," said his father with a sudden change of voice. "Cum ter me through Buck Rose jest afore yer landed thet the Riggses is a-sayin' how yer better not plan ter stay on fer good, bein's yer so gosh-a'mighty falutin a'ready. Dilly Riggs says yore kind ain't wanted 'round these hyur parts nohow."

"Oh, yes?" Hammil said with darkened face. "If I wanted ter stay, I'd stay whether I'd be welcome or not an' I'd like ter see the Riggs that could stop me!"

"Jes' what I told Buck," said the father proudly.

Mark glanced at Hammil and was lost in wonderment. Years of "furrin" associations had not obliterated this hereditary hatred of his family's enemy one whit. In point of fact, as one looked at his lean, set jaw, it was plain that the spirit of the feud had never been conquered in his long absences from home. Hammil was the true Kentucky mountaineer whether in his native hills or out.

"Why should they take that attitude?" Mark asked curiously. "Hasn't a fellow a right to leave the hills and follow a career wherever he wants?"

"Not at the risk of havin' 'em think a feller's high hat, like yer say up no'th," Hammil replied. "They think it o' me particular 'cause I went in th' air service and stayed there. Plain fact is they're jealous 'cause they hain't got ambition ter do it themselves. That's what Summers thinks 'bout it and that's why he got up the notion 'bout the flyin' school. Guess

he thinks if he gets 'em interested, they'll feel better 'bout me, but shucks, I don't give a hoot what the Riggses feel 'bout me!"

This fact was soon borne out, for not five minutes afterward there appeared up the road a great hulk of a man sitting astride a mule. As they drew nearer, Mark heard both father and son whisper the name, Riggs.

Though the narrowness of the road would have forced Hammil to stop in any case, it was evident that it was not a Hammil custom to ignore their enemy nor even to pass him by with a curt nod. Old Pete's salutation, however, could not be mistaken for other than it was—mere mountain courtesy.

"Howdy, Dake!" he drawled coldly, as the son drew the car up close to the thicket.

Dake Riggs pulled his mule clear of the car and nodded, frowning. "Howdy, Pete!" he mumbled, and gave his hat a defiant pull over his cold, blue eyes. Then his gaze slowly centered on the son. "So yer ter hum?" he asked.

Hammil smiled defiantly. "Yes, I am, Dake Riggs, and if it wasn't that I liked flyin' better, I'd think 'bout stayin' on fer good. Anybody yer know got objections?"

The ghost of a smile flitted across Dake Riggs' face, and was gone so quickly that Mark wondered if he had seen it at all.

"Wa'al, I wonder," he replied enigmatically, and as his glance rested on Mark he nodded again, his iron-gray beetle brows contracted slightly. "Reckon yore th' new flyin' school teacher what I heerd 'bout," he said laconically.

Mark bowed. "Yes sir. I'm Mark Gilmore and I hope to...."

Dake Riggs appeared not to be interested for he was again looking at Old Pete. “I heerd that th’ new agent is a right tetchious* pusson,” he said softly.

Old Pete did not blink an eye. “I heerd frum Buck he hain’t standin’ on no nonsense ef that’s what yer meanin Dake. Devlin his name is an’ Buck says he’s th’ devil fer blockaders. Wa’al, Peter son, reckon we better git on. Mammy’ll be hevin’ things ready.”

Hammil had already loosed his brake. Dake Riggs pulled his beast further over to the side unwilling to acknowledge the dismissal. Old Pete raised his big, bony hand and waved it.

“By, Dake! See yer ter taown, come marnin.”

Dake simply nodded and let them go in icy silence. After they had passed safely the first billowy rut, Mark turned and saw that the man was still in the same spot looking after them.

Could it be sheer imagination or did he actually see in Dake Riggs’ cold blue eyes, sinister gleam?

* Fretful.

CHAPTER V

A CALLER

Mark waited until distance obliterated the watching figure from view. Then he asked, “What’s blockaders, Hammil?”

“Moonshiners,” came the soft reply. “Devlin’s the new agent over th’ gov’ment men in Greeley district.”

“And Dake Riggs is kind of worried about him, huh?” Mark asked.

Hammil chuckled. “Dake don’t worry, Brother Mark. He’s just gettin’ his dander up ’cause he’s heard what a clever feller this Devlin is. Guess the last agent didn’t bother Dake much, hey pap?”

Old Pete shook his head sagaciously. “That’s cuz he was sort o’ on the down-go, son. I heerd he hed a bad heart. Wa’al, ’twuz lucky fer Dake, but now he’s gone an’ this Devlin has come an’ is fixin ter stay, hit hain’t comfortin’ th’ Riggses none—not the hull passel o’ em.”

Mark scrutinized the old mountaineer with a friendly smile. His trousers and flannel shirt were spotless and though his wide-brimmed hat bore signs of constant wear it looked carefully brushed and clean. Yes, it was obvious that there was a vast difference between the unkempt Dake Riggs and Old Peter Hammil.

Mark was presently to observe that this difference was manifest throughout the Hammil family. They had an inherent pride from the oldest to the youngest, a pride in the civilization of the world beyond the hills which they struggled to pattern after. And in Old Pete’s household they

came nearer to this realization, for mule raising was a lucrative business.

Old Pete had built himself a frame house which was the secret envy of the county. It attained the amazing proportions of a city house in width and a story and a half in height. Hammil proudly informed Mark of this as they drove into the well kept yard. There were three rooms downstairs and a bedroom upstairs—which apartment they would occupy together. No one within a radius of fifty miles had such a place.

“Windows an’ everythin’,” drawled Hammil. “We ain’t like the Riggses livin’ in th’ back country with houses mos’ fallin’ on top o’ em an’ nothin’ ter let th’ light in but th’ door.”

Mark looked up smiling but saw that Hammil was perfectly serious. Moreover, he looked disdainfully reminiscent as if the mere thought of the Riggs’ mode of life was repugnant to him. Old Pete’s expression, too, held a world of contempt for the whole impecunious clan of Riggses.

The Hammils turned out to welcome their flying kinsman almost to a man. The little four room house was filled to overflowing with Hammil’s four married brothers, his cousins and uncles and aunts whom Mark tried valiantly to count and keep track of, but soon gave up in despair. They all did their share, however, in trying to make him feel at home with their soft-spoken hospitality.

Mark could feel before supper was over that they had accepted him. Hammil’s mother was herself responsible for this, fluttering about in her clean calico dress from stove to table and murmuring about “young Mr. Gil’s kindness ter

Peter.” And though the kitchen table held at least fifteen diners there was not a sound. All listened in awed silence as she concluded a lengthy recital of Mark’s heroism.

Mark protested modestly when she had finished but to no avail. The Hammils had taken him under their wing and his participation in that savory supper of pone, fried ’taters and ’sass (apple sauce) seemed to seal a bond of lasting friendship. When they filed out just before dusk each one solemnly wrung his hand and nodded, and at the last of the line, Hammil’s four married brothers gravely spoke a word of thanks, then passed into the dusk where they mounted their horses.

Mark found himself alone with Old Peter and Mammy Hammil after the noise of their departing kinsmen had died away. Peter, the good woman explained, was out seeing that the mules were safe for the night.

“He allus does thet fer his pap when he comes fer a visit,” she said sweetly, nodding her graying head. “Reckon yore ’bout settin’ ter sleep after yore journey.”

Mark admitted he was pretty tired. “I guess Peter is too,” he said, kicking gently at one of Mrs. Hammil’s home hooked rugs that were spread here and there over the “parlor” floor. “I don’t think he’s feeling nearly well yet, that’s why the doctors in the hospital made him come home for at least a month. His lungs are pretty weak.”

Mrs. Hammil’s thin lips quivered. “He air got ter take care o’ hissself an’ stringthin up,” she said anxiously.

“Reckon he orter stringthin up longer,” said Old Pete. “He hain’t hed nothin’ but trouble with his lungs since thet gas bizness in th’ war.”

“The old rascal,” said Mark. “He’s never told me a thing about what happened to him in the war.”

The old people nodded as if to say that a Hammil didn’t talk about himself as long as there was something else to talk of, especially when it came to his physical ills. They were a stoical lot, Mark thought.

At that juncture there came to them the distant sound of a horse’s hoofs. They listened in silence as the sound came nearer and nearer and finally ceased before the door. Voices echoed in the misty twilight and suddenly they could hear young Hammil’s husky drawling tones.

A moment later he came stalking in at the door. “Devlin come ter see you, pap,” he announced, and behind him walked a very giant of a man—red-haired, with steely-blue eyes.

“Howdy, folks,” he said in a deep, pleasant voice. “Reckon yer know who I be?”

“Howdy, Devlin,” said Old Pete, and rising, extended his hand to the new government agent. “Hev a cheer an’ set. Won’t yer stay th’ night?”

Devlin with hasty formality pulled a worn gray cap from his head and stuffed it into an already bulging corduroy pocket. “Reckon I’ll have ter stay th’ night Pete,” he answered at length. “Uncle Sam put me inter this job ter work an’ git results, an’ I ain’t losin’ no time. I’m startin’ ter look over things up back country way an’ see what’s doin’. Kind of a good time termorrer when most o’ the folks are down ter Greeley, eh?”

Old Pete’s face was inscrutable. “Kinder talk as if ye heerd somethin’,” he said softly.

“Somebuddy’s got ter git after them Riggses,” said Devlin with a finality that was not to be mistaken. “Reckon they been doin’ jest a leetle too much fer quite a spell. Wa’al, they kin settle with me ef I catch ’em.”

Old Pete said nothing to this but walked to the hearth and lighted his pipe. That done, he made Mark acquainted with the newcomer and fell to talking of the prospective flying school, seeming to dwell at great length upon it. One could feel the man’s constraint with every word uttered. Suddenly Mrs. Hammil arose and excused herself for the night. Devlin, she announced, could occupy the “parlor.”

Mark and the lieutenant were in possession of the upper story bedroom a few minutes later. A moon was beginning to struggle through the misty dark clouds and points of light disclosed an uncarpeted but clean floor. A small wooden chair and a full-sized iron bed completed the room’s furnishings.

“Have ter wash at the well, Brother Mark,” said Hammil almost apologetically. “That’s one thing we hain’t got yet—a bathroom. Lights neither. Have ter be satisfied with lamps downstairs an’ the dark upstairs, hey?”

“Why, sure,” Mark said good-naturedly. “Don’t make any excuses to me, Hammil. Gosh, I think it’s great and that’s a fact! Just like when I was a scout and camped in the Adirondacks. I love lamps and lanterns and washing outdoors; honestly.” He walked over to the little cubby hole of a window and inhaled deeply of the cool, sweet night air. “Boy, *will* I sleep!” he exclaimed.

For a moment he stood looking out at the little roof that sloped down from the window and over the tiny porch. It was like a doll’s house, he mused, and smiled at the thought

that the dwelling actually housed that night such giants as the Hammils, father and son, and Devlin. He quite forgot that he was himself standing with his blond head bent in order to avoid the low ceiling of the room. And he had still a few more years in which to attain his growth.

Devlin's rumbling bass voice trailed out into the night and set Mark thinking. He turned to Hammil who was almost ready for bed. "Mind me asking you something, Ham?" he asked.

Hammil smiled at the nickname. "What's on yer mind, Brother Mark?"

"About Devlin. Your father sort of shut up tight when the talk came around to the Riggs bunch. I could feel he was just talking and that's all."

"Yer right. We like ter have folks stay with us overnight, regardless of who they are 'ceptin'...."

"The Riggses?" Mark interposed laughing.

"Right, Brother Mark. But outside o' them, we like ter give hospitality 'ceptin ter gov'ment men. Yer see it makes things look bad fer us and while we don't care what the Riggses think o' us, we don't like ter be thought informers when we're not. It's a sort o' honor we have 'bout such things. That's what made pap talk unnatural like. He don't like it ter have Devlin stop here tonight an' then start out makin' trouble for one o' the other o' the Riggses tomorrer, 'specially when he admits he heard something."

"You mean somebody's already given him a tip about one of the Riggses?"

Hammil nodded. "Yer guessed it right off. Now Dake Riggs has good reason ter snipe at one o' us. He's been waitin' fer years ter get such a good excuse."

It seemed incredible to Mark. “That’s nonsense. Why, even I could prove that your father told him nothing. In fact, I never saw anybody shut up so quickly as when Devlin started talking about those people. You’d think your father never even heard of them the way he did that!”

“Pap’s honorable,” said Hammil proudly. “Even if they don’t deserve it, pap wouldn’t snoop or tell about the Riggses’ way o’ livin’. That’s th’ way he is, Brother Mark. But jest th’ same this business is goin’ ter fall right on our heads. Trouble’s a-comin’.”

And Hammil said it so convincingly that Mark somehow felt that it was already on the way.

CHAPTER VI

PROWLERS

Mark lingered a while at the window looking at the vague outline of hills all about them. As the moonlight grew brighter they seemed to rise until their peaks were lost in the dark night itself.

The scent of pine floated in on the elfin breeze and strange noises came from the surrounding thickets. Now and then Mark could hear a tree rustling and once espied a rabbit hopping from the little yard out to the narrow road.

Suddenly his attention was drawn to the thicket at the right of the house. The breeze was not strong enough to do more than quiver a bit of protruding laurel, yet Mark distinctly saw the whole patch move for at least two seconds. Then for a moment it was still. When it again moved he whispered to Hammil.

“What do you think of it?”

Hammil’s lanky body crouched against the small window, tense and alert. Devlin’s bass voice still trailed out through the partly opened window in the parlor. They could hear him telling Old Pete that he was born and raised this side of Lexington, but that it didn’t prevent him from being on to “blockadin’ hillbillies.”

Old Pete was still a good listener evidently for his soft voice could not be heard. Devlin, however, seemed not to mind this silence on the part of his host. Perhaps he was too vigorous and too intent in the recitation of his plans to notice any lack of response.

“Buck Rose tells me you Hammils hain’t been on friendly terms with these no-account Riggses fer years?” he asked with booming accents. “Now mebbe it wouldn’ go agin yer conscience ter help me a leetle. I just heard accidental like that this Dake Riggs has got quite a set-up somewhere back o’ Hoss Run.”

Suddenly they heard the parlor window slam down. Old Pete’s soft goodnight echoed up the stairway and then his determined footsteps rang vigorously as he crossed from the parlor to the downstairs bedroom. Hammil nodded with satisfaction.

“Wa’al, pap gave Devlin his answer—*goodnight!*” he chuckled. “Reckon we don’t hate no Riggs bad enough to turn informer. They got ter live even if they are plumb lazy,” he added and turned back to the window. “Look! It’s somebody in that thar thicket!”

Mark looked in time to see the gaunt figure of a rather young man emerge from the thicket. He carried a rifle and wore his battered-looking hat low on his forehead. For a moment he stood like a statue, while Hammil breathed heavily.

“I’ve got ter let him know I see him,” he whispered.

“What for?” Mark demanded to know. “Why not let him go on. After all, he hasn’t done anything....”

“It’s doin’ a heap ter snoop, Brother Mark,” Hammil interposed, falling into the mountain vernacular with angry vehemence. “It hain’t safe ter let a man snoop like that without challengin’ him what his bizness be.”

Before Mark could stop him, Hammil had shoved up the window as far as it would go and was squeezing his long, lanky body through the small aperture. The trespassing

stranger seemed not to see him until he had climbed out and was sliding down the sloping roof.

By the time Hammil's long legs had touched the ground, the fellow had retreated to the protection of the thicket. Instinctively Mark pushed himself out onto the roof also. When he got to the ground he noticed that the parlor lamp had been extinguished. Devlin had evidently retired.

Hammil had already slipped into the thicket in pursuit of the trespasser. Mark stood in the shadow of the eaves, nonplussed. He hadn't any idea just what part of the luxuriant growth his friend had slipped into. Suddenly he decided to take a chance.

He ran straight ahead and plunged. Briers pricked at his ankles and an overhanging branch sideswiped him, cutting his face, painfully. But so intent was he upon listening for some sound of Hammil, that he was oblivious to physical discomfort.

He heard nothing, however, except the usual night sounds of June. It struck him as singular for it wasn't possible that two men—three men including himself—should be plunging in a thicket without making a sound. He himself was making noise enough, but when he stopped to listen the silence was like that of a tomb.

Two or three times he was prompted to call Hammil's name, but instinct warned him against it. Then suddenly he found himself out of the thicket—on the road. As he turned to look he saw the house just opposite where he stood. He smiled, for he had simply circled the thicket.

At that juncture he caught sight of something which robbed him of the power of speech. For a moment, he could do nothing but think, and subsequent activities proved that he

must have brought his mental powers into full play in that fleeting instant.

Not ten feet distant stood the gun-toting stranger, his back to Mark. About fifteen feet beyond that gaunt figure, was Hammil, his back turned also toward Mark. His posture indicated that he was listening, totally unaware that he was being watched. Perhaps not a quarter of a second passed in this tense attitude when the trespasser aimed his gun with catlike agility.

The muzzle pointed directly at the back of poor Hammil's defenceless head!

Mark threw all caution aside and leaped with blind fury, landing with his dead weight full on the would-be murderer's back.

CHAPTER VII

TARGET MATERIAL

It took a few carefully driven blows for Mark to get possession of the rifle. Hammil had reached their side at this juncture and hastened to separate them, although he soon found that the trespasser was getting quite enough of his northern opponent. Even then he was making a valiant struggle to be free of this slim blond fury and as he jumped to his feet, certain facial blemishes he bore gave mute testimony that his murderous propensities were, for the time being, sufficiently dampened.

Hammil chuckled into the young man's sullen, gaunt features. "Wa'al, Dilly Riggs," he said softly. "Yer sure hev somethin' ter remember Brother Mark Gilmore by fer a few days, hey?"

Dilly Riggs glared at Mark for a second, then stared resentfully at Hammil. "Reckon if yore friend was knowin' to the sarcumstance, he wouldn't hev done me dirt. I air out fer rabbits an' I seed one hyur when I come by."

Mark laughed. "Since when does Lieutenant Hammil resemble a rabbit, Riggs?" he asked sarcastically.

Hammil started. "Was he aimin' fer me, Brother Mark?"

Mark nodded. "So close that he couldn't have missed you."

"What yer got to say to that, Dilly?" Hammil asked more softly than ever.

"He's the lyin'est feller I ever seed," Dilly Riggs replied with a hurt grumble. "I was fixin' ter pop a rabbit over you-

un's head.”

A peculiar glint came into Hammil's gray eyes. “Now I know yer lyin', Dilly. Yer cum ter see what Devlin wants with us, hey? Wa'al, let me tell yer that he came ter snoop, bein's he knows we're not plumb fools, 'bout the Riggss. When he asked pap he got jest one answer—the kind of an answer all snoopers get from the Hammils. He was told *goodnight* an' that goes fer you too, Dilly!”

Dilly Riggs had the cold blue eyes of his father, Dake. Mark was quick to discern the family resemblance as the son surveyed his hereditary enemy in frozen silence. For a moment his thin, pale lips looked like mere slits. Then they parted ever so slightly.

“I'll name it ter pappy what yer jes' said,” he murmured without even a glimpse of his teeth. “Cain't yer listen ter him laff?” he added sarcastically. “Wa'al, I'll be gittin' on an' fix ter git another rabbit.”

Suddenly Devlin's booming bass voice broke the silence like the roar of a cannon. Clad only in his underclothing, he stood more giant-like than ever in the full light of the moon, his ponderous frame seeming to fill the little porch.

“Whar you-all talkin' out thar?” he called, shading his eyes from the light and peering around on all sides.

“Here,” Hammil answered from the shadowy thicket. “Brother Mark an' me thought we heard a noise.”

“Did ye?” the man asked, confused as to the direction of the voices.

Hammil walked a few paces out into the light of the road. “I reckon not though,” he answered and glanced back a second at Riggs, chuckling. “Twan't nothin' but a rabbit, Mr.

Devlin, that's all. They make a pow'ful lot o' noise runnin' through the patch."

Mark saw Dilly Riggs' lean jaw tighten. The next second Old Pete's white head appeared in the doorway.

"What air ye up to, sonny?" he called softly.

"Rabbits, pap," Hammil answered with another unrestrained chuckle. "I reckon thar must a' been a whole family uv them."

Mark clutched the confiscated rifle and looked at Old Pete's shaking head. He thought that never in his life had he seen such a flash of drama. And before he had time to wonder about the next move, he heard a significant rustle and looked around to find that Riggs had disappeared from his side.

A betraying swish sounded from the thicket and that was all. Dilly Riggs had waited his chance and Mark told himself that it was hard to believe that he had even seen the fellow. Indeed, if it hadn't been for the rifle he would have been content to think it all a hazy dream. He glanced slowly at his friend still standing in the road.

Hammil was nodding gravely, clearly cognizant of Riggs' sudden flight. He meant that he should go free then? Evidently, for the lieutenant's gray eyes were smiling when Mark stepped over to him.

"Yer saw nothin' but rabbits, Brother Mark," he said in a whisper. And added, "As far as Devlin's concerned, that's all yer saw. Give me th' rifle."

Mark handed it over and they started for the house. Devlin had already retreated just inside the doorway and as the two young men entered the parlor Old Pete glanced from one to

the other a moment, then let his searching gray eyes rest on the rifle.

“Thar be a heap o’ pesky critters ’round evenin’s distarbin’ folks,” he said looking his son full in the face. “Thar’s skunks too, a-plenty.”

“Well skunks are worth shootin’, pap,” Hammil said enigmatically. “Don’t you think so?”

“Wa’al, I wonder!” replied the old man. “I jes’ wonder!”

