

On the Mountain

By Susan E. Claggett

From the railroad a faint path stretched upward to a cabin high on the mountain above Horseshoe Bend. The same path continued downward to a cluster of houses, broadened into a narrow road, and came to a full stop before a rough porch, upon which several men were seated in varying degrees of comfort.

They were listening to one of their number. He was reading, with a trace of impatience—as if compelling himself to be neighborly when his desire was to hasten away—the market reports, the sporting page and the stock market. But what interested him, the war news, apparently did not hold their attention. They turned deaf ears to news from the front, but were absorbed in the Army and Navy ball game that had taken place the day before in Philadelphia.

With a sigh of relief, Willy Warren at last folded his paper, wished them good-day and, walking rapidly away, was soon lost to view upon the higher path. As he disappeared from sight the chair of Uncle Johnny Peyton came down on its four legs with a thud, and the old man said, addressing no one in particular:

"Pears like Billy's mighty low in his mind. He's in a heap of trouble I'm thinking."

"What sort of trouble, Uncle John?" a girl asked casually, as she came through the door of the post office and general store.

"Now, Miss Ma'y, y'know he's 'listed an' don't know what'll becom o' his leedle gal. He's feared he'll have to go 'fore he kin place her."

"I had not heard; but things right themselves in time, and this will be straightened out."

"Maybe, Miss Ma'y, maybe. But y'know Billy's got no one, leas'twise down hyar. There's an old aunt in Joway, an' I guess he's wrot to her, but hain't seen fit to answer, so I reckon she's dead. Course the fever tuk her, but he's riz her diffrent. She's a pretty leedle gal."

"Billy don't b'long hyar, y'know. He jest come. Something the matter with him. Never hear tell of his wife. Jest come with that gal an' she was a baby. Hired that cabin up yonder an' didn't make front till the fever tuk we-alls, then he come down an' tuk kyar of Jim," nodding toward a mountaineer sitting on the steps, "then he tuk hold o' me. Reckin we'd both be in the boneyard if he hadn't."

"So he made friends, after all," said the girl. "I think the child will be taken care of, Uncle Johnny."

"Sure. But that's not the p'int, Miss Ma'y. She's riz diffrent." His voice took on a wheedling tone. "I jest wonder if you couldn't think up some way to help Billy? He sartainly needs it."

"That would be unwarrantable interference, Uncle Johnny. I scarcely know Mr. Warren."

"Don't take no stock in sich talk," said Uncle Johnny, reaching for his twist of tobacco and cutting off a piece of goodly size. "When it comes to doin' things, an' thinkin' up things, Miss Ma'y, you're right smart. You didn't know we-uns when you come do the mountains, but you now has us trained to eat from your hand—almost."

She threw back her head and laughed heartily. "Almost is well put, Uncle Johnny; but I do not see how I can help you in this."

"'Twon't hurt to think erbout it, anyhow, an' p'haps you'll see light," was his concluding comment, as, with a glance toward the faintly outlined path she turned from the group and walked away.

She had been in the mountain three years—at first for her health, then because it claimed her. She had heard all about Billy Warren, had occasionally met him, but save for the most courteous no word had passed between them. For some reason he had not impressed her pleasantly. This was probably due to the fact that he had made no effort to know better one who had made friends with all the mountain people.

But the talk of old John Peyton, or some subconscious sense of trouble in the man himself as he stood shently beside her that morning, waiting for his mail, influenced her in the direction of her walk that afternoon. Yet she was not aware that she had been so influenced until she found herself watching a child dabbled bare feet in the rushing water of a tiny stream while she hushed a cornucopia doll to sleep.

There was no fear in the child's eyes as she raised them to the woman beside her. Instead there was a whispered "hush; you'll wake her. She's been real sick and is just going to sleep."

Mary Hilton dropped upon the ground, and in an equally low voice asked what was wrong.

