

# POKE of Possum Hill

By Frank H. Sweet

**P**OKE HAMM was in no degree a prophet, but he had one of a prophet's disadvantages, being without honor in his own country. The distinction, or extinction, fell upon him like a comfortable blanket, even in the plodding days of his babyhood, and became clinched during his brief, spasmodic hours of somnolency in the schoolroom and longer, mere lingering hours upon the mountainside. And when he sauntered reluctantly into manhood it was a sign manual that separated and marked him as one apart.

And yet energy was without premium on Possum Hill. A man could sit upon his own doorstep from daylight to dark, from Monday to Saturday, and not lose caste. He could even smoke his corn-cob pipe while his wife and daughters gathered berries or calamus root or chestnuts to sell and still be a reputable "Hiller" in good standing. No, it was not that. Rather was it the unthrif of non-accumulation. As a baby he had gurgled his content with the world, even while his brothers and sisters were purloining and misusing his rag dolls and rude toys; in boyhood he had gone a step further and turned over such belongings as unwittingly came to him to whoever expressed a desire for their possession, accentuating this in early manhood by even going out of his way to do things he would never have dreamed of doing for himself.

So his brothers and sisters, and the youth in general of the neighborhood, grew up and branched out into little shacks of their own, built in such natural wrinkles of the mountainside as promised immunity from wind or sun or shade, according to varying temperament; and their housekeeping beginnings of three chairs and a table and stove and bedstead accumulated to other bits of furniture inside, and perhaps to a cow and mule, and, in rare instances, two mules and "kerridge" outside.

Hiller prosperity never aspired beyond two mules and buckboard "kerridge." But Poke remained the same, and by the time he was twenty-five his name was commonly spoken with a drawing prolongation that sought to express a double and sarcastic meaning.

But for all that, Poke was not so slow as their insinuations would convey, or his lack of material accumulations declare. He had neither a rood of land for a holding nor a mule to back, nor a shack to share with some fair Diana of the mountain; but his old huzzie-loader brought in more game than the modern Winchester's of his associates, and there was no cabin raising or shucking or bee or deer stalking to which he was not the first invited, and where his broad shoulders or deft fingers or good natured humor or keen eyes were not in eager demand. He was indefatigable in the service of another, and gave of his strength and knowledge with unstinted generosity; but there his industry faltered; for he had no need of these things for himself, so did not seek them.

One day he was engaged in his favorite occupation of watching white clouds drift across the blue disk of the sky, and to do it to the best advantage was lying upon his back on a bed of moss, with his hands clasped beneath his head. It was mid-October, and among the chestnut branches was a "chickareeing" and scampering of squirrels intent on their winter stores; and of kinglets and sparrows and thrushes deploying and forming for their journey to the South; and, further away, the "caw, cawing" of black sentinels patrolling the sky. An odor of autumn foliage was in the air, a rustle of falling leaves, a sense of complete isolation and content. And then she came.

He was hardly conscious of her intrusion at first, she fitted so well into it all, with her soft gray calico and chestnut-gold hair; and she, on her part, was not aware of his presence. The clinging moss rose halfway up about his form, and he was so motionless and a part of the surroundings that a bird was chirping contentedly from the very toe of one of his great boots, only flying a few feet away as she approached.

"They were on the brow of a slope that dropped rapidly down into the valley, and she paused and threw her hand above her eyes with a quick motion which he recognized as expressing anxiety and hope. He could see her face plainly from where he lay, and could read in the glances which flashed from point to point something of the terror of their owner at not finding what she sought.

"What is it, Miss Laurel?" he drawled, as with a slow, muscular movement of his body he threw himself upon his feet and moved forward to her side. "Can I be any help?"

"O—h! hit's you, Poke? Thank God! Hurry! hurry! Pap's knocked down by a tree an' bein' crushed. I couldn't lift hit."

"Where?" asked Poke tersely.

"To Coon Flat. He was chopping a bee tree, an' hit fell 'fore he thought. Please, please, do hurry!"

