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BACKWOODS TEACHER

Backwoods Teacher

by JOSEPH NELSON

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
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FIRST EDITION

CONTENTS

FOR SALLY,

with love

CHAPTER I

Dollar Holler

Since leaving the crossroads store where the star mail carrier let us out, Sally and I had walked steadily for a mile or more down a ledgy wagon road which shouldered into the timbered mountain side. It was August and we were hot for there was no air stirring down here. Gnats sang about our ears and threatened our eyes, and a plague of midges, almost invisible, pestered us with hot needle jabs.

Just now we had no eye for the yellows and golds which the drouth was bringing weeks early to the sassafras and persimmon which grew in the open glades along the creek yonder. But we talked with determined cheerfulness. Not for a moment would we admit that I might not get the job I had come seeking. I was desperately determined I should get it, though this was a time when every school had a score of applicants for every position.

The road became precipitous and as a loose rock bounded from my foot a dog barked not far away, drowning the distant pot-racking of guineas.

Sally said, "There's a boy yonder by the creek."

I expected to see a fisherman, but the boy was just lying on the bank in the shade of a huge willow which had been washed half out of the earth. He spoke fiercely to the brown mongrel and caught it by the scruff as it slunk to him.

"Maybe," Sally suggested, "that's one of your pupils. He doesn't look so dangerous."

Our friend the mail carrier had regaled us on the drive down with a vast body of lore concerning country teachers who had been put to flight with barrages of ink bottles, sweet potatoes from lunch buckets, and such similar ammunition by the grown boys who, far behind their years, were more interested in the lark of breaking up the school than in learning their lessons.

I wasn't too happy at the thought of teaching an eight-grade school in a one room building, anyway, when my ambition—and preparation—was to teach in at least a junior college. But necessity does not recognize ambition. I half suspected that I was being needled, rather than simply warned and prepared by these dour yarns, and I protested that I foresaw no difficulty.

The mail carrier was unimpressed. "Way to do," he confided, "is kind of notice which of the big tough boys the others is lookin' to the first mornin' as ringleader. First little ol' thing he does to try you prob'ly won't be nothin' you can really put your finger on—but don't wait. Your school will stand or fall on your discipline. I was layin' for an ol' boy my first mornin' as teacher when I was sixteen year old. I pertended I wasn't even lookin' at him, but he knowed I was an' he cut a shine. I had a wooden-backed eraser in my hand. I was 'feared to th'ow it at his head lest he'd dodge an' somebody else would get it. But I caught him in the shoulder an' knocked him into the aisle. . . ."

He shook his head reminiscently. "I never said a blessed word 'cepting for the first reader class to bring their books to the rostrum—an' that boy turned out to be my best scholar. 'Minds me of a girl cousin of mine that taken a country school. Teacher'd been run off three year hand-runnin'. First mornin' she taken her books out of the satchel along with a hog stickin' knife. Laid it on her desk and said, 'School will come to order.' It did. Big boys all went home after a day or two. She married one of 'em later, an' they still laugh about it. . . ."

As Sally remarked, this boy didn't look particularly dangerous.

Squatting on the sand by the dog he eyed us stolidly through the fringe of tow hair which came down so far he had to tilt his head slightly back. He didn't look to be yet twelve. His overalls, discounting the dirt, were faded out blue-white. The single gallus was over a dark brown shoulder; he obviously wore nothing else at all.

Reaching the sandy flat that led to the water I said, "Hello, son. That creek looks nice and cool."

For a moment I thought he was going to say he wasn't my son, or something of the kind. He didn't. He said, "Hit's not so bad. I been in four times today." He added reassuringly, though with dignity and reserve, "This here dog won't hurt you all less'n I say fer 'im to. He jist likes to skeer folks."

Together we passed on the weather and the withered crops and he showed us a "red horse" swimming among the roots of the willow. We learned that it wasn't worth wasting bait on them today because they wouldn't bite.

"Course," he explained, "I could muddy up the water by threshin' around with a limb up there where it's shallow and they'd think we'd had a rain an' then they'd bite, but don't seem hardly like that there would be fair."

He was obviously burning with curiosity concerning us and after a time he said, "If you all was hankerin' to go swimmin' I could go some'res else if'n you ain't got yore suits."

I said, "That hole doesn't look quite large enough for two grown people."

"Hit's a right good hole," he defended. "Sandy bottom, no mud. They have baptizin's here."

"As a matter of fact," I told him, "we're on our way to Charley Helms's place. I wonder if you could tell us the shortest way from here?"

He brightened. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "You aimin' to put in fer the school?"

I admitted I had some such intention.

"Who's yore kin?" he demanded. And when I confessed I was

kin to no one around here he shook his head. "Yo're awastin' time, less'n you got kin." His pale blue eyes showed his stolid, self-reliant Anglo-Saxon heritage. Probably, I thought, his great- or great-great-grandparents had come to these hills from Virginia or Georgia and settled down, eventually making him kin to half or more of the people he knew. And he also showed a feeling of superiority and perhaps even a bit of pity at our ignorance.

"Besides," he went on, "Charley ain't no force around Big Piney. Don't nobody pay *him* no mind. He's jist white trash."

Brushing back wisps of her long, dark bob, Sally gave me a look which I gathered was to remind me that we had decided to indulge in no gossip nor in the local politics which, as our friend the mail carrier had it by grapevine, had split Big Piney community.

She said, "We understand the road forks around here somewhere and that one of them is a shortcut through Dollar Hollow."

"Dollar Holler?" The boy pointed. "Other side of them oakbresh."

Sure enough, beyond the oak brush I could see the fork. There was but a narrow flow of water at the ford a few rods upstream from the deeper hole. We easily jumped it, and with a final wave at the boy we took the lower road. The other half wandered up a mountain like the one we had come down. A bony cow stood in the shade chewing her cud and fighting flies as she stared at us, but the calf with her was fat enough. Stunted cotton, heavy with the dust of red clayey sand—or perhaps sandy clay—made curving rows through a patch to the left. Timber was on our right—pine and oak and cedar. A blackhaw bush hung heavy with green fruit, waiting for frost, and perhaps several tons of muscadines hung from the vine which had climbed into a monstrous red oak. The hot, fine dust which slopped like water under our feet was full of the fallen fruit. We gathered some from the weeds at the side and wiped the rough, red-brown hulls clean. The juice, for the moment, helped our burn-

ing thirst. No tame grape approaches the muscadine either in toughness of hull or fineness of flavor.

The weeds were too dirty to walk in and besides were full of dewberry and sawbrier vines. But at least, here in the brassy sun, there were no gnats or midges. We noticed the surface of the cotton patch was baked hard, and climbing the fence we found the going better. The potracking of the guineas we had heard grew louder. We heard a hen or two cackling and singing. Maybe we were coming to where we could get a drink.

I hadn't been greatly reassured by our conversation with the boy, and I was no more so when, through the timber, we saw him and the dog scurrying up the hill road to our right.

"Rushing somewhere to tell the news," Sally surmised. "It may be that strangers are a novelty back in here, without even an automobile road."

It was the fact that the three directors were hopelessly deadlocked over the selection of a teacher, each holding out for his own candidate, on which circumstance we were depending to get me a hearing. Country schools had already started in some places and Big Piney was also eager to begin so that the children would be out in time for spring planting next year. Perhaps some of the directors were trying to get their relatives into the position and were thus causing the tie-up—for the school board could not elect a "relative within the third degree" of any member unless more than half the voters in the district should petition them to.

The mail carrier had said, "I'd see Charley Helms. He mentioned to me that he would consider a family man—and he hinted that he has an empty house for rent. . . . Of course, you'll have to rent from somebody."

Our consciences were not entirely easy over the proposed bit of log rolling and we didn't intend to mention the house unless Helms did.

"Maybe that's the Helmses' place now," I panted hopefully as the top of a clapboard roof, with white stone chimney, came in

sight through a big persimmon tree which drooped with yellowing fruit.

A couple of dogs—a lubberly hound pup and a collie with fur full of beggar lice and burrs—pelted down the road, greeting us with friendly enthusiasm. We were at the end of the cotton patch now, and as we climbed the fence into the road the dogs stopped barking and leaped upon us, wagging their tails.

And in the silence a querulous, fretting female voice reached us: "Oh, Lord God! That's liable to be Cap'n Jethrow!" And then, "Why don't you younguns run over to the field and pick up a batch of apples an' maybe we can sell 'em to him after he gets th'ough lookin' at the cow? An' take your time in this turrible heat. . . . You can go wadin' if you want to—but don't get in whur it's deep, an' watch out fer water moccasins—"

"Now what?" Sally whispered as we discouraged the dogs.

We could see more of the cabin now. It was of weathered gray logs, chinked many years ago with red clay which had fallen away in spots. A covered breezeway or "dogtrot" halved it. The gables—or at least the one at this end—were of lumber which still showed the ancient curving marks of the circular saw which had sliced it from the logs at some little "peckerwood" mill. The window in the gable indicated that the loft served as "the sleeping place." A sagging gallery with white stone slabs ricked together for steps went across the front.

Then back in the breezeway where they appeared to think themselves invisible we saw a very large woman and several children. We hesitated and finally stopped at the hole in the staggering fence where, judging from the remnants of hinges on what was left of a post, there had once been a gate. The woman spoke below her breath to the children without looking at them. They continued to stare at us but they spoke not a word until a little girl said, "Hyuh, George. Hyuh, Spike." She was apparently addressing the dogs which still pestered us. They paid her no attention.

I knew Sally must be as discouraged as I at the useless curbing

around the well. There was no concrete to prevent surface water pouring directly into it, under the rickety boards—nor was there even a cover which might have kept an inquisitive child from falling in. It wouldn't be safe to drink here, and that made my tongue drier than ever.

Dust gritting in my teeth, I asked, "Is this Mr. Helms's place?"

The woman edged onto the porch, the cotton-topped children inching after her. There was scarcely room for them for the litter of nail kegs, boxes, scythe, axe, corn sheller, sewing machine, and such. Putting a hand on her hip, she gave sort of a little grunt.

"Well," she said after a time, "I reckon not."

"This is Dollar Hollow, though?" Sally asked eagerly.

"Dollar Holler?" The woman came down to the barren clay yard which, by way of vegetation, sported only yellow-blooming bitterweeds among the welter of cans, bottomless tubs, scraps of old automobiles, farming gear, broken glass, and, remarkably enough, a pile of long-necked gourds. She grunted again. "I reckon 'tis. Leastways," she added bitterly, "hit's what some of them dirty varmints up and down the creek calls it, though I don't reckon they're no better'n nobody else."

Sally said, "I'm sure they're not."

The woman brightened. "Are you'ns gettin' up a meetin'? I been waitin' on a good revival to start. I'm Sister Viny Muehlbach—that there's a funny name that don't have nothin' to do with a mule's back, a name from a furrin country across the waters. . . . I'm one of the saints over to the tabernacle. Sister Gentry, some calls me, after my first man. Or jist plain Sister Viny. I ain't hard to get acquainted with. Right now I'm in a backslid condition and I'd love to see a good meetin'. I do try to be a good Christian, don't I, Arizony?"

The oldest child, a thin little girl with almost-white blond hair and wistful gray eyes, nodded mechanically, following as the woman edged on toward the gate. I noticed now that in contrast to the dirty children Sister Viny had on a freshly ironed

dress. But great circles of sweat stained it around the armpits, and it was clear to our nostrils that she was innocent of bathing in the rememberable past.

Her scant brown hair was twisted into a bun squarely on top of her head, and her face, with its sagging planes and bulges, was as earnest as her voice as she said, "I know my sins is many, Brother, but you won't find none quicker than me to repent, once you get the meetin' to goin' good. I gen'ally get re-dedicated the first night and then I can he'p pray the others through when we get them to the altar. I do personal work amongst the congregation. I been baptized twelve different times since I was first saved fifteen year or so ago, haven't I, Arizony?"

"Yes'm," Arizony agreed absently, her gaze fixed on Sally.

"Well," I said uncomfortably, aware that Sally was beginning to enjoy my being mistaken for a preacher, "I—"

"But," Sister Viny was even more earnest, "if you aim to get in with Helms an' that crowd, you won't be able to do no good around here. Come in! Come in. You'ns look hot. I'll have the younguns lug up some fresh water from the sprang. Chicken got in the well a while back an' we never knowed it till we started drawin' up feathers and the water ain't fittin' to use yet—"

We explained that we had to be back at the highway when the mail carrier returned so must hurry on. Again, she warned us against Helms.

"He'll want to do a lot of the preachin'," she declared, "if you act the least mite friendly with him. Hit's all right to fellowship with him a little, of course—"

Unwisely, hoping to break the flow, I asked if Helms was a preacher.

She gave a snorting grunt. "Oh, he claims he's called—but don't seem like they's anybody called to listen to him. He'll go traipsin' off of a Sunday maybe fifteen-twenty miles whur they have Sunday School but no preacher, and get up an' preach. And at Big Piney, every little excuse, like when we have testifyin', he

gets up to witness fer the Lord an' they ain't no hushin' him. To be honest about it, he does perty good when he really gets under the power, far as his way of preachin' goes, but you can't say he's a God-filled man because he ain't up good on his Bible. Fer instance, he's a soul-saver. I don't mean like savin' souls, but he thinks the soul is saved in the grave with the body till the Jedgment Day an' gets up with it—"

She cleared her throat and in her rather high voice she said, "What do you think of the signs of the times, Brother? I'm a student of prophecy. Do you think the time is fulfilled fer Jesus to come?"

Sally spoke seriously: "My husband is a teacher and we're seeing the directors about the school here for this winter."

Mrs. Muehlbach's deflation was pitiful to see. For a moment she seemed scarcely able to get her line of reasoning in reverse and readjusted to the facts. Shifting her broad hips she rested on her other brown foot in its tattered shoe. Her brown eyes went up and down me as she absently retied the sash which held the dress against her heavy middle. I asked how much farther it was to the Helmses'.

"Hit's a right smart little piece," she said at last. "Now, I ain't no hand to talk when I'd ort to be listenin' but you may not have no luck. Helms has done got him a teacher picked out, same as them other two has. Community's allus pullin' sideways and back'ards like a pair of cold-shouldered mules that don't want to do nothin' but get their front feet over the tongue and kick the dash out with their hind'n's. Uh—I'd ast you'n's to come on in whilst I hash up some dinner but they's a man comin' to look at a cow I got to sell and to see about some critters I'm pasturin' fer 'im, and I reckon that there is him now. . . . You younguns run get them apples like I said or I won't give you ary nickel—"

Sure enough, a man was riding up the road from the way we had come, his horse's hoofs silent in the deep dust. Before we

could see him very well for the tree limbs, he got down and started looking about his saddle girth.

The dogs galloped to meet him, barking cheerfully, and as Sally and I edged away Sister Viny added, "Not that I don't hope you do get the school, Mister. Last year they had a little ol' flippety-snippet that I don't reckon was no better'n she'd ort to abeen. Painted her face like a barn and acted uppity. Folks said she never had her mind on anything but makin' eyes at a big boy that went to her, and bawlin' out the little kids. But she boarded with Charley Helms and so naturally he wants her back. . . . Course, I ain't hintin' they might be other reasons he wants her. . . . His daddy was an ol' rounder. I wouldn't say this to jist anybody, but he got hisself more'n one bresh-colt—"

We escaped after a final regretful statement from Sister Viny that on account of this cow trade she couldn't ask us in to set a spell and "take dinner" with her.

CHAPTER II

School Director Number One

We were not particularly cheered over her view of the school situation but we each tried to hide this. After all, Helms had said he was in favor of a married man. Sally needled me a bit, suggesting that I might hold a revival if worse came to worst.

The road led steadily upward now until at last we were where we could look across a plateau which appeared to go without a break to hills a dozen or more miles away. These rolled out of sight, tier on tier, into hazy blueness. This spur of the Ozarks was just far enough north so that cotton was unprofitable. What was raised had to be hauled to gins miles away. Yet, some people still produced it as what they optimistically called a "cash crop."

To the eastward there were swamps. And once the Gulf must have laved these very hills where homesteads now stood between ridges of forest land, for almost anywhere could be picked up rough, gnarled rocks with the imprints of shells in them.

After a half hour we saw another house, half of logs, half of weatherboard which had never been painted. A pick-up, cut down from a touring car, stood in the lot with at least two flat tires. And on the door of it was the cracked and peeling legend: "Chas. Helms."

"Thank God!" Sally whispered.

No dogs gave alarm. Somewhere a hen cackled. A couple of guineas rasped hoarsely, like the filing of a saw, as they crossed

the yard, their throats fluttering with their rapid breathing. They rousted a speckled hen from her dust bath under the front porch. The hen went up the steps, hopped to the sill of the open window and down inside though it would have been more convenient for her to go through the hole in the rusty screen door.

A child said, "Here, Henny Penny." She kicked open the door, the unprotesting hen in her hands. Seeing us she halted, still holding the chicken. Then scratching one chigger-welted leg with the toes of the other foot she said, "This here is my hen."

"She looks like a nice hen," I agreed. "Your daddy home?"

By then a long, thin woman, dark like the girl, and two smaller children were at the door. She said, "Yes, Brother Helms is here. . . . Charley—" But the long-sought-for educational official was already bringing up the rear.

They all came out upon the porch. I said, "You certainly do have some nice trees in your yard." And my compliment had the advantage of being quite true. "You're Mr. Helms, I guess?"

"Reckon so," the lanky, overalled man agreed. "Or Brother Helms, as I'm gen'ally called." He had a pendulous lower lip which showed long yellow lower teeth when he forgot to keep it up. I had the uncomfortable feeling that he had instantly spotted me as a would-be teacher baiting him with insincere compliments. But he added, "Yes, sir, I reckon we got about the coolest place they is around here. Allus a breeze comin' down the draw—" And then as he apparently noticed the listless leaves, hanging as limp as the cheesecloth curtains at the windows, he added, "Well, most gen'ally, anyhow."

I couldn't seem to get the gate open. Hitching up the gallus which had slipped off a narrow shoulder, Brother Helms said, "If'n 'tain't too much trouble, jist go right there and step over the fence, if you all don't mind. I got that gate tied shet with some balin'-wahr to keep a bunch of pigs out of the yard that's been runnin' loose. We got a stock law but they's some that's above the law and ain't got no regard fer the rest of us and turns their stuff out—"

"Now, Poppy!" Mrs. Helms put in.

"I'm only sayin' what's the truth. Eight of them shoats in that bunch. Got in the sprang yestiddy and turned over the old lady's milk, and the cream bucket. Had fifty cents' worth of cream in it, too. Seems like 'cept at hog killin' time a hog is about the uselessest, ornriest, destructivest critter the Lord ever made. Next to humans."

Sally looked dubiously at the waist-high fence we were to "step over." A gunny sack had been placed over the sagging, rusty strands of barbwire which were stapled to the fence above the woven wire. This in turn was weighted to the ground in several places, where the pigs had obviously been crawling under, by heavy slabs of rock placed on sticks which were thrust through the bottom meshes. I wondered what Brother Helms would do when the animals learned to jump through the upper part of the fence.

I knew that upbrush etiquette demanded that we wait a decent period of half an hour or more before bringing up the object of our call, but time was pushing, so when at last we reached the porch I thrust out a hand and said, "Brother Helms, I'm Joe Nelson and this is my wife. I'm looking for a school to teach and I heard that if I could get you to back me I might be able to get Big Piney."

I could see that he was pleased in spite of his self-deprecating grunt. He allowed me to shake a moist, dead-fish hand.

"Don't know whur you could aheard that," he said. "They's some mighty stiff-necked people hereabouts and seems like I can't reason with 'em. Set down. Set down. . . . You any kin to the Nelsons up by the dam?"

I confessed that if I had any relatives in these parts I didn't know it, being originally from a distant state.

He said, "I was thinkin' maybe you was kin to my old lady. Her mother was a Carny and the Carnys is sort of kin to the Nelsons—though Lord knows they don't brag about it and I reckon you wouldn't either if you was kin to these Nelsons.

White trash. One of the boys is in jail now for stealin' chickens from a nigger. Not," he added hastily, "that I'm ary nigger-lover, but way I look at it, morally it ain't no different stealin' from a nigger than anybody else. Come in. Set."

Mrs. Helms made hospitable motions of dusting off a cane-bottomed chair and a tool chest with her apron. She had once been a pretty woman, I could see, but now her teeth were bad and she didn't have enough flesh and her hands were as horny as mine, which was saying something.

My one term of teaching, since Sally and I married on our college graduation day fourteen months ago, had been in a town school which paid in practically uncashable warrants. The county would accept them in taxes and all winter we had lived by selling them at whatever discount was necessary to people who had let their taxes go as long as the law allowed and had to pay off or lose their property. This was just after the day of plowed-under cotton and murdered pigs and cattle slaughtered and burned "to strengthen the market." To eke out our existence during the winter Sally had taught typing and shorthand to our landlady's daughter for our rent and I had worked for a farmer on cold and dreary Saturdays and Sundays for food to take home. Since school was out I had learned, at the hourly wage of seven and one-half cents, the mystery of using an axe, and all summer I had made posts and cut wood for him to sell. And when you work like that, for that kind of money, you don't think of prices in terms of copper and silver. You reflect that you can smoke a cigarette in less time than you can earn it—and that you have to work a longer time to get the stamp to mail a letter than you need in which to write it. . . .

Because of railroad taxes and the state equalizing fund, most country districts were better off than town ones; their warrants were honored in cash and the sixty dollars of "cash money" paid at Big Piney seemed so much, just thinking about it, that it was almost unreal. Right now I kept telling myself I had to win

Helms's vote. I told myself I would win it, but I was knocking on wood.

Brother Helms sat down on the floor, leaning back against the wall, and the "leastun" crawled upon his lap. I also sat down on the floor, leaning against a post, and Mrs. Helms and the other two children stood around, refusing the tool chest.

"We jist ain't tahrd," the girl who owned the chicken declared.

But presently, apologizing for the "severalth" time—to use a good word we learned at Big Piney—for her dress which was much smeared from tomato canning, Mrs. Helms did sit down, a girl on either side of her.

"These pestering flies!" she exclaimed. I had a feeling she was leaning over backward to "talk proper" in the presence of her company. "Aiming to rain, I reckon, they're so bad. And the Lord knows we can use it. Potatoes wasn't worth digging, and the running bugs taken the beans, and the onions rotted in the ground, and grasshoppers is taking what's left of the corn. . . . They never paid us hardly nothing for not planting no cotton this year, the government didn't, but I guess it's just as good we taken what we could get. . . . Vermalee, honey, you and Feelia come help your mommy. If you will excuse me, Miz Nelson—?"

Sally said, "Let me help, too," and in she went with them, as further apologies drifted back from Mrs. Helms.

The short-stemmed pipe on which Brother Helms sucked and blew while crumbling venomous-looking homegrown in his palm had the virtue of overcoming some of his rich personal aroma. While the little boy on his lap soberly shifted his gaze from the pipe to me and back again, Helms filled it and felt in the band of his dusty, sweat-circled black hat for a match.

"Reckon you think it's funny, seein' a man smoke that's got the call to preach," he said, "but I do it fer my health. I don't get no pleasure from it, or I wouldn't do it. It's fer my health. I believe in the Lord healin' folks, like it says over there to have the elders anoint you with oil an' lay on hands and you'll be healed.

Or ast whatsoever ye will, believing you have received, and it shall be done unto you. And gen'ally the Lord does heal us—though I never did have no luck prayin' fer a toothache. Nor my rheumatiz. It's the pains in my j'ints I smoke on account of. All the herbs and plants was put on the earth fer our use, and I reckon that includes tobacco if it's used fer medicine an' not pleasure—"

He hushed to suck fire into his pipe from the match which was about to burn down to his finger and thumb, and then he flung it away with an apology to the child for not letting him blow it out.

"Here, honey," Helms said as a chicken ran up to investigate the fragment of match stem. He felt in his hat band again. "Here's one fer you to blow out." And abruptly he asked, "You seen the other directors?"

I told him I hadn't. He allowed the little boy to take an eager puff or two on the pipe and said to me, "Keeps 'em from havin' worms. . . . Well, anything I'm fer, they ain't. And anything either one of them is fer, I know hit'll work out bad for the younguns from this side of the creek. . . . But," he scratched his back thoughtfully against the boards, "hit's high time school was startin'. We allus most usually have a summer term and a winter term but we never could get started on a summer one this time because them other directors was so hard-headed. But—s'posin' you did get the job . . . whur you aim to live?"

"Well," I said carefully, "we have our own furniture. I was hoping we could find an empty house."

"That so? Well! Now, I tell you, I been holdin' out fer the teacher we had last year. . . . Mighty nice young lady . . . Then I found out a day or two ago she's got a job. But I've kept it quiet, because the other two boys would each one been after me to be on his side. . . ."

He paused to light the pipe again and in the house I heard Sally admiring the willowware. I made myself sit still and keep quiet while Helms sucked and smacked.

"We get them plates out of oats," Mrs. Helms explained. "The

younguns get so tahrd of eatin' the things it don't look like we ever will get us a whole set, way we keep bustin' 'em up. That pet hen of Vermalee's, she flew up the other day—"

"So," Helms was saying, "I jist said, 'Lord send us a teacher—the one You want us to have,' and here you are. These thangs don't jist happen, Mr. Nelson. With the Lord there ain't no accidents. I wouldn't be atall surprised if I decided to be fer you. . . . Got you ary c'tificate? Not that I'd give a dime fer a truck load of them degrees an' such but you got to be qualified or I could get th'owed in the pen for hahrin' you to—"

He took my certificate which I had earned at a county examination. My state certificate for teaching high school history was worthless for a country district eight-grade school—and it had been a tough, grinding business to re-learn all my grade school history and geography and how many shingles it takes for a house with so many gables of a certain size.

But I had gone on the theory that one could learn anything if it meant receiving cashable warrants. I didn't know that it was customary to take the county examination in one or two subjects at the first examination and one or two at the next, and the rest the third. I took all eight the same day instead of over the two-month period. I was just as surprised as the county superintendent when I came out with an average grade of ninety-eight plus. The highest, he said, that had ever been recorded in the county.

But Brother Helms didn't seem impressed. I didn't know at the time that his sole ability in the reading and writing line was to sign or recognize (if printed) his name.

"Looks all right," he decided. "Uh—you a good Christian man, Mr. Nelson? Yore woman a Christian?"

"Well," I said, "we try to be."

"Can you teach Sunday School?"

I was pretty sure I could but he didn't seem to be listening.

"As it happens," he said, "I been thinkin' of rentin' this here other house. To tell the God's truth it ain't so fancy—but then

hit's the only empty house in the dee-strict they is. Oh, they's several places bein' used for hay barns an' sech-like but you wouldn't want them. . . ." He shot me a series of quick glances. "This mornin' the ol' lady dropped her dish-rag three times hand-runnin' and she said they was sure somebody comin' an' she went an' killed a hen. I said, 'Mommy, I bet it's our teacher, comin' to rent that there house. . . .' Tell you what—" he became confiding and earnest—"seein' as it's you, I'd let you have that there house for seven and a half a month, an' let you run yore cow in the pasture free."

I was so relieved to realize that I had won one vote that before I could accept, Helms nervously said, "Well—what about six then?"

It was what we were paying in town, where we had a few advantages we hardly expected to find out here. It didn't occur to me until later that he scarcely dreamed of getting even five—or that I should have looked at the house and perhaps bargained a bit.

I nodded. Elated and triumphant, he called, "Mommy! I've got us a teacher! Mr. Nelson's aimin' to rent that house!"

CHAPTER III

I Get the Job

Sally and I were not feeling quite so high as the Helmses as we ate with them in the sweltering kitchen. We knew that we still had to get the vote of another director and that even a promised school contract is no good until it is signed. Yet the Helmses seemed to consider the whole thing done. I realized now that the rent money meant about as much to them as the school salary would to us.

The cane-bottomed chair was brought in for Sally. The rest of us had tomato crates—boxes made of slats, each of which held a bushel—and Helms explained that a couple of years before he had contracted to raise tomatoes for the now-defunct "factory" (the cannery) but that he fertilized his plant bed with bone meal and dogs destroyed it, digging for the bones.

"Spent all that money," he mourned, "even to gettin' my crates to haul to the factory, an' it turned out to be a good year. Folks made a hunderd dollars an acre off'n t'maters that year—"

"Brother Helms was so discouraged he never tried again," Mrs. Helms explained. "You all call for what you can't reach."

She apologized for each thing on the table, and Feelia gave special attention to me and Sally with the "bresh"—a limb with the leaves on it—with which she shooed flies from the table. By some miracle, I suspect, the dumplings were good. Everything else indicated that Mrs. Helms was an exponent of the school of

cookery which contends that if you put enough grease in anything it is bound to be fine. This was bacon grease, to boot.

"Soon as we get through eatin'," Mrs. Helms told Sally, "I want to show you the shoes I'm aimin' to get the children out of the first rent money. . . . Vermalee, honey, run get Mommy the Roebuck sale book. I kicked it back under the bed the other day when I seen Cap'n Jethrow coming. That's the storekeeper. He shuts off your credit if he catches you trading out of the catalog. Says, 'Why, no'm, Miz Helms, don't reckon I can let you have that on the books, long as you've got cash money.' And when I say I don't have it he says, 'Why, I seen a package from Monkey Ward in the mail man's car that had your name on it, so you must have cash.' So I have my packages come to my sister over by the dam and we sneak 'em home when we go to visit her of a Sunday. But whenever we're mad at Jethrow, we jist order plain out. Send off on Tuesday. That way the package comes on Thursday. We allus go to the box over on the highway on Thursday anyhow because that's when the paper comes."

It was quite a relief to finish the meal and get back to the comparative coolness outside. Brother Helms stated that as soon as we got the tires pumped up he would take us to see the other directors in his "otto." The tires didn't have holes in them, he explained. The air just kind of seeped out.

Since he understood better than I just how the faulty hose connection had to be pressed against the valve stem and held there to get the air where we wanted it, the more strenuous labor of pumping fell to me while he did the brain work. We then pushed the pick-up out the lot gate. The three of us got in and coasted down the long slope. The car shuddered and jumped as he put it into gear, and then smoke poured from the hood and up through the floorboard as the engine roared into life.

"I allus warm her up good at first," Brother Helms explained, "and after that I cut her off goin' down hills to save gas."

It appeared that we were going back the way we had come but presently he turned off. We lurched and jolted fearfully

along. What had looked like a great, rolling valley was not so rolling as one crossed it. It was full of steepnesses. We skirted deep gullies which ran down into dark hollows. We crossed little bridges, narrow and shaky. It was dizzying to look down at our feet, for the floor board was partly missing and the road rushed by just beneath.

We passed several neat farmsteads with houses which had once been painted and we saw some good stock. Presently a man on horseback sidled out of the road to let us pass.

Sally said, "Why, isn't that the man who was coming to Mrs. Muehlbach's?"

Helms grinned, interested. "Have a sack of flour 'hind his saddle? . . . Howdy, Cap'n!" He waved as we passed, and sure enough, there was flour dust on the horse's rump. The rider peered at us over a bristly red mustache and as we rolled on Helms said, "He ain't no captain. That's jist kind of a nickname."

"What was the sack of flour for?" Sally broke in.

Helms grinned. "Why, Jethrow keeps a few critters at Viny's place to graze. Ever' time he comes by he brings a sack of flour —to pay his pasture rent, they say."

I was beginning to get an inkling and I supposed, from her stillness, that Sally was too, until presently she said, "Dollar Holler—do they call it that because it rhymes?"

Uncomfortably, Helms said, "Well'm—could be. . . . Viny, she'll be sort of a neighbor of you all's. But she won't cause you no bother. Course, she's sort of a scandal—not that I'm blackguardin' her—for quick as we have a meetin' you'll hear her say as much. She allus makes a new start and runs off old Pete Muehlbach that hangs around her place. He chores when he's there and gets up wood and steals hogs off the range for winter meat and so on, and he's handy to her, so pretty soon she backslides and lets him come back. Then the county welfare, they cut off the money fer the children—an' the outfit lives lean till they can get onto the regular relief, which o' course takes

a while an' then you have to go through a lot of red tape 'fore you can draw yore groceries. . . . But what I was sayin' about Pete Muehlbach, looks like he's left the country fer good this time—"

The car coughed and spluttered to a stop halfway up a hill. Brother Helms unconcernedly put the gear in reverse in lieu of an emergency brake and swung his feet over the door and slid out. From the back he took a bucket, bent into a spout at one side, and from the bucket he took a gray syringe tube.

"This here ol' tube is about frazzled out," he informed us, thumbing down the loose ends of several pieces of tape around it. "Gas eats rubber up. . . . Reckon I'll have to trouble you all to get out. Wait'll I un-wahr that door. Kind of a sleight to it."

He came and unhooked the wire that held our door closed. We got out, careful of our clothing on the springs which had worked up through the old quilt folded over the remains of the cushion. He took the cushion out.

"My feed line is kind of clogged up," he explained, unscrewing the gas tank cap, "so I have to stop ever' once in a while and sipher out some gas to pour in the little tank under the hood to get the suption started up again. I been aimin' to really clean this ol' tank out but seems like I been so busy I don't get around to it. Plumb forget it till I start to drive some'res."

The lid was stuck. He tapped it with a rock until it loosened and then, squatting, he sucked gasoline through the tube. After numerous twistings and turnings of the thing to cramp the leaks in the rubber, so they wouldn't get air, he started a flow. Spitting again and again, he wiped his mouth on his shoulder.

"That stuff kind of blisters yore mouth and face," he informed us. "Don't like to let none of it go on down. Eats the linin' out of a body's stomach—and if you get enough of it, hit'll kill you."

The hot engine fried and crackled and gurgled and steamed, and Sally pushed her hair back from her ears as we exchanged grave looks behind Brother Helms's blackly wet back. But we

were feeling cheerful enough about things to grin at each other. She had scrimped and cut corners and done wonderfully well keeping up the front that is required of a schoolteacher's wife whether he is paid or not—and just now she was worked down far too thin from her garden which she had made in spite of the drouth by carrying water, and from her canning. I was thinking we'd be borrowing Mrs. Helms's catalog as soon as we received our first pay. Sally needed lots of things.

"Now, you take Uncle Johnny Haskins," Helms rattled on, "that owned this house I'm lettin' you have. He et the linin' out of his'n with red pepper and bad whisky. He really loved red pepper. He was in the bootleggin' business and when he got so drunk he didn't know what he was doin' he'd drink his sellin' liquor. He allus eked it out by throwin' in a lot of wood-ash lye and iodine to make it strong and hot and have a good color, and then he'd put the water to it to fill up the fruit jars—"

The siphon tube abruptly got some air and he had to go through the ritual of getting the trickle started again. At long last, as we were rolling again, Helms broke off his steady gabble to tell us that we were approaching Caldwell's place. This was a more pretentious house than we had seen so far. Everything was spic and span, the two-story white house had nice curtains at the windows, and the fences were new and in good order.

"Mighty pretty little cow yonder," Helms observed. "Caldwell has got about as good a set of milk critters as you'll find around here. You all got a cow?"

I told him we hadn't.

"Well," he stated, "man'd sure ort to have a cow. I'd be glad to sell you one, but here you done rented my house an' they'd be talk if you bought yore cow off'n me, too. . . . Now, I won't be s'prised if Caldwell decides to vote fer you when he sees I jist don't aim to vote fer his man. He wants to get school started, and he don't want that woman Kincaid is pullin' fer—kind of a cousin of Kincaid's, she is, and this man Caldwell's got picked out is a cousin of his woman's, an' neither one of 'em can vote

fer their own kin because they can't get enough names on the petition. Anyhow, wouldn't hurt to at least price Caldwell's cows."

Before I could explain that I'd rather just try to get the job on the merits of my credentials, he pulled up before the white-paling yard gate. A big red coon hound raised his head from his paws on the concrete porch and barked hoarsely without rising. A woman hanging clothes on the line looked at us from under the broad eaves of her pink bonnet.

Brother Helms said, "Evenin', Miz Caldwell. How you all?"

Here may be as good a place as any to say that in the hills "evening" is the time from noon until supper, and after that, in summer, the time from then until dark might be referred to by such a term as "late evening," while from darkness on is "night." One plans to do things "tonight" rather than "this evening" if he means, roughly, from suppertime on. Outlanders sometimes get their appointments sadly mixed by not understanding this.

And perhaps the term "you all" should be explained a bit. When Brother Helms asked, "How you all?" he was not thinking or speaking of just Mrs. Caldwell, but of her and her household. The term is plural and never under any circumstance singular; it is here that radio comedians and Northern writers, doing a sharecropper novel after three weeks' residence in the South, most quickly expose themselves. The Ozark hillman may also use the plural, "you'ns," instead of "you all," but if he has been brought up to say the one term he never uses the other—except to mock or make fun of someone using the less-familiar term in his particular neighborhood. The Missouri and North Arkansas Ozarkian is inclined to "you'ns," which more or less disappears as one drifts southward.

Now Mrs. Caldwell said, "We're right fairly, thank you," but she was not cordial. "How're you all?"

"Fairly. Fairly. Where's Mr. Caldwell at?"

A tall, spare man in new overalls came up out of a concrete

cellar and ducked under the clothes, and as we went into the yard, approaching him, he smelled of apples. He was clean shaven and his brown eyes were alert.

"Been puttin' a few windfalls in the cellar," he said. "And we ground a little cider, too. . . . Lots of rain on your side the creek, Charley?"

Brother Helms raised his long, lower lip as he grinned. "Washin' us away."

It appeared that no introductions would be forthcoming from him, and as Mrs. Caldwell approached I told them who we were.

Caldwell's hand was powerful, for all that he appeared to be above sixty. He didn't make a point of bone cracking. It just came natural to him.

"Schoolteacher?" he asked.

He looked at my certificate and read my letters of recommendation in a semi-audible whisper for an interminable ten minutes after we took chairs on the porch.

Finally in a half-apologetic, half-business-like way, he said, "Well, Mr. Nelson, I guess I'd as good to speak plain. These papers look good if I knew I could put any dependence in them. I guess the certificate's all right, of course, though I don't hold with a lot of stuff they teach nowadays. But your letters—well, we've hired teachers with letters just as good, and they never kept no order, or they let the scholars go out and play too much, or somethin' else was wrong. I taught school for eighteen years and I sort of know the ins and outs of all this recommendation business. . . . If you're so good, why didn't they hire you back where you been teaching?"

I explained the money situation and pointed out that one of the letters mentioned I had a job waiting for me at my old school if I wanted it. He took another long time to verify that.

He grunted a few times to himself. "Think you can handle the di-scipline?" he asked. "I'm strong for order in the school. . . . Course, no need to ask a teacher that. They always say they can—"

I had a feeling that Helms was going to mention a cow, and I pondered how best to stop him without hurting his feelings.

Caldwell said, "Well—I reckon Charley is for you or he wouldn't have brought you over. I've got me a good teacher picked out, but I don't guess there's any chance for him, and I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Mr. Nelson. I'm going to vote for you—and if I catch you favoring my kids just because I'm a director—or anybody else's for any other reason—you won't need to ask me for the school back next year."

I could scarcely believe the deed was accomplished. Giving me no time for thanks, he went on: "I believe in bein' plain and having an understanding beforehand, but I don't want any promises about how you're going to teach us a good school because either you will or you won't and promises won't make any difference. Mama, bring out the cider—"

His manner changed all at once. He said pridefully, with the air of a dog dragging in a new pup to be admired: "Got us a new icebox to go with our light plant last week. You folks care for cold sweet cider?"

CHAPTER IV

We Move to Big Piney

As we drank the cider, we saw half a dozen children coming across the pasture. I was a little confused as some started shouting, "Hello, Gran'ma," and others, "Hello, Mama!" It turned out that some of these youngsters were Caldwell's grandchildren through the children of his first wife. A widower, he had married the present woman when she came to Big Piney to teach, and had raised a second batch of children after his first ones were grown.

And, in the group, was the boy we had met at the creek, along with the mongrel dog. He now wore a shirt and clean overalls, and his hair was combed out of his eyes. He was a grandson, it turned out, and he grinned companionably at us. We didn't know then that he was considered "a little odd." He stood aloof as the other children sat down along the edge of the porch and drank their cider. Presently he seemed pleased to be given the errand to go tell the third board member that a meeting was being called for two o'clock on Caldwell's front porch.

"We'd go there," Caldwell explained, "but it'd just put you out of your way, and he won't be at home anyhow."

He returned with the boy, Clyde, though, and as we saw them coming I also noticed Caldwell's cows coming to drink at the windmill trough in the lot. They were beautiful animals—spotted Jerseys.

"Critters have to be really thirsty to come down in noon heat

to drink," Caldwell observed, but his words were mostly to make sure that I saw the animals. When I asked what he would take for one he looked as if I were trying to buy one of his children—or the big hound.

Then, grinning a little sheepishly, he said, "Well, I'm such a fool about them cows I don't guess I could set a price that would interest you. They fill the cream can right on up and we aim to keep 'em. . . ."

It turned out that Kincaid was the secretary of the board. He had brought his book of minutes. He was a young man, dark hair shaggy, face stubbled, and he seemed greatly upset. To my surprise, it turned out further that Helms was the president of the board—I learned later that he and Kincaid had agreed between them to vote for themselves and for each other when the board elected its officers—and he promptly said, "Howdy, Frank. Meet the new teacher. Hope you'll make it unanimous. Mr. Nelson, this here is Mr. Kincaid."

Caldwell said, "You'll have to call the meeting to order, Charley, so we can transact legal business."

Brother Helms said, "All right. Meetin'll come to order. All of them in favor of Joe Nelson fer teacher, say aye."

I couldn't tell whether Kincaid said anything or not, but when Helms said, "Them agin him, same sign," he was silent.

Five minutes later I had my contract. Kincaid left without ever having actually spoken to me, and I felt bad pondering this as Helms obligingly drove us to the crossroads to catch our ride home. He was nonplussed at Caldwell's failure to hook me a good stiff price for a cow.

"Well," he said as we stopped to "sipher" out more gas to get the "suption" going again, "like I mentioned, I got a mighty nice little heifer with her first calf I'll sell you worth the money—an' give you time to pay fer her, too."

And when we finally left him: "Be lookin' fer you tomorrow. . . . Ol' lady and Vermalee will redd that house for you—an' we'll spread the word that school starts Monday."

All we had to do now was to find someone who would move us on a Sunday. . . .

Helms had shown us the road to turn off to reach the house he had rented us, and he had shown us the building from a distance—two log rooms, two built on with lumber, and, Helms declared, all nicely finished inside with tongue-and-groove pine, with paper in two of the rooms.

The mail carrier's brother owned a truck of sorts; we gave him what was left of Sally's garden and promised to send him three dollars cash out of my first pay for moving us. When we pulled into the yard of our new home a fog of dirt was coming out a window. More than a fog. It was being shoveled out.

Vermalee was doing the shoveling and presently she realized that we had arrived. It turned out that she was here alone, and was shoveling sheep manure out of one of the rooms where the animals had been stabled.

She tried to be casual about this. Her greeting was, "Mommy wasn't hardly able to get around today and Poppy went to meetin' or we would done ahad this done."

I said, "Isn't that sheep manure, Vermalee?"

She nodded in a plagued sort of way, not looking at me. "But," she brightened, "hit's jist like rabbit pills. Ain't like as if cows'd got in here. You'd really have sump'n to do then."

The "pills" had dried and gone to powder, and it blew in choking brown clouds as Vermalee heaved another shovelful out the window. The truck driver was the only amused person on the scene.

I said, "Vermalee, you can stop now. Go home and tell your father that I rented a house from him—not a barn—and that we'll have to get another place to live."

She wiped an arm across her face which was already smeared with sweat and dirt. Her stricken eyes weakened my resolution. Her lips trembled. She quavered, "Mommy's done got the first month's order wrote out."

Abruptly she dropped the shovel. She said, "I'll fetch Poppy."

She scrambled out the low window, which I discovered now was not only glassless but sashless, and pelted away at top speed up the slope of the brushy pasture.

Sally said, "Now what? Why didn't we have the gumption to look at the place first?"

We stood around wiping sweat and trying to decide whether to put our things in the house so the trucker could go home or to keep them in the truck while we house-hunted.

"I just have a feeling," Sally said, "that if we ever unload them here we'll be stuck."

I had the same feeling. Gloomily we looked things over. The sheep had been confined to one room. As Helms had said, two of the rooms had been papered. In one, this was done with thick, gray insulation paper which had been tacked up. It now sagged from wall and ceiling. In another room newspapers and sheets from magazines had been pasted to the wood. The dates were 1923 and 1925—the latter where the job had perhaps been finished after a delay, or where a repapering job had been started and presently stopped.

Presently we heard Vermalee shouting, "Poppy! Poppy!" somewhere in the distance. There followed a long spate of unintelligible anguish. We didn't know it then, but it was less than a half mile across country to the Helms place, though four or five times that by road. Soon we saw the whole family streaming down through the brush. They were hot and panting. Mrs. Helms was worried, and she was embarrassed about the house.

"Oh, Lord," she kept groaning to herself. And she explained: "I had a knitting pain in my side this mornin' till I couldn't hardly stand up or I'd done tended to this. Charley, you ortn't to let them sheep do this!"

Helms still had on his clean Sunday overalls he'd worn to meeting. Bluffly he said, "If things ain't right, I shore aim to make 'em right. I'll treat you jist like I'd want you to treat me, Mr. Nelson."

He professed great amazement when he surveyed the room.

"Well, to tell you the truth about it," he declared, "I did see a sheep or two lookin' out the winder when I come along one day, but I never thought about 'em all comin' in like this and *livin'* here—not all of 'em. . . . The crazy, blattin', cussed critters. Nothin' ornrier'n a sheep when he sets his mind to it. Somebody taken out some of the sashes—though I got some I can put right in here—and I reckon the sheep jist jumped in. . . . Now, I'll tell you what. Either we'll get in and he'p you all clean this up, or if you want to we'll swap houses with you. Time you could get up there with the truck we could about have our stuff set out in the yard—"

It was obvious that Mrs. Helms was flabbergasted by this idea. She said, "Why, our whole married life, we lived in that one place—"

Sally was looking at the monstrous elms and burr oaks in the yard and along the branch over in the pasture. It was really a beautiful home site—if you could see past the dilapidated fences and the old cans and trash kicking around, and the sagging barn and sheds. As a matter of fact, the dried manure had very little odor and what there was was suggestive of the earthy smell in deep, shady woods. It was preferable to the smell of old dish water and cabbage and frying fat meat at the Helmses' home—a smell that stays behind after the people are gone.

Sally glanced at me. Seeing how the wind blew, knowing as well as we that we wouldn't take his home after what his wife had said, Brother Helms exclaimed, "Well, le's tie into this. We can give her a good cleanin' before you know it, and this time tomorrow you can't tell a thing's ever happened. You can even slap a little paint onto the floor if you want to sometime, Brother Nelson. Uncle Johnny won't care—"

"Uncle Johnny?" I repeated.

"Shore. Didn't I tell you?" Brother Helms was surprised. "This is his place. I jist rent it from him. . . ."

Sally was busy making a bargain of her own. She had already discovered the barn had manure in it many years old—more than we could use on a garden—and she cannily asked Brother

Helms when he could get that load of sheep manure hauled away from our window.

"I'll want it moved by tonight," she stated. "Or if you want to give it to me, I'll have it moved."

His relief was mighty. So our trucker hauled a valuable load of fertilizer home with him, promising that if he got as much as five dollars out of it, to pay for his time and trouble, we would owe him nothing else.

It was dark when the Helmses helped us lug in the last of our furniture from the yard and place it upon the damp pine boards, scrubbed white and softly splintery with lye soap. And, much to our amazement, no one—at least, not ourselves—would have guessed a sheep had ever been in the house. Brother Helms promised to come back next afternoon, when the floors should be thoroughly dry, to help put down our linoleum and our front room rug. Our things, nicer than we could have afforded, had been given us by our families as wedding presents. The Helmses admired them vocally until we were embarrassed, and Mrs. Helms was eager to come see the "parlor rug" when it was on the floor. She had partly unrolled it on the grass to examine its colors.

They gave us an urgent invitation to go home and eat supper with them and stay all night but we declined with thanks. They took out against the afterglow to get their milking done—"if the ol' cows has come up, or if we can hear the bells so's we can find 'em."

We were tired. We sat on the rickety front steps while water heated for the coffee.

"I feel this is home," Sally murmured.

I felt so too. Katydids sang in the big trees. Across the road someone's stock came to the spring that ran there. It was a quiet and peaceful time with no other house, no other light, in sight. We sat holding hands until the kettle sang on our little wood range. . . .

CHAPTER V

Ghosts in the Night

For our bedroom we had chosen the room where the sheep had been staying. This was on the north side and theoretically would be cooler in summer. We hadn't slept much for two nights—night before last for thinking of our trip to see the directors, and last night for getting ready to move. But in spite of our weariness we couldn't seem to drop off tonight, either.

We had a great sense of achievement. In a time when so many of our friends were depending on government projects for a living, and in a community where to half or more of the people a ten dollar bill looked as big as the national debt, we felt we were the blessed of the gods.

Eight months of teaching at sixty dollars a month was four hundred and eighty dollars—and twenty weeks of the year were left in which a man might get work during the days when farmers were rushed, trying to harvest barley, wheat, and oats and at the same time cultivate their young corn. . . . And then there was threshing, and the first cutting of hay, and the prodigious labor which went with putting it up. Weeks during which I might earn a couple of shoats for our winter's meat, and a calf or two, and when I might swap work to get some plowing done for raising fodder for our own cow. . . .

Sally said, "Would you be afraid for us to have a baby now?"

"Me afraid? You're the one who would have to do the having, after all."

"If we keep putting it off," she said, "we won't be any younger —and aren't things looking up for us?"

"Well," I said, "I'd like it fine. When—?"

"Along about the last day of school, I'd judge," she answered dryly. "That's why I've been scared to death these last two or three days that we might not get a decent job. . . . Of course, it may be a false alarm—"

A nice breeze came through our screenless, sashless windows. We drowsed as thunder growled in the southwest, and then we slept. A most unearthly, clattering disturbance woke us. I saw something white. I'd always claimed I should like to see a ghost and once I had stayed all night in a "haunted house" to see one —but now that one was actually here it wasn't so funny.

"What on earth—?" Sally cried.

Just then, with a loud blat, another ghost sailed in through the window. Had we spoken quietly, everything might have gone well but we frightened the creatures and we had a merry time of it for four or five minutes. They charged hither and yon as we chased them—upon the bed, knocking against chairs, dashing into the other rooms. Apparently they couldn't see the open, outer doors and windows. In the yard all their mates baa-baa-baaed insanely.

Craftily, sweetly, though we were boiling with murderous impulses, we got the two varmints back into the bedroom after blowing out the lamp which seemed only to confuse them. We closed the doors. Little by little we inched them to the window. Just as we thought they would go out, they leaped upon the bed again and off at the other side.

"Oh, dear God!" Sally said.

I don't remember just what I said.

It was another interminable time before we got them back to the window. Now Sally was on the bed. The brutes stood look-

ing out at the shadows which ran as broken clouds chased before the moon. I could take no more. I caught the nearest sheep under the brisket and around the breech and as she trampled my feet with her sharp hoofs I heaved her headforemost out the window. I turned to the other.