"Daddy says it's a case of mumps or measles, he's not sure which; but she's been so awfully cross and has tired me so, he says there is no living with either of us."

"Betty, to whom are you talking?" The voice came from the shadow of the cabin.

"A pretty lady, honey?"

"Don't talk me fairy tales, child; pretty ladies don't climb the mountains."

"She looks real daddy. Shad I pinch her and find out?"

"I wouldn't. I'll come and find out for myself. There was a rustle of leaves, and Mary Hilton raised her eyes to Billy Warren's face.

She did not move, and the child, with steadily advancing fingers, again asked: "Shall I pinch her, daddy?"

He did not reply. Instead he drew his hand across his eyes as if uncertain as to the reality. When he did speak his voice was sadly unsteady.

"Thank God! Hereafter I shall always believe in prayer."

Mary looked at him thoughtfully. "You have been praying, and I am an answer to your prayer? In what way, especially?"

"You have come."

"You wanted me?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you not come to me?"

"I want help. I could not ask for it unless as a last resort. Offered, it is different."

"And you think I will offer it?"

"Judging from your goodness to the mountain people. You give comfort to them."

"That is different. They are poor. In my humble way, I give help where it is needed. Years ago I took a course of training in an eastern hospital. It has stood me in good stead in my life here. But my work does not approach yours. You are a physician?"

"An army surgeon, retired on account of ill health, which I have regained on the mountain. You know what that means at this time. I am ordered to Fort Oglethorpe by the 15th. That leaves me but two days, and I feared I would have to ask for that which I hope will be offered."

"And that is?"

His gesture toward the child was eloquent. "I am all she has."

"If I do this thing, do you surrender her entirely, or will you claim her upon your return?"

His eyes held hers with an expression quickly veiled. "I will not return."

"I do not quite understand," she replied slowly. "We are strangers. You must have friends who would gladly do this for you."

"Yes, but I would choose you from all the world."

There was a certain controlled emotion in his voice that affected her strangely, and she rose to her feet.

"Again I say that I do not understand."

"That is natural." He walked the length of the level in front of the cabin and back. "Upon the eve of a great upheaval a man can allow himself a certain latitude of expression, especially when he knows it can do no harm," he said gravely. "I do not expect to return. Because I am convinced of this, I can say to you what under other circumstances would be little short of impudence, for, as you can see, I am a stranger. But I beg you to care for my son when you first come to the mountain. I want you to know this, and to believe it. I could not let you know before. My wife—I do not wish to speak of her. She is dead, and I offer you not affront when I tell you that I love you. It is because of this I wish to leave Betty in your care."

With troubled eyes Mary looked toward the child. "I did not imagine this."

"How could you? My effort has been to keep you from knowing. Will you do this for me, now that you do know? It will be my comfort when my time comes, 'over there.'" He turned from her, looking out into the limitless space. "It will be my comfort," he repeated.

"Why are you so sure you will not return?"

"There would be no incentive, with Betty cared for."

Then it was that Mary surprised herself by saying deliberately. "Mr. Warren, if I told you that my interest—"

"Interest! I would want something more than interest," he interrupted.

"Would that not do for the present?"

"No. It must be something more direct."

For long she hesitated, then said steadily. "I think it is more than interest. I am not sure. But if an overwhelming anxiety for your safe return is an evidence of a deeper feeling, it is yours."

He took her hand, raising it to his lips. "In that case, Mary Hilton, God willing, I will return to you and Betty."

The Black Sheep

By GEORGE ELMER COBB

Reluctantly Jason Hall reproached Pierce Duntley when he gave up his position as a store clerk and joined a show. Duntley did not become an actor of performer, but to the grave, strict, deacon the circus was an abomination and the theater a deep pit. He bluntly informed Duntley that he was on the downward path and intimated that he should see to it that he did not also drag his wife and child to destruction.

"But not interfere," advised Duntley in his offhand way. "I see a chance to make money, and I'm going to take it."

