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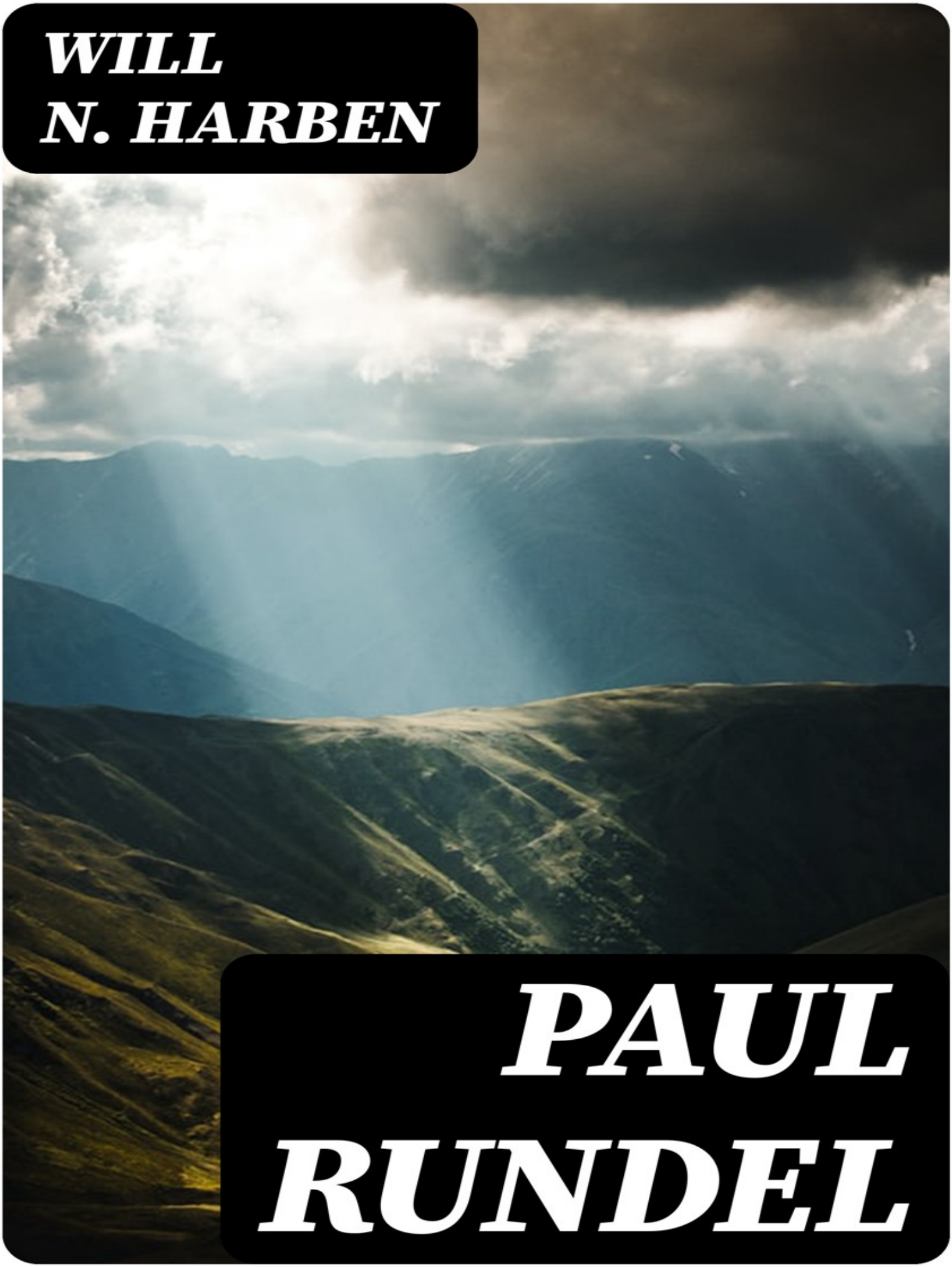
N. HARBEN



PAUL RUNDEL

WILL
N. HARBEN

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Will N. Harben

Paul Rundel

A Novel

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THE MEMORY OF MY LITTLE SON ERIC

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CHAPTER I

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FROM the window of her husband's shop in the mountain-village of Grayson, Cynthia Tye stood peering out on the Square. She was tall, gaunt, and thin-so thin, in fact, that her fingers, pricked by her needle and gnarled at the joints, had a hold in energy only, as she pressed them down on her contourless hips. She had left her work in the living-room and kitchen back of the shop and come in to question the shoemaker as to what he wanted for his dinner, the boiling and stewing hour having arrived.

