ABNER DANIEL

By . . . WILL N. HARBEN

Author of "Westerfelt"

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Synopsis.

CHAPTER I.—The story opens with Alfred Bishop, a Georgia planter, closing a trade of $5,000 in mill stock for 5,000 acres of mountain land. Mrs. Bishop and their son Alan object to the trade. Mrs. Bishop's brother, Abner Daniel tells a story. II.—The sale over. Bishop boasts that his land is on a prospective railroad. Tompkins, the former owner, has just unloaded a tract of 2,000 acres adjoining Bishop's. III—Bishop goes to Atlanta to see Lawyer Perkins, who told him about the railroad. He has been deceived. The old man is so cast down that he returns home without seeing his brother William or his daughter Adele, who is at her uncle's in Atlanta. IV.—Bishop has bought 20,000 acres of mountain land in all and mortgaged his plantation. Abner tells Alan to consult Rayburn Miller, a land speculator. V.—Miller tells Alan about a dance at Darley. Alan's sweetheart, Dolley Barclay, will be there. Frank Hillhouse is attentive to Dolly. Craig, the banker. VI.—Dolly tells Alan that her father objects to his love quest. Barclay has also been caught on mountain land. VIII.—Miller gives Alan cynical advice on love. Dolly's mother talks to her of her own love experiences. Dolly unhappy. IX—Abner and Rev. Mr. Dole discuss religion; Pole Baker, the ex-moonshiner, whom Alan has reformed. X.—Abner goes to Barclay's, and Dolley talks to him of Alan. He tells Alan of his own sweetheart who died and he still loves her. Alan will hope and wait. XI and XII—Allen goes to Miller with a project for a railroad to the land. He redeem Pole Barker from the prison gang.

CHAPTER XXII.

ABOUT noon that day as Pole Baker sat on a fallen tree near the roadside in the loneliest spot of that rugged country, his horse grazing behind him, he saw Craig coming up the gradual incline from the creek. Pole stood up and caught the bridle rein of his horse and muttered:

"Now, Pole Baker, durn yore hide, you've got brains—at least some folks say you have—an' so has he. Ef you don't git the best of that scalawag, yo're done fer. You've put purty big things through. Now put this un through or shet up."

"Well, here you are," merrily cried out the ex-banker as he came up. He was smiling expectantly. "Your secret's safe with me. I haven't met a soul that I know since I left town."

"I'm glad you didn't, Mr. Craig," Pole said. "I don't want anybody a-meddlin' with my business." He pointed up the rather steep and rocky road that led gradually up the mountain. "We've got two or three mile furder to go. Have you had any dinner?"

"I put a cold biscuit and a slice of ham in my pocket," said Craig. "It 'll do me till supper."

Pole mounted and led the way up the unfrequented road.

"I may as well tell you, Mr. Craig, that I used to be a moonshiner in these mountains, an'"—

"Lord, I knew that, Baker. Who doesn't, I'd like to know?"

Pole's big booted legs swung back and forth like pendulums from the flanks of his horse.

"I was a-goin' to tell you that I had a hide out, whar I kept stuff stored, that wasn't knowed by one livin' man."

"Well, you must have had a slick place from all I've heard," said Craig, still in his vast good humor with himself and everybody else.

"The best natur' ever built," said Pole; "an' what's more, it was in thar that I found the gold. I reckon it ud 'a' been diskivered long ago, ef it had 'a' been above ground."

"Then it's in—a sort of cave?" ventured Craig.

"That's jest it; but I've got the mouth of it closed up so it ud fool even a bloodhound."

Half an hour later Pole drew rein in a most isolated spot, near a great yawning canyon from which came a roaring sound of rushing water and clashing winds. The sky overhead was blue and cloudless; the air at that altitude was crisp and rarefied, and held the odor of spruce pine. With a laugh Pole dismounted. "What ef I was to tell you, Mr. Craig, that you was in ten yards o' my old den right now?"

