

The God-Lonesome Man in Brasstown Valley

By Mrs. L. H. Harris

IT was a winter night, and when the stranger lifted the latch and entered Pappy Corn's house he found the old man sitting with his warped brownie legs extended to meet the warmth of a blazing log fire. His hands were clasped over his waistcoat, his chin rested upon his breast, and his lips were puckered sternly about the stem of his pipe.

"Mister," he said, when his guest was comfortably settled in the opposite chimney-corner, "did I ever tell you about John Harpeth?"

"No, you never did."

"He was known far and near as the God-lonesome man, because he believed he'd been predestined to torment from the foundation of the world."

"We have had sinners here, same as you have on your side of the mountains, ordinary prodigal sons that went astray and come home again properly penitent; but he was the only one we ever had that didn't weaken durin' revival season, nor took backwater towards the kingdom of heaven even when he was sick and expected to die."

"He was ill-begot to start with," and I reckon he fell from grace when he was born. His mother was ashamed to show her face, and he grew up in her shadow, ragged, ugly, and too proud to speak to decent folks. Anyhow, by the time I'm fixin' to tell you of, he was a man grown, his mother was dead, and he was livin' in a little black house up on the only hill in Brasstown Valley, like a lonely young eagle. He always made me think of an eagle, walkin' around sorter awkward because he had to wear breeches over his talons. He had the same high, slow-turnin' head, the same cold eye."

"He hated every man to his face, so to speak, and he knowed enough damnin' passages from the Bible to git along without doin' any cussin' of his own."

Pappy paused, cast a half-humorous half-appalled look upon his guest, and inquired:

"Mister, did you ever have a man level a blazin' hell-p'intin' Scripture at you, when you wa'n't armed with your Sunday feelin's nor nothin' to protect yourself?"

"No, I never did."

"Well, sir, it'll come nigher makin' you feel ha'r-hung and breeze-shaken above the pit of fire and brimstone than any sermon you ever listened to in your life."

"And the pizen use Harpeth had of the Scriptures was what caused folks here in the Valley to be afeard of him, drunk or sober. Prim Mayberry 'lowed it made the goose-bumps rise on his back in June to walk along the big road below Harpeth's Hill and hear him up there in the corn-field quotin' King David's blasphemous psalms ag'in' the Hittites as if he was prayin'. And Jonathan Snow was so afeard of him he'd come a mile out of his way to keep from meetin' him and riskin' his spiritual peace of mind ag'in' his selections from the Old Testament. That was because Jonathan once took a lien on Harpeth's mule for five dollars when Harpeth was drunk and didn't know what he was doin'. The next day they accidentally met at Stallin's store, and Harpeth swore at Snow out of Jeremiah till the sweat busted out on the old man's forehead and his knees give away. Snow wanted to git out a warrant and have him took up fur breakin' his peace, but the sheriff laughed and 'lowed he couldn't arrest a man fur quotin' Scripture."

"Besides, Harpeth had good reason for his spite. Every time he got into a scrape or fell in debt, he'd slouch into the Valley, borrow money from Deacon Snow at a terrible rate of interest, and give a mortgage on his stuff to kiver the loan. So, while we all fattened and sung hymns down here, Harpeth, poor and drunk and God-lonesome, set up on his hill and watched us carry on. There's nothin' a man is such a dern fool about, Mister, as his immortal soul. If he don't spile it with devilment like Harpeth did, he'll do it with meanness like Snow's. Once, I recollect, I quit usin' strong language fur a month, and I'll be danged if I didn't begin to feel my oats, spiritually speakin'. If I'd went on doin' without them carnal words in my conversation, I might have drawn up into one of them tomtit saints

that cultivate their own moral natures by despisin' everybody else's. Now there was that old meetin'house rooster, Jonathan Snow, thinkin' he was all right because he didn't git drunk nor fight and because he had the impudence to believe that he was elected to salvation from the foundation of the world, same as Harpeth 'lowed he wa'n't elected. And every time he took a due-bill from Harpeth fur payin' him out of some trouble, he'd clear his conscience by astin' the prayers of all Christian people fur the pore lost sinner, as he called him. Then maybe he'd git down to lead the prayer, and fairly scarify him before the Lord."