Silas, whose sedentary occupation had supplied him with the surplus flesh his wife needed, and whose genial pate was as bald as an egg, save for a bare fringe of gray which overlapped his ears on the sides and impinged upon his shirt-collar behind, looked up and smiled broadly.

“I wish you'd quit that, Cynthy. I really do.” Every outward and inward part of the man lent itself to his smile, the broad, clean-shaven Irish lip, the big, facile mouth, the almost wrinkleless pink cheeks, the clear, twinkling blue eyes, the besmirched goatee—in fact, all his rotund, satisfied self between his chin and the bench on which he sat shook like a mass of animated jelly.

“Quit what?” She turned on him suddenly. “Why, quit always and *eternally* comin' to me when I'm chock full o' breakfast, and askin' me what I want to eat for dinner. I can still taste my coffee. I reckon settin' humped over this way between meals ain't exactly accordin' to nature in its best

state. I'd ruther live in a boardin'-house and take what was served, hit or miss, than to digest a meal in my mind three hours before I eat it."

"Huh! I say!" Cynthia sniffed, "and what about me, who not only has to think about it beforehand, but has to pick it in the garden, git it ready for the pots, smell the fumes of it from daylight till dark, and worry all night for fear something, will sour or be ate up by the cat, dog, or chickens?"

Silas laughed till his tools—last, hammer, and knife—rattled in his leather apron. "You got the best o' that argument," he chuckled, as he pressed the shoe he was repairing down between his fat knees, crossed his short feet, and reached for a box of nails which had fallen to the floor. Then his merriment ceased. He bent a tender glance on the woman and a gentle cadence crept into his voice: "The Lord knows you *do* have a hard time, Cynthy, an' no jokin'. I wish thar was some way around it. I lie awake many and many a night just thinkin' how happy me'n you'd be if we could take a trip off some'rs and not have nothin' to bother about for one week anyway. What are you gazin' at out thar so steady?"

"I'm watchin' that pore boy, Paul Rundel," Cynthia returned, with a sigh. "I never see 'im without my heart achin'. He's haulin' bark for Jim Hoag's tannery. He driv' up on a big load to the post-office while I was out gatherin' beans just now. You remember them two devilish Harris boys that picked the row with 'im at the hitchin'-rack last week? Well, I saw 'em at the corner and thought they looked suspicious. Then I knowed they was waitin' for 'im, for they

nudged one another and picked up brickbats, and went to Paul's wagon. I couldn't hear what was said, but it looked like they was darin' Paul to git down, for they kept swingin' their bricks and shakin' their fists at 'im."

"What a pity, what a pity!" The shoemaker sighed. "That boy is tryin' his level best to live right, and thar was two ag'in' one, and both bigger and stronger."

"Well, Paul kin take care of hisself," Cynthia said, with a chuckle. "It looked like he was in for serious trouble, and I was runnin' to the fence to try to call somebody to help him, when, lo and behold! I saw him reach back on the load o' bark and pick up a double-barreled gun and stick the butt of it to his shoulder. I am a Christian woman, and I don't believe in bloodshed, but when them scamps drapped the'r bricks and broke for the blacksmith shop like dogs with their tails twixt their legs I shouted and laughed till I cried. Paul got down and was makin' for the shop, when the marshal—Budd Tibbs—stopped 'im and made 'im put up the gun and go back to his wagon. The next minute I saw the Harris boys slip out the back door of the shop and slink off out o' sight."

"It's bad, bad, bad!" Silas deplored. "Sometimes I wonder why the Lord lets things run slipshod like that. Paul has a bright mind. He is as sharp as a brier. He loves to read about what's goin' on over the world. If thar ever was a boy that needed good advice and trainin' he is one. He's right at the turnin'-point, too; he's got a high temper, a lot o' sperit, and won't stand naggin' from high or low. And what's he got at home? Nothin' that wouldn't take life and hope out of any ambitious boy—a daddy that is half dead, and won't work a lick—"

“And a mammy,” Cynthia broke in, with indignation, “Si, that is the vainest, silliest woman that ever breathed, traipsin' out to meetin' in her flimsy finery bought by that boy's hard work. They say, because she's passably good-lookin' and can sing well, that she thinks herself too good to lay her hands to a thing. She don't love Ralph Rundel, nor *never* did, or she couldn't act that way when he is sick. I've heard, on good authority, that she never cared much for Paul, even when he was a baby—folks say she didn't want 'im to come when he did, and she never took care of 'im like a mother ought to.”

