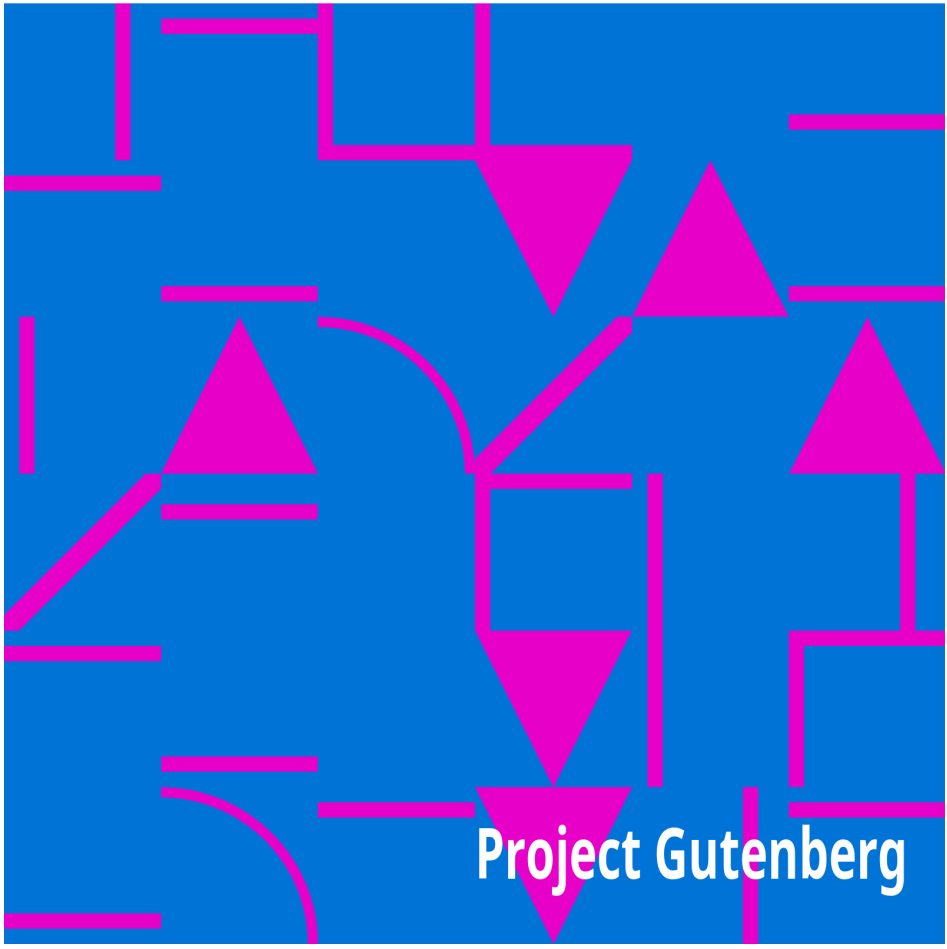
Hell Fer Sartain and Other Stories

Jr. John Fox



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'Hell fer Sartain'

and

Other Stories

by

JOHN FOX, JR.

TO
MY BROTHER
JAMES

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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ON HELL-FER-SARTAIN CREEK

Thar was a dancin'-party Christmas night on "Hell fer Sartain." Jes tu'n up the fust crick beyond the bend thar, an' climb onto a stump, an' holler about ONCE, an' you'll see how the name come. Stranger, hit's HELL fer sartain! Well, Rich Harp was thar from the head-waters, an' Harve Hall toted Nance Osborn clean across the Cumberlan'. Fust one ud swing Nance, an' then t'other. Then they'd take a pull out'n the same bottle o' moonshine, an'—fust one an' then t'other—they'd swing her agin. An' Abe Shivers a-settin' thar by the fire a-bitin' his thumbs!

Well, things was sorter whoopin', when somebody ups an' tells Harve that Rich had said somep'n' agin Nance an' him, an' somebody ups an' tells Rich that Harve had said somep'n' agin Nance an' HIM. In a minute, stranger, hit was like two wild-cats in thar. Folks got 'em parted,

though, but thar was no more a-swingin' of Nance that night. Harve toted her back over the Cumberlan', an' Rich's kinsfolks tuk him up "Hell fer Sartain"; but Rich got loose, an' lit out lickety-split fer Nance Osborn's. He knowed Harve lived too fer over Black Mountain to go home that night, an' he rid right across the river an' up to Nance's house, an' hollered fer Harve. Harve poked his head out'n the loft—he knowed whut was wanted—an' Harve says, "Uh, come in hyeh an' go to bed. Hit's too late!" An' Rich seed him a-gapin' like a chicken, an' in he walked, stumblin' might' nigh agin the bed whar Nance was a-layin', listenin' an' not sayin' a word.

Stranger, them two fellers slept together plum frien'ly, an' they et together plum frien'ly next mornin', an' they sa'ntered down to the grocery plum frien'ly. An' Rich says, "Harve," says he, "let's have a drink." "All right, Rich," says Harve. An' Rich says, "Harve," says he, "you go out'n that door an' I'll go out'n this door." "All right, Rich," says Harve, an' out they walked, steady, an' thar was two shoots shot, an' Rich an' Harve both drapped, an' in ten minutes they was stretched out on Nance's bed an' Nance was a-lopin' away fer the yarb doctor.

The gal nussed 'em both plum faithful. Rich didn't hev much to say, an' Harve didn't hev much to say. Nance was sorter quiet, an' Nance's mammy, ole Nance, jes grinned. Folks come in to ax atter 'em right peart. Abe Shivers come cl'ar 'cross the river—powerful frien'ly—an' ever' time Nance ud walk out to the fence with him. One time she didn't come back, an' ole Nance fotched the boys thar dinner, an' ole Nance fotched thar supper, an' then Rich he axed whut was the matter with young Nance. An' ole Nance jes snorted. Atter a while Rich says: "Harve," says he, "who tol' you that I said that word agin you an' Nance?" "Abe Shivers," says Harve. "An' who tol' you," says Harve, "that I said that word agin Nance an' YOU?" "Abe Shivers," says Rich. An' both says, "Well, damn me!" An' Rich tu'ned right over an' begun pullin' straws out'n the bed. He got two out, an' he bit one off, an' he says: "Harve,"

says he, "I reckon we better draw fer him. The shortes' gits him." An' they drawed. Well, nobody ever knowed which got the shortes' straw, stranger, but—

Thar'll be a dancin'-party comin' Christmas night on "Hell fer Sartain." Rich Harp 'll be thar from the head-waters. Harve Hall's a-goin' to tote the Widder Shivers clean across the Cumberlan'. Fust one 'll swing Nance, an' then t'other. Then they'll take a pull out'n the same bottle o' moonshine, an'—fust one an' then t'other—they'll swing her agin, jes the same. ABE won't be thar. He's a-settin' by a bigger fire, I reckon (ef he ain't in it), a-bitin' his thumbs!

THROUGH THE GAP

When thistles go adrift, the sun sets down the valley between the hills; when snow comes, it goes down behind the Cumberland and streams through a great fissure that people call the Gap. Then the last light drenches the parson's cottage under Imboden Hill, and leaves an after-glow of glory on a majestic heap that lies against the east. Sometimes it spans the Gap with a rainbow.

Strange people and strange tales come through this Gap from the Kentucky hills. Through it came these two, late one day—a man and a woman—afoot. I met them at the foot-bridge over Roaring Fork.

"Is thar a preacher anywhar aroun' hyeh?" he asked. I pointed to the cottage under Imboden Hill. The girl flushed slightly and turned her head away with a rather unhappy smile. Without a word, the mountaineer led the way towards town. A moment more and a half-breed Malungian passed me on the bridge and followed them.