CHAPTER VIII

A SUGGESTION

Mark had quite a day of it next day. From early morning until nearly sundown he used up a considerable amount of gas and oil, lung-power and energy, in endeavoring to convince his rustic onlookers that it behooved every man, and even woman, to become air-minded. The price for learning air-craftsmanship was so small as to be absurd, he told them, for the philanthropic powers that be of the East Coast Airlines had decided on a fee within reach of the hill men's pocketbooks.

Hammil picked him up in the Ford in time to get up to Horse Run before supper. He had himself spent a greater part of the day at the field boosting the project with true Kentucky spirit and with a good word for Mark at every turn. The rest of the time he employed in "knocking around town" as he expressed it, "tryin' ter find out how folks are takin' ter it."

"And how *are* they taking to it?" Mark asked anxiously.

"Reckon they'll take to it fust rate when they git used ter seein' what a nice kid you are, Brother Mark," Hammil answered.

Mark looked thoughtful. "Well," he said hopefully, "I suppose I can't expect to grab recruits right off. After I did some stunts and made a couple of take-offs and landings to show them how safe it was, they seemed to look more interested. Before that, when you were there, I couldn't get a rise out of them. Any other time it would have struck me as

funny to see them standing there—that big crowd, all tight-lipped and not a smile, down to the smallest kid. Boy, I felt kind of discouraged. Anyway, while you were around in Greeley, I got the promise of two fellows to come Monday. I think they said they were cousins of yours or something. Hollins, one fellow said his name was and the other said he was Johnnie Bly.”

“My kin,” said Hammil thoughtfully.

“Most of them I tried to recruit said it was hard to get away except on Saturday,” Mark said with furrowed brow. “I suppose that’s true when you come to consider they’re mostly all farmers’ sons. Well, I’ll just have to try and rope as many as possible on Saturdays.”

“Bout it,” Hammil agreed. And when they had left Greeley well behind, he suggested, “How ’bout yer stayin’ inter town altogether? Oh, I don’t mean we’re aimin’ ter git rid of yer or that we don’t like yer company—gosh; pap and mammy think yore jest fine an’ they’d hate ter see ye stay somewheres else.”

Mark smiled quietly. “Then why suggest about me staying in Greeley at all?” he asked.

Hammil kept his eyes straight ahead. “Cause yer likely ter git on better bein’ right near th’ field. I didn’t give much tho’t to it when I asked yer ter stay on ter home, but now I see how ’tis.”

“How what is?” Mark insisted.

“How it is stayin’ with us, an’ so far from the field and all. Tain’t fair to yer when yer can do better stayin’ ter town. Yore so bent on making this a big thing for yourself and for the East Coast, I want to help yer as best I can.”

“I see,” said Mark. “But now that you’ve finished your whys and wherefores tell me the truth.”

“Truth ’bout what, Brother Mark?” Hammil asked, never giving his companion so much as a side glance.

“The truth about why you suddenly want me to make this change. Buck told me this morning that you had told him the reason you had insisted upon me staying up at your house was that there wasn’t any place in Greeley with room enough, nor fit enough for me. Also you said your mother and father would take it amiss if I even suggested it.”

Hammil looked at Mark for a moment, then drove the car viciously over two particularly bad ruts. “Wa’al, yer got me cornered ’bout it, Brother Mark, an’ I won’t have yer feelin’ that yer suddenly not wanted. The truth is, I don’t want yer ter stay with us any longer ’cause it’ll bring trouble ter yer an’ mebbe hurt yore chances with the school. As ’tis, Dake Riggs is spreadin’ word ’round that we had Devlin up fer an earful last night an’ that you pounced on his son, Dilly, when he was out fer rabbits. He’s sayin’ yer just prob’bly a gov’ment man in disguise. So now yer see why I think things would be better if yer stayed at Greeley.”

“It’s foolishness, Ham, that’s what it is,” Mark protested. “In the first place, I wouldn’t forsake your mother and father’s hospitality to please a rat like Dake Riggs must be. In the second place, I’m thinking it won’t be none too many males around your house for me to stay if these Riggsses go on with last night’s performance. And last but not least, I can’t see how it would affect my chances for recruits by staying on with you people. Surely all the folks around won’t believe any such nonsense that I’ve anything to do with the government. Why, heavens, do they know how old I am?”

“I circulated that news a-purpose, Brother Mark. But ter tell the truth, yer look a lot older. Past twenty anyway. Yer see fellers up here in th’ hills don’t pal ’round together when there’s such difference in their ages like you an’ me. They can’t understand that I jest like you like a younger brother.”

“And that I think you’re the squarest older fellow I’ve ever met, huh?” Mark added. “Anyway, I’ll do my best to convince people that I’m not disguised as anybody but myself and the heck with what Dake Riggs gossips about!”

Hammil shook his brown hair back from his forehead. “Wa’al, since yore set on that, Brother Mark, let me tell you that you hain’t got any idea what ’tis ’round these parts to have a feller like Dake Riggs, and Dilly too fer that matter, spreadin’ the news that the Hammils give hospitality to the new gov’ment man. ’Specially since it seems that Devlin knows somethin’ of one o’ the Riggses’ blockade and is likely mos’ any time ter come on it an’ arrest a Riggs or two. Right away folks’ll say it’s sure we turned informer an’ how can we deny it after Devlin comin’ up last night an’ demandin’ hospitality? Dilly heard from the patch, so Dake’s been tellin’ that Devlin was talkin’ it over with pap.”

“Well, I can prove that Devlin did the talking about it, not your father,” said Mark indignantly. “Why, didn’t I even remark to you when we got upstairs last night, how your father just wouldn’t say a word!”

Hammil nodded gloomily. “Jest try an’ make outside folks believe that, Brother Mark. ’Specially when yore our friend Devlin did us no favor by stayin’ last night. It’ll hang onto us for quite a spell that we turned informer.”

“Then I’d let such people go hang,” Mark said. “If your word isn’t as good any day as Dake Riggs’ then let them

think as they like.”

“That’s the trouble, Brother Mark. It’s plumb comfortin’ ter have yore neighbors on yore side when trouble’s brewin’. And Dake Riggs is brewin’ trouble right now. When he gits every last neighbor o’ ourn down on us, he’ll start a fraction*, ’cause he knows he can fight all he wants an’ they won’t lift a hand ter help any mother’s son of us.”

“Why, that’s crazy,” Mark said, bewildered at this queer mountain reasoning. “You could even get Devlin to prove that your father didn’t...”

“Try an’ make hill folks believe a gov’ment man, Brother Mark,” Hammil interposed gravely, “They hate ’em, because most uv ’em fear ’em. And because a gov’ment man is a sort of detective an’ might some day pounce on their blockade they won’t give him quarter an’ they hate those that do. Brother Mark, informers are hated in these hyur hills like snakes.”

“And I suppose you’re likened to these said snakes—you and your family?” Mark asked, disgusted at the thought of such injustice.

“We air,” Hammil answered, unconsciously falling into the native vernacular, “an’ if yer stay with us, you be too!”

“Then I be,” Mark laughed. “What’s more, I’ll make them like my kind of snake before they see the last of me.”

* Fight.

CHAPTER IX

A SIMMERING POT

Mark's hill recruits never appeared but it so happened that the East Coast Airlines advertising brought others more interested and sincere about air interests. The news of the flying school found its way along as far as Lexington and as there was a good macadam road straight from there to the little settlement of Greeley, the young instructor soon found himself besieged with applicants.

They were mostly sons of prosperous merchants and farmers and Mark found them an interesting lot. He was happy in his new role and soon became reconciled to the fact that his plan of recruiting the hill people was thankless and almost hopeless. Those that were willing, such as Hammil's own two cousins, were too weighted down by farm chores to spare the precious time.

By the end of his second week at Greeley, he felt a sense of achievement. His own youth attracted a stream of young men to the Greeley airport and he was able to send a glowing report of his activities to the kindly Mr. Summers back in New Jersey.

In celebration of this event, Hammil took a spin with Mark. "Jes' for five minutes," said the lieutenant. "Jes' long enough ter kind o' cool off 'fore we drive home fer supper, hey?"

"Righto," Mark answered happily. "Things are coming along swell, Ham. Kind of different than what I expected, but as long as they're coming, I should worry, huh?"

Hammil nodded and kept silent as they left the ground. They circled Greeley, then swung off over Twin Peaks. It was their first spin in this direction together and the Kentuckian took a native's pride in pointing out several points of interest. One, of course, was his home, nestled like a tiny white speck against the green ridge.

"If you throttle down yer ship and bring her real low, yer can see a body standin' in th' yard," he told Mark. "I've done it lots of times when I've been a-comin' home fer a visit or goin' away. Mammy an' pap always stand an' wave somethin' white and I circle twice ter show 'em I see 'em."

Mark smiled. "Looks pretty from here all right," he said. "I'll have to try and see if I can get a glimpse of you next week, Ham. Your father says you're going to look out for things while he goes on a little business trip to Lexington. Think I'll take my pupils around this way for a change. I've been going north for some reason and it gets monotonous."

"Wa'al, it's good 'round hyur when thar ain't any weather, Brother Mark," said Hammil. "But look out over Twin Peaks, rain or shine! It's the doggone-est air pocket whatever I struck. Yer jest simply cain't make headway."

Mark took extra precaution over these two stunted peaks and brought the Kent D-2 quite low in order to get a view of this queer freak of Mother Nature. Hammil explained that between the blunt looking peaks was a natural meadow.

"Where?" Mark asked peering down along the forest sheathed ridge.

"That's it," Hammil answered. "It's tol'able meadow if yer kin find it. Trouble is 'count o' the thick forests yer cain't see it from the air nohow. Thar's a sartin' place yer kin slip in an' make a perfec' landin' an' the same way yer kin slip

out. A pilot I knew from down Knoxville way says he did it a few times an' made it as slick as anything. He showed me twice whar ter duck the peaks and come down, but I cain't seem ter be sure ever. Every time I make a try, I sorter lose my narve that mebbe I won't git the right place; 'tween dodgin' the peaks and that air pocket, I don't wonder."

Mark studied the spot closely in circling it again, but he could see no opening, much less a sign of the meadow; nothing but two dome-shaped eminences over which they were flying and like which there were many more, undulating, with no great disparity in height, toward the horizon. Their steep sides rounding to the tops seemed smooth-surfaced because of the luxuriant verdure and the countless ravines separating the ridges were gloomy and forbidding. Deep and narrow, they looked an almost blackish green in the late light of day. And as Mark put the nose of the Kent D-2 back toward the airport, he got a quick glimpse of a shimmering curve of water, revealed by a gap in the mountain.

"How about climbing up from below some time and studying the situation, Ham?" he asked. "I'd be tickled to go with you some off day. We could draw a map of the whole location and get it down pat."

Hammil smiled. "Easy tellin' yer a stranger in these hyur hills, Brother Mark. Why, I don't think the oldest man in the hull of our county has ever been within twenty mile of Twin Peaks. Mebbe it's a little exaggerated as ter distance, but yer cain't git much nearer on account o' the dense forest an' undergrowth. Yer see jes' in between th' timber line an' the peaks it hain't bad 'tall. It's gittin' thar frum b'low an' gittin' b'low from above."

Mark laughed. “That’s explaining it fully. Ham. Everything’s deceiving at a distance, especially mountain forests where a fellow can’t see the undergrowth from above, huh?”

“That’s it ’xactly,” Hammil said peering at his little white speck of a home below. “Pap’s out in the yard I think. Looks like his white hair.” He sighed audibly. “Yer know. Brother Mark, I’m plumb ’fraid that pap’s white hair’s likely ter be whiter (if so that can be) ’fore many suns.”

“Why?”

Hammil stirred in the leather seat and shook his head gravely. “Old Buck Rose told me just ’fore I saw you this evenin’ that Devlin popped on one o’ Dake Riggs’ stills and ’rested his cousin Long John what was tendin’ it.”

“And that means....” Mark began.

“That things are beginnin’ ter boil,” Hammil interposed grimly. “It means us Hammils cain’t set a foot ’long Hoss Creek Road or back country ’thout a rifle.”

Mark brought the plane down to the field gracefully and after seeing that she was safely under cover for the night, he followed Hammil in silence toward the office shanty, behind which the little Ford was parked.

He was so indignant over this new turn of events that he couldn’t put it into speech. It was as difficult for him to understand the reasoning of the Hammils as the Riggs’ evasion of the law. It seemed incomprehensible that the law-abiding family of Hammil either could not or would not appeal to this same law for protection from their hereditary enemies. It was simply an eternal wrangle for the proverbial eye for eye. And what was more amazing, the lieutenant himself, though long inured to northern community life and

law, looked and talked with approval of this ancient method of dispensing justice and honor.

Mark glanced wonderingly at the hills about them and realized that the hillman was ever the same in his native hills. He was a law unto himself, always, and wanted neither advice nor protection from “furrin law.” Centuries of civilization had changed this code not one whit and Mark thought, as his gaze rested on the distant twin peaks, that it would never change. It would be as eternal as the dream-blue mist that swathed the hills so protectingly.

Verily, the ways of the hillmen were strange.

CHAPTER X

FEUD SPIRIT

Despite the atmosphere of foreboding hanging over Old Pete's modern home, they managed to have a cheerful supper. If Mammy Hammil had fears she hid them bravely under a glowing smile that was quaint on her withered cheeks. Many such smiles had probably hidden many such fears over a long period of years, Mark thought, and now in the evening of her life it had become second nature to her.

Her energy was amazing as she flew back and forth in the warm, odorous kitchen, from stove to table and from table to stove. "Ham-meat an' biscuit bread fer you-all," she said sweetly, "an' I don't want nary none left. My man hain't got sech a good appetite terday, Son Mark, so it's up ter you an' my Peter ter eat rimpions.*"

They topped off the meal with the inevitable "sass" and washed it down with black coffee. After that the men folks were shoosed off into the parlor where Mark observed Old Pete squinting out of the window into the approaching twilight. He stood back a little in the shadow and seemed to start when his son put a match to the gaudy kerosene lamp standing on the center reading table.

"Got ter have a light, pap," Hammil explained, seemingly aware of his father's movement. "We cain't sit hyur in the dark plumb comfortable an' besides if hit comes, wa'al, we know where we're at. Besides, we Hammils don't sit or walk in the dark a-purpose."

“Yer right, Peter,” said the old man, his voice quivering with emotion. “Reckon at my age I hain’t showin’ I got the all-overs ’count of a sartin bunch o’ hawgs,” he added pulling his chair up to the table.

Mark gathered, not without some misgivings, that Old Pete was expecting uninvited guests in the form of hogs. Despite his own anxiety, the old man’s denunciation brought a smile to his lips, for he had a subtle humor, this weather-beaten old hill-billy, and it was easy to guess that such dry wit had relieved the tragic tensivity of like situations throughout the past.

Mark strolled to the door and opened it, intending to have a puff on his pipe out of doors. Hammil, however, summarily demanded that he remain just where he was.

“But it’s lovely out tonight,” Mark protested, inhaling the sweet, cool air through the partly opened door.

“I know ’tis, Brother Mark, but jes’ shet that do’ and do yer puffin’ in hyur. This is one o’ them nights when it’s a sight healthier ter smoke indoors.”

Mark shut the door and obediently sat down on one of the wooden chairs. “Have you ever thought, Ham,” he said thoughtfully, “that you and your folks are doing exactly the same sort of thing that the settlers did after Daniel Boone came out through this wilderness!”

“Sho’, I’ve thought uv it, Brother Mark. I cain’t say I’m zactly proud uv it, ’specially since I been up no’th with the East Coast people. I cum ter see how turrible ’tis ter have yore folks shot down fer somethin’ that happened mebbe a hundred year back. But what kin I do ’bout it? What kin any of us do? Have somebody shoot at yer an’ see what yer’ll do! Sit back an’ take it? Wa’al, I’d jest like ter see even *you* do

it! Like fun yer would. Brother Mark, self-preservation is still the fust law o' life an' don't let nobody tell yer different."

"Appeal to Devlin for protection!" Mark pleaded. "Have the proper authorities clap Dake Riggs into jail for threatening you, and his son, Dilly, for attempted murder."

"And have Dake's kin get us fer good—which is 'zactly what they *would* do," Hammil declared passionately.

"Thar air a hunerd Riggses all told in this hyur county," said Old Pete. "And thar air only fifty-eight o' us Hammils. Figger it out for yo'self, Son Mark."

The old man's words were scarcely uttered when they heard the hissing whine of a bullet, followed by the shattering of the narrow-paned window. Mark got to his feet, Hammil slipped into the hallway leading upstairs, and Mrs. Hammil rushed in from the kitchen, her face white and drawn. She stood a moment framed in the doorway, looking searchingly at her husband, who hadn't moved in his chair. Suddenly a little groan escaped her thin, quivering lips.

"Ye air hit, Pete?" she said, rushing to his side.

Mark moved to him also. "Are you hurt, Mr. Hammil?" he asked.

The old man winced a trifle. "Reckon jist a bit through the shoulder," he said in faltering tones. "Tain't nothin'."

Hammil strode into the room at that juncture, armed with two rifles. His face blanched as he looked at his father. "Sure 'tis jes' a flesh wound, pappy?" he asked with infinite tenderness.

Old Pete slipped his clean flannel shirt off his shoulders exposing the wound. "See—tain't nothin', son; mammy kin fix me up in th' kitchen. Reckon yer'll *haf*ter be in darkness

now,” he added and allowed his wife to help him to the kitchen.

Mark leaned over the table to extinguish the lamp and saw a gleam of metal imbedded in the oak. He looked up at Hammil. “Here’s the bullet, Ham,” he said in a hushed voice. “It must have grazed right off your father’s shoulder.”

Hammil nodded grimly as the light went out under Mark’s hand.

“It might have been worse, Ham—that bullet. It might have slipped down nearer—nearer the heart, I mean.”

“Thar’s always that possibility,” Hammil murmured, and his lanky figure stalked noiselessly toward the window, rifle in hand.

Mark clenched his hands with suppressed rage. Suddenly he stepped forward to Hammil’s side. “Where’s that other rifle I saw you with, Ham?” he asked vehemently.

“Over thar on that cheer near th’ kitchen do’,” replied the other. “Why?”

“I want it,” Mark answered. “I want it to help shoot every cowardly Riggs that I lay eyes on! Let’s blow out of here and challenge the snakes in the open. Let’s see if they’re men enough to meet us face to face, huh?”

“Brother Mark,” said Hammil huskily, “yore a man among men—durned if yer ain’t! It ain’t done in these hyur hills ter take ’em face ter face, but I’ll be blowed if I don’t think it’s a heap sight better! If yer willin’ ter face th’ music whatever comes, *I’m willin’!*”

“I’m not only *willing!*” Mark cried, opening the door. “But we’ll make *them* willing to run, by gosh!”

* Heartily.

CHAPTER XI

MARK AND HAMMIL

There was not a Riggs, however, to meet Mark's challenge. Scour the thicket as they did, not one was to be heard or seen and they decided after an hour's hunt that further search would be futile. It was evident that there had been but one sniper and he had probably taken to his heels after the one shot.

"We'll know better the next time, Ham," said Mark profoundly, as they returned indoors. "We'll wait for them in the dark. Your father was perfectly right about it—you can't treat such people with so much consideration as to leave your light on and let them find their mark so easy. I didn't realize how dangerous it was. Why, just to think, your father could just as well ... well, anyhow, we'll give them tit for tat, huh? We'll give them a dose of their own sneaking medicine!"

Old Pete called them out into the kitchen where no light shone, save the glow from the stove. He was apparently quite calm albeit his face seemed a little white as he peered intently at Mark.

"Son, I air proud o' ye," he said slowly, "I air right proud o' ye! Fer a furriner yer got mo' narve than the hull passel of Riggses put together!"

And that from an old timer like Old Pete was a compliment indeed.

Mark laughed. "It isn't nerve, Mr. Hammil," he said earnestly, "it's temper. I'm good and sore at the whole parcel of Riggses, as you call them. It doesn't seem to me that

there's a man among them if they all do their fighting in that fashion. It's pretty low down, if you ask me, and I hate low down people!"

"The Hammils' hain't never fired a shot fust—*never!*" said Mrs. Hammil from her rocking chair in the shadows. "It's allus been a Riggs ter start things boilin' by the fust shot. Hain't I right, pappy?"

"Edzactly!" said Old Pete sternly. "Wa'al, I reckon that was ter let us know they sartinly aim ter pin Long John's arrest 'pon us-all. Wa'al, let 'em! Reckon we kin hold our own."

And from the old man's sure-footed stride as he entered his bedroom for the night, it was evident that he could more than hold his own. Straight as an Indian, and without an ounce of superfluous flesh, he was, at seventy-seven years, a monument to wholesome living. And his soft, silken, white hair clinging about the nape of his neck seemed to bespeak his years of waiting for the treacherous Riggses.

Hammil had something to say to Mark as soon as they entered the half-story bedroom. "I jest want ter tell ye, yore a kid after my heart," he said unabashed. "Seems like pap an' me cain't ever thank ye enough."

"That's good, Ham," Mark laughed. "I hope you *can't* thank me enough—I hope you can't thank me at all. Man alive, it's like a tonic for me to be here. I see how things are right before my eyes. A fellow reads about these feuds, but he doesn't know anything about them unless he gets mixed up in them. Why, I've read how they actually free most murderers down here—even when it's plain they're guilty. I never believed that such a thing could be true, but somehow tonight I see everything in a different light. Like you said

before, it wouldn't do any good to put Dake or Dilly Riggs in jail....”

“No, not even if that bullet had hit pap right fatal,” Hammil agreed. “It would be plumb extr'ordinary if they wasn't freed. Witnesses lie, the lawyer may be related to the defendants, even the jedge may be distant kin o' the Riggses. So thar yer air, Brother Mark.”

