THE MOONSHINERS

BY HOMER CROY

Drawing by Joseph Clement Coll

FOLLOWERS of the romancers and the fiction writers who have painted in glowing colors the simple, downtrodden, and misunderstood moonshiners for all they are worth find it hard to believe there is another side to the still. The revenue officers are always coming upon a beautiful, black haired, picturesque tongued mountain girl who pretends to fall in love with one of them that she may turn aside their suspicion from her real young giant lover who is operating a still under cover; or upon a ravishing girl who lures one of them by a false note to his death over a precipice, or into a trap where he is suddenly seized and blindfolded and held a lone prisoner in a gloomy cave guarded by this exquisite child of nature until her father, brother, and lover make good their escape—on the printed page. Of such are the wonders of fiction.

As a cold matter of fact the brave hearted revenue officer goes about his duty enforcing the law, his life on a thread, unknown and unsung. In the prosaic way real life works out the ravishing maid is a tangle haired woman who fights and claws the officers, using language that makes them blush for shame. Of such is reality.

At first people of the mountains made their own whisky as a matter of course; but with the introduction of newspapers and warnings of the law every man, woman, and child in the mountains were doing what they should not. The days when moonshiners did not know better have been a long time passed. To-day they enter into it as a business, carefully calculating their chances and profits.

Now a Great Business

MOONSHINING in Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and the Carolinas is now carried on in a purely commercial way, without sentiment or romance. Once mountain folk had no other way of disposing of their corn save by making it into whisky; but now, with better wagon roads and railroads, all their corn finds a ready market on the cob. Ninety per cent. of illicit stills are now operated by persons who buy their corn. Many even buy it on the market and have it shipped in by rail.

The mountaineer who can afford to run a still is an aristocrat among his kind. He is the local capitalist. As found in the mountains of Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina, a copper still will hold from fifty to two hundred gallons at a boiling. From one of these a barrel of whisky can easily be made during a day and a night. These outfits range in value from one hundred to five hundred dollars. Sometimes as much as five thousand gallons of "beer"—ferment not yet liquor—is found at one still. In addition hogs and cattle are fed on the waste. The whisky is shipped out and sold, and the stock goes to market; thus they use the railroads both going and coming.

Stills are no longer unwieldy, home made contrivances. Instead they are all of the best workmanship, and lose very little energy in converting corn into thick white liquor. Moonshiners can make two and a half gallons of whisky from one bushel of meal. They receive an average of four dollars a gallon for it.

Moonshining is a business.

During the last two years, since prohibition went into effect, moonshining in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi has increased more than one hundred per cent. Before prohibition, whisky sold for about a dollar and a half a gallon; now it is four. Prohibition laws have done away with the sending in of whisky, and so the mountaineer is now reaping his harvest.

So remunerative is moonshining in several counties in Georgia in the Blue Ridge Mountains and its chains that ninety per cent. of the people are either moonshiners or active sympathizers.

Against all this the unsung revenue officers must wage their thankless war. That they are doing so is shown by the fact that during the fiscal year which ended June 30, 1909, they seized and destroyed two hundred and thirty-one illicit distilleries in Alabama, three hundred and seventy-four in North Carolina, and six hundred and twenty-three in Georgia.

In 1908, eleven hundred and thirty illicit distilleries were seized in the United States; in 1909, seventeen hundred and forty-three.

So widely separated and so differently do they work, that the followers of secretive distilling are given different names. In Georgia they are called "moonshiners"; in Alabama they are known as "wildcatters"; in the Carolinas they are "blockaders."

Moonshiners—giving that the preference—do not go about their clandestine business in the blind way they once did. The game now has too much at stake to trust to luck. And it is also becoming too dangerous, thanks to tireless officers. The moonshiners are as well organized as a secret society, and are banded together for mutual protection. They divide into colonies and settlements in obscure mountain districts, and each settlement has its recognized leader. They are all sworn by bloody and secret oaths to protect one another. They stand by one another through thick and thin. Never once does one of them turn State's evidence.

So up to date and progressive have they become that each colony is provided with telephones. Moonshiners usually group their houses on each side of a road, with several of the houses scattered a half-mile or more back. If a family in one of the outlying houses discovers the "revenooers," or hears a suspicious sound during the night, every other family in the settlement is immediately warned. Each house has a dinner bell, too, on a post, after the style of the old Southern plantations. A ringing of the bell in a certain way means one thing, and either faster or slower means something else. If on a raid one of the members of the family dodges the officers and gets to the bell,—often it is a mere boy or girl,—the whole community knows to some degree of certainty just where the officers are and how many are in the posse.

In addition each house has a pack of mongrel curs which rush out and set up a din at the approach of a stranger. At night they are particularly alert.

Always Ready for Officers

IN a moonshining settlement nothing is left to chance. So skilled are the mountaineers that they can tell by the cries of night birds when their houses are being surrounded. Strung through branches of trees and over tops of underbrush are wires, which the officers disturb in passing. These set off bells in the houses, giving moonshiners time to hide their women and children and prepare for an attack.

It is almost impossible to take a house unawares.

Revenue officers have what sometimes seem almost unsurmountable difficulties to overcome to run the moonshiners to earth. Often the officers' headquarters are a hundred miles from the district where whisky is being made. The stills may be ten or fifteen miles from a railroad, through a district where officers can scarcely pick their way. Officers have to go on horseback and carry guns. To invade such a district is like requiring an army to slip upon a suburban city without being seen or heard.

Information as to illicit stills is received in different ways. Often it comes by mail from an unsigned writer. Sometimes notes are found in their wagons as they are coming from other raids. Sometimes an officer will find a crumpled bit of paper under the door of his own home which will lead to the arrest of a band of moonshiners. The letters are usually sent by persons living in the moonshining district who are not in sympathy with their neighbors, but would not dare admit it on their lives.

James H. Surber, chief of the revenue agents at Atlanta, Georgia, received this letter written on coarse brown paper with a blunt pencil. It is typical:

DEAR SIRS—There is sum blockade wourk in Sheffield districk, in Rockland county either in Smith Bottoms, Somers plantation, or big Haines crick, little Haines, or Sandy crick, or near Cabel. I cant tell as I am afraid to hunt for them and no one knows I wrote you. I am a special friend of prohibition and hope you will get them. It is brandy time. Yours truly, NO NAME, NO BLAME.

If the anonymous writer had told the exact location and the officers had gone directly to the spot, the moonshiners would have known that there was an unloyal person in their midst and would not have rested until the person was hunted out. Even from such a note as this it often takes many weeks of spying and searching to locate the still.

So strong are the moonshiners that non-sympathizers are afraid to let it be known that they are not loyal. Along with these notes often come fake letters sending the officers off on wrong scents. It is considered a great joke by moonshiners to send the revenue officers off to one part of the county on a false trip while they merrily ply their trade in another part of the county. The officers must be able to tell the earnest notes from the decoys.

Many stills are located in caves with the pipes from the boiler or furnace coming up through a dead tree or in the underbrush. So expert do officers become at finding these underground stills that they can trace one a half-mile by the soot on the leaves. Once in Letcher County, Kentucky, Deputy Taylor, while searching through the woods for a suspected still which he was giving up hope of locating, came across a gander. The gander started off frightened in a waddling trot. The deputy followed it for half a mile, when it brought up at a still where it had been accustomed to feed on refuse from the corn.

In raids through timber at night the officers have a double foe to contend with; for from April to October the diamond back rattler and spreading viper infest