"But Harpeth was far beyond the breath of sech words. And I can tell you it's no tame sight to see a man that fears neither God nor man act accordin' to the liberty of his spirit. Harpeth'd work all the week in his corn-field, as hard as if he had a wife and nine child'en to support. But when Saturday noon came, he'd ram his breeches in his boot-legs and start for

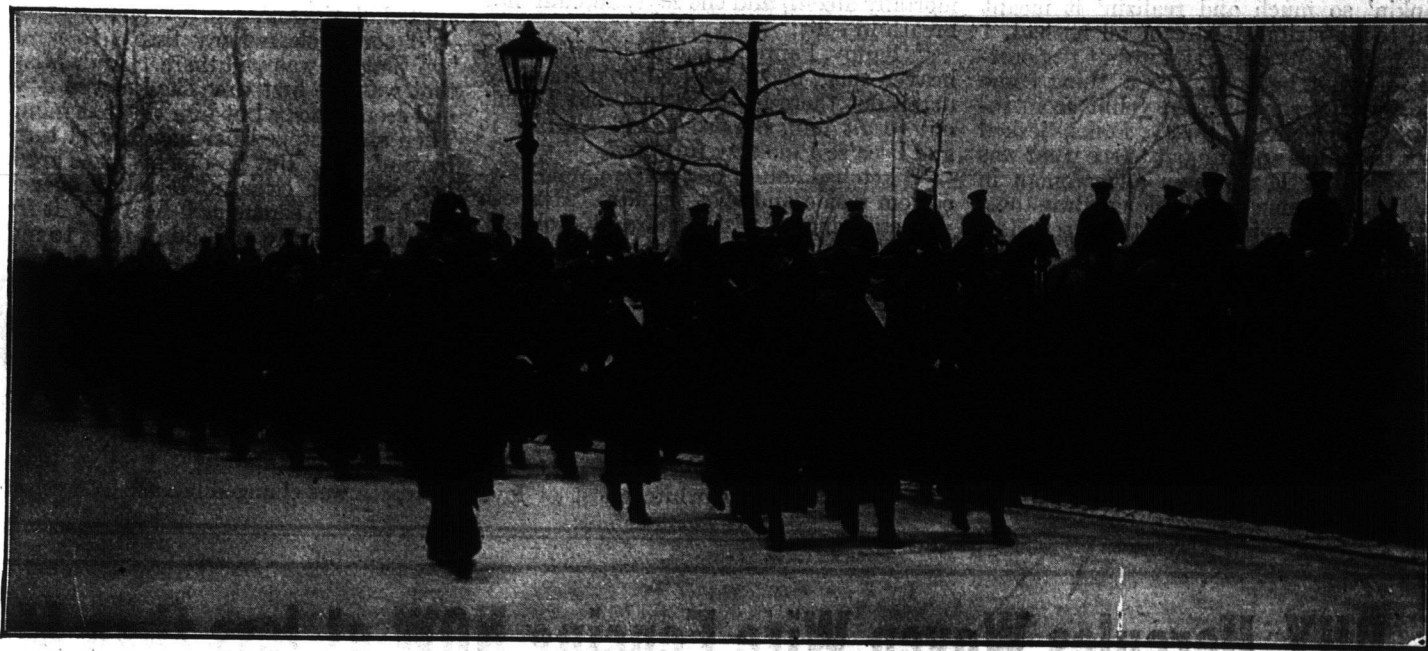
Harpeth fell in love with Rosie Mayberry, Prim's youngest gal. None of us ever knowed how it happened. Maybe he seen her hangin' about the berry-bushes on the mountains. She was a sad, white-faced little dove of a thing that was always strayin' off by herself, and lookin' up at you as if she'd jest pulled her head from under her wing. Or maybe she'd seen him standin' up there on his hill, a lonely figure ag'in' the sky-line, and maybe she thought pitifully of all the hard things she'd heard about him—the heart of every woman is jest a cradle at the bottom, Mister, and she'll tuck anything in it that is forsaken and needs carin' fur! Anyhow when Harpeth took to drappin' down by her like a ragged young eagle every time she went down the big road, she'd pink up and put on that dim, glorified look women have when they air bein' courted. Courtin', Mister, appeals to good women's spiritual natures, same as it does to all men's carnal natures. So Rosie looked up into Harpeth's eyes, and was born again, born to love and that foreknowledge of things that all women have."

"But when her folks found out what was goin' on there was a terrible row. Misses Mayberry was the first to ketch up with 'em. Late one evenin' she was waddlin' down the big road to Stallin's store with a basket of eggs, singin' a hymn, and jest

r'ar around in general, but Rosie was the very apple of his eye. So he sent Harpeth word if he so much as looked at her again what he'd do to him. But Harpeth didn't git it, of course, because nobody dared to bring sech a message. And it was Rosie that gave him his walkin' papers. They say she cried and took on terrible and held out ag'in' her folks as long as she could, but at last she passed her word not to speak to him again."

"About a week after that I was out there in my crib shellin' corn when I heard somebody comin' along the path from Mayberry's house. I peeped through the crack between the logs, and seen Rosie steppin' very slow with her head down. The next minute Harpeth whirled around the corner of the crib from t'other side."

