SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Young Carlyle Wilburton Dale, or "Bill Dale," as he elects to be known, son of a wealthy coal operator, John K. Dale, arrives at the Halfway Switch, in eastern Tennessee, abandoning a life of idle ease—and incidentally a bride, Patricia Clavering, at the altar—determined to make his own way in life. He meets "Babe" Littleford, typical mountaineer girl. "By" Heck, a character of the hills, takes him to John Moreland's home. Moreland is chief of his "clan," which has an old feud with the Littlefords. He sees Dale of the killing of his brother, David Moreland, years ago, owner of rich coal deposits, by a man named Carlyle. Moreland's description of "Carlyle" causes Dale to believe the man was his father.

CHAPTER II

In the Cup.

Dale found the humble home of his mountaineer host a home in the fullest sense of the word.

At the noonday meal, he met Mrs. Moreland and the sons of the household, and they were exactly as he had pictured them. Mrs. Moreland was quiet, motherly, always smiling, as straight and real as her husband. The sons, Caleb and Luke, were as much alike as the fingers on your hands; they were tall and broad-shouldered, grey-eyed and brown-haired.

Before sundown Dale had become acquainted with the rest of the Morelands, and he liked them, every one. He was at the cabin of his host's gray old father and mother for a long time.

When supper was over John Moreland lighted the big glass lamp in the best room, and the family and their guest gathered there to spend the evening. Then the lanky moonshiner and his mother came in.

Granny Heck had the sharp features and the stooped, thin figure of a witch. She wore a faded blue bandana about her white head, and she carried a long hickory staff; there was a reed-stemmed clay pipe in her mouth, and her dark calico skirt had a tobacco pocket in it.

Her son preceded her into the room. He walked to the center table, faced about, and said with a low and airy sweep of his right hand:

"Bill, old boy, this here's maw. Maw, she tells forchunes."

"So this here," creaked Granny Heck, looking over the brass rims of her spectacles, "is Mr. Bill! Well, well! I jest thought to myself 'at I'd come up and see ye, Mr. Bill, and tell yore forchune."

She dropped into the rocker that Caleb had placed for her.

"Addie," she said to the smiling Mrs. Moreland, "will ye bring me a cup half full o' coffee grounds?"

When the cup came, the fortune-teller took it and shook it and patted it, all the while muttering mysterious words that she had learned from the old Indian, Cherokee Joe—which served her purpose very well.

"I see," she mumbled more or less sepulchrally, "a pow'ful good-lookin' gyurl in a calliker dress, with her hair a-hangin' away down her back. A barefooted gyurl, with big, purty eyes. She's a-standin' on a low cliff, a-peepin' at you through the laurels, Mr. Bill. This is in the past. . . .

"In the future," she went on slowly, "I see this here as plain as daylight through a knothole; a awful big man, with curly black hair and curly black beard, and with eyes like a clift-hawk's; and I see you, too, Mr. Bill; and I see a fight, a master fight—Lord Fa' mussy, what a fight! But you'll marry the gyurl after all, Mr. Bill."

Dale laughed. The old woman had described Babe Littleford. But who was the "big, dark man"? Some fellow who had lost his heart to the mountain girl, perhaps.

When the Hecks had gone, John Moreland leaned forward and touched his guest on the knee.

"That thar big man mentioned in tellin' yore forchune," he said, "might ha' been Black Adam Ball. Black Adam, he lives with his pap and mother a few mile up the river. As big as a skinned hoss, he is, and plumb ongodly strong. He's been a-beggin' Babe Littleford to marry him fo' a year or two, and she won't listen to him.

"Ef ever ye do haf to fight Black Adam," John Moreland went on, "ye want to fight him with a two-eyed shotgun and buckshot. He's the meanest man on earth; snake-broth and pizen vine is religious aside o' him. But ontel ye begin a-makin' love to Babe Littleford, I reckon the' ain't no danger o' you a-havin' trouble with Black Adam; and you ain't likely, I take it, to make love to Babe."

"But Babe's the best one o' the Littlefords," declared Luke.

John Moreland reached for the leatherbound old family Bible. He opened the Book at random.

"It's about time we was a-goin' to our rest, and we'll go jest as soon as we've had prayers, Mr. Dale."

