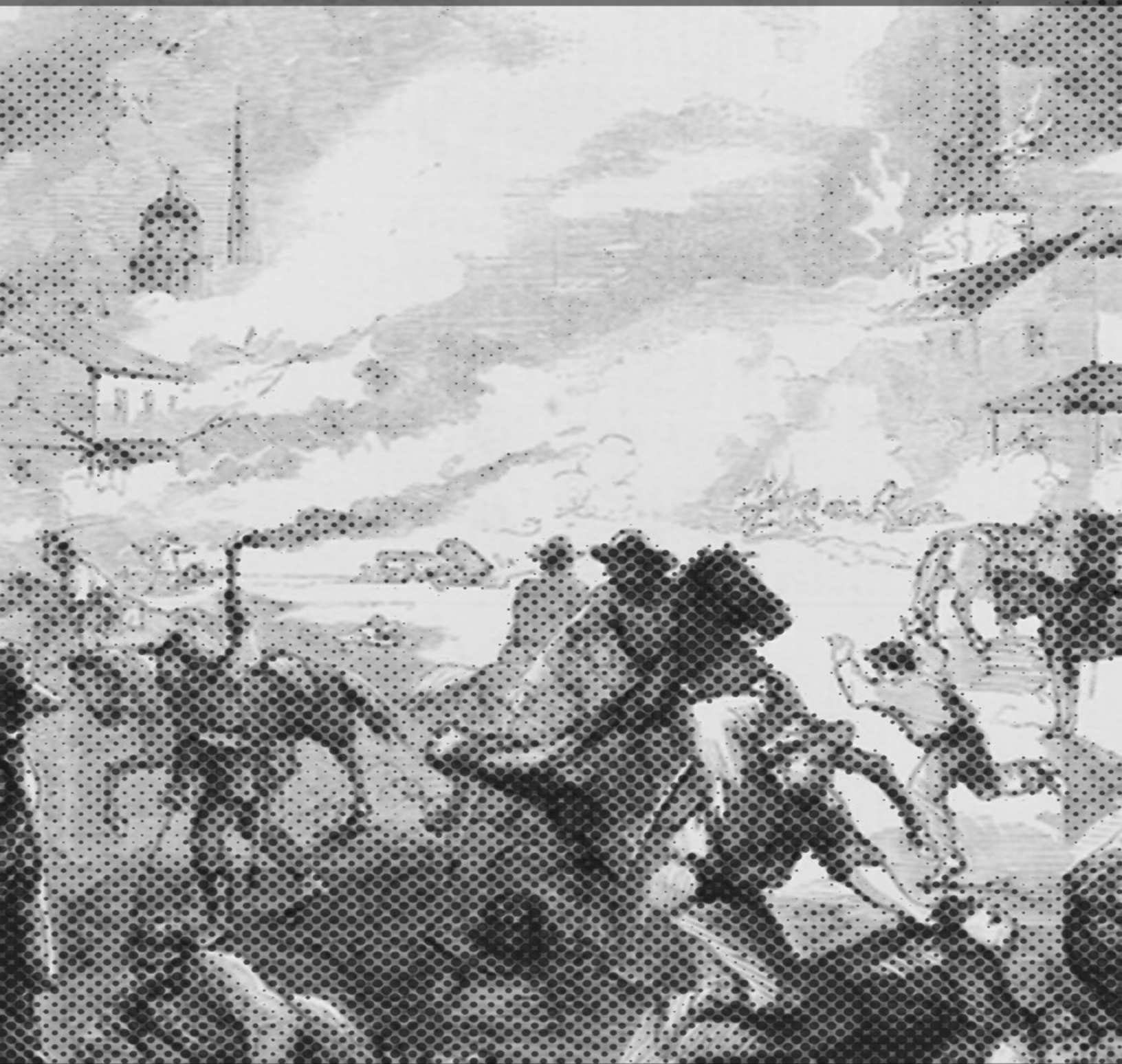
Mary Noailles Murfree



The bushwhackers & other stories

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CHAPTER I

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One might have imagined that there was some enchantment in the spot which drew hither daily the young mountaineer’s steps. No visible lure it showed. No prosaic reasonable errand he seemed to have. But always at some hour between the early springtide sunrise and the late vernal sunset Hilary Knox climbed the craggy, almost inaccessible steeps to this rocky promontory, that jutted out in a single sharp peak, not only beetling far over the sea of foliage in the wooded valley below, but rising high above the dense forests of the slope of the mountain, from the summit of which it projected. Here he would stand, shading his eyes with his hand, and gaze far and near over the great landscape. At first he seemed breathless with eager expectation; then earnestly searching lest there should be aught overlooked; at last dully, wistfully dwelling on the scene in the full realization of the pangs of disappointment for the absence of something he fain would see.

Always he waited as long as he could, as if the chance of any moment might conjure into the landscape, brilliant with the vivid growths and tender grace of the spring, that for which he looked in vain. A wind would come up the gorge and flutter about him, as he stood poised on the upward slant of the rock, the loftiest point of the mountain. If it were a young and frisky zephyr, but lately loosed from the cave of Æolus, which surely must be situated near at hand—on the opposite spur perhaps, so windy was the ravine, so tumultuous the continual coming and going of the currents

of the air,—he must needs risk his balance on the pinnacle of the crag to hold on to his hat. And sometimes the frolicsome breeze like other gay young sprites would not have done with playing tag, and when he thought himself safe and lowered his hand to shade his eyes, again the wind would twitch it by the brim and scurry away down the ravine, making all the trees ripple with murmurous laughter as it sped to the valley, while Hilary would gasp and plunge forward and once more clutch his hat, then again look out to descry perchance what he so ardently longed to see in the distance. Some pleasant vision he surely must have expected—something charming to the senses or promissory of weal or happiness it must have been; for his cheek flushed scarlet and his pulses beat fast at the very thought.