“I've watched Paul a long time,” Silas remarked. “Me'n him are purty good friends. He's rough on the outside, but now and then I see away down into his heart. He worries about his daddy's bad health constantly. They are more like two brothers than father and son, anyway, and as Ralph grows weaker he leans more and more on his boy. It certainly is sad. I saw 'em both down at Hoag's cotton-gin last fall. Paul had run across some second-hand school-books somewhar, and was tryin' to explain 'em to his pa, but he couldn't make any impression on him. Ralph looked like he was tryin' to show interest, but it wasn't in 'im. I tell you, Cynthy, the hardest job our Creator ever put on his creatures is for 'em to have unbounded faith in the perfection in the unseen when thar is so much out o' joint always before our eyes.”

“Yes, but *you* never lose faith,” Cynthia said, proudly. “I'd have let loose long ago if I hadn't had you to keep me agoin'.”

“You see, Cynthy, I've noticed that something bright always follows on the heels of what is dark.” Silas hammered the words in with the tacks, which he held in his mouth. “Peace hovers over war and drops down after it like rain on dry soil; joy seems to pursue sorrow like sunshine pushin' clouds away, and, above all, love conquers hate, and you know our Lord laid particular stress on that.”

“Paul has just left the post-office,” Cynthia said. “He's left his hosses standin' and is headed this way.”

“He's comin' after his daddy's shoes,” Silas replied. “I've had 'em ready for a week. I took 'em out to his wagon one day, but he didn't have the money, and although I offered to credit him he wouldn't hear to it. He's as independent as a hog on ice. I tell you thar's lots in that boy.”

Cynthia, as the youth was crossing the street, turned back into her kitchen. A moment later Paul entered the shop. He was thin almost to emaciation, just merging into the quickly acquired height of a boy of sixteen, and had the sallow complexion that belongs to the ill-nourished mountaineers of the South. His coarse brown hair fought against the restrictions of the torn straw hat, which, like a miniature tent, rested on the back part of his head. The legs of his trousers were frayed at the bottoms and so crudely patched at the knees that the varicolored stitches were observable across the room. He wore no coat, and his threadbare shirt of heavy, checked cotton had lost its buttons at the sleeves and neck. He had a finely shaped head, a strong chin, and a good nose. A pair of dreamy brown eyes in somber sockets were still ablaze from their recently kindled fires. His mouth was large and somehow,

even in the grasp of anger, suggested the capacity for tenderness and ideality.

“Hello, young man!” Silas greeted him as he peered at the boy above his brass-rimmed spectacles and smiled genially. “Here at last. I was afraid you'd let them shoes take the dry-rot in my shop, and just because you wouldn't owe me a few cents for a day or two.”

Paul made no reply. His restless glance roved sullenly over the heap of mended shoes and boots on the floor, and, selecting the pair he was looking for, he ran a quivering finger along the freshly polished edge of the soles and bent the leather testingly.

“Some o' the white oak you helped tan out thar at Hoag's,” Silas jested. “If it ain't the best the brand on it is a liar, and I have been buncoed by your rich boss.”

This also evoked no response. Thrusting the shoes under his arm, the boy put his hand into his pocket and drew out some small coins and counted them on the low window-sill close to the shoemaker. He was turning away when Silas stopped him. Pointing to a chair bottomed with splints of white oak and strengthened by strips of leather interlaced and tacked to the posts he said:

“Take that seat; I hain't seed you in a coon's age, Paul, and I want to talk to you.”

With a slightly softened expression, the boy glanced through the open doorway out into the beating sunshine toward his horses and wagon.

“I've got to move on.” He drew his tattered sleeve across his damp brow and looked at the floor. “I got another load to bring down from the mountain.”

Silas peered through the window at the horses and nodded slowly. “Them pore pantin' brutes need the rest they are gettin' right now. Set down! set down! You don't have to hurry.”

Reluctantly the youth complied, holding the shoes in his lap. Silas hammered diligently for a moment, and then the furrows on his kindly brow deepened as he stared steadily through his glasses, which were seldom free from splotches of lampblack and beeswax.

“I wonder, Paul, if you'd git mad if I was to tell you that I've always had a whoppin' big interest in you?”