When half a chapter from St. Matthew had been laboriously but reverently read, the Morelands knelt at their chairs, and so did Bill Dale. John Moreland's bedtime prayer was very simple, and very earnest, and it had in it more of thanksgiving than of supplication. And a part of it certainly was uncommon—

"Bless the stranger with us here to-night, and all o' our kinfolks, and all o' our friends, and our inimies, the Littlefords—'specially the Littlefords. Aymen!"

Dale was deeply impressed. He heard Mrs. Moreland dimly when she told him to let her know—she would hear him if he called—if there wasn't enough cover for his bed. Then he found himself alone with the stalwart chief of the Morelands.

He stepped forward and put his hand on the mountaineer's shoulder.

"How a man can go down on his knees and pray for his enemies," smiled Dale, "is entirely beyond me. Do you really mean it?"

"I try hard to," Moreland said quickly. "In a-doin' that," he went on, "I go Ben Littleford one better. Ben Littleford's the bell sheep o' the people who lives acrost the river from us, people we've hated fo' years and years. Ben, he holds fambly prayers, too, every night. He'd ax the blessin' o' the Lord on the stranger onder his roof, but not on his inimies, the Morelands. Yes, I try hard to mean it, Bill Dale."

"And that other enemy," murmured Dale—and he wondered why that should bother him so much, why he should feel that vague responsibility about it—"the man who killed your brother, David—"

"I don't never pray fo' him," interrupted the mountaineer, going a little pale. "I hain't that nigh juffect. A man don't git so good 'at he axes the Almighty to bless the devil—or the rattler in the laurels, or the copperhead 'at waits onder a bush fo' the passin' o' some bare-legged child."

Dale winced, but Moreland didn't notice it. Dale let his hand fall from the other's shoulder. Moreland began to speak again:

"I didn't tell ye afore, Bill Dale. My brother David, he was the hope o' his people. He was better'n the rest of us. The one big aim o' his life was to educate us all, the benighted. Yes, we're benighted, and we know it. He meant to do it with the coal he'd found. As I've done told ye, we ain't never had the heart to sell the coal. I hope ye'll have a fine rest, Bill Dale. I ain't a-goin' to call ye 'Mister' no more, Bill Dale!"

"Don't!" smilingly said the younger man. "'Bill Dale' is right, y'know. Good-night, John Moreland!"

Dale removed his shoes and outer clothing, blew out the light, and went to bed in the best room's hand-carved black walnut fourposter.

For a long time he lay there awake, and stared through a little window toward a bright star that burned like a beacon fire about the pine-fringed crest of David Moreland's mountain. He believed he understood now why his father had turned a greenish gray when this coal property was mentioned to him. He believed he understood why his father had flatly refused to investigate this vein. But he was wholly at a loss to account for the use of his own given name instead of Dale.

Looking toward the mountain again, he spoke as though he were talking to David Moreland himself:

"I'll see it through for you, old man. This shall be my country."

CHAPTER III

Goliath of the Hills.

Dale awoke a little after daybreak, arose and dressed himself, and went out by way of the door beside the huge stone-and-clay chimney.

The mountain air was bracing. Dale threw out his chest and started eagerly for a walk.

The road led past the cabin of Grandpap Moreland. When Dale was directly in front of the log house, he saw the aged mountaineer standing on a rickety sawhorse beside the stone step at the narrow porch; Grandpap Moreland was helping a gray cat down from the roof.

"Mornin'! I was jest a-takin' that thar cussfired old pest down offen the roof. I've took him down every mornin' as reg'lar as I make fires, fo' three year or more. Ef it wasn't bad luck to kill a cat, I' shoot him, mebbe."

After breakfasting with John Moreland, Bill Dale borrowed fishing-tackle from his host, and set out alone for the little river.

There were many shoals and rapids, and he went almost half a mile before he found a place to his liking. It was a beautiful spot. Above, the water poured between two great boulders with a gentle roar; below, it shallowed out over round stones. Overhead towered tall white sycamores.

Not until he had put a minnow on the hook and cast it out did he see that he was not alone at the pool. On the other side, less than sixty feet away, Babe Littleford sat on a stone the size of a small barrel; she held a cane fishing-rod in her hands, and her bare feet were in the water to her ankles. She was looking squarely toward Dale, and there was something akin to reproachful anger in her long brown eyes.