Poke nodded reassuringly. Coon Flat was three miles away by a circuitous path around craggy points and up and down declivities, or one mile by going straight over the ridge and meeting a precipice by crawling out upon a branch for twenty feet and sliding down the tree trunk for thirty feet more. Poke wondered if Laurel had

come by this route. But as he sprang up the slope he swung his hand toward the circuitous path, knowing full well as he did so, that the girl would do exactly as she pleased, for that was her way.

He had met Laurel occasionally during his rambles on this part of the slope, and thought her a remarkably plain spoken, clear-headed girl, with none of the silly pranks and giggles which he commonly attributed to young women.

But matters feminine were of slow growth in Poke's unpracticed brain, and the sweet personality of the girl as she stood there on the brow of the slope, gazing down at him with anxious, appealing eyes and flushed face, did not penetrate fully to his consciousness until he reached the very summit of the ridge. Then he stopped with a sudden appreciative "By Jock! Wa'n't she party!" ending with a lingering drawn-in whistle, this time intermitting with a chuckle; and the whistle and chuckle, translated, intimated that were he thinking of setting up a shack of his

own this was the sort of girl—or queen—he would install within his sacred precincts. "An' I wouldn't keer a darn if her paw was the best fixed man 'roun' 'yer," he chuckled, as he hitched his body along the branch toward the tree trunk. "I'd jes' go in to win. A gal like that's wuth fightin' fur—yes, an' dyn' fur." This time the chuckle preceded the whistle, and the whistle was blown out with a mournful quaver that declared he was not one of those who thought of setting up a shack of his own.

Coon Flat was the wonder and chagrin of all the mountain side, for it was not the climax of brazen industry? They all had their patches, but beside Coon Flat their patches were as barren fields to a land of milk and honey. Jake, the father of Laurel, as he was called in contradistinction to another Jake of the same name, who was father of Meg, grew potatoes that stood him from the October digging to the May planting; his onions and cabbages were far above family needs and flowed over into envied sales for ready money, and, to cap it all, behind his cabin was a four-acre field that every fall showed green with sprouting shoots and every spring grew heavy with swaying, golden headed wheat. No wonder he had two mules and a buckboard "kerridge," a "peazzer" in front of his cabin and a kitchen with real window glass windows behind! And no wonder he carried his head high as the mighty man of the Hillers and looked askance at the valorous "pore trash" youth that dared to raise eyes at his daughter! But of Poke he had not even thought as an object of suspicion.

So now, after that stalwart youth had removed the heavy tree trunk from his body and had lifted and borne him to his bed in the cabin as gently as a mother might her child, he welcomed with cordial gratitude an offer to remain and look after things until he could get out. Laurel was strong and willing, but her hands would be full in looking after him, and there were the mules to care for and the dozens of pigs and a cow to drive up from the valley and milk, and besides it was high time the four acres were again seeded in order that there should be a succession to the sacks of golden grain which were now stored in the shed loft waiting for the higher quotas which rumor promised. Yes, a strong man was needed on the place, for Coon Flat, even in its splendor, was isolated. The nearest neighbor was too far away to be reached by even the report of his rifle.

Poke entered upon his new work with unwonted energy. A great heap of wood was cut and piled near the back door, where it would be handy for Laurel. He brought water and fed the pigs, and in spite of her protests insisted on doing the milking himself.

And he brought out the big, unwieldy plow and swung it in behind the mules and went merrily around the four-acre lot in lessening parallelograms. And it may be that his energy and cheerfulness was in no way diminished by the fact that he knew Laurel was always somewhere about the cabin, and that it was she who would prepare his meals and sit with him at the table, and that in the evening he could lean near the invalid, with whom she would talk.

He was not in love, of course. Such an absurdity did not even occur to him. It was the novelty of seeing a woman about that was pleasant. He had no sisters, and his mother had been long dead. It was just the novelty and the neatness and contentedness of it all he liked. And the idea, if his thoughts took such definite form, remained with him for a month—until the invalid began to hobble about on crutches—when suddenly the truth came home to him, as had her beauty that day on the ridge. He was clearing new land below the four-acre lot when the snook straightened him up with a half-wondering, half-frightened "I'm one of 'em! Yes, sir! I'm-one-of-'em!" Then his indrawn whistle began and was blown out with a chuckle, and they, with the straightening up, were repeated every few minutes during the

next hour. When he returned to the cabin the half-frightened look had left his face, but the wonder still remained, and with it was an ecstatic dimness that seemed strangely at variance with his usual bluff frankness.