Craig looked about in surprise. "I'd think you was making fun of me—tenderfootin', as we used to say out west."

"I'm givin' it to you straight," said Pole, pointing with his riding switch. "Do you see that pile o' rocks?"

Craig nodded.

"Right under them two flat ones is the mouth o' my den," said Pole. "Now let's hitch to that hemlock, an' I'll show you the whole thing."

When they had fastened their horses to swinging limbs in a dense thicket of laurel and rhododendron bushes, they went to the pile of rocks.

"I toted mighty nigh all o' 'em from higher up," Pole explained. "Some o' the biggest I rolled down from that cliff above."

"I don't see how you are going to get into your hole in the ground," said Craig, with a laugh of pleasant anticipation.

Pole picked up a big, smooth stick of hickory, shaped like a crowbar, and thrust the end of it under the largest rock. "Huh! I'll show you in a jiffy."

It was an enormous stone weighing over three hundred pounds; but with his strong lever and knotted muscles the ex-moonshiner managed to slide it slowly to the right, disclosing a black hole about two feet square in the ragged stone. From this protruded into the light the ends of a crude ladder leading down about twenty-five feet to the bottom of the cave.

"Ugh!" Craig shuddered as he peered into the dank blackness. "You don't mean that we are to go down there?"

It was a crisis. With his big feet dangling in the hole, Pole threw himself back and gave vent to a hearty, prolonged laugh that went ringing and echoing about among the cliffs and chasms.

"I 'lowed this ud make yore flesh crawl," he said. "Looks like the openin' to the bad place, don't it?"

"It certainly does," said Craig, somewhat reassured by Pole's levity.

"Why, it ain't more'n forty feet square," said Pole. "Wait till I run down an' make a light. I've got some fat pine torches down at the foot o' the ladder."

"Well, I believe I will let you go first," said Craig, with an uneasy little laugh.

Pole went down the ladder, recklessly thumping his heels on the rungs. He was lost to sight from above, but in a moment Craig heard him strike a match and saw the red, growing flame of a sputtering torch from which twisted a rope of smoke. When it was well ablaze, Pole called up the ladder: "Come on now, an' watch whar you put yore feet. This end o' the ladder is solid as the rock o' Gibralty."

The square of daylight above was cut off, and in a moment the ex-banker stood beside his guide.

"Now come down this way," said Pole, and with the torch held high he led the way into a part of the chamber where the rock overhead sloped down lower. Here lay some old whisky barrels, two or three lager beer kegs and the iron hoops of several barrels that had been burned. There were several one gallon jugs with corncob stoppers. Pole swept his hand over them with a laugh. "If you was a drinkin' man, I could treat you to a thimbleful er two left in them jugs," he said almost apologetically.

"But I don't drink, Baker," Craig said. His premonition of danger seemed to have returned to him and to be driven in by the dank coolness of the cavern, the evidence of past outlawry around him.

Pole heaped his pieces of pine against a rock and added to them the chunks of some barrel staves, which set up a lively popping sound like a tiny fusillade of artillery.

"You see that rock behind you, Mr. Craig?" asked Pole. "Well, set down on it. Before we go any furder me 'n you've got to have a understanding."

The old man stared hesitatingly for an instant, and then, after carefully feeling of the stone, he complied.

"I thought we already—but, of course," he said haltingly, "I'm ready to agree to anything that 'll make you feel safe."

"I kinder 'lowed you would." And, to Craig's overwhelming astonishment, Pole drew a revolver from his hip pocket and looked at it, turning the cylinder with a deft thumb.

"You mean, Baker"— But Craig's words remained unborn in his bewildered brain. The rigor of death itself seemed to have beset his tongue. A cold sweat broke out on him.

"I mean that I've tuck the trouble to fetch you heer fer a purpose, Mr. Craig, an' thar ain't any use in beatin' about the bush to git at it."

Craig made another effort at utterance, but failed. Pole could hear his rapid breathing and see the terrified gleaming of his wide open eyes.