"Good morning!" called Dale, lifting his hat.

There was no reply. There was not even a change of countenance. Again Dale called his friendly greeting, and again there was no reply. It piqued Dale.

A few yards down the stream the white body of a sycamore lay from one bank to the other; it had been blown there by a recent storm. Dale wound his line, went down and crossed by means of the prostrate tree.

She didn't even look around when he walked up to her and spoke again. It struck him as being decidedly odd.

"I say," he told her, "you're as chatty as a set of stencils. You mustn't talk so much, y'know."

Her eyes smiled at the river, but Dale couldn't see her eyes.

"Do you like violets, Miss Littleford?" he asked next.

In the black, mica-starred soil at his feet grew a carpet of the finest violets he had ever seen. Babe let the tip of her cane rod fall into the water and looked around.

"It sounds funny to hear a man talk o' sech little things as vi'lets," she declared. "Most o' men don't think o' nothin' but workin', huntin', fightin' and eatin'. I'm a little mad at you! I went home yeste'day—and I think I run might' nigh the whole six mile—and fixed up dinner fo' you, 'cause I onderstood you was a-comin' to our house—and you went to them low-down Morelands!"

"I beg pardon," he said contritely; didn't know you were especially expecting me. I had business," he added, "with John Moreland."

There came to his ears from somewhere down the river the chorus of a rakish old hill song, and the voice was that of the lanky moonshiner, By Heck—

"Oh, when I die, don't-a bury me deep,
Put no tombstone at my head and feet,
Put a bear's jawbone in my right hand
On my way to the Prom-ised La-a-and,
Oh! On my way to the Promised Land."

A few minutes later there appeared on the Moreland side of the river the singer of the rakish old song; he had a minnow pail in one hand and a white hickory rod in the other.

"Hi, thar, Bill, old boy!" he yelled. "Hi, thar, Babe! Either of ye'uns ketched anything?"

Ben Littleford's daughter held up a fish proudly. Heck slapped his thigh with his slouch hat.

"Good fo' you!" he exclaimed. "But they ain't a-bitin' jest right. The moon's wrong, and the signs is wrong fo' bitin'."

At that instant John Moreland appeared at Heck's side. He seemed very serious about something.

"Bill Dale," he called, "come over here."

Wondering, Dale put down his rod and turned to obey. Two minutes later he stood before John Moreland.

"I jest wanted to tell ye," and the mountaineer almost closed one alert grey eye, "'at ye're purty shore to git into trouble over thar."

"I'm an able-bodied man," Dale returned smilingly.

"You shore are," frowned Moreland, "but mebbe you ain't used to durned hard fightin'."

Not used to hard fighting! Dale's smile broadened. Once he had whipped a heavyweight pugilist; and he had fought as a matter of principle, and not for money or prestige.

Moreland suddenly jerked one thumb toward the other side of the stream. Dale looked and saw, standing beside Babe Littleford, a quite formidable man. He had the height and breadth, almost, of a Goliath. He was black-eyed and black-haired, and his thick, short beard was curled like the hair between a bull's horns. In one hand he carried a repeating rifle as lightly as though it were a mere straw.

One of his great arms suddenly straightened toward Dale, and a voice as gruff as the growl of a bear said hotly:

"What was you a-doin' here a-talkin' to my gyurl?"

Babe Littleford looked angry. Dale flushed, then went pale.

"I have a habit of talking with whom I please," he said evenly.

"Spoke like a man," drawled the lanky Heck in a very low tone.

Goliath of the hills stared unbelievingly. Dale said in an undertone to John Moreland: "Is it that Ball fellow?"

"Yes," answered the hillman; "it's Black Adam Ball."

Ball dropped his rifle to the violets, slowly clenched his huge and hairy hands, and thrust his bearded jaw out aggressively.

"I dare ye over here, ye pink coward!" he challenged.

"If you have any business with me, come over here and transact it," Dale retorted. "I won't run."

"That's Moreland terrytory," Ball objected. "But I'll meet ye half way, and I dare ye to take me up, ye lace-trimmed pink mollycoddle!"