At dusk the next day I saw the mountaineer chopping wood at a shanty under a clump of rhododendron on the river-bank. The girl was cooking supper inside. The day following he was at work on the railroad, and on Sunday, after church, I saw the parson. The two had not been to him. Only that afternoon the mountaineer was on the bridge with another woman, hideously rouged and with scarlet ribbons fluttering from her bonnet. Passing on by the shanty, I saw the Malungian talking to the girl. She apparently paid no heed to him until, just as he was moving away, he said something mockingly, and with a nod of his head back towards the bridge. She did not look up even then, but her face got hard and white, and, looking back from the road, I saw her slipping through the bushes into the dry bed of the creek, to make sure that what the half-breed told her was true.

The two men were working side by side on the railroad when I saw them again, but on the first pay-day the doctor was called to attend the Malungian, whose head was split open with a shovel. I was one of two who went out to arrest his assailant, and I had no need to ask who he was. The mountaineer was a devil, the foreman said, and I had to club him with a pistol-butt before he would give in. He said he would get even with me; but they all say that, and I paid no attention to the threat. For a week he was kept in the calaboose, and when I passed the shanty just after he was sent to the county-seat for trial, I found it empty. The Malungian, too, was gone. Within a fortnight the mountaineer was in the door of the shanty again. Having no accuser, he had been discharged. He went back to his work, and if he opened his lips I never knew. Every day I saw him at work, and he never failed to give me a surly look. Every dusk I saw him in his door-way, waiting, and I could guess for what. It was easy to believe that the stern purpose in his face would make its way through space and draw her to him again. And she did come back one day. I had just limped down the mountain with a sprained ankle. A crowd of women was gathered at the edge of the woods, looking with all their eyes to the shanty on the river-bank. The girl stood in the door-way. The mountaineer was coming back from work with his face down.

"He hain't seed her yit," said one. "He's goin' to kill her shore. I tol' her he would. She said she reckoned he would, but she didn't keer."

For a moment I was paralyzed by the tragedy at hand. She was in the door looking at him when he raised his head. For one moment he stood still, staring, and then he started towards her with a quickened step. I started too, then, every step a torture, and as I limped ahead she made a gesture of terror and backed into the room before him. The door closed, and I listened for a pistol-shot and a scream. It must have been done with a knife, I thought, and quietly, for when I was within ten paces of the cabin he opened the door again. His face was very white; he held one hand behind him, and he was nervously fumbling at his chill with the other. As he stepped towards me I caught the handle of a pistol in my side pocket and waited. He looked at me sharply.

"Did you say the preacher lived up thar?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, breathlessly.

In the door-way just then stood the girl with a bonnet in her hand, and at a nod from him they started up the hill towards the cottage. They came down again after a while, he stalking ahead, and she, after the mountain fashion, behind. And after this fashion I saw them at sunset next day pass over the bridge and into the mouth of the Gap whence they came. Through this Gap come strange people and strange tales from the Kentucky hills. Over it, sometimes, is the span of a rainbow.

A TRICK O' TRADE

Stranger, I'm a separATE man, an' I don't inQUIZite into no man's business; but you ax me straight, an' I tell ye straight: You watch ole Tom!

Now, I'll take ole Tom Perkins' word agin anybody's 'ceptin' when hit comes to a hoss trade ur a piece o' land. Fer in the tricks o' sech, ole Tom 'lows—well, hit's diff'ent; an' I reckon, stranger, as how hit sorter is. He was a-stayin' at Tom's house, the furriner was, a-dickerin' fer a piece o' lan'—the same piece, mebbe, that you're atter now—an' Tom keeps him thar fer a week to beat him out'n a dollar, an' then won't let him pay nary a cent fer his boa'd. Now, stranger, that's Tom.

Well, Abe Shivers was a-workin' fer Tom—you've heerd tell o' Abe—an' the furriner wasn't more'n half gone afore Tom seed that Abe was up to some of his devilMINT. Abe kin hatch up more devilMINT in a minit than Satan hisself kin in a week; so Tom jes got Abe out'n the stable under a hoe-handle, an' tol' him to tell the whole thing straight ur he'd have to go to glory right thar. An' Abe tol'!

'Pears like Abe had foun' a streak o' iron ore on the lan', an' had racked his jinny right down to Hazlan an' tol' the furriner, who was thar a-buyin' wild lands right an' left. Co'se, Abe was goin' to make the furriner whack up fer gittin' the lan' so cheap. Well, brother, the furriner come up to Tom's an' got Tom into one o' them new-fangled trades whut the furriners calls a option—t'other feller kin git out'n hit, but you can't. The furriner 'lowed he'd send his podner up thar next day to put the thing in writin' an' close up the trade. Hit looked like ole Tom was ketched fer shore, an' ef Tom didn't ra'r, I'd tell a man. He jes let that hoe-handle drap on Abe fer 'bout haffen hour, jes to give him time to study, an' next day thar was ole Tom a-settin' on his orchard fence a-lookin' mighty unknowin', when the furriner's podner come a-prancin' up an' axed ef old Tom Perkins lived thar.

Ole Tom jes whispers.

Now, I clean fergot to tell ye, stranger, that Abe Shivers nuver could talk out loud. He tol' so many lies that the Lawd—jes to make things even—sorter fixed Abe, I reckon, so he couldn't lie on more'n one side o'

the river at a time. Ole Tom jes knowed t'other furriner had tol' this un 'bout Abe, an,' shore 'nough, the feller says, sorter soft, says he:

"Aw, you air the feller whut foun' the ore?"

Ole Tom—makin' like he was Abe, mind ye—jes whispers: "Thar hain't none thar."

Stranger, the feller mos' fell off'n his hoss. "Whut?" says he. Ole Tom kep' a-whisperin': "Thar hain't no coal—no nothing; ole Tom Perkins made me tell t'other furriner them lies."

Well, sir, the feller WAS mad. "Jes whut I tol' that fool podner of mine," he says, an' he pull out a dollar an' gives hit to Tom. Tom jes sticks out his han' with his thum' turned in jes so, an' the furriner says, "Well, ef you can't talk, you kin make purty damn good signs"; but he forks over four mo' dollars (he 'lowed ole Tom had saved him a pile o' money), an' turns his hoss an' pulls up agin. He was a-gittin' the land so durned cheap that I reckon he jes hated to let hit go, an' he says, says he: "Well, hain't the groun' rich? Won't hit raise no tabaccy nur corn nur nothin'?"

Ole Tom jes whispers:

"To tell you the p'int-blank truth, stranger, that land's so durned pore that I hain't nuver been able to raise my voice."

Now, brother, I'm a separATE man, an' I don't inQUIZite into no man's business—but you ax me straight an' I tell ye straight. Ole Tom Perkins kin trade with furriners, fer he have l'arned their ways. You watch ole Tom!

GRAYSON'S BABY

The first snow sifted in through the Gap that night, and in a "shack" of one room and a low loft a man was dead, a woman was sick to death, and four children were barely alive; and nobody even knew. For they were hill people, who sicken, suffer, and sometimes die, like animals, and make no noise.