Laurel noticed the change at once, and her face grew puzzled, but only for a little while. Then an odd twinkle of humor came into her eyes as though she understood, and mingled with the humor was a tender, flickering light which had been gaining strength in her eyes these last few weeks, a light which Poke had not yet seen.

As he entered Jake looked up with angry impatience and Poke raised a hand defensively before his face, but the invalid was not thinking of that. "Heered anything 'bout wheat today?" he grumbled. "Goin' down, of course."

"Going up," Polk answered promptly. "A man hollered to me from the aize of the hill this mornin' and an' said 'twas seventy.'"

"Seventy?" Jake grabbed his crutches and rose totteringly to his feet, but sank back with a snarl of mingled rage and pain. "Seventy cents, an' I've got ninety bushels! Dum the ole back! By the time I'm out again hit'll be down to fifty like 'twas last year, an' that'll be a clean loss of \$18. Blame hit all!"

"Dey'n't I go, pap?" suggested Laurel. The gloomy face cleared slightly, then lowered. He loved the profits of his industry, but not so much as he loved Laurel. It was thirty miles to Staunton.

"No, ye can't," he snarled. "There was a brief silence. Then—" "That's Poke, pap. He's mighty strong and willin'." The face darkened, then grew lighter. Evidently the idea, at first scouted, was being tolerated. "That meant Poke had been making giant strides forward during these few weeks."

"I dunno," doubtfully.

Poke saw his opportunity and rose to it like a man—like a man of industry. He was developing rapidly.

"I'll take hit down all right," he said, confidently. "I've sold wheat to Staunton afore." He was thinking of two bushels he had once taken to market for his father, the proceeds of which he had lost on the way home. He did not mention the loss, however, but the thought of it made him hesitate in the face of this vast enterprise, which involved ninety bushels.

"Wouldn't ye better wait a little?" he suggested weakly. "Signs seem to 'low wheat's still risin'. Mabby hit'll be wuth while to hol' back till 'yer' out."

Jake snorted.

"That's more fallin' than risin' in wheat," he snapped. "I've four' that out. I reckon 'yer' better go; an' min', I want ye to git hit all down to morrow. Seventy cents! Yes, ye must' git hit all in tomorrow!"

Poke's head was whirling. But there was Laurel looking at him confidently and her father already losing some of his newly acquired confidence. He must brace up.

"All right," he said, as steadily as he could. "The mules can draw half on the long waggin, and I'll boyr Tom Stuart's mule an' Ike Brown's ole horse an' hitch 'em to Bill Croyner's hay

waggin. That'll take the other half, like's boy Sam an' drive behind me, so I can keep an eye on him. Oh, yes, we'll get on fast rate."

Jake nodded approvingly; it was a good plan. "About hit, when I'm gone, warnin'ly; 'try an' get hit."

After the wheat was loaded on next day Poke entered the cabin for a few last instructions. Before leaving he contrived to draw Laurel into the back—then for a moment. There he was seized by a sudden inspiration.

"Say, Laurel," he began, eagerly. "I—say, would ye min' me gettin' a ring to Staunton, a got' ring, for you an' me?"

She looked at him quickly, understandingly, her face flushing. She could not remember a single one of her married acquaintances who had been given a gold ring.

"Why, no, I wouldn't min', Poke," she said simply. "I'll be real glad."

"An'—an' would ye min' speakin' to your paw 'bout hit, when I'm gone, Laurel? Hit might be a good time now I'm a-totin' his wheat."

"No—no, I don't min'."

But Laurel looked at the doorway until the heavy waggon rumbled out of sight. Then she went in to her father.

"Pap," she announced abruptly. "I've said yes to marry him."

"An' you?"

"I've said yes," composedly.

Jake controlled himself with a mighty effort. With Laurel he must be diplomatic.

"Well, ye know best," he grimaced affably. "But ye know how 'tis with Poke. Ye'll have to wait till he's able to keep ye. I don't reckon he's saved enough to buy a runt pig yet."