"You've had a lots o' dealin's, Mr. Craig," said Pole. "You've made yore mistakes an' had yore good luck, but

"You've trapped me!"

you never did a bigger fool thing 'an you did when you listened to my tale about that lump o' gold."

"You've trapped me!" burst from Craig's quivering lips.

"That's about the size of it."

"But—why?" The words formed the beginning and the end of a gasp.

Pole towered over him, the revolver in his tense hand.

Mr. Craig, thar is one man in this world that I'd die fer twenty times over. I love 'im more than a brother. That man you've robbed of every dollar an' hope on earth. I've fetched you heer to die a lingerin' death, ef—ef, I say, ef—you don't refund his money. That man is Alan Bishop, an' the amount is $25,000 to a cent."

"But I haven't any money," moaned the crouching figure; "not a dollar that I kin lay my hands on."

"Then you are in a purty bad fix," said Pole. "Unless I git that amount o' money from you you'll never smell a breath o' fresh air or see natural daylight."

"You mean to kill a helpless man?" The words were like a prayer.

"I'd bottle you up heer to die," said Pole Baker firmly. "You've met me in this lonely spot, an' no man could lay yore end to me. In fact, all that know you would swear you'd run off from the folks you've defrauded. You see, nothin' but that money o' Alan Bishop's kin possibly save you. You know that well enough, an' thar ain't a bit o' use palaverin' about it. I've fetched a pen an' ink an' paper, an' you've got to write me an order fer the money. If I have to go as fur off as Atlanta, I'll take the fust train an' go after it. If I git the money, you git out; ef I don't, you won't see me ag'in nur nobody else till you face yore Maker."

Craig bent over his knees and groaned.

"You think I have money," he said, straightening up. "Oh, my God!"

"I know it," said Pole. "I don't think anything about it—I know it."

He took out the pen and ink from his pants pocket and unfolded a sheet of paper. "Git to work," he said. "You needn't try to turn me, you durned old hog!"

Craig raised a pair of wide open, helpless eyes to the rigid face above him.

"Oh, my God!" he said again.

"You let God alone an' git down to business," said Pole, taking a fresh hold of the handle of his weapon. "I'm not goin' to waste time with you. Either you git me Alan Bishop's money or you'll die. Hurry up!"

"Will you keep faith with me—if—if"—

"Yes, durn you, why wouldn't I?" A gleam of triumph flashed in the outlaw's eyes.

The ex-banker had taken the pen and Pole spread out the sheet of paper on his knee.

"What assurance have I?" stammered Craig, his face like a death mask against the rock behind him. "You see, after you got the money, you might think it safer to leave me here, thinking that I would prosecute you. I wouldn't, as God is my judge, but you might be afraid"—

"I'm not afraid o' nothin'," said Pole. "Old man, you couldn't handle me without puttin' yoresel' in jail fer the rest o' yore life. That order's a-goin' to be proof that you have money when you've swore publicly that you didn't. No; when I'm paid back Alan Bishop's money I'll let you go. I don't want to kill a man fer jest tryin' to steal an' not makin' the riffle."

The logic-struck home. The warmth of hope diffused itself over the gaunt form.

"Then I'll write a note to my wife," he said.

Pole reached for one of the torches and held it near the paper.

"Well, I'm glad I won't have to go furder 'n Darley," he said. "It 'll be better fer both of us. By ridin' peert I can let you out before sundown. You may git a late supper at Darley, but it's a sight better 'n gittin' none heer an' no bed to speak of."

"I'm putting my life in your hands, Baker," said Craig, and with an unsteady hand he began to write.

"Hold on thar," said Pole. "You'll know the best way to write to her, but when the money's mentioned I want you to say the $25,000 deposited in the bank by the Bishops. You see, I'm not goin' to tote no order fer money I hain't no right to. An' I'll tell you another thing, old man, you needn't throw out no hint to her to have me arrested. As God is my final judge, ef I'm tuck up fer this, they'll never make me tell whar you are. I'd wait until you'd pegged out, anyway."