Half-way would be the middle of the river, and no place for a fight, surely. But Dale was nettled. His temper, the temper that he had never been able to keep wholly under control, was rising fast. He threw off his coat and hat and rolled the sleeves of his soft shirt to his elbows. Then he waded into the pool. The slowly moving water was up to his waist at the half-way point, and the bottom was of hard-packed sand.

The Goliath stared unbelievingly. He was not accustomed to having his challenges thus accepted. He threw off his hat and went to meet the lithe young stranger.

Bill Dale squared himself and put up his guard. Adam Ball came on, and he was scowling wickedly.

Ball rushed, the clear water swirling in his wake, and let out with a powerful right. It was a blow to crush an ordinary man's chest in; but, to Ball's surprise, it failed to land. Dale evaded it cleverly, and at the same time sent a swift left uppercut to the other's bull-like jaw. Adam Ball muttered two wicked words and steadied himself; he had caught a tartar. A moment, and he led out again, and he missed again; but he followed it with a blow that made a red mark on Bill Dale's shoulder.

"How's that, ye pink coward?" he crowed.

"All right—how's this?"

And Dale sent on a mighty blow that rebounded dully from the giant's chest and elicited only a harsh laugh of contempt. There was little to be gained by striking a man like Adam Ball on the chest; Dale knew now that he must reach a more vulnerable spot.

Then he feinted with his left and drove his right to Ball's mouth, bringing blood. Ball roared in his blind rage and dashed toward his antagonist, resolved to get a clinch. But Dale eluded the terrible arms, although in so doing he received a blow on the temple that made him dizzy for a few seconds.

While Ball was again engaged in trying to gain the advantage of a clinch, Granny Heck made her appearance on the Moreland bank. She promptly launched her sympathies in a manner that pleased both her gaping son and the watchful and silent John Moreland.

"Hit him in the stummick, Mr. Bill!" she cried over and over. "Hit him whar he lives at!"

The combat grew hotter and hotter. Both landed frequently now. The faces red now and then. Their clothing had been torn away to the belt, and their magnificent wet bodies glowed in the morning sunlight. Dale had seriously damaged his soft hands; they felt as though they were filled with slivers of steel. But still he fought on doggedly, determinedly, desperately, minute after minute.

Those on the two banks watched it all with suppressed excitement. Babe Littleford stood in the edge of the water, with her hands clasped below her throat, her face was pale. John Moreland, who had witnessed many other great fights, himself a fighting man, had never before beheld such a contest of strength and endurance as this; Bill Dale had won John Moreland's heart for all time to come.

But the blows of the fighters were growing weaker now. The sound of their labored breathing rose distinctly over the gentle roar of the sparkling waters above.

Then the watchers saw Adam Ball lunge at his man, saw Dale stumble out of sheer weakness, saw Ball's mighty blood-streaked arms close about the beautiful white body and hug it close to his great and hairy chest. A moment, and Ball was bending Dale slowly backward and downward more by reason of weight than of strength; another moment, and Ball was about to sink the brown head under the surface!

Babe Littleford gave a smothered cry. John Moreland stepped toward the water and shouted hoarsely:

"Don't ye drowned him Adam! Ef ye do, ye'll answer to me!"

Dale had gathered himself for a last move. He slipped downward suddenly, immersing himself completely, and shot one arm around Ball's thigh; then, by a great effort, he rose with the giant and overthrew him, and staggered free!

Ball's hairy face came to the surface first. Dale fought back the pain of the water in his lungs, and the pain as of sharp and jagged slivers of steel in his hands, and struck madly, half blindly, at the hateful face. He kept it down, but it wouldn't go under the water completely. . . .

Adam Ball began to drift as though lifeless down the stream. Bill Dale followed, still fighting weakly, choking as he breathed. But soon he ceased to strike. He saw, instead of the beast-like face, flashes as of distant summer lightning, and red blotches against a thick blackness. The blotches faded, and all became dark to him; he pitched forward, gasping, and began to drift down the stream with the vanquished Ball.

Babe Littleford was standing in the water to her knees. When Dale succumbed to utter exhaustion, she started toward him, to save him from drowning. She felt strangely drawn toward the big, white, clean man who had whipped the Goliath she had always dreaded. But she had gone only a few yards toward the center of the river when John Moreland and Sam Heck reached the unconscious figures.