Grayson, the Virginian, coming down from the woods that morning, saw the big-hearted little doctor outside the door of the shack, walking up and down, with his hands in his pockets. He was whistling softly when Grayson got near, and, without stopping, pointed with his thumb within. The oldest boy sat stolidly on the one chair in the room, his little brother was on the floor hard by, and both were hugging a greasy stove. The little girl was with her mother in the bed, both almost out of sight under a heap of quilts. The baby was in a cradle, with its face uncovered, whether dead or asleep Grayson could not tell. A pine coffin was behind the door. It would not have been possible to add to the disorder of the room, and the atmosphere made Grayson gasp. He came out looking white. The first man to arrive thereafter took away the eldest boy, a woman picked the baby girl from the bed, and a childless young couple took up the pallid little fellow on the floor. These were step-children. The baby boy that was left was the woman's own. Nobody came for that, and Grayson went in again and looked at it a long while. So little, so old a human face he had never seen. The brow was wrinkled as with centuries of pain, and the little drawn mouth looked as though the spirit within had fought its inheritance without a murmur, and would fight on that way to the end. It was the pluck of the face that drew Grayson. "I'll take it," he said. The doctor was not without his sense of humor even then, but he nodded. "Cradle and all," he said, gravely. And Grayson put both on one shoulder and walked away. He had lost the power of giving further surprise in that town, and had he met every man he knew, not

one of them would have felt at liberty to ask him what he was doing. An hour later the doctor found the child in Grayson's room, and Grayson still looking at it.

"Is it going to live, doctor?"

The doctor shook his head. "Doubtful. Look at the color. It's starved. There's nothing to do but to watch it and feed it. You can do that."

So Grayson watched it, with a fascination of which he was hardly conscious. Never for one instant did its look change—the quiet, unyielding endurance that no faith and no philosophy could ever bring to him. It was ideal courage, that look, to accept the inevitable but to fight it just that way. Half the little mountain town was talking next day—that such a tragedy was possible by the public road-side, with relief within sound of the baby's cry. The oldest boy was least starved. Might made right in an extremity like his, and the boy had taken care of himself. The young couple who had the second lad in charge said they had been wakened at daylight the next morning by some noise in the room. Looking up, they saw the little fellow at the fireplace breaking an egg. He had built a fire, had got eggs from the kitchen, and was cooking his breakfast. The little girl was mischievous and cheery in spite of her bad plight, and nobody knew of the baby except Grayson and the doctor. Grayson would let nobody else in. As soon as it was well enough to be peevish and to cry, he took it back to its mother, who was still abed. A long, dark mountaineer was there, of whom the woman seemed half afraid. He followed Grayson outside.

"Say, podner," he said, with an unpleasant smile, "ye don't go up to Cracker's Neck fer nothin', do ye?"

The woman had lived at Cracker's Neck before she appeared at the Gap, and it did not come to Grayson what the man meant until he was half-way to his room. Then he flushed hot and wheeled back to the cabin, but the mountaineer was gone.

"Tell that fellow he had better keep out of my way," he said to the woman, who understood, and wanted to say something, but not knowing how, nodded simply. In a few days the other children went back to the cabin, and day and night Grayson went to see the child, until it was out of danger, and afterwards. It was not long before the women in town complained that the mother was ungrateful. When they sent things to eat to her the servant brought back word that she had called out, "'Set them over thar,' without so much as a thanky." One message was that "she didn' want no second-hand victuals from nobody's table." Somebody suggested sending the family to the poor-house. The mother said "she'd go out on her crutches and hoe corn fust, and that the people who talked 'bout sendin' her to the po'-house had better save their breath to make prayers with." One day she was hired to do some washing. The mistress of the house happened not to rise until ten o'clock. Next morning the mountain woman did not appear until that hour. "She wasn't goin' to work a lick while that woman was a-layin' in bed," she said, frankly. And when the lady went down town, she too disappeared. Nor would she, she explained to Grayson, "while that woman was a-struttin' the streets."

After that, one by one, they let her alone, and the woman made not a word of complaint. Within a week she was working in the fields, when she should have been back in bed. The result was that the child sickened again. The old look came back to its face, and Grayson was there night and day. He was having trouble out in Kentucky about this time, and he went to the Blue Grass pretty often. Always, however, he left money with me to see that the child was properly buried if it should die while he was gone; and once he telegraphed to ask how it was. He said he was sometimes afraid to open my letters for fear that he should read that the baby was dead. The child knew Grayson's voice, his step. It would go to him from its own mother. When it was sickest and lying torpid it would move the instant he stepped into the room, and, when he spoke, would hold out its thin arms, without opening its eyes, and for hours Grayson would walk the floor with the troubled little baby over his shoulder. I

thought several times it would die when, on one trip, Grayson was away for two weeks. One midnight, indeed, I found the mother moaning, and three female harpies about the cradle. The baby was dying this time, and I ran back for a flask of whiskey. Ten minutes late with the whiskey that night would have been too late. The baby got to know me and my voice during that fortnight, but it was still in danger when Grayson got back, and we went to see it together. It was very weak, and we both leaned over the cradle, from either side, and I saw the pity and affection—yes, hungry, half-shamed affection—in Grayson's face. The child opened its eyes, looked from one to the other, and held out its arms to ME. Grayson should have known that the child forgot—that it would forget its own mother. He turned sharply, and his face was a little pale. He gave something to the woman, and not till then did I notice that her soft black eyes never left him while he was in the cabin. The child got well; but Grayson never went to the shack again, and he said nothing when I came in one night and told him that some mountaineer—a long, dark fellow-had taken the woman, the children, and the household gods of the shack back into the mountains.

"They don't grieve long," I said, "these people."

But long afterwards I saw the woman again along the dusty road that leads into the Gap. She had heard over in the mountains that Grayson was dead, and had walked for two days to learn if it was true. I pointed back towards Bee Rock, and told her that he had fallen from a cliff back there. She did not move, nor did her look change. Moreover, she said nothing, and, being in a hurry, I had to ride on.

At the foot-bridge over Roaring Fork I looked back. The woman was still there, under the hot mid-day sun and in the dust of the road, motionless.

COURTIN' ON CUTSHIN

Hit was this way, stranger. When hit comes to handlin' a right peert gal, Jeb Somers air about the porest man on Fryin' Pan, I reckon; an' Polly Ann Sturgill have got the vineg'rest tongue on Cutshin or any other crick.

So the boys over on Fryin' Pan made it up to git 'em together. Abe Shivers—you've heerd tell o' Abe—tol' Jeb that Polly Ann had seed him in Hazlan (which she hadn't, of co'se), an' had said p'int-blank that he was the likeliest feller she'd seed in them mountains. An' he tol' Polly Ann that Jeb was ravin' crazy 'bout her. The pure misery of it jes made him plumb delirious, Abe said; an' 'f Polly Ann wanted to find her match fer languige an' talkin' out peert—well, she jes ought to strike Jeb Somers. Fact is, stranger, Jeb Somers air might' nigh a idgit; but Jeb 'lowed he'd rack right over on Cutshin an' set up with Polly Ann Sturgill; an' Abe tells Polly Ann the king bee air comin'. An' Polly Ann's cousin, Nance Osborn, comes over from Hell fer Sartain (whut runs into Kingdom-Come) to stay all night an' see the fun.

Now, I hain't been a-raftin' logs down to the settlemints o' Kaintuck fer nigh on to twenty year fer nothin', An' I know gallivantin' is diff'ent with us mountain fellers an' you furriners, in the premises, anyways, as them lawyers up to court says; though I reckon hit's purty much the same atter the premises is over. Whar you says "courtin'," now, we says "talkin' to." Sallie Spurlock over on Fryin' Pan is a-talkin' to Jim Howard now. Sallie's sister hain't nuver talked to no man. An' whar you says "makin' a call on a young lady," we says "settin' up with a gal"! An', stranger, we does it. We hain't got more'n one room hardly ever in these mountains, an' we're jes obleeged to set up to do any courtin' at all.

