

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WHO STOOD 99

THE three scouts would never have been able to explain satisfactorily their reasons for being so easily persuaded, nor their obstinacy in adhering to the determination so suddenly made. Prue Welch would have thanked a Divine Providence for it. The doctor, her husband, took it as quite in the natural course of events.

He was a queer man, the doctor, a pathetic little figure in the world's progress—an outgrowth of it, in a certain way of thinking.

Born of good old New England stock, he spent his studious, hard-working boyhood on a farm. At sixteen he went to the high school, where he was adored by his teachers because he stood 99 in algebra. Inconsequently, but inevitably, this rendered him shy in the presence of girls, and unwarrantably conscious of his hands and feet. So when he went to college, he spent much time in the library, more in the laboratory, and none at all in the elemental little chaos of a world that can do so much for the wearers of queer clothes and queerer habits of thought. He graduated, a spectacled grind, bowed of shoulder, straight of hair, earnest of thought.

Much reading of abstract speculation had developed in him a reverence for the unpractical that amounted almost to obsession. Given a bit of useless information and a chunk of solid wisdom, he would at once bestow his preference on the former, provided, always, it were theoretical enough. He knew the dips of strata from their premonitory surface wiggles to their final plunges into unknown and heated depths. He could deliver to you a cross-section of your pasture lot, streaked like the wind clouds of early winter; and he could explain it in the most technical language. Nothing rock-ribbed and ancient escaped him in his frequent walk. He saw everything—except, perchance, the beauty that clothes the rock-ribbed and ancient as a delicate aura, invisible to the