“There *you* are—you *hill* people!” Mark said vehemently. “There's no way out for you fellows at all, is there? None but your own two hands! And whatever else the outside world may think of it—it's the only way—it's all you can do!”

“It's all we can do!” Hammil echoed grimly.

CHAPTER XII

“DENOTING STORMS”

Sunday passed without incident. Monday came with work for Mark to do and as he set out for town in the Ford with Hammil and Old Pete he was given over to a fit of the blues because of an overcast sky.

“Won’t rain afore night, Son Mark,” Old Pete predicted. “Anyways, ’twon’t come on afore five o ’clock evenin so yer got quite a spell ter show off them stunts to yore pupils.”

Mark was easily encouraged and thanked Old Pete in glowing terms before Hammil and he saw the old man off for Lexington. A “neighbor-friend” from Greeley was to drive him in and they parted cheerfully.

Mark had a busy day and though the sky became more overcast with the passing hours, the rain was still holding off at half past four when his last pupil departed. Hammil, he remembered, had promised to call for him at five thirty which gave him quite a little time to wait.

Buck Rose had left for the day and there was only one mechanic on duty in the nearest hangar. No chance to gossip away an idle hour with him, Mark regretted, for the fellow was busy putting into shape an emergency plane that the East Coast people had sent down the day before for Lieutenant Hammil’s use.

Mark pondered the problem of waiting and puffed on his pipe just outside his fuselage door. Suddenly a distant rumble of thunder sounded and he looked over south toward Twin Peaks. One would have thought it came from there for the

mist gathering thickly about the peaks, reminded one of curling blue smoke after an explosion. It gave Mark an idea.

“I’ll just take a few minutes, cruise over that way,” he mused. “Kind of nice to see how it looks when a storm is gathering.”

He slipped back through the door and up into the cockpit. There he looked over his gauges and saw that he could use more gas, easily, but being an accommodating soul he decided against it when he thought of the lone mechanic with work enough to do at that present moment. In any event, he would not be gone more than a few minutes, and there was gas enough for that.

Just as he turned his switch, he saw two young men straggle around from behind the plane. Their ragged shirts and trousers and untidy socks and shoes proclaimed them at once. Also their battered black hats. One was peering at Mark sharply as they approached, but the other was beckoning and smiling amiably.

It dawned on Mark after a moment that the serious-faced fellow was none other than Dilly Riggs. Who the other fellow was, he did not know, but it was enough to see in the flesh this murderous member of a murderous clan.

He felt a curious repugnance toward the young hillman as he came close. The gaunt features and high cheek bones, the cold, expressionless blue eyes, all brought back the night of the rabbit incident to him and he wondered if those same features had peered along the sights of a rifle the night of Old Pete’s narrow escape.

Mark left his engine going and stalked back through his cabin and out of the door. Dilly and his companion were

awaiting him, it seemed, for they stood quietly and looked up.

“Well, Dilly,” Mark said coldly, “what do *you* want?”

“Nawthin,” replied Dilly. “Lon Higgins, hyur wants ter see yer ’bout th’ flyin’ school. He wants he should go up in th’ air. Don’t know fer why. I jist brung him over ter show him whar yer be. Them clouds mean rain. I jist p’int blank have ter git home.”

Mark scowled. “Well, that’s where you ought to stay all the time, Dilly Riggs—*home!* That’s where all your people ought to be, instead of sneaking around nights like skunks and sniping at innocent people like poor Old Pete, who’s never done you or yours one bit of harm. I can vouch for that, and don’t think I can’t. Those Hammils are the most honorable people that ever lived but it seems that you Riggses are so blind, you can’t see it. It’s time you *should* see it! And if you don’t, look out that the chance don’t come when it’s too late! Go home and tell that to your father, Dake.” He stopped, breathless.

Dilly’s uncombed, straight black hair hung down from under his wide-brimmed hat and almost covered his eyes, so that Mark could not see what effect his harangue had had on the young hill-billy. He could only speculate on its effect by two noticeable points of color that had appeared on his high cheek bones during the oration.

Suddenly he mumbled, “I jist p’int-blank have ter git home.”

“Then go, for heaven’s sake!” Mark shouted angrily. “Who wants your kind around anyhow? You don’t look natural without your rifle, Dilly. Where is it—hidden in some patch along the Creek road? That’s about all you people

seem to do—hide and seek! Oh boy, I'd like to see you and your folks try your shooting up where I come from—you wouldn't last twenty-four hours!"

Dilly Riggs waited for Mark to become breathless indeed, then moved off. Once, he glanced up at the young, angry pilot and seemed to look right through him despite his hair-shaded eyes.

Mark, disgusted, did not so much as look after him, but immediately centered his attention upon the grinning Lon Higgins. "Well, what do *you* want?" he demanded.

"I want fer ter go up in th' air," Higgins replied with a self-conscious giggle. "Jes' like Dilly told yer, mebbe I kin larn how ter do it like you."

"Never mind Dilly," Mark said sharply. "You mean you want to take lessons and become a pilot?"

Lon Higgins grinned more amiably than ever and nodded. "My pappy says I kin go up in the air with ye terday an' see how I like it. He says it'll be plumb 'nough he reckons." Mark looked at the fellow searchingly.

"How old are you?" he asked skeptically.

"Twenty-one, a week come terday."

"Mm. Well, you're old enough to know what you're doing."

Mark fell to discussing the price of student flying and Lon grinned in assent to it all. He spoke only of his earnest desire to go up in the air that very day to see how he liked it. He insisted upon it, smiling continuously.

Mark felt doubtful about it somehow, yet it was hard to refuse this almost too amiable rustic. "Can't you wait and go up with me tomorrow morning?"

Lon shook his head emphatically. He wanted to go up then or never—that was his attitude.

Mark didn't like losing the chance of interesting a hill-billy in flying. Goodness knows, there were few enough who cared even for a trial flight. The thunder was rumbling ominously by then and a brisk breeze had whipped up from the southeast.

Mark tried another tack. "We're going to have a pretty bad storm, Higgins. I don't like taking you up in it. It may break any minute."

Lon shook his head again. "I hain't afeerd o' storms," he assured Mark. "Mebbe you air."

That was too much of a challenge for Mark—too much from a grinning hill-billy. "I'm certainly not afraid of storms," he declared. "I was only thinking of you; but come on! You ought to know your own mind if you're so near twenty-one. Gosh knows, I think I'm capable enough and I'm not that old. Well, we'll just take a spin over Twin Peaks. A spin and that's all, for I haven't much gas and besides the wind is getting too bad to stay up for long anyhow. Here—here's a 'chute—I'll help you on with it."

Lon grinned into Mark's face as he helped adjust the parachute. "Hain't you wearin' one o' these hyur contraptions?" he asked in his queer, wheezing voice.

Mark shook his head. "No, I don't wear them except on long trips—they annoy me. My employers insist on passengers wearing them, though. Well, that's that. Now you sit behind that other control and keep your eyes open to what I do and when we come down, see if you can tell me. Which I very much doubt you'll ever do," he added to himself.

Lon Higgins, Mark speculated, was not exactly what he felt to be a promising pupil. For one thing, he grinned entirely too much. And for another thing, there was something strangely disconcerting about his demeanor

CHAPTER XIII OVER TWIN PEAKS

They had hardly more than left the runway when the storm broke. A torrent of rain washed over the plane's nose and a gale hurtled furiously past. Lon Higgins minded it not at all, and grinned until his light blue eyes were all but dimmed by his own secret mirth.

Mark felt annoyed for a moment or two, but then forgot about it as he needed all his attention at the dash board. His gas gauge needed constant inspection and he chided himself that he hadn't taken the time to gas up just a little before he left. He could have done it himself almost, in the time it took to harangue Dilly Riggs. However, he would do no more than circle the peaks and back again.

Too much mist had gathered for him to see Hammil's home. Rain splashed against the windows all around and a stiff head wind began to buck them. Mark throttled her to the limit, for he was true pilot enough to love beating stiff winds and storm.

"It air a plumb crazy storm," Lon laughed in Mark's ear. "Hain't it?"

Mark nodded and looked at his passenger thoughtfully. "Aren't you a little nervous—this being your first flight and in a storm too?" Lon shook his head profoundly. "I hain't afeerd o' nawthin' 'cept fallin'. Airplanes hain't much fer that nowadays, air they? My pappy says they ain't."

"Well, your pappy's pretty much right," Mark agreed. "They're like everything else I suppose—they can stand so

much, even nowadays. But I try to keep my mind on the ship and nothing else, and that's what helps. It's getting pretty bad. Terribly misty below and this awful rain and gale—gosh! I can't see those peaks now, can you, Higgins?"

Higgins giggled. "Mebbe you air up too high."

Mark looked at his altimeter. It was registering about the same as it had the day he and Hammil flew over the peaks. Eight thousand, nine hundred and ninety-two. Wind was south and southeast. He glanced out of the window. The visibility was bad. He could not see the peaks at all. Where was he?

He gave his gas gauge an almost furtive glance and looked away from it, fearfully. What a fool he had been to let the grinning Higgins urge him into such a flight. He figured that he hadn't been up more than ten or twelve minutes, but bucking the gale as he was doing had used up more gas than he had counted on.

Valiantly he tried to swing the plane around. It swung with the wind, however, and when he had turned he had no more idea where he was than before. And to make matters worse, he became suddenly aware that his compass had gone haywire. What now, he asked himself?

The howling wind and beating rain against his windshield seemed to freeze his very blood. Each time he tried to swing her over to what he thought was west, the wind took them and carried the ship like a feather.

Once or twice he glanced sideways at Higgins, only to find him grinning as steadily as ever. It annoyed him so he resolved not to look that way again. The precarious plight of the plane was distraction enough.

In desperation, he brought down his altitude only to find that the mist was thicker with every hundred feet of descent. He began to wonder if they were over Kentucky at all for the wind could easily have carried them out of the state in those few moments.

Cold beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead and he whipped off his helmet. It was plain that he would have to do something and do that very soon. He couldn't just go fogging around in this fashion. And like an evil eye, the gas gauge was ever drawing his attention.

His throat constricted at the last glance. It was down to almost zero. Now he would *have* to make the break. He wiped his moist brow with his hand and swallowed hard. If only he hadn't brought that grinning fool! It was bad enough with just himself to account for.

He turned to Higgins. "You know what's happened?" he said brusquely.

Higgins' smile faded not one bit, but in his eyes was a vacant stare that Mark seemed to notice for the first time. It startled him considerably.

"Do you know what's happened to the ship?" he repeated irritably.

Higgins shook his head, smilingly. "I hain't got a notion," he giggled.

"Well, I warned you about coming up in this storm!" Mark shouted. "We're floundering—we're lost—oh, we're in a fix! Can't you understand?"

Higgins grinned vacantly.

Mark was in despair. "Listen, Higgins, it's a case of you bailing out—do you hear me? Jumping out in your 'chute! Do you know how to count?"

“I hain’t got a notion o’ it,” came the reply. “I hain’t never been ter school.”

Mark groaned. “Listen, Higgins, try to be intelligent for just five minutes—five seconds. Listen to every word I say! Go back to that door and open it and jump out and keep your hand on this cord,” he said passionately, indicating the rip cord. “Keep your hand on the cord right now—yes! Now say to yourself after you jump—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and then give the cord a good pull.”



HIS BIG, HULKING BODY SWEEP CLEAR OF THE
SHIP.

“One, two, five ... three,” said Higgins. “Thar I be.”

“You’ll be where you don’t want to, if you don’t get up and go for that door!” Mark cried. “Count one, two, five, three, twice—two times—understand that! Remember after

you count, pull the cord good and hard! Now beat it—*quick!*”

Mark put the ship into a climb while Higgins went grinning back through the cabin. When almost at the door, he stood stupidly for a moment and hesitated. Then he came lumbering back to the cockpit.

“I hain’t likely ter fall when I jump outer that door, hey?” he asked. “Whar do I go jest jumpin’ p’int-blank inter th’ air, like that?”

Mark threw up his hands. “Higgins, I’ll knock you out of here, if you don’t go now! You jump like I said and you’ll land somewhere—what’s the difference as long as you don’t crack up like I’m going to do in another second. I’m using my last bit of gas climbing to let you get a good start. *Now get!*” Higgins fled through the cabin, laughing shrilly. Mark watched him, saw that he went straight toward the door and opened it. The next moment, his big hulking body swept clear of the ship.

Mark glanced at his gauge and saw that it was registering zero.

CHAPTER XIV

THE END?

Mark counted five for his own peace of mind, then proceeded to forget about Lon Higgins and attend to his own destiny. He banked his ship to the right, then set her nose straight down. After that he shut his eyes for a second, only to open them again and, from force of habit, glance at his gauges.

One thing was certain—he was losing altitude with alarming rapidity. It couldn't be much longer. What couldn't be much longer, his mind echoed. The crash, he answered between set lips; crash, death and destruction. He couldn't possibly avoid it.

His mind was calm, however. Calm enough to heed some inner voice that seemed to warn him against letting the plane get out of his control without a desperate fight. Well, fight he would, although it seemed quite futile to hang on so tenaciously when Death was grinning so close at hand.

Grinning, he echoed. The word called up Lon Higgins again just when he thought he had forgotten him. The fellow had been a jinx with his eternal grin. What a partner to have almost to the end! What a contrast there was between him and Lieutenant Peter Hammil with his kind, sober face. Mark would have given much in that moment to hear his friend say "Brother Mark," just once.

Down, down, down he rushed. It was sickening. The mist seemed to be flying up in his face and after another second he got a glimpse of green. Oh, yes. The earth, or mountains

or trees. If it wasn't one it would be the other. Either would finish him up with the same speed. One thing he hoped—that he wouldn't be crippled or...

Things became clearer. The mist seemed not so thick and he could see that he was in the mountains. Trees, trees, trees! He was falling madly, straight for them; straight into that endless verdure.

Again he shut his eyes, only to open them and wrestle desperately with the controls. The trees were rocking and yawning and he had a last minute thought that a crack-up was nothing like what he had always fancied it would be. He was calm—almost serene, and his only anxiety was lest he should lose control of the ship before he died.

He didn't want to do that. He must hold on, no matter what happened. He'd crack up like a true pilot. In control of his ship to the very last. Well, this was the last he would know, for something green slid up before his eyes and went past him. More green that he knew to be trees. The plane suddenly swooped.

This then, was the end....

CHAPTER XV

A BIT OF CHANCE

Mask held on with all his strength. Something unusual had happened! He was rushing out on a level keel. He looked with bated breath and saw, to his utter joy, that he was almost on top of a little grassy meadow.

With a singing heart, he swung her around and after an almost neckbreaking jolt, she pancaked.

For five full minutes Mark sat there, limp, exhausted, yet smiling. Every nerve in his body tingled and he laughed aloud when he realized that his first observation outside of his cockpit was that it wasn't raining. As if that mattered to his own immediate welfare! Whether this meadow were not just some mirage did not occur to him. He thought afterward that it might just as well have been some tiny eminence without room enough to turn around. But he did not care if it were. The main thing—his plane was on some bit of solid ground, for he had felt the wheels grip mud.

When he got up he stretched himself and felt his arms and feet with satisfaction. Whatever good angel had made it possible for him to still laugh and feel the joy of being alive, he would never cease to wonder. Not a scratch, nothing. He couldn't believe it and hastened through his cabin, giving it a perfunctory inspection as he went. That too, seemed in perfect order.

With a whoop of joy he swung open the fuselage door. He was right in the meadow. There it was before his very eyes—a green, “grassy bald” as Old Pete had called it. It was not

very much larger than a small city block and hardly as wide. Just large enough to manoeuvre one's plane in and out of it. Nice if one had gas!

Mark laughed as he stepped out and surveyed the rest of his surroundings. Ridge after ridge lay below, separated by deep and narrow ravines. There, in the distance, he could see through a tiny gap in the mountain, a shimmering curve of water. Everywhere his eye could see, the green glistened from the recent storm and a hush pervaded everything.

Suddenly a raven's cry broke the stillness and from a forest on the next ridge he saw its black body emerge. Swiftly it flew, upward, upward with wide wings outspread while Mark listened and looked, fascinated. He was as footloose, as free, as that very bird.

His brown eyes followed the course of those black, flapping wings and suddenly he noticed two peaks, rising many ridges above the one on which his meadow was situated. Two peaks they were, and of peculiar formation—two which he had seen before; stunted and domeshaped! Twin Peaks?

It must be, he told himself. He had not recognized them at first sight because of the absence of mist. Hadn't Old Pete said that they were only free of mist after a plumb sharp storm? Well, there had been a storm all right—there wasn't the least doubt of that. And there wasn't any doubt that he had fallen directly in between those two renowned peaks.

He ran a little distance along the grassy bald to get a better view of the peaks. The verdure on the next few ridges was so dense as almost to obliterate them from view and unless one stood in just that part of the meadow, it was impossible to see anything but forest.

Quickly he ran back to the plane to look again and found that the upper ridges all but overshadowed that part of the meadow. It was from the extreme end of the place only that one's view of the peaks was not obstructed and it was certainly at this end that his plane had slipped through. For a moment he was delirious with joy.

This was the meadow that Hammil had talked about.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he had not so much to be joyous about after all. Hadn't Hammil told him that it was next to impossible to get into the meadow unless one knew exactly where to slip in? A plane would also run the risk of cracking up against an upper ridge and that no careful pilot would chance.

How, then, would he be able to get help in order to get out? If neither Hammil nor himself had been able to sight the meadow from the air, then it clearly augured against him now. He had simply dropped in it himself by some queer twist of fortune, or misfortune—he wasn't so certain which. In any event, that could be determined only by how quickly he was rescued from his meadow.

He remembered Hammil's warning that the lower ridges were impassible and he was inclined to agree after a moment's study. Forest and undergrowth prevailed and not a sign did he see of any welcome trail or stream excepting that curve of creek in the distance. How he could get to that was a problem for he judged it to be at least fifteen miles away.

Thunder rumbled in the east. The storm had passed. In the west, a coral hue tinted the sky. Above on the upper ridges he could see the waving white and pink of rhododendrons interspersed with blazing azalea.

A familiar cry told Mark that the raven was returning—returning to its nest for the night. His black wings flapped noisily above the ridge until he reached the forest. Then he was gone and the western sky looked like a curtain of filmy turquoise.

Mark scrambled inside the plane to think.

CHAPTER XVI

OUT OF THE FOREST

He thought of many things. Lon Higgins was one, and Mark felt a tinge of remorse that he had been irritable and impatient with the simple fellow. After all, it was evident that he was just another of those hillsmen who seem not to fit into any particular category. He heartily hoped that Fate had been as kind to Lon in his landing with the parachute as he had been with his plane.

The wind might easily have carried Higgins out of reach of the higher ridges. And as the wish was father to the thought, Mark resolved not to worry about it longer. He had his own rescue to ponder over.

When his wrist watch crawled around to seven o'clock his spirits began to sink. The mechanic couldn't possibly have that plane in shape before morning; he couldn't hope for rescue before then. The most sensible thing to do was to stick it out and not fret. The night would pass quickly enough and he was lucky to have his plane for shelter. One couldn't ask for more comfortable sleeping quarters than the trim little cabin and he had an old blanket somewhere in the storeroom.

A pang of hunger brought to mind the thought of food. He was going to miss Mrs. Hammil's savory supper and he already missed Hammil's good company. What were they saying and wondering about him now? Would they be worried and lose a night's sleep over it? Mark was afraid they would for he knew how faithful his friend always was in getting to the field on time to meet him.

The mechanic, he reflected, knew just about how much gas he had had during the day. He would also know that there couldn't have been much left when he started off for Twin Peaks at the breaking of the storm. All this information Hammil would assiduously seek and, upon getting it, he would know that something had happened.

Mark got a great deal of comfort out of that thought for he knew that Hammil would keep someone working on the emergency plane all night in order for him to go out and search in the morning. And that was that.

He got out of the plane once again and strolled about. Twilight was almost upon him. The ridges above and below were barely visible and it occurred to him that he might have scouted around and looked for something to stay his hunger, even if it had been but a few berries. Night was too close at hand, however, to risk straying far from the plane. With dense forest at either end of the meadow, it was taking too great a risk at this late hour.

Dusk drove him back into the plane where he wandered restlessly around from cockpit to cabin and back again. His lights were not working, of course, but he found his flashlight and an old magazine tucked away in the rack and proceeded to make himself comfortable by propping the light against the back of his side passenger seat.

Two of the cushions he used for a head rest and the blanket he spread on the floor, rolling himself in it. "No chance of callers," he said whimsically; "no such luck!"

After an hour's perusal of the well-thumbed pages, he threw the book aside and switched off the light. His hunger was just annoying enough to make him want to sleep. Yet

somehow he felt wide awake and though he tried several times to compose his active mind, it was in vain.

On an average of every ten minutes he would switch on the light to see the time until at ten o'clock, this became tiresome. He would compose himself, he resolved solemnly then, and succeeded, for by ten thirty o'clock he was fast asleep.

It was a moonless night, though clear, and now and then the stealthy swish of nocturnal prowlers sounded through the grass. Wild razorbacks venturing down from above the timberline paused upon approaching the little plane and sniffed with all the curiosity of their kind. Once a big female bear trotted out of the forest and stopped cautiously before the gleaming propeller.

She too, sniffed, but with more than mere curiosity as her object for her sensitive nostrils had caught the human scent from inside. After a few grunts she waddled on, leaving Mark to sleep in peace.

Midnight came and went and Mark's slumber was proclaimed by intermittent snores. He rolled tighter in his blanket as the cool mountain air blew in through the partly opened cabin windows. Once, in turning, he almost wakened thinking he heard a cry, but his drowsy mind ascribed it to dreaming and he was soon lost in a profound sleep again.