"Nice sheepy!" I wheedled. "Nice—"

With a dash, the thing bounded past me and dived after its mate. Blaating steadily, they ran off into the darkness to find the rest of the flock which had vanished. I jammed chairs into the windows, and we went back to bed.

"Are you all right?" I asked Sally.

She was already in a good humor. "I'm cold, is all! Snuggle up here, Brother Nelson!"

The next thing we knew rain was blowing and the rumbling thunder had turned into a storm. Mrs. Helms's predicted break in the drouth had come. The rain was whipping everywhere through the window beside the bed and at the one near the foot. Shivering, we dried off and opened out the divan for the rest of the night. We were finally sleeping again when we were brought to by a great jangling of bells and running of cattle. It was daylight. Out the window I saw half a dozen cows galloping around the yard ahead of Vermalee and Feelia. The next minute they clattered off across the pasture for home.

Sally said, "Anything you say will be used against you."

But I wasn't talking.

I had gallantly insisted to Sally the night before that this morning her breakfast should be served her in bed but it was already more than a full hour past our get-up time and, even as I, she felt we were "wasting daylight." Besides, she said, as she rattled the stovelids, she wasn't going to be one of these women who pamper themselves around with morning sickness. She had studied all about it in Motherhood and Child Care at college, in which they borrowed the baby of one of the lady professors and bathed it, and Miss Colvey, the instructor, said that morning sickness was

simply a matter of psychology, rooted in modern woman's instinctive resentment that she had to be the sole childbearer of the race.

"The expectant father," Sally explained as we ate, "is normally—" She hushed. She was a little green around the gills. "I—I don't think I'm very hungry," she said.

Grimly, as I carried the damp mattress out where the sun could hit it, I promised myself that this afternoon I would prop up the yard fence enough to keep the cattle and sheep away from the house. Tomorrow I would start making fence posts to do the job right, for we realized that the only repairs which would be done around here were those we might do ourselves.

Except for the missing windows. Charley Helms was going to install the ones he had promised. We knew he was going to; he wasn't going to get his first month's rent, for which he had hinted last night, until the windows were in—and Mommy wanted to send off the order today.

Dresses and school shoes for the girls. Dresses, fifty-nine cents each, shoes a dollar and thirty-nine. ("Hit pays to get good all-leather whilst a body is at it. No savin' to scrimp on shoe money.") And there would overalls for the little boy, Junior, forty-nine cents. Dress for Mommy, eighty-nine. Brother Helms had his new Sunday overalls, so they didn't yet know what to do with the rest of the six dollars.

"By bein' keerful, a body can wear his Sunday overhalls three-four months fer nice," Brother Helms had explained. "In good times, you can take 'em then fer ever' day and get new ones fer Sunday. But times like these you may have to wash 'em and keep wearin' 'em, and I don't like to have even my ever'day ones washed, much less my Sunday ones. Takes the stiffenin' out of 'em."

Presently, now, we heard what we knew must be his car starting up, half a mile away over the hill. He had told us that just about everybody turned out for the first day of school and that

he would come by and bring our windows and haul us over and help us "get acquainted around."

Sally didn't want to go to the schoolhouse but she didn't want to get the name of being "stuck up" or to upset tradition even though she needed to get her house straightened before people called. So, hoping none of the women would decide to come home with her, she left everything as was and got ready. To our surprise, Helms was alone.

"Ol' lady didn't feel like comin'," he said, clambering out and taking some old, weather-worn window sashes with small panes from the hay in the back, "and the kids cut through the woods to carry their grandma some milk."

We were afraid yesterday that Mrs. Helms was overdoing, though she had seemed to enjoy making the floor come white and seeing the dust and cobwebs come down from the brown-smoked walls and ceilings. But Helms declared she wasn't bad off.

"To tell the truth," he said as we carried the windows in, "she mostly figured she'd wait to appear in public again till she gets her new dress. Seems like womenfolks ain't satisfied if they ain't worryin' about bein' in the latest."

The windows fitted our frames so well that we were not greatly surprised when he said sheepishly, "Facts is, I was needin' some winders over home last winter—had pasteboard nailed over some that had panes busted out—and bein' as I was rentin' this place anyhow, I says to myself, 'Well, if I'm rentin' the place, I'm rentin' the winders too, ain't I? so I can use 'em where I want to.' So I come an' got 'em."

We had already swept the sheep pills out from the midnight escapade—without this evidence, it didn't seem that it had really happened—and agreed not to mention the incident, lest it prove to be a source of humor. Concerned now about Helms, Sally asked, "But what will you do for yourself?"

"Oh," he shrugged expansively, "we've got the old sashes. Glass ain't but eight cents a pane and I'll have a calf or pig to

sell that'll turn the trick by cold weather. Or maybe I'll get up a meetin' some'res. Folks most allus take up a collection for the preacher, time it's over. I'd be havin' one here right now, but seems like folks is cold and indifferent to their fate and don't take no interest in their souls. . . . Uh—of course, if somebody was to talk around about me havin' one an' get folks worked up . . ."

He looked at us hopefully. Sally said, "We'd better be going, hadn't we? Joe must be there early. . . ."

In the Ozarks, the last half of August is almost certain to bring enough rain for breaking ground and planting winter barley. Now as we jolted and jounced along it was like May and yellow-hammers and cardinals and blue buntings and jays frisked and called. The wind was uncomfortably cool on our faces. Roadside trickles were fed by wet weather springs among the cedar and pine and blackjack on the sodden slopes and ledges above us. Yesterday the ditches were dry. Tomorrow—unless the rain crows and turtledoves mourning along the creek brought another downpour—they would once more be dry except for wetness under drifts of leaves and sand.

A pair of lean post-cutters waved at us as we met them on their way to some cedar brake. Burdened with bucksaws and axes and splitting hammers—the handles black with cedar gum—and pockets sagging with wedges, they were hurrying to get in some good licks in the coolness. The posts would end up in Kansas or Iowa, and pull some local farmer through a lean period. For their own use here, men cut oak posts which far outlasted the cedar though it was not so smooth and pretty.

The moisture had already settled in the thirsty fields, where there was some sand and gravel, so that the earth was dry enough to work, and as we passed Caldwell's place he was following a heavy gray team down his first fall furrow, the streak of turned ground lying straight and black behind him. The musty smell of the dirt came to us on the wind.

Brother Helms said, "Reckon I'd ort to been plowin' this mornin' but I don't have nary plow point till I go to the store.

And like I told you yesterday, the scholars expect the board members to turn out and show a little interest, and give a little talk, and I knowed it would be up to me because Kincaid and Caldwell won't do it."

Presently we forded the creek and ground up a little rise and there we were. The building was a white one-room affair, apparently with a small entryway, and perhaps twenty by thirty-five feet over all. I was understandably eager to examine it and to see what I was going to have in the way of pupils. Four girls and two boys, the oldest perhaps nine, sat solemnly along the edge of the porch, clutching books and tablets and lunch baskets—half gallon syrup or lard pails with holes punched in the lids. A couple of older girls—thirteen or fourteen—strolled on the playground, arms around each other.

As we got out, the children along the edge of the porch jumped up and ran inside. One of the big girls cried, "You little snots better not move our stuff off the back seats!" and they started in, too, glancing as if to see whether we were amused.

Helms had already told me, when I mentioned the key, that the schoolhouse was never locked.

"We put a lock in," he said, "after we bought some fancy round-wick lamps so we could have literaries and spellin' matches on Friday night, and be able to see our song books on Sunday night. Course, ever'body knowed who we had in mind to steal 'em—not that I'm callin' any names—and one mornin' the lock was busted off and the lamps all set out here on the porch. It come to us then that nobody would steal 'em because they couldn't use 'em without gettin' caught, and it jist made 'em mad because we showed we didn't trust 'em. So we never did lock up again. It was one of them snapper night locks an' one of the teachers busted it off cause the kids kep' lockin' 'im out."

Other children could be seen and heard coming while I swept and Sally dusted the summer's accumulation of grime from windows and sills and the seats and desks. It was quite obvious from the reports of the pupils that Brother Helms was to be our only

adult visitor, and with a wry little grin at me Sally decided she would be getting back home to her work.

There were five rows of desks, six to a row. A few small ones down front for beginners were fairly new. Others had initials and designs cut deeply into the wood. Books on a desk held it by right of conquest, and there was some contention among newcomers for choice seats. There was scarcely an opportunity for me to say good morning to the children for Brother Helms was carrying on a steady monologue in my direction as I poked through the bookcase, labeled "LIBRARY," on the rostrum.

There were perhaps a hundred and fifty volumes here, from backless, ragged ones on down to others rather unworn. I was looking for desk copies of texts, but from the mixture I came up with I couldn't decide just what books were in use in the school. Likely-looking ones I placed on the table which served as the teacher's desk, or on the small one, beside the four, long, recitation benches, which held a scratched globe and dog-eared dictionary.

Suddenly I noticed the room was quiet. On the weedy playground, I saw, Brother Helms was the leading spirit in a game of "darebase." He galloped madly and daringly from one base to the next when the chance offered, and cheered the others on occasion or "tagged out" venturesome spirits who tried to slip up behind him.

I hated to stop the fun but the loud-ticking alarm clock I had brought said nine. I went to the door with the old cowbell I had found on top of the "library" and clanged it. Shouting, panting children rushed noisily in and took their seats. Several of the "big girls," their hair carefully curled and hanging to their shoulders, were more sedate. Brother Helms brought up the rear.

I counted noses. Fifteen. The oldest was perhaps sixteen. Most of them had made at least a pretense of cleanliness. Some were as well dressed as at the school where I had taught in town. Some wore shoes, some were barefoot. The boys, eight of them, wore overalls, one and all. The only children I recognized were the two Helms girls, Clyde whom we had met at the creek on

Saturday, and, vaguely, some of the little ones I had seen at Caldwell's. Nowhere did I see Sister Viny's youngsters.

A boy of perhaps eight, combed and furbished within an inch of his life, raised his hand and without waiting said, "The Kincaids ain't acomin'. They're aimin' to go to Little Piney."

Here it was—a community split over the teacher.

Helms spoke from the rear of the room, where he leaned against the wall, "I wouldn't be bothered about that, Brother Nelson—"

Suddenly I resented his being here. I had only eight months to do what I could for these children. I needed to get acquainted with them and they with me and I knew we couldn't do it properly with an audience.

I said, "In case any of you haven't heard, I'm Joe Nelson. Brother Helms wants to get to his plowing—" grins, here, and a snicker or two, which I frowned down—"but he has a few words to say, so we will hear him now."

I didn't hear a great deal that he said, but the minute he finished I walked with him to the door, shook his hand, and turned back to the room. I had a feeling that, with any encouragement, he would stay all day. On the rostrum again, I felt about as helpless as a man can feel. Just how did one teach eight grades at once?

But I somehow felt good, too. I felt that I was better prepared, so far as my academic training went, than ninety-five per cent of the country teachers in the state. Certainly Big Piney had never before had anyone with a college degree. Here was my chance to show people that training did count for more than kinship.

Daily Bible reading is obligatory here. I looked at the two big girls at the rear who were whispering and watching me to see what I might do about it.

I said, "The young lady on my left back there—what is your name?"

"Me?" she said. "Melba. Melba Crinshaw."

"You may read the Bible to us this morning, Melba," I told her.

Big Piney school had started.

CHAPTER VI

Teacher in the Doghouse

Melba, sad to say, was not a good reader. She was embarrassed, besides. I had to help her over many words. She was much relieved—though apparently resentful at me as if she felt I had known of her shortcoming and deliberately embarrassed her—when I thanked her and let her return to her seat. My thanks seemed to confuse her the more.

I had found the register in the table drawer. It was constructed to hold the record sheets for ten years and was over half full. The names were familiar to me from the gossip I had picked up in two days—names like Helms, Crinshaw, Davis, Kincaid, Masters, Caldwell, Ashton. Names from England and Scotland and Ireland.

Several hands were up.

"Yes?" I asked a blue-eyed, twelve-year-old boy.

"What's the rules of the school?"

I took a leaf from *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*—or was it *Schoolboy?*

"There are none," I told him. "Just do what you know is right."

While he digested that I nodded at a little girl. She came to the rostrum, yellow pig-tails shining. She was tiny and I wondered if this was not her first day. Shyly she said, "I got a baked sweet-'tater in my lunch bucket."

"Well!" I said. "That sounds good." As she turned back to her

seat I shook my head at those who were amused—most of whom probably also had a baked sweet-'tater in their lunch, even as I had in mine, and a golden, delicious one it was, too, with the natural sugar baked out and glazed on the crackly hull. But sweet potatoes, growing prodigiously even in bad years, were a badge of poverty because the poorest had them, and, while eatable at home, were consumed from lunch buckets with no fanfare.

The register was in a bad state. Last year's teacher had flaunted her name in it, providing the information that she was eighteen years old and a high school graduate and a holder of a third grade (the lowest) county certificate. The permanent record she had left of work done and grades earned was fragmentary. As a farewell she had written: "To next year teacher in case I do not have the school again. It is hard to say just what should be done with most of these pupils. Attendance not good. Examine. And put in grades to suit yourself."

The onus was on me. She had not jeopardized her chances for reemployment by issuing any failing grades, apparently. I asked for last year's report cards. Remarkably enough, no one had thought to bring his. I asked that names, birthdays, and present ages be put on slips of paper and brought to me. There were four first graders—two girls, two boys. I had them come to the recitation bench. Feelia Helms was basking in the light of the fact that she knew the teacher.

I wrote her name on the sheet of paper she had brought to school, spelling it in printing script: "O p h e l i a." I said, "Now, that spells Ophelia. I expect that's your real name and they call you 'Feelia' for short, don't they?" She didn't know. Her sister Vermalee looked at me suspiciously. Ophelia went to the board to practice writing her name. The little girl who brought the potato, Sue Anne Ashton, was soon beside her.

Four other children—a girl and three boys—trooped in, having belatedly heard that school was taking up today. Eventually I had a rough register made on a sheet of paper. I was bothered

about proper placement of the children. I didn't want to give anyone a feeling of inferiority. I didn't want to set the community at loggerheads with me the first day. But neither did I plan to have any child struggling constantly with work that was beyond him.

There were not enough books. That was obvious. The ones the pupils had brought were in bad shape. I was nonplussed to discover that the three who presented themselves as eighth graders—two girls and a boy—had a mixture of books which they stoutly declared were used last year by the eighth grade. Few of the texts were alike.

Something had happened to the time. It was recess. I said, "We will always leave the floor clean before each recess and noon, and before going home of an afternoon. Pick up any paper you've dropped. Any that's no good, put it in the waste basket as you go out."

Pete Caldwell, a third grader, said, "I thought we didn't aim to have no rules."

"That will just be a custom," I explained. "An easy way of keeping the house clean. You may call it a rule if you'd rather." Then I said, "Several of you broke into your morning by leaving the room. Take care of that the first thing at recess so you won't have to leave again before noon. At the end of the noon hour, we'll have a five minute bell so you can get ready to come in and go to work. All clear?"

It seemed so. We went outside. The sun was blistering now, the air steamy. Last night's coolness was forgotten. The pump was rickety but it worked without priming and soon we had water. A glass was being passed around. I said to one of the Caldwells, "Let's each bring his own glass after today and not drink after each other. That passes colds around."

"We ain't got colds," Pete explained.

"This winter you may have," I countered a little lamely.

"We don't have different glasses at home," another pupil told me. "We jist have the dipper."

"Well," I said, "we'll take that up in health class."

We wiped the iron rust from the pump handle off our hands. Little girls were gathering rocks and sticks to lay out the rooms of a playhouse. Frances and June and Melba and Martha—thirteen, fourteen, and the last two sixteen—strolled under the big trees, arm in arm, laughing and giggling. Sandra Haley wanted to stroll with them, but she was only eleven. Her figure was still a boy's; the mysteries of womanhood had obviously not begun for her. She was coldly told to play with the little girls.

The boys shouted for "darebase." I had never played this. I hadn't played with children since my own school days, and I felt self-conscious as I consented to join them. But I was soon yelling as loud as Brother Helms had been—cheering, taunting, warning by turns. Sandra was presently in the game. She had taken off her new shoes so she could run, and she was fleet and resourceful. Presently Melba, June, Frances, and Martha were also with us. I regretted it as much as anyone when we had to go panting in.

The atmosphere had subtly changed. I was no longer the strange new teacher. I belonged. Clyde gave me a friendly grin, peering at me from under his mop of hair, in remembrance of a coup by which he and I had cornered one of the girls and tagged her.

Now, all business, I said, "Every day before first recess will be arithmetic time. Every day after that until noon will be history and geography time—history one day, geography the next. The first half of the year we'll have history twice a week and the last half we'll swap around and have geography twice. All clear?"

I hoped it was to the pupils, though it certainly wasn't to me. I was just doing what the book said. I had heard old-timers, who taught in the days when a country district might turn out seventy to a hundred pupils, tell how they conducted two reading classes at once while keeping an eye on another class at the board and another doing seat work. Meanwhile, those not having classes were supposed to be studying, or perhaps one of the older

"star pupils" would be hearing another group over in one corner of the building. And in every case, those teachers—and people who received schooling under such conditions—felt that the results were good.

"Of course we had dullards," one man agreed. "They have them everywhere. But we didn't have to put up with them in school as they do now. A child who didn't do well was taken out and put to work and no one thought anything of it. Those who did go to school were kept jumping. Our school philosophy then wasn't that the teacher must keep the scholars amused. He was supposed to keep them busy. We didn't have grades in those days. We had 'classes,' divided according to the reader we were in. A scholar was in the first, second, or third reader and so on. If his folks were willing for him to go on after he finished the common branches, but couldn't afford to send him off to an academy or high school, maybe his teacher knew enough to teach him algebra or even Latin. If not, maybe the teacher would get in and study with him and when they got stuck they threshed it out together."

Now I said, "All who have geographies, begin studying the first few pages. As fast as we can, we'll call the classes. At this time every day those who haven't yet taken up geography will have reading. First graders, come to the bench. . . . Second and third, study the first page or two of your readers—"

My four first graders came up. Sue Anne, Ophelia Helms, Johnny Masters, Jim Caldwell—whose brother swore his name was Jim and not James. Sue Anne had a fairly new primer, Johnny one like it. Jim and Ophelia had old first readers of a different series. What we needed was pre-primers. I had a theory that the most important academic subject a child learned in school was how to read, and that the time to start was the first day.

The four looked at me expectantly and eagerly. I heard myself saying, "We will use these first readers, like Jim and Ophelia's, later on, but right now they would be a little hard for us. Let's

look at the picture on the first page of Sue Anne's book. Under the picture is the little boy's name. His name is—"

"Billy!" Sue Anne cried.

A sea of hands waved in the room.

"Pete?"

He looked significantly up at his two extended fingers.

"Why didn't you go at recess, Pete?"

"I think I did."

"You must not have. It was just ten minutes ago."

"Well, I forgot to."

"Go ahead."

Two other boys wanted to go and several girls.

"One at a time," I said. "Only one girl out of the room and one boy." One of the older girls—June, I thought she was—appeared distressed. I added, "Unless it's an emergency. If anyone can't wait at any time, he's to go ahead."

She fidgeted a bit and left.

Until last year, Helms told me, when the WPA built toilets, only the girls had one. Before that the boys went down into the west hollow and the teacher went into the hollow back of the schoolhouse.

"Thataway they wasn't allus a fuss bein' raised over him catchin' the kids smokin' or them catchin' him."

Noon was upon us before I was half through the period's work. I suspected my ineptitude was plain to everyone and it was making me wonder if I was cut out to be a country teacher. I was appalled at the amount of ignorance I had uncovered. Practically no one could read as he really should from his geography. And how could they learn if they couldn't read?

I said, "I see that all of you have forgotten your towels today. Bring them tomorrow. Today we can dry our hands in the air before we eat."

Several looked at their hands and said they weren't dirty or that they only washed when they ate at home—but we all lined up at the pump just the same. We divided into several groups

in the shade and ate. Sandra went off by herself. Someone said she had a banana in her new red lunch box and was afraid somebody would ask her to divide it.

These were the sweltering dog days when snakes went blind and struck at every noise near them, and when dogs went mad—"from the heat," I was told. It made no impression at all when I explained that the ancient Egyptians named these the dog days because of the conjunction of the sun and the "dog star"—the star so named by them because it showed itself in the direction of the sources of the Nile at the time of the annual flood of that river, thus, like the barking of a watchdog, warning that the inundation was on the way.

"If they had named it the 'cow star,'" I pointed out, "then we would probably call these the 'cow days.'"

They listened politely, but I saw I had changed no opinions.

Someone found a litter of butterfly wings brightening the ground at the base of a blackjack oak. Presently, some twenty feet up the trunk, we saw swarms of butterflies sucking at the juice which oozed from the tree where something—"sapsuckers," the children said—had injured the bark. And then we spied the praying mantis moving slowly toward one of the creatures which slowly opened and closed its wings in apparent enjoyment of the juice.

It appeared to sense the danger and flew. Patiently the mantis moved again. A great, murderous arm shot out. A red butterfly struggled and fought to escape the claw which had hooked it, but it was drawn to the little head on the end of the movable neck, and presently, as its juices were sucked out, it ceased its fight. . . .

It was too hot to play running games so we played "give me a wave," a form of hide and seek but less strenuous. After a while I asked Clyde to go ring the five minute bell—bell ringing being a privilege—as a signal for everyone to get ready to go in. The pump handle was blistering from the sun so that it had to be held with a wad of grass.

I did a little better on the health recitations than I had done on the morning classes. However, we did not stick to lists of cut and dried questions. The talk ranged widely from old-time shuck mattresses to straw ticks to feather beds and the picking of live geese to obtain feathers.

"They squawk a little," June admitted. "But then they're lots cooler afterward."

We decided, though, that none of us would like to have part of our hair pulled out so we would be cooler. And Martha explained how her Gran'ma Baily dyed the unbleached muslin from feed sacks. She didn't like "store dye." She used walnut hulls and other things she found in the woods and set the colors "by throwing salt and alum and stuff" into the kettle.

We spoke of lightning and "thunderbolts." Of these latter, Fritz Baily said his uncle used to "gather them up—and we still got lots kickin' 'round the barn. . . . You can tell they've really been hot." He promised to bring one. (Next morning he did—a meteorite the size of his fist.)

Meanwhile, during other classes, I kept the first graders busy learning to write their names. "Health" and "science"—which we were to study on alternate days—were not in the curriculum for the little ones, but this seemed silly to me and I was proud of the fact that I had a class for them, too. We talked about why we should have separate drinking cups. We talked about germs, but it was only lip service that was being paid. I wished desperately for a microscope. What did it mean to talk about something as far out of their ken as snow is out of a Melanesian's?

I asked, "Do you like to eat with a spoon which someone else has been using?"

Said Gerald (pronounced with a hard *G*)Ashton of the second grade: "Nope."

Hating to becloud the issue, I nevertheless said, "Let's not say 'nope' in the schoolroom. It isn't considered polite. Just say 'no.'" Obviously Gerald didn't quite see my point but I went on: "And why don't you like to?"

"It's got spit on it."

Well, now! "And doesn't the glass or dipper have spit on it when someone has had the rim of it in his mouth?"

That seemed to be a new thought. But Gerald was equal to it: "The water kind of washes it off when you stick it back in the bucket."

Vermalee was in the sixth grade and supposed to be studying, but from her seat she interrupted: "Poppy lets Junior puff on his pipe after him."

"I know," I agreed, feeling that I hadn't come off with colors flying very high. It was time for recess. Everyone looked on the floor for paper. I said, "All who have left the room since noon will study for five minutes before going out to play."

There were looks of dismay. I felt a little mean—and a little triumphant, for practically everyone had left the room during the period, usually with grins at each other over the way the new teacher was being worked.

Several had faulty memories and had to be reminded that they, too, were to stay. Those free to go did so in triumph. Frances and Melba were among those at liberty. As they reached the porch, Melba's hoarse whisper came back into the still and stricken room:

"I bet he doesn't kiss his wife because he's scared of germs."

Everyone looked at me—and joined with me in a good laugh. It occurred to me that I was punishing myself, staying with the culprits.

"When the clock says twenty-five till three," I announced, "you may come outside."

Frances and Melba looked sheepishly at me as I approached the pump. Melba, the sixteen year old, was aware that she was quite pretty. But she still didn't like me because of the Bible-reading episode.

Frances pumped. I caught a drink and said, "Thank you," gravely.

Again I had the feeling that it caused embarrassment for me to

express thanks for small favors—and I was gradually to learn that some hillmen do not express thanks, although that certainly does not mean they are ungrateful nor lacking in manners. It seems to embarrass them in the same way it would for them to be required to show a tender emotion in public.

Hesitantly Frances answered, "You're welcome."

As I started to take my glass in I was almost run over by the pupils swarming out. In a moment a game of "wood-thief" was going—but no one asked the teacher to play. The teacher was in the doghouse.

"Language and literature," I stated pontifically, "are two of the ways we have of telling our ideas to each other, and of finding out someone else's ideas. How do you suppose mankind ever learned to talk in the first place?"

Everyone waited expectantly.

"Amos?" He was thirteen, tall, thin-faced.

A shifting of feet. A shake of the head. "Don't know. . . . Reckon they didn't have to learn. Don't say nothin' about it in the Bible. In there they talked whenever they got ready."

He had me there.

Making virtue of necessity, I said, "That's the point exactly. There wasn't room to tell us every little thing, was there—such as every time they ate a meal or took a drink of water? So perhaps they did have to figure a way."

Laboriously we went through some of the suppositions concerning language development.

"Finally," I said, "as men traveled and moved about, they discovered that other people didn't talk as they themselves. And even in the same country people had different ways of talking, but usually not so different that they couldn't all understand each other." I trod easy now, for this was what I was working up to: "Is it still like that? Do you know anyone who has odd words and expressions?"

No one did.

I said, "I have noticed something very interesting. Fritz, what is the word we use to talk about a mother sheep?"

He was a little wary but he said, "Why, a yoe," the word rhyming with hoe.

I said, "I think that must be a word which has come down to us from the olden times. Places I've lived, people called them ewes. In fact, that's the commonest way."

"Oh," Fritz conceded, "I've hearn 'em called that."

I decided not to go into the "hear-hearn-heared" of Chaucer and Elizabeth and Washington just yet.

"It may be," I pointed out, "that some of us will not live all our lives right here. Some of you may go to high school and others may go away and find jobs. And a peculiar thing about language is that it must sort of fit in with the language of the people around us or they'll have the advantage of us. . . . How many of you have grandfathers or great-grandfathers, maybe, who came from Tennessee?"

Some of them had heard that their folks came from Tennessee and Georgia and Virginia. I told them their ancestors came there from England, probably, bringing their own language with them. Settling back in the hills where few travelers came because the way was hard to travel, they kept their own way of talking—and brought it with them to these mountains when they moved westerward to get more room. Again, traveling was hard; outsiders, for many years, were largely unknown and unwelcome.

"Who knows," I asked, "the song about Hugh of Lincoln?"

Two or three did.

"Your great-great-great-grandfathers and mothers—or perhaps even their grandmothers and grandfathers—brought that over the ocean from England," I said, and on the map we found the journey, and talked for a little time of the distance. "And that was an old song then," I added. "I've heard that it was sung more than five hundred years ago. Yet it hasn't been forgotten. Why?"

No answers. They were still suspicious of my motives.

"Martha, you say you know it—"

Martha—sixteen—quickly said, "Not well enough to sing it."

"Oh . . . And how did you learn it?"

"Heard my Uncle Lonnie sing it."

"And where did he learn it?"

"I don't know—from his mother, I guess, 'fore she died."

"And she?" They had the idea. I said, "It's only back in the hills, where the people settled down and stayed in one spot, that we find these interesting old songs—and it's the same with many words. For instance, some people say 'help' and some say 'holp.' Which would you guess was the way it was said in the olden times, back in England?" I gave them a hint: "Up North, for instance, the people say 'help.' "

And when Martha surmised that "holp" was the old form, I asked, "Are we going to say that's wrong just because they say something else in Chicago?"

We decided that "holp" would be wrong in Chicago, because it would be strange and people would not know what we meant, or else they would laugh at us, and since we were outnumbered we would probably have to give in to their way of talking. But here, if we wished to say "holp" we could, just as in the East if they wished to say "tomahtah" they could.

Enthusiasm was mingling with the suspicion now.

"Still, though," Clyde suggested, "hadn't we ort to get in the habit of sayin' words like in other places if they don't say 'em our way no place but here?"

Several thought that might be a good idea. At least we could practice them somewhat in accordance with the dictionary suggestions while at school. I said, "Tomorrow we'll talk about other words from the olden times." But I didn't tell them yet that one might be the Elizabethan "it" with an *h* in front of it. . . .

One sees treatises of various degrees of erudition which explain where and when the hillman used that strong old word, and the only thing wrong with those I have seen is that they go too far

or else not far enough or that the writer had no ear for speech.

One of them may say that though in beginning a sentence the hillman says "hit," in the middle of one he drops the *h*. That is both right and wrong. Another may say that the *h* is inserted after a vowel, but dropped after a final consonant in the preceding word—something like the use of "a" and "an." To a certain extent this is true—but while recognizing euphony it ignores cadence. For the slow-talking hillman may stick "hit" into a sentence at almost any point, and the fast-talking one may do so after a definite pause regardless of preceding vowels or consonants. And if ever he says "hit," he will do so at any point where he wishes to make his meaning strong and emphatic—and he will do so without regard to euphony or cadence.

Dialect, of course, is a tricky thing. A full presentation of Big Piney's would be as wearisome as that of Boston's or Harvard's. But in the final analysis it is surely as correct to say "wahr" for "wire" as to say "waw" for "war." Yet "waw" is apparently considered the finest of English by some who perhaps would be amused at the speech of a mid-Western or Eastern mountaineer.

To me a most interesting facet of the speech of the people of Big Piney and all their kin is the shifting of sounds—a process which has been going on in the Aryan languages since prehistoric times, as the Grimm Brothers proved when they showed that German might be transposed into pretty good Latin by the regular changing of the voiced stops. Yet, the great Caesar had written home a couple of millennia before to state that the language of the fierce peoples to the north was like the chattering of so many birds and unintelligible to his educated ear.

To my surprise, in following days, my pupils were as fascinated by these matters as was I. I brought them on down to the great vowel shift in English. This was, by and large, the pronouncing of vowels at a progressively higher point in the throat, and at a point nearer the tip of the tongue. One will get the general idea by intoning: *ă, ā, ä, aw,* and similar mutations of other vowels. As the vowel is pushed to a point farther ahead in the mouth, the

sound changes. It is easier to say the forward sounds, and hence the ancient Anglo-Saxon gutturals vanished.

In Big Piney the shift has continued beyond what is considered standard English, and in a point or two appears to have shifted back downward—or perhaps to have halted at a certain place while elsewhere the shift continued. These things are immediately noticed in such examples as, jist-just, whur-where, fahr-fire, wahr-wire, thank for think, drank for drink, thang for thing, p'int for point.

And there is a further shortening of words by the dropping of consonants and intermediate vowels, just as we progressively and lazily changed "hlāfweard" to "loverd" and finally to "lord." This word also fascinated the children by showing the vowel shift—and in its literal meaning of "loaf warden" or "keeper of the loaf." At Big Piney, this consonant dropping appears in such words as "he'p-help" and "th'ow-throw," just as it anciently appeared in thousands of words, such as "sign" and "frighten," in standard English. The pupils were surprised to learn that once upon a time all the letters in such words were pronounced.

They were further interested when we discussed the history of the making of dictionaries, and in the fact that I had contributed several hundred items to the new one of American English, for many years in preparation at the University of Chicago. But I didn't mention that I was picking up some choice items at Big Piney for transmission, such as: "The news was *norated* around." "He took a stick and *progued* around in the hole." That is—probed. And a most surprising one which for want of a better name I dubbed a triple progressive: "Your'n's's." Apparently it was built up gradually by those failing to recognize that the dialectical "your'n" was already possessive, added the first *z* sound, and subsequently, through some process I don't quite fathom, the second one. But there were two families at Big Piney which used the term where others said "yours," "your'n," or, at most (which is fairly common), your'n's."

And there were other interesting localisms such as "dulge"

(rhymes with bulge) for dig. Perhaps it is a corruption of "delve," for some say "delge." But there seems to be in the word also the added sense of digging for the purpose of hunting or disclosing something.

I had some long thoughts as to just how far a teacher should go in meddling with the speech of a people. Farther, I decided, in this instance, than I really liked to. Perhaps farther than I would have had any right to not many years ago. But this was no longer a people, a folk, here in Big Piney, but a segment of a nation—a segment into which the lava-flow of what we call progress was creeping.

Every outlander who might come in and brush against them would change them a little, even if he should stay and be absorbed. A mark of progress was the school bus, which two boys met at the village three miles beyond the creek—a village consisting of store-postoffice, a smithy, church, grade school, and a clump of farmers' houses—to ride to the high school in town. Other signs were Caldwell's light plant, electric refrigerator, and radio. The several automobiles roundabout. The talk of REA and "the lights" for everyone, and of a WPA farm-to-market road from the network which was lacing the region together for many miles around. And the coming of the AAA men with their moving pictures to the schoolhouse, and their speeches, and their little wheels to measure patches to see how much they were going to pay you this year "for not raisin' nary crop."

This could end in only one thing, I reasoned: the leveling of ways, the uprooting, the deep-plowing of this last seedbed of Anglo-Saxonism, sending it the way of the "sang" (ginseng) root which had already been hunted to the last one. And when that leveling should be over, the people here would be no more —but still no less—interesting than those anywhere else. The question was, when they were changed would they have any more in terms of happiness than they did now, as their children faced me in Big Piney schoolhouse?

Giving these children the example and the incentive to use

standard speech was a part of the leveling process. How far should I go? It isn't enough to say that the speech patterns of the world are set by the lazy, the ignorant, and the children, with the scholars and "the best people" tagging along half a century later.

As King Alfred did, we say "goose-geese" and "louse-lice" (he pronounced it "leese," of course, since that vowel had not yet shifted) and "mouse-mice," but we do not say "book-beek." The English peasant, yeoman, noble, and king saw enough geese and lice and mice that he pronounced these plurals often and properly. But when he said "books," weakening the plural to the common run of plurals, there was no one likely to be near who knew enough to correct him. And today the children, the lazy, and the ignorant still use words to suit themselves—ordinarily following a pattern of ease or of reasonable analogy. The rest of the world soon must follow to make itself understood by the majority. At present, "who" and "me" and "her" and "him" are often usurping the old places of "whom" and "I" and "she" and "he." It's a prissy professor of English indeed who still says, "This is me," is incorrect. Already the subjunctive strikes a jarring note on many ears. Perhaps, some day, even "lon-jer-ay" will be standard. . . .

But "jist" and "fahr" do seem a little out of step. My clear duty seemed to be to ask my "scholars" to walk with the crowd. I took the plunge. On the board, at one end where it might be left, I wrote:

INTERESTING WORDS FROM THE OLDEN TIMES
HOLP—HELP

I read it to the children. "Tomorrow," I said, "we will see if we can decide on some more words to go up there. All of us will try to think of one by then. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

Rabbits Ain't Meat

At four o'clock I was bushed. I was glad to hear the last "Good-bye, teacher," "Good-bye, Mr. Nelson." I felt as if I had been swinging a sixteen-pound hammer all day, driving fence posts. I wondered if I had accomplished anything, if anyone was leaving the schoolhouse any better or any wiser than when he came this morning.

But I had a few moments at last to think of myself, and it seemed to me a good omen that I had managed to get this job just as Sally and I learned that we were expectant parents. By the time the room was swept, I felt a little better. I was eager to get home, but when I passed Caldwell's and saw him taking his team out of the field, I stopped. He was affable.

With little preamble I asked if there were any families in the district who would be unable to buy their children proper books.

"Well," he took off his hat and wiped sweat from the band and from his forehead, "we've had that come up before. Most of 'em could, but some of the ones that's ablest would fuss about it. Others, it would work a hardship on. Books come high. Take a family with even one child and it counts up."

"Well, what about your library funds?" I asked. "Did you vote a tax for that?"

"I'm ashamed to say it, but we didn't. We wouldn't even have got enough mills voted for that sixty dollars you're getting except that the people back of me wanted the man I was for, and he

was getting sixty where he was. The Kincaids figured to put one over on us and get the sixty for their teacher who isn't any better qualified than last year's, so they voted with us on the taxes. But I didn't even mention library at the school meeting this spring. It wouldn't have done any good. . . ."

I reached home with half a dozen yarns of the day's activities to tell Sally, but I didn't get to tell them. The house was practically shut off from view by the downward-spreading branches of the great trees as I walked up the road, but I could hear the hum of a familiar voice. Gradually the words and phrases took shape. Sally had company. Mrs. Muehlbach. And I heard children playing.

A momentary silence engulfed the scene as I reached the gate. Sister Viny's bulk was jammed into one of our rockers, there on the front porch. The children paused at their task of gathering the enormous burr oak acorns, as large as black walnuts and larger, and stared at me. Four of them, all girls, from Arizona on down to the smallest who was perhaps three.

Sally called, "How was school?"

"Fine," I said. "How was housekeeping? Good evening, Mrs. Muehlbach." I didn't want to get the name of being "uppity" by saying good afternoon.

Sister Viny started fanning again with a folded newspaper. "Evenin'," she said. "I come over to he'p Sister Nelson straighten up f'm her movin'. I b'lieve in bein' neighborly an' I love to get acquainted with folks. Brung y'uns some t'mater p'eserves, too, to he'p on the cookin'—but when I got here, she done had ever'thing lookin' like Sunday, an' yore supper on the stove. Course, I'd agot here this mornin' but my man, he's been off on what you might say a business trip huntin' work these last three months an' he made it in in the night an' we set around astudyin' an' atalkin' this morning. . . ."

Before I could comment on this, she added, "That there is Pete I refer to—Mr. Muehlbach. . . . I was awonderin' would you

go name it to him about lettin' the younguns that's old enough go to school."

"Why," I said, "I—"

"Ever' year," Arizona piped up, "he sw'ars to God he'll let me go the next an' when it gets here he won't do it. Mama was aimin' to start me an' Navoma this mornin' but he said we couldn't."

"I was jist asayin' to Miz Nelson why didn't you an' her come eat supper an' stay all night with us—"

"Well," I said, "I've got to patch up these fences this afternoon, and tonight I have some schoolwork. But I'd be glad to go see your husband—"

Mrs. Muehlbach fanned some more and wiped sweat from her heavy face. The chair creaked ominously as she swayed it a bit from side to side, and even more ominously as she rocked a little.

She said, "I reckon them dirty Helmses has told you he ain't really my husband. But soon as my first man has been gone full seven year me an' Pete aims to get married. Can't have Mr. Gentry declared dead till he's been gone seven year. Pete, he's saved up three-four times to get me a divorce but he allus gets drunk an' blows it in 'fore he quite gets enough, or else the younguns has to have winter clothes or the grocery bill gets ahead of us when the cows goes dry in the winter an' we ain't got no cream to sell, or, like when Nevallion, the least'n there, come, my pains was on me three days. We done ever'thing. Put the axe under the bed. Took one of the baby dresses we had ready fer her out an' run around the house three times. That's s'posed to make one come. But nothin' we done didn't do no good an' finally we had to send fer the doctor an' he wouldn't come less'n he had ten dollars in his hand first. Le's see—what was I atellin'?

"Oh—about the divorce. But what I say, the Lord is agin divorces an' he's akeepin' me f'm gettin' one, so's I can't be married to one man whilst I got another'n alivin'. That's what it says in the Bible. Yo'uns ain't Methodists, I reckon?"

Sally was quite solemn. "No," she said. "We—"

"Well'm, I'm glad to hear that!" Sister Viny declared. "They got a cold religion, them Methodists. Oh, hit'll keep 'em f'm stealin' an' all, if they live right up to it, I s'pose, but it's a cold religion. And they don't think nothin' of gettin' divorces an' marryin' again, even if they ain't got Bible grounds. Over there where it says all that about adulterers and fortification, they jist act like it ain't there. Like I told you, I'm one of the weakest of the Lord's childern but I'm allus ready to repent an' come back to the fold. I do try to be a good Christian, but seems like a lone woman with a bunch of younguns to raise has a hard time. I—"

I broke in, talking along with her for a moment until she saw that I wasn't going to yield the floor. She hushed. I said, "I'll tell you what—you go ahead and let Sally entertain you while I change clothes and start work on my fence. Then whenever you're ready to go home, I'll go see your husband."

"Well," Sister Viny decided, "he'll be ararin' now, me bein' gone so long. I reckon if it's the same to you, we'll go now. He 'magines things, Pete does. 'Magines I get out to talk to other men—" She shook her head dolefully. "He gets kind of wild—"

Sally said, "Why don't I go along for the walk?"

Sister Viny wrenched herself from the chair. "I love a good rocker," she said. "A rocker is a heap of comfort. My first man, Mr. Gentry, he got me a rocker, but it's wore out long ago. He got it 'fore he went to Arizony. That was why I named Arizony that, was because he was off out there when she happened. . . . You younguns! Don't go apackin' all of Mr. Nelson's acorns off home. If he gets him ary shoat he'll need 'em fer feed. Wonder to me they ain't killed Charley Helms's cow-brutes. Guess they ain't fell thick enough yet is why. Lord, hit's a caution how they'll bind up a cow-critter. He did lose a calf last year on 'em. They dry up cows, too. . . . How many scholars turned out today, Mr. Nelson?"

"Nineteen."

"Well, I'm shore glad you got the school. That girl last year, I wouldn't awanted my younguns agoin' to her even if Pete had

abeen willin'. I admit I don't do the best I know how, but I do the best I can, but a teacher, she's s'posed to set a good 'zample before the younguns. . . . I wouldn't say this to ever'body an' I wouldn't want it to get around but I reckon abody don't have far to seek to know why Charley was so anxious to have her boardin' at his place again this year. . . . How come he give in all at once to havin' you?"

"He wanted to get the school started," I stated as I fastened the gate behind us. "And I surely wouldn't think that his interest in keeping the teacher went beyond the board money he received."

"He and Mrs. Helms seem to get along well," Sally put in.

Sister Viny appeared to realize that she was outnumbered. "Well, I wouldn't say they don't," she agreed, "an I'm certainly the last one that'd do any gossip. . . . How long you'ns been married did you say, Miz Nelson?"

Sally looked at me helplessly as we followed to the turn of the road. "Fifteen months—nearly—"

What point Sister Viny might have intended making from that, we never knew. She only said, "Hit's a heap shorter to cut through the woods but the ticks an' chiggers drive me wild. . . . Shore a nice rain we had las' night, wasn't it?"

I had learned that Pete's nickname was Muley—and it might well have been so even had it not been prompted by his last name. He was a small man of perhaps forty with an unusually long face. His black eyes were very widely spaced, the whites muddy. He sat on the front porch floor, back against the wall, whittling. He had tied the two dogs in the yard with ropes and they yelped and barked and lunged against the leashes.

"Pete don't like a runnin'-off dog," Arizona informed us.

Pete shouted, "You dogs! Hesh up!"

He flung the stick he was whittling. It struck the pup and as it yelped and cried he yelled, "I never aimed to hit you! Hesh

up! I was th'owin' at George! God damn it, you'd think you was killed."

"He don't mean no harm," Sister Viny assured us. "He even fergets an' talks that way in front of a preacher."

Pete rose, pulling the blue denim jumper, which he wore for a shirt, together and buttoning it. He went to the dogs and kicked them into cowering, whimpering submission.

"Man can't think with them dogs takin' on," he apologized to us. "You younguns fetch out cheers." He was pleasant.

"We can't stay," I told him. "I've got to get home and go to work."

The older dog was fawning on him now. I waited for Sister Viny to make some sort of introduction. Then I said, "I'm Joe Nelson, the schoolteacher."

No answer, except a hospitable, though suspicious, grin.

"You younguns, fetch cheers!" he repeated.

Two cane-bottom kitchen chairs were brought. I said, "Mr. Muehlbach, you have some nice children here. I missed seeing the two older ones in school today."

He fidgeted.

I said, "They're eager to come. I thought maybe there was something about the business that I could help straighten out so they could be there tomorrow."

A shake of the head. A removal of the heavy black hat to scratch his scalp. The sour smell of the sweatband filled the air, more powerful, even, than the rancid sweat of his jumper and overalls.

"I don't hold with a lot of book-learnin'," he declared at last.

"Well, of course," I agreed, "I suspect some folks set too much store by it—but we won't have to worry about that for Arizona and Navoma until they can at least read and write."

"Hit's all that readin' I don't hold with!" he broke in. "If they was boys, I wouldn't say a word. But a girl learns to read—then what? Wants to set around all the time with her nose stuck in a love book, wastin' the Lord's time. An' it puts ideas in her head.

She wants to be like the girls in them love books. First thing you know she gets out an' finds her a bresh-colt. Then don't nobody want to marry her. That there Clyde—calls hisse'f Clyde Caldwell. Ain't no more a Caldwell than I am. What'd his mammy do? Found him in the bresh, or leastways got him there. She was durn' lucky the Caldwell boy up an' took her. Don't happen once in a thousand times. . . . That's why he's kind of tetched, that Clyde, his mammy gettin' him in the bresh like a God damn' heifer. You younguns go pack up a fresh bucket of drankin' water. I been thirsty all evenin'. Got any chewin' on you, Mr. Nelson?"

"No," I said. "I wonder if you know the law requires you to send all your children over six to school?"

His eyes hardened. "Don't go draggin' the law into this!" he exclaimed. "I can be led where I can't be drove. Besides, the law can't make you send 'em when you ain't got nothin' to put in their lunch bucket, ner shoes fer 'em to wear."

"Pete," Arizona broke in, near tears, "you swore to God last year I could go this year. You promised!"

He fidgeted. He said, "They'd make fun of you—"

"I'll see that they don't," I assured him, as he wavered. "She won't have to have shoes till cold weather. . . . And they can bring just whatever they'd have at home in their lunch buckets."

He shook his head. "Sweet-'taters an' cornbread an' 'lasses ain't fittin' to take in a lunch bucket. You got to have meat."

"I had no meat in my lunch today," I pointed out, "and won't tomorrow. I did have a sweet potato—and I'll have another tomorrow. Besides, the woods are full of rabbits."

"Rabbits ain't meat—"

Arizona started crying. Navoma joined in. Pete looked at them wildly, clenched teeth showing as his lips quivered in a sort of helpless rage. He seemed to be fighting back waves of murderous impulse.

"All right!" he cried at last. "Now get that drankin' water! A man can't thank with all that God damn' bawlin'." He rose

from the edge of the porch, standing on the ground. "Get that water! I'm thirsty!" And, as they disappeared, he turned to Sister Viny who was now visibly relaxing. "You got any snuff hid anywhurs?"

She shook her head, silent for once. Pete wiped sweat on a trembling sleeve of the jumper.

Apologetic now, he said, "Younguns make me nervous. . . . You tell them kids at school do they pick on these younguns I'll waylay 'em an' have it out of their hides. Viny, go set supper on. You sure you ain't got a chew on you, Mr. Nelson?"

CHAPTER VIII

Background for Living

I was in full agreement with the aphorism that all one needs for a school is a log with a boy on one end and a teacher on the other. But that second morning, as I dusted from yesterday's sweeping, it still seemed to me that with a score of boys and girls on the other end we would go farther and faster with a few books to help us along.

I had run into the same problem last year—not enough books, not enough money at home, pupils studying together or having partnership books and the eternal excuse: "I never got to study. . . . He didn't get through with the book in time. . . ."

Something had to be done. Even if the agitation for free elementary texts eventually brought results, it would be of no help at Big Piney this year—

A soft voice came from behind me: "Mawnin', suh."

Startled, I turned to see a colored girl of ten or eleven and a boy a couple of years younger. Helms had said, "One thing about it around Big Piney, you don't have to put up with a lot of niggers. We only got two families. Niggers like to be whur they's brickplants, like in town, or whur they can make cotton fer somebody. . . ."

The children were rather light-skinned and their clothes were clean. They had stopped at the door. They were not allowed in the white folks' schoolhouse.

I said, "Good morning. What could I do for you?"

They shifted their feet in embarrassment and apprehensively the girl asked, "You ain't aimin' to har you nobody to do up you' janner work, are you?"

"My janner work?"

"Yo' flo' sweepin' an' all."

"I hadn't thought of it," I admitted. I didn't add that I preferred to do it myself and have the money.

They shifted their feet some more. Finally the girl said, "Us'n got a note."

I saw it now, in her hand. "Come in," I suggested. But they wouldn't come past the doorway and I went and took the paper. In indelible pencil, which made bright purple at the points where it had been freshly wet, it said:

> Mr. i say they can sweep up. if you he lessin. you he you house. they help you wif i had good schole. but haf forgot Emma Nolan. Re'spy. also in winter they pack wood in

A little questioning made it all clear: They would do my janitor work and every day would come over to my house for me to hear their lessons; if necessary, the girl could help Sally with her housework. It would, of course, take me less time to do my janitor work than to hear the lessons of two more pupils in a separate after-school session. But I heard myself saying, "All right. We'll try it and see how it works out." For it seemed unfair to me that in spite of the law which made it impossible for them to come to school they should have no schooling at all.

But there were no pleased looks on their faces. I asked, "What's the trouble? What did you want me to say?"

They studied their feet and the palms of their hands. Finally the girl said, "Us'n don't like school."

"Oh. . . . It's your mother who wants you to come?"

A nod. I sat down and wrote, in what I hoped was a clear hand which she could read, a note asking their mother to bring them to the schoolhouse this afternoon at four. I told them what

the note said, in case she couldn't make it out. In some doubt as to whether or not they would give it to her I watched them leave.

Presently, out of sight around the timbered bend of the road, I heard not-ill-natured shouts: "Hi, niggers!" The Caldwells.

Answering shouts: "Hi, white trash!"

Now the Helms children: "Hi, black trash!"

"Had a little dog, name was Dash, ruther be a nigger as po' white trash!"

Pete Caldwell, the director's third grade hopeful: "You dirty niggers better get runnin'! We'll rock you in home!" Pete was ten, and husky.

"Yaa-yaa-yaa!" The voices dwindled, evidently out of rock-throwing range. "You get rocked home—"

A stamping of feet and slapping of thighs, as in scaring a dog. Pete again: "You better dodge! When I say run, I mean—"

A sudden, startled squall. Excited babbling. And then squealing and crying. As I reached the pump here came the Helms children and four Caldwells. Pete Caldwell was stooped over, holding his face. Blood ran brightly from between his fingers. When he saw me he started blubbering like a three year old, pointing back down the road.

They all started crying, "Them niggers jumped onto us. Them niggers rocked us!"

The blood seemed to be from Pete's nose. "They both th'owed at once!" he declared. "I dodged one and got hit with th'other'n—"

"Which one of them did your rock hit?" I asked.

"Neither one. I was jist skeerin'—" His eyes widened as he saw he had stepped into that one. "I never th'owed no rocks. I never th'owed no rocks, did I?" He looked at the others. There were half nods and shakes of the head.

"Come to the pump," I told him. I worked the handle. He washed and held handfuls of cold water to his nose. It still bled and he spat blood. His upper lip was thickly swollen, cut outside

as well as in. He moaned and whimpered. He had no handkerchief. I tore off the end of a clean dustcloth and he sat down by a tree near the porch, holding the cloth to his nose.