Heck dragged Ball to the Littleford bank and left him lying there, face downward, on the sand. Moreland half carried, half dragged Bill Dale to the other bank. Babe Littleford waded out. She paid absolutely no attention to the worsted bully. She stood intently watching the limp form of Dale.

"Is he dead, John Moreland?" she called tremulously.

"No, Babe," Moreland answered, his voice not unkind; "he ain't anyways nigh dead."

He and Sam Heck took up Dale's dripping figure and bore it away. Babe Littleford ran to higher ground, hid herself behind a clump of sassafras and watched them.

Granny Heck followed with Dale's coat and hat. She chattered all the way across the meadow—

"Now what did I tell ye, John and Sam? What did I tell ye? La, la! Wasn't it a master fight, like I said—now wasn't it?"

"Sometimes ye make me a little tired, granny-woman," Moreland remonstrated gently. "The' ain't nothin' in forchune-tellin'. You've jest been here fo' so long 'at you know how to judge the future by the past. And you're a tol'able good guesser, too, I reckon."

Granny Heck flared up quickly: "Ain't nothin' in forchune-tellin'! Now don't go and fool yeself, John Moreland. You listen to me about a half minute, John. I seed more in the cup 'an I told Mr. Bill. I seed blood and death. I seed a big fight atwixt the Morelands and the Littlefords!"

"That's easy to guess at," John Moreland replied. "You know, o' course, 'at Black Adam will do all he can to bring trouble to us on account o' Bill Dale a-stayin' with us. And you know it ain't never onpossible to hatch up war atween us and the Littlefords. Jest run on ahead, Granny Heck, and tell my wife to hunt up some kind o' good liniment fo' Bill's bruises. Tell her she needn't to waste time a-lookin' up any bandages. This man here is like me: he wouldn't wear bandages, 'cause they look bad."

When Dale came back to a state of consciousness, he was lying under covers in the carved black walnut bed. Beside him stood John Moreland, who held in one hand a bowl containing a hot herb brew that his wife had prepared. Granny Heck, her son By, and Mrs. Moreland stood not far away.

"This here'll be good fo' ye, I think," said Moreland, nodding toward the bowl in his hand. He went over and put an arm around Dale's shoulders and helped him to sit up.

Dale drank the stuff with difficulty.

"Much obliged," he muttered thickly. "I—let's see, did I whip—how did it end? He didn't lick me, did he—that fellow Ball?"

"He shore didn't," smiled Moreland. "Not by a big sight. He fell out fust. His own pap won't hardly know him, Bill!"

* * * * * * *

News travels rapidly in the big hills. The Morelands began to gather at the home of their chief to see the man who had whipped Black Adam Ball; every Moreland able to walk came to see Bill Dale. For three hours he was lionized, but he didn't enjoy it; the water had left many pains in his chest, and his head ached dully, and his hands still felt as though the bones were shattered in them.

Came a thundershower that afternoon, and the mountain evening fell with a chill. A fire was made in the wide stone fireplace in the guest's room, and when supper was over the family gathered there with Dale, who refused to be kept in bed.

After a few minutes of silently watching grotesque shadows flit across the log walls, Dale said to John Moreland:

"If your brother David could know, don't you think he'd want you to get the value out of the coal?"

John Moreland bent forward to rest his chin in his hands. His sober grey eyes stared thoughtfully toward the fire.

"I ain't never looked at it thataway," he said.

"That's the right way to look at it," declared Dale. "But you shouldn't sell the property as it is."

The mountaineer turned an inquiring face toward his guest.

"How in thunder could I handle it ef I didn't?"

"Why not let me develop it for you?" Dale said earnestly, eagerly. "I won't charge you anything above expenses, and I won't be extravagant."

"It'd take consid'able money to start things a-movin'. Have you got it?" asked Moreland.

"No, but I can get it. Almost anybody would be willing to lend money on so good a thing as this, y'know."

For a little while Moreland sat there and looked squarely at Dale, who returned his gaze without a sign of flinching. The hillman was trying to find a motive.

"How comes it 'at you, who ain't knowed us but two days," he demanded, "can be so much int'rested in us?"