"I'm not setting any trap for you, Baker," whined Craig. "You've got the longest head of any man I ever knew. You've got me in your power, and all I can ask of you is my life. I've got Bishop's money hidden in my house. I am willing to restore it if you will release me. I can write my wife a note that will cause her to give it to you. Isn't that fair?"

"That's all I want," said Pole. "An' I'll say this to you: I'll agree to use my influence with Alan Bishop not to handle you by law; but the best thing fer you an' yore family to do is to shake the dirt of Darley off'n yore feet an' seek fresh pastures. These round heer ain't as green, in one way, as some I've seed."

Craig wrote the note and handed it up to Baker. Pole read it slowly and then said: "You mought 'a' axed 'er to excuse bad writin' an' spellin', an' hopin' these few lines will find you enjoyin' the same blessin's; but ef it gits the boodle that's all I want. Now you keep yore shirt on, an' don't git skeerd o' the darkness. It will be as black as pitch, an' you kin heer yore eyelids creak after I shet the front door, but I'll be back, ef I find yore old lady hain't run off with a handsomer man an' tuck the swag with 'er. I'm glad you cautioned 'er agin axin' me questions."

Pole backed to the foot of the ladder, followed by Craig.

"Don't leave me here, Baker," he said imploringly. "Don't, for God's sake! I swear I'll go with you and get you the money."

"I can't do that, Mr. Craig; but I'll be back as shore as fate, ef I get that cash," promised Pole. "It all depends on that. I'll keep my word if you do your'n."

"I am going to trust you," said the old man, with the pleading intonation of a cowed and frightened child.

After he had got out Pole thrust his head into the opening again. "It 'll be like you to come up heer an' try to move this rock," he called out, "but you mought as well not try it, fer I'm goin' to add about a dumpcart load o' rocks to it to keep the wolves from diggin' you out."

CHAPTER XXIII.

RAYBURN MILLER and Alan spent that day on the river trying to catch fish, but with no luck at all, returning empty handed to the farmhouse for a late dinner. They passed the afternoon at target shooting on the lawn with rifles and revolvers, ending the day by a reckless ride on their horses across the fields, over fences and ditches, after the manner of fox hunting, a sport not often indulged in in that part of the country.

In the evening, as they sat in the big sitting room smoking after supper cigars, accompanied by Abner Daniel, with his long, cane stemmed pipe, Mrs. Bishop came into the room in her quiet way, smoothing her apron with her delicate hands.

"Pole Baker's rid up an' hitched at the front gate," she said. "Did you send 'im to town fer anything, Alan?"

"No, mother," replied her son. "I reckon he's come to get more meat. Is father out there?"

"I think he's some'r's about the stable," said Mrs. Bishop.

Miller laughed. "I guess Pole isn't the best pay in the world, is he?"

"Father never weighs or keeps account of anything he gets," said Alan.

"Thar's yore money! It's all thar."

"They both make a guess at it when cotton is sold. Father calls it 'lumping' the thing, and usually Pole gets the lump. But he's all right, and I wish we could do more for him. Father was really thinking about helping him in some substantial way when the crash came"—

"Thar!" broke in Daniel, with a gurgling laugh. "I've won my bet. I bet to myself jest now that ten minutes wouldn't pass 'fore Craig an' his bu'st up would be mentioned."

"We have been at it, off and on, all day," said Miller, with a low laugh. "The truth is it makes me madder than anything I ever encountered."

"Do you know why?" asked Abner seriously, just as Pole Baker came through the dining room and leaned against the door jamb facing them. "It's beca'se"—nodding a greeting to Pole along with the others—"it's beca'se you know in reason that he's got that money."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that!" protested Miller, in the tone of a man of broad experience in worldly affairs. "I wouldn't say that."

"Well, I would, an' do," said Abner, in the full tone of decision. "I know he's got it!"