The boy made as if about to speak, but seemed to have no command of tact or diplomacy. He flushed faintly; his lashes flickered; he fumbled the shoes in his lap, but no words were forthcoming. However, to Silas this was answer enough, and he was encouraged to go on.

“You see, Paul, I've knowed you since you was so high”—Silas held his hammer out on a level with his knee—“and I have watched you close ever since. Yore daddy—that was in his palmy days—used to take you with 'im when he'd go afishin', and I used to meet you an' him on the creek-bank. You was as plump and pink a toddler as I ever laid eyes on, just the age of the only one the Lord ever sent us. When mine was alive I was so full of the joy of it that I just naturally wanted to grab up every baby I met and hug it. I never could hear a child cry over a stubbed toe, a stone-bruise, or any little disappointment without actually achin' at the heart. But our son was taken, Paul, taken right when he was the very light an' music of our lives. And, my boy, let me tell you, if ever a Christian come nigh wagin' open war

with his Maker I did on that day. God looked to me like a fiend incarnate, and His whole universe, from top to bottom, seemed a trap to catch an' torture folks in. But as time passed somehow my pain growed less, until now I am plumb resigned to the Lord's will. He knowed best. Yes, as I say, I always felt a big interest in you, and have prayed for you time after time, for I know your life is a tough uphill one. Paul, I hope you will excuse me, but a thing took place out thar in front of my window just now that—”

A grunt of somnolent rage escaped the boy, and Silas saw him clench his fist. His voice quivered with passion: “Them two devils have been picking at me for more than a year, calling me names and throwing rocks at me from behind fences. Yesterday they made fun of my father, and so I got ready, and—”

“I know, I know!”—the shoemaker sighed, reproachfully—“and so you deliberately, an' in a calm moment, laid that gun on yore load of bark, and—”

“Yes, and both barrels was loaded with heavy buck-shot!” the boy exulted, his tense face afire, his eyes flashing, “and if they hadn't run like two cowardly pups I'd have blowed holes in 'em as big as a hat.”

Silas made a derogatory sound with his tongue and lips. “Oh, how blind you was, my pore boy—you was too mad to see ahead; folk always are when they are wrought up. Paul, stop for one minute and think. If you had killed one or both of 'em, that wouldn't have settled the trouble. You don't think so now, but you'd have gone through bottomless pits of remorse. The Lord has made it that way. Young as you are, you'd have died on the scaffold, or toiled through life as

a convict, for it would have been murder, and deliberate at that.”

The youth shrugged his thin shoulders. “I wouldn't have cared,” he answered. “I tell you it ain't ended, Uncle Si. Them fellows has got to take back what they said about my father. They've got to take it back, I tell you! If they don't, I'll kill 'em if it takes a lifetime to do it. I'll kill 'em!”

Silas groaned. A pained look of concern gathered in his mild eyes. He reached for the polishing-iron which was being heated in the flame of a smoking lamp on his bench and wiped it on his dingy apron. “It won't do!” he cried, and his bald head seemed drawn down by fear and anxiety. “Something has got to be done; they are a pair of low, cowardly whelps that are try in' to bully you, but you've got to quit thinkin' about murder. It won't do, I say; the devil is behind it. You stand away above fellows like them. You've got the makin' of a big man in you. You love to read and inquire, and they don't know their a b c's and can't add two figures. You mustn't lower yourself to such riffraff, and you wouldn't if you didn't let the worst part o' yourself get the upper hand.”

When the boy had left the shop Silas stood watching him from the doorway. It was a pathetic figure which climbed upon the load of bark, and swung the long whip in the air.

“What a pity! What a pity!” the old man exclaimed, and he wrung his hands beneath his apron; then seating himself on his bench he reluctantly resumed his work. “As promising as he is, he may go clean to the dogs. Poor boy!”

CHAPTER II

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IT was now near noon, as was indicated by the clock on the low, dome-capped tower of the Court House in the center of the village square. Paul recognized several idlers who stood on a street-corner as he drove past. They looked at him and smiled approvingly, and one cried out:

"Bully for you, Paul! You are all wool and a yard wide."

"And guaranteed not to tear or shrink!" another added, with a laugh over his borrowed wit; but the boy neither answered nor smiled. A sudden breeze from the gray, beetling cliffs of the near-by mountain fanned his damp brow, and he gazed straight ahead down the long road. Hot broodings over his wrongs surged within him, and the fact that he had so completely routed his enemies failed to comfort him at all. They could still laugh and sneer and repeat behind his back what they had dared to say to his face about a helpless man who had offended no one. Cowards that they were, they would keep their lies afloat, and even add to them.