The other children and several newcomers circled before him, staring, until the spectacle grew dull. Then they scattered to play. Soon they were shouting at Pete: "Come on, Darleen—be on our side!" They made rhymes, "Darleen, Darleen—got hit on the bean!" I gathered that the colored girl's name was Darleen.

Pete came in, unable to stand the taunts. He looked pale. I gave him a shot of ammonia in water, and, since the bleeding had stopped, doctored him with turpentine. All in silence. He but fleetingly met the eyes of those who came to inspect him.

It was almost time for the five minute bell when I heard a thin, piping, triumphant, "Well, Pete let me come."

I was thinking of Pete Caldwell and it took me a moment to make the mental adjustment as I turned to see Arizona. She wore a clean, stiffly starched, red flour-sack dress which struck her halfway between hip and knee. Her blond-white hair was braided, with a bit of twine at the end of either pig-tail. Her face was clean but her legs and feet had the same water-streaked dirt, among the chigger bites and scratches, that had been there yesterday.

"Well, good morning!" I looked around for Navoma.

Arizona added, "I knowed las' night Pete was lyin' like a dog but sure enough, he wasn't. He let me come. He swore to God last year he would this year—but then, the year before that he done the same. . . . Mama said tell you he never meant no harm blackguardin' 'fore your woman. That's jist his way. Seems like he can't he'p it."

I was not used to the term "blackguarding" for profanity or vulgarity or for character assassination, but I let the entire matter pass and asked about Navoma.

"Pete wouldn't let her come. He said we'd try me—and if you

couldn't learn me nothin' wasn't no use havin' her traipse over here, too." And after a moment: "He said ever' single day I got to learn sump'n. First day I don't, he's aimin' to keep me home an' not have me wastin' the Lord's time."

"Well," I told her, "we'd better see that you learn something every day. Find a seat you think you'd like where no one has books. You may put your lunch bucket on the shelf back there."

Pete Caldwell exclaimed, "Make her quit gawpin' at me!"

And Arizona asked, "Whatsa matter with him?"

"He bit off more than he could chew. Now you go out with the other girls. . . ."

But already it was time for the bell.

The room was expectant. I took a moment to enter Arizona on my temporary register. Pete's color was good by now. I said, "Pete will read the Bible for us this morning."

"I don't feel like readin'," he countered.

"If you don't feel like standing," I said, "you may read it at your seat."

I took it to him and put my finger on the spot. I knew myself for a hypocrite, for it was the "do unto others" passage, and I was pretty sure I shouldn't want anyone forcing me to read that passage if I had just been indulging in a bit of racial or other intolerance. But then, on that basis, I reflected, our entire routine of preaching-exhortation-punishment-rehabilitation is hypocritical and would collapse if we followed the golden rule. To a certain extent everyone in authority, to whatever degree, must be a demagogue.

Pete was a good reader. Even now he got the words out understandingly, though thickly, and with but little help. He was red-faced as he finished, but I had no way of knowing whether he or anyone else had connected the reading with what happened earlier. At best he was being made an example for the sins of the group he was with.

When he finished I said, "I have a book here about some chil-

dren who live across the ocean in a country we'll study about in geography. A country where the mountains are higher and sharper than these around here and where in places a goat can scarcely get about. One of the girls in the book is named Heidi. She has a goat whose name, as I recollect, in our language means Snow-Hopper. . . . Who would like to hear me read a chapter—?"

All of the hands went up. All but Pete's. He was sullen, thinking his own thoughts. Vermalee's hand stayed up.

"What is it, Vermalee?"

"Feelia taken her name home the way you wrote it off. Mommy says that spells Op-helia, and don't have a thing to do with her name. She's named Feelia, after Gra'ma. She wrote it off for you the way hit's s'posed to be spelled."

Arithmetic, first period. While others studied or pretended to study, the first grade came to the recitation bench. I found they all had a conception of number, as such. Yesterday I learned there were no flash cards at school. Last night Sally made some from a calendar. They learned to identify 1 and 2, and to add the combinations of those figures. I put samples on the board and they went to their seats to practice writing them.

Huril Davis handed me a note as he came up with the third grade. Written with pencil, it said:

> Dear Mrs Nelson a stork shar is being held for my daughter in town next Tuesday. Of next week. Mrs. Ella May Houston is her name. If you cant go please leave gift at store if you want to. Or have Mr. Nelson give it Huril. Thanking you.
>
> Hurils Mother

Said Huril, belatedly: "Hit's for yore woman. Mama said she hopes it's wrote off good. My sister that it's bein' helt fer he'ped her. She's been to high school."

"Oh, she has?" I could scarcely think of anything to say.

"She jist went one week, though. Then she stopped an' got married. She never graduated—she quituated." He paused for me to smile at this chestnut.

Vada Sue Baily, next to Huril on the bench, said, "Mr. Nelson, you know what happened yesterday? Mama had some milk down in the floor whur the wind blowed through to keep it cool an' our dogs come in an' knocked the lid off and drunk it might' near all up 'fore she caught 'em at it!"

Everyone laughed. Her older brother, Fritz, at his seat, was red-faced and chagrined.

"You must have smart dogs," I observed, hoping to pass it off.

"Oh," she agreed modestly, "they're right smart dogs, I reckon."

Frank Crinshaw, also of the third grade, wanted to be in the limelight: "You aimin' to get you one of them mattresses, Mr. Nelson?"

"Mattresses?"

"They're aimin' to make mattresses at Cap'n Jethrow's barn 'fore he putts hay in it. They bring out cotton an' stuff an' ever'-body goes an' a woman shows 'em how to make mattresses. They done it last year, too."

"That's a WPA project," I said, "to use up a great deal of cotton and help the cotton farmers. But if you had a mattress factory, Frank, what would you think of the government for going into the mattress business and letting folks have them free?"

"I don't reckon I'd like it."

Said Fritz: "The folks that go make 'em ain't goin' to be buyin' no mattresses anyway, so it don't hurt the factories."

"That's true," I agreed, "but last year I saw hundreds and hundreds of cattle bought by the government and shot and burned to help the cattle-raisers. People begged for that meat—they even cried for it—but they couldn't have any because it would hurt the meat markets. And those were people who

wouldn't have been buying any meat anyway. Wonder if something was wrong somewhere in the scheme?"

We discussed that without coming to any conclusion, and Fritz told of a friend at a CCC camp. Every few months all the boys received new shoes. The old ones were piled and burned. A farmer wanted some for himself and his boys:

"The boys was barefooted an' the old man was might' near it. But they said it was agin the regulations. The captain wouldn't even turn around an' let them steal some of the shoes that hadn't caught fire yet."

Said Frank, reverting to his first subject: "My uncle in town got six of them mattresses last year. He had to climb up on a cheer to get in bed—but he said once he was up there, hit really rocked him to sleep."

Time for recess. I said: "As perhaps all of us know by now, an unpleasant thing happened before school this morning. Is there anyone here who thinks it would be right to make fun of one of your classmates because he happened to get in the way of a rock?"

Solemn eyes. Pete flushed.

"Is there anyone who thinks it right—now that you've had time to think about it—to make fun of or throw rocks at someone or call him names just because his skin is a different color from yours?"

Headshakes. Were they saying what they thought or what the teacher wanted them to say?

"Is a white mule any better than a black one?"

From Clyde: "He might be."

"Because of his color?"

"I wouldn't thank so—but then you know a horse with four white stockin's an' a white nose ain't no 'count—"

"No—I didn't know that."

"Shore. Ain't you never heard, 'White nose, four white feet—he ain't fittin' even to beat'?"

I never had. But we were fogging the issue. "Supposing we'd been born black and lived where everyone else was of another color—or supposing one of us had to live where there were just Negroes. Would we think it right for them to gang up on us?"

"Whether we thought so or not," Fritz said, "they would. My cousins that live on a shanty boat on the river around Little Rock, they tied up one night close to whur didn't nothin' but niggers live, and them niggers called 'em river rats an' run 'em off."

"And they didn't like it, I imagine?" I asked a little lamely. "Wouldn't it be better, since we have what is supposed to be a free country, with all of us supposed to be free and equal, if we could keep from fighting among ourselves?"

Vague nods. "After recess," I said, "during history time, we'll talk about how the idea grew up in this country, for the first time in the world, that all men are born free and equal—and about what we ourselves can do to make it really more like that."

"I thought," Sandra spoke up, "that I was s'posed to have about how America was before Columbus came."

"You were—and maybe we can talk about that, too. But school is supposed to help us in our everyday living—it's part of our life—and we want to keep up with the ideas that affect us from day to day as well as to learn how the Indians lived. . . . And right now, to get back to what we started talking about—Vermalee, Feelia, Pete—all of you who were yelling at those colored children: supposing one of you was on the way to the mailboxes some day and those Nolan children got after you—would you like that?"

Shakes of the head.

"There's a passage in the Bible which says for us to treat other people the way we'd like for them to treat us. . . . Is that a good idea? . . . Anyone have anything else to say?"

Clyde grinned: "Hit don't pay, does it, to have a fraction with somebody that's a better rock-th'ower than you are?"

A general laugh cleared the air. We went out to play. They

had never heard of "red rover, red rover." June and I chose sides. I chose Pete first. . . .

Language, spelling, literature, penmanship, art (not all on the same day!) were for the period after the last recess. I wished we had work books, just as I wished we had a bit of scientific equipment for science-agriculture-natural-resources-conservation, which came after lunch. Today, in that, we had examined handfuls of dirt gathered from here and there to see what it was composed of, and we had put some acorns and grains of corn in damp sand, planning to open samples each day to see what was taking place.

Now it was time for penmanship. "Everyone," I stated, "must have tablet and pencil by tomorrow. You can't do your work without them. The pencils I cut up to make enough pieces for those who brought none are so short they are hard to use." Ten minutes of writing practice for everyone, from beginners up, copying samples from the board. "Don't try to write fancily," I said. "If you can just make it so that people can read it and not have to wonder if your *o*'s are *a*'s and your *h*'s are *k*'s, and things like that, that's the main thing."

Reading. Today I saw more of the puzzle which Clyde's mind presented. He could work sixth grade arithmetic if I told him what the reading in the problem said, but he could not read. Literally, he couldn't. I had to tell him almost every word and the ones he got right seemed to be guesses from context. The odd part was that he had kept on going to school all these years, facing daily frustration. His attendance record in the register was high. A fear, a dumb pleading, was in his eyes. I suspected he thought I was going to embarrass him before the others, and I pushed my questions to the back of my mind. This was something to see him about in private.

He was not the only one who was having trouble—but Sandra's, for instance, was of a different sort. She could not give full or clear answers to questions about what she had read, but

Clyde, after hearing her, could tell me all the answers. Apparently he had made his progress in school by being a good listener, just as the blind or deaf person is forced to sharpen his other senses.

In general, I was discouraged at the lack of knowledge in these children. I knew of course that people might forget up to eighty per cent in a given subject in just a summer's time. But the prospect here was so dismal I did not know which way to turn. I was convinced that this was not simply a matter of forgetting, but of never having known.

I though bitter thoughts of the way the future of the children had been given, for political or religious reasons, or reasons of kinship, into the hands of upstarts and illiterates. But then, Big Piney wasn't unique in that respect. The country over, I reflected, had put its educational administration into the hands of school boards composed of business men who know nothing of educational problems but who insist on dominating the schools and the formation of curricula with their ideas—and who have a subtle contempt for the "impractical" teachers who "have never met a payroll" and are willing to work for the wages offered in the schools. And I had just recently heard from a friend who was bluntly told in a northern city that unless he could prove himself to be an Irish Catholic he needn't bother to apply for a teaching job there. . . .

Now came the moment to discuss words from the "olden times," and from the suggestions which had been eagerly made throughout the day we wrote on the board in the box: "Yolk-Yelk." (Rhymes with whelk.) And I noted a peculiar thing: the ones who were most enthusiastic about discussing this word were from the homes where the pronunciation was "yolk." They felt a little superior to the ones who, in the minority, declared that while Gran'pa or Gran'ma said "yelk," they themselves did not. I saw that our research could lead to trouble if some careful steering wasn't done.

Amos Masters—rawboned, husky, as tall as myself—came to

the dictionary at my request. He was embarrassed because he was in the minority. With a bit of assistance he discovered that seven hundred years ago the word did have an *e* in the middle—and was so called because of its color which meant yellow.

"Hey!" Amos cried. "We're nearer right than old' June an' ol' Melba back there afeelin' so big! They had a good reason to say 'yelk' back in the olden times."

We ran down a few of the cross-references and learned that "glass" is kin to "yelk" because both are related to a word which meant "amber," and that "gold" and a host of other words mingle their ancestral blood in the same family stream, though the present children bear little resemblance until the relationship is pointed out.

So now everyone felt a little superior, regardless of which side of the fence he was on, just as two people who are privately certain they have skinned each other in a horse trade have a mutual inward glow.

It was five minutes past going-home time, we discovered abruptly, but Amos lingered to say, "That there is real interesting, ain't it, how them words sort of meant somethin' away back yonder?"

But we had to come down to earth. I gave another reminder about paper and pencils, and then I said we would have to buy some schoolbooks.

"You will notice," I pointed out, "that in the back of your books is printed the price, for new or second-hand, which the state allows to be charged. I have written off lists here for each of you of the books you need. Some of you need books which I haven't put down because I thought you'd need others worse. . . ." I took a deep breath: "If you can't find anyone in the neighborhood who has these books for sale, bring the money to me tomorrow and I will send to town for them."

I passed out the slips and as they left I pumped water into an old bucket in which to dip my broom as I swept. I looked now

and then down the road for Emma Nolan and her children, but after twenty minutes, as I finished my chores, they had not come.

I sat down to work on my register, transferring names into the permanent book from the sheet of paper I had been using. I understood there were three Kincaids. Hopeful they would yet show up, I left spaces for them. I glanced back through last year's record. And the one before. I saw that the children of some families were chronic absentees. And in almost every case the present abilities of the children, so far as I had learned them, were correlated to their attendance record. Perhaps inadequate teaching was not the whole story, after all.

It was almost five. I needed to get home and work on the yard fence some more. The Nolans had not yet shown up. I put the book away, closed the windows, and shut the door behind me.

I was not surprised when Director Caldwell came out to stop me as I passed his house—for Pete was his offspring. Pete trailed him, chapfallen, feet dragging.

Caldwell nodded. "Evening, Mr. Nelson. . . . This boy of mine been fighting?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

"Did you whip him?"

"Didn't he tell you that?"

Hesitantly, now: "I told you I didn't want any favorites played with my children."

That rankled. "Do you whip a child when he puts his hand on the stove?" I asked shortly. "How soon do you think he'll throw any more rocks at the Nolan children?"

"He did that?"

"I have a feeling," I said, "that the whole thing is pretty much settled. How do you feel about it, Pete?"

Pete was silent. Caldwell said, "I always followed the practice of whipping my children if they got a whipping at school. If they didn't tell me, I whipped them double when I found it out. . . . I hope you don't aim to run a namby-pamby school,

Mr. Nelson. Fightin' on the way to school is the same as at school. Last year the teacher turned the children of a certain family loose five minutes early every day so they could get a head start on the children of another family to keep from gettin' rocked on the way home. . . . That was one of my strong reasons for wanting a man—"

"Well, there's the boy," I countered. "All I know about the fight is what I could hear. I didn't see it. He's yours to whip if you want to."

"Hmmmm. . . . All right. We'll call it settled. No hard feelin's. I just believe in a man speaking his mind."

"Then I'll speak mine. What's to be done about schooling for the Nolans?"

A shake of the head. "There's nothing can be done."

Half an hour later it still boiled down to that. The community, it seemed, felt that the Nolans were all right but that if they wanted school they had better start one of their own—or go where there was one.

CHAPTER IX

Bundle of Switches

I heard Mrs. Muehlbach's voice as I neared home: "I just don't know what to say about this here paper Arizony brung. If'n I tell Pete they's money to pay, he'll rare an' pitch. . . . Besides, I ain't got it. What the welfare has been sendin', I have to hand that over to Cap'n Jethrow on the bill—an' soon as whoever it is 'round yere that spies on me sends word to that there long-tongued clapper-demouth welfare woman that Pete is back, she'll cut off my 'lowance. . . . I'm awful fed up with her. But I really cleaned her plow las' time she come buttin' in, actin' so stuck-uppity. What she don't seem to realize is that us voters hahr her an' pay her wages an' that she's workin' fer us to hand us out our money—"

I could see through the brush that she was settled again in the rocker, an arm of which she had woefully sprung on her previous visit. . . .

"She comes around actin' so pyore an' holy, an' this time she had a man with her—a lantern-jawed ol' varmint with a big golden watch chain acrost his ol' pussy-gut an' a Bible under his arm. These yere ol' fat preachers, I don't feed 'em. I wouldn't give 'em hay if'n they was a cow in a concrete pasture because a preacher ain't s'posed to be fat. Show's he's jist got his mind mostly on runnin' around eatin' yaller-laiged chickens with folks. . . . So I never ast 'em to eat. . . . This yere woman she says to me, 'Miz Muehlbach, how come you don't run off this yere ol'

Pete fer good an' thataway you'ns would get yore welfare each an' ever' month.' "

Sister Viny was mimicking in a high, mincing voice, her face twisted into a smirk, back stiffened, chin thrown up at an angle. Then she dropped abruptly to her natural pitch which was still high enough: "I told her, I says, 'Lady, fer all the welfare checks you could stack up in the wood box yonder, I wouldn't swap one—"

Sally had seen me. She waved and called, and I never did find out what else Sister Viny said to the lady from the welfare. . . .

We knew at our house how scarce "cash money" could be for we were trying to make what few dollars we had on hand hold out—what with the credit Cap'n Jethrow might be expected to give us—until I received my first pay. I was surprised next day to see about half the necessary capital show up for the books I had listed as most needful.

Clyde had brought a note:

> Mr. Nelson
>
> About the money. I can save some of the cream money but dont have now cream is on Sat morning at store. Just sell one time a week. On Sat. Dident know about this sooner. Now about Clyde I think it his eyes. Aim to take him to eye specalist to get specalties for him. Took him once but said dident need will take to another.
>
> His Mother (Thank you in advance for wait about the money. Will send on Monday.)

Wilbren Davis handed me another note as I dusted:

> to teacher Wilbren sed you told him to Bring $125¢ like on Paper fore a Book I cant send it till Monday wont git are pay untill sat from Mr Jethrow Mr Davis work by day fore him and I send it them By him also for Mary Lee reader she like schol fine this year
>
> Mrs Davis

The Davises were not too clean. Presently Mary Lee came in crying. Arizona Muehlbach was with her. Some other little girls grouped at the doorway, watching. I saw that I should have been in the schoolyard. I hadn't realized that so many would arrive so early.

"What is it, Mary Lee?"

She pulled at a sagging, too-large tan stocking. Snuffles and sniffles and a woebegone face.

"What ails her, Arizona?"

"Them big girls hollers, 'Roosevelt's acallin',' at her."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" No answer. "We all have to take a little teasing in this world. Just laugh and go on—that's often the best thing to do."

"Hit's when she makes a noise they holler."

"A—"

Just then under the stress of crying, Mary Lee made another noise. Snickers from the doorway.

Still from Arizona: "They holler it because hit means Roosevelt putt you on relief an' you have beans to eat—an' they couldn't get on the relief—"

From Wilbren, at the window: "We never *wanted* on it! My daddy works! He don't steal hogs fer a livin'—"

"That will be all of that kind of talk from you, Wilbren," I told him sternly, hoping I had broken into his words, for I sensed what was coming, in time to keep Arizona from hearing. But I hadn't.

Furiously she shouted at him: "Pete ain't my real daddy an' he don't steal hogs an' if you pick on me he'll waylay you an'—"

I got her stopped. "Mary Lee, go tell the ones who were teasing you to come in here."

They came, flushed and guilty but trying to appear innocent and careless—Sandra, June, Martha, Melba. Others gathered to watch.

"You girls," I stated, "are the young ladies of the school. It's

up to you to set an example for the little ones. Now act your age. All clear?"

Nods. "Yes, sir. . . . Yes, sir. . . ."

"You needn't say 'Yes, sir,' to me unless you want to."

Puzzled by the last—and relieved at the mildness of the reprimand—they went out. I followed to keep an eye on things.

Yesterday I had lugged over volumes one and two of my *Britannica.* Today I brought the third and some smaller books. I was fearful in my heart of trusting my things to an unlocked building but, everything considered, I thought I should take the risk. Some might have said that the *Britannica* was too advanced for these children—but it was what I had and besides I had a theory that a child might learn something by being forced to extend himself a little.

Now I gave a little talk. I said I knew how it was with many of us—that we managed for food and clothing but that it was hard to "scare up" cash. I said I would bring books to the school for the use of everyone and that I felt everyone else in turn should be glad to let his books be studied by those who needed them. I pointed to the "story books," as I had learned any volume of fiction was called, which I had brought, and suggested that during the day, when anyone had recited well, he might look them over.

I made out an order—and put myself in debt to the bookstore for four dollars and a half on my own account, to be paid out of my first salary warrant if parents failed to send me money. This was for books which I definitely wanted us to have. Another order would go off when some of the promised "cash money" came in.

Amos Masters and Fritz Baily lit out with the order for "the big road" when we heard the mail carrier's car grinding up Bailey's Hill just before recess. When they returned during recess Amos was quietly boastful of the dozen letters he had.

"They're fer my dad," he explained to me. "He seen whur if you send in a dime you get big mail."

I glanced at the garish envelopes as he shuffled through them: BIG PROFITS FROM WINTER CHICKS, and RAISE RABBITS FOR BIG MONEY, and VALUABLE OFFER INSIDE, and SONGWRITING—THE ROAD TO FAME AND FORTUNE. . . . Apparently he was now on every sucker list in the country.

"Shucks, this ain't nothin'," Amos remarked carelessly. "Some days, fer a while there, he got more'n this. . . . They drindled away an' I told him he was goin' to have to send another dime, but looks like they're comin' back now."

"What does he do with them?" I asked.

"He likes to read 'em over. Us kids brung some old'ns to school to write on the backs of till we get our tablets. . . ."

Next day two others met the carrier to get the books. He had promised the boys he would take care of the order personally and without fee in order to save us time and postage. We had a pleasant half hour at Big Piney school opening the package and looking over the treasures.

Perhaps I only imagined it but I felt that those books meant something special to the children. But we needed so many more —particularly work books in which they could drill and work out picture problems, and so on. I had decided it was not so bad for some children in a class to have one geography text, for instance, and someone else another kind. If we ran into conflicting statistics or other information, it showed us the progress made between the years in which the books were published, and sent us on a purposeful hunt for further details.

There had been practically no "leaving the room" since Monday—so little that I had made no point of it. But on Thursday we had a tragedy: There came a slow trickling sound. The room became deadly still. All eyes were turned toward Johnny Masters, grade 1. A puddle was forming under his seat. Johnny started crying.

Hushing the incipient laughter, I said, "I thought everyone

understood that when he has to leave the room and can't wait he is to go right then without asking. Does everyone understand?"

Everyone does. Next day Johnny brought me a note:

> Dear Teacher, when Johnny has to go he has to go. Amos said it not your fault but Johnny doesn't understand before now. He takes it after his uncle that is in the pin. I gave him laxtive. As he kind of act sick. So be sure and let him go.
>
> Mrs. Masters

"You understand about this, Johnny? You're always to go just before books in the morning, and at recess, and just before books at noon—but between times if you have to, you're to go ahead?"

A nod. "I reckon I may have to go perty often today. She give me a whole chicken gizzard."

"Chicken gizzard?"

"The yeller linin' out of it. She dries 'em on the back of the stove whenever she kills a chicken. Hit beats anything you can buy at the store—that there Black Draught [rhymes with "caught" at Big Piney] an' stuff . . ."

Coming back in while I was reading the morning's chapter from *Heidi,* he was grinning and glancing toward a window.

"What is it, Johnny?"

"Them niggers is out there."

"Where?" I couldn't see anyone.

"Hidin' under the winder alistening to us."

I stepped to the window. No one in sight. But as I leaned out I saw the edge of a garment under the raised floor where boards had been torn away, it seems, by possum hunters.

"Darleen—you and your brother come out."

Out they came. They were sullen, sheepish, a little afraid.

"I thought you didn't like school."

"Us'n like stories, though."

"How long have you been coming here?"

"How long we been?" she asked the boy. His eyes, fixed on me, gave the effect of rolling as he shook his head. She said, "Three days now. Us'n hear all 'at stuff 'bout Heidi. . . ."

"How did you happen to first come?"

"Mama say come listen, learn what us'n could. . . . But we ain't learn' nothin' yet. . . ."

"Oh . . ." I had ordered an extra pre-primer in case Pete Muehlbach should decide to let Navoma attend. I reached for it. . . . "After we finish the story reading," I told Darleen, "you and your brother may take this home and see how much of it you can read. Then come see me after school as I told you to the other day."

The faces were still sullen, still suspicious. Darleen silently took the little paper-backed booklet with a brown hand. After a moment she gave me a thank-you.

But they did not come after school.

Saturday morning. I paused, in the hot timber back in the wood lot in the pasture, to wipe sweat. I had hacked out a dozen posts for my fence and as I admired them I heard voices. I saw Brother Helms, Caldwell, and Kincaid coming through the oak sprouts of the pasture below the woods. I sensed that all was not well. Their manner was hesitant, yet purposeful.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

"Morning . . ." Long habit kept them from stating their business at once. Kincaid was dour and silent. He squatted on the broken heels of his mulehide shoes and whittled. Helms had caught a summer cold; he wiped his nose now and then on his sleeve. Caldwell talked about the posts, the weather, the fall planting, the school.

But finally he said, "All right, Kincaid. We're taking up his time. Tell him what we come for."

Kincaid wiped sweat from the chestnut stubble which he obviously had not shaved since I saw him a week ago. He slapped at a fly which pestered him.

"Let Charley tell him. He's president of the board."

Brother Helms shook his head. "You was the one wantin' to come. You was the one stirrin' up the stink."

"It's your'ns's school; *I* ain't havin' no part in it—but I'm 'sponsible all the same an' I ain't wantin' the law on me."

Caldwell said, "Well, Mr. Nelson, I hate it we took up your time—and ours. Bring your wife and come to see us tomorrow for Sunday dinner after meetin'."

Helms was relieved at the change of subject. Kincaid rose, snapping his knife shut.

"All right!" He looked tautly at me. "Ain't no law agin you bein' a nigger-lover, but you can't mix it with school! You got no right to have them niggers come to school."

Helms shifted uneasily from foot to foot. Caldwell was silent.

I said, "Mr. Kincaid, are you aware of your legal responsibility as a school director of this district to provide educational facilities for all the children in it? What if some of their parents should have the law on you?" I didn't know, really, what his legal responsibility was. Apparently he didn't either.

To him, Caldwell said, "There—I told you what he'd say. Satisfied?"

"He's got no right givin' schoolbooks to them niggers."

"It just happens," I put in, "that I bought that book and charged it to my own name. Have you ever considered the value of an education to the members of the community, Mr. Kincaid?"

(At this time I didn't know Helms could not read or write.)

I continued, "If you feel that education is good for your children—if you feel it will make them better off in life, you must feel that it will also be a help to the community for them to be better off. Have you ever discovered that it's any help for part of the people to be ignorant? If education makes us able to earn a better living then we have more money to spend with each other—"

"A lot of fancy argyments won't he'p!" he declared. And I

realized that if it had not been the Nolans there would have been something else to "argy" about. "Folks is more stirred up than these fellers is lettin' on like. You have them niggers back on the schoolground, even, an' I'll have your county c'tificate—an' I might do more. If you think I'm skeered of what them niggers could have the law do to me, yo're crazier than you look. This yere is a white-man's dee-strick. . . ." He turned and stalked off.

Caldwell glanced hesitantly at me. "I reckon maybe you better bear in mind what he said," he told me. "No use just diggin' up trouble. Always enough as it is . . ."

Monday morning. A bundle of switches was hanging on my front gate. In some surprise and irritation I tossed them into the ditch. Evidently someone thought the teacher wasn't stern enough.

At school I found the pre-primer on the front porch, weighted with a rock. My shoulders ached and my arms were dead from the load of books I had brought. Putting them on my table I went for the pre-primer. I saw that it had been handled quite a bit. I glanced around, thinking maybe I might see the children watching from the brush, but they were not in sight.

I pondered the philosophies of men. The community had met, sixty strong, at the brush arbor down in the grove by the creek yesterday. People gathered around to get acquainted with the new teacher and his wife. Several asked, on introduction, "Are you saved?" or, "Are you a Christian?"

The sermon was on the chosen people; the preacher talked concerning the fatherhood of God and the consequent brotherhood of man. The woes of the Israelites in Egyptian bondage were held up for us to weep over. The preacher wandered off into an unknown tongue during the closing prayer.

Everybody said it was a good sermon.

They were lenient with me. They didn't even mention the matter of the Nolan children.

Arizona and her little sister arrived. I had passed the test: "Pete said you done perty good. He said you learned me enough he would try you on Navoma."

Their feet were clean—and still wet—as if they had washed them at the creek, but their legs were dirty. The other day in health class I had mentioned that one should be sure to have clean feet, as well as clean hands, when coming to school. Today, I reminded myself, I must mention legs also. . . .

The Bible reading and the chapter in *Heidi* being finished, Martha came to the parlor organ on the rostrum. It belonged to the church group but they sang without it in summer as they didn't want to take it to the open arbor where it would be exposed to the weather. Martha could chord tunes. We were in the midst of "The Jolly Old Sow"—the one who fretted herself away, trying to persuade her pigs to say unk, unk, unk, instead of wee wee—when a mournful clatter approached.

It was Brother Helms's conveyance. My hopes were dashed as he pulled onto the schoolground and stopped. He came to the doorway, his loose lower lip showing teeth as strong and yellow as those of a horse. He wore his new shirt which had come for him in the mail order, and his Sunday overalls. The children twisted to look at him. They grinned at each other.

The song was done. My heart had sunk low. I had a premonition, but I said, "Do you want to see one of your children, Brother Helms?"

He was not to be put off that easily. A clearing of the throat, his Adam's apple bobbing: "No. I was jist passin'. Used to be the custom on Monday mornin' to have a minister speak to the younguns. We was talkin' about it at board meetin' the other day an' thought maybe we'd revive it. I aimed to speak to you about it."

As Mr. Caldwell had feared, I am the namby-pamby type. I couldn't somehow muster the courage to send Helms packing. In a minute we were listening to his inexhaustible stock of

platitudes given in his fast, uneven delivery. But that wasn't what held me, the way the bird is held by the snake:

". . . The fear, uh, of the Lord, uh, is the beginning of wisdom, uh, as it says over there in Holy Writ, uh. How true, uh, that is, uh. But they's other things, uh, that you need in this yere old world, uh. Never had no schoolin' myself, uh. Nothin' but the school o' hard knocks, uh. Hit hurts me to see, uh, a scholar awastin' his time, uh. . . ."

I cringed afresh each second, awaiting the next *uh*. He didn't use them in ordinary speech and he didn't realize that he used them in his oratory. His own children were grinning in pride or embarrassment. Pride, I thought. I shook my head and frowned at the others who were keeping count of the *uh*'s on their fingers.

"Never had nary chance, uh, myself, uh. Never learned, uh, to read an' write, uh. Can't read my Bible even, praise the Lord, uh, but I can remember it, uh, after hearin' others read it, uh. We have ears, uh, an' hear not, uh, an' eyes an' see not, uh. I tried an' tried to read it, uh, but I was too old. You got to get, uh, yore learnin' young, uh. Mind yore teacher an' do what he says, uh, an' hit'll grease the way, uh, when yo're out in the wide world, uh, in the field of life. . . . Bow yore heads, uh, fer a word of prayer. . . .

"Oh, Lord, grab these younguns up by the nap o' the neck, uh, an' the seat o' the pants, uh, an' shake 'em till they realize, uh, their God-given opportunity, uh, Lord, to come to school. . . ."

While he was still praying I heard the clump-clomp of hoofs, the creak of wagon gear. When the noise came even, he said, "Amen!" and looked to see who was passing.

I saw a rickety one-horse wagon, drawn by a rickety mule. It was loaded with a mound of household plunder. A Negro woman walked beside the mule, holding rope plow-lines for reins. Trailing her were Darleen and her brother.

They didn't look this way. The room was quiet. I had a feel-

ing of failure as if somehow I was the one who was causing their departure, the way a well-meaning incompetent can always cause the maximum of trouble by butting into the existing order.

Helms glanced at me. He said, "Well—reckon I better mosey along."

He edged out of the room. I took a deep breath.

"First reader," I called. "Come to the bench."

The talk was guarded, in the beginning, at recess. Then it all came out. The Nolans had appeared at Cap'n Jethrow's early this morning. A bundle of switches had been thrown on their porch in the night. He tried to convince them that no one would dare burn the house since he owned it and since the culprit would be certain to be caught. But he finally agreed to call their store bill even and to give them five dollars cash, in return for their crop, so they could leave.

Where were they going?

Who knew?

But after all, they had five cash dollars with which to start over. For a few minutes everyone was solemn, thinking how that would be. Then a game of prisoner's base was started by several—but already it was time for the bell.

I was disturbed now about the switches I had found on my gate. As books were taken up again I said, "Do I understand that the bundle of switches the Nolans found was a threat to burn them out?"

Everybody wanted to talk at once. Fritz said, "I've hearn my dad tell how they used to hang switches if they was anybody doin' wrong. In them days though it meant they'd whip 'em out if they didn't leave an' then burn their house so's they wouldn't have no place to come back to, less'n they sold it."

I didn't think things would be carried that far with me—and I said nothing about the matter to Sally, not wanting to worry her, nor to anyone else. My idea was that whoever had hung the switches would betray himself to me sooner or later by men-

tioning them, thinking himself safe enough to be indulging in gossip which I would undoubtedly have told around.

Three nights later, while I was still considering, we were roused from sleep by the bellowing of cattle and the blaat of sheep and the wild pounding of hoofs. Looking out I saw a ragged wall of flame racing through the waist-high "sage grass," as the growth over the lower half of the pasture was locally called. A grass inedible after maturity—but highly inflammable, dry as it was, and filled as it was with last year's dead growth. Tongues of fire shot to the sky, it appeared to me, and the wind which bore it toward the barn and the patches of grass around the house was heavy with nostril-biting smoke.

Shouting wildly and senselessly of fire, thinking the neighbors might hear, I blundered to the kitchen for matches. I vaguely recalled the Muehlbach kids had been playing with an old brake drum by the front steps. I told Sally to find it and beat on it, and barefoot, in undershirt and shorts, I ran to the high grass nearest the barn. My thought was to backfire. I was afraid if I did the barn would go but I knew it would go if the wind brought the full fury of the flames roaring down. And if the barn went, the house probably would catch from it.

Then it looked as if the fire were turned back on itself by the shifting wind. The flames dropped. I ran back to the house and grabbed my shoes. Sally had found the brake drum and was getting a hollow sound from it.

"Hang it on the nail on the porch post!" I shouted. "And don't let it touch the post!"

And as the clangor came wild and loud I grabbed the water bucket. Somewhere—perhaps at Muehlbachs'—I heard a shotgun explode several times in succession, the rural call to fire. But as I grabbed up the water bucket and the gunny sack we used as a back door mat and ran into the yard I could see no fire there. They were rousing help for me. And in the distance I heard the shouts of those on the way.

Nothing but the wind saved us. For two hours we beat at

that line of flame which crept in all directions, now flaring high on the lower side near the house, now dropping back again. The Caldwells and Helmses and Muehlbachs and Davises fought valiantly and if anyone noticed I had no pants on, until Sally gave them to me, they said nothing about it.

Sally ran her legs off fetching buckets of water to douse the sacks used to whip the flames. They burnt out against the road on one side and plowed ground on the other. And at long last there were only smouldering fence posts and glowing spots where cattle manure or heavy stools of the coarse grass had been.

We stood catching our breath, tenderly feeling our scorched faces and blistered hands and arms where sparks had stuck. Our clothes were burned full of little holes. And we were worn out. Fighting fire is a mean job. But no one wanted thanks.

"A fahr," Brother Helms said, "is ever'body's. We'd ruther a-fit it on yore land as our own."

The women went to the house to make coffee while we watched against flare-ups, and now I told about the switches.

Caldwell said, "You made a bad mistake, Brother Nelson. It should have been talked around big. Then nobody would have dared done this."

I agreed that he probably was right.

"There's the matter of my books at school," I added. "I'd hate to see anything happen to them."

Caldwell grunted. He said, "I'm not inclined to think the one you might suspect did this. After all, he's a little kin to Uncle Johnny Haskins who owns this place."

"No love lost between 'em," Davis growled, stubbled face hard in the moonlight.

Pete Muehlbach said, "Anybody got a chew on 'em?"

Davis handed him his plug.

Next day the three directors came to the school and measured the windows. Caldwell's eyes were swollen as badly as mine from the smoke. I had already had the news from the Caldwell and Helms children: bars were going to be put on the school-

house windows and a lock on the door so anyone who was mad at the teacher couldn't bother his books.

"Because," as Clyde said, "hit ain't no crime jist to come in, but if they broke in they could get sent off to the pen."

Kincaid motioned me to one side during recess while the others were finishing their calculations. Trimming a little stick with his knife, and shooting me quick glances, he said, "I ain't awantin' no trouble. I jist wanted to let you know if you think I knowed anything about yore fahr, I never. That ain't my way. I allus come plain out with what I got to say or do."

"I've mentioned no names," I told him.

"Well—jist see you don't go 'cusin' me," he said, and turned away.

CHAPTER X

Witch-Ball

A month had gone somewhere, and in that month Sally and I had uncovered something very like unto the jewel of contentment, at least for a few moments at a time, and that is perhaps as much as man can hope for in this existence. These moments had come sometimes when standing in our yard, looking at our great trees with the katydids fiddling and the jarflies snarling their loud, long song, and looking on beyond them to the blue and smoky hills with the light and shadow falling in blobs on height and hollow.

And they had come while making the rare discovery of a tree which ripens its persimmons to luscious sweetness before frost, or gathering tangy fox grapes and muscadines for juice and jelly, or possum grapes which are mostly seed and hull and bitter to the taste but which give the finest juice when properly prepared.

They had come, even, while cleaning up the trash which careless tenants and renters had left in the yard for years past, and saying to each other what a few flowers here and there would do, and a rock wall yonder on the slope, filled in to make a terrace, and what a fine place this would be to live if one had a car. For, once to the mail route, it is but an hour's drive from Big Piney to town.

And they had come at the times when we were acutely aware that we were being privileged to see the culture of America's last

frontier in the process of skipping a hundred years of social and economic evolution overnight.

We had always heard of the upbrush hillman who farmed with a mule or perhaps only "hoed in" a small garden patch and a spot of new-ground with corn for bread, hominy, and whisky; who took his pork or other meat mostly wild, and did without what he couldn't make, raise, or catch. Of women who raised little patches of cotton in the dooryard to be picked from the seeds by hand; who sheared a few sheep every June and "bucked" the wool clean at the creek, and carded it, as they did their cotton, by hand; and who spun it on ancient wheels into yarn for knitting and into warp and woof for their high, clacking looms as they sat snugly by the chimneyplace in winter. We had heard of men who cut wheat with cradles in their little patches, and who threshed it with flails and took it to be ground with stones at old mills run by water.

In short, we had heard that these people, long isolated in their sixty thousand square miles of brake and hollow—a region as large as the state of Georgia—were truly our "contemporary ancestors," as someone had called them, because they were reminders of a different era in the world's development.

But, sadly or otherwise, this was not what we had found. True, we had seen great sharp-bladed cradles hanging in the dog-runs of cabins, or in barns, and we had walked over steep and stony stubble fields which one could see from the circular sweeps of the blade had not been cut by machinery. We had seen the fragments of looms relegated to barns; only Gram Slocum—a queer old woman up Slocum Holler, who was sort of a "power doctor," i.e., one who could "do things," and who depended on charms rather than the "yarbs" we once saw her gathering in the woods —only she, in all the length and breadth of Big Piney and its adjoining neighborhoods, still used her loom.

We saw that the old things and the old ways were being swallowed up. Young people were not only ignorant but contemptuous of the old ways, as they were everywhere. A generation was

growing up which could perhaps shear a sheep but which could not have made a pair of breeches with the wool if its life had depended on it; which knew only by hearsay of lye hoppers; of homemade shoes of hide tanned with the brains of the animal on which it had grown; of "rifle-gun" (a proper distinction from shotgun) balls run in molds on the "chimley hurth," or of house raisings and husking bees. A generation which, where religious prejudices didn't prevent, put more faith in the "satchel doctor" and "tooth dentist" and patent pills from the store than in the charm workings of the pipe-sucking Gram Slocum. But then people didn't like to go to Gram's cabin, where she lived with her brother Hi. Stockmen, hunting hogs or cattle on the range, were always careful, of course, to speak her fair if they passed her place, and doubtless some had a private contempt for her powers. But everyone said it "gives a man a funny feelin' " to go into her house. . . . And this was a generation which preferred talking machine and guitar to dulcimer and fiddle.

The old ways we saw were a link between America's past and America's present, and we were charmed, perhaps beyond justification, by them. Spiritually, morally, mentally, the people were about like people anywhere: bright, dull, retarded, "queer." The Big Piney folks had as much knowledge as the people anywhere else: it was just of a different kind. Now, to cope with the world which was rushing to meet their open arms, they needed even more than they were getting of knowledge of another sort.

Our neighbors might be uncomfortable in store suits and two-way stretch girdles, and they might not be aware that their blood lines often traced back to high places in England, or that the crest on a vagrant silver spoon was a badge of pride, but in spite of this they could still be well-off. There was, for instance, a pair of deer hounds in the dooryard of a one-room slab shack over on Little Piney for which the owner had refused an offer of twelve hundred dollars from a St. Louis hunter. Mildly he said: "We raised them dogs from pups."

Or a man might have the things which go to make "cash

money": droves of swine chomping acorns in the woods or, when "the mash" (mast) fails, eating corn and protein supplement. ("Settle-ment," Cap'n Jethrow called it, and settle-ment his customers bought.) And a man was likely to have cattle from which to sell cream, and "stock" (beef) cattle running in the hills, and a few sheep from which to sell wool and fat lambs. From goats he took mohair (while using them also to kill sprouts by their constant nibbling), and with his dogs he was in a way to take a few furs in winter. Traps were frowned upon unless set in places inaccessible to dogs, and many a bitter vendetta has resulted from a dog in a trap, or from the destroying of traps to prevent this.

Too, a man might have cedar brakes from which posts could be cut, sometimes thousands from an unbelievably small area. Often they grew so close together that a big dog might have difficulty getting through the low-growing limbs, but it is in these thickets that commercial posts are made. That is because the lower limbs are small and can be stripped off with a sharp axe like flicking leaves from a weed with a stick, and because the trees grow with almost the same thickness for many feet upward as they struggle for light. A cedar growing in the open may be sixteen inches thick at the ground and six at eye level, besides being gnarled and rough from heavy limbs which grow all the way to the earth. It is worthless.

Caldwell had posts from virgin river-bottom cedar in his fences which he knew to be fifty-seven years old and still sound, but the latter-day cedar is not like that. It rots swiftly, being better fitted for the drier climates to which truckers take it.

The farmer might sell his posts, when first we knew Big Piney, at a profit of three to five cents above cutting cost, and this was what kept many of them eating and off relief. Further, it cleared land of "varmint cover" and opened it for the more valuable grass. Too, the cry that stripping forests away opens land for erosion is not always a valid one. Certainly the mat of grass roots in the ground, once kept bare in the dense thickets, held more earth in place than the cedars did.

And we learned that womenfolks usually made the garden and usually split their cook wood from chunks brought in, sawed to proper length, by the men. Some women worked in the fields and in the timber with team or pitchfork or axe, but except in dire emergency most of our neighbors would have thought shame to let their women do work beyond tending house and yard and chickens, milking cows, feeding pigs and calves and the occasional orphan lamb, and making garden. . . .

We learned our neighbors would have their share of fun at shivaree or playparty where "singin' games" done to vocal music had the earmarks of old English and American dances, but the better-thought-of folks did not hold with "round dancing" or "fiddle dancing." The fiddle was still, to many, "the devil's music box." We heard of violent "fractions," even to the wrecking of all the furniture in a cabin, at a fiddle dance. The immediate excuse was the turning of a girl by her waist instead of her hand in a running-through of Cotton-Eye Joe. ("I'd abeen married a long time ago/If it hadn't abeen for Cotton-Eye Joe. . . .") However, the situation was perhaps aggravated by corn-whisky—the prime evil of fiddle dances. But the young blade going to a simple playparty knows better than to take a bottle.

This is not to say that there aren't communities in the hills where decorous people attend fiddle dances—but the distinction must be made that in the places where religion requires one to give up dancing he may still attend the playparty and have a barrel of fun with "Old Joe Clark" and "We'll All Go Down to Rouser's" and "I'll Tune Up My Fiddle, I'll Rosin My Bow—!" Or clap and sing:

"Jay-bird died with a whoopin' cough—
Snow-bird died with a colic—
Met a froggie with a fiddle on 'is back
Agoin' to the frolic!"

Or he may soberly sing "Weepin' an' a-Wailin'," and at the same time be aware that through every head in the room is running the unmentionable parody, "Creepin' an' a-Crawlin'" with the intermittent chorus line: "Oh, throw yore laig over me, do!" (In it the maiden comes to harm as usual—but oh, how willingly!) The rigid churchman may still at his own discretion put a spoonful of whisky in a toddy for sickness, and he may go so far (if not fearful of setting a bad example) as to have a nip on a cold night when after coon or possum, or listening to the dogs run a fox. But the "saved" are likely to abstain from liquor entirely. Certainly drinkers are not welcome at mixed gatherings.

In the long September evenings we walked in the woods. From hilltops we looked across valleys where here and there a farmstead drowsed with a finger of smoke rising from the supper fire and cattle came in Indian file for milking. We gathered hazel nuts and chinquapins; we saw the scarlet of maple, the gold-yellow of sycamore and hickory, the red of black oak, all mingled with greens and browns. We ran upon a red fox, flushing him from a tangle of buckbrush in an open glade, and he was as startled as we. We watched a flying squirrel, and we saw a digger wasp with a caterpillar thrice her size. She dragged it into her burrow to lay her egg upon it, and filled the hole with her front feet but to our unbounded disappointment she—the only animal besides man ever to use a tool—did not pound the dirt down with a pebble in her mandibles as they sometimes do.

We saw horse and mule shoes hanging on fences or low limbs, but for one to go over our doorway we waited until we found one lying free. Those already hanging had been placed there for luck by someone who had run upon them in road or path. So I learned from my pupils. I was fortunate, of course, in that I was teaching and in daily contact with the children of the community, and in that I had their confidence—at least to a degree. As soon as they began feeling that I was one of them and was interested in them I learned things that I wouldn't have learned

in years of associating with them and their parents outside the school. For the outsider to "dulge" into such matters is useless. He learns exactly nothing, beyond what he accidentally sees.

But let no one mock or make light of the beliefs of the Big Piney folk, whether of charms or "ghosties" or of semi-dark powers held by such women as Gram Slocum. Let no one mock if ever he or she has knocked on wood or worn "something old, something new," or stamped a white horse or avoided a crack lest he break his granny's back, or consulted a fortune teller or worked out a system for predicting business trends by car loadings. Superstition is superstition and the practices at Big Piney are often no more than a laughing lip-service, just as the sophisticated elsewhere may carry a good-luck penny or refuse to cut out a dress on Friday. And the economists make as many blunders with their graphs and ouija boards as do mountain weather prophets with their goosebones.

It was now, when the Moon of Painted Leaves was hard by, that Sally and I found our "witch-ball." We had ventured up Slocum Holler, thinking to visit Gram and Hi on the pretext of getting some "yarbs," or better yet, a charm of some sort, for an imaginary "misery" in my arm. A great, black dog was chained on the front "gallery," looking every inch suitable for the dog of a witch-woman. He bayed us, hoarse and ferocious; we hallooed repeatedly at the gate but we roused no one. Respecting the custom of not stepping into a man's yard until you know him to be at home, we finally left—but we had no doubt we had been watched by hidden eyes.

And presently, at the base of a great blackjack, a virgin tree, we found the witch-ball (for such we named it). We had heard of "charm bags" containing feathers and graveyard dust and such, and of witch-balls (in New Orleans, that was) composed of nondescript hair, feathers, and so on, molded into form with wax or soap. This one, so far as we could see, was made of feathers and scraps of peculiar-looking bone, but we couldn't tell what held it together.

Had Gram been aware of our coming and thrown this thing here to stop us? Or was she trying to take some power or ability, which she might fancy us to possess, unto herself? Or what? We looked at each other, talking low, and the flesh of my back crinkled as I glanced into the darksome woods of the deep hollow—a wild and forbidding place at dusk. I knew what people meant by not wanting to fool with someone else's horseshoe; I was repelled by this thing, yet fascinated. We ended by taking it with us and putting it on the mantel at home.

We were busy those days, after supper, pasting up wallpaper which Cap'n Jethrow got for us in town at nine cents a roll—and pretty it was, too. As I recall, we papered the two front rooms for less than two dollars—not counting the flour and starch with which we made our paste. We hated to cover up the interesting news items on the papers with which the last job had been done, and the offers whereby we might buy houses, shipped all ready for us to nail together, or "genuine simulated diamond" rings for ninety-eight cents. But cover them we did. The two back rooms of the house had never been papered; the pine wood had long ago turned the dark brown of the inside of a smokehouse and we liked it that way more than we liked the idea of buying bolts of canvas with which to start a job of papering. In the front rooms the old paper—pasted directly to the wood, with never a split or wrinkle—served as canvas.

I think Brother Helms might have raised our rent, after seeing the wallpaper and the patched screen doors and the new screen wire I had tacked bodily over the windows, had he owned the house himself. But as it was he passed the improvements off with good grace—and while admiring the paper he saw the witch-ball on the mantel.

"What," he asked, "is that there?"

Sally and I glanced at each other. We had learned that protestations of ignorance were likely to meet our questions which touched on the occult in Big Piney. We had been waiting for someone to ask us about this.

I said, "Well—what would you say it was?"

"Why, I'd say it was whur a hawk had et a quail or quailedy-lookin' little ol' chicken an' then th'owed up the ball of feathers an' bones after the meat was di-gested out. . . . What I really meant, what you putt it up there fer?"

Lamely I said, "A curiosity . . . I never saw one before."

Later I learned that these "witches' balls" are quite common in the woods around Big Piney; Sally and I had many a wry grin in running across them. . . .

We were finding an inward something in us which we hadn't suspected was there. Was this the spell of the place, the spell of a new toy, upon us—or had we been born a hundred years too late?

CHAPTER XI

Box Supper

Today, this Friday of the fourth week, I was finishing my report cards as fast as the pupils appeared so I could put their attendance down, for there were to be big doings, come night. We needed all spare time to finish getting ready for our box supper—or box social, as some call it. The news had been "norated around" and we were hopeful that many women and girls would be here with boxes, and as many men and boys with money to buy them. But we had announced that corn and sweet potatoes and eggs or anything else which could readily be sold would be accepted in payment of bids.

Cap'n Jethrow had promised to take this produce off our hands, and with the money we intended buying work books—arithmetic, history, science, geography, art, spelling, music, and a general one of the history, geography, and resources of our state. All of us were fascinated by the samples which publishers had sent me, for they contained pictures to color or complete and blanks to fill in.