"Well, you're wrong thar, Uncle Ab," said Pole, striding forward and sinking into a chair. "You've got as good judgment as any man I ever run across. I thought like you do once. I'd 'a' tuck my oath that he had it about two hours by sun this evenin', but I kin swear he hain't a cent of it now."

"Do you mean that, Pole?" Abner stared across the wide hearth at him fixedly.

"He hain't got it, Uncle Ab." Pole was beginning to smile mysteriously. "He did have it, but he hain't got it now. I got it from 'im, blast his ugly pictur'!"

"You got it?" gasped Daniel. "You?"

"Yes. I made up my mind he had it, an' it deviled me so much that I determined to have it by hook or crook ef it killed me or put me in hock the rest o' my life." Pole rose and took a packet wrapped in brown paper from under his rough coat and laid it on the table near Alan. "God bless you, old boy," he said, "thar's yore money! It's all thar. I counted it. It's in fifties an' hundreds."

Breathlessly and with expanded eyes Alan broke the string about the packet and opened it.

"Great God!" he muttered.

Miller sprang up and looked at the stack of bills, but said nothing. Abner, leaning forward, uttered a little, low laugh.

"You—you didn't kill 'im, did you, Pole, old boy—you didn't, did you?" he asked.

"Didn't harm a hair of his head," said Pole. "All I wanted was Alan's money, an' thar it is!"

"Well," grunted Daniel, "I'm glad you spared his life. And I thank God you got the money."

Miller was now hurriedly running over the bills.

"You say you counted it, Baker?" he said, pale with pleased excitement.

"Three times—fust when it was turned over to me an' twice on the way out heer from town."

Mrs. Bishop had not spoken until now, standing in the shadows of the others, as if bewildered by what seemed a mocking impossibility.

"Is it our money—is it our'n?" she finally found voice to say. "Oh, is it, Pole?"

"Yes'm," replied Pole; "it's yo'rn." He produced a crumpled piece of paper and handed it to Miller. "Heer's Craig's order on his wife fer it, an' in it he acknowledges it's the cash deposited by Mr. Bishop. He won't give me no trouble. I've got 'im fixed. He'll leave Darley in the mornin'. He's afeerd this 'll git out an' he'll be lynched."

Alan was profoundly moved. He transferred his gaze from the money to Pole's face and leaned toward him.

"You did it out of friendship for me," he said, his voice shaking.

"That's what I did it fer, Alan, an' I wish I could do it over ag'in. When I laid hold o' that wad an' knowed it was the thing you wanted more'n anything else, I felt like flyin'."

"Tell us all about it, Baker," said Miller, wrapping up the stack of bills.

"All right," said Pole, but Mrs. Bishop interrupted him.

"Wait fer Alfred," she said, her voice rising and cracking in delight. "Wait; I'll run find 'im."

She went out through the dining room, toward the stables, calling her husband at every step. "Alfred! Oh, Alfred!"

"Heer!" she heard him call out from one of the stables.

She leaned over the fence opposite the closed door, behind which she had heard his voice.

"Oh, Alfred!" she called. "Come out, quick! I've got news fer you—big, big news!"

She heard him grumbling as he emptied some ears of corn into the trough of the stall containing Alan's favorite horse, and then with a growl he emerged into the starlight.

"That fool nigger only give Alan's hoss six ears o' corn," he fumed. "I know, beca'se I counted the cobs. The hoss had licked the trough clean an' gnawed the ends o' the cobs. The idea o' starvin' my stock right before my"—

"Oh, Alfred, what do you think has happened?" his wife broke in. "We've got the bank money back! Pole Baker managed somehow to get it. He's goin' to tell about it now. Come on in!"

Bishop closed the door behind him. He fumbled with the chain and padlock for an instant, then he moved toward her, his lips hanging, his eyes protruding.

"I'll believe my part o' that when"—

"But," she cried, opening the gate for him to pass through, "the money's thar in the house on the table; it's been counted. I say it's thar! Don't you believe it?"