No one noticed his coming or going. All boys are a species of vagrant fowl, and with the daily migrations back and forth of a young mountaineer especially, no steady-minded, elder person would care to burden his observation. Another kind of fowl, an eagle, had built a nest in the bare branches at the summit of an isolated pine tree, of which only the lower boughs were foliaged, and this was higher even than the peak to which Hilary daily repaired for the earliest glimpse of his materialized hopes advancing down the gorge. The pair of birds only of all the denizens of the mountain took heed of his movements and displayed an anxiety and suspicion and a sort of fierce but fluttered indignation. It is impossible to say whether they were aware that their variety had grown rare in these parts, and that their capture, dead or alive, would be a matter of very considerable interest, and it is also futile to speculate as to

whether they had any knowledge of the uses or range of the rifle which Hilary sometimes carried on his shoulder. Certain it is, however, the male bird muttered indignantly as he looked down at the young mountaineer, and was wont to agitatedly flop about the great clumsy nest of interwoven sticks where the female, the larger of the two, with a steady courage sat motionless, only her elongated neck and bright dilation of the eyes betokening her excitement and distress. The male bird was of a more reckless tendency, and often visibly strove with an intermittent intention of swooping down to attack the intruder, for Hilary was but a slender fellow of about sixteen years, although tall and fleet of foot. A good shot, too, he was, and he had steady nerves, despite the glitter of excitement in his eyes forever gazing down the gorge. Because of his absorption in this expectation he took no notice of the eagles, although to justify his long absences from home he often brought his rifle on the plea of hunting. How should he care to observe the birds when at any moment he might see the flutter of a guidon in the valley road, a mere path from this height, and hear the trumpet sing out sweet and clear in the silence of the wilderness! At any moment the wind might bring the sound of the tramp of cavalry, the clatter of the carbine and canteen, and the clanking of spur and saber as some wild band of guerrillas came raiding through the country.

For despite the solemn stillness that brooded in the similitude of the deepest peace upon the scene, war was still rife in the land. The theater of action was far from this sequestered region, but there had been times when the piny gorges were full of the more prickly growth of bayonets. The

echoing crags were taught the thrilling eloquence of the bugle, and the mountains reverberated with the oratory of the cannon—for the artillery learned to climb the deer-paths. There was a fine panorama once in the twilight when a battery on the heights shelled the woods in the valley, and tiny white clouds with hearts of darting fire described swift aerial curves, the fuses burning brightly against the bland blue sky, ere that supreme moment of explosion when the bursting fragments hurtled wildly through the air.