He was to learn later that this cry had not been part of a dream. He was to learn also that more than one queer, throaty cry had broken the deep silence of those mountain ridges and had been partly responsible for disturbing his dreamless sleep. And if he had heard them it is likely that he would have been shocked much more than when they found their way to the very door of the cabin.

Even in the small hours of that morning it was difficult to distinguish just what the cries were. They came out of the same forest whence the bear had lately come. Thick, throaty, unintelligible sounds accompanied this strange looking dark object as it crawled slowly and painfully through the grass, dragging something white behind it.

Slowly, ever so slowly its long black bulk moved along, stopping to rest for long intervals. It seemed, however, not to swerve from the path in which the gleaming propeller lay. Once when one of the prowling razorbacks stopped to satisfy its curiosity there was a low, but definite, growl that sent the beast on its lowly way.

After that the black bulk made better headway until the nose of the plane was reached. It didn't stop until it was almost at the fuselage door. Then it seemed to rise for a little only to slump again, emitting a poignant cry that pierced the darkness.

Mark awoke at the sound of scratching on the fuselage door.

CHAPTER XVII

A LAUGH DESERVED

He called out sleepily but got no answer save a low, murmuring sound. When he repeated his call the answer came in a groan. He got to his feet then, alarmed and not a little chilled and peered out at the window.

He saw at once the black bulk with its fluttering white object attached, but the darkness was still too thick for him to discern what it was. Consequently, he called from the window and the thing rose a trifle then slumped to the ground as it had done so many times before.

Mark rushed to the door, flung it open and stepped out. His feet caught in the fluttering white thing and he stumbled, barely catching himself. But it was that that told the story for he had only to pick up the stuff to know that it was a parachute.

He was on his knees immediately and turned over the still form about which the parachute was fastened. The white face and fine lips gave him a good scare at first but upon listening to the young man's heart, he was immensely relieved. It was weak, but steady.

Mark rubbed his wrists, realizing that it was all he could do. From close inspection during the evening he knew that there was a dearth of water in that vicinity. It was a despairing thought, though a futile worry when nothing could be done about it for the present.

He set about trying to bring the young man to his senses. After a few minutes his efforts were rewarded with a

piercing groan. Mark leaned over him and looked in his face.

“You’re all scratched up, Higgins,” he said, warmly, and examining a gash just over the young man’s temple. “It’s *me*—*Gilmore*—the pilot! I’m here and everything’s all right. I’ll try and do what I can for you. Where do you hurt?”

Lon Higgins scarcely opened his eyes and Mark noticed that he was not grinning.

“I air hurt all over,” he said in a voice hardly above a whisper. “Since I cum down I cain’t walk—my legs, my arms—everythin’s plumb busted I reckon.”

“Oh, not as bad as all that,” Mark said comfortingly. “I’ll see if I can get you in the cabin. It’s a darn sight more comfortable than out here. Can you raise yourself at all?”

Higgins could only groan.

Mark lifted one of his arms ever so gently. Even that brought a screech from the victim. The other arm too seemed to give him great pain. Broken. Whatever other injuries he had sustained, Mark could only surmise.

He related his terrible experience, bit by bit, after Mark had managed, with heroic effort to get him up into the cabin.

“How on earth, Higgins,” Mark asked, “did you ever get into such a condition? What’s more—how did you spot me and this plane?”

“I got plumb silly when I jumped outen that plane door,” Higgins mumbled between groans. “I got so silly that I clean forgot ’bout countin’ like yer told me. So I kep’ fallin’ and hollerin’ till I tho’t I’d go plumb through the hills. Fust thing I knowed after thet I woked up with my hull body painin’ an’ I was hangin’ cross some thicket thar in thet woods.”

Higgins fainted several times after that lengthy recital and Mark kept a lonely vigil with him until long after dawn. In

between times, when the young man could stand it, he applied some roughly made splints which had been hastily put together from a few dry sticks in the forest. And when Mark had given the sufferer all the first aid available he was minus a new broadcloth shirt and two handkerchiefs.

Higgins' clothing was tattered and torn so that it could never be worn again. Mark regarded this as one good feature of the tragedy for the stuff had long outlived its usefulness.

He had never felt so sorry for anyone in his life as he did for Higgins. Especially when he heard how the poor fellow had seen the plane had come down. They had not been more than five hundred feet away from each other all the evening, yet he had been too weak to call or move to make known his distress.

He had lost track of the number of times he fainted, he told Mark. Time and again he had tried to call but unconsciousness would overcome him before he had the strength to even try his lungs. And so the night passed into early morning before he managed to drag himself to the plane.

"I feel terribly guilty about you, fellow," Mark told him after he was resting more comfortably. "But how did I know I was going to land in the lap of the gods, huh? Why, I was all ready to take my ticket of leave. I let you have the 'chute and was glad that you had some chance of saving yourself, and here you get the worst of it!"

Higgins began to grin again, despite his pain.

"Gee," Mark said thankfully, "am I glad it wasn't Dilly Riggs that inveigled me into taking him up! If he'd ever got such a deal as you've had, he'd declare it was some frame-up

on the part of the Hammils, I bet anything. Believe me, I'm darn glad that you don't happen to be one of those Riggses!"

"I *air* one o' the Riggses, stranger," said Higgins, without losing his grin. "I air the son o' Long John what's a cousin ter Dake Riggs. My mammy's Dake Riggs' sister—see, stranger? We air kin," he added with a deep groan.

Mark threw up his hands and left the cabin to look for water. He was beaten and he was willing to admit it. Mountain kin had got beyond him, he was ready to tell the whole world. And though he felt worse than ever about the incident because of Lon's ready admission, he could not resist the laugh that came to his lips.

"And I'll keep on laughing at myself for the next hundred years," he said aloud. "Why, I never stopped to think that a Higgins could just as well be a Riggs—I don't know!"

He decided that in the future he would be extraordinarily cautious about such matters. Almost anything could turn out to be a Riggs—yes, even the razorbacks snorting and snooping wild along the ridges. One didn't know but that somewhere back in the dark, dim past of razorbacks, the Riggses began.

He laughed at the thought, and let it go at that.

CHAPTER XVIII

DISAPPOINTMENT

At seven o'clock Mark returned to the little cabin without having found so much as a spring. Higgins was about as he had left him, suffering intensely and grinning still but his grin now aroused Mark's pity rather than annoyance.

"Nothing doing, Lon," he said cheerfully. "But don't worry for I'll go out again and hunt. I hated to get too far down on the next ridge for fear Lieutenant Hammil would be out looking for me. Didn't hear a plane at all, huh?"

Higgins had heard nothing.

"Anything I can do for you, fellow—outside of getting food and water?" Mark asked drily.

Higgins shook his head. "I'd jist p'int blank like ter git home."

"And heaven knows I'd like to get you there too. I've got two reasons now for making Hammil see me down here. You need attention right away—food and water besides."

"Reckon you-all air hungry too," Higgins moaned.

Mark laughed. "I'm so hungry, I'm *not* hungry! But never mind about me. As long as I can walk I'm doing swell. Every time I look at you or hear you groan I think that I ought to be lying there instead. Even if you *are* a Riggs, kind of, I feel awfully sorry for you."

Higgins took the sympathy with his usual grin and Mark decided to accept the fact that the fellow wasn't quite right in his head.

“Something else for me to worry about,” he chided himself when he got outside again. “Not only is he a Riggs, but I’m certain he’s a halfwit and when I see him back in the bosom of his family—if I ever do—they’re pretty sure to accuse me of deliberately getting him into this fix! I just have the feeling that they will! And how can I prove that I *didn’t*? There’s Dilly, though—he stood by and heard his cousin ask to go up. That’s right! You’d imagine if he didn’t think Higgins knew what he was about that he’d have said something. Mm! Well, I’ve at least got that to comfort me.”

In truth, Mark had little to comfort him. He was constantly scrambling uphill and downhill to find a drink of water. Undergrowth had taken its toll of his clothing and briars had left their ugly marks on considerable parts of his person.

After one of these futile searches for the elusive stream he climbed back to the meadow, thoroughly disheartened. Weary in every limb and muscle, he sat down in a patch of sunlight just outside the plane’s cabin. Higgins was groaning continuously now, making things more difficult than ever. He hated going in and asking the suffering fellow what he could do when he knew that he hadn’t the facilities to do a single thing.

He glanced at his watch. Eleven o’clock exactly. It made him smile bitterly. What good was time when Hammil didn’t even make an attempt to come? And while the thought was yet vivid in his mind he heard a distant whirring in the air that brought him to his feet with a jump.

Twin motors! He could distinguish the sound even then. Hammil’s emergency plane! His heart leaped in his breast.

“Higgins!” he called. “I hear Hammil’s plane! It means ... wait ’til I get back. I have to signal him from the other end of the field.”

Higgins’ groans followed him the full length of the meadow. Mark felt joyous despite them because Hammil’s plane would mean that those groans would end. They could rush him to the hospital above Lexington and he would be cared for.

He took his post at the most advantageous spot that the field offered. Then he took from his pocket a good-sized piece of white muslin that had, until that morning, done service as an undergarment. The other half of it lay in readiness for extra bandages which Higgins was likely to need before he could be transferred.

Mark smiled at the thought of his distress signal and was silently thankful that it was summer and warm country for he was now reduced to trousers, socks and shoes. His coat was doing duty as a blanket over Higgins.

The whirring became more pronounced, then presently Mark could see the gleaming propeller high above the peaks. Somehow his whole physical being seemed to be at a standstill. Would Hammil be able to see him.

The plane came lower and lower, then began to circle. Once, twice, three, four, five ... Mark was afraid ... Hammil didn’t act as if he saw that frantic appeal for help. Was it because of the upper ridge so densely sheathed with forests? Was it possible that he could see the lieutenant, and in turn not be seen by him?

He was standing on the very edge of the big clearing. Another step and the trees of the forest adjacent would shadow him too much from the air. Yet he realized with,

dimmed hopes, that the upper ridge jutted out so far as almost to shut out sight of the meadow from the peaks. And with Hammil having to keep at a safe altitude because of the air pocket, what chance had he to attract his attention?

Evidently Hammil was doing all in his power to see if his friend had, by any chance, become stalled between the peaks. His patience in circling the dome-shaped eminences brought a smile of admiration into Mark's worried eyes.

To climb a tree or ascend to one of the higher ridges was out of the question. The forests were solely pine and the upper ridges had not a single trail to offer. The undergrowth was impervious; he had looked over the situation soon after daylight. Besides, there was the constant danger of becoming hopelessly lost in the deep forests.

All these thoughts he turned over and over again in his mind, desperately trying to think of some position into which he might get to draw Hammil's attention. But to no avail—his mind suddenly became a blank for the plane was climbing up into the tenuous mist over the peaks. Certainly he could not charge his friend with laxity in his search for he had spent fully thirty minutes in circling over the silent depths of the hidden ravine.

Mark brought down his distress signal slowly. His arm ached, his head ached from looking up so constantly, and his heart felt the ache of dead hopes.

In this frame of mind, he went back to Higgins.

CHAPTER XIX

A TRAIL

The young hillsman seemed to be considerably worse. Mark saw it instantly and he was alarmed. Higgins neither spoke nor smiled, seeming to be at the point of exhaustion from constant pain. To make things worse, he whined continually for water.

Mark left him in a sort of semi-comatose condition. Though he had himself no more than a rudimentary knowledge of first aid, he was cognizant of the fact that the young man's injuries were serious.

He moped along the edge of the ridge and stopped at a spot where he could observe the gap in the mountains with its glimpse of cool, sparkling water. Under other conditions on a like June day, he told himself, the sight of that shimmering curve in the distance would suffice until he could travel that fifteen or twenty miles to quaff of its cold refreshment. But now, today, when his throat was parched to aching almost, and his hunger was so great, the glimpse of that far-off stream was torture.

He turned his back upon it and walked past the cabin windows, listening intently for some sound from Higgins. It was still as a tomb, however, and a hurried glance revealed that the poor fellow was still unconscious.

If ever a young man was in a life and death predicament, that young man was Mark. If he left Higgins to make his way somehow to the lower ridges for help, he might be leaving the suffering fellow to die alone. And if he stayed on, without

the means of procuring food or water, the risk was just as grave. Either way would be taking a long, long chance, but after much cogitation he resolved to wait the afternoon and see if he could make himself seen.

Hammil, he felt sure, would come again.

And he did. But with the same results. Mark might have been the ridge itself for all the animation his presence gave to the lonely spot. Hammil's plane circled the peaks tirelessly, but in vain. The distress signal had not a chance in that verdure-hidden ravine and Mark's form was dark against the green background.

He watched the plane swoop away with a rather numb sensation. He wasn't desperate or hopeless—he was nothing. Without speaking to Higgins, he left and began a difficult descent down to the next ridge. Briers and underbrush began to have less terror for him than heretofore. They could scratch and slap about his crawling body unmercifully, but he did not feel it. His mind was centered on getting help—getting water, and that was all he was capable of thinking.

He did not, however, lose track of the meadow's location despite the fact that it was a good ten miles before he found a trail. It was quite worn, he saw joyfully, and in point of fact there was every indication that more than one man had trodden this path not many days before.

This discovery sent the joy of renewed hope singing through Mark's mind. It gave him new determination, new resolve, and he followed it a little way studying the ground with all the intensity of a scout of old. Nothing missed his eager brown eyes.

He judged that he had gone about another half mile when he came upon a rusted tin pail. He picked it up as if it had

been gold and kept on going. Then a distant swishing sound reached his ears—the sound of falling water. He stopped, listening, and descried upon a nearby thicket a certain shimmering shadow.

Alert, he glanced back. Yes, the sun was going toward the west and the shadow had fallen easterly. The trail also took a slight turn there. Mark ran and gathered hope from the further sign of a covert where the path turned, filled with little glistening rocks.

He made the turn with bated breath and was not disappointed for there was a rushing stream and emptying into it from the shrub covered rocks above was a spring.

Mark drank deeply of the water, then rinsed the pail in the stream as best he could. The rusted coating, however, could not be dislodged, but he decided that it was better than nothing. Higgins would receive water from it as joyfully as from a fine tumbler.

While he was filling it at the sparkling spring his eyes wandered along the trail, which continued for a way beside the stream. The worn path left the water course, he noticed, after a distance of about five hundred feet. From there it continued on up the mountain seeming to back track, as it were, up to the next ridge.



THE BEAR SCURRIED OFF THROUGH THE
UNDERBRUSH.

A little further on his dancing eyes espied a group of wild cherry trees weighted down with over-ripened fruit. He was making tracks for that location in no time, balancing his pail with constant attention.

He ate his fill notwithstanding that the fruit was a little too ripe to please the palate. His trousers pockets, being all that was available, he stuffed for Higgins' consumption but after he had continued his way on the back-tracking trail he ran into a profusion of berry bushes of all kinds overladen with nicely ripened fruit.

Mark disgorged his pockets of the cherries in a twinkling and spent the next ten minutes in refilling them with an assortment of the choicest fruit he could find. Then he started on again, his own hunger quite satisfied for the time being.

The trail grew narrower as it ascended but he saw that it did not swerve away from the direction of the meadow. If it kept on that way, he thought, it might come out a few miles west of it but no more than that.

After a half hour's laborious climb he was obliged to stoop much of the way. The overhanging shrubbery was dense although here and there he noticed that some of it had recently been slashed away. Underfoot, however, the going was not half bad and he was assured by the continued footprints that it had been often used.

The pail developed a slow leak along the way and Mark had the extra worry of holding it so that his right thumb covered the hole. Not a drop must be wasted, he told himself. Higgins would want a gallon with the fever that he had developed since morning.

Once the soft patter of footsteps sounded not far behind him and he wasted ten minutes of good time and high hopes only to find a shaggy bear lumbering toward him. The creature was obviously more startled than he for it looked at him a moment, then scurried off through the underbrush and did not reappear.

After that the trail again took a decided turn to the left where it opened and widened. Five minutes further on he sighted grass and no trees, and as he emerged he found that he was back at the meadow where he had started from, and there was the plane peacefully spread under the last rays of the dying sun.

Mark stood a moment, looking back at the trail which he had just left, then followed the earth depressions along the edge of the meadow and found that they continued right on into the forest in which poor Higgins had fallen.

That trail, he decided, was pretty much used.

CHAPTER XX

LON CONFESSES

Higgins drained the pail and grinned. “Feel better now that you’ve had that?” Mark smiled.

The young hillsman nodded. “How air we-all goin’ home?”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking of every minute,” Mark answered, feeding the berries to his patient. “You see, I’ve found a trail and it’s set me thinking. I found it below when I was looking for the water. Comes right from that stream up here where I came out in the meadow. Gosh, I was never so surprised in all my life. Goes right into the forest over there where you met terra firma.”

Higgins consumed a few more berries, and for a while his face looked blank. Then he shook his head. “We-all air got ter go home. My mammy’ll be thinkin’ one o’ the Hammils feathered* inter me an’ throwed me in the patch somewhar’.”

“The Hammils,” Mark said coldly, “don’t shoot first. If such a thing ever happens to you, it’ll be because you force them to it and their backs are to the wall.”

“Wa’al,” Higgins grinned. “We-all air got ter git home.”

Mark nodded. “You realize,” he said, “that you’re not in a condition to even crawl now, don’t you? How can we do it then unless help comes. I can’t leave you here alone, Higgins. Heaven knows how long it would take me to get down and get help and get back. You can’t be without water long at a time. Do you know anything at all about this wilderness—how to get down—how long it would take?”

Higgins looked a trifle thoughtful before he grinned and shook his head. "I air plum dumb 'bout this hyur country."

"Did you know about this meadow?"

"I heerd 'bout it plenty times. Tain't thet it's sech a long way a-gittin thar, but it's surely mighty discomfortin' travel. Patch henders folks a sight o' the way, 'tis said."

Mark laughed. "Even Daniel Boone himself would admit that. I'm sure even he'd hesitate before blazing a trail through such underbrush and thicket. Gosh, I've never seen its equal. But that trail I've just found isn't half bad. Quite decent under foot and room enough to stretch out your arms in most places. Somebody uses it. The footsteps are pretty fresh looking and I'd swear that it wasn't more than a few days ago at most. The question remains, trail or no trail—how I'm going to get you down is beyond me!"

Higgins had neither the mentality nor the strength to think about it. His only thought was to get home and he didn't care how that was accomplished. Mark succeeded in making him realize why it was that he had been unable to get Hammil's attention in the air.

"Wa'al, jist p'int blank build a fire an' make a smoke signal, cain't yer?" Higgins asked afterward.

"Don't you suppose I've thought of that too? I tell you I'm beaten for doing anything like that in this place. The foliage obstructs everything and a smoke signal down here wouldn't mean a thing to Hammil above the peaks. If he saw any of it at all he'd think it was a brush fire. Why I don't go up higher and do it is because I can't find a way yet to get there. If I caught a glimpse of a trail I'd be willing to walk fifteen miles to it, but there isn't a sign of any. Still I'd try anything—*do* anything if I didn't have you here to think of!

You'd be in a fine fix if anything happened to keep me from getting back. No, Higgins, there's too many obstacles and I'm not going to do anything that would take me away from here for more than a couple of hours."

Higgins grinned. "Fer a furriner, you air the feelinest feller I ever seed," he said with a new warmth in his thin voice. "Reckon yer'd o' got outa hyuh come mornin' if it wasn't fer me, hey?"

"Never mind," Mark said. "The question isn't me—it's you. Anyhow we can't do anything more tonight. Here's the sun almost gone. But we've got to do something as soon as it's morning! What it'll be, I've no idea. Thing is to rest as best you can again tonight. And so help me, I promise action tomorrow."

Higgins bore up remarkably. Mark realized that he was a tremendous sport under the circumstances, and he told him so.

"Wa'al, I shouldn' a' come under the sarcumstance," the young hillsman said softly. "Reckon I don't know a heap 'bout airplanin' and sech, but I seed right now 'twas my own fault I got hurted. Yer didn't want ter do it an' I reckon I hain't got no call ter let yer say yer did. Mebbe I shouldn't been carin' which nor whether Dilly said, hey? He thought uv it in the fust place, but I reckon twas a tale o' his."

"*Dilly?*" Mark repeated. "What are you trying to tell me, Higgins?"

Higgins' two lips went together in a fine slit for a moment, then parted. "I air tellin' yer a plumb secret, but Dilly done me dirt 'count o' axin me ter do what I did an' axin me ter ax yer besides. He's the one. He tole me I wouldn' git a scratch if I went up in your aryplane warin'

one o' them thar parychutes. He tole me I'd come down jist like a bird an' land nice an' soft. Wa'al, I didn't. He didn't tell me I had ter count 'bout openin' 'em—that's what he plum forgitted."

Mark's face lighted with understanding. "I think I'm beginning to see, Higgins," he said thoughtfully. "You're trying to tell me that Dilly Riggs talked you into begging me for a ride, huh!"

"You air understandin'."

"And Dilly Riggs told you to make a parachute jump of your own accord, is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Edzactly. He 'lowed it'd make trouble fer you ef I jumped in thet parychute 'count o' you-all's friends with Hammils. Wa'al, he sed I should tell yer my pappy wanted me ter try a ride fer ter take lessons frum yer an' then he says I should tell yer I'm twenty-one come Tuesday cuz mebbe yer wouldn't take me if yer knowed I wasn't sixteen till come December."

Mark sat back on one of his side seats, aghast. He was also troubled and puzzled. "Why," he asked tensely, "do you suppose Dilly thought it would make trouble for me if you jumped in a parachute? How did he know that I had a parachute for you at all?"