His road took him past the lumber-yard, sawmills, brick and lime kilns, and through the sordid negro quarter, which was a cluster of ramshackle shanties made of unpainted upright boards grown brown and fuzzy, with now and then a more primitive log cabin, a relic of pioneer and Cherokee days. Vast fields of fertile lands belonging to his employer, James Hoag, lay on both sides of the road just outside the village. There were stretches of corn, cotton, and wheat in

the best state of cultivation, beyond which, on a gentle rise, stood the planter's large two-story house, a white frame structure with a double veranda and outside blinds painted green. Beyond the house, at the foot of the slope, could be seen the dun roofs of the long sheds and warehouses of Hoag's tannery, to which Paul was taking the bark. A big gate had to be opened, and the boy was drawing rein with the intention of getting down when Hoag himself, astride a mettlesome bay mare, passed.

“Wait, I'll open it,” he said, and spurring his mount close to the gate he kicked the wooden latch upward and swung the gate aside. “Drive ahead” he ordered. “I can pull it to.”

Paul obeyed, indifferent even to the important man's presence. He would have forgotten Hoag's existence had the mare not borne him alongside the wagon again. The horseman was a middle-aged man of sturdy physique, fully six feet in height, and above two hundred pounds in weight. His skin was florid, his limbs were strong, firm, and muscular, his hands red and hair-grown. There was a cold, cruel expression in the keen blue eyes under the scraggy brows, which was not softened by a sweeping tobacco-stained mustache. He wore well-fitting top-boots which reached above the knee, and into which the legs of his trousers had been neatly folded. A wheeled spur of polished brass was strapped to the heel of his right boot. He sat his horse with the ease and grace of a cavalry officer. He held his mare in with a tense hand, and scanned the load of bark with a critical eye.

“How much more of that lot is left up there?” he asked.

“About two cords, or thereabouts,” the boy said, carelessly.

“Well,” Hoag said, “when you get that all stacked under the shed I want you to haul down the lot on Barrett's ridge. There is a good pile of it, and it's been exposed to the weather too long. I don't know exactly where it lies; but Barrett will point it out if he ain't too lazy to walk up to it.”

“I know where it is,” Paul informed him. “I helped strip it.”

“Oh, well, that's all right. You might put on higher standards and rope 'em together at the top. That dry stuff ain't very heavy, and it is down grade.”

He showed no inclination to ride on, continuing to check his mare. Presently his eyes fell on the stock of the gun which was half hidden by the bark, and his lips curled in a cold smile of amusement.

“Say,” he said, with a low laugh, “do you go loaded for bear like this all the time?”

A slow flush of resentment rose into the boy's face. He stared straight at Hoag, muttered something inarticulately and then, with a distinct scowl, looked away.

The man's careless smile deepened; the boy's manner and tone were too characteristic and genuine, and furnished too substantial a proof of a quality Hoag admired to have offended him. Indeed, there was a touch of tentative respect in his voice, a gleam of callous sympathy in his eyes as he went on:

“I was at the post-office just now. I saw it all. I noticed them fellows layin' for you the other day, and wondered what would come of it. I don't say it to flatter you, Paul”—

here Hoag chuckled aloud—“but I don't believe you are afraid of anything that walks the earth. I reckon it is natural for a man like me to sorter love a fair fight. It may be because you work for me and drive my team; but when I looked out the post-office window as I was stampin' a letter, and saw them whelps lyin' in wait for you, I got mad as hell. I wasn't goin' to let 'em hurt you, either. I'd have kicked the breath out of 'em at the last minute, but somehow I was curious to see what you'd do, and, by gum! when that first brickbat whizzed by you, and you lit down with your gun leveled, and they scooted to shelter like flyin' squirrels, I laid back and laughed till I was sore. That was the best bottle of medicine they ever saw, and they would have had a dose in a minute. They slid into the blacksmith's shop like it was a fort an' shut the door. I reckin you'd have shot through the planks if Budd Tibbs hadn't stopped you.”

No appreciation of these profuse compliments showed itself in the boy's face. It was rigid, colorless and sullen, as if he regarded the man's observations as entirely too personal to be allowed. An angry retort trembled on his lips, and even this Hoag seemed to note and relish. His smile was unctuous; he checked his horse more firmly.