Already, before books were taken up, I could see this was going to be One of Those Days. Outside, a yammer arose. Jim Caldwell and Gerald Ashton—first and second grade—trooped in with wooden pistols. Frank Crinshaw, of the third, lingered at the steps.

Gerald cried, "Frank shot us and we shot him and then he

said he wasn't dead and shot us some more. We ain't aimin' to waste no more bullets on *him*."

Before I could say a word they turned and rushed out, shouting, "Pow! Pow! Pow!" at him. "Fall over!"

Vada Sue Baily brought me a note:

> Mr. Nelson
> I would like for Vada Sue to take
> a Dip theiria Shot
> Mrs. Baily

She meant when the health nurse came. Some of the people were fighting inoculation. They had vaccinated for smallpox for many years, beginning back in the days when one member of the family would go to the doctor (or to someone who had been vaccinated and whose arm was ripe). When the arm had reached the proper stage, all the other arms of the family would be lacerated and the oozings of the first one applied.

But these diphtheria shots were a different thing. They could be given only by a physician or by the nurse who stood in his place, and some believed that the employment of doctors was forbidden by the teachings of the Bible. The belief was not weakened by the fact that in the experience of the old-timers the doctors' patients back in the hills were likely to end in the graveyard.

This was of course because the old-time chills-and-fever doctor was not likely to be any better qualified than the "yarb"-grannies until, say, after the turn of the century. And even where good doctors were available they were seldom called until the granny-woman saw that the patient was slipping through her fingers. Hence, the sight of the physician, to the old-timer who failed to connect cause and effect, was likely to be a chilling one.

When his Bible told him to call in the elders and heal the sick "by the prayer of faith," it was not only cheaper but was likely to do as much good—so he reasoned. And preachers from the "poke-root" and "lightnin'-bug" churches (brush arbors) were

not likely to do anything to change that belief. Not only had they seen the sick rise and "take up their beds and walk" after being prayed for—but they were "just naturally agin doctors," as one of them said to me. Always the chanters of secret words of power and the workers of the supernatural have jealously spoken against the workers of other magic. Those who assure us they have the ear of God and are His mouthpiece are not willingly pushed aside. . . .

The morning air was bracing. Spirits were high. Here came Jim and Gerald again, Frank following all the way in. Jim exclaimed, "Frank hit me! Frank hit me!"

From Frank: "I never done it! All I done was jist kind of throw a rotten pear an' he got in the way of it—"

"Are you hurt, Jim?"

"Not so awful bad."

"Why did you throw the pear, Frank?"

"I was through eatin' the good off of it."

"All right. Take your seat as a reminder to be careful where you throw things. We settled that long ago, I thought."

"I wouldn't ahit him but he was cussin' me."

"Oh—so you did throw at him?"

"He called me a yeller-bellied bastard."

"I never! I never—"

"Didn't he, Gerald?"

From Jim, before he could be faced down: "Gerald made me! He putt me up to it—"

In my sternest way: "You boys take your seats. Keep them until you can get along together—even if it's until the last recess."

Soberly they sat down, making faces at each other as soon as they thought me busy. Johnny Masters arrived. Hoarsely he whispered, "What you all settin' in yere about?"

"None of yore business."

Johnny has a note also—concerning an educational film I had arranged to show in school. It says:

To Teacher, about the moving pictures If it is just about farm machinery and hogs and so on. it will be Alright for my Children. But if like in town no send them home

Mrs. Masters

This phobia against moving pictures, of course, was not exclusive with Big Piney but was and still is a tenet of the more boisterous religions all over the nation. Nor were all the Big Piney folks "agin the pictures." Cap'n Jethrow was likely to have several people in his truck on Saturday afternoon when hauling his purchases of cream to the county seat. More than one of them had remarked, in a discussion of the matter, that he "couldn't hardly wait till the Saturdays rolls around" to go to the show again.

A timid hand was raised by Frank: "I thank we could get along together now, Mr. Nelson."

"We'll try you at first recess if all of you feel that way by then."

Books. A hasty Bible passage. No reading from a story book this morning. We needed to rub a few rough edges off our program for tonight. June, Martha, Sandra, and Frances needed no practice on that mournful but lilting ballad, "The Maple on the Hill," but they wanted to run through it, so I allowed them to. Amos Masters wished to give his fox hunt imitation—alternate barking, baying, yipping, querulous whining when the trail is lost, the happy chase once more. . . .

Everyone had at least one "piece" to say. Some had dialogues. We ended by practising everything. As a matter of fact, we could afford to take off all the time necessary. This had been earned by hard work. The past week I had been amazed afresh each day at the amount of ground most of the pupils were covering. They seemed to have suddenly awakened.

I felt that at least part of this might be traced to drill in phonetics and consequent development of ability to read. The mysteries of this simple science of connecting particular sounds with letters had fascinated most of my scholars. They had be-

come so adept that Fritz promptly figured out that m-i-s-l-e-d spelled "mizzled," and he decided it meant "the feller was kind of addled—mixed up in his mind, sort of," which indeed he was.

But Clyde was still a puzzle to me. From ABC flash cards he could give phonetics, but still he could not read.

The time for tonight's gathering was "early candle light," which is to say good dusk—though of course there were not so many candles burned by Big Piney folks as among an equal number of fashionable people in town. But the hillman's day is divided by light and dark, the way his year is divided by heat and cold, and he clings to this old time-telling expression which to me has a fine and romantic sound.

If he is a thrifty man he begrudges quitting his work in field or timber before dusk; if the women, as well-conducted women should, don't do the milking he may quit a little early or he may milk by lantern light, granting there are no children to perform the chore. But on a special occasion, as for the box supper, he will "take out" of the field early.

And now, when school was out, the children rushed home to do their chores and get ready to come back. People would be here by families—parents, brothers, sisters, grannies. Except for the young blades, and the young ladies who were being courted.

In the hills a boy "carries" his girl somewhere, just as he did in the old days. Once it was in a rig, afoot, or on horseback, she either riding pillion behind the saddle or on her own mount —which he romantically led. Now he may use a car, but if you are either puzzled or amused when he says he carried her he may not know why. At any rate, we were hoping many a girl would be carried to the box supper by her sweetheart, for it was there we stood to make our best money.

This was a happy day in another way for Sally and me—and, in a minor way for Cap'n Jethrow. It was pay day, and we owed him almost ten dollars—sack of feed for the cow and pig, one dollar; the rest for groceries, a strip of bright oil cloth, and a few little odds and ends. We had lived well, too, for we had

brought much canned goods, largely the fruit of Sally's labors, with us; and we had our milk, butter, and cream, for the fall rains had made the pasture good so that the cow and calf could graze all they wished.

It was a long walk around to Kincaid's house to get my money. His dogs warned of my coming. I wouldn't have been greatly surprised, when he came out of the house, had he set them on me. He made no move to hush them and meeting me at the gate he spoke above their mighty barking:

"Here's yore pay if that's what you come fer." He handed me the warrant, which I would get countersigned at the box supper.

I mentioned the social and asked him to come to it.

"We ain't havin' no part in that school," he answered, the hardened muscles of his cheeks pushing his eyes half shut. "And I don't like no outsider comin' a-invitin' me to my own school if I was. But even if we come, don't be 'spectin' to get any money out of us. We got another school to put our money into this year."

I left. This was the first time I had seen him since they measured the schoolhouse for bars. I never knew whether those were simply a threat or were seriously intended, but the board finally decided they would look bad, and that a determined housebreaker could pry them off with a pole unless they were extremely heavy and well attached. So they compromised by putting locks on doors and windows. Perhaps Caldwell was back of the matter and was making a gesture to indicate that an eye was open for trouble, with retributive measures waiting.

When I reached home Sally already had the cow milked and the calf given her share, along with a handful of bran stirred into it, and the pig had had his feed and what skim milk was left from yesterday.

Having a baby seemed to be agreeing with Sally. She never looked better than now. She had her box ready for the supper, but she would not let me see how it was wrapped inside the brown paper sack in which she had placed it. That is part of

the fun, not letting one's swain see how one's box looks. We feasted our eyes on the warrant, which would not have to be discounted like last year's. It more than matched the list of figures we had made out the night before.

Sally caught up her hoe and I mine; our fall garden was thriving like smoke. If frost held off, we would be well repaid. If it came early, we wouldn't.

Pete Muehlbach wouldn't come to break ground when Sally wanted to plant it: "They'd be talk, was I to come when the man was away from home; an' on Sattidy I allus catch a ride to town." Brother Helms said he would come "in the evenin' when Brother Nelson is around to kind of show me about how he wants it done—soon as I get a new plow point." The time was set for next day. Two days later, when he hadn't arrived, Sally interviewed Mr. Caldwell—careful to suggest that the time she had in mind was after school.

He brought his team and plow after finishing a field. I relayed his question to Sally, who was standing beside me: How much garden did she want? We were almost out of money and a little fearfully she countered: "How much would a quarter's worth be?" After all, you could hire a man and team for a dollar and a quarter a day—but then it was as much trouble to come for five minutes' work as five hours'.

Stiffly he replied: "I don't hire out; this is neighborly work. How much ground do you need turned?"

Chastened, she showed him the plot she had set her heart on, and since then we had been figuring how best we might repay him.

I spotted Sally's box as she and several other women went to put their offerings on the table on the rostrum. Each was wrapped fancily, and jokes were called back and forth to young swains who would burn with jealousy if their girls' boxes were bought by someone else—for, of course, whoever bought a box

helped consume its contents in company with the lady who had packed it.

There were two or three cars on the ground, as dark came on. Other people had come in wagons. Many had brought chairs and these were carried in. By day, an iron heat can settle on the hills in September, but the nights are likely to be cool and this night was. The house was packed, the smells of sweat and tobacco were strong, and now and then I caught a whiff of corn whisky. A baby sucked noisily as I rose at the front and extended a hand for silence. I looked all around once more but nowhere did I see Kincaid, nor anyone who might be of his family.

I thanked people for coming. I told them that one evening soon we hoped to have a Friday night "literary" in which they could see how well the pupils were doing so that, at a later one, they could judge for progress. But tonight we had prepared only an entertainment—and with the money we hoped to raise we intended to buy books which would enable us to do more and better work. I could not forbear adding that our attendance record for the school month was almost perfect, and that I believed this indicated a genuine interest in the school by the children and parents.

I could see that I had done enough speechifying, even though I was getting a few agreeing nods. I glanced at the paper in my hand. I said, "Sue Anne Ashton will recite a poem, 'September.'"

It required forty-five seconds for her to do so, after reaching the stage. She was a pretty little thing and she received a big hand, although it is almost certain no one except the pupils and her parents knew what she said, for she forgot all her coaching once she was on her own. With the bit in her teeth she galloped through and ran to her mother, much pleased with herself.

Encores were invariable on the musical numbers; applause was always generous. But at last the speeches all were said and the songs all sung. Amos Masters's fox and hounds, stirringly presented, was as well taken as I gathered it had been for several

years past. And, as it happened, Lonnie Haskins, a notable singer and hand with the guitar, had brought his "inster-ment." He was the uncle of Martha Ashton who had taught her the old ballads she knew—and likewise he was the star auctioneer of the district. He had promised the Ashton children (he lived in their home) that he would officiate for us tonight.

Now he sang "Little Mohee" and an encore to the same melody, "Moonlight and Stars." He gave us a "folly" ballad—a song with a nonsense chorus—and ended with, "Oh, I'm a 'roamer' gambler—"

And now— Now it was time for supper. Grinning and preening himself, the florid musician took the rostrum again. He wore a new blue chambray work shirt with the shelf-creases still in it, rusty blue serge pants, and mulehide work shoes without socks. He had a fringe of reddish hair and a large Adam's apple and a look of sly benignity.

"Folks," he said, "you've seen this yere nice entertain-ment the p'fessor an' the scholars has worked up, an' I want to say that I fer one enjoyed it, an' I know I speak the senti-ments of one and all when I say that." He spoke slowly and deliberately, gesturing with his right hand. "The younguns done good an' they can be proud of theirselves. Now boys, get yore money ready an' when I call fer bids you better not hang back or somebody else will eat supper with yore girl an' it may be me. I know who two or three of them there boxes belongs to, an' I reserve the right to do a little biddin' myself. I come hyere hongry, an' I don't aim to go home so. . . . Mr. Teacher—have you p'inted yore clerks?"

Amos Masters and Fritz Baily, my two oldest boys, were taking this job since neither of them was sparking a girl. They were husky and rawboned but their awareness of the other sex so far consisted only in teasing. They took their places at my desk, supplied with paper on which to keep a record of who "bid in" each box, together with its identifying number which some of the girls had tagged on as the boxes were brought in at the beginning of the evening.

Successful bidders were to go forward one by one and settle with the clerks while the next box was being sold, but they could not take their purchases until the sale was entirely over. At that point they would go forward again, receive their boxes, claim their ladies—and eat.

I was disturbed to note that no one had come with any produce, unless it had been left outside, with which to settle bids. But we did have several strangers, evidently from neighboring communities, and they looked as if they might have some money.

Haskins took the first box from a clerk. He said, "Boys, that's a perty piece of doin' up, that there red ribbon, an' I bet what's inside is as good as the outside. . . . Now, this yere sale is fer a good purpose. Hit ain't fer foolishness. Ain't nobody give me leave to set ary price, but what do you say, folks—no bid starts less'n a quarter? Ain't that fair? If you taken yore girl to the restaurant in town you wouldn't get her back out fer no quarter, would you now? Boys, I'm workin' up my appetite. I bid a quarter myself—"

Someone called, "George, you aim to let ol' Lonnie eat with yore girl? He allus takes home the girl he eats with—"

Laughter.

"Thirty cents!"

"Thank you, Sam," from the auctioneer. "Now George, if'n you think this is Marthy's box and you hanker to eat with her, you better speak up. I tell you that was a right good cake she cooked. Speak up—"

"Don't get no chance, all you old gran'paws jawin' so hard." This was George Appleby who looked to be eighteen and whose folks were substantial farmers and stockmen. His brother was off at an agriculture school. His sally turned the laugh, and he said, "Thirty-five cents."

"I'd bid forty—" from another corner—"but I'm afraid George ain't got but thirty-five cents an' I'd hate to see him not get to eat with that girl—"

"Me, too," the autioneer admitted, "but I'd hate worse to let this box go fer a measly, pindlin' thirty-five."

Silence. No one wanted to risk forty.

"George," Haskins pronounced solemnly, "I'm aimin' to make you a proposition. If'n you'll say forty I'll knock it down to you."

Sure of himself, George drawled, "What's the matter with you flint-skinners? If thirty-five don't suit you, give me a scare."

"Skeer 'im, boys!" Lonnie begged. "If'n that girl wasn't my own niece, so's I *could* spark her home, I'd bid fo'-bits, shore as God made green apples—"

Some venturesome soul said, "Forty cents," and I put in with forty-five before George could speak. For a moment I thought we'd more than emptied his pocket and that I'd bought a box, but then he said, "Anybody else?" All was silence. "Four-bits," he intoned grandly.

Lonnie Haskins said, "Son, you've bought you a box. Come an' pay yore bill. . . ."

He had held out for a good bid on the opener to sort of set the pace for the evening, but now bids went faster. Apparently people had a little cash put back, or had trimmed their necessities when they took their eggs and cream to the store this week, for the boxes brought forty-five and fifty cents right along. One presently brought sixty-five, and one was run up to a dollar.

When they were about half gone, Haskins said, "Now, ladies an' gentlemen, before we sell the rest, we got a few little contests to work off. Votes will be a penny a hunderd, an' you can buy as many as you want to. An' you can vote fer yoreself if you feel like you ain't bein' done right by. We got prizes fer the winners. First-off, we're aimin' to 'lect the best-lookin' man, an' the clerks can put me down fer one of the candidates. Boys, I'll take a hunderd votes, an' there's the cash."

Laughter, as he tossed a penny to them.

Someone put up Cap'n Jethrow, with another penny. This contest was good mostly for laughs. It netted ten cents and Haskins received, as prize, a mirror from an old compact in

which to view his beauty. A jar of pickles, furnished by one of the girls, went to "the most love-sick couple"—Miss Callie Ashton, a good-looking woman of some forty-five years, and Lonnie Haskins, though they did not go together. There was only a distant relationship between Miss Callie and Lonnie's Ashton kin. He called cheerfully, "Callie, me an' you had jist as good to get married and eat these things an' put an end to gettin' 'lected ever' time." Miss Callie turned pink, but she smiled good-naturedly.

A bar of soap went to the man with the dirtiest feet, as indicated by the voting, and then came the *pièce de résistance* of the contest—the thing all had been waiting for: The Prettiest Girl. She would receive the cake, made and donated by Miss Callie, which rested in splendor on the little table usually occupied by the globe.

Apparently the strangers were here to avenge a wrong under which they had smarted for a year since a delegation from Big Piney attended one of their suppers and elected a Big Piney girl as the prettiest at the gathering. They were the object of glances and whisperings.

Two or three Big Piney girls were nominated. George put up Martha and plunked down fifty cents. Her name, with five thousand votes, was duly placed on the blackboard. In the white light of the Aladdin lamps there was quietness.

One of the strangers called, "Miss Mary French. And you better bring them votes down to a penny apiece so's we can keep track. We'll take ten dollars' worth to start."

"Thank you, Homer," Lonnie said equably. "We can use the money an' I don't blame you fer puttin' her up. Fer a gal that wasn't borned and raised at Big Piney, I think she's as perty as you'd find anywhurs. Mary, stand up an' let's see you. . . . Law me, now, she is perty, ain't she, folks? You Big Piney boys better putt your money whur your mouth is if you aim to keep that cake at home!"

The girl was pretty—a brunette, rosy-cheeked at the moment

from embarrassment—but overdressed. A few more half-hearted bids were made on our girl, but it was no use. The outlanders took the cake in triumph.

And the one called Homer said, "An' if any of you boys is countin' on lettin' the air out of our tars to get even, don't bother. We got the car right outside the door here an' we're watchin' it—"

There was now an undercurrent of bad feeling, it seemed to me, but things gradually brightened again as the box auction was resumed. Sally had played a trick on me, swapping boxes with another woman in private and then letting me see the one she took to the rostrum, and she grinned as, with four youngsters gathered wistfully around to help, I ate with their mother. The lady's husband was too wise a fox to be so taken in, and he presently sauntered up—a big, jowly man who filled his shirt and overalls to the fullest.

He said, "Reckon we ain't met, Mr. Nelson. . . . How's the ol' lady's box suit you?"

Sally, eating with one of the strangers, was taking this in. Well, I don't like cake made with bacon grease and iced with jelly, but I manfully said, "Fine. . . . Here—help yourself."

"Don't mind if I do—"

I accidentally moved my cake where the hound with him nuzzled it, and with loud protestations of regret I gave it to the beast. I have no doubt that this wise and thoughtful creature has at least one star in its crown.

But, over all, it was a fine evening. We took in thirty-one dollars and thirty-one cents, which cabalistic figure exceeded our dreams by at least eleven, thirty-one. We would have books galore, and we would have something else I'd dreamed of—a microscope. A small, toy-like affair, which would enlarge rather clearly to fifty diameters, could be had for six and a half dollars. I had seen such a one brought by Santa Claus to a child last Christmas. It would open up the outer fringes of a world but vaguely wondered about, so far, at Big Piney school.

CHAPTER XII

Uncle Johnny Haskins

Gradually we absorbed knowledge of our friends and neighbors, and of the intricate kinships of Big Piney. And we learned to guard our tongues because fresh kinships were always popping up to surprise us. For all we knew, the enterprising fellow who supposedly was running a "thumper"—a "lightnin'" still—at the fork of Little and Big Piney creeks might well be kin even to such an imposing personage as Cap'n Jethrow's high-bosomed, bespangled spouse who wore store clothes exclusively, and rimless glasses.

Not that Cap'n Jethrow put on any airs as he went about looking at his livestock here and there, or rattling to town in his truck. He made no bones of the fact that he just wore his teeth "for nice"—to town, for instance, or to church where he sang a startling bass. But even in town he slipped them into his pocket if he had a meal: they hurt his gums to chew.

Sister Viny's tongue was fortunately, or at least pleasantly (for the most part), loose at both ends. We seldom had to burn long with curiosity about anything. From her, from the Helmses, from here and there, we learned the history of Big Piney and its people. Of Uncle Johnny Haskins, for instance, and of how when his father died, after having a set of teeth made, the grieving widow took the plates back to the dentist. Said she: "My man can't wear these thangs no longer, an' we ain't aimin' to pay the rest on 'em." I learned much of Uncle Johnny. . . .

And so it was that the moment I saw the coffin box in the spring wagon, I knew it must be he who was stopping at the front gate one Saturday evening in the October dusk.

The community was filled with the descendants and kin of him and his first wife. His two present ones—each claiming the other to be an impostor and herself his "rightful woman"—had taken their offspring and gone home to the northern part of the state several years previously. Uncle Johnny followed them as soon as his affairs would permit, being somewhat hampered at that moment by the fact that he was in the state prison farm for manufacturing, possessing and selling whisky.

On his visits back to his Big Piney kin, he always brought his coffin which he had made himself, years ago, just in case. I could scarcely guess whether he was surprised at seeing me, a stranger, here at his old home place. Sally and I were now the proprietors of a dog which had adopted us. Uncle Johnny looked at me in silence from under his bushy white brows as I quieted the animal which was growling at the hound who lay on the coffin box, bristling and curling its lip contemptuously.

So this, I thought, looking at the shriveled little man as I went to the gate, is Uncle Johnny.

It couldn't be. Not the Uncle Johnny who "laid out" a panther with a club, chained it up, "drug it home" with a rope from his saddle horn, and leashed it to the tree yonder for several days before killing it to collect his bounty. Not the Uncle Johnny who went down under a rock in the river and hooked a hundred pound catfish, losing a lot of meat from his hand before it was over. The thing closed its jaws on him, but he hauled it out—with the same horse which "drug" the panther home, for all I knew.

Not the Uncle Johnny who, bloody but unbowed, snarled at an interfering sheriff in town: "Go start a fight of your own if'n you want one. This'n is our'n! Keep out of it 'fore you get hurt!" And who had two women in one hollow and kept them peaceable. . . . Well, reasonably peaceable, anyhow . . .

"Howdy." His voice was surprisingly mild even for one his small size. "Thought I was arentin' this yere place to Charley Helms."

"Oh," I explained, "I'm just renting the house from him." But I felt a moment's uneasiness. I could see myself paying rent twice.

He grunted. "Heared he was akeepin' sheep in thar. I guess it's better to have people. I wrote my nephew Jim to have 'im get them critters out but I heard he never done it. . . . How much you payin' him?" He flicked a gadfly off one of his little black mules which stood hipshot, switching its tail. "I heared," he added, "it's six dollars a month."

I couldn't deny it.

"I don't guess," he went on, "that I know you."

I introduced myself. Uncle Johnny said, "Well, don't reckon we're 'quainted. . . . Believe I'll step across the road thar an' get me a drank out of that thar sprang. . . . Allus packed my water f'm it. That well, hit's handy in the yard an' all, but I jist putt it down to please my woman. Don't satisfy a man's thirst. . . ."

I had proved to my own satisfaction, when I dosed the well with chlorine on our arrival, that the spring in the hollow across the road was nothing but the outburst of the vein which was tapped in the yard. The chlorine came through strongly into the spring—and besides, having discovered from Lonnie Haskins, Uncle Johnny's oldest boy, that I had the gift of witching for water with a peach limb, I had followed the stream out of the yard and down the hill to where it erupted.

Lonnie had come by to see me a few days after the box supper. I had the feeling, even after he was gone, that he had left unmentioned the real purpose of his visit. He said he was just over this way and dropped in to see how we were doing "on Pap's old place." I mentioned the well and the spring and he cut a peach limb to show me how the underground stream went that way.

The limb, really, was a fork—like a beanshooter stock with a handle three or four inches long, and the prongs five times that. Grasping a prong in either hand, with the single end of the fork turned upward, Lonnie paced across the yard. Presently the fork began twitching and jerking and finally it turned down.

It was fascinating to watch, no matter how he did it; it was thoroughly uncanny when I took the thing and paced and felt it come alive, turning down with a strength beyond my power to withstand. Whether it was pointing to water or not I don't know—but presently it turned down in the same spot for Sally.

Lonnie was taken aback at this. "Hit's a quare business," he stated. "I've allus been told only one member of a family has got the power to witch water. . . ."

We solved that by deciding there was no reason two people from different families might not retain such power after marriage.

"Well, now, they is somethin' to that," he decided. "I hadn't thought of it jist thataway." His voice was slow and filled with a changing cadence which made it pleasant to hear him speak.

Uncle Johnny was getting down and now I noticed the long, rough, welted scars on his hand and wrist. They looked as if he might well have got them putting his hand into the catfish's mouth while tickling it under the chin with the other—and all but got himself drowned when the critter unorthodoxly clamped down while he was slipping the hook through its gill. . . . At any rate, that was the story which was believed at Big Piney.

The water came out of the hillside through a pipe and dashed into a long hollow-log trough. Uncle Johnny took a stance and sipped steadily from the stream at the mouth of the pipe. Finally he straightened, panting, drying his mouth on his jumper sleeve. He seemed for a moment to study his reflection in the water which lay puddled on the sheet of limestone at his feet.

"Yup," he said, "that's *water*. Good fer the kidneys and j'ints. Good fer the body an' good fer the soul. . . . Had a babtizin' here once. . . . Feller name of Todd. We fit, bled, and died

together, me and him. Turrible good friends we was, me and him, but my youngest woman that lived here, she was awful fed up when he come to spend the winter with us. I'd take 'im back an' forth with me to whichever woman I was goin' to see. My other woman down the holler, she didn't mind him so much.

"Well, I knowed afterwards of course that my woman here—Juny, her name was—Juny, she got to shinin' around Todd, sweet-talkin' him, and I knowed afterwards it was jist to devil me into runnin' him off. But I didn't know it then an' when he taken it serious-like an' played back at her, I hit him over the head with a jug.

"He kind of got over it, but next day he taken down sick. Didn't have no feelin'. We finally give 'im up. Brung the satchel doctor from town an' *he* give 'im up. Todd told ever'body he didn't hold it agin me, hittin' him. Said he didn't want no blame placed. He was worried about his soul, though, reason he was talkin' like that. Figgered he wouldn't do so good after he was dead if'n he didn't fergive ever'body. I'd been kind of a preacher in my time—not ordained, but I'd saved a power of souls—an' I read 'im the Scriptures on it, how he had to fergive me. . . .

"Well, Todd he never had been saved. Wanted to be babtized, but I was in a backslode condition, livin' with them two ladies, not knowin' which'n I was really married to. I had the papers on both of 'em, but—but that's a long story. Any way you looked at it, I didn't want to sp'ile Todd's chances, tryin' to get 'im th'ough on my say-so. Not, as I say, that I hadn't done a power of good in my time. Brother Hollerin' Johnny Haskins they used to call me before I ruint my voice. When I got to goin' good you could hear me all the way f'm Big Piney schoolhouse to the mouth of the branch.

"I well remember my first sermon. The Lord had been pesterin' me to preach fer a long, long time, and one Fourth o' July my pap, he had me grubbin' sprouts. Hit was a dry, hot

time an' the sprouts come up hard, but Pap was apunishin' me fer some foolishness I'd done. I wanted to go to the speakin' they was havin' at the camp meetin' over at Big Flat. The Lord kep' sayin', 'Come feed my sheep,' and finally I said, 'Lord, here I am.' I th'owed down that ol' grubbin' hoe an' taken out up the branch an' never grubbed a sprout since. . . .

"Well, we couldn't get holt of another preacher, an' there was Todd wantin' to be babtized so I said I would do it. Didn't have a trought here in them days. The drinkin' place was filled up with clay an' gravel. Had to be a lot shoveled out to make a long enough hole to get him under. I stayed in the house gettin' close to the Lord whilst the boys was makin' things ready. Then we lugged Todd over an' laid him in that cold water. I was goin' to say the words an' dip his head, but he come up ararin' an' asnortin', well as I was. . . . Well, reckon I better mosey on 'fore I get benighted. How's everybody round about?"

With the reluctance of the hillman to eat in a strange home, particularly unless flanked by an acquaintance or two, he refused supper though it was on the table. As he got back into his spring wagon, I asked casually if he had much trouble bringing the panther home that time.

He shrugged. "Not a heap. But 'tweren't a power of credit to me. A man is s'posed to be smarter than a brute. I knocked 'im in the head after I'd kind of addled him with this here shot I got in when I seen him layin' up on the limb." I hadn't heard about the shot. "Kind of creased him an' he hit the ground, squallin' an' twistin' an' I lit in on 'im. . . ."

He drove on down the creek in the dusk.

Uncle Johnny's former troubles with the law were partly a matter of politics. The sheriff in the adjoining county (which came within a couple of miles of the house here) was facing election. He had to make an example of someone. Uncle Johnny was selected because he was well-known as a moonshiner and bootlegger around the sheriff's county seat, but, not living in the county, no vote would be spoiled by his arrest. For that matter,

the sheriff got along so well with his prisoners that on voting day when he took them to the polls they always voted for him, no matter if they didn't even live in his county.

It was when he was working in a lumber camp that Uncle Johnny acquired his two ladies. Coming out of a long drunk, he discovered that both claimed him. Both had what appeared to be valid marriage certificates, issued by Missouri justices of the peace. These officials at that time were able to sell a license and ceremony all in five minutes flat. I don't know why the matter couldn't have been settled by reference to dates on the certificates. Some said they were of the same date, others that the dates had been torn off; Sister Viny claimed that no one at Big Piney had actually seen any "wedding papers."

At any rate, it was said that Uncle Johnny stated that he loved them both and didn't want to hurt the feelings of either by making a difference between them, so he brought them both back home. Public feeling was much against him; his kin felt humiliated. He fell into the habit of living in a hut halfway between the two cabins where the women lived, and loudly declared that he was not living with either—just supporting them and taking his meals first at one house and then the other. Yet they both had children with the regularity of the seasons, and indignation died away as people found other things to talk about, but no one visited the two cabins. . . .

Uncle Johnny, it seemed, had now come back to Big Piney to help his Haskins and Ashton kin make sorghum. Late cane had done as well as Sally's late garden. Throughout Big Piney people were stripping leaves from the stalks in the fields, using a sharp-edged paddle with either hand. Headers followed behind, riding down the stalks with the armpit and clipping off the seed heads with sharp Barlow knives and tossing them into piles for chicken feed, or to be ground for hogs and cattle, and for next year's seed.

Others clipped the remaining stalks near the ground with sharp hooks, and made piles at intervals to be picked up on

wagon or sled. Thrifty farmers, short of feed, then went through the patch—if the molasses making was not too pressing—with a hay rake and gathered the stripped leaves into windrows and shocked them for forage. But usually, in the stubble fields, one could see the leaves littering the ground and blown out into the brush or caught in fences; for cattle turned in to pick them up, before a hard freeze, might be killed by nibbling at the suckers springing from the old roots. These are deadly to the ox family, as the cane itself may be at times—particularly in a drouth. Though cattle turned in on cane as it comes up in the spring may run on it all year, and thrive (the same being true of Johnson grass and sudan grass which has become cross-bred with sorghum), those unused to the stuff may fall dead almost as if shot, from eating only a bite or two. At other times cattle may break into fields and eat for several hours without harm beyond bloating. Hillmen attribute the fatal element to the powdery bloom which sometimes covers stalk and leaf.

There were two molasses mills in Big Piney, to which all the neighbors hauled their cane. My reasons for going to the one at the Ashton place one afternoon after school were several. One was to get me a bucket of "sogrum." Uncle Johnny was "give up to be" the best molasses maker the region had ever spawned—and the making of sorghum is an art as well as a science. Every molasses maker looks with contempt on all others, even though he himself turns out an off-color, off-taste product.

But my strongest reason for going was that Martha—who had been in the contest for prettiest girl at the box supper—had dropped out of school. My hopes and my pride over the attendance record of the first month had since been dashed as children stayed home "to he'p with the 'lasses," or to help with this and that. Not that it had been too bad. For the children had learned that they could not go on with their classes until they caught up on their back work, and they had been assured that they would do a year's work before they received a year's credit. I thought—and still think—that a fair basis on which to run a school.

But this matter of Martha was serious. Gerald and Sue Anne, her little brother and sister, said she had quit for good. They appeared not to know why. I had a feeling for several days that some of the other pupils knew why, even if these didn't—and then Sally learned from Sister Viny that "they's talk about Marthy. . . . You know George that bought that box of her'n at the supper? Well, anyhow, when her time come and passed this month, her ma got it out of her. Hit was on the way home f'm the box sociable it happened. . . . Seems like the sin ain't so much in the doin' but in gettin' caught. Her ma is gen'ally a right sensible woman but she kind of went to pieces and done too much talk amongst the kin an' then some of them done too much talk an' now it's out on her. . . ."

The boy "had left the country," though he had been considered quiet and steady. People seemed as much shocked over his part in the matter as Martha's. Opinion was divided: "He bagged her into it, she says. She didn't want to, but he bagged and bagged an' she give in. . . ." And: "Nice girls don't come to harm. She prob'ly led him on."

I was young and callow but the whole thing hit me hard. I felt as if I were the grandfather of the race. Martha had learned much this year. She was good-natured, she had a good mind, she was quick and clever—and now tragedy.

She would probably never find a husband now, unless it were some widower with children who needed a drudge or some old man who wanted a young woman to sleep with. And the thing I always came back to was that if I had never thought of the box supper it might not have happened. . . .

Since the Ashtons lived somewhat out of the way, I swept the school at the last recess, streaking the floor considerably with the extra water I used to keep down dust, and when books were over I headed through the woods, along the footpath, with Gerald and Sue Anne. Obviously they sensed that there was some drama about Martha; perhaps they knew more than anyone supposed. Hill people are extremely reticent, by and large,

with their children concerning sexual matters. Like the Victorians, they pretend that sex does not exist, and, as elsewhere, a variety of fables accounts for the presence of a new baby or new calf.

This is carried to the extent of thinking up further fables to account for the taking of cows to bulls, and of the activity of male and female animals which, in the very nature of things, sooner or later present spectacles for everyone to see. Euphemisms are used in referring to male animals: A bull may be called an "ox," a "steer," a "male cow," or, as is most common, a "male." The word has been so long applied to bulls at Big Piney that they have become synonymous, so that if one desires to indicate a "male hog" he must use the full term unless the subject of the conversation is already understood. "Male," alone, means "bull." I even heard of a deacon in a church, nonplussed at failing to find the husband at home when he took a cow to a neighboring bull, say to the woman: "Well—uh—which pasture is your top-cow in?" "Male" had become so clearly a sexual word that he felt it necessary to think of a euphemism even for it. Likewise, a ram is a "male sheep" or a "buck;" for some reason even a woman may use that latter term which, one might think, would be too descriptive of the mating process. A boar is a "male hog" or a "seed hog;" some few people even refuse the term "rooster" in mixed company. They say chicken, or—I have been told—if under strict necessity of being clear, he-chicken. "Cock" is the most avoided of all these words. If a lady must speak or be spoken to of a stallion or breeding jack, all sorts of circumlocutions are used. Commonly one refers to so-and-so's "horse," and the fact that he owns a sire is likely to be enough to make further identifying words unnecessary, even though he may also have work stock.

This is perhaps as good a place as any to tell of a jack Pete Muehlbach once brought in from his wanderings and which "stood the season" down in the timber at a modest distance from the house. Mr. Caldwell took a mare there, hopeful of getting a

mule colt from the deal. Many persons, taking a mare for breeding, believe that she should not be ridden until afterward, and of course when Sister Viny saw Caldwell leading the mare down the road she knew why. She stayed modestly back in the house, though she was visible from the road through the window.

Caldwell helloed and called Pete.

Answered Sister Viny: "He ain't yere; he taken his mascu-line an' went to town." Even she couldn't bring herself to say jack.

I had some thoughts, as I walked through the sharply cool woods with the children, that perhaps this reticence on the part of parents had led to Martha's downfall. But, on the other hand, there were certainly few people around Big Piney in whose lives there had been any scandal. There was Clyde "Caldwell's" mother, of course, who had made just such a slip as Martha; everyone seemed to feel that Mr. Caldwell's son had done a fine thing in marrying her. Certain it was that she had been a good wife to him, hard working and thrifty, and they seemed to feel toward each other about the same way as all the other couples who came to Sunday meeting. And if there was any remaining stigma upon her, it didn't show. . . . But would it be the same with Martha?

We went into a deep hollow, along a little stream ("Hit ain't got no name; hit jist runs into the branch") and then down the creek and up a hill where the timber had been deadened by girdling with axes. The trees stood gaunt and weird, the bark fallen away and leaving the wood gray with weathering. Most of the limbs had fallen, too, leaving naked stubs, but here and there a tree stood with great arms. The scene was desolate and somehow disturbing to me, but the children seemed unaffected by it as they led the way over fallen limbs and trees. Angora goats with silken, waved, mohair coats and fantastic horns scampered up to see us and blatted along behind us for a few hundred feet.

From the hilltop the smears of color ran off into the distance. Near at hand bittersweet and Ozark holly and red haws dripped

scarlet berries and other haws were waxy purple-black along the wayside. The timber was not deadened here and as Gerald hurled a rock into a hickory at a squirrel a great horned owl which he had not seen until now flew out and sped away on silent wings.

The children said something under their breaths, and they had crossed their fingers. They glanced at me then, somewhat abashed, and I let them see that my fingers were crossed, too—although I didn't know exactly why we were supposed to have them that way. I did know that owls are birds of evil omen—perhaps because of their appearance, their nocturnal habits, and the fact that their flight (because of their soft plumage) is noiseless. Some hillmen call the horned—or hoot—owls "witch-chickens" because of their hellish ability to come into a tree where chickens are roosting without disturbing the fowls. Inching along a limb, they nudge a hen nearer and nearer the end of it until finally she falls and they then grab her in midair, in talons which extend the size of a man's hand, and bear her away.

"What was that you were saying?" I asked Gerald. I knew that the Ashtons "believed things" deep and dark. I had seen it come out in various little ways at school. But now the children only glanced at each other, obviously unwilling to break the silence which doubtless had been enjoined upon them at home. I changed the subject—but Monday morning at school when Clyde Caldwell was the first to arrive I asked casually: "What's the charm that some folks say when they see a hoot owl, Clyde?"

"Charm?" He peered at me through the fringes of his hair which, dampened for combing, had now dried out enough to fall over his forehead. He reflected earnestly. "Well—le's see, now. I don't know nary charm, but they's an' old sayin' that some folks says but all it is is, 'Ol' Tom Walker [the devil] under yore hat, God the Father, God the Son, an' God the Holy Ghost.'"

I made a note of it in the composition book in which I now and then entered odd words, "old sayin's," and such. "Why do they say it?" I asked.

He grinned. "I bet you run onto an ol' owl with them Ashtons the other evenin', didn't you?" he asked acutely. "Hit's a caution to snakes the stuff they b'lieve. . . . Say, did you hear about the teacher over to Rock Point district aquittin'? The scholars wouldn't mind her an' she couldn't keep no order. She'd cry an' bag 'em to be good but they got up on the destes [desks] an' walked up an' down the rows alaughin' at her. She was a nervous wreck. Went acryin' down the road—"

"She should have whipped their bottoms," I told him. "Why do people say that old sayin' when they see an owl?"

"To keep it from catchin' their chickens, I reckon. I don't guess I ever heard nobody say. Them Ashtons, they b'lieve jist any ol' thing. Ol' Uncle Johnny used to set hisself up as a power doctor but all he was was jist a chills-an'-fever doctor an' I can cyore chills an' fever myself. He even claimed he was a witch-master. . . ."

"A witch-master?"

"Shore. Didn't you hyear about that case up in Missouri whur my uncle lives about them fellers havin' that man in court claimin' he'd witched their hogs? Gran'pa Caldwell, he's got the piece out of the paper about it. The judge, he got snortin' mad. First he thought they was jist greenin' him, and then when he seen they wasn't he was still mad. Told them fellers they ain't no sech thang as witches. Hit was jist a few months ago. Didn't you know about it?"

"No," I told him. (Later I checked with Caldwell; he had the clipping, all right. The judge was quoted as saying, "This court does not recognize the existence of witches!" The defense countered with John Wesley's statement to the effect that "if we give up witches, we must give up the Bible, because we are told of witches in it.") "No, I never heard of it."

"Them men got jist as mad as the judge. My uncle, he was right in court. They got sassy with the judge an' he had to threaten 'em. Folks figgered they might do something to the man they thought had set a spell on their hogs, like them hogs

in the Bible. . . ." Clyde shook his head wonderingly. "Hit's a sight what folks will believe, ain't it?"

But that talk was not until Monday and now, on Friday, to make it clear to the Ashton children I was not trying to pump them, I pointed down into Ashton Hollow and remarked, "They have a big fire going, haven't they?"

Below us, in the long, level valley was the Ashton place—frame rooms built onto the original log dwelling. There were several log barns and sheds with clapboard roofs. One apparently had been shingled at the wrong time of the moon, or with clapboards rived at the wrong time, for they had curled up, as we could see from here by the sharp, ripply pattern of light and shadow on them from the sun which was almost level with the top of the building. Even as we watched, it dropped enough so that the roof was only an expanse of weathered, oaken gray.

There were fences, some of rails from another day and some newer ones of wire. Small shocks of drouth-bitten corn marched across a ridgy field. Yonder were haystacks. Chickens industriously snatched up the grain a woman tossed to them. And beyond the buildings was the molasses mill.

At one side, at the mill proper, a horse went around and around hitched to the end of the long horizontal sweep which turned the vertical rollers through which a man fed cane. To the right was the long, low furnace of white stones chinked with clay to keep the heat under the pan—a shallow affair perhaps four feet wide and sixteen feet long—in which the cane juice thickened to molasses. A tin smokestack, rusty reddish black, rose at the end opposite where the wood was fed in so that the heat would be drawn the full length of the pan.

The smell of the smoke and of the rich molasses came to us on the evening wind as we circled to drive the cows down for milking. The woman in the lot saw us. She stood looking our way for a moment and then hurried into the house.

It was Martha.

"She was thinkin' about marrying George," Sue Anne said,

"but I reckon she never because his last name starts with *A,* too."

"What does that have to do with it?" I asked.

"Ain't you never heard *nothin?*" She looked at me wonderingly and chanted,

> "'Change the name and not the letter—
> Change fer the worse an' not the better.'"

CHAPTER XIII

The Meetin'

I was sorry I had come. Now that I was here there was nothing I could say, and rather than showing sympathy by my presence, I wondered if it didn't look as if I were merely curious and prying. Martha and her mother kept rigorously out of sight and there was nothing for me to do but go on to the molasses mill.

Lonnie Haskins had taken out the horse which pulled the sweep, and was now forking "plummy" (pomace—the crushed cane stalks) to one side so it wouldn't be in the way. Unfit for fuel because of dampness, it might lie there and rot like the shrunken piles from previous years, or perhaps some of it would be hauled to fill a ditch. It should of course be spread back on the land, and I made a mental note to bring up fertilizing methods in agriculture and homemaking. Not that I expected my words of wisdom to have any effect on the practices of my pupils' parents, even if they should be reported at home, but I hoped they might bear fruit in a future time when there were new homes.

Bees and hornets and yellow jackets were thick around the strainer cloth over the juice barrel at the grinder and around the five gallon lard stand into which Uncle Johnny was putting "skimmin's"—the foam and dross which rose on the boiling syrup. The can would be set aside and if the family ran out of molasses the skimmin's would be used, unless incomplete cook-

ing had allowed souring. Then it would make hog feed or perhaps vinegar.

John Ashton—Uncle Johnny's son-in-law—was cutting wood into short pieces. Dirty and hot, he gave me a short, "Howdy." I felt he resented my coming here, and I didn't blame him.

"The children told me you have sorghum for sale," I said lamely.

"Six-bits a gallon," Uncle Johnny agreed, "an' worth it. These is real'n's—" Filling a new and shiny bucket with hot molasses, he nodded toward a row of filled fruit jars. "You can read a newspaper th'ough 'em."

Sure enough, the jars of rich amber were clear enough so that the hand could easily be seen on the other side.

"If hit'd suit you to have 'em in an old bucket," Uncle Johnny added, "they're a nickel off."

I knew that he wanted his new buckets for sale in town so I took an old bucket and presently said I must go.

"Better take supper with us an' stay all night," Uncle Johnny invited, conventionally polite, but his son-in-law, whose home this really was, didn't even say, "Yes, do." I made my excuses and went down the trail which would take me to the road home.

It was late. The shadows were long and darkness was creeping into the hollow. I hurried to climb to the high ground where the sun still laced the ridges with redness.

Rooster gets up, sees the sky red,
He'll go to bed with a wet head.

The sky was red on Sunday morning but the sun was bright and clear as we later went to "meeting" at the schoolhouse. During the fall and winter and spring the brush arbor was not used. Big Piney had no regular preacher. Brother Saddler came from the county seat the third Sunday each month. He was ordained. Several lay preachers of varying abilities came on other Sundays. While the church was called "union," the prevailing brand of

religion leaned somewhere between what Brother Helms speaks of as the "old-time Hollerin' Methodist" and the present-day shouting religions. There was a dash of Baptist, but those of that persuasion never openly objected to taking communion with the others.

Today Brother Saddler was to begin a revival. Sally and I arrived early in order to dust from Friday's sweeping, lest there be talk that the teacher was not doing his janitor work. Brother Saddler and Sister Annie, his wife, and their four children—Tom, Daisy, Anna Marie and Junior, aged six to twelve—were just getting out of their new car. With their guitar and mandolin cases, they waited for us and there was a lot of hand shaking. Sister Annie, a large-breasted woman, considerably heavier even than the well-padded Brother Saddler, had her short white saint's cape already about her shoulders, though most of the saints, we understood, did not put these on until they entered the church. We had seen none worn until now, for they were more or less put aside except during the rising heat of a revival.

Beaming upon us, Sister Annie remarked that in the morning I would have four new pupils. For how long?

"Well—as long as interest holds in the meeting," she explained. "We like to live right in the community where we're holding a meeting. Gives us a chance to dig out all the old hatreds and troubles so they can be straightened up and settled. The children get such good experience going to different schools, like in Oklahoma where the Lord wonderfully gave us fifty-six souls since we were at Big Piney a month ago—"

"Fifty-seven," Brother Saddler interrupted.

My reaction to the news that I would have four new pupils was not one of joy at the opportunity to bring light to young minds. I was resentful at the parents. I knew how completely it would disrupt things, bringing these children in and gearing the classes to be sure they were properly caught up with what we were doing before they were dragged off to break into another school's program. I had a feeling that Junior, the eldest, knew exactly

what I was thinking, for he gave me a steely, calculating look as if taking his new teacher's measure. . . .

The turn-out for church was good, the singing loud and lusty. The hymn books looked queer to Sally and me because they had shaped notes which, by their diamonds, squares, and so on, indicated the do-re-me-fa-sol (as itinerant country singing masters teach it)-la-ti-do. The Ashton clan was absent so we had to get along without Lonnie's heavy bass.

The sermon was on tithing. A month ago, when Saddler had collared me privately, I mentioned mildly to him that we were more than tithing when one considered the books and things we were buying for the school. Now, glancing my way a good deal, he cried:

"Do we hope to sneak by the Lord's command by giving money to a person or an institution and calling it a tithe? Give ye a tenth unto the Lord, the Lord says, so that your storehouse shall be full! Remember, you are giving nothing to the Lord when you give Him even a tenth. That is a just debt. What you give after that is your gift."

His voice had risen until the windows actually rattled. Then, in a dramatic whisper:

"How do you go about giving to God? There is only one way we can do that—and that is to give to the servants of the Lord so that they may carry on His blessed work!"

There was a lot more of it. Sally said afterward that she had planned to ask them to eat Sunday dinner with us but somehow she lost her enthusiasm for it. But it would have made no difference. After the final song and the benediction, the brief altar call having brought no one to the mourners' bench, I heard Miss Callie inviting them. Miss Callie had been married once—for a week, as she put it—before her husband went off to die in the trenches.

Brother Saddler said, "Thank you, Sister Callie. We will come stay all night with you tonight if you invite us—but this afternoon we have it upon our hearts to see about another thing of

which the Lord has spoken to us." He raised his sandy brows significantly. "How is the road down to the Ashton place?"

So Sister Callie invited the teacher and his wife home for the dinner she had lavished hours upon for the Saddlers. The home was a great, rambling, solid frame house which once had housed a family of father, mother, grandmother, and Miss Callie and her fifteen brothers and sisters (no twins or triplets, either!). Now there were only Miss Callie, her ninety-seven-year-old grandmother, Miss Callie's youngest sister Vada, and Vada's crippled husband.

He was Digby Haskins, remotely kin to Lonnie, Uncle Johnny, and the Ashtons, as well as to the Appleby clan to which Martha's absconded sweetheart belonged. Clubfooted, he was still a hard worker and a good manager. He had sleek stock and good fences. But the entire afternoon, I was unable to find any subject—even cattle, crops, or weather—on which he seemed to care to converse. Doubtless this was as boring and frustrating to him as to me. But the old grandmother was a fascinating talker. She told me many a good yarn—and that evening at church (after I went home to do the chores, and met Sally again at the schoolhouse) Miss Callie said to me: "Brother Nelson, Gran'ma says you're the most interesting person she has talked with in years."

It was proof all over again that the best conversationalist is the best listener.

I said, "Tell her I return the compliment—with ten per cent interest. I enjoyed being with her."

I didn't know then how richly that message to the old lady was to repay me later, in a more substantial way than mere words.

Everyone knew that the Saddlers had gone to the Ashtons'. How they had garnered the news of the neighborhood so quickly, unless—which didn't seem probable—someone had written them, we couldn't imagine.

Now, as clouds gathered darkly, promising to fulfill the red sky of the morning, the score or so of us "socializing" in front of the schoolhouse heard Brother Saddler's car carefully

growling over the bumps in low gear, pulling out of Ashton Hollow three quarters of a mile away. But no one mentioned the thing of which we were all thinking.

Presently, before the car arrived, we saw the Saddler children, Lonnie Haskins, and Gerald and Sue Anne coming out of the short-cut woodland trail. Lonnie was reserved but not churlish as he spoke to us. Everybody talked about the weather. The children went to play on the seesaws, except for the older Saddler boy. No one dared ask if the rest of the Ashtons were coming, but I think none of us were surprised when Uncle Johnny, the Ashtons, and Martha got out of Brother Saddler's car.

I think, too, that we were all glad it was dark enough to hide our faces. There were murmured greetings. Then louder talk. The mothers of some of Martha's former chums were keeping their daughters at their sides.

Heartily, Brother Saddler said, "Well—I reckon we better get started."

The mantles of both Alladin lamps were broken and Cap'n Jethrow had forgotten to bring more from town, so for several Sunday evenings people had been bringing ordinary kerosene lamps from home and taking them back again.

In the dim yellow light, Martha stood for a moment looking around as if she had not seen this place for a century. Then she took her old school seat. Her mother crowded into it with her, looking straight ahead in a sort of shamed defiance while Martha sat with downcast eyes.

We opened with a song. Then Sister Annie, the preacher's wife, "led us in a word of prayer." We sang again:

"What a song of joy will ring
For our soul's eternal King,
When on ear-r-r-r-r-r-th . . . no more we ro-o-o-o-o-o-oam!"