"He said he found out p'int blank 'twas the law fer ter make passengers put them on an' he said I'd be passenger," Higgins said stoutly. "He didn't tell me fer why it'd make trouble on you when I jumped, but he said he'd buy me a gun-rifle ef I did it an' he wouldn't tell nary a soul. This marnin' he promised me when me an' him hed ter cum ter town fer grub that ef I did it, he'd buy me candy. He said he hated you like pizen and thet he'd like ter feather inter yer

only that he'd git hung fer it. So he says fer me ter play that trick and jump on yer would make yer trouble 'thout him havin' hit on his head. Uncle Dake Riggs, he said, would shoot yer down on sight fer it."

"*Oh!*" Mark breathed. "So that's it, huh? The sneaking skunk!" Then: "Listen, Higgins, tell me this—does Dilly know that you can't count?"

"Sho!"

Mark's eyes sparkled. "Is there any trouble between you and Dilly. Does he like you?"

"Wa'al, ter tell the truth, he hain't much of a fool 'bout me, cuz one time I seed him in the woods on the Hoss Fork an' he meeted th' tother gov'ment man what was hyur afore Devlin. Dilly took money frum him, he did, an' I tole my pappy. Wa'al, my pappy tole Uncle Dake Riggs an' Dilly got a beatin' frum his pappy right smack, an' after, my pappy tole me that Dilly got the money cuz he turned informer 'gainst some neighbor-people. 'Tother day I seed Dilly in the same woods takin' money frum Devlin an' that was after my own pappy was 'rested. Wa'al, Dilly tole me right up when he caught me that he informed 'gainst my pappy an' all 'count o' the beatin' he got that time. Uncle Dake Riggs don't know a thing 'bout it an' if he did, I reckon Dilly's git mos' feathered. But I cain't tell cuz Dilly said he'd kill me."

Mark's face was filled with color. "Your Uncle Dake Riggs owned that place your father was working, didn't he?"

"Sho. Dilly said he killed two birds 'count o' that beatin' an' he said ef his pappy beated him agin, he'd inform d'reck'ly agin *him*. But I dasn't tell so much, hey!" the poor boy asked, suddenly frightened.

Mark saw then the extreme youth in his haggard features. He saw too that Dilly Riggs had killed more than one bird with one stone. Quite obvious it was that the plotting hillsman had taken advantage of his cousin's low mentality with which to fling his stone. Knowing that Lon Higgins couldn't count he had depended upon the unopened parachute to bring this poor half-wit's life to an end, and thus rid himself of the troublesome possibility of exposure.

Yes, Dilly Riggs was indeed a canny soul, Mark thought, for he wasn't forgetting that he was also getting even with himself for certain well-aimed blows. To set his kinsmen against an interfering "furriner" must have been a well thought out plan. And no one would suspect that it was other than the pilot who, because of loyalty to the Hammil family, had deliberately sent a half-witted boy to his death.

Dilly Riggs had planned it adroitly, there wasn't a doubt. He had forgotten nothing. His own career of betraying his kinsmen to government men was too profitable to be interfered with, so he must be rid of objectionable spies such as poor Lon. Enmity toward the Hammils perhaps was his only genuine emotion—his only means of showing some loyalty still to his kinsmen. His hereditary hate made it easy for him to snipe at them; with the approval of his father, of course. Not only that, but it made things so much simpler to be able to shift suspicion and blame to that same enemy.

Mark saw it all clearly. Each fact stood out like the stars appearing over Twin Peaks, and he was able to sift things right from the beginning of his stay with the kindly Hammils. Why, there wasn't a doubt but that Dilly Riggs had informed Devlin that very night that he and Hammil had caught him out on the road! And Dilly's sniping at poor old

Pete was probably just his way of salving a guilty conscience, if he had such a thing.

“Maybe he meant to aim at me for the pounding I gave him,” Mark thought. “Most likely that was his idea. Well, anyway, he’s too low down for words. A hillsman to go against his own, huh? Well, maybe I’ll spoil his party. If I ever get out of here, I’ll show him up!”

Higgins must have sensed his thoughts. “You hain’t goin’ ter tell what I told yer, air ye?”

Mark shook his head. “I’ll not tell that *you* told me, anyway, I can promise you that, Lon, but I’ve got to let it be known that the Hammils are innocent of anything like your family are accusing them of right now. And, your cousin Dilly just can’t be let to go around footloose. He tried to kill you, Lon—do you realize that? He was afraid you’d tell what you saw going on between himself and Devlin and he thought that as long as he hated me I could be used as the goat. He thought it certain you’d be killed. And he wanted me killed without getting the blame himself. Well, if you *had* been killed I’d certainly have been in for it and Dake or some other Riggs would have popped me off. Maybe they will yet, who knows? You’re not in such a condition to bring home that’ll make them like me any more.”

Lon Higgins was a man in physique, and for a fleeting second he was a man in mind. He raised his head as best he could. “Wa’al, I’ll *make* my folks like yer, Gilmore! Thet’s what! Ef my cousin Dilly done me such dirt as ter fool me inter thet parychute business ter git me killed, wa’al, I air not carin’ which nor whether ’bout him. Mebbe I hain’t got sech brains as most folks, but I got feelin’ an’ you got feelin’ fer me. Thet’s why I’ve told yer.”

Exhaustion claimed the poor boy after that and he was unable to say more. Mark bathed his head with a bit of cool muslin that he had been able to moisten from the drippings of the leaking pail. Presently a deep sleep stole over him and mercifully shut out of his consciousness all pain and sorrow.

Mark looked at him for a moment, then stole out of the cabin. A full moon was rising over the peaks, the stars were of a brilliance that gave him pause. One felt both extremes of human emotion on such a night. Dilly, he hated, and could have killed without mercy at that moment.

But Lon Higgins proved conclusively that the Riggs family were human in spots.

* Shot.

CHAPTER XXI

DESPAIR

Mark worried and slept throughout the early part of the night. Just before midnight he was awakened by a familiar sound, the sound of a plane. He had been lying beside Lon on the floor of the narrow compartment and so moved cautiously in getting up. The moon, he noticed, was streaming over the nose of his plane.

He hurried out across the meadow and bethought himself of matches. Now was the time to make a fire—now was their one chance of help from the air! He knew from the still distant sound that the plane was Hammil's. He would have time to go back to the cabin and get the packet of matches that he had carefully avoided using for even so much as a quiet smoke. They reposed in his coat pocket which was at present covering the sick and suffering Lon.

Mark reentered the stuffy cabin on tiptoe, meanwhile keeping his ears alert for the nearing plane. It took him but a moment to draw out the packet without disturbing Lon. The big patch pocket of the coat, he felt, was decidedly wet. And no wonder, for the suffering young hillsman had stuffed in it the moist piece of muslin that his faithful nurse had so recently laid on his fevered brow.

Mark felt of the packet. It was soaked. He hurried out doors, tore out one of the matches and endeavored to strike it. There was not, however, so much as a responding hiss as its damp sulphur point was scratched across the flinty surface of the cardboard.

He tried another with the same result and had used up the last one when he heard the plane directly overhead.

“Not a match!” he cried desperately. “No fire—nothing!”

He looked up quickly. The moon had passed to the west—the peaks were almost in darkness, and the end of the meadow was as dark and silent as the tomb. Still, he ran on to take up his position there, hoping against hope that something would happen in his favor.

Hammil’s plane sailed over the darkened peaks, like some great nocturnal bird. She dipped and banked over toward the ravine, but there Mark could not see it for the straight, towering trees prevented him from moving any further.

She sailed back toward the peaks again, switching her lights on and off. Suddenly a flare was released and it sped down with flashing speed. Straight on it came only to disappear among the forests of the lower ridges. Another one followed in its wake but with the same result.

Mark turned away numbed, and told himself that he was certainly at the end of his rope. All these miles and miles of trees, yet not one that he could find in a suitable position for his present purposes. Those near at hand offered no climbing facilities.

“Anyhow,” he mumbled despairingly, “I don’t think if I climbed atop the Empire State Building in New York that Hammil would see me. I honestly don’t!”

He stumbled along, kicking at the dew-laden grass, and though he tried to shut it completely from his mind and hearing, the sound of Hammil’s departing plane brought a keen ache into his heart.

The moon sailed behind a cloud just then, leaving the meadow in darkness. The plane looked like a huge ghostly

bird resting there in the shadow. Beyond it, Mark could see nothing. But he heard something—strange, yet familiar. After another moment it occurred to him that it was footsteps.

Poor Mark—his heart almost failed him with eager hope. He kept telling himself that it couldn't be true. Human beings? There was more than one, and besides he heard the low rumble of voices. A searching party, he was certain.

“Hey there, whoever you are!” he shouted. *“Hey!”*

Strange. No one answered. Instead, he heard running feet. Still, no answer. Where were they running to, and why! Suddenly a cold fear clutched at his heart. He couldn't let them go—*he couldn't*. Perhaps they had misunderstood his appeal. Why, he remembered, it wasn't an appeal at all, rather it was a challenge. And just when he didn't mean it to be! Of all times.

He ran, calling as he went toward the forest. *“Help!”* he cried. *“Don't run away—I need help—please!”*

He stopped for a moment and tried to peer ahead. Was it a running figure he saw dodge into the down-ridge trail? He was certain of it. His next appeal was poignant.

“Don't—don't run away, whoever you are!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. *“My heavens! A boy is injured here—I need your help!”*

He listened. The patter of running feet was quite distant. He ran back to the plane and got his flashlight. If they wouldn't answer, he'd follow them up, if he had to run his head off.

And he did almost that.

CHAPTER XXII

MARK RESOLVES

That chase was one of the most heartbreaking experiences Mark had ever had in his life. In point of fact, its only participant seemed to be Mark himself for when he got to the down-ridge trail from the plane, there wasn't a sound.

He had run nevertheless, and kept on running, calling his desperate appeals with longer ringing shouts. It was incomprehensible to him how anyone with a spark of humanity in his soul could resist answering those heart-felt pleas.

They heard him—they *must* have heard him! He was certain that the whole of humanity had heard him! But for all the response it brought, he might just as well have cried out to the lonely Twin Peaks atop Horse Mountain. The echo of his quivering voice would then have some reason to fling back in his white face the miserable emptiness which one expected to find up there. But down there, somewhere along the lower ridge, his echoes were taunting somehow. He knew that they had fallen, not on emptiness, but on deaf ears.

It was absolutely the end. When a fellow man ran from his cries for help, what could he expect? His first cry had not frightened them away, he knew that now. They had deliberately run from him, for his later cries were appealing enough to move the mountain itself.

But why?

As he scrambled wearily back up the trail his flashlight picked out many tracks. There had been at least three sets of

them, beside his own. Then he remembered the depressions he had discovered that day—three there were of them also. Most likely the same men whose travels frequently brought them back and forth on that trail.

Mark wondered when they again would travel the trail. It wasn't likely that the next day would see them, nor the next. The path was not packed enough to be in daily use. Well, all this reflection would not help the suffering Lon nor himself. He had to think and to do something. Another day of inactivity could not be endured.

He slept little through the remaining hours. Morning dawned gray and misty and even the peaks were lost to view in the tenuous vapor. Higgins awakened grinning, his condition unchanged.

Mark turned to him, smiling comfortingly. "Lon, old kid," he said affectionately. "I've been thinking things—*and how!*"

"What air yer thinking," the boy groaned under his smile.

"Well, for one thing—I want action! No help comes to us, so we'll go to get it! Last night, you know, or rather toward early morning Hammil tried again to find us, but no luck. Then when I was coming back toward the plane I heard footsteps."

Higgins listened to Mark's story of the chase with a vacant expression on his face. When it was finished he seemed to start a little.

"What's matter?" Mark asked.

"Them thar fellers," the boy said hesitantly. "Mebbe thar runnin' fer blockaders, hey?"

"How should I know?" Mark returned, somewhat puzzled. "Just what do you mean by *running*?"

“Wa’al, frum what I heerd,” Lon answered, “sometimes blockaders send fellers cross this hyur mountin’ ter fetch stuff an’ they allus travel late hours. Mebbe that’s what they-all were doin’, hey?”

“I don’t know,” Mark answered thoughtfully, “you seem to have a pretty good knowledge of it yourself, though. Did you happen to hear that it was this particular trail that these runners traveled, Lon?”

Lon’s cheeks paled a little. “Wa’al,” he stammered, “I heerd ’twas a trail what crossed over a bald ten mile or more b’low Twin Peaks.”

“Apparently then,” Mark said slowly, “this is the bald, as you call it. But how, kiddo, did you ever happen to hear all this?”

“We-uns in th’ back country hyur a tol’ble lot, Gilmore,” Lon answered readily. “Back country hain’t far frum hyur as distance goes. Wouldn’ be far ’tall if tweren’t fer brush an’ sech. Back country lies ’most up and down like frum Twin Peaks.”

“You mean it lies just below, huh?”

“Edzactly. Reckin it hain’t easy travelin’ when the trail does end, hey?”

Mark was a little puzzled at this question, but too excited to ask about it at the time. “Well, just the same, Lon,” he said, “we’re going to make for that trail right now! Where it ends and when it ends, isn’t going to enter into my plans now. In fact, I don’t give a hang. I crave action and we’re going to start!”

Lon was actually frightened. “Air ye plumb bereft?” he asked. “I cain’t move my leg and arm and yore a-tellin’ me we’re a-going ter make it fer the trail.”

Mark laughed at the boy's worried face. "Calm right down, kiddo. I've taken you into consideration, and how! It's going to be anything but easy, but it'll be taking a step in some direction for help and that's the main thing. I'll do no more waiting. We ought to attract someone if we keep going. It's only reasonable that we should."

"How air ye takin' me?" Lon queried with quivering voice.

"I'm going to get your one good arm into that coat of mine," Mark said smiling. "Then I'm going to button it at the top and lift you up as best I can, while I slip into the back of it and carry you. It's a trick I learned when I was a Boy Scout—it's called the emergency coat lift and boy, it's our only chance. Progress will be mighty slow, I'm warning you, for I'm not a Hercules by any means, and you're no lightweight, Lon, so don't expect too much."

Lon looked at Mark as if he was crazy. "You air doin' sech trouble fer me, Gilmore?" he asked in amazement.

"Sure, why not?" Mark returned carelessly. "You've needed medical attention for pretty nearly thirty-six hours and that's just that many hours too long. Not only that, but we can't live on berries another day. I can't leave you alone, so I'm taking you with me."

Lon Higgins shook his shaggy hair about in consternation. "I'd *tell* a man, Gilmore, yore jest the feelinest feller I ever seed, and Hammils be what they air, cain't be so faultin' when they tuk yer as a friend!"

And that from a Riggs was compliment indeed.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Weak Assurance

Mark had no idea how far they had gone when the sun was high overhead at noon. It was a terrific task, heartbreaking and backbreaking, but the trail seemed to be holding out. Berry bushes and springs were encountered often enough to stay their hunger and the suffering Lon stood it like a major.

Their stopovers had been many; in point of fact, much too many for progress, and it seemed to Mark that the Twin Peaks looked not much further away than when he had looked at them from the meadow. But no matter, he thought, they at least were getting somewhere.

“If it takes us ’til Christmas,” he said aloud.

Lon grinned. He did little else now for speech seemed to cause him pain. The Herculean job of lifting him up for the emergency coat lift was replaced by divers lifts that Mark had learned in scouting. But by late afternoon both carrier and carried were glad to return to their first method.

Mark’s old blanket had been taken along and Lon had kept it faithfully tucked under his good arm. At times they were both certain that this increased the weight on the carrier’s back and that it would be better dispensed with. For some intuitive reason, however, they did not part with it.

Just before sunset, Mark conceived the brilliant idea of putting the blanket into practical use. “It’s full size and can be spread out,” he explained to Lon. “Then I put you on it

and take one end and pull you along while you hold on with your good arm.”

Higgins nodded, exhausted. “I air willing ter do mos’ everythin’, Gilmore. We air comin’ down purty smack. Tain’t long now ’fore the trail ends an’ that’ll be come dusk.”

Mark looked at him curiously. “You know then about this trail—huh, you rascal?”

Lon nodded. “Sho’.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before, then?”

“I air ’fraid o’ Uncle Dake Riggs,” came the reply.

“What’s he got to do with it?”

“A heap. This hyur trail his men use what run fer him. Them it was what you heerd and mos’ seed. Reckon they run frum yer cuz they thought mebbe ’twas gov’ment men a-waitin’ ter ketch ’em. Yer see, they travel fifteen mile over these hyur mountin’s ter fetch an’ carry stuff fer Uncle Dake Riggs. Every few days they go ’fore midnight and cum back ’bout the time what you heerd ’em.”

“And they use this very trail all the way, huh?” Mark asked, interested.

“Part so. They use it frum a leetle ways in thet forest by the bald an’ down to whar this ends, like I been a-telling yer. Frum thar, it’s a ways through brush whar I’m a-goin’ ter show ye. Then when we cum ter a leetle gulch what has a big boulder lyin’ aside it, yer turn in an’ jist walk a p’int blank straight line the rist o’ the way. Ef yer don’t walk straight yer’ll never cum ter Uncle Dake Riggs’ place.”

“His home?”

“Naw. Uncle Dake’s cabin hain’t less than five mile frum his place.”

“Oh, I see, Lon.”

“Wa’al, I reckon yer kin try thet blanket business, cuz we’re a-goin down-hill the rist o’ the way and I *mean* down-hill.”

Mark laughed. “I believe it, Lon. But say, how about *me*? Walking into your Uncle’s place isn’t going to be any pink tea for me, is it? I’ve always heard that a blockader would rather kill a fellow than have the location of their still known to an outsider.”

“Wa’al, thet’s the reason I didn’t mention it afore. But since I seed how feelin’ yer was I reckoned ’twouldn’t be no harm fer ter let yer take me p’int blank thar. I kin tell Uncle Dake everythin’ you been a-doin fer me—mos’ breakin’ yer back a-carryin’ me like I was a baby. Then I kin tell him what Dilly made me do fer ter get me killed. Twixt thet, he’s a-goin’ ter know who informed on my pappy, Long John, an’ I reckon Uncle Dake hain’t a-going ter feel like faultin’ anybody. He’ll be risin’ ’gainst Dilly an’ ye’ll be able ter git back ter Hoss Creek an’ tell Old Pete that we hain’t aimin’ fer any ruction with ’em fer a spell anyway.”

Mark ran his slim fingers through his thick, blond hair as Lon sank back exhausted after this long speech. “All you say sounds good, Lon,” he said. “But I’m a little shaky about it. Not your Uncle Dake so much, but about walking with you into that still. I’m afraid that alone would keep him from showing me quarter at all.”

“Tain’t so when I tell him how feelin’ ye air,” Lon protested with a spent voice. “Ter show him thet yer did all this fer a Riggs will be a heap an’ it hain’t a-going ter make no differ ’bout the still.”

Mark nodded. “All right, Lon. If you can promise me no trouble will come of it. There isn’t any other place where we

could go?"

Lon shook his head vehemently. "Uncle Dake Riggs is yore nearest neighbor-man."

"That's that," said Mark thoughtfully. "Perhaps it'll be all right."

"Sho'," Lon assured him, hardly above a whisper. Mark, however, had his doubts.

CHAPTER XXIV

A VALIANT JOURNEY

The blanket trick was effectual—*it had to be*. Higgins begged not to be lifted again when Mark suggested that perhaps the continuous sliding motion was causing him too much discomfort and pain. Lon declared that it didn't though his face was like chalk.

Mark carried the blanket end along with the foot of the injured leg. He held it up gently; avoiding as many bumps as was possible. Lon seemed to prefer it, saying that holding his leg aloft lessened the pain. But about the injured arm, little could be done.

They reached the little gulch near midnight and as Lon had no more strength than to nod his assent, Mark was forced to use his own judgment about the descent. He started following the line set by the gully and boulder and had gone but a few feet when he saw that the journey was going to be terrible for the injured boy.

"I'm feel better about carrying you, Lon," he said. "Why, it's a mass of brush and thicket and you can't be pulled along over that. I've *got* to carry you!"

Lon had no strength to protest and stood the terrible strain of being lifted to his former position. Mark thought that he would be weighted down with it himself and wondered how his back and muscles would feel if he ever survived the ordeal.

After he had started on, his burden seemed to ease a little. Lon too had relaxed and was silent the rest of the way, and

Mark was so relieved not to hear the pitiful groans that he did not disturb him with even a word of comfort. Time for that when the boy was where he could have real comfort.

At intervals, Mark stopped and leaned against the nearest tree to rest as much as was possible under the circumstances. He ached in every muscle and the constant strain on his head was making it ache violently.

But on he kept, sliding and stumbling with weariness yet keeping himself in such balance that he never fell. And after a time, when he was about to despair of getting anywhere, the ground seemed to level off under his feet. A woods enclosed him and without turning back to look, he knew he was out of the worst of it.

He could make a little better progress with no brush or thicket to fight continually. And as he trudged along over the soft ground he smiled as he visualized how he must look, scratched and cut from his forehead to his waist. His arms felt actually raw and the only whole part of him seemed to be his feet. Briers had cut through his trousers so that his legs were added to the already large list of individual casualties.

“I’ll look like Robinson Crusoe or somebody,” he mumbled, with a chuckle. “Gosh, I’d frighten my own father and mother if they ever saw me now. So what am I to expect from Dake Riggs in his own place! Boy!”

Once in the laurel thicket, Mark stopped a moment to listen to Higgins’ breathing. It sounded particularly laborious and came at irregular intervals.

“How you feeling, kiddo?” he asked softly.