“They won't bother you no more,” he said, more seductively. “Such skunks never run ag'in' your sort after they once see the stuff you are made of. That gun and the way you handled it was an eye-opener. Paul, you are a born fightin' man, and yore sort are rare these days. You'll make yore way in the world. Bein' afraid of man or beast will stunt anybody's growth. Pay back in the coin you receive, and don't put up with insult or abuse from anybody. Maybe you

don't know why I first took a sorter likin' to you. I'd be ashamed to tell you if I didn't know that you was jest a boy at the time, and I couldn't afford to resent what you said. You was a foot shorter than you are now, and not half as heavy. You remember the day yore pa's shoats broke through the fence into my potato field? You was out in the wet weeds tryin' to drive 'em home. I'd had a drink or two more than I could tote, and several things had gone crooked with me, and I was out o' sorts. I saw you down there, and I made up my mind that I'd give you a thrashin'"—Hoag was smiling indulgently—"and on my way through the thicket I cut me a stout hickory withe as big at the butt as my thumb, and taperin' off like a whip at the end. You remember how I cussed and ripped and went on?"

"You bet I remember," Paul growled, and his eyes flashed, "and if you'd hit me once it would have been the worst day's work you ever did."

The planter blinked in mild surprise, and there was just a hint of chagrin in his tone. "Well, I didn't touch you. Of course I wasn't afraid of you or the rock you picked up. I've never seen the *man* I was afraid of, much less a boy as little as you was; but as you stood there, threatenin' to throw, I admit I admired your grit. The truth is, I didn't have the heart, even drunk as I was, to lick you. Most boys of your size would have broke and run. My boy, Henry, would, I know."

"He'll fight all right," Paul said. "He's no coward. I like him. He's been a friend to me several times. He is not as bad as some folks think. He drinks a little, and spends money free, and has a good time; but he's not stuck up. He

doesn't like to work, and I don't blame him. I wouldn't, in his place. Huh! you bet I wouldn't."

"Well, I'm goin' to put 'im between the plow-handles before long," the planter said, with a frown. "He's gettin' too big for his britches. Say, you'll think I'm a friend worth havin' some time. Just after that thing happened at the post-office, and you'd gone into Tye's shop, Budd Tibbs turned to me and said he believed it was his duty as marshal to make a council case against you for startin' to use that gun as you did. I saw the way the land lay in a minute. Them skunks are akin to his wife, and he was mad. I told him, I did, that he might summon me as a witness, and that I'd swear you acted in self-defense, and prefer counter-charges against the dirty whelps. Huh, you ought to have seen him wilt! He knows how many votes I control, and he took back-water in fine shape."

"I reckon I can look after my own business," the boy made answer, in a surly tone. "I ain't afraid o' no court. I'll have my rights if I die gettin' 'em." Hoag laughed till his sides shook. "I swear you are the funniest cuss I ever knew. You ain't one bit like a natural boy. You act and talk like a man that's been through the rubs." Hoag suddenly glanced across a meadow where some men were at work cutting hay, and his expression changed instantly. "I never told 'em to mow thar," he swore, under his breath. "Take your bark on. You know where to put it," and turning his horse he galloped across the field, his massive legs swinging to and from the flanks of his mare.

CHAPTER III

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THAT afternoon at dusk Paul drove down the mountain with his last load of bark for the day. The little-used road was full of sharp turns around towering cliffs and abrupt declivities, worn into gullies by washouts, and obstructed by avalanchine boulders. In places decayed trees had fallen across the way, and these the young wagoner sometimes had to cut apart and roll aside. The high heap of bark on the groaning vehicle swayed like a top-heavy load of hay, and more than once Paul had to dismount from the lead horse he rode, scotch the wheels with stones, and readjust the bark, tightening the ropes which held the mass together. At times he strode along by the horses, holding the reins between his teeth, that his hands might be free to combat the vines and bushes through which he plunged as blindly as an animal chased by a hunter. His arms, face, and ankles were torn by thorns and briers, his ill-clad feet cut to the bone by sharp stones. Accidents had often happened to him on that road. Once he had fallen under the wheels, and narrowly escaped being crushed to death, a perilous thing which would have haunted many a man's life afterward, but which Paul forgot in a moment.

Near the foot of the mountain the road grew wide, smooth, and firm; his team slowed down, and he took a book from the wagon, reading a few pages as he walked along. He was fond of the history of wars in all countries; the bloodshed and narrow escapes of early pioneer days in

America enthralled his fancy. He thought no more of a hunter's killing a redskin than he himself would have thought of shooting a wild duck with a rifle.