Well, you go over to Sallie's to stay all night some time, an' purty soon atter supper Jim Howard comes in. The ole man an' the ole woman goes to bed, an' the chil'un an' you go to bed, an' ef you keeps one eye open you'll see Jim's cheer an' Sallie's cheer a-movin' purty soon, till they gets

plumb together. Then, stranger, hit begins. Now I want ye to understand that settin' up means business. We don't 'low no foolishness in these mountains; an' 'f two fellers happens to meet at the same house, they jes makes the gal say which one she likes best, an' t'other one gits! Well, you'll see Jim put his arm 'round Sallie's neck an' whisper a long while—jes so. Mebbe you've noticed whut fellers us mountain folks air fer whisperin'. You've seed fellers a-whisperin' all over Hazlan on court day, hain't ye? Ole Tom Perkins 'll put his arm aroun' yo' neck an' whisper in yo' year ef he's ten mile out'n the woods. I reckon thar's jes so much devilmint a-goin' on in these mountains, folks is naturely afeerd to talk out loud.

Well, Jim let's go an' Sallie puts her arm aroun' Jim's neck an' whispers a long while—jes so; an' 'f you happen to wake up anywhar to two o'clock in the mornin' you'll see jes that a-goin' on. Brother, that's settin' up.

Well, Jeb Somers, as I was a-sayin' in the premises, 'lowed he'd rack right over on Cutshin an' set up with Polly Ann comin' Christmas night. An' Abe tells Polly Ann Jeb says he aims to have her fer a Christmas gift afore mornin'. Polly Ann jes sniffed sorter, but you know women folks air always mighty ambitious jes to SEE a feller anyways, 'f he's a-pinin' fer 'em. So Jeb come, an' Jeb was fixed up now fittin' to kill. Jeb had his hair oiled down nice an' slick, and his mustache was jes black as powder could make hit. Naturely hit was red; but a feller can't do nothin' in these mountains with a red mustache; an' Jeb had a big black ribbon tied in the butt o' the bigges' pistol Abe Shivers could borrer fer him—hit was a badge o' death an' deestruction to his enemies, Abe said, an' I tell ye Jeb did look like a man. He never opened his mouth atter he says "howdy"—Jeb never does say nothin'; Jeb's one o' them fellers whut hides thar lack o' brains by a-lookin' solemn an' a-keepin' still, but thar don't nobody say much tell the ole folks air gone to bed, an' Polly Ann jes 'lowed Jeb was a-waitin'. Fact is, stranger, Abe Shivers had got Jeb a leetle

disguised by liquer, an' he did look fat an' sassy, ef he couldn't talk, a-settin' over in the corner a-plunkin' the banjer an' a-knockin' off "Sour-wood Mountain" an' "Jinny git aroun'" an' "Soapsuds over the Fence."

"Chickens a-crowin' on Sour-wood Mountain,
  Heh-o-dee-um-dee-eedy-dahdy-dee!
Git yo' dawgs an' we'll go huntin',
  Heh-o-dee-um-dee-eedy-dahdy-dee!"

An' when Jeb comes to

"I've got a gal at the head o' the holler,
  Heh-o-dee-um-dee-eedy-dahdy-dee!"

he jes turns one eye 'round on Polly Ann, an' then swings his chin aroun' as though he didn't give a cuss fer nothin'.

"She won't come, an' I won't foller,
  Heh-o-dee-um-dee-eedy-dahdy-dee!"

Well, sir, Nance seed that Polly Ann was a-eyin' Jeb sort o' flustered like, an' she come might' nigh splittin' right thar an' a-sp'ilin' the fun, fer she knowed what a skeery fool Jeb was. An' when the ole folks goes to bed, Nance lays thar under a quilt a-watchin' an' a-listenin'. Well, Jeb knowed the premises, ef he couldn't talk, an' purty soon Nance heerd Jeb's cheer creak a leetle, an' she says, Jeb's a-comin', and Jeb was; an' Polly Ann 'lowed Jeb was jes a leetle TOO resolute an' quick-like, an' she got her hand ready to give him one lick anyways fer bein' so brigaty. I don't know as she'd 'a' hit him more'n ONCE. Jeb had a farm, an' Polly Ann—well, Polly Ann was a-gittin' along. But Polly Ann sot thar jes as though she didn't know Jeb was a-comin', an' Jeb stopped once an' says,

"You hain't got nothin' agin me, has ye?"

An' Polly Ann says, sorter quick,

"Naw; ef I had, I'd push it."

Well, Jeb mos' fell off his cheer, when, ef he hadn't been sech a skeery idgit, he'd 'a' knowed that Polly Ann was plain open an' shet a-biddin' fer him. But he sot thar like a knot on a log fer haffen hour, an' then he rickollected, I reckon, that Abe had tol' him Polly Ann was peppery an' he mustn't mind, fer Jeb begun a-movin' ag'in till he was slam-bang agin Polly Ann's cheer. An' thar he sot like a punkin, not sayin' a word nur doin' nothin'. An' while Polly Ann was a-wonderin' ef he was gone plumb crazy, blame me ef that durned fool didn't turn roun' to that peppery gal an' say,

"Booh, Polly Ann!"

Well, Nance had to stuff the bedquilt in her mouth right thar to keep from hollerin' out loud, fer Polly Ann's hand was a-hangin' down by the cheer, jes a-waitin' fer a job, and Nance seed the fingers a-twitchin'. An' Jeb waits another haffen hour an' Jeb says,

"Ortern't I be killed?"

"Whut fer?" says Polly Ann, sorter sharp.

An' Jeb says, "Fer bein' so devilish."

Well, brother, Nance snorted right out thar, an' Polly Ann Sturgill's hand riz up jes once; an' I've heerd Jeb Somers say the next time he jumps out o' the Fryin' Pan he's a-goin' to take hell-fire 'stid o' Cutshin fer a place to light.

THE MESSAGE IN THE SAND

Stranger, you furriners don't nuver seem to consider that a woman has always got the devil to fight in two people at once! Hit's two agin one, I tell ye, an' hit hain't fa'r.

That's what I said more'n two year ago, when Rosie Branham was a-layin' up thar at Dave Hall's, white an' mos' dead. An', GOD, boys, I says, that leetle thing in thar by her shorely can't be to blame.

Thar hain't been a word agin Rosie sence; an', stranger, I reckon thar nuver will be. Fer, while the gal hain't got hide o' kith or kin, thar air two fellers up hyeh sorter lookin' atter Rosie; an' one of 'em is the shootin'es' man on this crick, I reckon, 'cept one; an', stranger, that's t'other.

Rosie kep' her mouth shet fer a long while; an' I reckon as how the feller 'lowed she wasn't goin' to tell. Co'se the woman folks got hit out'n her—they al'ays gits whut they want, as you know—an' thar the sorry cuss was—a-livin' up thar in the Bend, jes aroun' that bluff o' lorrel yander, a-lookin' pious, an' a-singin', an' a-sayin' Amen louder 'n anybody when thar was meetin'.

Well, my boy Jim an' a lot o' fellers jes went up fer him right away. I don't know as the boys would 'a' killed him EXACTLY ef they had kotched him, though they mought; but they got Abe Shivers, as tol' the feller they was a-comin'—you've heard tell o' Abe-an' they mos' beat Abraham Shivers to death. Stranger, the sorry cuss was Dave. Rosie hadn't no daddy an' no mammy; an' she was jes a-workin' at Dave's fer her victuals an' clo'es. 'Pears like the pore gal was jes tricked into evil. Looked like she was sorter 'witched—an' anyways, stranger, she was a fightin' Satan in HERSELF, as well as in Dave. Hit was two agin one, I tell ye, an' hit wasn't fa'r.

Co'se they turned Rosie right out in the road I hain't got a word to say agin Dave's wife fer that; an' atter a while the boys lets Dave come back, to take keer o' his ole mammy, of co'se, but I tell ye Dave's a-playin' a

purty lonesome tune. He keeps purty shy YIT. He don't nuver sa'nter down this way. 'Pears like he don't seem to think hit's healthy fer him down hyeh, an' I reckon Dave's right.