The old man moved through the gate mechanically. He paused to fasten it with the iron ring over the two posts. But after that he seemed to lose the power of locomotion. He stood facing her, his features working.

"I'll believe my part o' that cat-an'-bull story when I see"—

"Well, come in the house, then," she cried. "You kin lay yore hands on it an' count it. It's an awful big pile, an' nothin' less than fifty dollar bills."

Grasping his arm, she half dragged, half led him into the house. Entering the sitting room, he strode to the table and, without a word, picked up the package and opened it. He made an effort to count the money, but his fingers seemed to have lost their cunning and he gave it up.

"It's all there," Miller assured him, 'and it's your money. You needn't bother about that."

Bishop sat down in his place in the chimney corner, the packet on his knees, while Pole Baker modestly and not without touches of humor recounted his experiences.

"The toughest job I had was managin' the woman," Pole laughed. "You kin always count on a woman to be contrary. I believe ef you was tryin' to git some women out of a burnin' house they'd want to have the'r way about it. She read the order an' got white about the gills an' screamed, low, so nobody wouldn't heer 'er, an' then wanted to ax questions. That's the female of it. She knowed in reason that Craig was dead fixed an' couldn't git out until she complied with the instructions, but she wanted to know all about it. Then I told 'er she'd be arrested for holdin' the money, an' that got her in a trot. She fetched it out purty quick, a-cryin' an' abusin' me by turns. As soon as the money left 'er hands, though, she begun to beg me to ride fast. I wanted to come heer fust, but I felt sorter sorry fer Craig, an' went an' let 'im out. He was the gladdest man to see me you ever looked at. He thought I was goin' to leave 'im thar. He looked like he wanted to hug me. He says Winship wasn't much to blame. They both got in deep water speculatin', an' Craig was tempted to cabbage on the $25,000."

When Pole had concluded, the group sat in silence for a long time. It looked as if Bishop wanted to openly thank Pole for what he had done, but he had never done such a thing in the presence of others, and he could not pull himself to it. He sat crouched up in his tilted chair as if burning up with the joy of his release.

The silence was broken by Abner Daniel as he filled his pipe anew and stood over the fireplace.

"They say money's a cuss an' the root of all evil," he said dryly, "but in this case it's give Pole Baker thar a chance to show what's in 'im. I'd 'a' give the last cent I have to 'a' done what he did today. I grant you he used deception, but it was the fust water sort that that Bible king resorted to when he made out he was goin' to divide that baby by cuttin' it in halves. He fetched out the good an' squelched the bad." Abner glanced at Pole and gave one of his impulsive inward laughs. "My boy, when I reach t'other shore I expect to see whole strings o' sech lawbreakers as you a-playin' leapfrog on the golden sands. You don't sing, an' pray a whole lot, nur keep yore religion in sight, but when thar's work to be done you shuck off yore shirt an' do it like a wildcat a-scratchin'."

No one spoke after this outburst for several minutes, though the glances cast in his direction showed the embarrassed ex-moonshiner that one and all had sanctioned Abner Daniel's opinion.

Bishop leaned forward and looked at the clock, and, seeing that it was 9, he put the money in a bureau drawer and turned the key. Then he took down the big family Bible from its shelf and sat down near the lamp. They all knew what the action portended.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ABOUT a week after the events recorded in the preceding chapter old man Bishop, just at dusk one evening, rode up to Pole Baker's humble domicile. Pole was in the front yard making a fire of sticks, twigs and chips.

"What's that fer?" the old man questioned as he dismounted and hitched his horse to the worm fence.

"To drive off mosquitoes," said Pole, wiping his eyes, which were red from the effects of the smoke. "I'll never pass another night like the last un ef I kin he'p it. I 'lowed my hide was thick, but they bored fer oil all over me from dark till sun-up. I never 've tried smoke, but Hank Watts says it's ahead o' pennyr'yal."

"Shucks!" grunted the planter. "You ain't workin' it right. A few rags burnin' in a pan nigh yore bed may drive 'em out, but a smoke out heer in the yard 'll jest drive 'em in."