As he started down the last incline between him and Grayson he replaced his book on the wagon. The dusk had thickened till he could scarcely see the print on the soiled pages. Below, the houses of the village were scattered, as by the hand of chance, from north to south between gentle hills, beyond which rose the rugged mountains now wrapped in darkness. He made out the sides of the Square by the lights in the various buildings. There was the hotel, with its posted lamps on either end of the veranda. Directly opposite stood the post-office. He could make no mistake in locating the blacksmith's shop, for its forge gave out intermittent, bellows-blown flashes of deep red. Other dots of light were the open doors of stores and warehouses. Like vanishing stars some were disappearing, for it was closing-time, and the merchants were going home to supper. This thought gave the boy pleasant visions. He was hungry.

It was quite dark when he had unloaded the wagon at the tannery and driven on past Hoag's pretentious home to the antiquated cottage in which he lived. It had six rooms, a sagging roof of boards so rotten and black with age that they lost thickness in murky streams during every heavy rain. There was a zigzag fence in front, which was ill cared for, as the leaning comers and decayed rails testified. Against the fence, at the edge of the road, stood a crude log barn, a corn-crib made of unbarked pine poles, above which was a hay-loft. Close about was a malodorous pig-pen, a cow-lot, a wagon-shed, and a pen-like stall for horses.

The chickens had gone to roost; the grunting and squealing of the pigs had been stilled by the pails of swill Paul's father, Ralph Rundel, had emptied into their dug-out wooden troughs. In the light of the kitchen fire, which shone through the open door and the glassless windows, Paul saw his father in his favorite place, seated in a chair under an apple-tree at the side of the house. Ralph rose at the sound of the clanking trace-chains and came to the gate. He rubbed his eyes drowsily, as if he had just waked from a nap, and swung on the gate with both hands.

“No use puttin' the wagon under shelter,” he said, in a querulous tone, as his slow eyes scanned the studded vault overhead. “No danger o' rain this night—no such luck for crops that are burnin' to the roots. The stalks o' my upland cotton-patch has wilted like sorghum cut for the press. Say, Paul, did you fetch me that tobacco? I'm dyin' for a smoke.” He uttered a low laugh. “I stole some o' yore aunt's snuff and filled my pipe; but, by hunkey, I'd miscalculated—I sucked the whole charge down my throat, and she heard me a-coughin' and caught me with the box in my hand.”

Paul thrust his hand into his hip-pocket and drew forth a small white bag with a brilliant label gummed on it. “Bowman was clean out o' that fine cut,” he said, as he gave it into the extended hand. “He said this was every bit as good.”

“I'll not take his word for it till I've tried it,” Ralph Rundel answered, as he untied the bag and tested the mixture between thumb and forefinger. “Storekeepers sell what they have in stock, and kin make such fellers as us take dried cabbage-leaves if they take a notion.”

Ralph was only fifty years of age, and yet he had the manner, decrepitude, and spent utterance of a man of seventy. His scant, iron-gray hair was disheveled; his beard, of the same grizzled texture, looked as if it never had been trimmed, combed, or brushed, and was shortened only by periodical breaking at the ends. Despite his crude stoicism, his blue eyes, in their deep sockets, had a wistful, yearning look, and his cheeks were so hollow that his visage reminded one of a vitalized skull. His chest, only half covered by a tattered, buttonless shirt, was flat; he was bent by rheumatism, which had left him stiff, and his hands were mere human talons.

Paul was busy unhooking the traces from the swingletrees and untying the straps of the leather collars, when Ralph's voice came to him above the creaking of the harness and impatient stamping of the hungry horses.

“I noticed you took yore gun along this mornin'. Did you kill me a bird, or a bushy-tail? Seems like my taste for salt pork is clean gone.”

“I didn't run across a thing,” Paul answered, as he lifted the harness from the lead horse and allowed the animal to go unguided to his stall through the gate Ralph held open. “Besides, old Hoag counts my loads, and keeps tab on my time. I can't dawdle much and draw wages from him.”

“Did he pay you anything to-day?” Ralph was filling his pipe, feebly packing the tobacco into the bowl with a shaky forefinger.

“He had no small change,” Paul answered. “Said he would have some to-morrow. You can wait till then, surely.”

“Oh yes, I'll have to make out, I reckon.”