The question demanded a straightforward answer. Dale realized that there was but one way in which he could give a satisfactory explanation, and that that was by telling the truth—but not the whole truth, as he surmised it, for then his efforts would go for naught.

Moreland was speaking again, and his eyes were brighter now.

"I agree 'at David would want us to develop the coal, ef he could know. It's like a light a-breakin' to me. But that coal is sacred to us, Bill Dale, and afore ye go any fu'ther I'll haf to ax ye to tell me all about yeself. A city man up here in the wilderness—it don't look s'picious, Bill, mebbe, but—well, I hopes ye can pardon me fo' axin' it. I shore got to be keerful about Brother David's coal. Addie and the boys'll go out and leave jest us two in here; and when ye're a-talkin' to me it's the same as talkin' to a tombstone so fer as tellin' is consarned. Addie, honey; Luke, you and Cale—"

Mrs. Moreland and her sons arose and left the room, closing the door behind them. Bill Dale paced the floor, arms folded, brows drawn. Finally he halted before the Moreland chief.

"There's nothing I'm ashamed of, I guess," he said. "I don't like to tell it simply because I don't like to tell it. But—I'll do it."

He sat down in his sheepskin-lined rocker, lay back and closed his eyes as though to visualize the story, to live it over.

"Maybe it's not very much in my favor, John Moreland," he began. "I never could get along with my parents, or with the set I was born into. Somehow, I was different. Father and mother wanted me to be a dandy; they even wanted me to let a servant dress me. The climax came when they tried to marry me to a young woman who didn't want me any more than I wanted her."

He opened his eyes, looked straight at Moreland, and went on:

"You see, they wanted to marry us in order to unite old Clavering's fortune and my dad's; Patricia, like me, was an only child. It had been all cut and dried for us, for years. They put it up to me like this: they said I owed it to them, that it was my duty; that I had always been a severe trial to them; that my savagery had put gray into my mother's hair, and a lot of things of that kind. I fell for it at last; it was sort of a matter of self-defense. With Patricia, it was a case of—well, a case of simple obedience. Pat is a good girl. . . ."

A minute of silence; then:

"I'll hurry along with it, John Moreland. I had one fine friend back there. It was Robert McLaurin, a reporter on the city's leading newspaper. My parents didn't take to him because he was a worker, and not a fop. Mother wanted Pat's cousin, 'poor dear Harry' Clavering, for my best man. 'Poor dear Harry' and I had a fight, once upon a time, and I—I had whipped him; and I didn't like him. I chose Bobby McLaurin for my best man, and I wouldn't give him up.

"It was only when we met before the chancel in a big crowded church that I fully realized the tragedy of it for Pat. I saw that her face was a clean white, and that her eyes held the shadow of something that was very terrible. I turned my head and saw the same shadow in the eyes of my greatest friend, Bobby McLaurin. I knew then. Bobby and Patricia loved each other, John Moreland! Bobby didn't have any money to speak of, and that had held them apart.

"It had been the finest thing in the world, McLaurin's acting as best man for me. There was friendship for you! I couldn't take from them their one chance of happiness. . . .

"I couldn't see anything else to do, so I ran. I went home, pulled off my wedding rig and put on the clothes I'm wearing now, threw some things into a bag and hurried down to the union station. I found that I could have my choice between a flier for Atlanta and the—the train that brought me here. I bought passage to Atlanta, but I never meant to use it; I meant to take the other train and pay a cash fare. In doing that, I hoped to lose myself from them. I wanted to go unhindered to some country where I wouldn't be considered a—a savage, y'know.

"I went out to the train-shed, and I hadn't been there a minute when Bobby McLaurin came. I asked him how he knew where to find me. He said:

"'I thought you wouldn't care to stay here after doing what you did, and I wanted to say good-by, Bill.' He always called me that, and it made me feel like a man. Then I put my bag down and took him by both shoulders and told him this:

"'Look here, Bobby, I'm going to give you some advice, and you take it. You steal Pat and marry her. Steal Pat and marry her if you have to live in a hole in a hillside. You're as good as any of them, and lots better than most of them. You can work your way to a better salary. You see,' I told him, 'we get about what we deserve in this world. Most of us don't deserve much.'