Rosie? Oh, well, I sorter tuk Rosie in myself. Yes, she's been livin' thar in the shack with me an' my boy Jim, an' the— Why, thar he is now, stranger. That's him a-wallerin' out thar in the road. Do you reckon thar'd be a single thing agin that leetle cuss ef he had to stan' up on Jedgment Day jes as he is now?

Look hyeh, stranger, whut you reckon the Lawd kep' a-writin' thar on the groun' that day when them fellers was a-pesterin' him 'bout that pore woman? Don't you jes know he was a writin' 'bout sech as HIM—an' Rosie? I tell ye, brother, he writ thar jes what I'm al'ays a-sayin'.

Hit hain't the woman's fault. I said it more'n two year ago, when Rosie was up thar at ole Dave's, an' I said it yestiddy, when my boy Jim come to me an' 'lowed as how he aimed to take Rosie down to town to-day an' git married.

"You ricollect, dad," says Jim, "her mammy?"

"Yes, Jim," I says; "all the better reason not to be too hard on Rosie."

I'm a-lookin' fer 'em both back right now, stranger; an' ef you will, I'll be mighty glad to have ye stay right hyeh to the infair this very night. Thar nuver was a word agin Rosie afore, thar hain't been sence, an' you kin ride up an' down this river till the crack o' doom an' you'll nuver hear a word agin her ag'in. Fer, as I tol' you, my boy, Jim is the shootin'es' feller on this crick, I reckon, 'cept ONE, an', stranger, that's ME!

THE SENATOR'S LAST TRADE

A drove of lean cattle were swinging easily over Black Mountain, and behind them came a big man with wild black hair and a bushy beard. Now and then he would gnaw at his mustache with his long, yellow teeth, or would sit down to let his lean horse rest, and would flip meaninglessly at the bushes with a switch. Sometimes his bushy head would droop over on his breast, and he would snap it up sharply and start painfully on. Robber, cattle-thief, outlaw he might have been in another century; for he filled the figure of any robber hero in life or romance, and yet he was only the Senator from Bell, as he was known in the little Kentucky capital; or, as he was known in his mountain home, just the Senator, who had toiled and schemed and grown rich and grown poor; who had suffered long and was kind.

Only that Christmas he had gutted every store in town. "Give me everything you have, brother," he said, across each counter; and next day every man, woman, and child in the mountain town had a present from the Senator's hands. He looked like a brigand that day, as he looked now, but he called every man his brother, and his eye, while black and lustreless as night, was as brooding and just as kind.

When the boom went down, with it and with everybody else went the Senator. Slowly he got dusty, ragged, long of hair. He looked tortured and ever-restless. You never saw him still; always he swept by you, flapping his legs on his lean horse or his arms in his rickety buggy here, there, everywhere—turning, twisting, fighting his way back to freedom—and not a murmur. Still was every man his brother, and if some forgot his once open hand, he forgot it no more completely than did the Senator. He went very far to pay his debts. He felt honor bound, indeed, to ask his sister to give back the farm that he had given her, which, very properly people said, she declined to do. Nothing could kill hope in the Senator's breast; he would hand back the farm in another year, he said; but the sister was firm, and without a word still, the Senator went other

ways and schemed through the nights, and worked and rode and walked and traded through the days, until now, when the light was beginning to glimmer, his end was come.

This was the Senator's last trade, and in sight, down in a Kentucky valley, was home. Strangely enough, the Senator did not care at all, and he had just enough sanity left to wonder why, and to be worried. It was the "walking typhoid" that had caught up with him, and he was listless, and he made strange gestures and did foolish things as he stumbled down the mountain. He was going over a little knoll now, and he could see the creek that ran around his house, but he was not touched. He would just as soon have lain down right where he was, or have turned around and gone back, except that it was hot and he wanted to get to the water. He remembered that it was nigh Christmas; he saw the snow about him and the cakes of ice in the creek. He knew that he ought not to be hot, and yet he was—so hot that he refused to reason with himself even a minute, and hurried on. It was odd that it should be so, but just about that time, over in Virginia, a cattle dealer, nearing home, stopped to tell a neighbor how he had tricked some black-whiskered fool up in the mountains. It may have been just when he was laughing aloud over there, that the Senator, over here, tore his woollen shirt from his great hairy chest and rushed into the icy stream, clapping his arms to his burning sides and shouting in his frenzy.

"If he had lived a little longer," said a constituent, "he would have lost the next election. He hadn't the money, you know."

"If he had lived a little longer," said the mountain preacher high up on Yellow Creek, "I'd have got that trade I had on hand with him through. Not that I wanted him to die, but if he had to—why—"

"If he had lived a little longer," said the Senator's lawyer, "he would have cleaned off the score against him."

"If he had lived a little longer," said the Senator's sister, not meaning to be unkind, "he would have got all I have."

That was what life held for the Senator. Death was more kind.

PREACHIN' ON KINGDOM-COME

I've told ye, stranger, that Hell fer Sartain empties, as it oughter, of co'se, into Kingdom-Come. You can ketch the devil 'most any day in the week on Hell fer Sartain, an' sometimes you can git Glory everlastin' on Kingdom-Come. Hit's the only meetin'-house thar in twenty miles aroun'.

Well, the reg'lar rider, ole Jim Skaggs, was dead, an' the bretherin was a-lookin' aroun' fer somebody to step into ole Jim's shoes. Thar'd been one young feller up thar from the settlemints, a-cavortin' aroun', an' they was studyin' 'bout gittin' him.

"Bretherin' an' sisteren," I says, atter the leetle chap was gone, "he's got the fortitood to speak an' he shorely is well favored. He's got a mighty good hawk eye fer spyin' out evil—an' the gals; he can outholler ole Jim; an' IF," I says, "any IDEES ever comes to him, he'll be a hell-rouser shore—but they ain't comin'!" An', so sayin', I takes my foot in my hand an' steps fer home.

Stranger, them fellers over thar hain't seed much o' this world. Lots of 'em nuver seed the cyars; some of 'em nuver seed a wagon. An' atter jowerin' an' noratin' fer 'bout two hours, what you reckon they said they aimed to do? They believed they'd take that ar man Beecher, ef they could git him to come. They'd heerd o' Henry endurin' the war, an' they knowed he was agin the rebs, an' they wanted Henry if they could jes git him to come.

Well, I snorted, an' the feud broke out on Hell fer Sartain betwixt the Days an' the Dillons. Mace Day shot Daws Dillon's brother, as I rickollect —somep'n's al'ays a-startin' up that plaguey war an' a-makin' things frolicsome over thar—an' ef it hadn't a-been fer a tall young feller with black hair an' a scar across his forehead, who was a-goin' through the mountains a-settlin' these wars, blame me ef I believe thar ever would 'a' been any mo' preachin' on Kingdom-Come. This feller comes over from Hazlan an' says he aims to hold a meetin' on Kingdom-Come. "Brother," I says, "that's what no preacher have ever did whilst this war is a-goin' on." An' he says, sort o' quiet, "Well, then, I reckon I'll have to do what no preacher have ever did." An' I ups an' says: "Brother, an ole jedge come up here once from the settlemints to hold couht. 'Jedge,' I says, 'that's what no jedge have ever did without soldiers since this war's been a-goin' on.' An', brother, the jedge's words was yours, p'int-blank. 'All right,' he says, 'then I'll have to do what no other jedge have ever did.' An', brother," says I to the preacher, "the jedge done it shore. He jes laid under the couht-house fer two days whilst the boys fit over him. An' when I sees the jedge a-makin' tracks fer the settlemints, I says, 'Jedge,' I says, 'you spoke a parable shore.'"