Occasionally a cluster of white tents would spring up like mushrooms at the base of a mountain spur—gone as suddenly as they had come, leaving a bed of embers where the camp-fires had been, a vague wreath of smoke and little trace besides, for the felled trees cut for fuel made scant impression upon the densities of the wilderness, and the rocks were immutable.

And then for months a primeval silence and loneliness might enfold the mountains.

“Ef they kem agin, ef ever they kem agin, I’ll jine ’em—I’ll jine ’em,” cried Hilary out of a full heart as he stood and gazed.

And this was the reason he watched daily and sometimes deep into the night, lest coming under cover of the darkness they might depart before the dawn, leaving only the embers of their camp-fires to tell of their vanished presence.

The prospect stirred the boy’s heart. He longed to be in the midst of action, to take a man’s part in the great struggle, to live the life and do the faithful devoir of a soldier. He was young but he was strong, and he felt that here he was biding at home as if he were no more fit for the

military duty he yearned to assume than was the miller's daughter, Delia Noakes.

"I tole Dely yesterday ez I'd git her ter l'arn me ter spin ef ye kep' me hyar much longer," he said one day petulantly to his mother. "I'll jes' set an' spin like a sure-enough gal ef ye won't let me go an' jine the army like a boy."

"I ain't never gin my word agin yer goin'," the widow would temporize, alarmed by the possibility of his running away without permission if definitely forbidden to enlist, and therefore craftily holding out the prospect of her consent, which she knew he valued, for he had always been a dutiful son. "I hev never gin my word agin it—not sence ye hev got some growth—ye shot up as suddint ez Jonah's gourd in a single night. But I don't want ye ter jine no stray bands—ez mought be bushwhackers an' sech. Jes' wait till we git the word whar Cap'n Baker's command be—fur I want ye ter be under some ez kem from our deestric'—I'd feel so much safer bout'n ye, an' ye would be pleased, too, Cap'n Baker bein' a powerful fighter an' brave an' respected by all. Ye mus' wait, too, till I kin finish yer new shuts, an' knittin' them socks; I wouldn't feel right fur ye to go destitute—a plumb beggar fur clothes."

Hilary had never heard of Penelope's web, and the crafty device of raveling out at night the work achieved in the day, but to his impatience it seemed that his departure was indefinitely postponed for his simple outfit progressed no whit day by day, although his mother's show of industry was great.

The earth also seemed to have swallowed Captain Baker and his command; although Hilary rode again and again to

the postoffice at a little mountain hamlet some ten miles distant, and talked to all informed and discerning persons whom the hope of learning the latest details of the events of the war had drawn thither, and could hear news of any description to suit the taste of the narrator—all the most reliable items of the “grape-vine telegraph,” as mere rumor used to be called in those days—not one word came of Captain Baker.

His mother sometimes could control his outbursts of impatience on these occasions by ridicule.

“’Member the time, Hil’ry,” she would say, glancing at him with waggish mock gravity in her eyes as they gleamed over her spectacles, “when ye offered ter enlist with Cap’n Baker’s infantry year afore las’, when the war fust broke out—ye warn’t no higher than that biscuit block then—he tole ye that ye warn’t up ter age or size or weight or height, an’ ye tole him that thar war a plenty of ye ter pull a trigger, an’ he bust out laughin’ an’ lowed ez he warn’t allowed ter enlist men under fourteen. He said he thunk it war a folly in the rule, fur he had seen some mighty old men under fourteen—though none so aged ez you-uns. My, how he did laugh.”

“I wish ye would quit tellin’ that old tale,” said her son, sulkily, his face reddening with the mingled recollection of his own absurdity and the seriousness with which in his simplicity he had listened to the officer’s ridicule.

“An’ ye war so special small-sized and spindlin’ then,” exclaimed his mother, pausing in her knitting to take off her spectacles to wipe away the tears of laughter that had gathered at the recollection.