No sound came from the boy except the loud breathing. Mark asked him again but got no response. “He’s probably

taking a little snooze. Anyway, I'm on the right track," he said, sniffing the air.

It was filled with a peculiar odor, one that was not difficult to recognize. It gave him pause, however, for he knew that it meant only one thing—he was nearing Dake Riggs' place and it was but a matter of moments when he would either be very safe or very much in danger.

The odor became more and more pungent and soon he left the woods behind. With almost shocking suddenness, he saw before him a light emanating from a large low-built shack of clapboards. Smoke was curling from a chimney and loud voices trailed out into the little clearing in which the place stood.

Mark snapped out his light and stuffed it in his pocket, then stalked bravely up to the door.

CHAPTER XXV TO THE WALL

Dilly Riggs, of all people, answered Mark's loud knock. He started visibly when he saw who the callers were and seemed to be shocked out of the power of speech. Dake Riggs presently appeared and peered over his son's shoulder.

"I have your nephew, Mr. Riggs," Mark said steadily; "please relieve me of him. He's badly hurt—very badly."

Dake Riggs' long thin jaw seemed to drop completely. He stared for a moment until Mark made a motion to his back.

"I've carried him all the way from that meadow below the peaks—I'm almost dead!" Mark exclaimed.

"Dilly!" roared Dake. "Git you out thar an' help yore pore cousin Lonnie often this hyur furriner's back. Hyur, I'll give yer a hand."

Dake Riggs' three helpers soon came to the rescue and Mark found himself entering the still-house unescorted. He sat down on the nearest chair, exhausted. In a far corner stood a dilapidated bed where Lon was deposited. After that, all hands stood back and looked down at him as if they had no idea what to do next.

Mark got up and went to the boy's side. "Get some water for him—get plenty. I think he's fainted."

The three men scurried out of sight. Dilly, Mark noticed, slunk out of the door with them. Dake and he were left alone for a moment, staring at each other.

Mark leaned down and began to rub Lon's wrists. They were cold and rather moist. "I don't like this," he said,

feeling the still boy's forehead. "He's too quiet, even for a faint. He needs a doctor—quick as he can get it!"

"Wa'al," said Dake, stroking his unshaven chin, "I hain't got a notion whar ter git a doctor—not afore mornin'."

"Haven't you a wagon at your home?" Mark asked, looking straight into the hillsman's cold, blue eyes. "Oh, don't worry about anything but Lon, Mr. Riggs. He told me all about your place here—how else could I have got here! He *had* to tell me! *He's* all that counts now."

Dake partially succeeded in looking at ease. "I hev a wagon ter hum, but I reckon the boys'll hev ter carry Lonnie thar."

"That's what I meant," Mark said briskly. "If you can't get a doctor to him tonight—get him to a doctor! You see he's been lying helpless since the day before yesterday. He asked me to take him for a little spin. A storm came up and I ran out of gas. The only thing for him to do was to bail out in his parachute and he did. The trouble was—he couldn't count and he lost his head.... Well, this is the result."

Dake avoided Mark's gaze. "The hull county's been a-lookin' fer yer aryplane an' you an' Lonnie. Everybody's a-thinking yer dead. How come you-all hain't hurt outside o' yer scratches?"

Mark told him—told him the whole story from beginning to end. The men came back with the water, Dilly tagging at their heels, gaunt and hollow-eyed. Still, the story was continued and Lon was bathed and his lips moistened.

Mark worked over the boy and talked in between times. Still, he did not respond. Dake was silent, Lilly was silent, and the three helpers (cousins of Dake) stood about like useless children.

Mark felt it was the time to strike—quick. He told the wide-eyed Dake, word for word, just what Lon had related of Dilly's treachery.

Dake turned to his son when Mark had finished. "You heerd what this furriner says, hey?"

"Sure," Dilly said, red of face, but his eyes flashing defiance at Mark. "What he says came spang outen his mouth an' yer ain't believin' a furriner anyway, air ye?"

Dake's voice was like ice when he answered. "Fer why should Lonnie tell him 'bout yore informin' the other gov'ment man, an' lie 'bout this hyur business he says yore havin' with Devlin?"

"Cuz Lonnie's plumb bereft, hain't he?" Dilly returned. "Cain't he hev notions 'bout them things when he hain't got his head set straight, hey? I reckon I know thet Lonnie's the lynest fool I ever heerd of. He cud say mos' anything an I reckon yer'd tuk it straight."

To Mark's utter astonishment, Dake revealed himself to be an indulgent father.

"I hadn't sed nary a word whut I b'lieve frum this furriner. 'Specially a *Hammil* furriner," he added, putting his large, bony hands on his son's shoulders. "I hain't takin' a furriner's tale fur sartin 'gainst my son. That's all thar is 'bout it."

Mark looked at him coldly. "What purpose could I have in telling you a lie about this, Mr. Riggs? What is more, I could have left poor Lon to die up there instead of dragging him on my back for all these long hours. To a fellow like me that's never lifted anything heavier than a garden hose, it wasn't any pink tea. I'm glad I did it, but not at the expense of being called a liar when I'm only repeating what this poor kid here

told me. I'd rather have your belief than all the thanks in the world and that's a fact!"

Mark imagined that he saw a flickering smile in Dake Riggs' eyes.

"Yuh wuz pretty anxious ter hev Lonnie take a ride in yer aryplane, wuzn't yer?" Dake asked directly.

"That's a lie, Mr. Riggs, and I can prove it."

Dilly cackled hoarsely. "Somethin' else comin' spang outen his mouth," he whined. "Wa'n't I near whar I cud hyur yer a-lurin' poor Lonnie inter yer plane?"

Mark set his jaw: "You're an infamous liar, Dilly, and you know it!"

Dilly grinned, but Dake frowned. "See hyur, furriner, yer cain't set an' say yer didn't know Lonnie wuz Dilly's kin! Yer cain't say that my son didn't tell yer how responsible yer'd be if anythin' happened ter the pore boy when he cudn't count his numbers wuth anything ef he hed ter use one o' them parychutes!"

"Dilly told me no such thing, Mr. Riggs!" Mark said brusquely. "He didn't even stop but a minute. He walked up with Higgins and told me that he brought him over because the kid wanted to go up with me. Then after a minute, he said he had to get home point blank or something like that. Anyway, the main thing is that Dilly himself brought the kid to me and introduced him. Lon lied about his age."

"Reckon yer knowin ter the sarcumstance better'n that," Dake Riggs said slowly. "Tain't likely Lonnie'd be smart enough ter say he'd be twenty-one come Tuesday. Thar ain't nary bit sense in it."

Mark was wild with anger. Spots of bright color suffused his scratched cheeks. "This is sheer nonsense, Mr. Riggs.

Why should I have to talk for myself about this? Haven't you people—outside of your son, of course, got ears to hear and eyes to see? Aren't you smart enough to guess that I couldn't make up a story like that out of whole cloth? What reason would I have? The Hammils? Nonsense. What the heck do I care about your feuds! Whether I think my friend Lieutenant Peter Hammil is a fine fellow and that his mother and father have been good to me, makes no difference. Lon needs attention—will you please see that these fellows get him to your home where he can be fixed up till you can get a doctor? Seems to me you're not caring much about him when you can stand around like this and argue. You better think less of what you believe, or don't believe and get some action for this kid.”

“Jest what we'll do,” said Dake, signalling to his helpers. “Git yer coats on and take him.”

Dilly grinned down in Mark's face. “Thar hadn't no use, Gilmore,” he said sardonically. “Yer cain't make pappy believe yer tale, so don't try. He don't never b'lieve furriners mech anyway—'specially Hammils' furriners!”

“Listen, snake,” Mark said, unable to hold back his temper, “go wriggle your sneaking self through that underbrush out there, and hold it clear so these men can carry Lon through. I noticed that it was pretty thick so I suppose that's the way out of here to the main trail, huh?”

“Yer axin me, furriner?” Dilly asked, laughing.

Mark's eyes flashed a warning to the impudent young hillsman. “Dilly Riggs,” he said, “I wouldn't ask you a question if I could honestly prevent myself. I don't have to, though. Whatever question's asked of you will probably

come from Lon when he comes to. One will be on the subject of why you wanted to kill him.”

“That’s jist ’bout enough, stranger,” Dake said in frozen tones. “Thar hain’t nary a truth in sech talk ’bout Dilly an’ you air jist looking fer trouble, I reckon. Yer want ter git Lon ter tell thet in front of we-uns an’ then I’ll listen on yer.”

“I’m willing,” Mark answered glancing at the silent boy. “All I want is to have Lon tell you himself.”

But Mark had the feeling, somehow, that perhaps Lon would not tell. Would not? No, he would surely tell if he could. But how was one to be certain about it anyway?

Lon had the look of one who was past even the question of life.

CHAPTER XXVI

DAKE RIGGS CHATS

Dilly disappeared along with the three men after all. Mark stretched his weary muscles and decided that the air was less objectionable when the young hillsman had gone. He said nothing of this opinion to Dake, however, but merely asked if he could have food.

“Any kind—I could eat wood, Mr. Riggs,” he admitted.

“‘Fraid thet’s ’bout all’s ’round hyur jist now,” Riggs said, taking his place on a stool opposite. “Got some lath-open bread whut’s been hangin’ round hyur quite a spell.”

“I’ll have it,” said Mark modestly, “that’s if you’re not counting on eating it yourself.” Dake looked at his guest with some surprise, but the instinctive hospitality of the hillsman came to the fore. “Yore welcome ter have it, furriner, an’ I reckon I kin give yer a dram o’ blockade.”

“No thanks,” Mark said smiling. “I feel half dead now.” He caught himself up at the puzzled look on his host’s face, and added: “I mean I’m anxious for something cool—water. *Just water!* It’s been a long, hard day.”

Mark sighed with relief when Dake left for some mysterious part of the clapboard shack. A curtain of ancient manufacture concealed the back chamber and was strung across the narrow room on a piece of rope. The front part of the place was evidently a sort of sitting and office room combination.

Dake returned with the lath-open bread and even as he handed it to Mark, the flat cake crumbled with age. Then he

went out again for water and Mark stuffed the stale crumbs into his mouth as if they were some freshly baked delicacy.

“Haven’t had anything but berries these last couple of days,” he explained to Dake when he returned. “Sure does empty a chap’s stomach. Boy, what I couldn’t do to a nice, juicy steak!”

Dake sat down and eyed him coldly. “Reckon yore purty tired.”

“Am I!” Mark exclaimed. “Tired and cold. I used up my shirt and underclothing for bandages and things. Lon was pretty much in need of them.”

“Jasper Bolin, one o’ them fellers what yer seed hyur afore, mebbe kin give yer a shirt an’ a old coat what he don’t want back hyur. I’ll give it yer and tell him when he comes back.”

“That’s fine,” said Mark expanding. “I’ll let him have it back just as soon as I can get to Ham’s—I mean Old Pete’s son—he’s my best friend, you know. One of my very best, anyhow! Fine feller, believe it or not.”

Riggs’ inscrutable face revealed nothing.

“I just couldn’t drag myself to start away now,” Mark rambled on. “I’ve got to sleep somewhere—mind if it’s on this cot.”

Riggs nodded. “Sleep all yer want. I go ter hum an’ sleep soon’s Jasper gits back. He stays on watch all day an’ a plumb good shot he is with a rifle-gun.”

Mark felt like chuckling. “There’s no doubt of it.” Then: “Is Jasper any relative of yours, by any chance?”

“He air my kin,” replied Riggs laconically, “Cousin ter my Dilly’s mother.”

“Oh,” said Mark, stifling a yawn. “Then he’s not exactly a Riggs, is he?”

“He air my kin,” Dake repeated with something of scorn for Mark’s stupidity.

“Well,” said Mark politely, “I suppose that’s what one would consider him—your kin. Up north, we seldom even know who our mother’s cousins are. Not much family pride, I suppose. Still, I’m fond of my own cousins. They’re not my mother’s cousins, of course. I don’t know if mother has a cousin,” he reflected. “Anyhow, I’ve got enough keeping track of myself.”

Dake Riggs’ mouth was shut so tight that his lips were all but invisible. “Air yore kin no’therners?” he asked, hardly opening his mouth.

“I’ve always supposed so,” Mark answered gladly. “I never really asked. But this is the first time any of my own family has ever been south so I suppose there wern’t any southerners, or I’d have been asked to visit them, sure as I live!”

“Yer don’t know then what ructions cum frum tryin’ ter poke yer head places whar tain’t healthy, hey!”

“And meaning....” Mark began.

“That yer kind of an upscuddlin’* feller,” Riggs interposed quietly. “Yer heated up my Dilly that night ’count of which he took on somethin’ fearful. Yer had no call ter lay hands on him.”

Mark looked Dake straight in the eye. “Pardon me for saying it, Mr. Riggs,” he said excitedly, “but your son puts it all over you. I’m beginning to think that there’s never been a Hammil who has been even quarter as treacherous to you as your son Dilly. Whatever lies he’s been telling you about that

night at Ham's, I don't know. What I do know is that I caught him about to shoot my friend right in the back. Do you approve of such methods?"

"Dilly wuz fixin fer ter kaitch rabbits," said Dake stubbornly.

Mark was disgusted, and looked it. "All right, Mr. Riggs. Have it your own way—I don't give a hang. I'm fed up to the neck with all this feud business and other things. I'm not interested how you hate each other or anything else. All I ask is that you don't shoot innocent people like Old Pete and my friend Ham. They've not done a thing to anyone of yours. I'm here to prove it. And as for your son, Dilly, it's useless to talk. You don't believe the truth when you hear it. Some day, perhaps you'll get an awful jolt from him and I don't mean maybe."

Riggs got up and went back to the other room. When he came out again he was carrying the promised shirt and coat. Mark took them and thanked his host graciously.

"They air pretty ragged," said Dake.

"I should worry," said Mark. "If that was all I had to worry about, I'd be happy."

"You air perfeckly right, furriner," said Hake enigmatically. "Yer hain't got no call ter worry—*yit!*"

Mark stretched himself on the dilapidated cot with its straw pallet and turned his face to the wall. Hake's words rang in his ears and he tried to guess what the man had meant, but sleep overcame him.

* Quarrelsome.

CHAPTER XXVII

A LIE FOR JASPER

Dawn came, then morning. Noon approached and Mark wakened out of a heavy sleep to the smell of strong tobacco smoke. It choked him and smarted his eyes and had him fully awake in a few seconds. He lifted his head from the pallet to find Jasper Bolin sitting on the stool and watching him intently as the blue smoke curled up out of his corn cob pipe.

“I jist took me a pipe,” said Jasper politely.

“So I smelled,” Mark said smiling. “You here alone?”

“Uh huh. Dake an’ the rest are ter hum. They cum back jist after dark ternight.”

“Not that I cared,” said Mark. “I just asked. I’ll have to be getting along. Ham and his folks will be worried sick and besides they might have sent a telegram to my mother saying I’ve been lost and probably died.”

Jasper listened with a vacant stare.

Mark sat up and stretched himself. He ached in every part of his body. “My back!” he groaned, then bethought himself of Lon. “How’s the poor kid? Did they get the doctor?”

Jasper shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know which nor whether ’bout thet. All I know—Lonnie hain’t needin’ no doctor now.”

“Why ... *why*?” Mark asked fearfully. “You don’t mean to tell me that he....”

“Wa’al, sir, we all wuz s’prised,” said Jasper lightly. “Jist like thet—*spang*, I seed it!”

Mark felt cold. “Heavens! That’s terrible! Why, I never dreamed he was hurt so badly. Oh, my gosh! Perhaps if I had brought him down right away he could have got over it. But how did I know? He never told me about this trail until we were on our way. Afraid of his Uncle Dake Riggs, he told me. Well, poor grinning kid, he won’t be afraid of anything now. But to have it happen like this—gosh, I’m done in—you know it?”

Jasper nodded. “He got ruint* internal.”

Mark buried his head in his hands. “I hope his mother doesn’t blame me.”

“He hain’t got his mammy,” Jasper gossiped willingly. “She air like Lonnie was gittin’ ter be. She’s been down ter Knoxville thirteen year come April.”

“Not quite right, huh?” Mark asked sympathetically. “Poor Lon.” It gave him some consolation to think that perhaps he had saved the boy from his mother’s hard road. “Perhaps it was for the best, huh? Perhaps the poor kid would have been knocked around terribly. Especially when Dilly could have anything to say about it. Gosh, do you think he’d have been all right if I’d brought him down that same night?”

“He got ruint internal,” Jasper repeated and puffed his pipe complacently. Little by little his small, thin head was obliterated in the choking, blue smoke.

Mark got up, annoyed, and strolled to the open door. “Well, I’m terribly sorry,” he murmured, “but I can’t see how I could have done differently. My hands were tied.” He turned back and glanced at Jasper. “Can you give me some idea where I go from here?”

Jasper's small light eyes fixed themselves on Mark.
"Reckon I hain't got no idees 'bout thet."

"How's that?" Mark queried, puzzled. "You come back and forth every day, don't you?"

Jasper nodded. "Not frum yore way," he insisted. "I live back country—not down ter the creek."

"Oh come, Jasper," Mark said. "You're surely not trying to tell me you don't know your way from the back country down along the creek and to Greeley. If you're Dake's *kin*, you know where every Hammil in this county lives."

Jasper nodded. "Wa'al, I reckon I kin tell yer whar ye'd go if yer gits away frum hyur. Yer tuk and light through thet brush yer see out thar and go p'int blank till yer cum ter the yaller patch. Then turn ter yer right till yer see a leetle fork in the trail. Go t' the left an' yer'll be traipsin inter Old Pete's."

"Much of a distance?" Mark asked.

"Wa'al, I couldn't say e'zactly."

"You could. What do you want to say that for?"

Jasper brushed his hand back and forth over his bewhiskered chin. "Wa'al, I jist don't know how far 'tis. I 'low it hain't more'n six hour fer walkin'."

"That all?" Mark laughed. "Gosh, I'm so sore now, it hurts me to even stand up."

"Then I reckon yer better git used ter the idee o' stayin' fer a spell."

"Here?" Mark asked disdainfully. "Say, what do I look like? Not that I'm ungrateful for small favors received but with all you people acting as if I'd committed a crime or something about Lon—I'm not staying where I'm not wanted one minute longer than necessary."

“Yore stayin’ hyur till Dake thinks on it should yer go,” said Jasper in a low voice.

Mark wheeled around. “What are you talking about? What do you mean that Dake will think about me going?”

“Jist thet, feller. Dake giv me ter understand I should watch fer you an’ keep yer hyur till he thinks on it. He hain’t sartin’ what yer should git mos’—a plumb good talk ter send yer spang back no’th or a leetle party after dark.”

Mark’s brown eyes looked almost black. “If I’m being held against my will and Dake is planning on some punishment, he doesn’t want to forget for a moment that it’s likely to go hard with him. I’m not one of you people that you can make me cringe and help you take the law in your own hands—if you call that law. Dake’s orders mean just nothing to me, Jasper.”

“Wa’al, jist the same, Dake says how does the Hammils or anybody fer thet, know whar yer air? Mebbe yer cud be dead, hey!”

“Maybe,” Mark answered, thinking hard. “But it happens that Lieutenant Hammil knows I’m not. Only this morning early before I left, I made a fire and smoke-signalled him that I was alive and well, but because of Lon I had to get down the trail. You see, Hammil was nervous about making a landing in that meadow—it’s dangerous. But in all probability he’ll have searching parties out this morning looking for me through, this back country.”

“Wa’al, wa’al,” murmured Jasper.

One glance at him convinced Mark that the lie had helped his cause. How much, only time would tell—a few hours at most.

* Injured.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WINNING HAND

Jasper did not let him out of his sight. He smoked much and talked little and kept Mark reminded that he was being watched closely. A bulging in his baggy trousers pocket gave his prisoner pause.

Mark was cautious but not nervous. Jasper made not one move that he did not observe closely. The fellow was different than most of the hillsmen. He had a lumbering, awkward gait and was decidedly clumsy in some of his movements.

By mid-afternoon, Mark had succeeded in making the fellow thaw out considerably. He talked of everything except of the hills. Finally, Mark suggested a game of pinochle.

Jasper was nothing if not thoroughly lazy. There was nothing he liked so much as finding time in which to loaf, and cards to him were ideally suited to his idle moments.

Two games brought them on cordial terms. Mark purposely let Jasper win both. Finally he laughed. "Third game, I bet I win."

"Win nawthin'," Jasper said sociably. "What yer bet?"

"Your gun," Mark laughed.

Jasper's face clouded a trifle.

"Oh, I don't want it. I just pretend that's the object, understand? I guess that's all that's worth anything between us, huh? Gosh, *I* haven't a thing."

Jasper grinned. "Awright, jist lay on, hey? Let's git started an' see."

An unobservant onlooker would never have guessed, looking in on the pair, that much depended on that game. Mark's laughter was a trifle forced, though at times it held a genuine tone when he thought of Jasper's gullibility. But the plodding hillsman played on unsuspecting.

They had almost finished and Mark looked at his watch. Almost half past five o'clock. Jasper grumbled good-naturedly—he was losing.

"Told you, you would, didn't I?" Mark laughed, throwing out his winning card. He rose and stretched himself lazily. Jasper did the same.

Mark walked to his side and gave him a playful nudge. "Come on, Mr. Bolin, give a young fellow a look at this gun you're trying to scare me with."

Jasper's face clouded again. "Cain't do hit."

"Sure, you can," Mark teased.

Jasper moved a little way. Mark followed.

"What's the matter—'fraid I'll take it from you?" Mark taunted him.

"Yer cain't take it, cuz I hadn't a-goin' ter let yer," Jasper said.