"What?" said Pole in high disgust. "Do you expect me to sleep sech hot weather as this is with a fire nigh my bed? The durn things may eat me raw, but I'll be blamed ef I barbecue myse'f to please 'em."

Mrs. Baker appeared in the cabin door holding two of the youngest children by their hands. "He won't take my advice, Mr. Bishop," she said. "I jest rub a little lamp oil on my face an' hands, an' they don't tetch me."

Pole grunted and looked with laughing eyes at the old man.

"She axed me t'other night why I'd quit kissin' 'er," he said. "An' I told 'er I didn't keer any more fer kerosene than the mosquitoes did."

Mrs. Baker laughed pleasantly as she brought out a chair for Bishop and invited him to sit down. He complied, twirling his riding whip in his hand. From his position, almost on a level with the floor, he could see the interior of one of the rooms. It was almost bare of furniture. Two opposite corners were occupied by crude bedsteads; in the center of the room was a cradle made from a soapbox on rockers sawed from rough poplar boards. It had the appearance of having been in use through several generations. Near it stood a spinning wheel and a three legged stool. The sharp steel spindle gleamed in the firelight from the big log and mud chimney.

"What's the news from town, Mr. Bishop?" Pole asked awkwardly, for it struck him that Bishop had called to talk with him about some business and was reluctant to introduce it.

"Nothin' that interests any of us, I reckon, Pole," said the old man, "except that I made that investment in Shoal Cotton factory stock."

"That's good," said Pole, in the tone of anybody but a man who had never invested a dollar in anything. "It's all hunkey, an' my opinion is that it 'll never be wuth less."

"I did heer, too," added Bishop, "that it was reported that Craig had set up

"Well, it's yorce," he said.

a little grocery store out in Texas, nigh the Indian Territory. Some thinks that Winship 'll turn up thar an' jine 'im, but a body never knows what to believe these days."

"That shore is a fact," opined Pole. "Sally, that corn bread's a-burnin'. Ef you'd use less lamp oil, you'd smell better."

Mrs. Baker darted to the fireplace, raked the live coals from beneath the cast iron oven and jerked off the lid in a cloud of steam and smoke. She turned over the pone with the aid of a case knife and then came back to the door.

"Fer the last month I've had my eye on the Bascome farm," Bishop was saying. "There's a hundred acres even, some good bottom land and upland an' in the neighborhood o' thirty acres o' good wood. Then thar's a five room house, well made an' tight, an' a barn, cowhouse an' stable."

"Lord! I know the place like a book," said Pole, "an' it's a dandy investment, Mr. Bishop. They say he offered it fer fifteen hundred. It's wuth two thousand. You won't drap any money by buyin' that property, Mr. Bishop. I'd hate to contract to build jest the house an' well an' outhouses fer a thousand."

"I bought it," Bishop told him. "He let me have it fer a good deal less 'n fifteen hundred, cash down."

"Well, you made a dandy trade, Mr. Bishop. Ah, that's what ready money will do! When you got the cash, things seem to come at bottom figures."

Old Bishop drew a folded paper from his pocket and slapped it on his knee. "Yes, I closed the deal this evenin', an' I was jest a-thinkin' that as you hain't rented fer next yeer—I mean"—Bishop was ordinarily direct of speech, but somehow his words became tangled and he delivered himself awkwardly on this occasion. "You see, Alan thinks that you 'n Sally ort to live in a better house than jest this beer log cabin, an"—

The wan face of the tired woman was aglow with expectation. She sank down on the doorstep and sat still and mute, her hands clasping each other in her lap. She had always disliked that cabin and its sordid surroundings, and there was something in Bishop's talk that made her think he was about to propose renting the new farm, house and all, to her husband. Her mouth fell open; she scarcely allowed herself to breathe. Then, as Bishop paused, her husband's voice struck dumb dismay to her heart. It was as if she was falling from glowing hope back to tasted despair.