Edith, the wife and daughter, was grieved, but she accepted the situation unannouncedly. She knew the restive spirit of this impulsive husband of hers, and hoped a brief experience would cure him of the roving taint. Each month Duntley came home for a couple of days. He dressed better and had great dreams of sometime owning a show of his own.

The dismal deacon continued to protest. He called the behavior of his son-in-law simply disgraceful. The censorious and narrow-minded father worked on poor Edith until, when Duntley came back from a long trip, he found the household effects in storage and Edith and the baby under the parental roof.

"Give up your nefarious calling, get back to honest work, and your wife will come back to you," said Jason Hall. "Otherwise, I shall see to it that there is a legal separation."

A coolness grew up between man and wife. Duntley flung away, angry, defiant, stubborn. A year went by and he did not reappear. Stories were related to the effect that Duntley had been seen at a picnic in the midst of a rollicking, wine-bibbing set of men and women. Another story was that Duntley had been manager for Mlle. Estrella, "the brilliant, meteoric trapeze artist." In a quiet way a divorce was secured. The deacon died, and Edith, taking her child, little Paul, with her, removed to a quiet country town.

One day Edith left little Paul in charge of the nurse for the day. Her plan was to visit a friend in a neighboring village.

"I'll take the baby down to my sister's, and spend the day there, if you don't object," said Mary.

Mrs. Duntley reached the next town, to find her friend away. She returned home, and went to the home of the sister of the nurse, to find them both chatting on the porch. Mary turned pale as she viewed her mistress.

"I found my friend absent," explained Mrs. Duntley, "and I thought I would come and see Paul home."

The nurse displayed embarrassment and was trembling all over. Abruptly she burst into tears.

"Oh, ma'am," she sobbed, "the baby is not here."

"Not here?" cried Edith in quick alarm. "Has anything happened to Paul?"

"No, ma'am," dissented Mary wearily; "but, oh! you'll never forgive me, but a gentleman has taken a great fancy to Paul, and he asked me to let him have Paul with him for today."

"Where? Where?" gasped the agitated mother.

"At the hotel."

"And you left my darling with a stranger?" cried Edith. "Wretched woman! Take me at once to my child. Who is this man?"

"He is—oh, ma'am, forgive me! forgive me! He is your husband—that was."

They made due haste to the hotel. Mary knew the room Duntley occupied, his door was open. Pleased, prattling tones mingled with tender masculine ones. On the floor was Paul, and near to him his father. The place was littered with toys.

Into the room Edith rushed and clasped the boy in her arms, as though from the jaws of peril. Pierce Duntley regarded her gravely. His face and bearing suggested a sedateness that had not formerly existed.

"You—you have changed," spoke Edith, rather abashed at the reproachful look her husband bestowed upon her.

"Somewhat," nodded Duntley. "Not that I was ever as bad as Father Hall fancied me. That wild rage in the woods was simply a morose scene in which I figured. Mlle. Estrella, the dancing trapeze artist whom I managed, was grandmother to eight children. But Father Hall was right—it was a trifling life and now I am part of a great humanitarian society, spreading education in the dark places of the earth. On that mission I leave for Hawaii next week, and I had had to see the dear little fellow here before I went away."

"Paul want good man come home with him," here cried out the little fellow, and ran back to his father and put his arms about his neck.

"No, little man; but I'm going to send all those toys home with you."

"I'm a lonesome man," said Pierce sadly. "Couldn't you forget—there isn't much to forget, except my old, roving ways—because of the love I have always cherished for you?"

She could not resist the momentary appeal. They were remembered, and Edith became a co-partner with Pierce in his great life work.

A Chance Acquaintance

By Florence Lilian Henderson

Nellie Morse had seen the young man only twice, but she was pleasantly surprised when he lifted his hat, and she smilingly replied to his courtesy. The first time was when, crossing the street, the handle of the little basket she was carrying passed and some supplies from the delicatessen store were scattered far and wide.