But Laurel smiled to herself contentedly. People were easily mistaken, she thought, and were apt to be prejudiced. Was not Poke the best natured and the best looking man on the slope? And had he not promised her a gold ring out of the plenitude of his riches? So she said softly:

"I won't go agin ye, pap; don't ye fear. We'll wait till ye say yours' that Poke's able to keep me."

"That's enough, an' at that very moment Poke was wondering dismally how he would be able to contrive the purchase of a gold ring with the twenty-five cents which represented the accumulation of his twenty-five years."

They expected him back by the end of the third day. It was the afternoon of the sixth when he returned. As he dismissed young Sam and attended to his mules there was a look of beatific joy upon his face, which remained there until he opened the cabin door and saw the expectant face of Jake. Then he whitened and staggered to the nearest chair.

"You pore boy!" cried Laurel tenderly. "You're plumb beat out."

"Did you get the seventy cents?" demanded Jake eagerly.

Poke gasped and tried to collect his thoughts. What was he here for? What did they want him to say? It was about the wheat, wasn't it? He had almost forgotten that unimportant matter after the gold ring took possession of his mind. He remembered the wheat had been taken to the storeroom of a big flouring mill and that he had told a clerk he would be back later and attend

to its sale; then he had hurried away in search of a job of hauling with the mules and had carted sand, two days for \$8 and had bought the gold ring. Yes, that was it, and he had given Sam the twenty-five cents to pay his fare to a cousin's at Fishersville to get him out of the way for two days. That was all—only he had forgotten to go back and sell the wheat.

"Did you get the seventy cents?" demanded Jake for the second time.

Poke felt that there was a crisis with him and he drew a long, hard breath. Then his gaze steadied.

"Ye see, hit's this way," he said; "signs are fur risin', an' I ain't sold yet. Ye must jes' as well have seventy-five or eighty cents as fur anybody else. But I'll go down," he was about to say "to once," but restrained himself, for that might betray him; he added instead, "in a few days an' see how the risin' comin' on."

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"Wall, hit's your lookout, Poke," he said, significantly. "I ordered ye to sell, an' of course I'll hol' ye responsible for all fallin's from seventy cents. Min' that!"

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GOING STRAIGHT TO JAKE—HE HANDED HIM A ROLL OF BILLS.



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the West had been soured, the markets of the world invoked and the many tongued lines of telegraph brought into the game. And all had rebounded to the honor and glory of Poke, of Possum Hill. When he returned to Coon Flat at the end of one short twenty-four hours his face was again expressive of beatific joy.

Going straight to Jake, the father of Laurel, he handed him a roll of bills.

"The risin' was even better than I 'lowed on," he said, nonchalantly. "I sol' for a dollar. Ye see, that was signs o' broakin' an' I 'lowed I better not hol' on any longer."

There are varying signs of wonder, chagrin, incredulity, satisfaction, but the mingling of them all which gathered on Jake's face was of the kind that cannot be put into words. He gazed at the money, at the strong, handsome figure before him, at Laurel, smiling a few feet away, and bowed his head in surrender.

"I reckon I mout be a mistaken, Laurel," he said, submissively. "Poke'll be able to keep ye, sure 'nough."

## "AMERICANS" in LONDON



WHO SING "AMERICA" FROM PRINTED SLIPS WITH AN AFFECTATION OF ENGLISH ACCENT

In my previous letters I have taken a few harmless flings at the London institutions which did not seem above ridicule. I have a few more particular observations to make on this general topic—namely, that Londoners devoutly believe that they hold in trust all earthly blessings—but as a sort of semicolon I think it is fair to interpolate some remarks about a certain class of Americans who live in London.

Please remember that I am not generalizing at the expense of American ladies and gentlemen who live here. I mean a particular group whose members, manking in general reluctantly admits, possess human attributes. Those to whom I refer are the monocolored nincompoops who gather in some London hotel on Washington's birthday and the Fourth of July, sing "Americka" from printed slips, with an affectation of English accent; feebly discuss the doings in the House of Lords and inquire in whispers if the United States Senate is the upper or lower branch of the American Parliament.