“I ain’t small-sized an’ spindling now,” said Hilary, drawing himself up to his full height and bridling with offended dignity in the consciousness of his inches and his muscles. “I know ez Cap’n Baker or enny other officer would ’list me now, for though I ain’t quite sixteen I be powerful well growed fur my age.”

As he realized this anew his flush deepened as he stood and looked down at the fire, while his mother covertly watched his expression. He felt it a burning shame that he should still linger here laggard when all his instinct was to help and sustain the cause of his countrymen. His loyalty was to the sense of home. His impulse was to repel the invader, although the majority of the mountaineers of East Tennessee were for the Union, and many fought for the old flag against their neighbors and often against their close kindred, so stanch was their loyalty in those times that tried men’s souls.

One day, as Hilary, straining his eyes, stood on his perch on the crag, he beheld fluttering far, far away—was it a wreath of mist floating along the level, sinuous curves of the distant valley road—a wreath of mist astir on some gentle current of the atmosphere? He had a sudden sense of color. Did the vapor catch a prismatic glister from the sun’s rays? And now faint, far, like the ethereal tones of an elfin horn, a mellow vibration sounded on the air. Hardly louder it was than the booming of a bee in the heart of a flower, scarcely more definite than the melody one hears in a dream, which one can remember, yet cannot recognize or sing again; nevertheless his heart bounded at the vague and vagrant strain, and he knew the fluttering prismatic bits of color to

be the guidons of a squadron of cavalry. His heart kept pace with the hoofbeats of the horses. The lessening distance magnified them to his vision till he could discern now a bright glint of steely light as the sun struck on the burnished arms of the riders, and could distinguish the tints of the steeds—gray, blood-bay, black and roan-red; he could soon hear, too, the jingle of the spurs, the clank of sabers and carbines, and now and again the voices of the men, bluff, merry, hearty, as they rode at their ease. He would not lose sight of them till they had paused to pitch their camp at the foot of a great spur of the mountain opposite. There was a famous spring of clear, cold water there, he remembered.

The great spread of mountain ranges had grown purple in the sunset, with the green cup-like coves between filled to the brim with the red vintage of the afternoon light, still limpid, translucent, with no suggestion of the dregs of shadow or sediment of darkness in this radiant nectar. Nor was there token of coming night in the sky—all amber and pearl—the fairest hour of the day. No premonition of approaching sorrow or defeat, of death or rue, was in the gay bivouac at the foot of the mountain. The very horses picketed along the bank of the stream whickered aloud in obvious content with their journey’s end, their supper, their drink, and their bed; the sound of song and jollity, the halloo, the loud, cheery talk of the troopers, rose as lightly on the air as the long streamers of undulating blazes from the camp-fires and the curling tendrils of the ascending smoke. More distant groups betokened the precaution of videttes at an outpost. A sentinel near the road, for the camp guard was posted betimes, was the only silent and

grave man in the gay company, it seemed to Hilary, as he watched the gallant, soldierly figure with his martial tread marching to and fro in this solitary place, as if for all the world to see. For Hilary had made his way down the mountain and was now on the outskirts of the camp, the goal of all his military aspirations.

He had come so near that a sudden voice rang out on the evening air, and he paused as the sentry challenged his approach. The rocky river bank vibrated with the echo of the soldier's imperative tones.

Hilary remembered that moment always. It meant so much to him. Every detail of the scene was painted on his memory years and years afterward as if but yesterday it was aglow—the evening air that was so still, so filled with mellow, illuminated color, so imbued with peace and fragrance and soft content, such as one could imagine may pervade the realms of Paradise, was yet the vehicle for the limning of this warlike picture. The great purple mountains loomed high around; through the green valley now crept a dun-tinted shadow more like a deepening of the rich verdant color of the foliage than a visible transition toward the glooms of the night; the stream was steel-gray and full of the white flickers of foam; further up the water reflected a flare of camp-fires, broadly aglow, with great sprangles of fluctuating flame and smoke setting the blue dusk a-quiver with alternations of light and shade; there were the dim rows of horses, some still sturdily champing their provender, others dully drowsing, and one nearer at hand, a noble charger, standing with uplifted neck and thin, expanded nostrils and full lustrous eyes, gazing over the winding way,