With basses, tenors, and altos coming in "on the parts" the room was filled with an orchestration of voices.

"Next, let's have 'Jesus of Nazareth,' " Brother Saddler boomed. "Give us that pitch, will you, June?"

June gave the pitch for the different parts on the wheezy organ. Brother Saddler led off:

"I once was a stranger to grace and to God
And knew not the dangerous path that I trod . . ."

"Now," Brother Saddler exclaimed, "let's have that grand old warning, 'There's an Eye!' June, the pitch, if you please!"

"There's an all-seeing eye watching you—watching you!
You better be careful what you do—what you do!"

The Saddlers had been picking guitar and mandolin while we sang. Now, with their children, they gave us a "special":

"Drifting down, down, down, drifting down—
In the foamy cup of beer, drifting down . . ."

Then the older boy and girl took the instruments and the four children gave us a special of their own:

"Little buds of love are we, growing for the King,
Letting little playmates see that to Him we cling. . . ."

Then there were testimonials, with various ones rising to say briefly that they were not ashamed to witness for the Lord, and that they wished the prayers of all Christians. But there were suppressed sighs and weary glances when Brother Helms rose. However, Brother Saddler was loaded and ready. The moment Brother Helms used a phrase suggestive of a hymn, the minister cried, "Hallelujah! Press ever forward, as the brother says!" He struck into "Press Ever Forward." The congregation joined in, and when the song was finished Sister Saddler rose to testify before Brother Helms could take up again. Like the Baptists and Methodists present, Sally and I kept silence.

When no one else wished to testify Brother Saddler said, "Brother Nelson, will you take the requests for prayer?"

I didn't know what he meant and in some embarrassment I said so. Kindly he answered, "Brother, I didn't aim to put you in a hard spot; I forgot you was raised in a church where they don't take much stock in prayer. And that is meant as no rebuke to you. It simply shows a sign of the times—a sign that evil is so abounding that at long last the Lord Jesus must come back to us, even as He promised He would. To show you what I mean, I'll take the requests. . . . There's a hand. . . . Sister?"

"I want prayers for the saving of the soul of a loved one," said Miss Callie's younger sister. Everyone knew she was speaking of her husband.

"Praise the Lord! Who's next—?"

"I want the Lord to undertake for the healing of my body, Brother Saddler."

"Amen! Praise the Lord! Anyone else?" And, finally, "Let the saints gather forward to join together in u-nision and strength—"

The room was filled with murmured "Praise the Lords," and people rose and went to the recitation benches which had been placed in a row below the rostrum for an altar. There they knelt, and Sally and I felt conspicuous being left at the back with so few others.

"Lead us to the Throne, Brother Caldwell," the preacher requested. He knelt down with the choir at one of the two benches remaining on the rostrum by the organ.

Brother Caldwell started praying in a deliberate and thoughtful way: "Now, O Lord, we are gathered together this Sabbath day giving honor and glory unto Thy precious name as Thou hast commanded—" Gradually the murmur of other voices grew, as each of the saints was moved to raise his voice. Soon all were loudly praying as many different extemporaneous prayers as there were people. Gradually the voices rose to a steady, sustained crescendo, and after five minutes or so they dwindled until only Brother Caldwell was still praying. When at last he said, "Amen," the others echoed, "A-a-a-a-a-a-men. . . . Yes,

Lord, in Jesus' name," in low voices. They rose stiffly and flexed their knees, tender from the floor. Mrs. Ashton had done her praying at her seat, though one of the saints. Her face was taut as she dropped a coin in the collection plate I passed, but neither she nor Martha looked at me.

Brother Saddler said, "I will take my text from that portion of the Word wherein Jesus saith, 'Go and sin no more.' "

I suppose Martha herself subscribed to the saying that a sermon was no good unless it hit her. I don't know whether she cringed or not as Brother Saddler flung brimstone with one hand and promises of salvation, in return for repentance and conversion, with the other, but I did. I felt a burning shame to be part of this. He gave it to us again and again with both barrels, from the woman taken in adultery on down.

His delivery would start in a normal tone, become gradually faster and louder and higher-pitched until he was shouting steadily, apparently never even drawing breath for minutes at a time. His face reddened and finally purpled with effort. Finally we could not hear the rain which now beat against roof and windows.

Abruptly then he dropped to a solemn whisper, panting along until he could breathe again. He carried us back to the Flood, running across the rostrum to pound on the wall (the door of the Ark) as he screamed, "Noe-y! Noe-y, let me in! Let me in!" But Noah refused to hear his plea. He dropped to his knees, fighting the raging waters around him, and then, arms wide, still on his knees, he made the plea that all who were now uneasy for their souls come knock at the Ark to which Jesus would gladly admit us. For outside was damnation and death.

The alert Sister Annie struck up, "Tomorrow's sun may never rise—" and the saints rose to their feet, singing with her, as still on his knees Brother Saddler sobbed, "Won't you come? Won't you come, ye that are weary and heavy laden?" We all rose.

It was only now that I noticed Sister Viny was not among even

the late arrivals. Brother Helms startled me by putting an arm around my shoulders.

"Are you shore all is right with yore soul, Brother Nelson?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Are you sure all is right with yours?"

That obviously was not the expected answer. But, recovering balance after a moment, he thrust out his limp hand and gave mine a clammy shake.

"God bless you," he said thickly. "I'd love to go work on Cap'n Jethrow but he hardens his heart an' claims he's saved—" He cleared his throat. "Besides, I owe him money an' it makes him mad. . . . Do you owe him—?"

A woman shouted shrilly as she got her husband to the altar, and half a dozen saints hurried to kneel around him and "pray him through." Two or three others were now working on Martha. She stood, head down, now and then nodding faintly, or shaking her head. And at last she went stumbling down the aisle with two of them. Brother Saddler leaped to meet her, intoning, "God bless you, daughter! God bless you!"

She fell to her knees and buried her face in her arms on the mourners' bench. "Pray!" her mother cried, kneeling beside her. "Pray, honey!" And the girl became the nucleus of a writhing circle of shouting humanity.

"Let's get out of here," I whispered to Sally. But she held me back: "We can't. . . . They wouldn't understand."

It kept on endlessly, it seemed, but really for only thirty-five minutes by the clock ticking on my desk. (I left it at school now, winding and setting it on Sundays at church for Monday's work.)

The praying dwindled and stopped. Wiping away sweat, Brother Saddler spoke earnestly: "I'm willin' to stay and wrastle all night with the devil for your soul, Martha, if you feel like it will do any good. But the Spirit don't seem to be here tonight. The meeting is cold. Can't you just open your heart and let

Jesus come in? He doesn't want to see you burn in everlasting hell fire."

"She wants to," her mother explained, "but she don't know how she's s'posed to feel when she's saved."

Several panting saints said she'd know when it happened.

There was another "season of prayer," but already the people were leaving. Martha promised to come back tomorrow night and they let her rise, red-eyed and worn-out and distraught.

Next morning, just after recess, I was startled to see Sally go by the schoolhouse. Later I found out why. From our friend, the mail carrier, when he stopped at the clump of boxes where ours stood, she had wheedled a bit of information.

She wrote that information on the outside of the envelope she had already sealed and stamped and which bore the name of Martha's young man. George had not written home, it seemed—but his mother had sent three letters in the past week to Appleby kin in a little town in an adjoining state.

CHAPTER XIV

Uncle Johnny's Coffin

It was that same day I whipped my first pupil—Brother Saddler's twelve-year-old Junior. Not because of his remarks about our little microscope, which would turn a drop of slimy water into a fairy land of foraging swimmers. Nor yet because of his constant speaking out to me from his seat, disturbing everyone, regardless of what I was doing. Repeatedly breaking his lead, he ground away an entire pencil at the sharpener before noon, but I let that pass too.

The other three of the four "little buds," as I had been thinking of them from the "special" they sang, were cooperative, but as woefully backward as I feared they would be. As the day wore on, Junior extended himself with the most sly and subtle irritations, each of which was too small of itself to put the finger on. So I tried to be overly helpful, thinking perhaps that he sensed an antagonism in me which brought out the worst in him.

Just as the pupils went out for the afternoon recess I glanced out the window to see Martha Ashton coming through the edge of the woods along the trail from their hollow. Junior's voice rose in a high chant:

"Mama, mama, have you heard?
Papa's aimin' to buy me a mockin'-bird.
If the mockin'-bird won't sing,
He's aimin' to buy me a golden ring.

If the golden ring is brass
He's aimin' to buy me a lookin' glass.
If the lookin' glass don't shine
He's aimin' to shoot that beau of mine!"

This old rhyme is tied up with the superstition—which probably is held with about as much conviction as making wishes on red birds—that if the breath of a girl clouds a mirror she is not a virgin, or at least could be easily seduced. At any rate, I have seen hill girls being careful to keep away from cold mirrors. Little girls are simply told it's bad luck "to blow on a lookin' glass," so perhaps some of the big ones who are careful don't know why. If they do know why, and discredit the superstition, it would still look brazen of them to flout it even before other disbelievers.

It was obvious that Junior's sing-song was with malice aforethought and that his slur was well understood by the older pupils—and by Martha, who had halted stock-still at the edge of the playground.

"Cut yourself a switch, Junior," I ordered.

Grinning cockily he flicked his knife open and cut a slender hickory sprout higher than himself.

"Put your hands on your knees," I said, and, startled, he exclaimed, "You wouldn't use that on a body, would you?"

"You chose it." I think he would have run except that I had outrun him in games at noon.

By the time I had switched him Martha had disappeared—and along with her had gone Gerald and Sue Anne. I learned then that she had told the little ones they must hurry if they wished to see their grandfather—Uncle Johnny—alive again; he had been taken with a spell.

So it was that after school I made my second journey in four days to Ashton Hollow.

Several men stood around in the yard, talking in low tones. They nodded quietly at me. Uncle Johnny, they said, was better but mighty low. He had been seized with the spell at the sorg-

hum mill just as he put the lid on the final bucket of molasses.

"Hit was jist as if he was bein' spared to finish the run," Lonnie Haskins told me with his hand sharply emphasizing.

Mrs. Ashton came from the house and, standing a few yards away, spoke to her husband. He went to her and then turned to me. He said, "He wants to know if you'll write his buryin' piece?"

It turned out that he wanted it done now so he could hear it read and give it his approval. He wanted me to come in to talk with him. I doubtless exhibited the silly, false optimism which people seem automatically to put on at such a time. As I entered the dim room where the light of the hearthfire played redly on the head and footboards of the high wooden bed, and over the beamed ceiling, I saw Uncle Johnny, scarcely making a lump under the covers.

"Howdy, P'fessor," he murmured. "I don't feel so bad. But this time tomorrow I'll be under the ground. I done got the ones picked to dig my grave in the mornin' an' the ones picked to carry me to it. . . . I figgered this was comin' on. I heard the death bells in my ears last new moon, an' I knowed then I'd never see another'n. . . . That's why I never raised no fuss about Charley Helms agittin' more rent money out of you than he's payin' on that whole place, house an' land both. Didn't want to start no neighborhood trouble in my last days."

People moved silently back in the shadows, faces eerie as the fire of lightwood rose and fell.

"Don't wear yo'se'f out atalkin', Gran'pa," a woman begged.

Uncle Johnny moved his head restlessly. After a little time, he said, "I been in this country a long spell. I was brung in when I was three year old. First thing I can remember was how Pap would put grains o' corn on a fishhook an' drag 'em back o' the wagon as we come f'm Tennessee. . . . Chickens was lots of times in the road whenever we was close to a house. . . . We had lots o' chicken to eat. . . ."

His voice dwindled. His eyes closed. He picked at the tufts of string with which the "coverlid" spread over him was tacked.

He said, "Marthy? Marthy . . . Where's Marthy at—?"

Martha came out of the shadows. She had been crying. "Here I am, Gran'pa."

"I heared some asayin' you felt like you'd brung this on me—" He sighed. "That there is foolishness. Ever' man's time comes. . . . Now, listen, you all. Ary soul that blames this on Marthy, they'll have me to reckon with. I been a man that all his life could do things. I don't hold that the power will be lost after I'm gone. Hit may be that after I'm gone, so as my sperrit can move about free an' easy, I can do what I ain't been able to do in the flesh. Hit may be that I'm bein' took fer a purpose—" His voice dwindled again.

Hill people hide their more tender emotions under gruffness or downright rudeness. There was only a sob or two now, and a murmured, "Oh, Jesus, Jesus," from someone. Martha stood by the bed, crying quietly. Then heads were cocked. Other ears quicker than mine identified the faint vibration in the air as a car.

It was Brother and Mrs. Saddler, and Sally was with them.

Other neighbors crowded in, whispering hoarsely. The preacher went to the bedside.

"How are you, Uncle Johnny?"

"Porely . . . My clothes will soon be hangin' on the line."

I thought his mind was wandering.

"Whur is John at?" he demanded.

Brother Saddler said, "We're going to pray for you, Uncle Johnny."

"No use prayin' fer me to get well. I'll be under the ground this time tomorrow. How is it fixed fer weather? . . . Whur is John at?"

John was pushed forward.

"They's a screech owl settin' on the ridgepole o' the house,"

Uncle Johnny told him. "Yo're the best shot. Take my gun out and shoot the critter. . . ."

Silence, except for the faint sound of the fire and snuffling of noses.

"Go shoot it 'fore it has a chance to holler. You hear me, John?"

"I heard you, Pa."

John hesitated, then made his way to the fireplace and took down one of the rifles there. I escaped the hot, smelly room, following him out. There was no bird of any kind on the ridgepole. Lonnie Haskins said, "Well, it prob'ly flew 'fore we got out yere. . . . Shoot the gun off to ease his mind, John."

John gave me a distasteful look as if he resented my presence. Then abruptly he pointed the gun upward and fired. We went back in.

Uncle Johnny said, "Did you kill it?"

A hesitation. What, I thought, if he wants to see the carcass? "I feathered it perty bad. . . . Hit went afloppin' off an' fell in the woods—"

Brother Saddler said, "All the saints gather round the bed. . . . It is not given unto us to know the will of God until after His precious will is shown, or as it is given us in the Word. But we do know that He says to call in the elders and to anoint with oil and that there shall be healing from the prayer of faith and the laying on of hands. . . ."

He was holding a small bottle. He said, "How is it with your soul, Uncle Johnny?"

"My soul feels good."

"Have you repented of all your sins?"

"Yes."

"Do you take Jesus Christ the Son of God as your Redeemer and Salvation unto life after death?"

"Yes, Brother Saddler . . . Where's the p'fessor? I want all my children named in my funeral writin' but jist the name of my first woman. . . . Some of 'em can tell you about it. . . . Don't

waste no time puttin' oil on me, Brother Saddler. . . . Turn me an' lift me up so's I can see down the holler. . . ."

Two or three of them lifted him up. He said, "That's perty. That's mighty perty. . . . Hit'll rain tomorrow all right. . . . If hit starts 'fore seven, I want my funeral-preachin' 'fore noon so hit'll be whilst the rain is still afallin'. . . . In the old days, ever'-body was buried 'fore noon. . . . An' I want to be in a windin' sheet. I don't want to be in my overhalls. . . ."

He turned his head. "P'fessor?" he said. "Whur's the p'fessor at?"

I moved forward. Looking fixedly at me, he said, "You write this up good. . . . Put in that I'm one of the old pioneers—"

Evidently he had a second attack just here. He was alive one breath, as the men held him, and dead the next. People looked at me in mingled horror and relief, because the last person a dying one looks at will be the next to go.

John Ashton moved to the mantel and opened the clock and stopped it, for, should it stop of its own accord while the body lay in the house, someone else in the family would be taken within the year. A woman, face averted, was already spreading a cloth over the bureau mirror, lest some hapless person catch a glimpse of himself before Uncle Johnny should be carried away and not live out the twelve-month. Sobs rose softly here and there. Brother Saddler was quietly praying, two or three of the saints joining in as they knelt by the bed.

Lonnie Haskins said, in a low voice beside me, "Pore pa . . . Thank the Lord, he shaved this mornin', an' trimmed his whiskers. . . ."

And someone else: "Lonnie—whur's Sue Anne at—?"

I went out with the women and with the men who were not to wash and lay out the body. I had been crowded into the kitchen and was going out the back door, but John Ashton said, with stiff reserve: "The back door is fer close-kin till after the buryin'. . . ."

So I went out the front. People were edging toward the gate, speaking of chores and saying they would be glad to come back to sit up with the corpse if needful. Almost before I knew it I was alone. As I looked around for Sally, I saw her at the end of the porch, standing on the ground looking fixedly at something I couldn't see.

She glanced at me and whispered, "Come here."

I went. I saw Lonnie Haskins and an old lady of the Ashtons' Baily kin, and Sue Anne out by the bee gums which sat on a long log under a peach tree by the smokehouse. Sue Anne was squatted before a gum. She rose and moved to the next one.

Sally said, "What's she doing?"

Behind us, a short, bitter voice said, "She's tellin' the bees. But you all probably don't take stock in that. You all are smart and fancy in yore ways."

We turned to see Adam Kincaid, the gnarled old father of the school director.

He stepped upon the porch and stalked into the house. Lonnie Haskins saw us now. When the bee ceremony was over, he came to us. He said, "Mr. Nelson, I want to say much obliged fer the piece yo're aimin' to write fer Pa. . . ." And, sheepishly, "Tellin' the bees is jist an' old custom. Hit prob'ly don't mean a thing—though some says that if the oldest woman an' the least youngun of the kin don't tell 'em when they's a corpse layin' in the house they'll all leave. . . . We done it to ease Gram Baily's feelin's, mostly—" He caught his breath, listening. "Lord, that's a sound I can't stand—"

I heard it. Sally said, "It—sounds like cloth tearing—"

"Hit is. . . . They're tearin' Pa's windin' sheet . . . When I was a shirt-tail youngun—an' that was in the days in these yere hills when a boy jist wore a long shirt, down to his knees, and never got no jeans till he was maybe 'leven-twelve year old—hit was all windin' sheets at funerals, after the old Bible ways. Later on, when young fellers got to buyin' weddin' suits—after they got too good to wear homespun, an' the girls too lazy and ignorant

to spin an' weave—why, if'n they hadn't outgrowed their suit when they died, or got too fat, or whatever, hit'd be tuck up out of the chest an' they'd be buried in it. . . . But Pa never would have a suit. He weren't fancy. . . . An' he allus said he liked the old ways of the Bible times. . . ."

He sighed. He said, "P'fessor, times like this, hit makes a man think, an' want to straighten up. . . . I've allus said I wouldn't say a thing to a body's back I wouldn't say to 'is face—but that ain't so. Anybody says that, he ain't keerful with the truth. . . . When you folks come yere to Big Piney, I might've straightened things up about the way Helms was doin' you on that rent, but you all looked stuck-up to me, an' I said as much to several. . . . An' besides, hit ain't often you see a town feller that can be told anything noway. I don't know how smart you are, but Pa taken to you—an' in this trouble we're in now, I feel like yo're right simple."

It was obviously a compliment. It was some time before I learned that in a general way it meant "good-hearted" and the opposite of "uppity."

"I feel," he said, "like yo're our friends. . . . I hope if you've heared any talk I've made you'll putt it in the past. . . ."

We murmured in embarrassment. Presently a couple of men came out, Caldwell and Charley Helms, who had been helping with the laying-out—for this chore is always taken off the shoulders of the kin.

Caldwell said, "Where's Uncle Johnny's coffin, Lonnie?"

It was in the barn, it seemed.

Caldwell said, "Now what about the death certificate?"

"Well—hit costs ten dollars to have the doctor come to Big Piney," Lonnie pointed out. "We don't hold with havin' doctors, an' I'd hate to go in debt fer money we don't have jist to have some clabberhead write on a piece of paper that Pa is shore 'nough dead. . . . Besides, they won't come without the cash in hand."

"Whatever you think," Caldwell told him.

And as we went to the barn for the casket Uncle Johnny had made for himself Caldwell told me that several years ago some families had been fined for buryings where there had been no death certificate. But since the change of county administration it seemed there had been no trouble.

In the dimness we found the casket on sawhorses in a crib. It was inside its coffin box. When we started to lift it out, it was unduly heavy. And as we opened it, the odor of corn liquor struck our nostrils. It was full of jugs.

No one said anything for a moment. Then Brother Helms breathed, "Lord help!"

And Caldwell said, "So *that's* why he hauled that coffin around with him."

CHAPTER XV

The Settin'-Up

Lonnie hesitantly explained that if it wouldn't put me out they would like to have the "writin'" about Uncle Johnny for use at his funeral in the morning. So we went in to the kitchen table, after viewing the body in the coffin wrapped mummy-like in strips of torn-up sheet as far as the chin. Greenish silver dollars from Uncle Johnny's little horde were over the eyes.

Neighbor women and the women of the family went about the kitchen cooking huge pans of biscuits and cornbread and potatoes and strong, rancid meat from last winter's butchering. With one of the children's pencils and tablets I began getting the vital statistics from Lonnie, there by the dim lamp. Neighbors kept coming to pay their respects, invariably bringing food. Most of them stayed a few minutes and departed, perhaps leaving one member of the family for the "settin'-up."

Brother Saddler felt that some folks might turn out for meeting—some, he put it, who hadn't heard about Uncle Johnny. What he perhaps meant was that some might who were not on visiting terms with the Ashtons. He and Mrs. Saddler ate at first table and left, saying they would return later. Brother Saddler gave Martha a hesitant reminder that she had promised to be at the altar, "hanging unto the horns of salvation," again tonight, but when she said she just couldn't "go off and leave Gran'pa" he didn't press the matter.

Martha was much depressed, obviously feeling that her sins had been visited upon Uncle Johnny. She and Sue Anne, it seemed, slept "up in the sleepin' place"—a half-finished loft room, such as was always found in the old one- and two-room log cabins, but not so often seen in larger houses of this type. Access was had to it by steep, ladder-like steps which rose from the kitchen; and presently I saw Sally going up with her. Perhaps the girl was glad of the suggestion which allowed her to escape the eyes around her. At any rate, Sally called back to me that she had a bad headache and that Martha was going to show her a place to lie down. They closed the trap door behind them.

A couple of hours later when Sally crept down, the tightly closed house was still filled with the smell of the burned grease from the fried meat, and with wreaths of tobacco smoke from the men who had finally settled down for the "settin'-up." There were several women, too, and as the family (who, all except Lonnie, had been staying in the kitchen with the other lamp) drifted off to bed, these came in with us men who were with the body.

In the hills, a body is never left alone from the moment of death until the last clod is upon the grave. This is perhaps partly from a desire to show respect, and partly to see that no animal gets into the coffin. There are numerous stories among the dwindling stock of old-timers concerning cats mutilating bodies, or simply getting into the casket and sitting upon the chest. Perhaps this has some connection with the ancient beliefs which, since the dark ages, have connected cats with the supernatural.

I have met but one person who openly admitted to having practiced—at least as she thought—witchcraft, and that was years after Uncle Johnny's death and in a supposedly more enlightened place. However, I have seen others practicing what was obviously black magic and with what appeared to be desirable results.

If anyone at Uncle Johnny's settin'-up believed as implicitly in the powers of darkness as I had reason to think, then and later,

that they did, they didn't say so that night. But there were plenty of marvelous stories of "ghosties" which haunted everything from houses where murder had been done to certain lonely spots along road and creek. When there had been a bridge over the creek at the schoolhouse, a woman in black would sit on it at the time of the spring rains. A frightened team once tipped the buggy of some strangers off and drowned a man and woman. The ghost never bothered anyone—"But," as Mr. Caldwell remarked, "it was scary to see her. Some of us got up the nerve to speak to her but she just looked at us and faded away."

There was another story of an orphan girl who was kicked from one family to another in Big Piney years ago, and made something of a drudge by her kin. Apparently she was a little queer. She appeared to die in a fit one day, and the family "norated" the news around that the burying would be that afternoon—a crass violation of custom, which postpones the funeral at least one day.

A casket was knocked together and the grave dug and the trip started to the burying ground. The horses were big, heavy animals and the load light, but they strained as if going uphill with logs. Their hoofs slipped; they sweated and struggled—and finally at the graveyard gate their strength would move the wagon no further. Some thought perhaps the girl had come to in the casket, but the people in charge thought it bad luck to open a coffin after the funeral. They lifted it from the wagon and went on with the burying—and after that bad luck followed them. The horses were killed by lightning, along with one of the men who lifted the coffin out, and one by one calamities overtook the other people involved until the remnant packed up and "fled off to a furrin country in the northern part of the state," as the groaning old Gram Soames put it.

And so on, and so on, until Brother Saddler presently came in from church. His wife had gone to Miss Callie's. The talk veered to other things but presently someone mentioned the "death bells" which Uncle Johnny had heard the last new moon

and we were off again on premonitions and "signs" and the seeing of people who were miles away, only to hear later that they had died at that exact moment.

Brother Saddler warned of "trafficking with the devil to get power," and Sally asked how one did that.

There were squirmings and fidgetings. An old lady muttered, "Hit ain't fittin' talk in mixed company, Miz Nelson. . . ."

Silence.

Finally, from Brother Saddler: "I heard that some claim to do it by going to the graveyard at the full moon and standing on the grave of an infidel, or someone that's been hung, and shooting a silver bullet at the moon. But I figure such foolishness is but an outward symbol. Not," he said doubtfully, "that I've ever seen anything that I thought was witchcraft. It may be that it all died away in the Bible times and that the words therein do not apply to the present."

More silence. Was that a contemptuous grunt from someone?

"Of course," he added uncomfortably, "it may be just a matter of defining our terms. You take such things as removing warts or styes—my mother could do those by saying a little charm. And there was the day at church, when the Masters boy jumped off that stump and cut his foot on a bottle. He was bleeding like a stuck hog—and Brother Caldwell stopped it by saying that verse from Ezekiel as he walked around him three times. I later tried that on one of ours—our least one—and it didn't work. So that means that some have a power that others don't."

The talk dwindled, rose again on other subjects. A spare bed had been left in the next room by the family, who had evidently doubled up elsewhere, and some of the women went in and lay down. Men dozed in their chairs. Toward morning rain started falling and we rushed out to fetch in the feather-and-straw tick and bedding from the bed where Uncle Johnny had died, and to get his clothes from the line. According to some custom into which I didn't inquire, all these had been taken outside shortly

after his death, including his "Sunday shirt and overhalls" from the peg on the wall.

Morning came, dreary and wet.

"Hit'll stop before noon," the word went round.

News was sent out by those going home to chore that the funeral would be here at the house at ten. Brother Saddler remonstrated briefly against this, but, bundling into wraps to go pick the spot for the grave at the burying ground, Lonnie Haskins said, "Hit was what Pa wanted; he had the ol'-time way."

The granny who had warned that the business of getting power from the devil could not be discussed in mixed company fixed a steady look on Brother Saddler. She said, "Happy the bride the sun shines on. Happy the corpse the rain falls on."

Sally and I got pretty wet, going home to see about things there and to clean up and get back to the funeral—for custom would release school today. Twice during the morning we heard the boom of dynamite, blasting rocks out of the grave.

When we reached the Ashton place again, after a second perilous crossing of swollen branches on slick footlogs, there were a dozen rigs and wagons standing in the drizzle. Seats had been covered or carried to shelter. Horses and mules steamed. Men squatted, whittling and chewing and talking in low tones, on the front gallery or under the overhanging extension of the smokehouse roof or under the barn sheds. The women had gone into the house. Children starting a bit of a scuffle on the porch were sternly ordered to "go 'way back and set down."

The hickory and blue chambray shirts and the overalls and cotton pants smelled musty from dampness as we went up the low front steps. We were given nods. The talk dwindled and rose once more. Some feared the sun would be out if we didn't hurry. But things were being delayed because the boys had run into so much rock that the grave was not finished and it would be a bad thing to reach the graveyard before it was. Sally went in.

The two Kincaids, father and son, were squatting against the

wall. The father droned along, ignoring me entirely, to the little knot of men about him:

"So Uncle Johnny, he married her. Him an' her pap didn't get along. The old man was a hard worker and he didn't take to the way Uncle Johnny was so easy-goin'. Hadn't been crazy about Mancey marryin' him in the first place only they'd run off an' done the job up right 'fore her pap knowed it. Well, Johnny an' him never really come to hard words, an' time drug along till Mancey had four-five little'n's. One day I looked out an' seen Johnny traipsin' by afoot. I ast whur he was goin'. Had his rahfle under his arm—his ol' squirrel gun, a ball an' cap he still used 'cause he couldn't afford ca'tridges—but I knowed he wouldn't abeen down our way to hunt, good as huntin' was on the creek.

"I thought to myself, 'Shorely he ain't goin' to shoot Mance's pap. . . .' He said, 'Goin' down to see my daddy-in-law. Aimin' to borry the cash money off'n him to buy me that there team o' lineback mules o' Rash's.' I says, 'What you want with mules?' I knowed now an' then he'd get a little farmin' fever, but hit'd allus pass. He'd liefer jist run some hogs an' cows in the hills but not too many that he couldn't winter them through the little snowy spell or two with what he could raise with a hoe—or let Mance an' the younguns raise with a hoe—"

Men shifted on their heels. The younger Kincaid said, "He's dead now, Paw."

"Shore—shore, an' he'd be the first'n to agree with me if he wasn't. *I* ain't speakin' hard o' him. I reckon I'm as good a friend as he's got. . . . Well, I said them mules would go at two hunderd if they went at a cent an' the old man wouldn't let him have the cash if it waren't but ten. He said he bet he would. He went on—an' after a while he come back with them mules. Had a set of harness on 'em, too. Well, I couldn't believe it. I ast him if he threatened the ol' man. He grinned an' says, 'Well, maybe you might say I done so—in a way. I told him if'n he didn't leave me have the money so's I could raise me a fittin' crop, I

would bring Mance an' the younguns over bright an' early next mornin' an' leave 'em fer him to keep up.'"

Men grinned faintly and nodded. Probably they had heard the story many times. Now they murmured, "That's Uncle Johnny, all right. . . ."

Kincaid threw a cud of tobacco out into the yard and reached for the dipper in the bucket on the shelf above his shoulder. He washed his mouth out and drank and said, "We butchered a little shoat yestidy, figgerin' maybe 'twas cool enough to keep the meat, an' hit allus makes me thirsty when I eat lots of grease. . . . I'll never f'get when Johnny went to work fer Mancey's pap. The Dawsons was allus mighty keerful with what they had—mighty savin' folks. Dawson give Johnny a job, not knowin' hit was aimin' to end up by costin' him his daughter. Hit was in the dead o' winter an' times was turrible—a sight worse'n this yere Roosevelt prosperity we're starvin' to death on now—"

Big Piney was violently split, politically. People either hated the administration with all their hearts, or thought that we were now in the Millennium. Kincaid was one of the former. He ignored the growl or two that arose and talked blandly on.

"Well, Dawson he tol' Johnny he could work fer 'is board an' room till the work started up, an' then they'd talk about cash wages. He putt Johnny in the timber, maulin' fence rails out of white oak an' walnut, an' then when 'twere so dark he couldn't see he could come in an' eat his supper. Next mornin' he'd holler him down the stairs at five. But it got to whur after a little while Johnny would have to help with the milkin'—and then he was doin' it by hisself. Then the ol' man got to whur—like he done his whole family—Johnny would have to pick a pint cup of cotton lint off'n the seeds before he could go to bed. Thataway the family kept in spinnin' an' quiltin' cotton. An' he'd holler Johnny down the stairs earlier an' earlier. But still he wasn't talkin' cash money. He'd say they'd speak of that when the work started.

"I seen Johnny one day. He says, 'Every night I git to bed a

little later an' every mornin' he hollers me down a little earlier till all I do is go up, throw my boots under the bed, catch 'em on the other side, an' come back down. I sho' wish the work'd start so's I could draw me some of that cash money.'"

"They're aimin' to begin," someone said.

Another rumble came from the cemetery a mile away through the mist. The windows rattled faintly. Kincaid said, "Reckon that's the last shot. They was about through, Perry said, when he come by."

We edged inside. People were in all the rooms but now they crowded into the one where the coffin rested, and into the two adjoining it, the better to see and hear.

A muted note sounded on the parlor organ which had been carried into the funeral room. There was whispering and bustling. Song books, brought from the schoolhouse, were handed back through the crowd. The smells of sweat and mustiness were overpowering, and were made worse by sweetly sickish odors of powder, perfume, and the vinegar from the cloth which had been kept over Uncle Johnny's face to preserve it. I had an impulse to rise on tiptoe, from where I stood in the kitchen, to see if they had forgotten to take the silver dollars from Uncle Johnny's eyes. But I could see nothing in the dimness.

"Number eighteen," the minister's wife, at the organ, murmured.

"Number eighteen," Brother Saddler relayed.

He turned pages, raising and lowering his brows. "Yes . . . 'I Will Meet You in the Morning . . .' The key, Sister Annie."

She ran the notes for the several parts. Brother Saddler echoed them softly and led off:

"I will meet you in the morning just inside the Eastern Gate—
I will meet you in the morning over the-e-e-e-ere—
I will meet you—I will greet you—"

The words filled the house. In a pause someone could be heard sobbing. The song was done. We sang "Beautiful Isle of Some-

where." Brother Saddler was about to announce another hymn when Lonnie Haskins, after a glance at the thinning weather, whispered to him. Brother Saddler had been looking at it, too, perhaps a little hopefully, but he gave in and said we would have a word of prayer. A few joined quietly in, their whisperings rising to audibility now and then, as the preacher led forth.

Then he read the "writin' " I had prepared, and next he took his text from (I think) St. John's Gospel—or perhaps "Little John." And then he preached. The burden of his sermon was neatly done: He neither preached Uncle Johnny into heaven or hell, but he gave the appearance to the family, I am certain, of doing the former. His text was on the certainty of an afterlife.

"I am proud and happy to be able to stand here this morning before my Jesus," he declared, "and say to you that there is an afterlife. How would you feel if I was to say to you that on the last day you and I would not rise up, and that your loved ones would not rise up, and that you should not see each other evermore? No! I say to you that we will all rise up, clothed in the garments of immortality, and stand before our Jesus at the great white throne to be judged."

He started preaching to sinners in general and to Martha in particular then, warning that no one knew the day nor the hour when the Last Call might come. There was much crying. Everyone looked at Martha as she sat with bowed head and trembling shoulders.

"Won't you come?" Brother Saddler begged. "Won't you kneel here at the coffin and say, 'Yes, Jesus, I want to be with Uncle Johnny on that last day. I want to join the marriage supper in the sky! Take me, Jesus. Take me for the sake of Thy precious blood which You shed on Calv'ree's mount for me, that it shall not have been shed in vain.' Oh, the sin of ingratitude! Think how you feel when you make a sacrifice and it is not appreciated. Think how Jesus weeps when a sinner goes to his death with a certainty of hell.

"Think how it feels to touch just the tip of your little finger

to the stove. Then multiply that by a heat sevenfold hotter than any heat on earth. And that is hot, my friends, mighty hot. A brick kiln gets up to I think it's thirty thousand degrees if I remember correctly—or maybe it's three thousand. But either way, multiply that by seven and think how it would feel to wallow in those flames day after day, year after year, burning but unconsumed."

His voice had fallen to a hoarse, mesmerizing whisper. Then suddenly he shouted: "Come to Christ, Martha! Come to your Jesus—*now!*"

There was a rustle and bustle. Sharp whispers rose. She had fainted.

Rain fell more heavily now as the casket was placed in an unsheeted wagon. The procession moved up a steep, ledgy road, Brother Saddler's car pulling out ahead because it could not go so slow as the wagons and rigs. Some of us were afoot. Sally had stayed at the house with Mrs. Ashton and Gram Baily and Martha who had been put to bed.

At last we reached the burying ground, half a mile from the schoolhouse. I had never been here before, for the road had been changed since the first graves were dug, so that the main-traveled way did not lead past. There were a few "boughten" stones of granite or marble, but most were the product of native stonecutters, made from slabs of magnesium limestone which was now black-gray with time. There was no opportunity to read names or mottoes, but I saw the patterns formed with mussel shells and colored glass on the graves. Some of the mounds had fallen in and been leveled. Yonder was one which could use a load of dirt.

I passed through the high wet grass and weeds and rose vines and japonica by a small grave. A glass-lidded box held a mouldering doll. A toy lamp—complete with chimney, wick, and burner, and holding kerosene which had turned dark yellow with age—was askew in the grass. I realized there was no intended

symbolism of having one's lamp filled and ready. It was simply a beloved plaything. The stone said, "Goodbye Mary Marie."

The wagon had stopped by the pile of broken, flinty amalgam of clay and stone which marked Uncle Johnny's resting place. Settled here in the low ground was the odor of dynamite. The muddy gravediggers squatted yonder under a cedar, tired and cold. One came now with a bucket. Silently he lowered himself into the hole. He started dipping up the knee-deep water and handing the bucket to another who poured it to one side and handed the bucket back.

"Struck a wet-weather spring," someone murmured.

Presently the coffin box which had been brought earlier was lowered and the opened casket placed on two timbers across the grave. The mist beaded Uncle Johnny's face and gathered in droplets on the scanty chin whiskers.

After a few words from Brother Saddler the coffin was closed and lowered into the box which was beginning to float on the water which seeped into the grave. Brother Saddler dropped dirt, and petals from one of the armloads of asters and zinnias and other late-blooming flowers, upon the coffin as he intoned further. The lid of the coffin box was let down. A man lowered himself and hammered the nails into place.

Now there was silence. The gravediggers took turns with the shovels, for to help dig a grave and not help fill it is a dangerous business. Finally the last stone, the last shovel of red mud, was in place. We could now leave with propriety. Only as I put my hat on did I notice that the drizzle had stopped. People wandered through the cemetery to put a few flowers on other graves. A man's voice came: "Skunk has dug into Pa's grave. I'll bring a trap fer the varmint."

" 'Tis nary skunk, is it? Possum, wouldn't you say?"

"Possum is too lazy to dig his own holes . . ."

"Jist fer a den, yes—"

Brother Saddler's voice rose above the murmurs: "Everyone

remember church tonight! Come and bring a friend. And be prepared for mighty works of the Lord. Pray with us until then that it shall be so. . . ."

"Lonnie! Lonnie, what's yore mind on this? Lake, he says 'tis a possum that's been adiggin' an' dulgin' into Pa's grave . . ."

CHAPTER XVI

Shivaree

In the olden times, before there were such things as marriage licenses in the hills, and when neighborhoods were "kinned up" from intermarriage until everyone was related to everyone else, the people depended for spiritual guidance and consolation on either circuit-riding preachers, or wandering ministers—ordained or otherwise. When there was a death, burial took place with perhaps only a few words and a prayer; when the preacher came—perhaps six months or a year later—there was a real funeral service, with tears flowing as freely as if the corpse lay before the congregation.

Also, in those days, a man left with a houseful of little children by the death of his wife—and many frontiersmen buried several wives, using up "one for the clearing, one for his middle years, and one for his old age"—his only recourse was to marry again as soon as possible. He had to be free to make a living, and custom would not allow a woman to go in and clean up the house for him or to tend the children unless another woman went with her, which was an unhandy arrangement.

But—after the sobering influence of one or two marriages, at any rate—people seemed to take a "sensible" view of matrimony, and a man would not be thought hard of if he took another wife soon. I heard of one man who had several prospects in mind. He saddled his mule, rode down the hollow, stopped at the home

of a maiden lady who was first on his list—one of two spinster sisters who lived together.

He had cleaned himself up and perhaps she suspected his purpose. He said, "May, I'd like to come in and set with you, with serious intentions. I'm ahankerin' to get married today."

She showed him the gate.

Over the ridge in the next hollow was his second choice—a widow. She said, "Well, that's plain enough spoke. Come in and I'll brew you a cup."

An hour later—"after a decent interval," as I heard it—they went down the holler to the settlement where her daughters had married into another family. There before an assemblage they wrote their names in the Bible and took each other for better or worse—the same to be re-solemnized later when the preacher should come through.

This was perhaps a survival of the ancient handfasting customs and trial nights of Europe and the British Isles and New England and the Southern coastal mountains, except that here it was permanent and binding. At any rate when the minister did come the marriage was "preached" and after that the husband's former wife was funeralized and the bride wept with the others.

It is not freely admitted in the Ozarks, as it is in the Smokies and other isolated sections, that in the early days itinerant preachers often found themselves called upon to marry young couples who had set up housekeeping and who by now had a child and perhaps another on the way. There are those in the Ozarks who have heard of such happening in other communities but never in their own. At any rate, it would seem that the association in which such couples might be living was as binding in the stern eyes of the community as if a thousand preachers had "said the weddin' words," instead of the neighbors simply hearing the vows.

For woe betide the young bridegroom who, once he had taken his girl to his cabin, tried getting out of his bargain. These people were rooted deep in the culture of England and Scotland

and Ireland and Wales and an engagement being in the final analysis almost as binding as a wedding, they thought no more of a girl's having her "engagement baby" a few weeks after her marriage than did the lusty Puritans of fabled morality.

But those happy times, those innocent days had passed forever from Big Piney—if, indeed, they had ever been there—by the time we knew it. A man demanded virginity in his bride—unless, of course, he had been chosen by a widow, who yet must be of spotless reputation. The common feeling was that if she gave in even to himself before marriage she might give in to someone else also, and he did not wish to risk being "cuckled."

And of course, now that the scandal was out on Martha, she would have no hope of getting George back, for everyone would know of his shame in having a girl who had "given in" too soon. The double standard rode high. A boy might "tomcat around" with all the sluts of which a community might boast and the matter be taken as a lark. For Martha, there were sniffs and dark sayings.

We didn't go to meeting the evening of Uncle Johnny's burying. We needed a night's sleep for one thing. For another we didn't want to witness the spectacle of what might take place. There was no way at all in which we could help. Sally had learned from Martha last night before the girl went to sleep that she feared she was damned. Her one hope was "to get prayed through." She was convinced that when the Lord saved her, she would feel some inward lightning bolt, some blinding flash of revelation.

Sister Viny arrived at the house while we were eating supper, she and her brood. They were quiet for once. Sister Viny was even morose. We presently gathered there had been a row with Pete, who didn't want them going to meeting. I recalled that it was her custom, every time she was "saved," to banish him from the house to an old cabin or shed while she lived in Vestal purity until flesh at last overcame the spirit. Or, in case the disgusted Pete had departed on another pilgrimage for parts un-

known, hunger forced her to "start havin' truck" with Cap'n Jethrow or others among the gentlemen who had given Dollar Holler its name. In the old days that's what it had cost a man to go through the Holler—"less'n he kept right on goin'," as Brother Helms explained it, "an' never stopped no-whurs." Now a sack of flour—fifty-five cents—would do.

"I hate to fuss with Pete," Sister Viny said, as she and the children made away with the pie that was to have been for tomorrow, "but my Jesus comes first. I'm one of the weakest of God's childern, but I ain't as bad off as if'n I didn't know so, an' the least I can do is git right again at meetin' time. You younguns quit dribblin' that there berry juice on Miz Nelson's nice tablecloth! Ain't you'ns ashamed of yoreselves?" She sighed. "I do try to be a good Christian woman, don't I, Arizony?"

Dribbling more juice, Arizona nodded automatically. "Yes'm."

A light step on the front porch. And then a surprised or disappointed, "Oh—"

Sally said, "Why, it's Martha."

Martha wouldn't come in—not until, presently, in what I feared was a mild huff, Sister Viny and the children went on toward the schoolhouse. Martha had been talking with Sally out in the yard. Now I got the news: George had returned this afternoon. They were to be married Sunday—after "mornin' preaching," at church. Martha hadn't been able to find out anything, but she gathered that Sally had written George a letter which had made him decide to come back.

They made quite a scene of it for a few moments. Tonight Martha was sure she was going to "get saved"—she was hopeful George would go to the altar with her, too—but right now she wondered if Sally had the pattern to her red dress, and couldn't it be cut off on newspaper to make her a wedding dress by? When Sally offered to help her make the dress, I realized that that was what the girl had been hoping for.

So we went to church after all, since Martha took it for granted. But she didn't go to the altar. George had promised

that after they were married he would go up with her—but he didn't want everybody "starin' and prayin' over me now." He had probably exerted himself all any one young man could be expected to, appearing at a time like this and sitting back against the wall. There were a few catcalls from the loafers who always hang around the outside of a rural church while meeting is in progress—more or less friendly mockings from his fellows, I presumed—but Mr. Caldwell and some of the other elders of the church went out and I heard them sternly threaten the disturbers with arrest and fining if they performed further.

After church, the embarrassed and relieved parents of Martha herded her and George carefully into the wagon for him to spark her home.

Sally learned that Martha was glad to be at our house making her dress since this helped avoid any assistance from George's mother or sisters. Martha knew of cases where a hair from another woman had been sewn into a girl's wedding dress so that her husband would not be true to her. She didn't really believe in it, but at the same time she didn't want anyone who didn't wish her well to be around working on her dress.

Did Sally believe that if you put a turkey-track quilt—a quilt with that pattern of piecing—on your bed your husband would be true to you? Gram Baily said it would work every time. Still, sometimes it seemed to Martha like the old sayin's worked, and sometimes it didn't. Gram claimed that when they didn't work it was because you did them wrong or someone else had said an old sayin' to the opposite effect before you said yours. Gram didn't blame Gran'pa Baily when he got to "acting up" with another woman some years ago. Gran'pa swore he hated her but just couldn't resist her—she had put a spell on him. But after a little while it wore off and everything was all right.

Not once all day did Martha mention her expected baby.

"She has real dignity," Sally told me.

I said, "What the devil did you write that whelp, anyway, the other day?"

She had hedged about this before when I had asked. Hedging a bit more now, she said abruptly, "Well—it sounds kind of silly—and I'm afraid that whatever charms or 'old sayin's' Uncle Johnny was using must be what really brought him back. I just told him that he realized, of course, she loved him—and that I didn't see how he could bear the thought of giving up such a sweet and pretty girl and letting her marry anybody down Slocum Hollow."

I said, "Nobody lives down Slocum Hollow but that dirty old Hi Slocum and his sister Gram."

Getting ready for bed, Sally said dryly, "I know. . . . I reckoned George knew it, too."

It was a nice wedding. George had bought a store suit, and he sat stiffly in Martha's old school seat with her, sweating in the heat of the too-hot fire someone had kindled to remove the early November chill. Brother Saddler, for some reason, didn't indulge in more than the briefest of altar calls at Sunday morning services during the revival. When no one came forward to be prayed for at his first invitation, he promptly said, "Well, now, we have one of the sacraments to perform this morning that gives me great happiness. Two of our finest young folks wants to be joined in holy wedlock. . . . George . . . Martha . . ."

They went down the aisle. George's mother was grim-faced. Martha's mother was unstrung as she stared fixedly at the couple. George had bought a wedding ring; apparently the preacher had examined the license beforehand, for now things went smoothly and quickly, and then Brother Saddler said, "I now pronounce you man and wife."

"Right foot first, honey," Mrs. Ashton whispered loudly as they turned. People went forward to speak with them, but there was no kissing of the bride even by George, for the hillman does not parade his more tender emotions before those who might remember it as a weakness and mock him. Martha had cried a little. Probably her friends and her kin were glad:

Happy the bride who weeps;
Happiness with her keeps.

John Ashton spoke above the buzz of voices and laughter: "We'd be proud to have all of y'uns that keer to, to come go home with us fer Sunday dinner; we butchered yestidy and Gram Baily is at the house now aspittin' the quarters afore the fahr-place in the old-time way."

The invitation was more than half expected, but we would have gone anyway. Perhaps he knew already of the loaded baskets covered over in the wagons and cars outside. And, true to his promise, George went to the altar with Martha on Monday night and they both "got prayed through."

It was on Thursday night we had the shivaree—or maybe Friday. Anyhow, after meeting people made as if to go home, but presently we crept back to the schoolhouse where we talked until we were sure the Ashtons would be in bed by the time we could make our way by moonlight through the woods.

Just as women afoot carried their Sunday shoes and put them on near the church, leaving the old ones hidden in the brush until afterward, so also had pans and buckets and bells and guns been hidden this evening. The deadened timber stood with fiercely raised arms as we walked through the frosty pasture and up the ridge. There was a lamp going down yonder at the house, but it went out even as we saw it. We crept downward. We were almost there when a dog bayed us. Then we started the noise.

Through the gate we went, and around the house. Our shotguns, streaking orange up into the air, deafened us as we jangled the bells and pans. A steel oil drum, the top cut out, was in the sideyard at the butchering place for scalding hogs. Empty, it made a fearful and unearthly din as it was beaten with sticks.

After about five minutes, in a lull, we heard the Ashtons urging the young couple to come out. The front door opened. We

cheered, and as light was struck inside we were invited in. They were ready for us. Cakes, of varieties that would keep for a while, had been baked ahead, and George had laid in two cans of penny stogies. The women gathered in the kitchen and the back bedroom, the men in the two front rooms. In the asphyxiating smoke of the stogies we made talk. The men who had refused the tobacco were given cake, but the platters were not passed to the smokers.

Soon some of the young people were making molasses candy in the kitchen. They boiled it up and buttered their hands and had a pulling, and when the ropy stuff became brittle it was snapped up and passed.

Finally someone near me drawled, "Well, we better mosey. . . . If'n hit were *my* shivaree, I'd sho' be mad if they kep' me out of bed any longer'n this. . . ."

We filed by the bride and groom (after having made a few more matter-of-fact references as to the advisability of ducking George in the creek, even though he had provided treat) and shook their hands and everybody said, "I wish you'uns every happiness," or "I wish you'uns a long an' happy life." This was very solemn, and many of the women hugged and kissed Martha.

It was a right good shivaree.

CHAPTER XVII

Sweetheart Flour

Several big things happened in that second week of November. A contributing factor was that our cow came in heat in the night, jumped the fence, and departed for an unknown clime. This was because Lonnie Haskins, now having taken over Uncle Johnny's affairs, had canceled Brother Helms's rental of the place where we lived.

Thus it was that with Helms's cattle gone there was no bull at hand, which prompted the cow to cross the ill-begotten fence and run away. I started out to find her, Sally agreeing to go teach for me if I wasn't back at the house on time.

I finally sighted the cow, grazing alone near a tumble-down cabin in an old field far beyond my bailiwick. She allowed me to gentle her down and put a rope on her small, curved horns and take a bight around her muzzle. She had never been broken to lead, though, and after these preliminaries she gave me a stiff tussle. But at last, trotting in the ditch beside the road, she headed for home, raising her head now and then to bawl shrilly. Cattle answered her and came running to fences to snort and gallop along with her, but there were no bulls among them and I was glad enough for that for I wanted no wrecked fences or roaming bulls to contend with just now.

I knew that Jethrow's bull, in the Muehlbach pasture, was for service, so when I came to the turn near our house I got the weary and now-docile cow headed that way.

Sister Viny may have been shy and reticent when Mr. Caldwell took his mare there and found no Pete around; maybe it was because Caldwell was one of the deacons. But she came bustling out now, her frowzy hair ruffling in the sharp wind.

"Want me to he'p you run her to the ol' male-brute?" she asked.

"Where's Pete?" I countered.

No other expression so perfectly fits her reaction as the cliché: her face fell. The broad bumps and planes of flesh sagged. Her mouth trembled.

"I'm afeared he's went off with another woman, Brother Nelson," she said. [I had been Brother Nelson since she was saved again.] "I ain't saw 'im fer four days—well, three days, I reckon 'tis. You younguns get back in outa this wind! I got to he'p Brother Nelson a minute."