"I asked him if mother was badly cut up. He said she was; that she had fainted. Dad swore aloud, he said, there in church. I told Bobby good-by and got aboard the train without saying anything about where I was going—but I didn't know myself where I was going, at the time.

"Now you've heard it. Every word was truth. If you'll trust me with the coal, I'll make this land my land, your people my people. I'll suffer with you when you suffer, and be happy with you when you're happy; and when you fight, I'll fight with you."

The Moreland chief arose, and Bill Dale arose. The hillman put out his hand, and Dale gripped it.

"I believe in ye, Bill," said John Moreland. "Fo' another thing, I've seed ye fight. You can work the coal."

He looked toward the closed inner door and called, "Oh, Addie; you and the boys can come back now."

Out of the night a face appeared at one of the small windows. It was a feminine face and handsome rather than pretty. Two slender, sunburned hands gripped the window-ledge nervously. The face pressed closer to the glass, then disappeared. Soon afterward the outer door of the guest's room opened, and Ben Littleford's daughter entered. Her skirts were dripping wet.

Mrs. Moreland arose and went toward the young woman. She knew that only something of great importance could bring a Littleford into her home in this fashion.

"What's the matter, Babe?"

Babe Littleford gave no attention to Mrs. Moreland. She went on to Bill Dale, walking softly on bare feet.

"Black Adam is a-goin' to kill you tonight, Bill Dale."

"That so?" Dale's smile was rather grim. "How did you find that out, Miss Littleford?"

"I found it out, all right. As he went off from the river this mornin', I made fun of him; and he patted the stock of his rifle and said he'd git you through a window! He was at our house this evenin' to help fix pap's gun, and when he left he started this way, a-goin' by the blowed-down sycamore. I waded the river at Blue Cat shoals to beat him here. I thought you might want to know about it, so's ye could mebbe save other folks the trouble o' makin' a funeral fo' ye."

She backed toward the door, her eyes never leaving Dale's face. Another second, and she was gone.

They were all on their feet now. John Moreland gripped Dale's arm.

"Over thar aside o' the chimbley, Bill!" he ordered, his native drawl for the moment absent. "Out, Addie, honey! Luke, bring my rifle and hat—jump keen! Cale, bring water and drownd this here fire!"

It was done. Moreland took his hat and the repeater and went alone into the night.

When some fifteen minutes had passed, there came to Dale's ears the sound of shooting. There were ten shots in such rapid succession that they made almost a continuous roar. Then came echoes and reverberations, and then silence. Soon John Moreland let himself into the dark room.

His wife's voice was low and filled with anxiety:

"What happened, John?"

A dull thud came through the darkness as her husband's rifle-butt struck the floor.

"This is what happened, Addie: As I passed the cawner o' the house, I got down that thar old oxwhip to take along. I went acrost the road and into the meadow, and thar I seen Adam Ball a-comin'. I hid, and when Adam was about to pass me, I jumped up and jerked his rifle from him and busted it ag'in a rock. Then I lights in and thrashes him with the oxwhip ontel he broke and run. And 'en this here happened, Addie:

"I was a-watchin' to see ef Adam had reely went off, when I seed a man a-comin' toward me fast. I thought it was Ball, o' course. So I up and tells him to show me how fast he can run and commences a-shootin' over his head to skeer him. But it didn't happen to be Adam Ball—it was Ben Littleford! He was a-follerin' Babe to see what she was up to, o' course."

"How do ye know it was Ben, pap?" Caleb asked.

"How do I know?" growled John Moreland. "When I got through a-shootin', he hollers at me and says: 'Tomorrow, John Moreland,' he says, 'we'll have a little Gettysburg o' our own!' And I might mind ye, Cale, 'at he keeps his word the same as I do."

"And Littleford meant a—" began Dale.

"That the'll be a big fight tomorrow," said Moreland. "Bill Dale, in a-makin' this land yore land and these people yore people, I'm a-feard ye're a-goin' to git more'n ye expected, mebbe more'n ye can handle. Do ye want to back out of it and let the coal go, or are ye one o' these fellers who chaws what they bites off ef it's a hoss's head?"

"I'll stick." Dale's voice came firmly in the darkness. "I'll stick."

(Continued Next Week).

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