When self-respecting Englishmen see these curiosities they look back upon the surrender of Cornwallis with considerable satisfaction. If George III, say the sneering ones, had been gifted with prophecy as well as obstinacy he would have lopped the American colonies from the map of the British Empire long before the colonies themselves accomplished the same result. They also say that the Earl of Chatham, instead of wasting his energies lauding a stubborn King the resistance of the Americans, would have busied himself with the framing of an act to protect London against obnoxious, though peaceful, invasion.

It is difficult to convince the untravelled Englishman that the American cad, who is seen at his worst in London, is not a national type, and even decent Americans who feel called upon to hurl back anti-American com-

ments, with a sharp in-shoot, can't help feeling some sympathy with the Englishman's viewpoint.

As a rule, the American cad lacks the mental grasp necessary to go through the legal forms of expatriation, and many of those endowed by inheritance with a certain amount of foresight lack the nerve, fearing newspaper ridicule. The result is the existence of a strange human anomaly which is hard to delineate in words.

Among the several idiocies against which the English have failed to enact laws is the habit of aping. This habit is the primary instinct of some Americans who come here. Anything that walks with two legs and has authority to give its name a funny prefix is, to the cad, an object of reverence. He tries to imitate its mannerisms of speech and action as well as its dress, generally unsuccessfully and with the result that he makes the fact of his imitation ridiculously conspicuous.

It is a generally known fact that the foreigner who can learn to speak French like a Frenchman must begin his training in the French language at quite an early age. In like manner the American (?) who wishes to become English in style and speech, so that he will be able to exclaim "My word" etc., with the proper London intonation, must have received thorough schooling in infancy. It is just as difficult for an adult expatriate to say "over there" according to the accepted London method as it is for him to give utterance to French nasal sounds in a manner that doesn't tempt a Parisian to look for a piece of loose brick.

In the theater we have seen monkeys, trained, imitate the actions of human beings. We have laughed and said, "That monkey seems almost human." Nevertheless we have never lost sight of the fact that it was a monkey. Similarly the American cad who bores Londoners with his affectation of English mannerisms can never hide the fact that he is not an Englishman, and Englishmen never lose sight of the fact that he is not.

Following are a few valuable hints to untutored expatriates:

First—The common adjective denoting a sanguinary condition is not used in polite English circles as a term of general description.

Second—The King does not speak of the Horse Guards as the "Orse Guards," nor of heavy artillery as "savy harilliers." He uses the "King's English" as his grammarians and orthographical experts prescribe. It is said by some who are in a position to know that his intonations are somewhat Teutonic—but that's a matter between him and the Kaiser, in which we need not interfere.

Third—The King is personally described as a genial old chap, hence it is not fashionable to affect a supposedly royal severity of mien.

Fourth—If an explanation surprises you say "Oh!" but pronounce it like the "Waow" commonly heard in the course of feline courtships, the first "w" of course being silent. (By all means consult a tutor on this delicate matter, as the correct inflection can be attained only by long and careful practice. Also see hints in the invaluable handbook, "How to Act Like a Chump in Three Minutes Without a Master.")

Fifth—When introduced to a man wearing fashionable clothes and a monocle, do not address him as "mildord" unless he is identified as a member of the peerage. Neither should "mildord" be addressed to a mere "Sir." If you so call him they'll think you poorly trained—as well as American. A plain "Sir" is nothing but a Baronet—a sort of doorman on the threshold of the actual peerage.

Sixth—A frequent use of the adjective "bally" is not in itself considered proof of noble lineage.

Seventh—When dining at the house of a peer you are under no obligation to address the pretty young person who lays the covers as "mildady." Neither should you call her "Arriet."

Eighth—In restaurants pronounce "Waiter" as "Wait-ah." Get a tutor—also familiarize yourself with the booklet entitled "Foolishness in One Easy Lesson."

There are many other rules that might be laid down for the guidance of those who would imitate persons of title. The imitator, however, will always labor under the difficulty of not being to the manner born. Perseverance and zeal in the matter of aping will, nevertheless, mitigate the ancestral traits of the American jockos.