"I can make out," I assured her.

" 'Twon't take but a minute, oncet we get her th'ough the gate yonder. Hit's a sight, way a cow-brute allus picks the wrong time. What you doin' about school?"

I told her. She waddled ahead, holding her old coat about her, and opened the gate.

"Beller, cow," she advised. "Beller at the ol' male-brute, honey." But Blossom was strangely uninterested. She paused to smell of this and that, for a cow uses her nose to get acquainted with things. Sister Viny raised her voice: "Whoo-o-oooooooo-ee-e-ee! Soo-ooo-ooook, now! Coooooooooo-eeeeeee!" And then, to my surprise, she put her head back, hands to mouth, and gave a startling imitation of a cow bellowing.

Blossom looked at her. But from the woodsy mountain behind the house there was no answering bellow. Sister Viny was irritated.

"The contrary ol' varmint!" she fumed. "Be good enough fer 'im if'n you was jist to take 'er some'res else. . . . I'll fetch 'im. . . . Come along. . . ."

I didn't know what to do and consequently I found myself

following hesitantly after her. Suddenly she gave the rumbling, mumbling fussing of a bull. The startled cow halted and then gave her shrilled bellow. She was answered now. We heard the gallop of cattle through the timber. Presently they loped into sight, the big white-faced bull in the lead. As he came up, a steer passed him, and he butted this animal viciously in the ribs, sprawling him to the ground. The bull was rather a weird-looking creature, for he had been venting his energy on a mud bank and his face, horns, and shoulders were caked with clay.

Sister Viny watched with frank, clinical interest.

"Jist as good to leave 'er all day," she advised. "These yere fences won't hold that brute if'n he don't want to stay in 'em an' he'll shore foller you home now."

I could see the wisdom of that. I took the rope off. We returned to the road.

Sister Viny said, "Now, soon as that cow gets a little tahrd, she'll lay down to rest, an' after that the male won't pay her no mind even when she gets up again. To speak of, that is. Layin' down putts a stop to all that. Uh—shame fer you to have to walk all this piece again. If you wanted to come in an' set by the stove a while you could save a trip. They's some parts of the Scriptures I'd love to hear yore idy about. Them younguns can go play in the barn if they get too noisy or anything—"

I got away fast—and I took Sally back with me when I went that evening for the cow.

Meantime Sally had startling information: Clyde had read a number of pages in a pre-primer today. I couldn't believe it.

I had scarcely heard of such matters in pedadogy as remedial reading, not having expected to do either general primary work or to teach reading. As I have said, I was disappointed in myself that I could teach Clyde nothing at all in the subject.

"I just happened to remember something I'd read," she told me, "about backward children whose trouble is all in the way their eyes work, or their minds, or something. Some of them see

things backward, some way. They learn, for instance, to write the ABC's—but when they look at d-o-g they see g-o-d. And when they begin getting the sounds of *g* and *d* mixed up, it throws their minds into a whirl. Does that make sense?"

"Well—if true. But how do you know all that about Clyde?"

"I gave him the mirror out of my purse. In it—he can read."

I took a bit of ribbing from Sally as we went to meeting that evening about Sister Viny's desire to have me explain the Scriptures to her. Clyde was at the schoolhouse when we arrived. He was burning to show me what he had learned. I felt pretty humble—and humbled—about the whole thing. A whole new world had opened before the boy. He swung his hand across the stage, pointing to the old bookcase and the new one as he declared, "I'm aimin' to read ever' one of them books!"

The meeting was rising to a climax. It held late each evening. Besides re-dedications, there had been half a dozen converts and the new ones in the fold were the most zealous in doing "personal work" among the known sinners, harassing them to go to the mourners' bench, and telling them of the joys of salvation, and how comforting it was to know that one had done as Jesus desired, and would see one's loved ones "in eternity."

This night, out of a clear sky, having had no more than perfunctory attention from the exhorters, Clyde went to the bench. A few saints gathered around him. Almost immediately he rose, shouting, and danced up and down the aisle, twisting his body and waving his arms as he had seen people do all his life.

The shouting spread—and then ceased as it began to be noticed that Clyde was "speaking in tongues." The words rose and fell in a musical pattern, and when Clyde hushed, Sister Saddler interpreted his words for us—for not all who speak in tongues have the gift of interpretation.

Much was made over Clyde. People wept over him and pounded his back, and shook his hand. He took it all in grand

style. He was led to the rostrum "to give his testimony." Brother Saddler was flushed and happy.

The gist of Clyde's testimonial, his tone crackling from bass to treble in the excitement (for his voice was changing) was that the Lord had wonderfully blessed him tonight. Now he was going to repay the Lord. He never aimed to commit any more sin, and he aimed to spread the Gospel. The Lord had given him a call to preach.

He and I discovered at school the next day that the way was yet going to be hard and rocky for him. It was embarrassing to him to study a first reader, but when I told him that Sally thought that was what he should do he fell in instantly with the plan—and as a matter of fact he finished it in a few days.

He had brought a Testament to school; the going in it was tougher. He withstood a little teasing on the schoolground—"Brother Caldwell," they were calling him—with a high, detached forbearance, going around with wrinkled forehead and smiling in tolerant amusement when imaginary drinks of whisky were offered him.

And as I rose to dismiss school he said, "Brother Nelson, I'd like to make a little 'nouncement. . . ."

Grins at the "Brother Nelson."

He came to the front and faced the pupils. He said, "Reckon maybe some of y'uns heard [for once, he was remembering what I'd had to say about "heared" not being the commonly accepted pronunciation] the Lord called me to the minstry last night. Tonight, I aim to deliver a message, an' I hope all of y'uns will come out to hear it and to share in God's blessin's."

Everything considered, it was a remarkable pronouncement. The grins had vanished. They came back presently, of course. A few winks were passed, and, once the pupils were outside, there were calls of, "How much you charge to marry me an' June?" and, "When you aim to hold the baptizin', Brother Caldwell?"

That was another meeting I wanted to skip, but Clyde gave

me "a special invitation. . . . An' I'm aimin' to say a few words of 'preciation about Miss Nelson. [The hillman who doesn't call a married woman "miz" calls her "miss," and some will address an unmarried woman as "miz"—a confusion of terms, or mind, which is not clear to me yet.] About the way she knowed about that there mirror. I reckon hit's all jist a workin' of the Lord."

Clyde took up quite a bit of Brother Saddler's preaching time, but the minister stood it with good grace. Then he announced that another one of the brothers desired to speak to us for a moment. This was a young married man who had been converted early in the revival and, of course, as part of the conversion had thrown his tobacco away. But the whole community had been laughing for two days over the way his boy—who had recently been whipped when caught smoking—had caught the father hiding in the most acceptable of all places (behind the barn—perhaps a throwback to childhood) sneaking a few drags on a cornsilk cigarette. (He had been unable to find the tobacco he had thrown into the brush.) There was no bribing the boy to silence for Brother Saddler's eldest, Junior, had been with him.

So we listened to the request of the man for prayers to strengthen him, and to a re-dedication of his life to the Lord, and then the meeting got under way for sure. And it was announced that the baptizing would be Sunday afternoon at two, the Lord willing.

A biting wind whistled in the cedars and lashed the open places that afternoon, though the sun was warm against shelter. However, there was no shelter at the deep hole in the creek, there where we met Clyde the day we came to Big Piney. But a good crowd was out. People talked of how cold it was the day *they* were baptized and of how it seemed like the ones willing to go into icy water were the more steadfast and blessed later on.

Finally we sang, "'Shall we gather at the river . . . The beauti-

ful, beautiful, ri-i-i-ver—? Yes! We'll gather at the river—Th-a-at flows by the throne of God!' "

The candidates for baptism (Sister Viny first) caught hands and, led by Brother Saddler, marched into the water. Sally was worried about Martha's going into the cold stuff. She had timidly broached the subject to her, but Martha said that everyone knew lots of cases where, at a time when it was sure death to a woman to take a bath even, she had been baptized and it hadn't hurt her at all. The women broke grips often enough to push their floating skirts under the water.

It was doubtless warmer than the air, but perhaps their mood of exaltation had something to do with their appearing to sense no discomfort. The song was done. Brother Saddler had handed his glasses to his wife, and he looked unfamiliar as he prayed.

Waist-deep, he brought Sister Viny before him. . . . "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. . . ." He dipped her, a folded handkerchief clamped over her nose and mouth, and raised her, gasping and spluttering.

The congregation was singing softly. Someone stepped forward to give Sister Viny a hand, and a quilt was held ready to throw about her until she could reach the old abandoned mill near by where a fire had been built to dress by. There was hardly a break in the rhythm of the song as through Sister Viny's white saint's dress, across the broad stern she presented our way while clambering the far bank, we saw in red letters:

Hi-Grade

SWEETHEART

Those Sweetheart flour people had worked only one consignment of their product off on the women of Big Piney before it was discovered the ink wouldn't wash out of their sacks.

Sally and I had to wait with the relatives of the candidates because, as soon as he could get into dry clothing, Brother Saddler and his family were going home with us for the afternoon and

for supper. Once more, we knew, an attempt was going to be made to save our immortal souls from the darkness of a church which, as Brother Saddler put it, "don't believe in *nothing,* as you might say—not even as much as them Methodists and Baptists with their handshake religion," i.e. which do not have mourners' benches where candidates are "prayed through" but which simply ask them to give the minister their hand as testimonial that they have been converted.

But today I was ready for him: I was going to do a bit of proselytizing on him and if he failed to get the point I expected to involve him in some of the old theological arguments (of which I felt certain he had never heard) which would force him into the impasse of (1) implying there is no divine justice or (2) God is not omniscient and omnipotent. Or perhaps that we should now have polygamy since (1) David was a polygamist and (2) David, by God's own statement, was a man after His own heart.

I was looking forward greatly to this, though I hadn't mentioned it to Sally since I knew she would be even more uncomfortable at the prospect than would Brother Saddler once we locked horns. But as the matter turned out, Brother Saddler foiled me completely.

Two or three other families stopped at the house, also, and the discussion went off on politics so that he did not try to convert me at all. The political talk was tinged with religion, of course. All the biblical prophecies were trotted out: America was the Eagle, England the Lion, Russia the Bear, just as was foreseen thousands of years ago and put down there in black and white; and not only that, the social security card a man must have to get a job was the Mark of the Beast which it was foretold man must take in order to live.

Soon it was chore time and supper time and time to go to the final meeting of the revival—a "fellowship" meeting which would be given largely to testimonials, praying and singing.

As we drove over to the schoolhouse, Brother Saddler said,

"It's been a glorious meeting in every way but one," and I thought, "Here it comes—"

"I've wrastled with the Lord and I've hoped and had faith; I've even gone down and seen Kincaid three-four times, hoping to get you and him together at church. I want to see him with a broken spirit and a contrite heart. I want to see him weep for his sins and throw his arms around your neck and beg for forgiveness for trying to burn you out—for I'm morally certain he must have done it—"

A little shortly I said, "Well, a good way to get him to do it would be to talk like that—"

"Oh, I haven't breathed it to a soul," Brother Saddler assured me hastily. "And I'm hopeful that Kincaid will be moved by the Lord to come out tonight and do his duty."

I decided presently there was justice after all—at least a reasonable amount of it. For, although Brother Saddler was not consumed by a bolt from heaven for his meddling, Kincaid didn't come to meeting. Things, too, were a little disrupted along about bedtime when dogs treed a skunk under the building. So the evening broke up on something of a high note and everyone went away talking about the new revival which would be held in the spring. And if any of those who had been baptized suffered any ill effects therefrom, we never heard about it.

CHAPTER XVIII

Little Boar Peep

I have never been a hunter or a fisherman, partly because I never receive the proper pleasure from killing things. My feelings were not consistent, of course, since I liked meat. But the day was coming which I had dreaded: the pig was to be butchered. He was more than a pig, more than a shoat even, standing as he did on the very threshold of hog-hood.

He was a sleek red animal, bought from Caldwell. Caldwell had said on that occasion, "Now, I don't pay a lot of attention to some of the planting signs. I do try to plant my potatoes when the moon is old, and when I was younger I liked to plant them before daylight. If it's a good season the moon doesn't make a lot of difference because all signs fail in a good season—though if it's a bad season they help.

"The zodiac makes all the difference in the world with animals, however. It just happens that this pig was littered when the sign was in the heart. That's the life sign—it'll kill alfalfa to mow it with the sign in the heart, or even Johnson grass—and you'll notice this litter is thriftier and bigger than the one with the sow yonder. Those pigs have gone to guts. They came when the sign was in the belly."

He had let the pigs run with their mothers too long because he had missed the sign for weaning. He advised against my taking mine that day.

"Sign's too high," he explained. "I was looking at the almanac yesterday about altering a calf, and the sign is in the privates. That pig wouldn't wean well. He would squeal and bother you for a long time. Come take him from his mammy when the sign goes below the knees. Just as it's going into the feet is good. Then when it goes on out the feet, the memory of its mother will go out with it and the critter won't give you a bit of trouble."

I had always known of gardens being raised "by the signs" and I had some familiarity with almanacs. Sally and I now had one which Cap'n Jethrow had given us, full of testimonials from ladies who had been marvelously helped by the female tonics advertised therein. In the front was the gentleman with his innards on the halfshell, and the virgin, the crab, the fish, the lion, and their friends all around the edges. Lines ran from these to the portions of the body controlled by the constellations which these figures represent.

Caldwell had made a few hints about planting when he plowed our garden, but only very mild ones as if he feared that we would be amused or think him superstitious. But the pig was a different matter. He had produced it and he wanted it to do well. Perhaps, even, he had decided by now that I had the proper scientific outlook on things myself, just as do the movie stars, Wall Street tycoons, housewives, and senators who consult their astrologers before taking important steps.

I told myself that I had no objection to Caldwell's feeding the pig a few more days, but in reality I suppose I didn't quite have the courage to risk a later I-told-you-so. At any rate I left the pig.

Then came the time when he must be castrated lest the meat taste strong and gamey and smell unpleasant in cooking. Caldwell came and did this—being careful to select a time when the sign was below the genitals. This way, the soreness would pass on out the feet in a hurry and the animal not be thrown off his feed for so long. To castrate when the sign was in the heart would result in death within the hour from bleeding. Every per-

son in Big Piney could cite instances when he or someone he knew, flying in the face of the best scientific knowledge in this matter, had castrated a colt or calf or litter of pigs when the sign was in the heart and the animals were always dead in about half an hour.

Apparently the castration was harder on me than on the pig. He squealed shrilly from the second I laid him by the heels until he was released, but after that he started eating again. In spite of his eunuch state we had continued to call him by his original name, Little Boar Peep, which we gave him because of the way he had of throwing his head back to look from under his ears. Naming him was an error. It had made a personality of him, instead of just a pig. He should have been left anonymous, like an unimpeachable source.

Among Sally's government bulletins was one on farm butchering; it said nothing whatever about being certain one selected a day in "the dark of the moon," i.e., the latter half of its period, when it is growing fuller, and when the uninitiated would expect it to be called "the light of the moon." The people of Big Piney did not go by the way the moon looked for the naming of its phases; they looked on their calendars, distributed by the purveyors of panaceas and nostrums, with not only the quarters of the moon shown but with the weather forecast for each day of the year. Some of them, having progressed away from the weather signs of the goosebone prophets, swore by these calendar predictions, saying, when they failed, "Well, hit's hard to hit it ever' time."

At any rate, Lonnie Haskins, who was to assist me in butchering—or, rather, I him—assured me it was a well-known fact that meat butchered in the light of the moon would not be of good flavor, would "drindle away in the skillet till they ain't nothin' left but grease an' cracklin's," and the lard made from the animal would become rancid before it was used up. "Then hit'd have to be made into soap," he finished, "an' hit wouldn't really make

even that fittin' to use. It won't wrench [rinse] out of the clothes; turns 'em yeller an' then the woman fusses an' fumes."

I didn't venture to say that packing houses butchered the year round. I knew he would probably say, "Shore; an' look at that store meat. 'Tain't fittin' fer a man to use."

So on a Saturday in the dark of the moon Lonnie came, bringing his knives. I would have liked to be in the house with Sally, trying not to hear the fatal shot; instead I was keeping up the fire under the old tub and the several buckets of water. Lonnie had told me that the way to cure meat was to "putt it down" in a box with about four inches of salt under it and then pour lots more on top. I had secretly committed the heresy of mixing brown sugar, white sugar, salt, a little sorghum, red pepper, black pepper, and saltpeter—to give the hams that wonderful red color—for a sugar cure. I had had the puzzled Cap'n Jethrow get me the brown sugar, the red pepper, and the saltpeter in town. All he had ever heard of the latter's being used for was to put in the food of some newly wedded man, or preferably one about to be, as a prank to cause impotence. I had also had him get me a water thermometer.

Lonnie looked the situation over. I had dug a hole and placed a couple of heavy chunks of wood so that the wooden barrel could be "set anti-goddlin'"—that is, aslant—into the ground. I had rigged a scraping platform before the mouth of the barrel. The water was boiling. Lonnie and I both learned something that morning: he learned (at least he pretended to believe me) that one can boil water over an open flame in a paper sack; I learned by demonstration that the hand can be dashed into water which is at a galloping boil and out again without burning it. Lonnie said that if the water were merely hot and not galloping it would take the hide off; I didn't test the theory.

"Trouble with a heap o' people," Lonnie said as we dipped water into the barrel and then covered the mouth with gunny sacks to keep the heat in, "is havin' the water too hot or too cold. That there sets the hair. They was a 'book farmer' moved into

the ol' Wetherel place at the head of Little Piney a few year ago—feller that went around a heap of the time in a suit of clothes. Had him a set of farmin' books. Also, he had ten thousand dollars cash money in the bank he was goin' to use in tradin' us fellers out of our stock. Aimin' to double his money. Hit was just two year till we cleaned him an' he drug his tail back North. Anyhow, he had these here books. Not that I got anything against a reasonable amount of book-larnin', fer I ain't. But either his books was wrong or he didn't know how to read 'em. Had him a thumometer—"

Oh-oh, I thought. Cap'n Jethrow had been gossiping.

"His books said have this yere water at a certain heat. I told 'im, I says, 'Mr. Taylor'—his name was Taylor—'Mr. Taylor,' I says to 'im, 'they're yore hogs an' we'll do it like you say, but if you go stickin' them into water that cold I'll have to be paid by the hour an' not by the hog.' "

Lonnie shook his head. "What the feller didn't know was that them hogs would cool the water mighty fast, secont they hit it. But we dipped 'em. Lord, we was aheatin' water, an' puttin' ashes and hot towsacks on them hogs all day. Got most of the hair off—shaved off, not scrup out with the roots like hit'd ort to be, a lot of it—but most of the scurf, hit stuck till we never did get it off. Them was ugly hogs when we got th'ough—"

"All right," I said. "How about this water?"

He stuck a finger into the barrel. "Hit'll be jist about right, gin we get the critter ready," he stated. "If hit's too hot hit'll set the hair till we never get it loose, but a feller can wait a little if he has to."

Now was the dread moment. Like a Judas goat, I tolled Little Boar Peep to the fatal spot near the barrel. Lonnie said, "When he draps, turn him squar' over on his back an' steady 'im by his front feet."

The ground was white with frost; my fingers were still numb from the morning's exposure though the sun was warming fast.

I thought, "The pig would like the sun, too, lying against the side of his shed—"

The gun cracked. The hog dropped, quivering, to his knees. I rolled him over for the sticking and as the bright blood gushed out, melting the whiteness from the grass and sending up clouds of steam, I thought of man's inhumanity to everything.

Wiping the knife, Lonnie said, "Now, little later on, we'd ort to th'ow a shovel of dirt from yore diggin' over the blood." Delicately he explained: "If ary lady was to come along that was in the family way, hit might mark the baby if she was to be give a turn by the sight of the blood. Course, some women don't mind seein' sech. . . ."

"A good idea," I agreed. I would be glad not to see it myself.

Presently we lifted the carcass to the scraping platform and Lonnie threw back the towsacks. He felt the water, down beneath the vapor.

"Now," he pronounced, "I'd say that'd give a good scald." He looked at me narrowly.

I said, "All right—I'd like to find out just how hot it is so I'd know what to do in case I don't have proper help another year."

I produced my thermometer.

"The water," he went on, explaining and not hedging, "hain't got ever'thing to do with it. You also got to use a little jedgement."

The thermometer said three or four degrees over the recommended temperature. Lonnie grunted. "May not be quite hot enough," he decided.

But we soused the hog in, hams first.

"Keep 'im sloshin'!" Lonnie warned. "If he sets still, hit'll set the hair."

That was what the book said.

We dragged the hog out. Lonnie tried bunches of hair with his fingers.

"Le's give 'im another'n," he decided.

We dipped again, and then swapped ends and scalded the other end; dragged the carcass out, and Lonnie tried an ear.

"When the years slips clean, an' the shells flips off'n the dew-claws," he stated, "he's ready fer scrapin'. . . ." He bent a foot back and tried it. "'Nother little dippin' won't hurt," he decided.

Presently we were scraping away. I couldn't seem to cover the territory as Lonnie could. He showed me how to hold the knife.

"I see you cut 'is tail off," he said. "An' that's a good idy. Some don't b'lieve it, but I've tried it fer years an' years an' hit takes a bushel less of corn to fatten out a hog that's had his tail cut off." (That's what Caldwell had said when, with a final slash of his knife before my surprised eyes he had docked Little Boar Peep.)

Soon the carcass, plump and white, was ready for swinging. Wrinkles were across the back of the neck like a prosperous magnate's. Lonnie had also brought a gambrel stick—a short piece of hickory, whittled thin at the ends and with a wire loop in the middle. This was inserted into the hamstrings. The hog was raised with wire stretchers swung from a heavy limb and given a final washing.

Soon he was gutted. Soon in a pan were the liver and heart and kidneys and sweetbread. Lonnie stripped out leaves of fat from the ribs.

"Now this yere," he said, "makes the best lard in the hog. Yore woman had ort jist to set that in a bread pan in the oven to render an' save it fer special."

He would set no price on his work; consequently he not only carried off more cash than if he had set the price himself, but of course a big mess of liver which he would have received anyway. The rest of the hog would not be cut up until late afternoon, which chore I was going to tackle myself.

Evidently I had beginner's luck for I did as neat a job as I ever did afterward—and as for Lonnie, after eating with us one

day he hummed and hawed and finally asked for "the receipt" for curing meat like that.

As for Sally and me, we could not stomach the thought of eating any liver at noon the day of the butchering. But that night I told her if the smell wouldn't bother her—she was pretty giddy from following Lonnie's advice about the leaf lard—I would fry me a slice of tenderloin "just to see how it was." Sadly enough, visions of Little Boar Peep grunting at his trough became dim and distant as the aroma of the meat filled the house. Sally decided to whip up some biscuits to go with brown flour gravy made in the skillet.

That was a larruping supper—and everything on the table, except the flour and salt and such, was from our own vine and fig tree.

"You know," Sally said, "I guess at heart we're just farmers."

CHAPTER XIX

The Little Horses

It was just before Thanksgiving that Clyde got me into trouble about "the little horses." Or perhaps I got myself into it. At any rate, it started one morning when he and some of the others of Caldwell's grandchildren, on the way to school, called Caldwell's daughter Rosa, "Aunt Rosa." She was in the fourth grade. It was some time before this incident that she had come to me one day complaining that in the playhouse she should be the mama because, even though Pearl was older, she was Pearl's "blood aunt." But it made her furious to be addressed so, and she had arrived at school weeping.

The offenders had been told before not to carry their teasing quite so far. I had them take their seats instead of going to play, "before books." Clyde used the time to browse in a science text. He came up with the eohippus. As soon as school convened he asked me about the photograph of the fossil remains.

"This is a very interesting thing," I told him. "It shows that once we had horses naturally in this country—although the modern horse, which developed from those tiny animals, and has only one toe instead of several, was brought in by the Spaniards. In fact," I elaborated, "the Indians had never seen a horse and they thought the Spaniards on horseback were half animal and half man—all just one creature."

I touched on the matter again in the science class, which I was holding that day for the entire room, on the dinosaurs. I men-

tioned that the possum is "a living fossil," having a skeleton like that of animals which became extinct long ago. "Maybe," I said, "even before those little horses Clyde was looking at, which gradually changed into our big present-day horses."

Clyde said, "Ain't that evolution, them horses changin' thataway?"

"It's evolution of a sort," I countered, "when your father breeds the spots off his cattle to get straight red with a white face."

"You can get spots," Clyde informed me, "by hangin' a spottedy cloth in front of the cow's feed box. Then she has spottedy calves."

"I'd have to see that," I informed him right back. "But if you could do it, you'd still be having evolution which simply means change."

I realized suddenly that this was dangerous ground. For it is forbidden to teach organic evolution in the state. Or at least in any tax-supported school, including the university. To make any of the comments which instinct prompted me to make would be but little better than if I added afterward: "There is no God." To say evolution is to say man-monkey; to say that is to say atheist and to deny the Scriptures. I pondered on how a teacher might hope to keep his intellectual integrity and still do his job.

I said: "The teachers here are not allowed to give you what many scientists believe, nor to discuss religion with you. The people of the state feel in general, as people feel all over the country, that a child should do his discussing of religious and other matters concerning the Bible at home with his parents. For instance, some people believe it's all right to have a doctor when you're sick and others say the Bible teaches us not to. Some say the Bible teaches us to believe in witches—and other very good and very religious people say there are no such things. So about the only thing any of us can do is to talk to our parents and then form our own ideas."

Said Clyde: "But do you believe they ever really was any little horses like that says?"

"That's a photograph of what's left of them," I pointed out.

The delegation waited on me next day at school, at noon. Every child there probably knew it was going to happen. I could only ask myself what I'd done now when I saw, to my great surprise, Brother Saddler, Brother Caldwell, Brother Helms, and two or three ladies of the community, including Sister Callie, driving onto the schoolground in Brother Saddler's car. He had, of course, been gone since the revival, and I was surprised to see him back again. They got out and soberly Brother Caldwell asked if they might see me "inside." And, in there, he said, "It happened that Brother Saddler was in the community and we took that as an omen that, being a spiritual man, he should come with us. We understand that you are teaching evolution."

I counted ten, looking at him in what I hoped was an interested, quizzical way, and after that continued silent. It was his baby; I thought I would let him nurse it.

"Well—at least that you believe in it," Miss Callie put in.

I said, "Brother Saddler?"

"That's what we heard," he declared.

"You're telling me now," I asked him, "that Miss Callie didn't turn her flock of white leghorns speckled by putting some speckled chickens in with them? When you and I were looking at them—"

"That's got nothing to do with evolution!" he countered.

"It has everything to do with what I discussed in this schoolroom," I answered.

"What we want to know," he said, "is do you or don't you believe that God Almighty made Adam and Eve?"

"No one else could have," I assured him, "but that subject has never come up in school—and won't as long as I teach it—"

"But evolution has—something about a lot of little horses."

I was determined not to be run out of my school just as my pupils were doing so well and, still trying to be calm, I showed him the photograph of the fossils.

"They don't look like horses to me!" he stated.

"An apple tree doesn't look like a rose bush to most folks," I answered, "but nurserymen—" I was careful not to say "scientists"—"say that they are of the same family. If you could handle one of those fossil skeletons you might see many resemblances between it and the present-day horse—"

"Yes—but this 'millions of years ago' business. We know that the earth is only six thousand years old."

"On the other hand," I fell back on some of his own philosophizings, "we are told that to God a thousand years is as but a day and a day as a thousand years. Our present measure of time may be a little different from that in the early Bible times."

He squirmed and looked at his cohorts. Caldwell spoke reasonably: "We seem to be in pretty good agreement. As long as Brother Nelson believes mankind descended from Adam and Eve it seems to me we shouldn't dulge into these science books too much. Just pass over them and not raise a fuss. Uh—one thing you are off on, Brother Nelson—that about the spotted cow. I've seen it tried and I know."

"Well, now, I tried that," Helms put in. "I never had no luck. Ol' lady wanted a spotted heifer to take the place of one we lost, an'—"

Embarrassed looks from the ladies.

"There's the matter of Jacob and the goats," Brother Saddler reminded us. "There's no doubt it worked in Bible times."

"Yes," I said blandly, "but a spotted cloth before the feed box—you could only hope to mark the calf the way a baby is marked when its mother gets scared of something; Jacob was doing like Lonnie Haskins does when he breeds a mare—he holds a cloth of the color colt he wants before her right at the time—"

Faces, male and female, were crimson. I was left all alone within a matter of half a minute as, trying to think of some faraway subject to discuss with each other, my visitors left.

And that was the last I heard of the little horses, of evolution, or spotted calves.

It took careful steering during science classes to keep discussions from becoming too warm. Perhaps no one really believed it would help a baby's teething pains to wear a mole foot around his neck. Or rid one of worms to wear dress or shirt backward. Or strengthen a man's eyes to grow a mustache. Or any of many other things we discussed. But with each instance, there were some who had heard of such until, even under the grins of their classmates, they couldn't quite *dis*believe.

I had no right to scoff. As a child I had believed that if one sang at the table he would cry before he went to bed:

Sing before bread,
Cry before bed.

That was what our colored washlady told me; she was a woman of great wisdom and I didn't doubt her at all. I had forgotten the rhyme, though, until I heard it again at Big Piney —but I had never forgotten that when a yellow news bee hovers around you it means you'll get a letter with good news, and that a black one foretells bad news. The news bee is as long as the finger. He can hover in one spot, with his wings making a high-pitched sound which can be heard for many yards, and then dart so fast that he is suddenly in another spot "without having moved." His abdomen does not appear to hold a stinger and perhaps he is not a bee at all. At any rate, though I had seen his predictions fail perhaps hundreds of times, I still felt a slight thrill at sight of one of the creatures. On the other hand, our washlady also believed in the forewarnings of black cats but I never "set any store" by them.

Our discussions at school were interesting. June came one Monday morning with a tale of woe. Her sister in town had moved the other day, and, against her better judgment, had moved her broom. Sure enough, tragedy struck: the moving truck killed the dog. Another thing to remember was that if you just *had* to go back to the house after starting somewhere the best thing (according to Amos Masters) was to take off your

hat and "set around a little while, makin' like you're not even thinkin' about a trip," and then go on. The Ashtons and Bailys walked out of the house backward the second time to remove the bad luck in case they had to return.

And everyone agreed that horsehairs, getting into water, turned into snakes. Some had seen them—"the little fine ones that hadn't grown up yet." Of course, I knew of thread-like worms which spend part of their life cycle in water, thus giving rise to this superstition which appears to be held all over the country.

Several were delegated to bring jars of water from troughs where this miracle was said to have occurred, and to bring horsehairs. We set up a row in the back of the schoolhouse, with the horsehairs counted and measured as to length, just in case there might be some worm eggs in the water already, and waited to see what would happen.

Nothing did until some wag contrived (apparently during church) to put a small water moccasin about ten inches long into one of the jars with a chip of wood for him to rest his head on. When school was finally out for the year we still had the horsehairs intact, and no "snakes." But no one, man or boy (for the entire community had watched with interest), had changed his previous views.

In jars "shet up in the house thisaway" it could not have been expected to work.

CHAPTER XX

Basket Dinner

The new farm-to-market road which the WPA was building was bringing steady pay to several Big Piney families. Their children bloomed out at school with fine jackets and "store stuff," and even included "store bread" in their lunch buckets.

I did a bit of "projecting around" and came to the conclusion that we might get an extension of the mail route into the neighborhood. Then so many would not have to go so far to their boxes—including us Nelsons. A petition was sent home by each child to be signed by his parents and neighbors. Everyone signed except the Kincaids and some of their kin. They lived far up Kincaid Holler and any way the route might run they would probably have to walk as far as they did now, so perhaps it was not spite which kept them from signing.

A man came from the county seat and looked things over and said all we could do was hope for the best. And there, with Thanksgiving coming on, the matter rested, our petitions forgotten, I suspected, in some dusty pigeonhole or filing cabinet.

On Thanksgiving, having no family in these parts, Sally and I were well enough pleased when Big Piney gathered at the schoolhouse for a community dinner. Eggs had gone up until you had to pay twenty-one cents a dozen, but in spite of the fact that we had to buy ours, our hens having gone on strike, Sally deviled an entire dozen. She also roasted a hen and made

dressing and I don't know what all—and, like ourselves, everyone showed up with several times as much as they could eat.

It was a crisp day, fine for walking but too sharp to stand still out of doors for long. The food was spread inside on improvised tables made with planks, brought by Cap'n Jethrow and placed on the desks and covered with cloths. A hymn was sung. A blessing was asked upon the food. We ate.

Brother Helms had spotted the roast beef Cap'n Jethrow and his wife had brought and was standing by it when the word was given. Beef was a rarity on the tables of Big Piney and the forks speared rapidly at Miz Cap'n Jethrow's platter. With his part of the prize, Brother Helms lugged his plate swifty to the end of the table where Mrs. Helms and the children had stationed themselves. I had heard Mrs. Helms confide to someone that she had "brung an aig pie with bananers in it." That was evidently it there by them, in full glory with browned meringue top—"calf slobbers," children called the meringue pies they brought to school, in allusion to the white, stiff foam that forms around a calf's mouth when he sucks.

The women had outdone themselves, bringing their specialties. Apologetic remarks rose, goading people to compliments: "My, I jist knowed all the time I weren't puttin' enough sage in that dressin'. . . ." "Why, that there is wonderful dressin', Mollie. I want to get your receipt. . . ." "That there cake of mine is mighty sad [heavy] lookin'. I told the younguns I was amind to th'ow it to the hogs an' if the hogs wouldn't eat it we could use it fer a door-stop next summer." "Sad? Why, just from the outside it looks fine. I'm aiming to try it soon as I get to cake—"

Eventually we were all approaching the cake stage. I saw Brother Helms swabbing out his plate with a piece of "store bread" and raising the window and handing the bread to the dog which followed his car. He said idly, "Well—don't believe I've et hardly all I want. Le's see—reckon I better try a piece of my ol' lady's pie so as not to hurt her feelin's—"

He slipped a slab onto his plate, scattering a few vagrant slices

of banana on the table and picking them up again. Mrs. Helms said, "B'lieve I'll try some o' that to see is it fittin' to eat. . . ." In a moment the children had the rest of it. Thus, the Helmses had the glory of knocking out the community eye with a banana pie, and at the same time had the pie, which is something like having your pie and eating it too.

There were no folderols, such as extra days off, at Big Piney, and on Friday school met again. When I got home that evening, the cow was ailing. Mr. Caldwell came and looked at her. She walked with short, mincing steps as if something had gone wrong with her legs so that they would not move forward more than two or three inches at a time. Her back was humped up, but she seemed in no pain.

Caldwell was puzzled. He declared he had never seen anything like it.

"If she was wobbly in her back legs," he stated, "I'd say it was holler tail. If it was her front end that was effected, I'd say it was the holler horn. But I never heard of a cow having both at once—and besides, she's not wobbly. She's just kind of string-haltered in all four legs."

Treatment for "holler tail," as I already knew, having seen Brother Helms treat all his cows recently (I thought all they needed was a little more feed), was to split the skin at the root of the tail and put in plenty of salt and pepper and bind the place up.

"The vets will tell you ain't nary sech thing as holler tail," he had confided, "but my experience with vets is that they kill about as many critters as they cure. *I* shore wouldn't have one foolin' 'round my place. I can show you the holler if you'll c'mere."

Sure enough, there was sort of a shrinking of the cartilage between two joints of the tail—whether normal or not, I don't know, but he treated all his cows and they were all still alive.

"Anyway," he had added, "hit acts as a sort of general tonic on a cow. Keeps 'er from comin' down with holler tail in the

future if she ain't yet caught it from the others. I most gen'ally allus doctor all my cows thisaway about once a year."

Holler horn is similarly treated by boring a little hole in the horn near its base, putting in salt and pepper, and driving a small peg in to hold it.

"I wouldn't know what to do for her," Caldwell finished. But he agreed that even if I had any way of sending for a vet—which I didn't, Cap'n Jethrow having his truck away with hogs for market—the man was as bad as Helms had told me. I didn't know whether this was because of incompetence or a probable failure to call him in time. At any rate, it was clear the cow might not last until tomorrow and there was no likelihood that anyone would agree to come from town tonight—even if I could reach him—with rain threatening. Creeks would be flooded.

"What would you do if she were your cow?" Sally asked him.

He hesitated. "We-e-e-ell—I'll tell you and you can laugh at me if you want to. I'd go get Gram Slocum. She wouldn't hurt the cow. She might help her. She can 'do things,' whether a body likes to admit it or not. She has cured stock and people both.

"And don't try to pay her," he warned, when he saw that I was more than half ready to follow his advice. "Just ask her if she'd like a present. There are some who might think in the case of a strange spell like that cow has that Gram had done something to her to bring it on. I mean poisoned her in order to get to cure her. I don't hold with charm workings any more than you hold with that spottedy-cloth business, Brother Nelson."

He left. I took a few moments to snub Blossom to a post and pour a dose of salts down her, with a teaspoon of kerosene in it, this being a general remedy advised for ailing cows which Sally had found in a government bulletin. Then I lit out. It was all but dark when I reached the head of Slocum Holler. Once a little "kinned up" settlement of Slocums lived up it, but now they had "drindled away," the old ones dying off and the young ones getting fancy ideas and moving to town, or marrying into other

settlements and moving there. The cabins had gone to wrack, serving now as homes for the bats which might prefer them to the caves which honeycombed the hills round about. The little patches where once were "hoed in" enough corn and cane and 'taters to run a family were grown up in brush, and crows mocked me in the dusk from the ancient furrows which still showed faintly on the slopes.

The road did not follow the very bottom of the hollow, for there the creek ran, but it was almost in the bottom. The hills rose sharply above me, dark with cedars and naked oaks, and the threatening clouds closed low overhead. It was back in here that Uncle Johnny had corraled his panther. Even now there were panther scares—inspired, doubtless, by bobcats, which are fierce and furious animals when cornered. I walked faster, knowing that it was two miles to the head of the holler where the Slocum cabin was situated, and where dwelt old Hi Slocum (concerning whom Sally had given Martha's beloved some food for thought) and his sister Gram.

It was said of Gram that in her younger days "her applesauce weren't fittin' to eat," this being based on the old sayin'—whether joke or superstition I don't know—that a woman of light virtue can't make good applesauce. But apparently that was in the days before she became a power doctor and exhibited her ability to "do things." Certainly there was no gossip about her now; perhaps it was too far up Slocum Holler (still, she could be seen now and then away from it, gathering "yarbs" for Hi to send off to the drug and herbalist dealers in St. Louis and Indiana). Or maybe men were afraid to have any truck with her now.

A hoot owl cut loose ahead, not hooting so much as giving the bark of a dog. It startled me. Somewhere I heard a fox. Trying to drum up a pack of dogs to chase him all night, I supposed. One had led packs past our house several times, taking them down one way, bellowing and crying, and a couple of hours later, when we were finally settled to sleep again, bringing them back.

There was no moon. Half a dozen times I stumbled into chuckholes or over ledges. I could see just enough to keep out of the brush as the clouds thickened still more. But at long last I smelled smoke. A dog bayed not far away and kept it up until I heard the rattle of the chain and realized that the cabin was at hand.

I reached the fence. "Hello! Hello, the house!"

"I know yo're thar, schoolteacher!" Gram Slocum growled from the darkness. "I knowed all the time you was acomin'."

"Then," I said, "I wish you'd just have come to the house without waiting for me to come after you."

"Don't shove myself onto nobody. My power is fer the good of all them that deserves it, but I don't shove it onto 'em. Come in. Come on in. The dog, he's chained up."

I said, "My cow is sick."

"Lord, teacher, I know yore cow is sick."

I did not say of course she did, now that I had told her so.

"Come in. I cain't go kitin' off 'thout'n I git my stuff ready."

So I went in. As I reached the stone steps she opened the door of the room on the right, letting pale firelight flicker into the dogtrot between the two halves of the house. There was no lamp, just a fire in the chimneyplace. Hi was nowhere in sight. In one corner was a high wooden bed. On the wall I saw a saw and hammer, a few clothes on pegs, a doll hanging by a nail which its body concealed (little girls were frequently required to keep their dolls that way back in the hills and were not often allowed to handle them), a gun, and a fish gig. From the dark beams hung flitches of meat and strings of peppers and chunks of dried pumpkin and bunches of onions, together with many sacks whose contents could only be conjectured.

The loom took up another corner, and near the hearth was the spinning wheel—the only ones used now at Big Piney, and these but seldom, as I had heard. Gram was putting things into a child's school satchel. A cat stared at me from the hearth. The fire crackled—and not from burning sassafras, either, for it was

the smoke of oak wood which had met me in the hollow. No one would burn sassafras, or the wood of a peach tree, or of a lightning-struck tree, because even if he didn't believe in the black idea connected with such he would not want the neighbors to think he was trying to cause the death of his folks.

I said, "Must be going to rain. . . ." I knew enough so that I might have added, "Because the kitty sits with its tail to the fire," but I was afraid the acute Gram would accuse me of attempting to show off.

Bundling her head in a cloth, she turned her shrunken, leathery face toward me. "Hit *ain't* fixin' to rain," she stated. "Hit's fixin' to do worse. Cain't you hyear the fahr astompin' an' atrompin' snow? When an oak-wood fahr tromps snow, hit's afixin' to *do* somethin'."

"Well," I said, "I never knew that before—"

She grunted. "Heap o' things I reckon you never knowed before." And then: "You stand right thar an' don't tetch nothin'. I'll know it if you do."

She darted across the breezeway and into the other room for a moment. I stood still, touching nothing, but she hadn't said not to look. I cut my eyes around, trying to see the jar in which she kept her teeth. Her brother Hi had been a tooth-jumper of renown in the old days, being able, it was said, to jump out a tooth in just a second with his punch and mallet, but he had lost his touch—perhaps through lack of practice—as he grew older and even Gram had gone to the regular tooth-dentist in town to have hers out when none of her own conjuring would ease the pain they caused her. She had "gone the whole hog" and had all of them pulled at one sitting. Perhaps they were already loose or the dentist would not have taken so many, for she had twenty-odd. She took them carefully as he removed them and brought them home with her lest someone get them and be able to work a meanness against her by having part of her body. But I saw the jar nowhere.

Gram brought a carbide hat-light back with her from the other

room. She fiddled with it and lit it with a spill which she touched to the fire, and stuck the old hat on over her headcloth.

"We'll go," she said.

I wondered if she shouldn't in some way let Hi know where she was going—I didn't suppose he could read a note even if one were left for him so I didn't suggest that—but presently as we went down the trail the dog hushed abruptly as if he had been spoken to. I had no doubt that Hi had seen me "a far piece" down this trail before I reached the house and had later heard everything which took place at the cabin.

She said, "If that thar Pete Muehlbach was in the country, I might think he had drawed a spell on yore cow-brute, the way you talked him into sendin' them younguns to school agin his will."

"Pete can draw spells?" I asked.

"I never knowed him to have no luck, but he tries, an' maybe sometimes he does have. I'm the best power doctor in the country an' he used to come messin' around tryin' to find out how to do things, but I ain't allowed to pass on my secrets to but three men. Hit's got to be men, an' no kin to me—I'd lose my power if I told anybody else. I done passed most of 'em on to fellers away f'm yere that will use 'em right, never drawin' a curse on anybody that ain't black-hearted, an' allus he'pin' them that needs it. The world is full of mean folks, but I never he'ped do but one man to death an' God knows he deserved it. But, though I've saw the devil three different times, I never sold myself to 'im, an' my power turned back on me f'm this feller we done to death an' I suffered an' my folks suffered."

Abruptly she turned her light into the woods, stopping a moment in study, and then went on.

My heart was beating fast. I said, "How does a person go about selling himself to the devil?"

She halted again, turning to throw the light into my face. "I don't do no talkin' with mockers."

"I'm not mocking," I declared. "I'm interested."

Unconvinced, she walked on, but presently she threw her light once more into the timber. Flashing it about a bit she said, "Now thar is a sample of Pete Muehlbach's conjurin'—Indian conjurin' he's picked up some'res, I reckon." She pointed. I saw nothing. "The paw-paw tree," she explained impatiently. "Them Ashtons has went around on Ember days when a body can be shore of killin' timber by hackin' around it with an axe an' done away with most of the paw-paws—they figger they're dangerous —but I allus kep' a little somethin' hangin' in this'n, because I love the fruit, so's they'd be skeered to mess with it. . . . An' that Pete, he done this."

More impatiently, she added, "Look in the crotch of it—"

Sure enough, it was crotched about waist-high. And as I stepped closer I saw that a hole had been cut or bored downward into the crotch and a whittled peg driven into it.

"What's it for?" I asked.

"To keep Viny f'm takin' ary other man—or lettin' ary other man take her, the way Pete taken her. But I don't set no store by such foolishment. Hit's superstition, an' I ain't superstitious."

I started to pull the peg out, and she snatched my hand away.

"I wouldn't fool with such!" she said. "You cain't be plumb sure, an' it don't pay to take chances. Besides, Pete has got a right to his beliefs, even if they are foolish."

"You're right about that," I agreed. "Maybe we'd better hurry along to see about that cow. Why do the Ashtons think paw-paws are dangerous?"

"God knows," she answered. "They believe a lot of quare things. Out huntin' tansy to give Marthy when her trouble was on her. I told 'em 'twould do no good. Hit has to be picked in the *odd* months—like January, an' March an' May—an' October, hit ain't a odd month. Shore enough, it never done no good, though they poured gallons down her; she's still aimin' to have that youngun. They was too proud to ast Gram Slocum fer he'p. Not that I would a-he'ped in the way they wanted, but I'd

abrung that pup crawlin' back to her, *baggin'* her on his knees to wed him."

"Uncle Johnny was doing something to bring him back," I ventured.

"Uncle Johnny!" she snorted. "If'n you want to know the truth o' the matter, I *did* fetch George back. Not that I got any likin' fer her folks, but I felt sorry fer the girl. She's a fool, I reckon, but she can't he'p who she's kin to. Ol' Uncle Johnny, he used to set hisse'f up as a witch-master. Go around drawin' pictures of witches when folks was abein' pestered by somethin' they couldn't understand an' ashootin' the picture with a silver ball he'd run out of a half dollar. One time he putt too much powder in his ol' cap-an'-ball an' busted the bar'l an' nigh blowed his years out till he couldn't rightly hyear nothin' fer a week. But nobody paid Uncle Johnny any mind. He might amade a chills-an'-fever doctor out of hisse'f if he'd worked hard at it an' not been too stinkin'-lazy to learn what yarbs to use. But he never would amade a power doctor like me, let alone a witch-master—not him."

"But," I said, "he could have been a witch if he'd sold himself to the devil?"

She only grunted. "Yo're too inter-ested in that," she said. " 'Tain't no profit in a body studyin' on it too much."

We came to the mouth of the hollow and followed the trail on through the Muehlbach woods, after climbing a fence, instead of going around the road. I wasn't lost, although I lacked something of knowing exactly where I was, but it was quite a surprise when I suddenly saw the light of my house.

Sally was at the barn with the cow, having covered her with an old quilt to ease her shivers. Gram Slocum watched as we induced the cow to walk some. Then she said, "I'll tell you'ns this—they ain't nobody can save that cow less'n it is me, an' I don't g'aruntee I can. You'ns go to the house. I can't do no good with outsiders around."

We went. I had thoughts of slipping back to watch, but I

had "batted" up the cracks until I wasn't certain I could find a peeping place. I had a concern lest the old woman set the barn on fire from her light, and I wasn't easy in my mind as I told Sally a bit of what had happened. But almost immediately, as we waited in the kitchen, I saw the light coming to the house.

Gram bustled in and put her satchel on the table, and as soon as she took off the incongruous hat with the lamp on it she looked like just another little mountain woman.

"Yore cow," she said, "will be all right at mornin' milkin'—or else dead. I'll set a little spell an' have another look at her."

She talked "crops and weather"—that is, harmless neighborhood gossip—for a few minutes, sounding just like anyone else, and it was a little hard to remember the spell which she and her cabin had thrown over me. We went out to see the cow then. She was certainly no worse. Gram Slocum professed to see a change for the better. I remembered the conventional, "What do I owe you?" which, among neighbors, is answered, "Not a thing." My response then would be, "Well—much obliged then, till you're better paid." But the response to Gram was, "Is there something I could make you a present of?" She said, "Well, I'm out of sweetenin' except jist a few 'lasses that's gone to sugar. You might let me have a little poke of boughten sweetenin' if you got plenty on hand."

We were ashamed to offer such small payment; she eased our feelings by taking along half a box of crackers (the whole two pounds had cost twenty-three cents), and she seemed quite pleased with her bargain.

Next morning, because of, or in spite of Gram's ministrations, when I waded the fresh snow to the barn (after another trip in the night) Blossom was peacefully chewing her cud. Except for a little stiffness, and the fact that she had generated no milk, she seemed all right. I fed her well and that night she gave almost as much milk as usual.

CHAPTER XXI

The Boys from Bear Creek

That day at school I learned a boisterous and fascinating game called "fox and geese"—not the usual game of that name—played on a big circular rink tramped out in the snow. We had great fun, but later the smell was a little intense when we warmed by the big wood stove. Some bed-wetter (Feelia Helms, it seemed to be) who slept in the same underwear she wore to school—after presumably drying it—generated quite an aroma.

This was a matter which, it might be expected, one's best friend would not tell one about, but there were some snickers and Feelia was much mortified when another small fry said, "Feelia's been playin' with fire"—an allusion to the idea that playing with fire induces bed wetting, though I did not understand this at the time, and consequently did not understand the snickers.

I said, "Is anyone here caught up enough on his own business to tend to someone else's?" I tried to limit myself on the number of these smug, schoolteacherish remarks I gave forth, but I had a phobia against seeing the helpless shoved around. Tolerance was a thing I was trying to instill into my pupils.

Time for books. This morning we had our Bible reading, but no song or chapter from *Pooh Bear,* which we were working through with delight. This was the Monday after Thanksgiving —the day to start work on the Christmas program, the *pièce de*

résistance of the year, a greater thing, even, than the last-day-of-school program.

We talked of Christmas. Some of the children knew old people who still believed that the "real" Christmas was on January 6—"Old Christmas," they called it. They wanted to know why it had been changed, so we talked a bit about calendars, and I dared tell them that no one knew for certain when Jesus was born so "the people of the Church in the olden times" decided to celebrate it on one certain day.

I told them there was an interesting coincidence in the matter of this day—which came at the period when the sun started its return journey northward (as it seemed to us) after having gone away from us for six months and then stopped for three days, as if it might not come back at all.

"The ancients," I said, "noticed when this turn of the year came, and they had a great celebration at that time. Then when it came the time of Jesus and—as the Bible tells us—he was dead and buried for three days before coming back to us, the people decided to continue having their winter festival but now they did it in worship of Jesus and they decided that they would celebrate his birthday at that time. Don't you think that was a good idea?"

Everybody thought so. Fritz Baily's grandmother, Granny Baily, had lost track of her birthday so she always had it on her "weddin' day," which we decided was a reasonable thing. But Fritz still wasn't satisfied about Christmas. Granny was one of those who held to "Old Christmas," and she knew that was the right time "because at midnight on January fifth the bees always hum in their hives and nestes."

My answer to that, as it was to more and more things lately (for I was learning some lessons in tolerance myself) was: "She may be right—who knows?"