Well, sir, the long preacher looked jes as though he was a-sayin' to hisself, "Yes, I hear ye, but I don't heed ye," an' when he says, "Jes the same, I'm a-goin' to hold a meetin' on Kingdom-Come," why, I jes takes my foot in my hand an' ag'in I steps fer home.

That night, stranger, I seed another feller from Hazlan, who was a-tellin' how this here preacher had stopped the war over thar, an' had got the Marcums an' Braytons to shakin' hands; an' next day ole Tom Perkins stops in an' says that WHARAS there mought 'a' been preachin' somewhar an' sometime, thar nuver had been PREACHIN' afore on Kingdom-Come. So I goes over to the meetin' house, an' they was all thar —Daws Dillon an' Mace Day, the leaders in the war, an' Abe Shivers (you've heerd tell o' Abe) who was a-carryin' tales from one side to t'other an' a-stirrin' up hell ginerally, as Abe most al'ays is; an' thar was

Daws on one side o' the meetin'-house an' Mace on t'other, an' both jes a-watchin' fer t'other to make a move, an' thar'd 'a' been billy-hell to pay right thar! Stranger, that long preacher talked jes as easy as I'm a-talkin' now, an' hit was p'int-blank as the feller from Hazlan said. You jes ought 'a' heerd him tellin' about the Lawd a-bein' as pore as any feller thar, an' a-makin' barns an' fences an' ox-yokes an' sech like; an' not a-bein' able to write his own name—havin' to make his mark mebbe—when he started out to save the world. An' how they tuk him an' nailed him onto a cross when he'd come down fer nothin' but to save 'em; an' stuck a spear big as a corn-knife into his side, an' give him vinegar; an' his own mammy a-standin' down thar on the ground a-cryin' an' a-watchin' him an' he a-fergivin' all of 'em then an' thar!

Thar nuver had been nothin' like that afore on Kingdom-Come, an' all along I heerd fellers a-layin' thar guns down; an when the preacher called out fer sinners, blame me ef the fust feller that riz wasn't Mace Day. An' Mace says, "Stranger, 'f what you say is true, I reckon the Lawd 'll fergive me too, but I don't believe Daws Dillon ever will," an' Mace stood thar lookin' around fer Daws. An' all of a sudden the preacher got up straight an' called out, "Is thar a human in this house mean an' sorry enough to stand betwixt a man an' his Maker"? An' right thar, stranger, Daws riz. "Naw, by God, thar hain' t!" Daws says, an' he walks up to Mace a-holdin' out his hand, an' they all busts out cryin' an' shakin' hands—Days an' Dillons—jes as the preacher had made 'em do over in Hazlan. An' atter the thing was over, I steps up to the preacher an' I says:

"Brother," I says, "YOU spoke a parable, shore."

THE PASSING OF ABRAHAM SHIVERS

"I tell ye, boys, hit hain t often a feller has the chance o' doin' so much good jes by DYIN'. Fer 'f Abe Shivers air gone, shorely gone, the rest of us—every durn one of us—air a-goin' to be saved. Fer Abe Shivers—you hain't heerd tell o' ABE? Well, you must be a stranger in these mountains o' Kaintuck, shore.

"I don't know, stranger, as Abe ever was borned; nobody in these mountains knows it 'f he was. The fust time I ever heerd tell o' Abe he was a-hollerin' fer his rights one mawnin' at daylight, endurin' the war, jes outside o' ole Tom Perkins' door on Fryin' Pan. Abe was left thar by some home-gyard, I reckon. Well, nobody air ever turned out'n doors in these mountains, as you know, an' Abe got his rights that mawin', an' he's been a-gittin' 'em ever sence. Tom already had a houseful, but 'f any feller got the bigges' hunk o' corn-bread, that feller was Abe; an' ef any feller got a-whalin', hit wasn't Abe.

"Abe tuk to lyin' right naturely—looked like—afore he could talk. Fact is, Abe nuver could do nothin' but jes whisper. Still, Abe could manage to send a lie furder with that rattlin' whisper than ole Tom could with that big horn o' hisn what tells the boys the revenoos air comin' up Fryin' Pan.'

"Didn't take Abe long to git to braggin' an' drinkin' an' naggin' an' hectorin'—everything, 'mos', 'cept fightin'. Nobody ever drawed Abe Shivers into a fight. I don't know as he was afeerd; looked like Abe was a-havin' sech a tarnation good time with his devilmint he jes didn't want to run no risk o' havin' hit stopped. An' sech devilmint! Hit ud take a coon's age, I reckon, to tell ye.

"The boys was a-goin' up the river one night to git ole Dave Hall fer trickin' Rosie Branham into evil. Some feller goes ahead an' tells ole Dave they's a-comin.' Hit was Abe. Some feller finds a streak o' ore on

ole Tom Perkins' land, an' racks his jinny down to town, an' tells a furriner thar, an' Tom comes might' nigh sellin' the land fer nothin'. Now Tom raised Abe, but, jes the same, the feller was Abe.

"One night somebody guides the revenoos in on Hell fer Sartain, an' they cuts up four stills. Hit was Abe. The same night, mind ye, a feller slips in among the revenoos while they's asleep, and cuts off their hosses' manes an' tails—muled every durned critter uv 'em. Stranger, hit was Abe. An' as fer women-folks—well, Abe was the ill favoredest feller I ever see, an' he couldn't talk; still, Abe was sassy, an' you know how sass counts with the gals; an' Abe's whisperin' come in jes as handy as any feller's settin' up; so 'f ever you seed a man with a Winchester a-lookin' fer the feller who had cut him out, stranger, he was a-lookin' fer Abe.

"Somebody tells Harve Hall, up thar at a dance on Hell-fer-Sartain one Christmas night, that Rich Harp had said somep'n' agin him an' Nance Osborn. An' somebody tells Rich that Harve had said sompe'n' agin Nance an' HIM. Hit was one an' the same feller, stranger, an' the feller was Abe. Well, while Rich an' Harve was a-gittin' well, somebody runs off with Nance. Hit was Abe. Then Rich an' Harve jes draws straws fer a feller. Stranger, they drawed fer Abe. Hit's purty hard to believe that Abe air gone, 'cept that Rich Harp an' Harve Hall don't never draw no straws fer nothin'; but 'f by the grace o' Goddle-mighty Abe air gone, why, as I was a-sayin', the rest of us—every durned one of us air a-goin' to be saved, shore. Fer Abe's gone fust, an' ef thar's only one Jedgment Day, the Lawd 'll nuver git to us."

A PURPLE RHODODENDRON

The purple rhododendron is rare. Up in the Gap here, Bee Rock, hung out over Roaring Rock, blossoms with it—as a gray cloud purples with the sunrise. This rock was tossed lightly on edge when the earth was young, and stands vertical. To get the flowers you climb the mountain to one side, and, balancing on the rock's thin edge, slip down by roots and past rattlesnake dens till you hang out over the water and reach for them. To avoid snakes it is best to go when it is cool, at daybreak.

I know but one other place in this southwest corner of Virginia where there is another bush of purple rhododendron, and one bush only is there. This hangs at the throat of a peak not far away, whose ageless gray head is bent over a ravine that sinks like a spear thrust into the side of the mountain. Swept only by high wind and eagle wings as this is, I yet knew one man foolhardy enough to climb to it for a flower. He brought one blossom down: and to this day I do not know that it was not the act of a coward; yes, though Grayson did it, actually smiling all the way from peak to ravine, and though he was my best friend—best loved then and since. I believe he was the strangest man I have ever known, and I say this with thought; for his eccentricities were sincere. In all he did I cannot remember having even suspected anything theatrical but once.

We were all Virginians or Kentuckians at the Gap, and Grayson was a Virginian. You might have guessed that he was a Southerner from his voice and from the way he spoke of women—but no more. Otherwise, he might have been a Moor, except for his color, which was about the only racial characteristic he had. He had been educated abroad and, after the English habit, had travelled everywhere. And yet I can imagine no more lonely way between the eternities than the path Grayson trod alone.

He came to the Gap in the early days, and just why he came I never knew. He had studied the iron question a long time, he told me, and what I thought reckless speculation was, it seems, deliberate judgment to him. His money "in the dirt," as the phrase was, Grayson got him a

horse and rode the hills and waited. He was intimate with nobody. Occasionally he would play poker with us and sometimes he drank a good deal, but liquor never loosed his tongue. At poker his face told as little as the back of his cards, and he won more than admiration—even from the Kentuckians, who are artists at the game; but the money went from a free hand, and, after a diversion like this, he was apt to be moody and to keep more to himself than ever. Every fortnight or two he would disappear, always over Sunday. In three or four days he would turn up again, black with brooding, and then he was the last man to leave the card-table or he kept away from it altogether. Where he went nobody knew; and he was not the man anybody would question.

One night two of us Kentuckians were sitting in the club, and from a home paper I read aloud the rumored engagement of a girl we both knew —who was famous for beauty in the Bluegrass, as was her mother before her and the mother before her—to an unnamed Virginian. Grayson sat near, smoking a pipe; and when I read the girl's name I saw him take the meerschaum from his lips, and I felt his eyes on me. It was a mystery how, but I knew at once that Grayson was the man. He sought me out after that and seemed to want to make friends. I was willing, or, rather he made me more than willing; for he was irresistible to me, as I imagine he would have been to anybody. We got to walking together and riding together at night, and we were soon rather intimate; but for a long time he never so much as spoke the girl's name. Indeed, he kept away from the Bluegrass for nearly two months; but when he did go he stayed a fortnight.

This time he came for me as soon as he got back to the Gap. It was just before midnight, and we went as usual back of Imboden Hill, through moon-dappled beeches, and Grayson turned off into the woods where there was no path, both of us silent. We rode through tremulous, shining leaves—Grayson's horse choosing a way for himself—and, threshing through a patch of high, strong weeds, we circled past an amphitheatre of deadened trees whose crooked arms were tossed out

into the moonlight, and halted on the spur. The moon was poised over Morris's farm; South Fork was shining under us like a loop of gold, the mountains lay about in tranquil heaps, and the moon-mist rose luminous between them. There Grayson turned to me with an eager light in his eyes that I had never seen before.

"This has a new beauty to-night!" he said; and then "I told her about you, and she said that she used to know you—well." I was glad my face was in shadow—I could hardly keep back a brutal laugh—and Grayson, unseeing, went on to speak of her as I had never heard any man speak of any woman. In the end, he said that she had just promised to be his wife. I answered nothing. Other men, I knew, had said that with the same right, perhaps, and had gone from her to go back no more. And I was one of them. Grayson had met her at White Sulphur five years before, and had loved her ever since. She had known it from the first, he said, and I guessed then what was going to happen to him. I marvelled, listening to the man, for it was the star of constancy in her white soul that was most lustrous to him—and while I wondered the marvel became a commonplace. Did not every lover think his loved one exempt from the frailty that names other women? There is no ideal of faith or of purity that does not live in countless women to-day. I believe that; but could I not recall one friend who walked with Divinity through pine woods for one immortal spring, and who, being sick to death, was quite finished—learning her at last? Did I not know lovers who believed sacred to themselves, in the name of love, lips that had been given to many another without it? And now did I not know—but I knew too much, and to Grayson I said nothing.

That spring the "boom" came. Grayson's property quadrupled in value and quadrupled again. I was his lawyer, and I plead with him to sell; but Grayson laughed. He was not speculating; he had invested on judgment; he would sell only at a certain figure. The figure was actually

reached, and Grayson let half go. The boom fell, and Grayson took the tumble with a jest. It would come again in the autumn, he said, and he went off to meet the girl at White Sulphur.

I worked right hard that summer, but I missed him, and I surely was glad when he came back. Something was wrong; I saw it at once. He did not mention her name, and for a while he avoided even me. I sought him then, and gradually I got him into our old habit of walking up into the Gap and of sitting out after supper on a big rock in the valley, listening to the run of the river and watching the afterglow over the Cumberland, the moon rise over Wallen's Ridge and the stars come out. Waiting for him to speak, I learned for the first time then another secret of his wretched melancholy. It was the hopelessness of that time, perhaps, that disclosed it. Grayson had lost the faith of his childhood. Most men do that at some time or other, but Grayson had no business, no profession, no art in which to find relief. Indeed, there was but one substitute possible, and that came like a gift straight from the God whom he denied. Love came, and Grayson's ideals of love, as of everything else, were morbid and quixotic. He believed that he owed it to the woman he should marry never to have loved another. He had loved but one woman, he said, and he should love but one. I believed him then literally when he said that his love for the Kentucky girl was his religion now—the only anchor left him in his sea of troubles, the only star that gave him guiding light. Without this love, what then?

I had a strong impulse to ask him, but Grayson shivered, as though he divined my thought, and, in some relentless way, our talk drifted to the question of suicide. I was not surprised that he rather defended it. Neither of us said anything new, only I did not like the way he talked. He was too deliberate, too serious, as though he were really facing a possible fact. He had no religious scruples, he said, no family ties; he had nothing to do with bringing himself into life; why—if it was not worth living, not bearable—why should he not end it? He gave the usual authority, and I gave the usual answer. Religion aside, if we did not know that we were

here for some purpose, we did not know that we were not; and here we were anyway, and our duty was plain. Desertion was the act of a coward, and that Grayson could not deny.

That autumn the crash of '91 came across the water from England, and Grayson gave up. He went to Richmond, and came back with money enough to pay off his notes, and I think it took nearly all he had. Still, he played poker steadily now—for poker had been resumed when it was no longer possible to gamble in lots—he drank a good deal, and he began just at this time to take a singular interest in our volunteer police guard. He had always been on hand when there was trouble, and I sha'n't soon forget him the day Senator Mahone spoke, when we were punching a crowd of mountaineers back with cocked Winchesters. He had lost his hat in a struggle with one giant; he looked half crazy with anger, and yet he was white and perfectly cool, and I noticed that he never had to tell a man but once to stand back. Now he was the first man to answer a police whistle. When we were guarding Talt Hall, he always volunteered when there was any unusual risk to run. When we raided the Pound to capture a gang of desperadoes, he insisted on going ahead as spy; and when we got restless lying out in the woods waiting for daybreak, and the captain suggested a charge on the cabin, Grayson was by his side when it was made. Grayson sprang through the door first, and he was the man who thrust his reckless head up into the loft and lighted a match to see if the murderers were there. Most of us did foolish things in those days under stress of excitement, but Grayson, I saw, was weak enough to be reckless. His trouble with the girl, whatever it was, was serious enough to make him apparently care little whether he were alive or dead. And still I saw that not yet even had he lost hope. He was having a sore fight with his pride, and he got body-worn and heart-sick over it. Of course he was worsted, and in the end, from sheer weakness, he went back to her once more.