the vacant road by which they had come. Beyond were the figures of the soldiers; a few, who had already finished their supper, were rolled in their blankets with their feet to the fire in a circle like the spokes of a wheel to the hub. There, pillowed on their saddles, would they sleep all night under the pulsating white stars, for these swift raids were unencumbered with baggage, and the pitching of a tent meant a longer stay than the bivouac of a single night. Others were still at their supper, broiling rashers of bacon on the coals, or toasting a bird or chicken, split and poised on a pointed cedar stick before the flames. Socially disposed groups were laughing and talking beside the flaring brands, the firelight gleaming in their eyes, half shaded by the wide, drooping brims of their broad hats, and flashing on their white teeth as they rehearsed the incidents of the day or made merry with old scores. Now and then a stave of song would rise sonorously into the air as a big bass voice trolled out a popular melody—it was the first time Hilary had ever heard the sentimental, melancholy measures of “The Sun’s Low Down the Sky, Lorena.” Sometimes, by way of symphony, a tentative staccato variation of the theme would issue from the strings of a violin, borrowed from a neighboring dwelling, which a young trooper, seated leaning against the bole of a great tree, was playing with a deft, assured touch.

Hilary often saw such scenes afterward, but not even the reality was ever so vivid as the recollection of this fire-lit perspective glimmering behind the figure of the guard.

The two gazed at each other in the brief space of a second—the boy eager and expectant, the soldier’s eyes

dark, steady, challenging, under the broad, drooping brim of his soft hat. He was young, but he had a short-pointed dark beard, and a mustache, and although thin and lightly built, he was sinewy and alert, and in his long, spurred boots and gray uniform he looked sufficiently formidable with his carbine in his hand.

“Who comes there?” he sternly demanded.

“A friend,” quavered Hilary, and he could have utterly repudiated himself that his voice should show this tremor of excitement since it might seem to be that of fear in the estimation of this man, who defied dangers and knew no faltering, and had fought to the last moment on the losing side on many a stricken field, and was content to believe that duty and courage were as valid a guerdon in themselves as fickle victory, which perches as a bird might on the standard of chance.

“Advance, friend, and give the countersign,” said the sentry.

It seemed to Hilary at the moment that it was some strange aberration of all the probabilities that he should not know this mystic word, this potent phrase, which should grant admission to the life of the camp that already seemed to him his native sphere. He advanced a step nearer, and while the sentinel bent his brow more intently upon him and looked firmly and negatively expectant, he gave in lieu of the watchword a full detail of his errand,—that he wished to be a soldier and fight for his country, and especially enlist with this squadron, albeit he did not know a single man of the command, nor even the leader’s rank or name.

Hilary could not altogether account for a sudden change in the sentinel's face and manner. He had been very sure that he was about to be denied all admission according to the strict orders to permit no stranger within the lines of the encampment. The soldier stared at the boy a moment longer, then called lustily aloud for the corporal of the guard. For these were the days of the close conscription, when it was popularly said that the army robbed both the cradle and the grave for its recruits, so young and so old were the men accounted liable for military duty. The sentinel could but discern at a glance that Hilary was younger even than the limit for these later conscriptions, and that only as a voluntary sacrifice to patriotism were his services attainable. The corporal of the guard came forthwith—tall, heavy, broad-visaged, downright in manner, and of a blunt style of speech. But on his face, too, the expression of formidable negation gave way at once to a brisk alacrity of welcome, and he immediately conducted Hilary to another officer, who brought him to a little knoll where the captain commanding the squadron was seated by a brisk fire, half reclining on his saddle thrown on the ground. He was beguiling his leisure, and perhaps reinforcing a certain down-hearted tendency to nostalgia, by reading the latest letters he had from home—letters a matter of six months old now, and already read into tatters, but so illuminated between the lines with familiar pictures and treasured household memories that they were still replete with an interest that would last longer than the paper. Two or three other officers were playing cards by the