Mark waved his hands deprecatingly. "You, Sir Jasper," he said, "are a lot of noise."

Jasper looked puzzled. Mark gave him no time to think. A man puzzled was a man off guard, he had once heard his father say. And the iron was struck while hot for Mark leaned forward and gave the hillsman's pocket a playful slap. Suddenly he made a significant move as if really to take the weapon from its owner's pocket.

Jasper, however, was sorely tried and took it out himself, but to his everlasting shame. Mark had waited for him to do

just that, and took advantage of the fellow's slow movement by snatching it from his hand.

Jasper looked dumfounded.

Mark laughed and pointed the gun directly at him. "The hands are quicker than the eye, Mr. Bolin. I turned that nicely, huh? Well, I'm sorry, but there isn't much time to lose. Go sit over there on the cot. It'll be much more comfortable than sitting in the same position on the stool. On second thought, maybe you'd like to take a nap while you're waiting. Would you?"

Jasper was scared. "What air ye talking 'bout, hey?"

"*You*, old thing. Just step on there, while I get you something to hold you down. Did you say you'd rather take a nap?"

Jasper was angry. "You air fooled me a heap an' I'll git 'round on yer some day. Dake'll be faultin' an' faultin' with me fer a spell 'count o' this."

"Well, I'm sorry, Jasper," Mark said soberly. "I really am! But you see how it is. Dake doesn't like me and I'm a friend of the Hammils. I haven't a chance—'specially since Lon's gone. I've no intention of letting the Riggses try any of their lawlessness on me, if I can help it."

"Jist the same they'll do it ef yer don't git out o' Greeley county," Jasper grumbled. "Yer don't think Dake'll take ter this easy?"

"No, I suppose not," said Mark, inspecting the curtain that divided the room. "I'm going to have to pull down your nice clean curtain, Jasper. I need the rope."

Jasper had nothing more to say for Mark's determination was plain. He had the rope down and managed with one free

hand to bind it around his captive sufficiently to hold him before he was obliged to lay down the gun.

Ten minutes completed this operation. Mark laughed. “I’m glad you decided to stretch out, Jasp. You’ll get awfully sleepy in one position, so you were sensible to lie down. It’s great how time flies when one sleeps, isn’t it?”

“Don’t know!” Jasper snapped. “Hain’f carin’ which nor whether. I air mad ’bout you, but it hain’t a-goin ter do me harm ter hav a couple hour sleep. Dake ’lows I hain’t needin’ sleep but I know differ. Fust time I lay me down daytimes like this fer quite a spell.”

“Then I’ve done you a favor, huh Jasper?” Mark asked patronizingly.

“Wa’al,” Jasper hesitated, “mebbe. But jist yer watch out thet yer hain’t bein’ too plumb smart. Dilly or one uv em might be keepin’ watch fer somethin’ like this.”

Mark laughed gaily and started for the door. “Toodle-oo, partner,” he said. “Thanks for the coat and shirt. I’ll send them back soon as I can get at my own. Tell Dake I send him my best regards.”

“Fust be keerful thet Dake don’t send *yuh* somethin’ thet hain’t so healthy as best regards,” Jasper flung back defiantly.

Mark’s parting shot was unexpected. “Well, Jasp, don’t forget that I’ve something to send back to Dake if I meet him. I don’t feel that I will. But just in case—*watch my dust!*” Jasper did—until the underbrush had completely hidden Mark from his restricted view.

CHAPTER XXIX

CORN PONE

Mark's return to the Hammil home on Horse Creek quite overcame the old people. Lieutenant Hammil managed to conceal some of his joy by whacking his friend heartily on the back despite the fact that he had been awakened out of an early morning sleep to answer an insistent knocking at the door.

Mrs. Hammil had flown into the kitchen with motherly concern and made her adopted son, as she called him, some breakfast, while Mark was commanded to tell the full story of his trials and tribulations.

"You didn't wire home about me, did you?" Mark asked first, after his narrative had been completed.

"No," said Hammil. "I'd thought ter do it terday, Brother Mark. It seemed in reason that yer couldn't go much longer, dead or alive. I hed ter wire the office though, but I told 'em ter hold out 'bout yore folks 'til I gave 'em the word."

Mark settled himself in the chair comfortably and looked at his watch. "Four o'clock," he said musingly. "I've been all that time getting here."

"Jasper Bolin must o' given the wrong d'rections," said Old Pete. "Thar hain't no fork up thar if it's the trail I think 'tis."

"Well, I found that out, all right," Mark smiled. "I thought I'd never find my way out of underbrush. It serves Jasper right. There isn't enough left of his old coat to send back now."

“How in lan’ sakes did yer manage ter dodge Dilly or Dake?” Hammil asked. “They must o’ set out fer yer ’long after dark.”

Mark laughed. “Well, if they did I must have kept a few steps ahead of them. Anyway, I kept wandering around, it seemed, until finally I saw water. Then it seeped into my brain that perhaps it was the creek.”

Hammil laughed. “Thought you was a-goin ter say the water. Wa’al, I sho’ am right glad ter see yer anyway, Brother Mark, an’ it sho’ is a pity that a nice kid like you should be picked on by the Riggsses jest ’count of us.”

“Oh, forget about that part of it, Ham. I gave them the slip, didn’t I? And how! And I learned something of value to you Hammils, didn’t I? Well, what’s a few nasty scratches and tired muscles compared to that?”

“An’ yer think Lonnie Higgins weren’t tellin yer no lie?” Old Pete asked worriedly.

“I know he wasn’t—poor kid,” Mark answered. “You see, Mr. Hammil, when he found out that Dilly had done such a treacherous thing, it set off a spark. His last one, I guess. Boy, I *do* believe what he said! One look at that slinking Dilly convinced me. And don’t you imagine that he wasn’t a little scared for a minute, that his father was going to take my word.”

“Old Dake goes fer his boy fust an’ last,” Old Pete murmured. “Tain’t in reason thet a young upscuddlin’ loafer like Dilly should start the guns a-goin’ agin’ after sech a long spell. I hain’t had nothin’but hardness ’twixt Dake an’ me. Tain’t ’mounted ter more than thet. But Dilly hain’t satisfied lest’n thar’s constant ructions. It jest seems thet way.”

Hammil looked at his father affectionately. “Forget about it, pap. If it’s true what Lonnie told Brother Mark, then all we have to do is sit quiet and see what next Dilly will do.”

“Wa’al, yet cain’t expect ter sit quiet long, son,” said Old Pete. “When Dilly’s stirrin’ the pot he likes ter keep folks restless.”

“Then we can join forces and do a little scouting ourselves, huh, Ham?”

At that juncture, Mammy Hammil appeared in the doorway, flushed and happy looking. “You-all do a leetle scoutin’ out hyur in the kitchen. Pone don’t keep hot fer chattin’ men folks and besides, Son Mark must be plumb starved. Ham-meat an’ fried ’taters an’ the coffee’s sizzlin’ a’ready....”

Mark got up and limped toward the motherly old soul. “Mrs. Hammil, did I hear you say ham and potatoes and coffee?” he gasped. “Or am I up on that consarned bald and dreaming?”

The good woman’s face beamed. “You air not dreamin’ ’tall, Son Mark,” she said sweetly. “My breakfas’ is jest the actualest breakfas’ whatever you tasted.”

“And now,” said Mark with a mischievous wink at Hammil, “I’m going to actually eat that actual breakfast, believe me!”

Hammil laughed. “I do believe you, Brother Mark. In fact, I got a notion that yore a-goin’ ter eat.”

CHAPTER XXX

A CONSCIENCE SOOTHED

Mark managed to guide Hammil and the mechanics to a safe landing in the meadow. It was difficult, and all were glad to escape the ever present danger of flying straight into the jutting ridge that so effectually hid the meadow except at that altitude so feared by airmen in mountainous regions.

While the mechanics were working on the Kent D-2, Mark told Hammil again of his heartbreaking attempts to make his distress signals seen during his dreary stay in the meadow. Together they went over the ground trying to see if perhaps, in his great excitement and anxiety, Mark had not overlooked some vantage point at which his signals could have been seen.

“But you’re right,” Hammil agreed finally, “thar ain’t anything like that ’round hyur. Jest that spot at the end of the meadow thar an’ that’s overshadowed from the air ’count of the forest so close and the ridge shrubbery up above. No, Brother Mark, yer didn’t have a chance o’ makin’ me see yer, I can see that frum hyur.”

“But you *did* have an idea I was here, huh?” Mark asked.

“Sho’—at first I did,” Hammil answered. “When yer didn’t show up I jest waited thinkin’ yer might ’a’ stayed longer than yer meant to. Then the mechanic told me what a speck a gas yer went out on. Wa’al, I never shet an eye that night nor the next mornin’ till that plane o’ mine was finished. I kep’ at those pore fellers every minute till ’twas in shape.”

“I took that all into consideration, Ham. I knew you’d come as soon as you could.”

“Wa’al, I knew how terrific that storm was an’ I knew yuh’d gone toward the peaks so I kep’ a-thinkin’ mebbe yuh’d been blown down in one o’ them many narrow ravines. Somehow I didn’t think ’bout thet meadow, never thinkin’ yuh’d have the luck ter git carried thar.”

“You mean the *hard* luck!” Mark laughed. “If it had been just me I wouldn’t have given a darn but, Ham, poor Higgins had me worried sick. I couldn’t leave him and I wasn’t helping him by staying on there without any chance of help. Gosh, that’s terribly on my conscience that perhaps I didn’t get going before I did.”

Lieutenant Hammil looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head. “Tell yer somethin’ I heard from Buck Rose ’fore we took off fer hyur. He said the word’s gone round somehow thet Lon Higgins wa’n’t a victim of his injuries.”

“No!” Mark asked puzzled. “What do you suppose....”

“Tell me, Brother Mark,” Hammil interposed with his quaint drawl, “when yer crawled out o’ thet underbrush from Dake Riggs’ place whar did yer git?”

“I found a faint trail and I took it, naturally. That brought me to a sort of grove and beyond I found a wagon road that looked as if it would take me in the direction of your house. You see I was depending solely on my memory and hoping against hope that perhaps Jasper had given me the right directions. That is, I was until I came to the wagon road—he hadn’t told me anything about that. All he mentioned was a little fork in the trail. Well, I didn’t see any but I kept up hope ’til after I left the grove. He had told the truth about the yaller patch, as he called it, but that was all.”

“The grove, hey? Wa’al, Brother Mark, he knew you’d be plumb bound ter find that. Thar wa’n’t no other by then, hey?”

“That was just it, Ham. There was nothing else but that wagon road and it ran straight for maybe a mile, then it forked considerably and I didn’t know which way to go. They all looked to go straight in the direction of the creek, but I know now that they didn’t. The one that I did take steered me off after a quarter of a mile. It went directly north I think so I came back and after I’d said eenie meenie, I took one of the other two. That was much worse. It struck off south after a half a mile and so after I walked back and took the last one which I should have taken in the first place, I caught sight of the creek not a half mile along.”

The lieutenant nodded. “Fore yer came to the fork, Brother Mark, did yer happen ter notice that the road passed under a hill?”

“Of course I did,” Mark answered, surprised. “How could I help but notice it! Some picturesque little cut that is. There’s a dumpy little road runs up there but it didn’t attract me because it went north and south. I’m right about that, ain’t I, Ham!”

“Sho’. It wouldn’ o’ helped yer none. But that wa’n’t why I asked yer ’bout it. I have another reason, Brother. I wanted ter find out the location particular so’s ter get my bearings about whar Duke has his place. It’s plain as day now. That’s what they call Boulder Cut Road up thar an’ it gits its name quite proper. Thar’s a bunch o’ boulders on the hill over the cut an’ sometimes we’ve had some plumb nasty accidents thar. Seems as if after a right bad storm it loosens things a bit on the hill and thar’s occasional slides that have whacked

many a pore traveler into eternity that was so unfortunate as ter be passin' at the time.”

“I see,” Mark said, quite thoughtful too. “Listen, Ham, you never talk around a subject like this without a pretty definite idea in mind, do you?”

“Yore right, Brother Mark. I've *got* an idea 'bout that cut. Dake Riggs' shack ain't so far frum thar. Fact is, it's down 'long that first fork yer took mistakenly. It's right 'round the bend whar the road shoots north.”

“Mm,” Mark sighed, “I was darn close to danger then, huh? Good thing I didn't delay long or they might have caught me.”

Hammil seemed to pay but little attention to that. He was obviously thinking of something more important. “See any wagon trail at all?” he asked quickly. “Fresh trail I'm a-meanin'?”

“Course I did,” Mark answered. “I didn't think anything of that, though. Nothing so remarkable in a fresh wagon trail on a road, is there?”

“'Tis up in these hills, Brother Mark. 'Specially our part of the country. Mostly pore folks, yer see. Dake Riggs is about the only feller 'round I know of as havin' a wagon. 'Tisn't much of a one as wagons go, but it helps carry whatever he gets ter carry frum the patch ter his house. With the mule fer hoss power it's plum convenient, I reckon. Easy ter hide away a little wagon and a mule in that big patch, hey?”

“The grove you mean, Hammil? Why, I guess it is, now that you speak of it.”

“We call it Boulder Patch, Brother. I know 'xactly whar 'tis.”

“Then why ask me all about it?”

“Jest ter make sure thet Buck Rose wa’n’t hearin’ gossip. Frum some roundabout way he got the news that Dake Riggs keeps his wagon and mule at the patch an’ the other night when you wuz at his place it was thar too. What I mean ter say is Buck heard that they didn’t have ter carry poor Lon all the way ter Dake’s shack—they had the wagon hidin’ in the patch so’s they could put him in it when they got ter the patch an’ take him the rest o’ the way ter Dake’s. Trouble is, he didn’t get ter Dake’s alive.”

“No,” Mark said sadly, “he didn’t. The wagon part doesn’t alter it much except that he must have had it more comfortable there than being carried by the men. I guess Billy didn’t help them much. Jasper seemed kind of upset about it too. He didn’t say anything but he looked an awful lot and I gathered that Billy didn’t help them at all.”

“Zactly, that’s what Buck heard. Yer see Buck hears heaps. Bein’ kind of quiet an’ a sort of furriner, coming as he does from down country way, he listens and learns a powerful lot. He heard somethin’ frum Abe Torlin ’bout the other night that’s set me thinkin’ along with other things yer told us ’bout Billy. Abe was one o’ those men yer saw in Dake’s the other night. Dake’s kin—his brother’s wife’s nephew, an’ kind of a easy goin’ feller fer a Riggs.”

Mark laughed. “But he isn’t a Riggs, Ham! Not if he’s Dake’s brother’s wife’s nephew! That doesn’t make him anything to Dake at all.”

“He air kin o’ the Riggesses!” declared Hammil solemnly.

“All right,” Hark agreed, suppressing a chuckle with difficulty, “but you’re the darndest people I’ve ever seen.

You can make relations when there just *ain't any!* Go on—what about Abe Torlin!”

“You must o’ remembered him, Brother Mark,” Hammil said smiling again. “He was that kind o’ dried-up lookin’ cuss with a scar on his chin.”

“I didn’t notice—I was too excited, Ham! All I noticed was when I woke up an’ saw Jasper keeping watch over me. I’d know that bow-legged....”

“Wa’al, Abe Torlin is the one I want ter tell you about. He let it get ter Buck about them takin’ pore Lon in the wagon soon’s they could git ter the patch an’ out. Seems Dilly jest disappeared—ran away frum ’em. Wa’al, they went about thar way long the road—one whacking at the mule an’ the other two kind of keepin’ watch at Lon frum whar they set in front. Abe says ’fore they got ter the cut, they thought they seed somebuddy runnin’ long up the hill, but they thought nothin’ of it. When they got right thar an’ started ter go under, somethin’ went bump an’ afore they knew it a boulder fell right on top o’ the wagon an’ smashed it ter pieces.”

“And poor Lon with it, huh? So that’s the real story of his death, huh?”

“Jest a minute, Brother Mark. Yer see, not much prevented Abe and the rest frum gettin’ hit either, ’ceptin they were quick an’ jumped in time. Abe was so het up about it, he jest had ter tell Buck an’ the funny part o’ it is he said he flashed his lantern up the hill after and could o’ sworn he saw Dilly Riggs runnin’ way inter the dark.”

Mark’s face lighted. “My gosh! Dilly *didn’t* want to let Lon live to tell the truth about me, nor himself. Well, it sounds pretty plausible, Ham. I wouldn’t doubt that he’d do just that kind of thing. Still you wouldn’t think that this Abe

Torlin would breathe a word to an outlander like Buck when he was kin of the Riggses, huh?”

Hammil scowled. “Abe, Jasper—the hull passel o’ Riggses, ’ceptin’ a few, o’ course, hate Dilly like pizen. In their hearts they do, ’cause they know he’s an informer. But they daren’t say so ’count o’ Dake. Dake would kill ’em unless they jest up an’ showed the skin that Dilly creeps in—the snake that he is.”

“You mean he has to have proof positive or he’ll commit murder, huh?” Mark asked.

“Well, I’ll admit that sounds pretty difficult, but it seems to me that if the kin keep on hating him, Dilly need only try another trick to have them jump on his neck. And he’s bound to try something like that, Ham. But you should worry, huh? While they’re fighting among themselves, you can be certain they haven’t the time to annoy your people.”

Hammil looked up at the Twin Peaks, wrapped in a dreamy haze. There was something gentle and luring in their solitude that seemed to offer an insistent appeal to the on-looking traveler whether by air or afoot. Memories of underbrush, however, were too fresh in Mark’s mind for the peaks to find a responding chord there. The lieutenant too, was wary.

“Even hyur in this bald, Brother Mark,” said he, “don’t tempt me. I wouldn’ be surprised if I didn’ ever get a hankerin’ ter drop in hyur again. It’s jest got no charm fer me and that’s that. Another thing, the idee of that Riggs family a-traipsin’ up hyur o’ nights on their evil ways, kinder pizens th’ air. No, I’ll be plumb glad when yo’re in yer cockpit and takin’ off.”

“Looks as if you’re going to get your wish right now,” Mark laughed for the mechanics were beckoning to them. “Guess the Kent D-2 is shipshape and raring to leave this ‘pizen’ atmosphere, huh Ham?”

Hammil smiled, taking the little fun-poking graciously. “Sho’,” he answered at length. “Ships air like human bein’s, Brother Mark. Why wouldn’ this crate o’ yours get ter feel the *pizen* o’ the Riggses, like I do, hey?”

“Don’t know,” Mark smiled. “But I wish the Kent D-2 could talk and tell me. I’d like to find out for your sake, Ham. I actually would. It’s been a pal of a bus up to that evening—honestly, she did everything but talk.”

“But see how she acted up when a pizen snake like Dilly had somethin’ ter do with yer flying, hey? Brother Mark, I tell yer, it air true.”

Mark, somehow, could find no word with which to deny it.

CHAPTER XXXI

WHISPERED HOSTILITIES

The Sunday following, Johnnie Bly stopped in for a chat with his kinsfolk. He explained that he was on his way to visit a sick aunt who lived in a little town about twenty miles distant from Greeley. Old Pete and Hammil showed an immediate concern and suggested that they go along to see their ailing relative.

Mark refused to accompany them and was rather glad when it developed that Mrs. Hammil would not go either. She was not feeling in the best of spirits that day and told her “men folks” that she was glad of the chance to stay at home and rest and talk with Mark.

“We’ll set an’ hev a nice, quiet Sunday,” she said, a little wearily. “Seems like I need it with sech ructions as them thar Riggses give us o’ late.”

Johnnie Bly crossed a long, lanky leg over his bony knee and eyed appraisingly his Sunday best store suit. When he looked up, his eyes glittered.

“Seems like the Riggses air goin’ ter give us more ructions than ever frum what I heerd long the road this mornin’. Heerd thet Devlin s’prised Abe Torlin alone in Dake’s place yistiddy mornin’. He wuz on watch, an’ course he wouldn’ tell whar Dake nor nobuddy else wuz. So Devlin jest took Abe ’long ter Greeley after he ’bout wrecked things fer Dake.”

A frown clouded Old Pete’s eyes. “Dilly reckoned things ’bout right, hey? He knowed his pappy wa’n’t goin’ ter be

thar yistiddy particular, and he knowed Abe was to be thar, so jedgematically, it looks like Dilly found out Abe's been a-talkin' 'bout some things, hey? Dilly cain't afford enemies about loose. What I cain't understand is why thet yaller-livered feller wants ter see his pappy's bizness busted up when it brings him a livin'."

Hammil smiled. "Don't forget, pap, that Dilly's been gettin' good pay frum Devlin. Another thing, he knows Dake can start somewhere else—maybe he has another place for all we know. Dilly can fool Devlin the same as he fools everybody else. He'll tell him jest so much an' no more. Devlin'll get the laugh some day."

Mark was puzzled. "I'm in a fog," he said thoughtfully. "I can't believe that Dilly would go to so much trouble just to get even with this Abe Torlin."

"Dilly would go to *any* trouble," Hammil assured him. "He's a-gettin' in so deep thet it's right hard fer him ter keep track o' his enemies inside an' outside his kin."

"All right, then, but why should any of them bother us now—I mean you Hammils?" Mark asked.

"Jest 'cause Dilly's been talkin' up thet we informed Devlin 'gainst Dake's place, I s'pose," Old Pete spoke up with measured tones. "Dake'll believe him—Dake'll believe anything thet rascal tells him. Somebuddy's got ter git the blame fer Abe an' we're plumb handy."

Mark smiled, hiding a decided skepticism. "Maybe you people are just thinking things now. Maybe there won't be a thing come of it."