I shall never see another face like his when Grayson came back that last time. I never noticed before that there were silver hairs about his temples. He stayed in his room, and had his meals sent to him. He came out only to ride, and then at night. Waking the third morning at daybreak, I saw him through the window galloping past, and I knew he had spent the night on Black Mountain. I went to his room as soon as I got up, and Grayson was lying across his bed with his face down, his clothes on, and in his right hand was a revolver. I reeled into a chair before I had strength enough to bend over him, and when I did I found him asleep. I left him as he was, and I never let him know that I had been to his room; but I got him out on the rock again that night, and I turned our talk again to suicide. I said it was small, mean, cowardly, criminal, contemptible! I was savagely in earnest, and Grayson shivered and said not a word. I thought he was in better mind after that. We got to taking night rides again, and I stayed as closely to him as I could, for times got worse and trouble was upon everybody. Notes fell thicker than snowflakes, and, through the foolish policy of the company, foreclosures had to be made. Grayson went to the wall like the rest of us. I asked him what he had done with the money he had made. He had given away a great deal to poorer kindred; he had paid his dead father's debts; he had played away a good deal, and he had lost the rest. His faith was still imperturbable. He had a dozen rectangles of "dirt," and from these, he said, it would all come back some day. Still, he felt the sudden poverty keenly, but he faced it as he did any other physical fact in life—dauntless. He used to be fond of saying that no one thing could make him miserable. But he would talk with mocking earnestness about some much-dreaded combination; and a favorite phrase of his—which got to have peculiar significance—was "the cohorts of hell," who closed in on him when he was sick and weak, and who fell back when he got well. He had one strange habit, too, from which I got comfort. He would deliberately walk into and defy any temptation that beset him. That was the way he strengthened himself, he said. I knew what his temptation

was now, and I thought of this habit when I found him asleep with his revolver, and I got hope from it now, when the dreaded combination (whatever that was) seemed actually to have come.

I could see now that he got worse daily. He stopped his mockeries, his occasional fits of reckless gayety. He stopped poker—resolutely—he couldn't afford to lose now; and, what puzzled me, he stopped drinking. The man simply looked tired, always hopelessly tired; and I could believe him sincere in all his foolish talk about his blessed Nirvana: which was the peace he craved, which was end enough for him.

Winter broke. May drew near; and one afternoon, when Grayson and I took our walk up through the Gap, he carried along a huge spy-glass of mine, which had belonged to a famous old desperado, who watched his enemies with it from the mountain-tops. We both helped capture him, and I defended him. He was sentenced to hang—the glass was my fee. We sat down opposite Bee Rock, and for the first time Grayson told me of that last scene with her. He spoke without bitterness, and he told me what she said, word for word, without a breath of blame for her. I do not believe that he judged her at all; she did not know—he always said; she did not KNOW; and then, when I opened my lips, Grayson reached silently for my wrist, and I can feel again the warning crush of his fingers, and I say nothing against her now.

I asked Grayson what his answer was.

"I asked her," he said, solemnly, "if she had ever seen a purple rhododendron."

I almost laughed, picturing the scene—the girl bewildered by his absurd question—Grayson calm, superbly courteous. It was a mental peculiarity of his—this irrelevancy—and it was like him to end a matter of life and death in just that way.

"I told her I should send her one. I am waiting for them to come out," he added; and he lay back with his head against a stone and sighted the telescope on a dizzy point, about which buzzards were circling.

"There is just one bush of rhododendron up there," he went on. "I saw it looking down from the Point last spring. I imagine it must blossom earlier than that across there on Bee Rock, being always in the sun. No, it's not budding yet," he added, with his eye to the glass.

"You see that ledge just to the left? I dropped a big rock from the Point square on a rattler who was sunning himself there last spring. I can see a foothold all the way up the cliff. It can be done," he concluded, in a tone that made me turn sharply upon him.

"Do you really mean to climb up there?" I asked, harshly.

"If it blossoms first up there—I'll get it where it blooms first." In a moment I was angry and half sick with suspicion, for I knew his obstinacy; and then began what I am half ashamed to tell.

Every day thereafter Grayson took that glass with him, and I went along to humor him. I watched Bee Rock, and he that one bush at the throat of the peak—neither of us talking over the matter again. It was uncanny, that rivalry—sun and wind in one spot, sun and wind in another—Nature herself casting the fate of a half-crazed fool with a flower. It was utterly absurd, but I got nervous over it—apprehensive, dismal.

A week later it rained for two days, and the water was high. The next day the sun shone, and that afternoon Grayson smiled, looking through the glass, and handed it to me. I knew what I should see. One purple cluster, full blown, was shaking in the wind. Grayson was leaning back in a dream when I let the glass down. A cool breath from the woods behind us brought the odor of roots and of black earth; up in the leaves and sunlight somewhere a wood-thrush was singing, and I saw in Grayson's

face what I had not seen for a long time, and that was peace—the peace of stubborn purpose. He did not come for me the next day, nor the next; but the next he did, earlier than usual.

"I am going to get that rhododendron," he said. "I have been half-way up—it can be reached." So had I been half-way up. With nerve and agility the flower could be got, and both these Grayson had. If he had wanted to climb up there and drop, he could have done it alone, and he would have known that I should have found him. Grayson was testing himself again, and, angry with him for the absurdity of the thing and with myself for humoring it, but still not sure of him, I picked up my hat and went. I swore to myself silently that it was the last time I should pay any heed to his whims. I believed this would be the last. The affair with the girl was over. The flower sent, I knew Grayson would never mention her name again.

Nature was radiant that afternoon. The mountains had the leafy luxuriance of June, and a rich, sunlit haze drowsed on them between the shadows starting out over the valley and the clouds so white that the blue of the sky looked dark. Two eagles shot across the mouth of the Gap as we neared it, and high beyond buzzards were sailing over Grayson's rhododendron.

I went up the ravine with him and I climbed up behind him—Grayson going very deliberately and whistling softly. He called down to me when he reached the shelf that looked half-way.

"You mustn't come any farther than this," he said. "Get out on that rock and I'll drop them down to you."

Then he jumped from the ledge and caught the body of a small tree close to the roots, and my heart sank at such recklessness and all my fears rose again. I scrambled hastily to the ledge, but I could get no farther. I might possibly make the jump he had made—but how should I ever get back? How would he? I called angrily after him now, and he

wouldn't answer me. I called him a fool, a coward; I stamped the ledge like a child—but Grayson kept on, foot after hand, with stealthy caution, and the purple cluster nodding down at him made my head whirl. I had to lie down to keep from tumbling from the ledge; and there on my side, gripping a pine bush, I lay looking up at him. He was close to the flowers now, and just before he took the last upward step he turned and looked down that awful height with as calm a face as though he could have dropped and floated unhurt to the ravine beneath.

Then with his left hand he caught the ledge to the left, strained up, and, holding thus, reached out with his right. The hand closed about the cluster, and the twig was broken. Grayson gave a great shout then. He turned his head as though to drop them, and, that far away, I heard the sibilant whir of rattles. I saw a snake's crest within a yard of his face, and, my God! I saw Grayson loose his left hand to guard it! The snake struck at his arm, and Grayson reeled and caught back once at the ledge with his left hand. He caught once, I say, to do him full justice; then, without a word, he dropped—and I swear there was a smile on his face when he shot down past me into the trees.

I found him down there in the ravine with nearly every bone in his body crushed. His left arm was under him, and outstretched in his right hand was the shattered cluster, with every blossom gone but one. One white half of his face was unmarked, and on it was still the shadow of a smile. I think it meant more than that Grayson believed that he was near peace at last. It meant that Fate had done the deed for him and that he was glad. Whether he would have done it himself, I do not know; and that is why I say that though Grayson brought the flower down—smiling from peak to ravine—I do not know that he was not, after all, a coward.

That night I wrote to the woman in Kentucky. I told her that Grayson had fallen from a cliff while climbing for flowers; and that he was dead. Along with these words, I sent a purple rhododendron.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HELL FER SARTAIN AND OTHER STORIES ***

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