We decided that among other things the school would sing two or three Christmas songs on the program. I had a book of Christmas songs and "pieces" from which I had clipped suitable

selections for various pupils in the room. Some had brought other pieces from home, carefully saved from previous years.

I was in the midst of reading one off before handing it out when the door slowly opened. A boy whom I had never seen before thrust his head in, shooting sharp, quick glances around and apparently ready to duck back out at the first sign of attack.

"Come in!" I invited.

He said something to someone with him and edged in—as woebegone a specimen as I ever saw. He was apparently about sixteen; his clothes had patches on top of patches, and they needed still more. Over cap and ragged jumper and overalls there was a coating of cedar gum and general dirt. Shaggy hair stuck out around the cap, and through a hole where the bill was ripped loose.

Another boy, a size smaller, edged after him; just as dirty and out at elbows—and heels. And yet another boy came after him. And still a fourth. The fourth one shut the door. Apparently that was the crop. They had lunch buckets.

The oldest said, "Poppy said fer us to come to school."

"We're glad to have you," I answered. "Go to the stove and warm. We'll start classes soon. What grades are you in?"

They shifted their feet and looked at each other. The oldest said: "Ain't in nary'n. We ain't never been to school before. . . ." And then: "We got to go back home after dinner if the snow blows off'n the cedars by then. We can't never come but half a day. We got to work fer Poppy."

This was a time, I felt, to make haste slowly. "Then," I said, "we'll have to try to have all your classes of a morning."

Steam rose from their feet as they held them to the stove. I explained that I would presently find them parts for their portion of the Christmas program we were planning, and they looked at me blankly and again at each other.

Presently I asked them to put their caps—which they still had on—and their lunch buckets at whichever of the vacant seats they

wanted to use and to come to my desk. I asked the oldest his name.

"Caspel Tibo," he answered—the last name being pronounced "Tee-bo," being one of the several dozen variants of Thibold, Theobaux, Thebo, and so on which are found in the Ozarks. "Caspel Tibo. C-a-s-p-e-l T-i-b-o. Mommy learnt me that and we can say our ABC's an' count plump out of sight."

"Good! That's a fine start!" And then: "Can you write your name?"

"Nawsir." An embarrassed shake of the head. "Cain't write nothin'."

I printed his name on the blackboard. "Each of these marks is one letter of your name," I explained, and I spelled it over to him. "You can practice on that. The first thing everyone of us might find handy to know is how to write our name, don't you think?"

The other boys were Urban, Ernest, and Junior. What does Junior stand for? "Stand fer? Hit's my name." "What's your father's name?" "Caspel—like his'n."

"Oh," I said.

"I was named after my Uncle Junior Tibo," he added helpfully.

Putting their names on the board, I asked, "Where do you boys live?"

"Down through the woods." Caspel pointed. "We're makin' cedar posties an' hackin' ties fer Cap'n Jethrow."

The shack where Emma Nolan and her two children had lived —that was where it would be if they were working for Jethrow.

"Cap'n Jethrow said Poppy'd ort to let us take up books whilst it was bad weather an' some days we couldn't work noway."

Apparently they all understood the connection between the letters and their names. Sure enough, they could also count to ten and they could count "plump out of sight" by twos, fives, and tens, though threes or fours puzzled them. So I made the digits,

each boy's at his own place, and left them to practice while I began the regular classes.

At recess, having noticed their broken shoes, I said that all who wished might go out and play—unless (as several had reported) their mothers had told them to stay indoors—and that all who wished to stay indoors might have some games there.

Said Caspel: "Poppy said did he hyear of us doin' any playin' he'd play us right out of school to the cedar brake in a hurry."

I had planned sooner to make some comment on the fact that we should come to school clean, not only because we would perhaps feel better but because it would be nicer for those around us, but now that the Tibos were here I decided against it lest they think I was talking about them and not come back. Their feet were wet from the snow and apparently they had worn their socks a long time for, now that they were at the stove again, the odor filled the room. I also was startled, as I punched up the fire and threw in fresh chunks, to see what appeared to be a sock pinned around Caspel's neck.

Catching my look, he squirmed a little and then he said, "This yere is to keep me from having the quinsy." He added, "We aim to do some trappin' an' huntin' with the dogs. Ain't nothin' good as skunk oil fer the quinsy. Next to that is a real dirty sock with a little coal-oil on it."

"Doesn't it give you a sore throat to have your feet wet?" I asked.

"Nawsir. Don't seem to. They're jist about always wet. Seems like I jist kind of croup up in the night an' then my throat swells up till it's so sore I cain't swaller." His blue eyes were earnest and puzzled in his mass of red freckles as he absently wiped his nose on his jumper sleeve.

I went out to settle a squabble about snowballing, and we decided that hard-packed balls should not be thrown, and none thrown at anyone who wasn't specifically "playing with you." I caught one in the back as I went in and when I turned everyone was laughing. The culprit was Frances, my star eighth grader.

"I thought you were playing with us!" she cried.

I ran her down and pelted her with two or three, meanwhile catching a couple of others in unexpected places, and soon the battle was general—after which, with everyone in high good humor, we went back in. Not till then did I guiltily remember I had been going to give the Tibos pre-primers from the library—books which we, of this year, were donating to the school.

But attendance was short today, so that there were no fourth grade classes and there seemed to be time to spare, now that I had the knack of conducting a class at the recitation benches, overseeing two others at the board, and keeping an eye on seat-workers. This, of course, was really no more complicated than any non-routine job, once one had a little practice. A class might have eight or ten minutes of discussion on interesting points in a lesson, or of corollary work, then twenty minutes doing something at the board while the previous board-workers recited or explained their board work, and after that they might use the rest of the period for preparation of other lessons or—if their work had been satisfactory—reading magazines and books of their choice. "Honor" students might speak to other honor students without permission or use the library at their own discretion; and the earnest low-grade pupil of good citizenship might have several of the privileges granted the others.

This included almost everyone at times; it was no fun being in the doghouse, and school patrons who at first grumbled at the informal atmosphere of which they had heard, and which they saw when they came to visit, backed water quickly enough when they heard the pupils recite. My belief was that the greatest thing I could possibly teach a child was the ability to reason toward a conclusion—in other words, to think constructively—and to study, in connection with this, intelligently.

But I also believed that, faulty as any curriculum is likely to be, he should learn specific facts from day to day for use in his thinking. It was, sadly enough, the recitation of these facts which

most impressed people at the Friday night literaries, or when they visited school.

It often put me in mind of the dunce who, also having a dunce for a teacher—a man given to asking the questions from the book straight down the row—always figured out his question in advance and painfully hunted up the answer. He failed to take into account that another boy was absent one day when learning the principal exports of the Argentine, and when the teacher asked him for what the ladies of that country were noted he drawled, "Hide, horns, an' taller."

I have made some mention of my resentment at the Saddlers' dumping their children into my care for the duration of the revival; perhaps this was because I thought they should settle down and give their children a normal home instead of dragging them from hell to breakfast holding meetings. Certainly I did my best by them while they were at Big Piney, and I felt that at least the two youngest learned quite a bit. The other two were bored with our backwoods community; they yearned for towns where three and four hundred people might turn out to shout and sing and "hear the message." I sympathized with them; I tried to give them something to think about, but I didn't regard it as my duty to entertain them. As a matter of fact, they had settled down and were doing well the last few days before time to leave.

But I didn't resent having the Tibos. I hid whatever pity I might feel for their condition, because I knew they would rightfully resent such sentiment. At the risk of sounding noble, I will say I was glad of the chance to help them and glad of the challenge they presented. However, I did wish they would clean up.

There was a moment for hand warming and sweeping off of snow and brushing it out the door. Then I said, "For right now, Caspel, we'll have you boys in a class together, since you're getting started a little late."

"We was allus aimin' to go down on Bear Creek," he volun-

teered as they came to the recitation bench, "but Poppy never could spare us."

"How many are in your family?" I asked.

"Us boys and Poppy and Mommy and three little'ns."

In good cedar, a hustling post-cutter could earn a dollar and a half or more a day—a third to a half more than at hourly wages for anything else. With work shoes to be had at a dollar and a quarter and everything else accordingly, I couldn't understand the clothes they were wearing.

"Well," I said, "you're going to learn to read." I gave them the books and they opened them with rough, dirty, chapped hands. "Do you notice," I asked, "that there are lines of letters, with the letters divided into small bunches? Does anyone know what each one of those bunches of letters makes?"

"ABC's!" Ernest was triumphant.

"Aw, they don't do nary sech thing!" from Caspel. "Words!"

"And," I comforted Ernest, "every word is made of several ABC's. Now the word under the picture— But first, let me tell you this book is about a boy named Frank, a girl named Betty, and a dog named Spot. Who has an idea what the word under the first picture is?"

They cried together: "Spot!"

"Fine! Who can find that word somewhere else on the page?"

"Here! Here!" They pointed with grubby fingers.

The Tibos were learning to read.

At noon they decided there was too much snow on the cedars. Poppy wouldn't be looking for them home. They brought out pones of cornbread, too yellow with soda, and glasses of sorghum and spoons to stir up the lumps of meat grease in it. While they might have preferred butter, let it be said that some with butter on the table pass it up for bacon grease to go in their molasses. In four minutes flat the boys had finished eating, and four voices were crying, "What's this yere word?" as books were thrust before me.

CHAPTER XXII

I Dabble in Witchcraft

Next day the Tibos reported that Poppy said did he catch them sticking their noses into ary Christmas program, he would stick them right back out again; he wanted them to study if they went to school when he needed them so bad to help him, and not waste their time on Christmas programs.

"I can understand how he feels about that," I assured them. "But I wonder if he knows that a great many people believe that memorizing things strengthens the mind—and at any rate everyone must—" I had a feeling that "memorize" would convey nothing to them—"must learn something by heart every month. So this month we're learning Christmas pieces. Then instead of having our Friday night literary during Christmas week, we'll have a Christmas program."

After all, Mr. Tibo was a patron of the school, although he might never have paid taxes and perhaps never would. This is a democracy and even the most illiterate may have some good ideas on how it should be run, since shrewdness and literacy have no necessary connection.

Dubiously they kept the verses they had been trying to give back to me. And I said, "Another thing—I wish you'd tell your father that playing is part of school, too. You need to play some. It freshens your mind so that you learn more." But I didn't think they would tell him.

I spent a few minutes hearing "pieces" and we practiced "Silent Night." Arithmetic. It didn't take long to discover that the Tibos—perhaps through counting posts and figuring their pay—were ready with sums involving all the digits. They could give, by a sort of reflex, answers involving halves. They knew their "twice times" table, but multiplication in general was beyond them. It was hard to classify them. Giving them number flash cards to drill each other, I kept an ear their way as I went on with other classes.

I had some burning thoughts about telling Tibo that the law required him to send his children to school all day, but Caldwell discouraged me.

"I know that outfit from away back," he declared. "It's a miracle to have any of 'em going at all. Tibo has had lots of bad luck. Got into debt through no great fault of his own and now he's trying to get out. If the law was put on him he'd take the kids out entirely and say they were sick or didn't have fit clothes. He won't go on relief. He's too proud to—and besides they'd put him in public work and he'd have to have a social security card and he thinks it's the Mark of the Beast."

It was a shocking condition which Sally and Mrs. Caldwell and Mrs. Helms found when they went to see Mrs. Tibo. The two-room house contained a rickety old cookstove set up on bricks, a homemade table without a cover, some wooden boxes and nail kegs, a lamp, and tumbled messes of ragged quilts and straw ticks in the corners, without bedsteads.

And there was the woman obviously ill of body and perhaps of mind, as might be expected in such circumstances. There were several ratty-haired children and a discouraged man ashamed of his surroundings, half apathetic, half blustering to hide his embarrassment.

The Tibos had been in school a week. They finished the pre-primers on Friday. Today the thickness of the primers I had given them had expanded, like decks of old playing cards, from

much reading over the week end. The first fifty pages or so of the primers used the vocabulary of the pre-primers, but the Tibos were not fully aware of this. They were greatly elated at having gone so far—and I was as much so, although I saw that I had bought myself a bunch of primers, for these would never be usable again. I had borrowed them from other pupils who were now in the first reader.

Geography. I was teaching Joyce, a fourth grader, To Think, but I seemed to be having little luck. She was willing but timid. She looked at me with large, liquid gray eyes, wondering what I was trying to dig out of her. I wondered who is right—those who trace "educate" to a Latin root meaning "to draw out of" or to another meaning "to pour into."

"Joyce," I said, "we have just learned in this paragraph that the people in New England like to have people from other places come there to spend their vacations. Why do they?"

She pondered a long time, smoothing her new red woolen skirt. She was nicely dressed and her hair, brushed and braided every morning, had ribbons to match the skirt.

After a time she said, "Sir-r-r-r?"

I took a new tack. Mr. Quigley, I reminded her, had a number of tourist cabins on the river to which people came from many different states for a while in summer. "Why," I asked, "does he like these people to come to his camp?"

She considered some more. "To ride in the boats?"

"Well—yes. And why does he want them to do that?"

"So they can catch fish?"

Give me strength. Just be patient. "Yes . . . But how does that help Mr. Quigley?"

She couldn't decide. Urban Tibo, soaking up some geography with his off-ear while copying a page from his primer on the board, waved an importunate hand.

"I know! Let me tell her. Hit's so he can make money, rentin' boats and cabins."

I had to agree that Urban was correct. "And now, Joyce, why do people in New England like to have tourists come there?"

She knew now: "To catch fish!"

Just before noon Brother Helms clattered down the road and stopped, yelling. I knew someone had been killed, or a house was burning. I raised a window and he shouted: "The mail petition has went through! Beginnin' the first of the year we'll have the F. D. R.!" So, for Sally and me, our new R. F. D. was always thus transposed.

Prayer meeting was on Wednesday nights and was better attended than prayer meetings with which I was familiar in urban communities where people have more outlets for the social instincts. Tonight the turn-out was almost as big as for Sunday meeting: the church wished to plan its portion of the Christmas program.

Cap'n Jethrow spoke gravely. He would provide sacks of treat for the children, with candy, nuts, apple, and orange, and the church could pay him at half price. Apparently this was the custom. Of course, he added, "a delegation" would have to be "p'inted to fill the pokes." He likely wouldn't get around to it.

While I thought of it I spoke to him privately about a twenty pound bucket of candy for the "teacher's treat" which custom demanded—and impulse dictated—I provide for my pupils. Yup; he would see that I got it.

Now we got down to the business of the prayer meeting but we kept it brief because it was already eight o'clock. We had a song. Miss Callie, the leader, had us say the Lord's Prayer. Then she said she guessed we had better omit the lesson. We took the bundles we had brought, and outside we found the odds and ends of furniture—chairs and a dismantled iron bedstead, complete with springs and slats—and made a procession down the hill.

We had the devil of a time when it was discovered Cap'n Jethrow had built a fence across the trail, taking in land which had previously lain outside, but we finally struggled over because it was a full mile around the road to the Tibo house.

There was no light when we reached the staggering yard fence. Startled sheep blundered away through the darkness. Quietly we put the things down in the yard, aware of the sharp creak of a door, and low, excited voices in the house. Perhaps the Tibos had had visitations like this in time past. At any rate, we were scarcely out of sight when they rushed forth and fell upon the prizes.

"Keerful now!" one of them warned. "Don't drop nothin'!"

And another: "Poppy! Make him leave me be. I got this first!"

And from Tibo: "Hesh up all of you! They'll hear you. Lug stuff in to the light!"

I had been going to the store once each week for our necessities, and this did us, what with the monthly trip Cap'n Jethrow made to bring our cow and pig feed and our kerosene and such. On this Friday, well marked by the Tibos blooming out in their new quilt-lined jumpers and overalls and shoes—these latter greased until practically dripping—Miz Cap'n Jethrow passed the schoolhouse in the truck with our order. She had been "threatening" to visit Sally, and I was glad to see she was about it.

Earlier in the day I had seen the Cap'n out on his saddle mule, which he preferred to a horse. Probably, I thought, he was seeing about his stock which was scattered in half a dozen rented pastures as in the summer, for the winter was still so open the animals were able to subsist on the green orchard grass, which withstands frost, and on the daily handful of cottonseed cake which the owners of the various pastures were hired to feed them.

Sister Viny's children had not been in school today, and thinking one or both of them might be sick—for they were much interested in their work and in the program and the decorating of the schoolhouse—I was somewhat surprised to see Sister Viny at the house when I reached home.

She sat grim-faced in the living room with Sally and Miz Cap'n Jethrow—considerately, as always, occupying the rocker from which she had finally snapped an arm, and which we had

left unrepaired for her use and comfort. Sally was obviously upset. She tried to include Sister Viny in the conversation, but Miz Cap'n Jethrow ignored the other visitor entirely. She talked and smiled thinly to Sally and me, now and then removing her pinch-on spectacles, gesturing with them, and putting them back on.

Sister Viny stuck it out to the bitter end, remaining in her chair when Mrs. Jethrow, her visit completed, rose to leave. And when Sally came back in, after seeing her go, Sister Viny rose.

Voice atremble, she exclaimed, "The old sow! The old white-livered sow!" In the hills, a boar is supposed to have white spots on his liver, and "white-livered," rather than being only a term of cowardice, in proper context meant an over-sexed and probably immoral person.

"I'll fix her!" Sister Viny cried, heading for the back door. "Whur does the ol' bitch think her man is at? I'll cuckle her 'fore she's a day older if I have to backslide to do it."

Next morning Sister Viny arrived early "to help wash." She didn't "work out"—that is, outside her own home—but she would come help a neighbor in need. She always called it "helping wash," even when Sally could do nothing about the chore and I wasn't there to draw water. She invariably fussed a little, when accepting her pay, that she had expected no money for a favor.

Waddling into the kitchen this morning she was half grim, half pleased. "Well," she greeted us, "I done what I said I would!"

It was that day that two big things happened to us. I don't know which was the bigger, though I had no doubt at the time. Pete Caldwell came at noon with our paper and a couple of letters —in addition, of course, to the ads designed by some knowing mind to sell us fruit trees, strawberry plants, baby chickens, patent brooders, and so on. Pete's father had been to the store and, returning by the boxes, had brought the mail.

In one of the letters was a check—"in four figures," as I later modestly put it when writing to friends; truthfully, too, for the

amount was $54.50. Because of some apparently universal quirk in the human animal's mind, it pleased me as greatly as if it had been a hundred times that amount earned at my regular work—for this was in payment for a "writin'" I'd done on the herbs gathered by Gram and Hi Slocum, and how they used the old-time hill lore in connection with them. How, even though their material was sent off to commercial herbalists, they were careful to keep separate the packages of barks which were scraped *up* the tree or limb from those which were scraped *down,* because for some ailments one might use the scraped-up bark of a certain wood and for others the scraped-down bark of the same. And, of course, the time of year of the gathering was important, as was the "sign" under which the gathering was done.

To see all this actual cash money for something I had written left me weak. My arms tingled as if asleep. Fortunately Pete had brought the mail just to the door and gone away again. Sally and I had something of a conniption fit. We quieted as Sister Viny came in from hanging clothes, but it was obvious to her that something was up.

I explained that we had received a little unexpected money—and she could well understand how that might excite a body. For several reasons we didn't want it getting out about the writing. We realized that we were looked on, anyway, by most folks as sufficiently queer and outlandish without adding anything to excite or confirm their worst suspicions. Moreover, we had become intensely interested in finding out more about some of the things which so far were only hinted at, and we knew that the mysteries would only be made deeper if people thought they were going to be written about.

I hesitate to go into the matter of the second letter I received that day. However, here it is for what it is worth, and those who have no interest in things which are now looked upon as occult, but which may sometime be taken for granted, may tread lightly by. At any rate, it brought us once more in contact with Gram Slocum.

The letter was from a friend who had become much interested in the experiments in applied psychology which were being carried on at some of the universities and by the Rosicrucian Society. He said that he was enclosing a gadget which was used in one of the simplest of the experiments—although an experiment which had the deepest implications and was of vast significance in the discoveries concerning the mind.

The gadget was a dial cut from light cardboard, with the numbers from one to twelve around the rim. Also included was a small needle or arrow cut from paper. The idea was to thrust a pin upward through the center of the dial and balance the arrow on the point. Then, said my friend, the operator was to shield his breath away from it by holding a paper before the mouth and nostrils, and concentrate upon the one of the numbers on the dial to which he wished the arrow to point. The results, he added, tended to prove that a thought was a physical thing.

I am at best a little on the gullible side, but my reaction to this was that my friend had been pretty badly taken in by some clever operator. However, in an idle moment I set the gadget up, protected it from my breath, and started concentrating on a number. I had been warned that it might take as much as half an hour to achieve results unless one were disciplined in concentration.

Sally was reading—for I had waited until evening when there would probably be no interruptions and the shades would be drawn against surprise. Everything was quiet except for an occasional crackle of the fire and the pop of a timber as the wind shook the house. Suddenly the arrow moved. It swung slowly around. It approached the seven upon which I was concentrating. Stopped. Swung back, and stopped again. It was directly on the dot by the seven.

I think my surprise, my delight, my whole feeling must have approached that of Balboa's when he finally sighted the Pacific. But an eerieness, an uncanny twitching of the flesh and of the

scalp were also upon me, as if I had drunk, believing, of Gram Slocum's blackest brew.

Coincidence, I told myself then as I recovered a little. A vagrant breeze, and a coincidence. I chose a three. Three, I said in my mind. Three . . . three . . . three . . . My brain felt as if it were expanding, pressing against my skull with the effort of concentration. The arrow quivered. It moved. It turned. Around, and around, and around. Three . . . Stop at *three,* you devilish critter—

It stopped at three.

Five, I commanded. It turned obediently to five. It stopped. One. It turned to one.

"Sally," I breathed. "Look here . . . look at this thing. . . . What number do you want it to stop at?"

"Oh, any of them." Sally wasn't impressed but like a dutiful wife she looked.

"Ten," I said. "Let's concentrate on ten . . ."

The spell was briefly broken. Sally became restless. But just then the thing moved. It passed ten, hesitated, and backed up, and kept on backing.

"Let's try seven," I said.

It passed seven and stopped at ten.

"Seven!" I said. It backed up to seven.

"Well," Sally exclaimed. "I'll be!"

I agreed that I would, too.

"But still," Sally said. "After all, now—"

So I went into the kitchen, out of sight. I thought of a number.

"It's stopped," she reported.

"Four?"

"Four! . . . It's moving. . . . It's stopped. . . ."

"Twelve?"

"Twelve."

We were enthralled. We kept the thing as busy the next several days as the new virgin in a harem. We would be at the barn. "Eight!" one of us would say. We would go creeping up and

peer through the window. Eight, it would say. When I went to drive Blossom down to milk one evening—she was visiting with Helms's cows over the fence and had forgotten to come—Sally stayed by "the witch clock," and when she signaled that it had stopped I wigwagged the number. Correct. Distance—at least that distance—didn't seem to affect the results.

After a session with it, when we fell to our evening's reading, we might glance up in an hour to see it turning slowly around and around. Our supposition was that we still had it subconsciously in our thoughts and that it was responding. But there seemed to be serious limitations either to it or to our minds, for when we increased the size of the arrow very much we couldn't budge it.

Meantime, we chose to regard the check we had received as found money. From Cap'n Jethrow we bought an "airtight" heater, made of very light material but good for three winters of careful use, for four dollars. It would take a surprising amount of wood, and it made a gratifying headway against the chill which crept into our house. We closed the fireplace in front. The chief danger of airtight stoves of course is that now and then when the draft is shut off too thoroughly an accumulation of gases inside may explode and burst the stove, with the possible result of burning the house down. So I punched some holes in the top with a nail and some more in the tin cover of the draft hole so it could always get some air if a zealous visitor should chance to shut it to the tightest.

With the rest of the check, we decided to brave Cap'n Jethrow's wrath. We pored for hours over the "wishbooks" and at last sent orders to Ward's and Roebuck's. The one to Ward's included a final "secret" entry by me, and the one to Sears' a similar one by Sally—for after all Christmas was almost here, and before our windfall we had decided that we couldn't buy any presents.

Meantime I hopefully wrote another piece, thinking to slip up on the blind side of that editor a second time, but it didn't seem to come off and in disgust I decided not to mail it.

On Saturday, when I was lugging down poles from the timber to saw up for the coming week's wood, I saw Gram Slocum approaching along the road. The providing of wood was my *bête noire,* my Jonah. One has to be raised with an axe to be a good axeman; the work was on the slow side for me at best, but worst of all I felt, after dragging the poles to the house, as if someone should offer me a bowl of rice and a couple of coppers.

I had tried to hire help but no one was interested. Everybody who was essentially hirable had a job on the new road, and if any of these worked on their off-days they were docked some way on the road work. I approached Charley Helms about swapping work, I to help him make wood and he to help me, and to include somewhere in the deal the hauling of mine to the house. But his wife and kids, it seemed, kept about enough wood hauled down with the sled and pony to run him, and they cut it up besides—and anyway, on Saturdays, now that they had lots to spend, they liked to go to town, and, on Sundays, to see their kin . . .

I threw down my poles on the pile, when I saw that Gram was coming in. We had heard that once she got anything from you she was likely to be back at odd times hinting for more presents.

She howdy-doed me and then, sniffing, she said, "What you aimin' to do with them poles?"

I knew what she was driving at. She had smelled the sassafras and it was of course very bad luck to burn this wood. I had got it because it was handy.

"Now don't worry yourself about it, Gram," I told her.

"I'm not worried fer myself," she answered. "I'm fixed agin harm by it. I'm thinkin' of you."

I answered, on a foolish impulse, "I'm fixed, too."

She halted, her gunny sack, doubtless holding roots she had dug at this propitious season, in one hand, the other arm akimbo. Her blue eyes narrowed.

"Who fixed you? They ain't nary power doctor 'round yere 'cept me could fix you to do any real good."

Sally came out and welcomed the old woman. I said, "Come in, Gram. I'll show you something."

She sensed that something was afoot. At first, as she saw the dial, she was half curious, half disdainful. But presently her eyes bugged. She insisted on setting it in a different place, or rather on my doing so, for she would not touch it, as if she thought I had some sort of control on it.

And at last: "How do you do it, Mr. Nelson?"

"I'm not allowed," I said, "to tell but three people. I've told my wife, and I've told a friend. I'm saving the third one just in case I should ever want to pass it on where it would do good. I can only tell women, of course, me being a man. . . ."

That was all in accordance with the best tradition.

She fidgeted and squirmed. Finally: "What good is it after a body knows hit?"

"Well—it's like a lot of things," I said. "Maybe not a great deal of good, but interesting."

She shook her head. "Do you have a secret sayin'?"

"Sort of."

"Out'n the Book?"

"No."

"Huh! . . . Well, most of my best sayin's ain't out of it, neither." A keen, sidelong look. "What is it you want to know the worst?"

"Two things," I said. "First, I understand you've met the devil three different times. I want to know how he looks."

"Oh, that! Well, he's a turrible ugly varmint. First time—mind you, I wouldn't tell this to ever'body; nobody that would laugh at me, because hit ain't a laughin' matter. The ol' man—he's a serious thing an' a heap o' folks will find it out gin he gets holt of 'em and starts roastin' 'em. Well, first time, thar I was in them deep woods huntin' sang roots. They're scarce as frog hair these days, way folks has hunted an' dug and tuck 'em all. This

was plumb over to the river an' the dark had ketched me, an' I mean dark. Hit was black. I lit fer home an' thar I was, comin' up a steep mountain follerin' my nose when I hearn a tramplin' an' a tromplin' along behind me. Thought 'twere a horse follerin' me. They'll do that, an old strayed horse will.

"I stopped to blow a little an' glanced back, an' 'tweren't nary horse. 'Twas Satan. They was jist enough of a glow about 'im that I could see 'im right good, though ever'whur else was that dark I'd been holdin' an arm in front of my face to fend limbs. An' thar he stood. Well, it give me a turn. A bad turn."

"What did he look like?" I asked.

"Well—" she circled her thumbs and fingers and put them to her eyes, "he had turrible big eyes, and—" she stuck up a forefinger on either side of her head—"two little short horns. He was hairy all over. Never seen his hands, but he had hind feet like a yearlin' calf. Kept aswitchin' an' aflickin' his tail. . . ."

She was breathing heavily. I said, "And what did you do?"

"Do? I done exactly like another lady done that I heared of that met 'im. I shook my finger at 'im and said, 'I rebuke you, Devil! I rebuke you, Devil! I rebuke you, Devil!' An' he turned tail an' went tromplin' back down the hill mindin' his own business." She added, "Three is God's number. . . . He couldn't stand up agin it." Taking a deep breath, she said, "Now—you tell me about this here thing."

"I told you," I reminded her, "there were two things I wanted to know." I didn't look at Sally at all.

"Turn about's fair play," Gram reminded me.

I was afraid she would be unimpressed or refuse to believe me when I bared the secret, but there was nothing for it except to tell her.

I said, "You just have to believe you have power over that paper arrow, Gram—and if you believe it, it will mind you. Of course," I added, as her eyes narrowed, "people who have lots of power to begin with can get the hang of it easier."

"How long did it take you?" she demanded.

"I was twenty-three years old," I told her, "before I got a budge out of it. But you're a woman with power."

Doubtfully, she said, "Well, that thar is true, of course."

Several years later I was to learn that small children—at least as young as five and six years old—could operate the thing very easily, but somehow I was both surprised and chagrined, as well as pleased, to see it turn for Gram. Whether the influence of mine and Sally's minds had anything to do with the matter I don't know, but Gram claimed it was stopping at "the secret numbers" she had in mind. She was quite elated.

I told her she might easily make one, but she shook her head. "I wouldn't know how."

"You can have this one, then," I offered. And I saw then that it was what she was angling for, as if thinking it had some special virtue, or perhaps a "spell" upon it that another might not.

It is said that the expression that someone's eyes "glistened" or "twinkled" is merely a figure of speech, but Gram's eyes seemed to glow with a light of their own now. "You could putt it in a little poke fer me," she said, still not touching it.

"Sally," I asked, "could you find a little poke that would hold this witch's clock for Gram?"

We found a small box. Still holding it, I said, "Now—this other matter . . . How does a body go about selling himself—or herself—to the devil in order to get power?"

"Well—hit ain't nothin' to it," Gram stated hesitantly. "First off—they say—you got to find somebody that's done become a real witch. I ketched a woman sayin' the Lord's Prayer back'ards once—but if they was anything wrong about her somebody had putt a spell on her. She weren't nary witch. And then, once you find 'em—" She shot quick looks at us. "I don't really keer to tell this—but since yore woman is alistenin' I reckon I can. Once you find 'em you go to the graveyard. Fer a man hit's got to be a woman-witch an' fer a woman a wizard—a he-witch, that thar is.

"Well—the man, after they find the grave of a infidel that's

shore to have went to hell, he lays her, thar by the grave, or, better, acrost hit. That's jist what they tell me, you understand. An' they do this fer three nights hand-runnin', each time asayin' the Lord's Prayer back'ards afterwards. I don't have no truck with people that'd do sech if I know about it. Hit's s'posed to take better if they's another man-witch an' woman-witch thar alookin' on. An' this had ort to be done at the full moon—but the new witch, she won't come into her real power tell after she's done somebody to death."

The room was very quiet. Wearily Gram said, "I reckon I better mosey along. Hi'll draw a suspicion I've been carried off."

CHAPTER XXIII

Christmas Program

From the first, I had "drawed a suspicion" that a big part of Tibo's reason for telling his boys they couldn't be in the Christmas program was that they did not have proper clothes. Perhaps this was true, for as we continued with our practice they offered no further objection. Apparently they were not wearing their new clothes to cut cedar—except for their shoes, which appeared to receive a fresh going-over with grease each day—for though their hands and faces and the fringes of their hair continued to be smeared with cedar gum their clothes did not.

I suppose they were not making as much money as at first glance it might appear. There were bad days when they could do little or nothing in the timber, and often the posts might have to be carried, one or two at a time, for hundreds of yards to get them over ledges or out of mushy glades, or out of thick timber to where a wagon could pick them up and haul them to the road. All this carrying was included in the price of the cutting. Too, Tibo often took his wife to doctors, and while I suspect the doctors charged him nothing he still lost time and had the expense of paying for the gasoline Brother Helms used in supplying transportation. While Brother Helms didn't believe in doctors for reasons of religion, he was willing enough for those who did not have the power of faith to consult them.

Short lesson periods were the reward of lessons well learned,

with the extra time given to practicing the program and decorating the schoolhouse as Christmas approached. On the last Friday before the big event, I remarked jokingly, "By the way—the church will give all the Sunday School children some treat. . . . Better come out Sunday and get your name on the list."

Joe Masters, age eight, thoughtfully remarked, "I ain't been goin' lately—but I used to go in the olden times."

I thought it was clear enough that the treat was to be given Christmas Eve night at the party, and Monday morning I was at some loss concerning Joe's disgusted air until he said, "Well—I come out to Sunday School yesterday—but they never handed out no treat."

Our windows were already covered with Santa Clauses and sleighs and what we fondly believed were reindeer. Now it was time to bring bittersweet and limbs of thornless Ozark holly, bare except for glowing orange-red berries, and mistletoe, and sprigs of real holly if a tree could be found. It was scarce here. We brought cedar and pine, too, and we cut streamers of red and white crepe paper to go across above our heads.

The tree was a cedar—too big it turned out to be, of course, for they always look smaller in the woods than in the house. Manfully we wrestled it through the doorway and to its corner. We had a bucket which would hold rocks to keep it straight, and water to keep it green. But when we raised it, it jammed so tightly against the ceiling that we just tied a couple of limbs to nails in the wall and forgot the rocks.

Everyone had been saving bits of tin foil and colored cellophane and clear cellophane, and brightly-colored paper which could be shredded and tossed into the limbs. The ends of many branches we dipped into flour paste and when it was nearly dry we dipped them in salt. When the sun came in, the salt sparkled and the cellophane glistened and we imagined the whiteness of the flour was snow. At the top went a tin-foil star, laid out with precision by the eighth graders who were studying the fascinations of compass and rule and geometrical figures. Strings of pop-

corn had been brought, too, and a bit of somewhat tarnished tinsel.

It was a pretty tree.

The country teacher is greatly judged by how good a program his pupils can present. Frequently the knowledge of this leads a teacher to allow schoolwork to be slighted in favor of preparing the entertainment. But as Sally and I went to the schoolhouse that evening, with baskets of presents and treat, I knew that my full duty had been done on both scores and it was a pleasant feeling.

I had neglected to leave wood in the stove, and the building had cooled enough from the day's heat so that the crepe-paper streamers overhead had sagged until in places we had to duck under them. Soon the stove was roaring and as we warmed our feet the streamers were magically raised to their proper positions.

"Pixies," Sally whispered.

The Tibos were the first to arrive. Either someone had given them more things since prayer meeting night, or they had bought some. The boys had had haircuts since they went home from school in the afternoon—rather rough-and-ready haircuts as if they had trimmed each other. Mr. Tibo was also freshly barbered. Self-consciously, as other people came, he took a seat, holding one of his little ones; smiling shyly, Mrs. Tibo allowed Sally to make conversation with—or rather at—her. The boys importantly took their presents to the tree.

The church congregation had drawn names for the giving of presents—all except one highly respected elder who said he would rather take the dime and buy something he *knowed* he wanted —and soon many colorful and mysterious packages were on and around the tree. No one was in a critical mood. The crowd had come to see and be seen, to enjoy itself, and to let the little ones shake hands with Santa Claus. Half a dozen mothers asked me if Santy would be here. I replied each time that I felt sure he would be.

In half an hour there was scarcely even standing room. People were becoming a little restless for the program to start, when finally Cap'n Jethrow's truck rattled up. Way was made for a big box, heaped with white paper sacks of treat, to be carried up to the tree. To my relief, Sam Devaney had arrived, too—evidently having come the last lap on the truck. I had drafted him from the adjoining community to play Santa. This was a devious effort of mine to confuse the wiseacres among the pupils who are always sure it isn't really Santa because they recognize his voice.

But Sam wasn't content to rest in anonymity. He sought me out to confer in mysterious half sentences and with winks and grins and nods as to just when he should vanish to get into his suit, though this had been thoroughly settled beforehand. The light glinting on his pink skull and fringe of pinkish hair, he finally was satisfied that he had called enough attention to himself and he retired to a place by the door.

The pupils were crowded together down front on the recitation benches which had been set off the rostrum for the evening. We had found a curtain for the stage in a box at Brother Helms's, along with a Santa Claus suit, and this we had rigged on a wire.

There appears to be something basic in human nature which makes it exciting to be behind a curtain. As actors for a playlet whispered and giggled in their privacy, I briefly welcomed the crowd. We began on a light note, working toward the climax. There were recitations and dialogues. Amos gave the old standby, "Jest 'Fore Christmas I'm as Good as I Can Be." Feelia Helms piped out verses telling how she still loved her old rag dolly better than the new one. There were the conventional humorous stanzas about how Father has to foot the bill for his presents that we give him.

At the halfway mark the four Tibos had a song by themselves —insurance against spoiling a larger presentation in case their father should mulishly have kept them home at the last minute.

Their song was Sam Devaney's cue. He was to leave the room as they came down on, "Oh, ho, ho, who wouldn't go! Up on the housetop, click, click, click—" For a little time, I thought he had forgotten, but then he slipped out.

The church choir now gave several carols. After that several tots from the Sunday School, below school age, pattered through verses their mothers had taught them. There were other brief numbers from the school, and then the grand finale.

I explained to our audience a bit about the origin of the stage play as we know it—first, merely a cradle of straw before the altar, with actors added from time to time until at last the presentations were so large they had to be given on the church steps and then finally on a series of wheeled stages, or wagons, which moved along from crowd to crowd giving successive portions of the Mystery and Morality plays. By then, our actors were ready. Two boys opened the curtain from the center.

Except for Joseph tripping on his over-long robe, the first act of the playlet, showing him and Mary seeking shelter, went off well. The audience hid their amusement nobly and the drama continued with a scene in the barn with the Baby Jesus. Then for the third act there was a tableau which included the Wise Men, and while the principals held their positions a chorus softly sang stanzas from the three songs, "Star of the East," "We Three Kings," and "Silent Night."

Murmurs of approval went up, but so effective had the children been in their parts that there was no applause. That was really the closing number. After it, two of the girls were to start to sing an arrangement of "The Night Before Christmas"—upon which Santa was to come ho-ho-ho-ing in, jingling a string of turkey bells. But they finished and still there was no Santa. The dramatic effect was lost.

I asked if someone near the door would look out to see if that was sleigh bells I thought perhaps I heard. We stalled around—and finally here came Santa, the usual fraud in stiff falseface and cotton whiskers and "ermine" trimming on red calico. A two-

year-old squalled in terror and had to be suckled. Other tots were bug-eyed. A little girl whose mother had threatened earlier in the evening to "call a policeman" if she wasn't good evidently mistook Sam for a policeman—doubtless never having seen one of those officials—and she wept as he shook her hand. Big boys and girls skylarked, asking for dolls and popguns.

At the tree at last, Santa began taking up presents one by one and handing them to me. I called off the names on them and a delivery squad of pupils transported them to the recipients. Soon paper crackled everywhere. There were exclamations of surprise and pleasure and of something very like chagrin. There were the usual jokes of boxes-in-boxes-in-boxes. Neckties and hair clips and dolls were exhibited.

There was a very large package for Clyde. Opening it at my desk he instantly forgot his duties as a deliveryman. He ripped away string and paper with abandon and brought forth a three dollar guitar, shiny with black and brown varnish.

"Jist what I been a-baggin' for!" he cried. "A git-tar!" He twanged it experimentally and told anyone who might be listening that Lonnie Haskins was going to learn him how to play it—and soon as he learned, so he could play and sing specials, he intended taking up preaching in earnest. The crowd had vanished from his sight. He was lost with his guitar.

The last package was finally passed. I had entered the name-drawing at school so that the pupils, beyond the one who drew my name, would not feel called upon to give the teacher a present, but I had three or four. Sally and I had ordered a gewgaw for each child—and we had been pleasantly surprised at the sturdiness as well as the quality of the inexpensive rings, necklaces, stickpins and such. Apparently the children were just as pleased.

Now it was time for the treat. First the Sunday School sacks—and there were enough extras so that every child could have one whether he went to Sunday School or not. Soon candy was crunching and scrunching, and sucking noises arose. Babies

waved sticky pieces. Then the teacher's treat—a sack for every pupil—and afterward it was time to go home.

People spoke politely of the program as they left, but perhaps the most gratifying compliment was from Tibo. Said he: "Hit was a right nice ceremony all the way through. . . ." And, hesitantly: "I'm glad I come."

There was a magnificent litter on the floor and on the desks—paper, string, nuthulls, and so on—but it would keep. Three or four youngsters explained to me, as I shut the stove off, that they knew who Santa was but I gave them no encouragement. The room was suddenly stark and forlorn as I went to put out the lamps.

Closing the door, from the darkness we heard calls of, "Your younguns done fine on their pieces," and, "So did yours—extry good. . . . You children! Yell Merry Christmas to the teacher!"

"Merry Christmas!" the voices came.

Sally and I answered, "Merry Christmas."

The wind was sharp but we were warm inside.

CHAPTER XXIV

A Feller Ain't Borned Knowin' How

On New Year's it was all right to sweep out the schoolhouse, I suppose—at least, I swept it—but to sweep one's dwelling might "sweep out the money luck" for all year. Sister Viny was careful not to take anything out of the house on that day, but if it became absolutely necessary to do so she made certain she brought something in first. In fact, she said, she usually made a point of going out the first thing on New Year's morning and bringing in a stick of wood or whatever came to hand lest she might forget during the day and throw something out unthoughtedly. She was also a strong believer in "the twelve ruling days." That is, the weather of the first twelve days of January indicated the weather for the twelve corresponding months. Wetness or snow on the sixth, for instance, predicted a wet and perhaps cool June—somewhat in the way thunder in February foretold frost in May.

The children at school had all heard of the custom of not washing clothes on New Year's lest it "wash away your friendships." Perhaps this was one of those half-believed things which, since they were easier to follow than not, were generally conformed with. Something like Brother Helms's custom of never starting a new piece of work on Saturday—"because I've noticed no matter what, seems like I don't get it finished. Then I take notice I'd as good to been fishin' or settin' in the shade."

This New Year's there was a peculiar odor in the classroom.

One somehow familiar, but which I couldn't quite place. We had had other odors to mark the turn of the seasons. Stale sweat in summer and fall, and the sharp clean smell of daisies and wild verbena picked along the road and creek and brought to school. And later the smell, clinging insistently to each child because it was in his clothing and upon his flesh, of frying fresh pork and then frying smoked pork. And then the smell of fresh animal hides when fur season opened. Twice we had had the odor of skunk upon our nimrods—not as offensive as one may have heard, if not taken at too-close range, but rather like wet bone meal such as is put in flower beds. And always there was the odor of the highly flavored hair-oil in which Cap'n Jethrow did a going business.

Finally between classes I said, "Can anyone tell me what it is we smell in here?"

Everyone looked at everyone. There came murmured agreements that they too could smell something. A few conventional wisecracks were made about various feet. Two or three looked at June. Uncomfortably she said, "Mama gave me some colog-ny for Christmas. Maybe that's it."

"Some—? No. No, it's not that."

Said Clyde: "Us kids are awearing asafetidy—and I been chewin' mine. That makes it smell louder."

Ah! Memories of childhood. "What are you trying to keep off with it, Clyde?"

Squirmings. "Oh—jist stuff in general . . . We heared they's mumps goin' around. And measles."

"I wore it once to keep off something," I told him. But I couldn't remember what. Then my suspicions rose. "Who has the mumps, Clyde?"

He evaded for a little, but he couldn't tell a lie: his little sister at home might have them. I sent the Caldwells packing—but probably it was futile. Soon we had a minor siege, contracted perhaps from the same carrier who infected the Caldwell child. School was closed when the teacher was attacked.

News travels—even up Slocum Holler. Gram, perhaps recognizing me now as among the fellowship, called one afternoon. She had an enormous curling object which was sharp-edged and pointed.

"Hit's a boar's tush," she explained, surprisingly direct. "A big old wild seed-hog's. My pap killed him. He give us a heap of trouble when I was only a youngun. Every fall we'd go out to run us in a bunch of pork out of the woods for our winter's meat. Everybody in them days that had sows on the range could take hogs up to their natural need—but woe betide ary brash soul that thought to take hogs if'n they had none arunnin' thar. He was liable to find switches on his gate. . . .

"Well, sir, this ol' he-hog, he killed our best hog-dog. This dog, he slipped in now and again and nabbed him a pig by the year and when its mammy charged him he run—always to-wards home. That way he got the drove to foller him because when the squealin' and fussin' started them yuther hogs, they'd come atearin' to see about it, the way hogs will. A fool hog is like a man—can't be drove but he can be led.

"Well, ol' Zeke was that thar dog's name. We had five-six dogs altogether. Them yuther'n's was all right, but not like Zeke. One day though, Zeke he got to showin' off biggety-like, chargin' in on this old boss-hog an' tearin' his years. Pap, he hollered and bagged and pleaded with Zeke. Even rode in an' fetched him a good'n with his ram-rod, but the hog, he might' near it got Pap's horse. Rared up aroarin' like a fahr in dry bresh—an' then he whirled around as Zeke taken him in the hind laig. Gutted pore Zeke right thar.

"Well, Pap had been alettin' that hog run—got turrible good pigs, he did—but now he seen he had let 'im run too long. He shot 'im. They all kep' ashootin', but didn't seem like it done no good fer a while. When they finally got him killed plumb dead they found out why—he had a double skull, one under the yuther'n."

Lonnie Haskins had told me that Hi Slocum carried an extra

large "seed-hog's tush" in his pocket when he went "avisitin'," because some folks held that that was the surest way to keep from getting "ary bad disease." Lonnie believed the surest was to be "extry keerful who you visit."

Now Gram said, "Well, I brung you over this tush. The loan of hit is yore'n till yo're well."

"But what's it for?" Sally asked.

Granny squirmed a bit. "Well," she said again, "me bein' a doctor, I guess I can tell you. He's to keep it by him till all the swellin' is past. Hit'll keep them mumps from goin' down on him."

Now I saw that the tooth was hollow, with a hole all the way through the tip. A thread was looped through it. She hung it on the bed post.

"If'n you get up an' move around much at a time," she cautioned, "you can hang it around yore neck."

I can highly recommend a boar's "tush" to anyone who has the mumps, for I got through the illness in first class shape.

Meantime, the FDR was functioning. The WPA road project did not go through Big Piney district, but near it, and the star carrier who had been bringing our mail was just as glad that his bid was not the low one to make the loop over the ruts and ledges of the Big Piney section.

A star route is not like the usual rural delivery. The carrier is not paid a fixed salary, but bids are asked for a stated period, and the low man gets it. These star routes apparently are through sections not too thickly populated, or where the road is substandard all the way so that regular salaries and mileage fees do not fit. To compensate him further, the carrier is allowed to haul passangers (which the regular carriers are not) and to haul freight, run errands in town for his constituents, and so forth.

Another route approached us on the southward and the carrier on it underbid the one who so far had been bringing our mail. There were headshakings and doubts as to whether he

could get through to us in wet weather. But we had reckoned without our man. His name was Bushenell; he lived just six or seven miles away, and carried the Big Piney loop the last thing, which was likely to put him at our house at dark if he had had anything to slow him. When the creeks were up, he simply bundled everything up in a sack and came horseback after leaving his car at his house.

He was a small, friendly man, face red and weathered, voice drawly. The afternoon he first stopped to get us straight on his list he was on his mare, not knowing how the creeks might be. When I exhibited surprise at seeing our carrier on horseback, he said, "Lord, son, this ain't nothin'. Why, I been atotin' mail through these yere hills an' hollers off an' on for God knows how long, an' my brother, he toted it afore me. We allus used to use nothin' but hosses. On Thursday, when ever'body got their *Weekly Star* f'm Kansas City, had to lead a mule behind to pack 'em. An' them damn' Monkey Ward catalogues—how I hated them. My brother, I was allus his prostitute whenever he was sick, an' let them catalogues start comin' an' he allus taken down puny fer a little spell till I got 'em de-livered." He laughed reminiscently and winked. "I have used the same scheme on my own prostitute since then. Lord, Lord. The tricks a man'll do to get out of his rightful work! Well—hope somebody writes you a letter now an' then. Hup, now, Fannie! Git along!"

So Sally and I had a new byword. Of a morning I would say, "How about going over to school and being my prostitute today?" Or (Mr. Caldwell, the superintendent, being absent from Sunday School): "It was certainly nice of Mrs. Ashton to be Mr. Caldwell's prostitute at church today."

Brother Helms aimed to put in some oats; however, to plow land in January ruins it "fer seven year," which is a shame because the road work was just running on half schedule now, and there were lots of pretty days when a man could be breaking ground if it would do any good. I told him I had seen lots of

mighty prosperous farmers break ground in January—and look at Caldwell. He's plowing right along.

Brother Helms was unimpressed. "Jist leave Caldwell be," he warned. "He may get by a little while with some of the fool luck he seems to have."

I made an effort to persuade Charley to come turn a piece of ground for me so I could put in something for Blossom to eat next winter, but he said that while he was off the road he wanted to catch up on some odd jobs around his place.

Yet he was good-hearted. He told me since it was Haskins's land I'd be ruining, 'twouldn't make him a particle how much of it I plowed and I'd be full welcome to use his team and gear.

"But," I objected, "I've never touched a plow in my life. Worked horses a little to a wagon and snaked some timber but I've never plowed."

"Well—course a feller ain't *borned* knowin' how. Hit ain't agin you since you likely never had a chance to learn. Ever'body has to pick it up sometime—an' you won't find a team of easy, slow-goin' mares in the country that can teach you any better'n mine. Take 'em along! Yo're full welcome."

I shook my head. "I don't like to borrow valuable things," I told him. "Something might happen to the mares while I had them. If I were able to buy a horse I'd just buy one. I don't want to buy a dead one."

Probably, though, I wanted to be persuaded, because I presently found myself hooking them to his rickety old wagon and loading in the plow and spike-toothed harrow. The Helmses' were not going to town until after noon because it was too chilly to sit around in the courthouse square talking to your friends and watching the crowds, and afternoons provided a long enough time when you had to be cooped up around a store stove with probably all the seats already hogged up by loafers when you got there. So Brother Helms said he believed he would go along with me and see that I got off to a good start.

"Hit's a mighty good idy, I've found," he stated as we rattled

down the road (the wagon had low iron wheels, apparently off some sort of implement—perhaps a manure-spreader—and we made a fine racket that must have carried for miles in the still, crisp air), "hit's a mighty good idy, when you go to learn somebody somethin', to see they tie into it the right way at the beginnin'. I can putt you on to a few little tricks an' sleights that'll save you a heap o' trouble later."

Sally was hard put to conceal her surprise when she saw that I had actually been able to hire—as she thought—Brother Helms to work for us. There was a little patch of four acres with a sort of fence around it. I had spoken to Lonnie about using it and I was to get the rental in return for making the fence cow-proof.

"Now, this yere patch," Helms told me, "hit's been plowed outwards the regular way a mighty long time. You can see the ridges of dirt around the fences, an' the holler in the middle. The best scientific practice on a field like this—an' hit'd ort to be done ever' other plowin' on any field—is to do what we call back-furrowin'. Start in the middle instead of on the outside, and th'ow the dirt in all the time."