At this juncture a woman appeared in the kitchen doorway. She was a blue-eyed, blond-haired creature of solid build in a soiled gray print-dress. She was Paul's aunt, Amanda Wilks, his mother's sister, a spinster of middle age with a cheerful exterior and a kindly voice.

“You'd better come on in and git yore supper, Paul,” she called out. “You like yore mush hot, and it can't be kept that away after it's done without bakin' it like a pone o' bread. You've got to take it with sour blue-john, too. Yore ma forgot to put yesterday's milk in the spring-house, and the cow kicked over to-night's supply just as I squirted the last spoonful in the bucket. Thar is some cold pork and beans. You'll have to make out.”

“I didn't expect to get anythin' t'eat!” Paul fumed, hot with a healthy boy's disappointment, and he tossed the remainder of the harness on to the wagon and followed the horse to the stall. He was in the stable for several minutes. His father heard him muttering inarticulately as he pulled down bundles of fodder from the loft, broke their bands, and threw ears of corn into the troughs. Ralph sucked his pipe audibly, slouched to the stable-door under a burden of sudden concern, and looked in at his son between the two heads of the munching animals.

“Come on in,” he said, persuasively. “I know you are mad, and you have every right to be after yore hard work from break o' day till now; but nobody kin depend on women. Mandy's been makin' yore ma a hat all day. Flowery gewgaws an' grub don't go together.”

Paul came out. “Never mind,” he said. “It don't make no difference. Anything will do.” Father and son walked side by

side into the fire-lighted kitchen. A clothless table holding a few dishes and pans stood in the center of the room. Just outside the door, on a little roofless porch, there was a shelf which held a tin basin, a cedar pail containing water, and a gourd dipper with a long, curved handle. And going to this shelf, Paul filled the basin and bathed his face and hands, after which he turned to a soiled towel on a roller against the weatherboarding and wiped himself dry, raking back his rebellious hair with a bit of a comb, while his father stood close by watching him with the gaze of an affectionate dog.

“That'll do, that'll do,” Ralph attempted to jest. “Thar ain't no company here for you to put on airs before. Set down! set down!”

Paul obeyed, and his father remained smoking in the doorway, still eying him with attentive consideration. Amanda brought from the fire a frying-pan containing the hot, bubbling mush, and pushed an empty brown bowl and spoon toward him.

“Help yoreself; thar's the milk in the pan,” she said. “If it is too sour you might stir a spoonful o' 'lasses in it. I've heard folks say it helps a sight.”

Paul was still angry, but he said nothing, and helped himself abundantly to the mush. However, he sniffed audibly as he lifted the pan and poured some of the thin, bluish fluid into his bowl.

“It wasn't my fault about the cow,” Amanda contended. “Scorchin' weather like this is the dickens on dumb brutes. Sook was a-pawin' an' switchin' 'er tail all the time I had hold of 'er tits. It must 'a' been a stingin' fly that got in a tender spot. Bang, bang! was all the warnin' I had, an' I

found myself soaked from head to foot with milk. I've heard o' fine society folks, queens an' the like, washin' all over in it to soften their skins and limber their joints; but I don't need nothin' o' that sort. Yore ma's not back yet. She went over to see about the singin'-class they want her in. She had on 'er best duds an' new hat, and looked like a gal o' twenty. She was as frisky as a young colt. I ironed 'er pink sash, an' put in a little starch to mash out the wrinkles and make it stand stiff-like. They all say she's got the best alto in Grayson. I rolled 'er hair up in papers last night, an' tuck it down to-day. You never saw sech pretty kinks in your life. Jeff Warren come to practise their duet, an' him and Addie stood out in the yard an' run the scales an' sung several pieces together. It sounded fine, an' if I had ever had any use for 'im I'd have enjoyed it more; but I never could abide 'im. He gits in too many fights, and got gay too quick after he buried his wife. He was dressed as fine as a fiddle, an' had a joke for every minute. Folks say he never loved Susie, an' I reckon they wasn't any too well matched. She never had a well day in 'er life, and I reckon it was a blessed thing she was took. A tenor voice an' a dandy appearance are pore consolations to a dyin' woman. But he treats women polite—I'll say that for 'im.”

Paul had finished his mush and milk, and helped himself to the cold string-beans and fat boiled pork. His father had reached for a chair, tilted it against the door-jamb, and seated himself in it. He eyed his son as if the boy's strength and rugged health were consoling reminders of his own adolescence. Suddenly, out of the still twilight which brooded over the fields and meadows and swathed the