

THE JEWEL OF JAFF JEWELL

Drawings by A. Howland

By ELMORE ELLIOTT PEAKE

HE was a squat, stooped little man, with a slumbling, simian gait, a tangle of whiskers and hair, bitternut jeans, slouch hat, and a pair of blue eyes that shone through his shaggy brows like violets in a brush heap. He lived back in the Ozarks, on a dome-like hill known as Honey Mountain. Few had ever seen his retreat; but it was described by those who had as a loop-holed log cabin with a projecting second story, blockhouse style, and a ten-foot stockade all around it which bristled with "No Admittance!" signs in crudely printed letters.

Yet Jaff was not exactly a hermit; for once a month or so he appeared in Morning Sun, driving a span of primitive, long-eared, harness-galled mules. Sometimes he brought in a load of corn, or a rack of hogs, or a couple of calves. Again his only produce was a sack of herbs—ginseng, bloodroot, yellow puccoon, yeshibellum—which was exchangeable for either cash or merchandise at Holstlaw's general store.

He never failed to call at the express office on his visits to town, and seldom failed to find a package. In fact, no one at Morning Sun received so many packages as this man who holed up in the mountains like a bear. For years their contents had been a source of speculation around the cracker barrels and gammon stoves of the village stores; and even Ed Bucks, the express agent, was unable to clear up the mystery.

"Is this way," said Ed to a circle of intimates one night. "All his stuff comes from mail order houses, and he'll sell anything from needles to hay presses. But tell it from me that the bulk of his parcels contain firearms. I've handled enough guns and ammunition to know their feel, even through wood. Besides, only last week a box came through so damaged that I could read the print on a carton of .30-caliber automatic cartridges with Spitzer bullets—which shows that Jaff, though he may belong to the feudal ages in other respects, is up to the minute on shooting irons."

JAFF confirmed this story on his very next trip to town by inadvertently dropping a .45 automatic pistol to the ground as he climbed into his wagon. Sheriff Bill Bates, the nearest man, picked it up for him.

"Some gun, Jaff!" observed Bill, running an admiring finger over the sinister beauty of the blue-steel engine of death.

"She's a pleasant-shootin' little weeping," admitted the embarrassed Jaff in his soft, womanish voice.

Morning Sun was a gun-loving, gun-toting community, and the unique weapon was, as a matter of course, passed from hand to hand for inspection. Ben Gowdy, a crack shot, voiced the general opinion.

"A killer, no doubt; but a cussed, square-handled, flamed-up assembly of metal to my eye for aimin'. Can you hold her down to anything closer than a general landscape effect?"

"Yes," said Jaff quietly, in spite of the laugh at his expense.

"Then hit that rooster yonder in three shots, and I'll pay for him."

Jaff glanced at the fowl, sixty-odd yards away, with a clear space of meadow beyond. Then, without leaving his seat or tightening the reins of the mules, he raised his hand like lightning, the automatic bellowed, and the rooster was a motionless heap of feathers.

"A no-luck!" declared Gowdy testily, as the laugh was now turned on him. "How many shots you got left?"

"Six."

"Turn 'em into that flock, and if you get two or better I'll pay the damages and buy drinks for the crowd."

"I don't like to kill dumb creatures for sport," declared Jaff.

"Don't worry!" sneered Gowdy. "They'll be c't."

Leaping to the ground with the agility of a boy, Jaff hunched forward and flashed his pistol into position again. What followed was in effect a continuous roar, as swift was the succession of shots; and when the hammer had roused five more chickens lay on the sword. The astonished spectators ran forward to examine the hits, as if suspecting some heart-poise. When they returned to drink at Gowdy's expense Jaff's wagon was rumbling across Osage Creek, beyond the bar house in town, where the highway, after its brief tramping-out as Main street, again resumed the humble role of a red-clay country road.

THE group, after picking up Judge Hare, in his silk hat and white vest that was never quite white except on Sunday morning, lined up at the bar of the Starling Price House for straight whiskey, and then blarney flowed out to the easy chairs on the veranda. Eight or ten pairs of feet settled on the railing like a row of crows, and the discussion of Jaff Jewell continued.



"And still he showed no signs of weakening."

"Some people out Honey Mountain way, who have missed chickens and shots, are inclined to think Jaff has a turn for night work," observed Pony Smith.

"A lie!" declared Judge Hare, lighting one of the long black stogies that he bought by the thousand. "Jaff's simply poor and friendless, therefore an ideal scapegoat. He's eccentric, of course. Twenty years of solitude would make most of us eccentric. I remember well the first time I saw him. He drove up and tied to that same rock in front of Holstlaw's where he tied this morning. Same mules and same duds too, apparently."

"Nobody knew his name then nor for months afterward, until he appeared in town one day and timidly inquired for a preacher. The boys badgered him a little, asking if a justice wouldn't do as well, but finally directed him to the Methodist parsonage. Stanley Force was the pastor then,—one of nature's noblemen. Jaff, in evident embarrassment, told Stanley he had a little job for him out his way. So Stanley put on a clean lawn tie, stuck a blank marriage certificate in his pocket, and climbed into Jaff's wagon."

The Judge puffed reflectively, and poked a fat hand at a crumb of ash that had lodged in a crease of his white vest, thereby adding another smudge to its checkered surface.

"Stanley stepped into the cabin and saw a home-made coffin across two chairs, and that was his first

intimation that he was expected to officiate at a funeral and not a wedding. He said it was the saddest funeral he ever attended. He stood on one side of the box, Jaff sat on the other, and those two constituted the total attendance.

"Outside, though, a little girl four or five years old was playing with her dolls, and all the time that Stanley preached she sang; a little lullaby, Stanley said, which all but put his voice out of commission. Then those two men carried the coffin out into the dooryard and lowered it into the grave, with a squall of hominy snow pattering on the bare lid; and the only words that Jaff spoke were, 'Mister, this is some blow to me. How much is your bill?' Stanley wept when he related the circumstances to me the next day; yet he had been a chaplain in the army and had buried his thousands."

The Judge, leaning forward and fumbling in the wrinkled skirts of his frock coat, drew forth a voluminous, perfumed silk handkerchief and blew his nose vigorously.

"It was a year later, almost to the day, when Jaff called on Stanley again. That time they buried the little girl. Gentlemen, experiences like that twist a man!"

THE twenty-third of December dawned at Morning Sun without a trace of frost; and with it, as if he had hitched his old wagon to the flaming car of Rhebus, came Jaff Jewell. He was waiting at the door of the