"Mebbe not, Son Mark," said poor Mrs. Hammil hopefully. "We'll jest let these men folks git long ter see Aunt Ida so's they'll be back soon after dark. They kin be

keerful comin' back and goin' ter Greeley, an' we'll be right comfortable, hey?"

Mark declared they would and at Hammil's suggestion promised to keep a weather eye out for prowlers, especially in the event that the travelers were unable to get back before nightfall.

A few signals were decided upon in any such contingency, one of which was a lantern to be hung out on the road and the house left dark. If no such prowlers were about, things were to be left as usual, allowing the returning men folks to come home in peace. Mark fervently hoped that the latter state of affairs would prevail.

He wouldn't admit the thought, but this feud business was getting on his nerves.

CHAPTER XXXII

A LATE CALLER

The day passed, however, in perfect peace. A glowing sunset glorified the drowsy hill world and when twilight came it found Mark and Mrs. Hammil anxiously looking forward to the homecoming of the absent male members of the household.

Darkness stole over the shining white house and the two sat quietly within. No light had been made for they had decided to wait and watch for a chance prowler or two from the quarrelsome Riggs clan. But their vigil was for naught as they neither heard nor saw anything more dangerous than a scampering rabbit.

At about eight o'clock, Mrs. Hammil assured Mark that he need no longer fear prowlers for the Riggses, she told him, were far too lazy to come that late. Those that weren't in dark business at that hour, were sound asleep.

Before lighting up the house, however, Mark determined to have a quiet look about and went outdoors armed with a Winchester that the good woman had thrust in his arm. He told her that it was silly and that he'd not have any use for it, but he had gone only a few feet when he decided that the smooth nozzle did give one a sense of infinite comfort after all.

His eyes were everywhere, tracking down shadows and even pursuing some soft swishing thing that passed him by in the darkness beyond the house. He chuckled heartily a moment later when he discovered that it was only a moth,

which flew directly into the glaring white bulb of his flashlight when he turned it onto the hapless insect.

Mrs. Hammil, he knew, was waiting and listening inside the parlor window. He could not see her, but he could visualize her white hair and anxious, lined face. Well, he told himself with a yawn, he could go back to the house and quiet her fears. Everything was all right. The Riggses were manifestly not mischief bent that night.

He flashed his light around the neighboring thicket, then proceeded toward the house.

He had gone only a few paces when he heard the pattering of footsteps behind him and a man's soft voice called out, "*Hey!*"

Mark wheeled around, grasping the rifle while he let the light fall to the ground.

"I'm Little Tom Ailers," said the fellow approaching quickly. "I air in need o' help frum a sartin feller by the name o' Mark Gilmore what's with Old Pete Hammil."

"That's me," Mark said, feeling genuine relief. "What do you want of me, Mr. Ailers?" he added with a purposely suspicious intonation.

"I hain't hyur ter do yer dirt," the man replied with soft, meek tones. "I hain't aimin' fer nothin' but help. I hain't got nary a rifle-gun nor nothin'."

Mark picked up the flashlight with his left hand, not releasing his grasp on the rifle. Quickly he flashed the light into the fellow's face. It was familiar and then again it wasn't. He knew he hadn't before met a hillsman with the dark, rather peculiar eyes of this stranger, yet there was decidedly something about him that called up recent memories.

He laughed at himself the next moment for he was convinced then that Mr. Ailers looked like all other hillsmen if only because of the inevitable black, battered hat so tightly pulled over his weather-beaten forehead. But the eyes, decidedly; he had not seen them ever before.

“Well, what is it, Mr. Ailers?” Mark asked tersely.

“I air cum ter ax yer a Christian favor, Mr. Gilmore,” replied the man. “Pore Lonnie Higgins was tuk ter my house by the Riggses an’ he air in a hard way. My woman cain’t do a thing fer him an’ him axin fer you-all mos’ the day.”

Mark stared. “*Lon Higgins!*” he repeated with bated breath. “What are you talking about, Ailers? Lon is dead ... killed, so I heard by ... he died in Dake Riggs’ wagon on his way to their cabin! Why....”

“Wa’al, he air ter my place jist the same an’ needs yer. I hain’t aimin’ ter tell the Riggses I’m a-doin’ this, but the boy needs your help. He said you-all promised ter take him ter the hospital an’....”

Mark was aghast. He grasped the man’s shoulder. “Why is it we’ve been hearing that pore Lon’s dead, huh? *Why?*”

Ailers shrugged his shoulders. “Riggses’ lies!” he hissed scornfully. “Twon’t take yer long ter git ter my place. I cum on my mule, but I wux ’fraid ter make much noise ’count o’ knowin’ how you-all must be expectin’ com-p’ny frum the Riggses. Mule’s tied up yonder on the road. Didn’t want ter git shot fer a Riggs, yer know.”

“Are you a Hammil?” Mark asked joyfully.

“I air a Ailers,” replied the man doggedly. “Hain’t the folks ter hum? No? Wa’al’s too bad fer that Peter cain’t mebbe cum with us a spell, hey?”

Mark explained hurriedly. "They won't be more than an hour or two, I guess. Then Hammil can come on to your house and meet me there. Mrs. Hammil will be safe 'til then, I guess. I'll leave this rifle with her." He laughed. "She won't need it, I'm certain, but it won't hurt to have it in case—"

Ailers chuckled softly. "Wa'al, jist tell her who I be an' she'll tell you hit air all right. I'll be gittin' that mule o' mine started. Lonnie hain't bad as he was, but he hain't betterin' 'tall."

"I'm so glad that there's even that much good to be told of him," Mark said breathlessly. "We heard he was dead ... twice, I heard it. Well, I'll hurry and tell Mrs. Hammil and I'll borrow one of Old Pete's mules. Be with you in a sec!"

Mrs. Hammil was delighted to hear that poor Lonnie Higgins was still in the land of the living. She pooh-poohed Mark's warnings to be careful and said she reckoned that it was safe and sound to light up for her men folks.

"Go 'long naow with Little Tom Ailers," she said breathlessly. "He air friendly ter the Hammils so thar hain't no danger 'bout that." Then: "Did he 'low ter tell yer fer why Dake tuk the boy ter Little Tom's?"

"No, he didn't," Mark admitted. "But I guess from what he said that Dake brought him there because they didn't know what to do for him. Why this report of Lon's death has circulated so freely, I don't know."

"Calc'late Little Tom knows when he says, *Riggses' lies*," said Mrs. Hammil disdainfully. "Wa'al, jest go 'long naow."

"*And how!*" Mark exclaimed, and rushed to Old Pete's nearest barn to fetch a mule.

A few seconds later he was coaxing the stubborn animal up the road to join the waiting Ailers.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A CONFESSION

Ailers became silent after they were started along the creek road. Mark wondered for a while, then decided that the fellow was perhaps naturally quiet. And after they had been riding a half hour in this same silence, poor Mark's cheery, sympathetic soul was chilled and filled with gloomy thoughts.

They were in the back country by that time, going in a direction that had been very real to Mark only a few nights previous. He said nothing of this, however, but spoke of the utter blackness and the silence.

Finally he could stand it no longer. "Do you live this side of the Boulder Cut, Ailers," he asked desperately, "or do you live the other side?"

"'Tother side," mumbled the man.

Mark looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "We must be almost there, huh?"

"Whar?"

"To the cut. Why, sure we are," Mark asked, peering intently ahead. "I can just make out the outlines of the hill."

Ailers had nothing to say to this, but urged his beast ahead with vigorous thumps on its poor, defenceless head. Mark followed behind not a little angry and with a sense of perplexity that was distracting. Then they came to the cut.

Mark urged his animal along with encouraging words and a stimulating slap on its sleek neck and by the time they came out of the inky little tunnel he had caught up with

Ailers. He laughed aloud and suddenly saw the man turn to him, fearfully.

“*Jump, feller!*” he whispered excitedly. “*Quick—jump!*”

Mark jumped, pulling the mule along with him as he did so. Ailers jumped too and ran ahead, screaming at the top of his voice. Presently, however, the boom of a falling boulder could be heard rolling down over the cut until it struck the road with a terrific impact.

Mark felt the very thud of it where he was standing. Ailers, too, stared at it as if he were not certain even then that he had escaped with his life. He looked stupid for a brief interval, then suddenly his face lighted and he whipped out a flashlight from his pocket and played it up on the hill.

“I know it air you-all, Dilly!” he cried out hoarsely. “Ef I find ye—I’ll *kill* ye!”

Not a sound broke the ensuing silence and Mark stood staring at the man in speechless confusion. Finally the words rushed to his lips.

“Ailers, if you don’t talk like Jasper Bolin and look like him—all except your eyes ... *your eyes*. Why, *Ailers*, you are *Jasper—you are!*”

The man’s eyes dropped under Mark’s accusation. “I air Jasper, feller,” he said with a more natural sounding voice, “I hain’t got the heart ter deny, I’m Jasper.”

CHAPTER XXXIV

JIMSON WEED

“Why,” Mark asked, “what’s changed you—your eyes, I mean?”

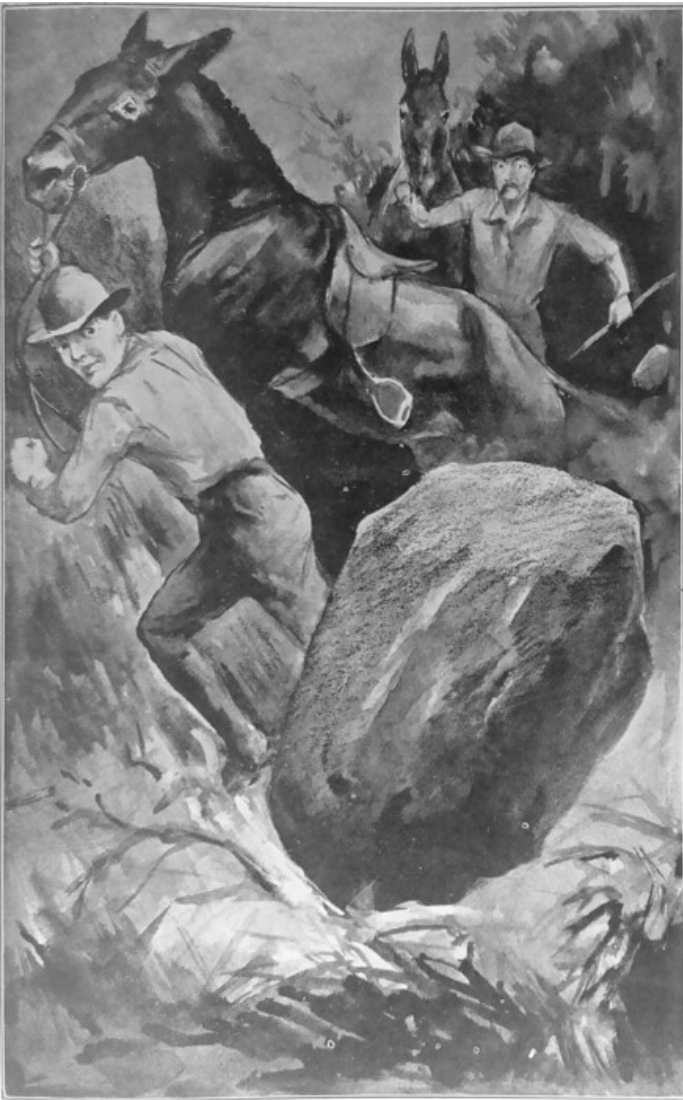
Jasper grinned sheepishly. “Jimson weed, furriner,” he explained, “A body hain’t got ter do mo’ than squeeze some o’ the juice inter each eye an’ in a leetle while hit changes the eyes black as night. Hit’s a trick my mammy knowed a long spell ’fore she was married. I did hit ter fool yer inter thinkin’ I was Little Tom Ailers so ye’d cum. I cain’t help it—hit’s Dake’s orders ter bring yer ter ’count fer Abe.”

“Abe?” Mark repeated indignantly. “What have I to do with *him*?”

“Powerful lot, so Dake reckons. So does most o’ the Riggses. They hain’t blamin’ the Hammils much as they blame you fer this trouble what’s happened lately. I hain’t saying I b’lieve hit, but I hain’t sayin’ I don’t. Jest on general principles I think yer ought ter leave these parts and be whar yer cain’t know what we hill folks are up to. Dake an’ Dilly got me ter do that weed stunt with my eyes so yer wouldn’t reco’nize me, but you air too smart.”

“You gave yourself away when you screamed,” said Mark angrily. “What started that boulder and how did you know it was coming before I did?” he added with vehemence. “*Dilly*? Come now, I happened to have heard that he’s suspected of shoving boulders before and onto wounded boys! Just think of that, Jasper. That snake’s the most cruel....”

“I knowed it—I knowed it!” Jasper cried, then caught himself just as quickly. “‘Tain’t true ’bout the pore boy bein’ alive yet—I’m feered I’m a sinner fer saying sech things, but Dake put me up ter tell yer. They thought it’d strike yer heart ter hear it an’ ye’d surely fetch ’long. Wa’al, it tuk my heart insted, furriner, ter see how willin’ an’ cheerful yer was ter hear that poor Lonnie was alive. Then when we cum ter the cut an’ I remembered how cruel he was ruint I jist looked up and I seed a figger runnin’ thar on the hill. I seed it!”



THE BOULDER STRUCK THE ROAD WITH A
TERRIFIC IMPACT.

“You needn’t tell me,” Mark said, disgusted. “*Dilly!*”

Jasper was loyal to his kin to the last. He stared vacantly ahead, but Mark had not been oblivious of the fleeting glitter of hatred in his darkened eyes at the mention of Dilly’s

name. The Riggsses might hate Dilly but they were ever loyal to a Riggs.

Mark got astride his mule again. “Of course you fooled me slick, Jasper, I’ll hand it to you. I’m at your mercy! I’m not such a fool as to think I have a chance of getting away.”

“I gotta plumb good gun,” Jasper said in a trembling voice. “I air not goin’ ter use it ’less I have ter. Reckon Dake won’t be hard on ye either ef yer promise ter clear outa sight o’ Greeley an’ fly back no’th whar yer b’long. Tain’t no use o’ tryin’ ter bust in our upscuddlin’ an’ thet yer cain’t seem ter do. Yo’re right fer the Hammils’!”

“Sure, I am!” said Mark proudly. “They’re fine people and, not to hurt your feelings, Jasper—I can’t find the same thing true of you Riggsses.”

“Wa’al,” Jasper said, wagging his head from side to side, “yer jist better git ’long up ter the patch with me now, but I give yer warnin’, don’t say ter Dake what yer jest said ter me.”

“I’ll tell Dake everything he doesn’t like to hear and see what he does about it,” Mark laughed indifferently. “There are some limits for a hillsman to go—even with a foreigner.”

Jasper looked up and Mark felt not a little awed by the firm resolve in the hillsman’s eyes. The jimson weed, he decided, did not only darken one’s eyes....

CHAPTER XXXV

THE FINISHING TOUCH

Mark was surprised at nothing he found in the grove that night. The group of Riggsses gathered about with Dake standing gravely in their midst did not daunt him in the least. In point of fact, he followed Jasper smilingly, resolved that no hillsman should find him a coward.

A large fire was throwing sparks skyward and over it a cauldron was hung. Each tense face moving about in its glow looked cruelly distorted, Mark thought, and his roving eyes, did not miss a good pile of feathers lying over under a tree.

So that was their game—tar and feathers!

He smiled a greeting at Dake and just then Dilly's slinking form appeared in the light. He moved toward his father's side and stopped, his high cheek bones bright with color.

"Wa'al," he said looking straight at Mark. "Reckon yo're 'bout ready ter leave the country, hain't yer?"

"Not so's *you'll* notice it," Mark replied scathingly. "And while I'm talking to your father, just you crawl back there in the woods with the rest of the snakes."

Dilly frowned but Dake's cold, blue eyes effectually prevented him from making any retort.

"Thar's two things I got fer ter tell yer," said Dake in icy tones. "Yer kin either git a nice coatin' or leave county by five tomorrer evenin'."

"By whose orders, may I ask?" Mark asked crisply.

"*Mine*," answered Dake and his mouth came together in a straight, thin line.

“As a result of what your informing son has so cleverly lied to you about, huh?” Mark retorted. “I...”

“Never mind arguing with that numbskull, Brother Mark!” Hammil’s voice suddenly interposed. “Devlin and his men will do the talking.”

A swarm of men seemed to leap into the firelight like so many apparitions. They had moved with silent yet vital tread until the Riggses were entirely surrounded. Everywhere Mark looked he saw a Hammil, rifle set and with the calculating eyes of Indian hunters.

Old Pete chuckled. “Jest in time, hey?”

Mark felt himself relax. He looked around from one to the other then. Dilly, white and quaking; Dake, coldly defiant. But the one he felt most sorry for was Jasper—little bow-legged Jasper, with his jimson-blackened eyes staring wistfully up into the gleaming guns of the government men.

Devlin was saying something to Dilly about a murder charge and attempted assault and to Dake he droned off a list of offenses resulting from that person’s habitual disobedience of federal laws. Not a word was spoken by the Riggses, not a sound issued from their sphinx-like jaws, yet Mark could have sworn he saw Dake’s eyes smile and his shoulders shake.

“Kinder givin’ us what you no’ the’ners call the hah-hah,” Hammil explained as they rode homeward. “He hain’t worrying none—neither’s Dilly. The Riggses air strong in this hyur county an’ Devlin won’t do mo’ than keep ’em whar they cain’t touch you fer a while.”

“You mean *me*?” Mark said. “Why Dilly’s charged with....”

“He hain’t charged with nawthin’ till the jedge says so,” Old Pete interposed sagaciously. “An’ frum what I knows ’bout jedges, they hain’t much in store fer the Riggsses ’ceptin’ Dilly might hang himself one o’ these days with jest ’nuff rope o’ his own.”

“Some enforcement of law you people have here,” Mark said sardonically.

“An’ jes’ fer thet very reason, Brother Mark, you hain’t safe in these hyur hills. You air too hot-headed. Pappy an’ I can stand things cause we don’t know so much different—we can stick up for ourselves an’ not try ter reckon we’re livin’ up no’t whar most folks are law-abidin as far as these things go. But hyur, we-all air used ter it an’ if the law don’t operate satisfactory, wa’al, we do the next best thing an’ take a chance; that’s all we *can* do. We hain’t sentimental ’bout enemies that hain’t sentimental ’bout us. We’re peaceable till folks cum ter our door an’ start shootin’. But I don’t blame yer fer gittin’ excited. Yer hain’t got a couple of hundred years o’ feuds with the Riggsses behind yer. That’s why I decided ter take over yore job an’ let yer take over my old job up no’t. It’s plumb better every way, Brother Mark....”

“I know it is, Ham—I... Well, it isn’t that, but why are you so anxious....”

Hammil smiled indulgently. “I air a good many years older than you, kid brother, an’ it’s jest ’bout time I took some worries frum pappy’s shoulders. I kin keep the school goin’ an’ take care o’ pappy’s mules some an’ still hev time left over fer watchin the Riggsses. I cain’t tell when they’ll need ter be trimmed up a leetle.”

“But, Ham,” Mark protested. “It’s been so short for me down here. Just as if I’m a sort of failure. Summers will

think....”

“He knows what I wired him today,” Hammil interposed smiling. “He knows I told him you was too good fer these hyur hills an’ that yer could handle yore job with flyin’ colors in a bigger field. Wa’al, Summers reckoned he thought so too and said he reckoned ’twa’n’t much could be done with a hillsman anyhow.”

“No,” Mark agreed, “I guess there isn’t. But I’ll never forget you for such a boost, Ham. It’s white of you, and to think you’ll be spending the rest of your time here.”

“Jest what I been lonesome fer an’ never knowed ’zactly till I realized how glad I was ter visit Aunt Ida and mingle with my kin.”

Mark smiled. “It’s in you too, Ham, huh? Well, I suppose it’s a disease sort of. But say, how did you know about me—about me being up at the grove?”

Old Pete looked over at Mark and drew his mule aside. “Yer knew ’bout Abe Torlin, hey? Wa’al, seems he knew ’bout the plot ter tar an’ feather yer ternight an’ Devlin got it outa him without nary a bit o’ trouble, ’cause Abe is powerful mad on Dilly an’ he wanted ter git even. We just told Devlin everythin’ bout thet rascal Dilly too and Abe he calc’lated ’twas time ter make the loafer suffer.”

“Well, it was fine, you coming like that. Gosh, I was relieved to get rid of that coating of tar. I wouldn’t have given in to Dake Riggs, even if it meant two coats, but yet I wasn’t looking forward to it, like a pink tea. It’s lucky you got Devlin to admit that Dilly was informing.”

“Wa’al,” said Old Pete, as he urged on his mule again. “Peter an’ me never knowed it afore till terday. When we got ter Ida’s place who should be thar visitin’ but Devlin, an’

fore yer knowed it we found hit out that he's Ida's husband's niece's son."

"Is Aunt Ida's husband a Hammil?" Mark asked with his tongue in his cheek.

"Yes," Old Pete answered solemnly, "he air a Smith by family, so he air a Hammil a-bein' Ida's husband, 'cause she air my cousin."

"Oh, I see," Mark said politely.

Hammil smiled. "Yo're laughing, Brother Mark, but don't mind us. I s'pose we air crazy on kin. Still it was funny, hey, that we should find out Devlin was our kin?"

Mark agreed that it was quite a coincidence, and though he was too fond of the Hammils to indulge in any jest at their expense, he couldn't refrain from telling the lieutenant that he solemnly hoped the day would never come when he would look further than his first cousins for kin.

And Hammil, ever the true hillsman and host, agreed that one could certainly overdo that sort of thing, himself included.

THE END

[The end of *Mark Gilmore's Lucky Landing* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh]