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Knob and shouting for Harry. We hunted all night and all the next day and night till we was plumb worn out. Many a time we'd have given up if we hadn't been ashamed to stop as long as the little schoolmistress kept on. I can hear her now, saying again and again that he'd promised to stay in the house till she got back. Then she'd call, 'Harold! Harold! Harold!' so pitiful it made your heart turn to water, an' so low and husky he couldn't have heard it if he'd been twenty feet away.

"We never did find him! Never! Not even his body! A catamount must have got him of course; but nobody ever told that to the little schoolmistress. To her we said that he must have wandered away and away clear out of the mountains, and that somebody must have picked him up and taken him off, not knowing where he come from. We lied of course, for no five-year-old kid could have gotten far enough away for that, but we had to lie and keep on lying as long as we dared.

"For a while the little schoolmistress went half crazy, with her ears cocked—a-listenin'. Then she stopped listening. Her hair got frost white, an' her face got thinner and thinner. Most folks here in the mountains that gets thin and white haired get bent and ugly, too; but she got beautiful instead—beautiful! There ain't no other name for it.

"She changed in other ways, too. Up till then she'd always been a 'furriner' to us. As I said just now she warn't our kind, an' we knowed it and she knowed it. But after the boy went she began to change. The mountains seemed to get her somehow. Little by little she changed, till she seemed as much a part of them as the Blowing Rocks and the Big Pine and the gashed summit of the Old Bald above her cabin. Nobody held it against her any more that she was a furriner.

"Then she started the school. Seems like she hadn't had time to notice how ignorant and shifless we all were as long as she had her boy. But when he was gone, she looked around and saw, maybe—it's a hard thing to say—but maybe the Lord sent Harold to bring her to Little Mill Trace and took him away again to let her see how much we needed her. There was a preacher up here a year or two ago that 'lowed that He did, an' maybe he's right—he seemed real intimate with the Lord! But it don't seem fair to me for the Lord to do a thing like that for the sake of a passel of onery mountain folks like we—uns.

"Anyhow she started the school in her own cabin. No, it warn't no free school. Nobody would have come if it had been. We ain't acceptin' charity from nobody up hyer in the mountains. Eve'body had to pay—not in money of course, for money's mighty scarce in these parts. The boys paid mostly by doing work in her garden and bringing her a side of haw meat now and then, an' the girls by making her clothes an' by taking her over a chicken or some eggs and sich like. After a while me and some of the others went over and built her a schoolhouse and cut cord-wood to keep it warm in winter. We've been cutting that cord-wood ever since—for full thirty years. I stacked the last of it this winter not more'n a week ago. She won't ever burn it."

The old man's voice broke, but instantly and angrily—he regained command of it. "There's the chimney of the school," he went on hurriedly. "Yonder through that notch in the trees."

The old man's shaking finger, knotted and lean, pointed through the window. Following its direction with my eyes I saw, against the snow, the same faint wisp of gray that the guide had pointed out to me an hour before.

"For thirty winters I've seen the smoke curling up from the chimney," Zeke finally went on. "It don't seem possible it's going to stop now. It's been a beacon set on a hill to all the region hereabout. Nobody but us can tell how much we'll miss it."

This acceptance—the acceptance of all the people whom I had met—of the sentence of death as irrevocable made me wonder. I asked as to the malady of the schoolmistress and suggested that she might get well again.

Zeke shook his head. "I don't know just what she's got," he said. "But Dr. Rufe Saunders says she can't get well, an' he knows."

Dr. Rufe Saunders it seemed was one of the little schoolmistress' pupils. He had gone out into the world, had learned his trade and had come back to practice it among his kindred and neighbors. Either because he was a born doctor or because his heart was in his work, he had accomplished things that seemed wonderful to the mountaineers. None of them questioned his dictum. I, however, being a stranger ventured to demur.

"Doubtless," said I, "Dr. Saunders is both wise and skilful; but in the city there are others still more skilful. Why not send for one of them?"

Zeke threw up his hands. "Because we ain't got the money," he declared roughly. "We're poor up here, Mister, dead poor. We've got enough to eat and wear, and we've got houses to shelter us. But we ain't got any money. An' furrin doctors want money. Dr. Saunders says none of the big men would come up here for less than a thousand dollars—an' the whole county ain't got a thousand dollars in cash."

My interest mounted uncontrollably. "But how about the men who have gone out into the world?" I questioned. "Perhaps they—"

Zeke nodded. "Some of 'em would I reckon if they knowed," he agreed. "But who's to find 'em? We don't set much store by letter writing up here, an' there's mighty few of 'em been kept up with. Dr. Saunders has written to some of 'em, but he ain't had no answers. An' I reckon it's too late now."

After a little Dr. Saunders came in—a typical mountaineer—a grave, stern man, whose appearance was a guarantee of his words. He gave absolutely no hope for the little schoolmistress.

"I've done all I can," he groaned. "But of course I'm not up-to-date. I can't keep so, living so far away from the hospitals and surgeons. One of the big men might save her. There's an operation that Curtis performs that might do it. I've written, but—"

His voice died away.

"I'm just going over to see her," he went on, after a pause. "Would you like to come with me? She is wandering a little—talking of the lost boy you know—and she can't talk to you. But you can see her, and that's a privilege to be remembered, though you may not think it. She's one of God's own women."

I went over, of course. The little schoolmistress' house was two rooms deep, built of whole logs notched together at the ends and daubed with clay. Within it was warm and comfortable. In the middle of one wall was a great fireplace, big enough to house the huge, black logs that it evidently regularly held in cold weather. Splint bottomed chairs one with rockers, stood on the slick, carpetless floors.

In the inner room, on a roughly-made bed, lay the schoolmistress, attended by a mountain woman. The doctor was right. It needed but a single glance at that fine head, those splendid eyes which had already taken on a touch of that infinity toward which their owner was drifting, to see that.

She did not notice me. The doctor was right. She was wandering—more than a little. I caught a word here and there. It was about her boy, her Harold. To her he was still alive. He would be great, famous, a power in the land. Memories of him blended indistinguishably with prophecies that never could come true. "Harold! Harold! Harold!" Her voice ran on insistently. The seals of thirty years had been loosed, and the great, hungry mother's heart poured forth its pent-up paeon. My own heart ached as I stood there and listened.

There came a tap at the door and Zeke entered, carrying an open telegram in his hand—probably the very first telegram that had ever come to the Little Mill Trace. He showed it to the doctor, and the doctor showed it to me. It read:

"Will be with you to-morrow. Am bringing Dr. Curtis with me. He will save her if any one can."

The signature made my eyes widen.



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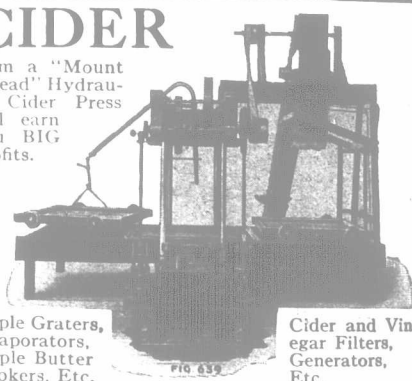
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