"Rosie, darlin'!" he says, as if the bees were buzzin' and the birds singin' and the flowers bloomin' in his voice jest fur her. And he reached out to take her, same as any man would have reached after his own. But she drewed back from him. She was one of them pore little angel-headed women that keeps promises, and she'd passed her word not to speak to him. So she stood lookin' at him, pitiful and white as if her very nature had been bleached of love. The tears came into my eyes at the sight. I picked up a red year of corn, hopin' it would do 'em some



Lady volunteers training in London against British invasion

Liquor Ridge on Blood Mountain. Now it's no cheerful sound to hear somebody passin' down the dark outside your home, callin' out terrible things ag'in' you from Moses and the Prophets. There were the nights when Harpeth got even with the saints. They say Jonathan Snow used to crawl in bed and pull the kivers over his head when he heard him comin'. Fur he always took pains to give Snow a right smart serenade from Deuteronomy or some fur part of the Scripture where the language wa'n't good."

"But if the liquor went the other way to his head, as it was apt to do, he'd take up the idea that he was the angel Gabriel exiled from heaven. Then he'd set down on the horse-block in front of old Zion Church and sing all night. Seemed as if he had an inspired windpipe and was courtin' the very stars above his head. He could reach an octave higher than any prima-donna angel that ever sung before the throne of grace, and—I don't keer whether it's sound doctrine or no—I believe the Lord heard him."

Pappy arose, kicked the logs into a red blast of flames, and turned his back to the grateful warmth, which was his usual method of indicating a flank movement in the story he was telling."

"But the more lonesome a man air, Mister, the more apt he is to git Eve-hongry," he went on, coining his face into a witty smile and leering down at his guest. "Adam hadn't et his first meal in Paradise before the Lord knowed that was the seat of his trouble; and every man since then gits a tech of it soon or late. So it was with Harpeth. Him that had been conceived in sin and born to iniquity, that believed his Maker had something ag'in' him from the foundation of the world, that had been outlawed by decent society, turned his face in time to the last refuge that fails a man, the heart of a woman. And it's accordin' to these Scriptures I've jest been tellin' you that

the personification of fat spiritual peace, when all at once who should she see on the meetin'-house steps but John Harpeth and her Rosie! He was holdin' her hands and lookin' down into her pink sunbonnet as if he'd never been drunk or committed a sin in his life. Misses Mayberry give a squawk, run forwards, and snatched Rosie up as if she'd been a young chicken settin' by a hawk."

"You low-down rascalion," says she, drawin' out her head at him like an old hen with her neck-feathers up, "to be tryin' to ruin a decent gal."

"I wa'n't tryin' to do no sech thing!" he answers quick as a flash. "We aim to git married."

"As if that wa'n't ruin enough!" she 'lowed, draggin' her wings and pullin' Rosie clear around behind her. "I'd rather see her dead!"

"I ain't talkin' about what you'd rather see; I was tellin' you what you air goin' to see!" he answers big as life, sorter clickin' his spurs to sass her."

"You come along, Rosie," says she, draggin' the gal after her with one hand, and holdin' on to the basket of eggs with the other. And as they went down the road together, Harpeth called after 'em:

"See you again soon, Rosie." That brought the old lady around in her tracks, and she shook her fist at him; but the pore gal was so 'shamed she dassent lift her head to look back."

"See you soon, Rosie," he hollered in answer to Misses Mayberry's fist. And she mighty nigh flung a fit as they turned a curve in the road to hear him yell at the top of his voice:

"Rosie, I'll see you so-o-n"

"Prim took it worse'n she did when he heard what had happened. Air you acquainted with Prim Mayberry, Mister? He looks as if the Lord had hewed his head and face out of red oak, it's so dull and sunburned. He wa'n't the man to

kissin' good, but it didn't. When Harpeth seen that look on her face, he stepped back and he says:

"You too?"—jest that way, and she knowed what he meant. It fell on her like a jedgment she didn't deserve, and she put her hands together flat, so, and held 'em up before him like a pair of folded wings, and as if she was pleadin' with 'em to him. But he begun to laugh, not at her, but at everything—at man in his little day, and at God in His Heaven. It was the grandest, maddest, most awful laugh I ever heard; and Rosie trembled at it like a reed shaken in the wind. Harpeth looked down at her and seen her still shiverin', with her little white hands lifted and her face turned up to him like a prayer that never hopes to be answered, and I reckon it was too much fur him. Anyhow, he give a kind of sob, snatched her to his breast, kissed her, dropped her back to the ground, and was gone before she had time to turn red."

"Mister, I wisht you could have seen that gal then. As the petals of the rose fit the rose, so at last her name fitted Rosie. Her eyes were like skies in May, her yaller hair laid out in the wind like corn-tassels. She cast one glance up and down the path to make sure nobody was in sight, then she pressed one hand to the cheek where his lips had started the flower-garden, drewed it away, looked at it in a kind of sweet wonder, and then I'll be danged if she didn't kiss it! Well, sir, I ain't talkin' about the propriety of sech doin's in general, but with nobody there but me and God to know how it took place between 'em, I jest laid back in the shucks and thanked Him for lettin' Rosie have that little taste of love, even if she never had any more."

"And fur a time it did look as if she never would; fur things went from bad to worse with her and Harpeth. Folks was down on her as if she'd been guilty of a kind-of moral weakness because she stuck to it that she was sorry for him, and that