The young man had gathered up the various articles, both had laughed merrily over the mishap, betraying Nellie's fondness for Swiss cheese, rye bread and pickles. Now they met again, and both were glad to pass the situation of something more than strangers.

"I see you have struck up an acquaintance with our neighbor, Mr. Philip Dexter, the art engraver," spoke a pleasant voice—that of Mrs. Rhoades, landlady of the house where Nellie and numerous other young women earning their living as stenographers and clerks had their abode.

"Oh, is that his name?" said Nellie, a trifle flushed.

"Yes, he rooms across the court, directly opposite your apartment. Mr. Nellie got her own supper on her little gas stove that evening. Then she went into her bedroom adjoining the little closet that did for a kitchen, and did not turn on the light. She sat down by the window, half-dressed over, and looked across the court, and how strange, how near and almost romantic!" soliloquized Nellie, smiling at the folly of a passing fancy.

"That must be Mr. Dexter's room, but the frost on the window obscures all view. Yes, that must be the brave rescuer of my delicatessen deliveries," added Nellie, as a shadow fell across the windowpane. "Why, he is drawing."

She held her breath with a strange sensation as, across the broad, frosted upper pane a quick, left hand, manly, slight tool of pencil, began sketching the profile of a human face.

"Why!" exclaimed Nellie. "It's me!"

Yes, Nellie had a saucy, unbecomingly stray lock that always came out of place across her forehead. She had a reticent smile, as well. There could be no doubt that the artistic hand at work was dimming faithfully from memory her own features.

And then the room across the court evidently warmed up, and slowly, but effectively, the fair face drawn was being sought for by the eye. And, with a slight sigh, Nellie sentimentally wondered if the fleeting interest of the young man had likewise faded into thin air.

Life had been stern and hard to Nellie. Left an orphan, she had been compelled to work for a living. More utterly, too, she had contributed to the partial support of a married and deserted sister. That sister was now seeking a legal separation from a more than unworthy husband, who had persecuted her sorely, who was even now being sought for by the police for his crimes, and who was a haunting menace to the two loyal sisters, and Winifred Allen was practically in hiding until the law gave her husband no further claim upon her.

Nellie came home one evening about a week later. The room was cold and damp, the heat having been shut off since morning, and the windows were coated with steam. She had just taken off her wraps when the door of the room opened quickly, closed and was locked with a click, and Richard Allen stood planted at her.

"Didn't expect me?" sneered Allen. "Well, I've located you. Now, for the other one. Where is my wife hiding?"

"How dare you intrude?" began Nellie; but the other faced her with a murderous gleam in his evil eyes.

"No dramatics!" he said, sharply. "I'm hunted and I'm desperate. I want to see Winifred and I'm going to. I'll give you just five minutes to decide to take me to her, or I'll slit that pretty white throat of yours, and here afterwards, if I find her. Do come, please, and do it quick, for I'm in dead earnest."

Nellie shuddered and thrilled. She knew the reckless, cruel nature of the man. She shrank to the window and leaned her forehead against the sash, trying to think of some way to baffle this ruffian from justice. Nellie gasped as she lifted her eyes. The upper sash was partially clear. She saw, seated near the window in his room across the way, Philip Dexter. She moved her hand to attract his attention. Then, softly, rapidly, on the lower, steam-clouded sash she traced with her finger the words:

"Come—come quick!"

"What are you up to there?" asked out Allen harshly, springing forward, battling with suspicion.

Nellie darted for the little kitchen closet. She slammed the door shut against the furious visitor, and clung to it as he endeavored to pull it open. He went flat on the floor as Nellie let go of the inside knob. At that moment Philip Dexter burst into the room.

There was a fierce struggle between the two men, but Nellie ran out and shrieked for help. Richard Allen went into the hands of the police, where he belonged, and out of harm's way.

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