"Thar's more land in that farm 'an I could do jestice to, Mr. Bishop, but ef thar's a good cabin on it an' you see fit to cut off enough fer me an' one hoss I'd jest as soon tend that as this heer. I want to do what you an' Alan think is best all round."

"Oh, Pole, Pole!" The woman was crying it to herself, her face lowered to her hands that the two men might not see the agony written in her eyes. A house like that to live in, with all those rooms and fireplaces and windows with panes of glass in them! She fancied she saw her children playing on the tight, smooth floors and on the honeysuckled porch. For one minute these things had been hers, to be snatched away by the callous indifference of her husband, who, alas, had never cared a straw for appearances!

"Oh, I wasn't thinkin' about rentin' it to you!" said Bishop. And the woman's dream was over. She raised her head, awake again. "You see," went on Bishop, still struggling for proper expression, "Alan thinks—well, he thinks you are sech a born fool about not acceptin' help from them that feels nigh to you an', I may as well say, grateful, exceedingly grateful for what you've done, things that no other livin' man could 'a' done—Alan thinks you ort to have the farm fer yore own property, an' so the deeds has been made out to"—

Pole drew himself up to his full height. His big face was flushed, half with anger, half with a strong emotion of a tenderer kind. He stood towering over the old man like a giant swayed by the warring winds of good and evil.

"I won't heer a word more of that, Mr. Bishop," he said, with a quivering lip—"not a word more. By golly, I mean what I say! I don't want to heer another word of it. This heer place is good enough fer me an' my family. It's done eight yeer, an' it kin do another eight."

"Oh, Pole, Pole, Pole!" The woman's cry was now audible. It came straight from her pent up, starving soul and went right to Bishop's heart.

"You want the place, don't you, Sally?" he said, calling her by her given name for the first time, as if he had just discovered their kinship. He could not have used a tenderer tone to child of his own.

"Mind, mind what you say, Sally!" ordered Pole from the depths of his fighting emotion. "Mind what you say!"

The woman looked at Bishop. Her glance was on fire.

"Yes, I want it—I want it!" she cried. "I ain't goin' to lie. I want it more right now than I do the kingdom of heaven. I want it ef we have a right to it. Oh, I don't know!" She dropped her head in her lap and began to sob.

Bishop stood up. He moved toward her in a jerky fashion and laid his hand on the pitifully tight knot of hair at the back of her head.

"Well, it's yores," he said. "Alan thought Pole would raise a kick about it, an' me an' him had it made out in yore name, so he couldn't tetch it. It's yores, Sally Ann Baker. That's the way it reads."

The woman's sobs increased, but they were sobs of unbridled joy. With her apron to her eyes she rose and hurried into the house.

The eyes of the two men met. Bishop spoke first:

"You've got to give in, Pole," he said. "You'd not be a man to stand betwixt yore wife an' a thing she wants as bad as she does that place, an' by all that's good an' holy, you sha'n't!"

"What's the use o' me tryin' to git even with Alan," Pole exclaimed, "ef he's eternally a-goin' to git up some'n? I've been tickled to death ever since I cornered old Craig till now, but you an' him has sp'iled it all by this heer trick. It ain't fair to me."

"Well, it's done," smiled the old man as he went to his horse, "an' ef you don't live thar with Sally I'll make 'er git a divorce."

Bishop had reached a little pigpen in a fence corner farther along on his way home when Mrs. Baker suddenly emerged from a patch of high corn in front of him.

"Is he a-goin' to take it, Mr. Bishop?" she asked, panting from her hurried walk through the corn that hid her from the view of the cabin.

"Yes," Bishop told her. "I'm a-goin' to send two wagons over in the mornin' to move yore things. I wish it was ten times as good a place as it is, but it will insure you an' the children a livin' an' a comfortable home."

After the manner of many of her kind, the woman uttered no words of thanks, but simply turned back into the corn, and, occupied with her own vision of prosperity and choking with gratitude, she hurried back to the cabin.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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