That made sense. We lifted the plow out, put the mares to it, and the edge of the new point made a bright black line as it skidded across to the starting point.

"Now," Brother Helms informed me, "first thing, a man's got to have his check-lines the right length so he can guide the team with the lines over one shoulder an' under the other'n." He tied them up short and said he would "lay a sample" for me to go by.

I walked along beside him as the slow-going mares drew the share through the dirt. It had enough sand in it so that it at once began scouring the rust off the moldboard instead of sticking to the rough surface. Presently Brother Helms halted and looked back. He seemed a little surprised at the fine, straight furrow he had cut, but he recovered so quickly I could not be certain.

"Now," he said, "that's a good piece of plowin' if I do say it.

But," carelessly, "hit's in knowin' how. Reckon I'll run back the next'n fer you."

His exhilaration increased by the second, and as he turned the team again at the other end he said, "Tell you what. Now I've kind of got my hand in this, might be a good idy if I kep' agoin'. I allus like to he'p a neighbor out. If you still want to hahr me, you go on up an' slash you down a batch of wood. Ol' lady an' kids don't need to go to town noway."

By noon, however, his itching to see the urban sights had increased according to the cube of the flagging of his enthusiasm for the good earth—so in the afternoon he left the mares to impart their knowledge of plowing to me. And we did a creditable job, too, except for a bit of mussiness at the corners. After all, they couldn't see behind themselves very well and they couldn't help it if I didn't turn as squarely as I should. But they hadn't been worked any more this winter than I had—if as much—so we quit early and hauled down poles while we rested, and after I fed them I took them home.

And so it was that I first had the smell of dirt, turned by my own hands, and a fine smell I found it to be. There was still daylight after the cow was milked, and as she and her long-weaned calf cavorted and galloped in the fresh dirt, kicking it high, Sally and I watched and laughed. We picked up the crumbly clods and broke them in our hands and let the cool dirt run through our fingers.

It had lain fallow for years, and cattle grazing over it had enriched it. We walked around the edges, tactfully not seeing the places where I had crooked my furrows. Another day of plowing would finish it to the fences.

"It will raise good oats," we said to each other. And we added, "If it rains."

CHAPTER XXV

The Housewarming

Jays had been with us all winter, and one day there had been a surprising thing. Instead of his raucous cawing *jay, jay, jay,* one of the creatures had several times given a sweet, liquid three-noted whistling song. Even though his throat moved as this sound came, we considered the possibility of another bird's giving the call, but no other bird was near that we could see. No one needs to believe this little incident, of course. We had never heard the song before and we have not heard it since; perhaps, after all, it was just one of those things which seem to happen but do not really.

We had snowbirds, too, and cardinals all the winter, and, of course, the ever-present crow who has learned to live comfortably with his angry but respectful enemy, man. There was hope of an early spring. In January a flock of ducks—whether going south very late or back north very early no one knew—landed on the river a few miles away, and in the same month we saw bluets in the meadows. All too soon, of course, for they were presently frozen. Elm buds were fat and hickory buds were swelling. A smell of life was already in the air, and on the warm days of the month a new look was in the faces of the children. Once more the forces of light had conquered: Apollo had not turned his face from us for good, after all; he was coming back our way.

And this in spite of the well-known fact that:

When the days begin to lengthen
The cold begins to strengthen.

For January was supposed to be the coldest, hardest month of all the year.

There were incidents to mark the passing of time, to serve as milestones from which to date things. Brother Helms bought a new red linoleum to go in their living room but sadly enough their eagerness outran their judgment. In unrolling it they cracked it pretty badly.

"The ol' lady an' the younguns jist couldn't wait to see it," Brother Helms told me. "I knowed we'd ort to laid it back an' built up a good hot fahr till it got soople an' limber. Feller's got to use a little jedge-ment with puttin' down rugs, same as anywhurs else."

Said Mrs. Helms to Sally: "I told Charley not to get too hog-wild, but he jist had to see how 'twas aimin' to look on the floor."

They also purchased (in the new-and-second-hand store where they acquired the linoleum) a somewhat-defunct affair consisting of a greenish chalk or plaster of Paris lady, rather chipped and about twenty inches high, with a clock in her stomach. She was buxom in the best bust-and-bottom tradition of the gay-nineties chorus girl, and she wore not a stitch of anything until Mrs. Helms dressed her in some scraps of old lace curtain, being particular to let the clock show even though it would not run. Brother Helms had been certain that dosing it with kerosene would put it in trim, but the chief result of that was that the statue absorbed quite a bit of the oil and proceeded to dispense it into the atmosphere from then on.

And, of course, there was The Day We Got the Radio. It turned out that the catalogue from which we had ordered many of the things before Christmas was out of date and much of our money had been returned. We could purchase, we saw in the January sale catalogue, a five tube radio, complete with batteries,

for nineteen-fifty. We fell into the habit of looking at the picture, of reading the specifications again, and in short of wanting it so badly we could taste it. In all of Big Piney, only Caldwell's and Cap'n Jethrow's sets worked consistently. Others had found it such a chore to do without their battery a week at a time while Cap'n Jethrow was having it charged in town for them that some of them had let their sets gather dust.

We were afraid if we ordered a set some people would think the Nelsons were living a little high; that perhaps the teacher's salary was too big. We solved the puzzle by having Sally's mother purchase the radio at the mail-order house's retail store in her home town and send it to us "in plain wrapper," as the purveyors of pornography advertised in the cheap magazines. Then to our neighbors we could truthfully say: "Sally's mother sent it to us." Page Mr. Milquetoast!

It was a great day when we strung the aerial, drove a ground rod, screwed the lightning arrester under the window, and ran the leads in. Wiring the batteries took some doing, for there were three of them—big dry ones—with figures like −22½ and +45 here and there, and we didn't want to blow out the tubes the first thing.

At last we snapped it cautiously on. Battery radios require no warming up and they bring in no high-line static. Friendly voices, much like those of our neighbors ("Only more so," as Sally said) came into the room: Lum 'n' Abner, born and raised not a million miles from Big Piney, were on the air.

We stationed the radio on the table where our new mantel lamp made a white light for reading; that way we could "set close an' not burn out the batteries, havin' it hollerin' all over the place," as Brother Helms put it when he came to listen. But I paid for being a dry-battery pioneer: in the following weeks I was called on to install several radios in the neighborhood. "Them fool directions," as Lonnie Haskins said, "they don't make no sense."

It was only February and we could have more snow—plenty of it—but we thought we wouldn't for this was the second day of the month and it was noon, and still the sky was overcast. Mr. Groundhog could not have seen his shadow with his glasses on. But, of course, just one flash of sun, and all would be ruined: there would be six more weeks of winter weather. Otherwise, spring was here.

At nearly time for last recess we had quite a scare. The room lightened perceptibly. We crowded to the windows, watching, but the sun did not come through enough to make a shadow. The overcast thickened again. All was saved, at least for the moment. And it was still saved as the pupils left for home. As I passed the Caldwells', Mr. Caldwell assured me that winter was over: in many years of watching, he had never known the groundhog's prediction to fail.

At dark the clouds were still with us. Said the literal-minded Sally: "We'll just see about this." And on the calendar she wrote: "Cloudy!"

In the days that followed, she marked down the snow which stayed on for nearly a week, and for longer than that in the deep, dark hollows. ("Well, now," said Mr. Caldwell, "it's not an extry cold snow and it will be mighty good for the ground; you can have February snow and still have an early spring.")

Preparations for Valentine's Day strengthened as the time for that festival approached. Cap'n Jethrow brought out collections at the store: "All sorts of prices," Clyde said, "from half a penny up to any price a body'd want to pay—some as high as a nickel." Valentines and valentine making became the motif of the school for a time. We found things to read on the origin of the day and of valentine giving, and related customs over the world. Valentine cutouts were put in the windows, and a box, covered with white crepe paper, dotted with red hearts, was made. Through the slot in the top, the valentines were dropped in.

In my book of recitations for all occasions were some Valentine pieces which I reserved for the day. We were having no

program, but after the last recess I read several of the poems and then the lid was removed from the box. One by one I read off the names and the recipients came forward. Things promptly became snarled up so that we had to reorganize and pass them down the rows to be handed back until they came to the owner.

For some reason, some received a score of valentines while others received only two or three—and I was glad we had gone through the name-drawing business lest some might not have received any. There were the usual number of comic insults to be laughed over. And every boy, I think, down to the first graders, gave June a token of the mushiest variety. The Tibos were absent, since this was good post-cutting weather. They had not been too well remembered, though the valentines they put in the box that morning were plentiful, and were mostly from the store. I added a few extras from my left-overs to the stack which I was to give them next morning. . . .

Tonight was the time for which George Appleby had ridden out with bids for a party, for he and Martha had fixed up the house on the old Hanson place and moved to it. George's folks had hundreds of cattle running in these hills, and they had done better by him than giving him the conventional wagon and team of mules.

For his mark, he had added a hole in the right ear to his father's double notch and underbit, and a nice bunch of cattle had been so tallied for him, now that it was coming the time when they could once more be turned out to make their own living for the summer. Martha's folks had given her a milk cow, some hens, guineas, geese; and quilts and such for the house.

There had been a couple of quilting bees, too, for her, to which Sally took pieces of cloth and plenty of thread for the quilting after the tops were made. Into one quilt went scraps from Martha's wedding dress. Old women who cannot read, either from failing vision or from never having learned, can still count off history—the history which makes any difference to them—by "telling" the pieces in their quilt tops:

"This hyur speckledy stuff—hit's from the dress yore pa got me f'm sellin' the calf 'fore you was born. . . . That thar red, hit was f'm yore first colored dress, honey, an' the hickory stripin' was from Merrick's shirt. . . . That was forty-eight year ago. . . ." For with care a quilt lasts beyond a lifetime. And so would Martha, when she was old, remember the things that had happened to her—just as Sally would be able to count off the scraps in the quilt tops she was making by the patterns of Big Piney—turkey track and wild goose and duck in the pond and wedding ring. But these of hers were small quilts for a baby's bed. . . .

We had planned a housewarming for George and Martha, and by general consent it was to be combined with the party they were giving. The night was a little dark, but with our lantern to light the way we took scant thought of that.

The way was not far—just back through the pasture and through a gate and down the road and we were there. We had gauged our time wrong. We were the first there except for the Ashtons. But the dresser scarf Sally had brought could be hidden in her purse so we didn't have to leave it outside for the time being.

I have heard that in some parts of the hills a young man does not immediately lay aside his wedding suit, but, even though there be no occasion to wear it, he will still get it out and sit around the house in it for a while now and then the first several months of his married life. I don't know why this is, but apparently it was not the custom around Big Piney. George was not wearing his for the party. As at church, he wore his leather jacket—which, as a matter of fact, probably cost more than the suit.

He greeted us bluffly. He seemed uneasy in the presence of Sally, doubtless remembering the letter she had written him. He made a great show of being affable with me. "Find a cheer," he invited, "if you can get around in yere." He added with heavy humor: "Martha was aimin' to clean the place up but she never got around to it."

The house was spotless, of course. Martha's baby was showing —and if "carrying it high" was any sign, it would be a girl, as Sally had been assured hers would be. Martha seemed grown-up and settled down—though a little flustered with her duties as hostess—and she needed none of my pity that she was married and soon to have a family while still just a girl. Marrying and having a family is a woman's business and her happiness in life; why wait until later to start living? But it was hard to realize that at the first of school she had been my pupil—and I wondered again how it would have been with her had we not had the box supper.

A fire roared, too hot, in the stove which sat far out in the room on the shiny new linoleum. Lace curtains were at the narrow windows. They had papered the house and a gaudy red divan and chair to match dominated the furnishings. Cane-bottom kitchen chairs had been placed around the walls for extra seating, and the Ashtons had brought their chairs.

The women went into the kitchen and George sat down and discussed with me and Ashton and Lonnie Haskins—who held Sue Anne on his knee—the merits of several kinds of trucks. He was thinking whether just to buy a pick-up for himself or a big truck to do hauling for the countryside, for quite a bit of stock went to market every month from hereabouts.

The talk dwindled as we heard more arrivals. Going to the door to call a welcome, Martha asked Lonnie how his tooth was.

"Don't speak of it, honey," he begged. "The thing has sort of forgot me fer the moment. . . ." And, to me, "Don't never let nobody tell you, Mr. Nelson, that a splinter off a lightnin'-struck tree is any he'p to a toothache. I reckon I've tried it thousands of times, jist in hope, and I was never done a bit of good. Today I walked plumb to the head of the branch whur I heard a tree was busted open in that last storm and got me some fresh ones—seems like gettin' out in the cool and walkin' around does me the most good or I wouldn't abothered with such foolishness—but it don't work. . . ."

I suggested that since the coolness helped, it appeared that he might have an abscess or ulcer under a tooth, and that cold water or ice probably would quiet it in case of another flare-up until he could get it out. And then I said, "I've heard that a piece of lightning-struck wood under the house will fend off lightning."

Lonnie fidgeted a bit. "Well," he agreed, "maybe some folks do believe that. . . . They's an awful lot of queer-soundin' idys in this world. . . . Sounds like Viny and her younguns, don't it?"

"Oh, Lord," George moaned. "I never ast them!"

Soon the house was full and in the heat we had to open the doors. Children "got up games" in the yard. There were cries, out there in the lantern light—for there was no moon yet—which told of "three-deep" and "flying Dutchman" and "drop the handkerchief." In the house there was talk and laughter, and some of the older boys and girls put molasses to cook for candy pulling.

There was no dancing because there wasn't room for playparty games stepped off to singing, and many of those present were church-going people who would leave if there should be round dancing or square dancing (again, granting there was room) done to music. There were some here who on occasion went down to Berry Holler where the Berrys had put up a platform for weekly dances in summer. But at such places there is drinking and now and then a general brawl; careful people stayed away from Berry Holler on dance night and kept their daughters away.

Hands were buttered now for pulling the thickened molasses. The moon was rising and, taking advantage of the sharper air outdoors, the young folks carried their candy kettle and spoons for dipping into the yard. Hilarity was rampant. Soon there was candy for everyone, and a great to-do of threatening to rub buttery and sticky hands in the girls' hair. When the youngsters were sick of sweets they drifted back to their games and their sparking.

Little ones, whining to go home, were suckled or cajoled or threatened, or pacified into sleep and put down somewhere. The

men held down the front room, gabbling and gossiping. Most of them sat on the floor, smoking or chewing, now and then rising to spit in the stove or out the door, or perhaps surreptitiously raising a window a crack to spit without rising. The chairs had been taken to kitchen and bedroom where the women played sit-down games from their circle of seats. Games in which "it" went around, repeating a rigmarole and attempting to make each player in turn laugh. If one did laugh, then she became it. And there were games requiring the remembering of what the last person "took with her to town," with the addition of one more thing. I heard Sally:

"I'm going to town, and with me I'll take a hen, a pot of coffee, a side of meat, a gallon of milk—"

Triumphant cries: "You left out the dozen guinea eggs!"

Sally had to pay a forfeit, selected by the one who was it, and then be it until someone else blundered. Her forfeit was to tell about the first time she was ever proposed to. Pretending to listen to a dissertation by Lonnie Haskins on the comparative value of horse and cow manure in hot beds, I cocked my ear a little further kitchenward:

"Well," Sally said, "I was four years old. The little boy next door asked me if I would marry him when he grew up—and I said I would if he would marry me."

I relaxed.

"Well!" Martha exclaimed. "What became of him?"

"He's sitting in there in the front room," Sally answered dryly.

Young fry of sparking age prevailed upon Martha to let them take down the bed in the bedroom so as to make space for "spin-the-plate" and "pleased-or-displeased." With obvious misgivings, Martha agreed, and soon they were happily paying such forfeits as taking someone for a walk, or kneeling and proposing. The suggestion of a game of "post-office" was vetoed by some of the mothers, but they made no great objection to candy biting—which is almost as good except that it is done in public and there are no "special deliveries." Commenting on that, one of the

women made a remark which sounded as if it were a reference to Martha's "trouble" of a few months ago, but no offense was meant and all the ladies jumped in to cover the break and Martha tried to pretend she didn't notice.

The forfeit games palled. The house began shaking with the quick stepping of feet as a singing game was started in the denuded bedroom:

"My own true love, my dearest dear,
Extend to me your hand;
We will depart in pursuit
Of a fairer land—
Where the hawk will chase the buzzard
And the buzzard chase the crow,
And we'll rally round the canebrake
And shoot the buffalo!"

They sang it through a dozen times while moving through the twisting figures. I went to the middle door where I could watch. There was clapping of hands, moving back and forth, bowing, and dust rose from the cracks in the boards under the quick tramp of feet. They tired of that game—or finished it, perhaps—and started another:

" 'Lasses grows on the white-oak tree!
The river runs sweet brandy-o!
Oh, who will come and go with me—
Sweet as the sugar in the candy-o?
Away we go, and away we go,
Down the O-hi-o!"

A relic of the days, no doubt, when some of their great-grandmothers did come down the Ohio and Mississippi on broadhorn boats and worded their playin'-songs to the tunes of another and different way of life.

They skipped through something else like a Virginia reel, and went through a more intricate affair in which everyone held

hands and twisted in and out under the arched arms of each couple in turn—a fast and pretty bit of doing which left them panting.

But the time was latening. When it appeared the refreshments were about to be served, a thoughtful parent or two started the dancers to putting Martha's bedroom back in order—and whether by accident or design her bedding included, I noticed, a turkey-track quilt. Apparently she was taking no chances with George. Folks went out to fetch in the gifts they had brought to start off the new home—scarves, a table cloth, a shiny milk bucket, pans and lids, a pair of "bed blankets," and what not. Some wag surreptitiously put a tiny china chamberpot on the table, giving rise to mild and ancient jokes.

We ate four kinds of heavily iced cake, then; there was pie for those who could hold it, and there was coffee but only a few could be served at a time as Martha had forgotten to borrow extra cups.

Folks departed. My hat seemed to have disappeared. By the time I found it in the corner behind the divan just about everyone had gone. As we left, Martha impulsively kissed Sally's cheek.

"Come to see me!" she invited, but she seemed to be saying a lot more besides.

CHAPTER XXVI

One for the Blackbird, One for the Crow

Spring was coming fast. One February dusk I saw a lone wild duck flapping southward, just a little higher than my head. Whether a fugitive from one of the mile-long strings which had been flying northward, or a rugged individualist who had changed his mind, I didn't know. He went past me just a few yards away, giving no sign that he saw me. We had another February snow—a robin snow which came in the night and was gone before noon. And also in February, yellow "Easter flowers" bloomed in yards and turned black when ice froze in their chalices.

Japonica bloomed as the earth warmed, and frogs trilled or bellowed from the creeks. The best oats are early planted. Mine went down the last Saturday of February. Brother Helms, in a burst of industry, brought his team and harrow. With a sack of seed swung under my arm by a strap over the other shoulder and the open mouth of the bag at hand, I learned to sow the grain with wide, even sweeps of the arm. The wind came and went, making it hard to gauge the exact distance I should step over at the end of each trip through the patch, but it was about five steps.

We had cut two good switches and tied a scrap of cloth on each. At the end of a trip, I would pull up the stick toward which I was walking, count ten steps over, stick it into the soft dirt, go back five steps, and head for the stick at the other end of the patch. Dip up a handful of the clean, yellow oats, throw

them, step, dip, step, throw—a handful on every other step. Brother Helms was ahead of me with the wide harrow, leaving the freshly stirred earth brown where he tore up the reddish crust. The harrow was wide but the mares pulled it easily. When he had finished, he started back at the other side to cover the seed by harrowing again before the crows, blackbirds, and cowbirds should eat it all. Stopping to fill his pipe near me, we talked of how one can't enter a field with a gun without every crow in sight flying away—while, as now, seeing no gun, they would come within a few yards of us to scratch and eat.

We left a little space at one corner and after the oats were in, Sally and I planted a few potatoes, just on the chance they might not freeze out. We covered them deep and mulched the rows with litter and leaves.

And then in March we held our breaths as peach blooms turned the sloping orchards pink and lit the three trees we had pruned and cleaned up in our garden. Sure enough, there was frost one morning, but by noon we could tell no damage had been done.

Judas trees burst out everywhere with lavender, and the tear-a-blanket (perhaps some sort of shadbush or hackberry) mingled its whiteness with them. And over the land, remindful of the smell of blooming grapes in June, came the overpowering sweetness of wild plum blossoms which, after a few days, showered the thickets with white petals.

Poke shoots showed. We picked the tender leaves, and the shoots of lamb's-quarter and narrow dock and of a thistle called "chicken lettuce," and of the mustard and turnip shoots in the winter patches. We had some bits of pork left and a few onions. Whoever ate a better supper than cornbread (with a handful of rich and crumbly cracklin's stirred into the batter), baked apples, and greens simmered, long and low, with lean pork, and onions on the side? Sally is a fine cook. When we have cornbread with plenty of brown crust, and yellow butter melting down through

it, and wild grape jelly, or sorghum whipped with heavy cream, we don't care if there is no cake on the table. . . .

The month pushed on. The elms feathered out with yellow-green, close behind the weeping willow in the Caldwell yard. Black oaks threatened to bloom and litter the earth. Hi Slocum, I heard, had tapped a few rock maples he knew about—though this is not really maple syrup country—and a few box elders, and made himself some syrup. Gram brought us a taste, and it was fine. Sassafras and hickory buds burst.

When the hickory leaves were the size of a squirrel's ear, it was time to plant corn. Five grains to the hill in the early patches while the ground was still wet and cold, and food still short for the wild things:

One for the blackbird,
One for the crow,
One for the mole
And two to grow.

Some folks would smear the seed with tar, we knew. It makes it mean to drop, but after pulling up a few stalks to eat the seed off the root, Mr. Crow will decide to pull up someone else's corn.

The school year was rising to a climax. In April it would be finished. The laggards were trying to make up lost time; those who had been careless about attendance were trying to impress the teacher at the eleventh hour. The eighth graders, who must pass the county examination, worked overtime, drilling on last year's examinations as covering a fair sample of the sort of thing they would be expected to know.

I had brought a cocoon to school during the winter and placed the limb from which it hung in a window to catch the sun, since I had found it in a sunny place. One day we noticed signs of life in it. We watched it off and on as we went about our work. Toward noon, the creature within had cut its way out and, groggy and soft, wings folded tightly into little packets on either side, it crawled forth.

We had witnessed the miracle of life. The moth rested and then crawled up the sash. Gradually the wings opened. They spread until it seemed they would be almost as large as one's two hands when they finished. We discussed the differences in the ways people and insects grow, and how each is a good way, well fitted to the different creatures. I told them how a young grasshopper can be trained to respond to a certain stimulus, such as tickling with a straw, as a signal that he can find food in the corner of his box—but that when he molts his old skin he has to be trained all over again as his memory cells are shed with the shell.

Clyde said, "Well, but how do animals remember things ahead of time instead of back'ards? The kingfishers know it's aimin' to be a dry summer. They're diggin' the holes for their nestes into the banks low above the water. If it was aimin' to be a wet summer they wouldn't do that because then they'd be flooded out when the creek come up."

I could see Sally writing on the calendar: "Dry summer! (Kingfisher nests)." But before I could discuss the matter with Clyde, a clap of thunder came, shaking the schoolhouse. It rumbled and growled off into the distance, and rain pattered down. Everyone laughed at Clyde as we hurried to close the windows. The warmth was dissipated in a moment as the cold wet air whipped through. There came a yelping from the porch: Amos was whipping his dog.

"Git!" he ordered. "Git home!"

And as the dog slunk off, Amos came in and shut the door.

"Dogs draws lightnin'," he explained.

But the shower passed and as the sun came back Clyde's face as a weather prophet was not entirely lost: you have to expect a few showers early-like in the year when it's likely to be cloudly any time you glance out.

I made a small fire in the stove as it came noon. Some of us stayed in to watch the butterfly finish unfolding his wings—and presently, soon after we finished eating, there came a burst of

hooting and laughing behind the building. The commotion grew until I went to see what was taking place.

The pupils had gathered at Sue Anne's and Feelia's playhouse. The little girls were considerably abashed. Gerald and Vermalee were predicting dire consequences for them. The laughter ceased as I approached. For a moment I didn't see the cause of the excitement—and then it was clear enough. They had been playing barber shop. Sue Anne's pig-tails were gone, her soft hair a weird and haggled mess—but Feelia's, bobbed to start with, was even worse. Chunks had been taken out all the way to her scalp.

Had they not been my responsibility, and had I not been in a position to realize with what horror and disappointment their mothers would see them, I would have been amused, too. But at the moment I was beyond laughter. Gradually, as they realized the enormity of what they had done, the culprits broke into repentant snivels and it was with obvious fear and trembling that they thought of what might happen when they reached home.

The edge was rather taken off watching the butterfly after books "took up" again. We looked at colored plates in the *Britannica* and in nature books, but we could not decide just what our gorgeous monster might be. We opened the window when he showed signs of wishing to depart. Uncertainly at first, he finally fluttered out.

"He's falling!" June cried.

No. A little breeze caught the wings he had been strengthening and he was carried higher and higher. Finally he was above the trees. Then he was gone.

"Where did he go?" Joyce asked.

But we did not know until Joel said, with clear reasoning: "To hunt another butterfly, of course."

Somewhat to my relief, Mrs. Ashton and Mrs. Helms appeared to hold me blameless in the matter of the haircutting. But, now that the horse was stolen, we did have a new rule: all playhouses must be on the playground proper from now on, and not hidden

away. Mrs. Ashton smoothed Sue Anne's hair as best it could be done, but I knew she must be sick at the loss of her daughter's pig-tails which were always combed out into a fluffy mass for Sunday and for school programs and such.

Said Gerald: "If she wants to go 'round lookin' like an old roached-up mule, *we* don't care. Learn 'er a good lesson."

Vermalee's report: "Mommy said Feelia would really be pretty for last day of school."

Easter was coming full early, but Good Friday is the time to plant beans, regardless—just as "Whether it's wet or whether it's dry, plant your turnips the twenty-fifth of July." So on Good Friday Sally and I planted our beans and I worked up rows for our Irish potatoes which should have been in by St. Patrick's Day with our early peas and such. The first potatoes, out in the corner of the oat patch, were up fine, and the oats had made an excellent stand. From a little distance, nothing could be seen but green.

Next morning, on Easter Saturday, we planted the potatoes, cut with one or two good eyes to the piece. Then we took stock on another couple of Sally's hens which were setting and which refused to be broken up. (Four hens already had eggs under them.) These two I had dipped in water, but that didn't cure their maternal fever. I had tied heavy corn shucks to them to make nesting uncomfortable. I had scientifically put them in a crate with a wire net bottom and hung them up, just like the book said, but that didn't help either. So we decided that since they intended to set anyway, it had as well be on eggs. Mrs. Caldwell had the kind of chickens we wanted so we went there for the eggs, but we didn't know whether they would hatch roosters or pullets because we carried them home in a basket rather than in a woman's bonnet or a man's hat.

At school on Monday we found a green-speckled tree toad, following him up by the trill of his song which, together with the mourning of doves and rain crows, foretold more weather—which is to say, falling weather. For when it "weathers up" or

"fixes to weather up" or "a spell of weather comes" it refers to wetness or snow or something unpleasant. We took the tree toad in and admired the way he could walk up the wall by means of the pads on his toes. We considered how fine it would be if we could do that—and all of us admitted that at some time we had wished we could fly by flapping our arms. So when books took up I read *Darius Green* aloud, we all being in a position to sympathize with his ambition.

Fritz Baily had a ringworm. While someone carried the restless tree toad outdoors, I doused Fritz's upper arm with iodine.

"I been kind of feelin' an itchy place," he explained, wincing from the iodine, "for the last few days, and a while ago I got to doin' it so bad I thought all at once maybe I had a tick. You can get them sometimes right in the middle of winter. So I pulled up my underwear sleeve and there was this. . . ." And, thoughtfully, looking at his wrist: "Feller's arms shore do get crusty by spring, don't they?"

I cautioned everyone to watch out for ringworm; everyone was searching as best he could in public, but no one found any. On the board I had Fritz draw a picture from a science book of how the fungus works under the skin, and explain it to the room. And then I promised to show anyone who might come to my house the fairy ring in the pasture which was nothing but a huge ringworm of a sort which grows in the ground, becoming larger each year, killing the grass as it moves, while new grass creeps into last year's dead spot in the middle. This one, I explained, was just the right size for a good fairy dance, being perhaps four feet across, and apparently four or five years old. But, alas, no one believed in fairies. . . .

The weather was balmy when I went to school that morning. I faced a hard, wet, cold wind on the way home. Sleet and gusts of rain alternated as I did my chores and carried in wood. Everything was icing over. The steps were treacherous. The pelting on the roof continued as we ate supper. It was nice to hear as we sat by the fire, except when we thought of the stock on the

range, for freezing rain was about the worst kind of weather for them, penetrating to the very hide as it did.

Next morning the world was covered with a sheath of ice, as was everything which stood on it. The dog was ludicrous, sliding to his belly as his feet skidded. Chagrined and puzzled, he made his way back to the porch. I wrapped my feet in gunny sacks to give me traction and did my chores. The temperature was just right for a blob of butter to form in the bucket as I milked—a chunk which, churned by the streams from the teats, grew to the size of a quarter.

Fog blew thickly as I went to school, armed with an alpenstock made from an old hoe with the blade broken off the ferrule, which I had sharpened. The temperature, rising and falling, was right at the freezing point so that as the fog blew the moisture froze more and more thickly as it touched things.

I had only two pupils that day, but the next, with ruts melting out where wagons broke the ice, everyone came. The sun was out. The air, when still, was warm, but the ice still covered everything, glistening from a million facets. Bits of ice jingled from the trees as thawing began—and high time, for many limbs had broken yesterday and last night under the weight.

Then a weird and amazing thing occurred: a high wind snarled down upon us, gathering coldness as it came. It shook the trees partly free of their loads, hurling tons of loosened ice for many yards, in pieces ranging from the size of a bean to the size of the forearm. The ice, rotten and porous, was light, but it struck the back end of the schoolhouse where there were fortunately no windows in a barrage which made it impossible to talk inside. It so filled the air, blowing in slanting lines, that we could not see for half a minute or so. When it stopped, we saw that a stray cow had been beaten to her knees. Bawling wildly, she tried to rise and fell again as a fresh wind came. In the next lull she regained her feet, only to be knocked down once more.

Most of the loose ice seemed to be shaken out of the trees, but now and then fresh wind blew more of the thawing stuff. The

children were apprehensive about going home, for all the woodland trails and roads were overhung with timber. But we could not stay at the schoolhouse all night.

We decide that if one listened he could hear the gusts of wind coming through the woods, shaking down the ice, before they came too close for safety. Then, by standing on the sheltered side of a tree, perhaps with his books over his head, there should be no danger. It was a great adventure, and we were Man Battling the Elements as we set forth. . . .

And we were glad the groundhog hadn't seen his shadow, because if he had there was no telling but that there might have been some really bad weather.

CHAPTER XXVII

Good Things Allus Come in Bunches

The ice was forgotten, the world greening fast. By recess each morning the sun burned hotly. We had spring fever but not the time to indulge it. We had work to do. The four Tibos raced to finish the third reader. Arizona was in a fair way to finish the second and be passed to the third grade. Clyde was owlish in the spectacles his father bought him from an itinerant peddler, on the assumption that if his eyes saw things backward he needed glasses. He had by no means got ahead of his troubles. He was a slow reader but, given time, and feeling certain no one was amused, he managed.

He fell into the habit of bringing his guitar to school to show how well he was learning to pick it. I could see no advancement, nor any connection between the picking and his singing, but he did keep time with the strings. He sang in something approaching soprano:

"Jesus taken my heart to pieces
And putt a little sunshine in . . ."

Maybe in the summer he could get a job, he thought, traveling with an evangelist. First good one came along, he aimed to ask him. He told me of his hopes a dozen times a day. But this day there were other things as well to occupy my attention: Sue Anne lost her "racer outer" off the end of her pencil. Fritz Baily explained to the geography class that his brother who had gone

off and joined the navy didn't like it. He had run away from boot camp several times, trying to come home. As soon as they let him out of the guardhouse, he always ran off again.

"But he's alearnin' to out-smart 'em," Fritz reported proudly. "Last time he got might' near it a hundred miles 'fore they caught 'im."

Gerald Ashton had my number, too, and came to class ready to play on my weakness for an anecdote. He had found a picture of a locomotive and was using it as a gambit to be reminded of the time his Uncle Lonnie fired the boiler on "the short line"—the narrow gauge which used to join the country seat with several towns. One night they came in off the run and the engineer, already pretty well drunk from a bottle he had finished in the cab, wanted to go to a saloon.

When they reached one he said to Lonnie: "You stand right here. I'm aimin' to go in and clean that place out. You count the fellers as I throw 'em through the door."

He went in. Immediately a man rolled across the sidewalk. He jumped up in the darkness, crying, "Don't count this'n! Hit's me!"

Science. Louis Pasteur. Pasteurized milk. No one thinks he would like milk that had been done that way. . . . Rabies . . . Uncle Johnny used to have a madstone which he got out of a deer, but someone stole it. Folks came from miles around when they were mad-dog-bitten. He always soaked the stone in sweet milk and stuck it upon the bite. When it fell off, it would be soaked again, turning the milk green, and re-stuck. When it would stick no longer all the "poison" was removed and the person was safe. It worked fine on snake bites, too. It was just a little ol' thing, it seemed, about the size of half a walnut, but white. . . .

A big event in the school year is the annual "school meeting." For two weeks now a notice had been tacked upon the schoolhouse door warning one and all that at two on meeting day the voters would meet here for the purpose of voting next year's

school tax and letting a contract for fuel, and to elect a director. Brother Helms was going out, his three year term being up.

For some time, I had had to parry questions at school as to whether I would teach Big Piney next year, and I had some more of it today. I couldn't have answered such questions even had I been willing. No one who might have been of direct assistance to me in getting the job had spoken to me about it. I did know that Kincaid was busily working to replace Helms with a man from the other corner of the district—Kincaid's corner. And just a little elementary arithmetic showed that he might well be able to do it, for there was some feeling that an effort should be made to bring him back into the fold.

I could not help comparing our tiny, local situation with the larger one in Europe: the pacifying of Mussolini in the rape of Ethiopia by England and France and America; and the similar thing which was happening in Asia. The loud-mouthed trouble-maker for some reason always finds his neighbors ready to appease him, instead of to knock all his teeth out—until he treads on their own personal toes. More than one boy around Big Piney made his spending money by gathering scrap iron for Japan, not knowing the very piece he dragged out of the barn might later take his own life. The general idea was that it was only to kill Chinese with.

As for the school election, I did not even know whether the Ashton clan would vote my way—that is, for Helms—for, although they certainly did not seem to dislike me, they were after all somewhat kin to the Kincaids and there appeared to be no reason to believe that blood wasn't thicker than water.

However, things had picked up in the economic world to the point where I was hopeful of getting good news from a teachers' agency which I had joined—a line on a job which would take us back to sidewalks and a good salary. But it would have been a salve to my ego to finish the term with everyone happy enough to offer me another contract. And of course the school law left the hiring of next year's teacher to the new board. Regardless of

how Helms and Caldwell might feel toward me their hands were tied for now. The trouble was, they didn't even say how they felt.

When lessons were over for the day, we practiced the pieces and songs for "last day of school." The sultriness ended with a shower—but presently, after it was gone, we were hotter than ever. On the way home I saw Caldwell. He was glum, and apparently chagrined and somewhat angry.

While he believed the Lord preferred we use all other means before having doctors, he thought doctors had their place and that if a man's faith wouldn't strengthen his eyes enough for him to read his Bible it was better to use glasses than not. He had bought a pair from the fly-by-night peddler the other day, but he had been caught in this afternoon's shower and the bifocals—little slivers of cellophane or celluloid, they turned out to be—melted off.

"In a way, it was good enough for me," Mr. Caldwell admitted, "dealing with a fellow like that, because I knew all the time he was a worldly man: he was smokin' cigarettes."

We talked a little longer, but neither of us brought up tomorrow's school election. It was not an inspiring subject.

Sally and I were as glum as Caldwell as I brought in the milk and strained it and sat down to supper. We even forgot to turn on Lum 'n' Abner. We heard the mail man's old high-wheeled Model-A growling and grinding along. He stopped at our box. I waited until he went on because, otherwise, I would be hung up in a conversation that would last until I finally walked off and left him. Tonight I didn't feel like chatting.

And now we learned all over again that though the mills of the gods grind slowly, they still grind: there was a letter from last year's superintendent. He had a job for me next year—high school, nine months, seventy-five dollars cash money each and every one of them! Well! we said. Let Kincaid do his worst. That's six hundred and seventy-five dollars! And here we get only four-eighty. Two hundred dollars more—and we'd be living

in town! Who cared if it would be harder to make the money stretch than here? It would even up. Next week, said the superintendent, come in and talk with him. Say on Saturday . . .

We talked it over until bedtime and afterward. We found that was one of the nicest parts of being married, drowsing along, between wakefulness and sleep, thinking of the family that we were becoming, and of how the future was brighter even than the present.

We really preferred staying home to going to the school meeting, but we had votes and it was our duty to be there. We had heard of school elections in rural districts which degenerated into brawls and even bloody fights. At one, rival factions resolved their differences by hurling chunks of stove wood at each other. At another district there was a standing rule that guns must be left out of doors—and known pistol carriers, by vote of the meeting, were required to submit to search. But of course things like that were most unusual, and while we didn't know quite what to expect at this, our first school meeting, we anticipated no bloodshed.

Sally was near the end of her waiting so we started early in order to take our time, for the day was warm. Sister Viny overtook us on the way, her children trailing her, and as we were nearly to the schoolhouse the Caldwells came in sight behind. Ahead we heard other voices. There was a crowd on the schoolground when we reached it. Yonder Lonnie Haskins conferred with Helms. The Kincaids and their crowd were gathered at one side. They had even brought the pitiful old feeble-minded woman. She had a doll, much bedraggled, in her arms and she stood grinning and slobbering and making a constant smacking sound with her lips.

Sister Viny whispered that it looked mighty bad for us. "They've voted Lidelia before!" she declared. "When it's a close 'lection, they fetch 'er out and vote her!"

"Oh, that's awful!" Sally declared. "That's terrible, bringing her out for people to stare at! I feel like going home."

"She'd still be yere," Sister Viny pointed out.

As far as I could see, it appeared that everything depended on what the Ashtons would do. No . . . Even if they voted for Helms, the Kincaids counted up one extra, counting Lidelia. I had suspected she would be here for I had heard of their bringing her before. Without going to court, there had never been anything anyone could do to prevent her voting and no one was ever willing to carry matters that far. Still, Miss Callie would be here soon, someone said, and that would at least give us a tie.

Brother Helms approached, motioning mysteriously for me to step aside.

"I was jist astin' Lonnie," he said confidentially, "not that I got any love fer him, way he taken that place away from me after Uncle Johnny died, if he would serve as moderator. . . . Hit's a little trick I'm workin'. Looks like they're aimin' to give us a tie —but the moderator can't vote, less'n he has to break a tie, so if we 'lect the moderator from their side, or from them that might be agin us, that will give us a vote ahead of them to start and we'll win. Looks like hit's aimin' to run about fourteen to thirteen. . . ."

Brother Helms's words made sense. I relayed the information to Sally. Sister Viny moaned, "Oh, Lord, if only Pete would come! But they's so many that won't take no interest—"

Mr. Caldwell jangled the bell. We filed in. The rival factions took seats on opposite sides of the room. Brother Helms, as current president of the board, said, "Now, folks, first thing we got to have a moderator. Mr. Secretary, take the desk up here if you please." And, as Kincaid went forward with his book: "Who you aim to have fer moderator, folks?"

The elder Kincaid said, "I nominate Brother Caldwell, an' move we 'lect him by acclamation!"

"Secont the move!" someone near him cried.

Kincaid exclaimed in taut glee: "Thar, now, Charley! They's a motion before the house got to be voted on!"

Brother Helms was floored. News of his "strategy" had not got sufficiently around—but even so it would have made no difference. They were one vote up. Caldwell took the stand.

Next year's wood contract was voted first—twenty ricks, and the low bid was ninety-five cents, a total of nineteen dollars. Then Caldwell said, "Now, we get some extra money from the state next year, and a lot of back taxes have come in, as you'll see presently from the financial statement. By voting the same millage as last year, we can pay our teacher seventy a month next year. I believe in good wages for teachers, because our children today are our citizens tomorrow. . . . Will someone make a motion about the rate?"

The Kincaids made the motion and it was unanimously carried by show of hands. The elder Kincaid whispered to Lidelia and, grinning and smacking her mouth, she raised her hand, making a pleased gobbling noise.

Then Caldwell said, "We're a little more prosperous than we've been for a while. We ought to do better about library books. I've heard the children—my own and others—talk about the books the teacher brought to school this year. I've looked up stuff here myself of a Sunday that I was curious about." He added the clincher: "Why, they even have more books at Little Piney than we've been having here. . . ."

A millage was voted which would provide twenty-five dollars, above possible state money, for books. The building fund was discussed and voted upon. Caldwell stalled a bit, going over the financial statement. But at last the final thing could be staved off no longer:

"We have one director going off the board," he said. "The chair will entertain nominations for a director for a term of three years."

The Kincaids nominated a bachelor named Elwood—a greasy old man I had seen only a couple of times. He had not endeared

himself to Sally the day, out hunting, he stopped at our house for a drink. It happened that she was just then dumping a jar of beans which had soured. He told her that he did his own canning and that he had never lost a jar of anything. "My mother," he added, "always told me I waste too much soap and water. . . . Maybe you just wasn't clean enough with them. . . ."

There was silence in the schoolhouse except for the crackling of a grasshopper as it passed the window. It looked as if poor Brother Helms would not even be nominated for another term. He was squirming and sweating and trying to appear indifferent. I rose and nominated him.

There were no other nominations. Caldwell asked the clerk to pass slips of paper for ballots. And then from the doorway there came a voice: "Mr. Moderator—what are you voting on?"

"Director, Miss Callie."

Sure enough, Miss Callie had finally made it, but the Kincaids were still a vote ahead. Then a couple of men rose and went out. Leaning over I could see they were helping Miss Callie's grandmother up the steps. She had not been out to church all winter. Old and tiny she came in, chin out, and took a seat.

She called in a surprisingly strong voice: "Who's bein' voted for, Mr. Moderator?" And then, glaring at the opposition, "I got wind of this business. It's a rare thing you get a schoolmaster in schools way back like this that's got both book-learnin' and gumption. I come out to see the right thing is done."

I was properly embarrassed—but, it came to me presently, my visit last fall with the old lady had brought a goodly harvest, for her presence tied the vote which Kincaid made by holding Lidelia's hand and tracing out something on her slip of paper. Caldwell broke the vote by voting for Helms. My heart was pounding.

Then Caldwell made a little talk, saying he hoped the community would get together and be friendly and work as a unit. The Kincaids, defeated, said nothing at all, but they looked darkly at the Ashtons who had voted on our side.

"Any more business?" Caldwell asked.

The younger Kincaid slammed his secretary's ledger down on the table. He exclaimed, "You can get yourself another director! *I* got no time to try he'pin' Big Piney run its business. I'm pullin' out of the dee-strick fer good. . . . Handier to send my younguns across the creek, anyway, whur jist one or two don't try to run the whole shootin'-match. . . . Pa—Lidy—Dee—le's go home!"

I hated that he felt so, but as we closed the schoolhouse, Caldwell said, "Let 'em depart in peace. . . . They'll come back all the quicker if they ain't begged. What they don't know is that the directors across the creek don't intend to put up with out-of-district pupils takin' up their teacher's time next year."

Brother Helms was in a big way. "Ride home, Brother Nelson?"

We thanked him. We thought we would walk. Little jolty to ride. He understood.

"Boy!" he cried, as we went to thank Miss Callie's grandmother for her kind words. "Did we skunk 'em! But good things allus come in bunches. . . ." He took a bucket and a red object from the back of his car. "Got me a brand-new sipherin' tube to suption my gas with!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

We Get Ready to Leave Big Piney

Although I was as eager as Sally to get back to town where there would be no cow nor pig nor calf to care for, I was rather taken aback that Helms and Caldwell did not offer me the school. I certainly didn't intend to tell them plain out that I had a better offer elsewhere—but I did ponder how best to let the news leak out to them!

Besides the offer in town, our fairy godmother had a further eye on us for sure just then: the mail man brought us a check for twenty-seven: fifty for an article on weather signs, omens, portents, and so on, plus a request from the same editor for another article I had suggested on the way Big Piney folks used the moon and zodiac signs in their daily lives. But that wasn't all there was in the mail: for another article on the unbelievably vast and varied natural resources of the state—resources, in sum total, perhaps unsurpassed in any area of equal size in the country—there was a check for ninety-six dollars.

So much good fortune left us so upset we couldn't eat supper for a long time. As we recovered from the shock, we were filled with a burning elation—but also with humbleness and thankfulness, and a feeling that we should be careful in any move we made, any thought we entertained, lest we disturb the great cosmic balance which was working in our favor.

If our baby cost no more than we anticipated, we would have money in the bank. Money which, had we been going to stay at

Big Piney, we would put into a car—for with a car, we said, it wouldn't be so bad living out here in the country with town only an hour away. Not that we wouldn't rather just live in town, of course. . . .

Next morning we received a monumental surprise when Mrs. Helms came by the house: Pete Muehlbach had come for her in the night. Sister Viny now had a baby. Because of her great natural bulk we hadn't even suspected that she was "suspecting" one, as Sally put it. Sally didn't feel up to traipsing all the way to church and back, but in the afternoon, the sun beating hotly down, we went to pay Sister Viny our respects.

The house was shut tightly; flies sang in the heat, and the smell was pretty terrific. The baby was wrapped in an old shirt of Pete's, having, besides that, a band and diaper. It was red and wrinkled.

"Ain't he a perty one, though?" Viny demanded.

We agreed that he was quite a lad.

"But doesn't he need a shirt and maybe a dress on?" Sally asked.

"Oh, law no, not with this here wool shirt o' Pete's. Hit's kind of a old granny-woman idy, I reckon, to wrop a boy baby in his daddy's shirt, but some thinks it gives 'em a better start in life, an' it don't hurt to foller a few idys even if they do sound foolish. Wool makes 'em break out good with the hives, too. I'd a-sent fer you instead of Miz Helms but I knowed this wouldn't be no place fer you; li'ble to bring on yore pains, too." The other children were standing around. Sister Viny said, "Don't pay them no mind—nor—" she giggled—"Pete. Him an' them knows whur younguns comes from. Law, they've seen cows find their calves many's the time."

Sally said lamely, "Well—we were certainly surprised to hear the news."

Sister Viny giggled again. "I kep' it kind of a secret. Folks is allus findin' something' to talk about an' I figgered I wouldn't

give 'em nothin' to talk about about *me*. Pete, whur at is that bottle—?"

Pete produced a bottle of water with a finger-length lamb nipple on it.

"My milk ain't come yet," Viny explained, "so we give 'im a little suck of sweetened water now an' then. Is it warm, Pete?"

Pete stopped his constant grinning long enough to say, "Hit's been asettin' in the sun in the winder—" He took his fingers and squirted some from the nipple upon his wrist. "Feels warm—"

Sally exclaimed, "You oughtn't to handle that—I mean—ought you?"

Pete blinked at her.

"I mean—your hands might be dirty—"

"Oh . . ." Pete looked at his fingers and thoughtfully wiped the nipple off on the bib of his overalls and gave the bottle to Viny.

I needed air. The room was unbearably close.

Sally said, "Does the baby need a bath? Mrs. Helms said you didn't let her bathe it—"

"Naw, he don't need naryin' yet. We greased 'im up good. I'll bathe 'im on the ninth day when I git up an' take my bath. Hit's all that sloppin' around in water that kills off so many new babies. Jist keep 'em greased good. My mother had thirteen. . . ."

So we had heard—and that she had raised four of them to school age. Sister Viny had told us all about it, along with such lore as that to cut a baby's nails before it was a year old would make a thief of it. They should be bitten off.

The talk turned to other things. Sister Viny said she was sorry she was down sick just now; she had aimed to campaign around in the neighborhood for me. Some felt like it was a bad thing, the Kincaids pulling plumb out of the school, them being old settlers and all. The Ashtons felt bad, and Martha's in-laws. And the Ashtons' Baily kin always felt however the Ashtons did. We

comforted Sister Viny and told her we wouldn't starve and that there were other teachers in the world.

"But another'n," she said, "might let them yuther younguns make fun of mine."

Monday was our last workday to wind things up, and Tuesday the last day of school. A day which always had its joys and sorrows, its gladness that school was out, and a vague sadness, which would last a day or so, that the familiar trend was broken.

At the end of the week the eighth graders would go to the county seat to take their examination, along with eighth graders from the hundred other districts in the county—districts which, in the next five years, would be reduced to half that number by consolidation, with buses winding over the roads. Big Piney was one of the schoolhouses which would stand forlorn and empty the year round except when meeting was held. In return for getting on a bus at six in the morning, winding over a forty mile route to pick up others, and arriving home at six or six: thirty in the evening, the Big Piney boys and girls would have the privilege of sitting in classes with fifty to sixty other pupils and receiving possibly one to two minutes' personal attention each day if they were average enough not to require more. It is not always easy to see how this is compensated for simply by the fact that the school building cost more than the one in the home district; there is often no other difference.

Our school was out this year a week early according to the county-wide scheme of things, which was for the country schools to finish next week. Nevertheless, I was confident my eighth graders would pass their examination—as, in fact, they did—and I had their diplomas made out, except for signing, to give to them in a little graduating ceremony tomorrow at the closing exercises. It is these exercises which are referred to when someone speaks of "going to last-day-of-school," just as one "goes to the Fourth"—that is, a Fourth of July celebration.

Most of the lower grade pupils were exempted from tests in

some or all of their subjects, and examinations for the rest were the order of the day on Monday. The preliminary ones in such things as penmanship, art, and (vocal) music had been got out of the way last week—and since I had the feeling that those were matters personal with the individual, everyone who made any effort in them, as all did, went through in fine style.

At odd moments during the day I put the finishing touches on my monthly and term reports, now that I had today's attendance. Report cards were practically filled in. Nobody seemed to know just what to do in an idle moment, for the routine was broken. Library books had lost their savor. There was cleaning out of desks and preparing of books to take home. Some put up exhibitions of their best written lessons and penmanship and drawings for the patrons to view tomorrow afternoon when they came to the program.

And finally, tomorrow was here.

I had called on none of the children the year long for janitor work, but today all made certain that everything was spic and span. Bookcases were straightened, the organ dusted, and all put in order for company. Right after dinner the mothers who were interested would gather to hear the recitations and see the presentations for attendance, citizenship, and scholarship. There was a high degree of excitement, I noticed—

Was that Brother Helms's car I heard? Maybe he would pass on by. Lord deliver us from a "few words" by him. The children evidently knew what I was thinking. There was some giggling. And there came Caldwell's new wagon, built on an auto chassis with inflated tires. And coming out of the woods trail afoot was Lonnie Haskins with a big basket in hand. And behind him were the Ashtons, and Martha.

Before I knew it the community had gathered in—parents and patrons. Sally was getting out of Caldwell's rig, laughing at my surprise as I went to help her. Everyone else laughed too. For a moment I could not understand that I was receiving the ac-

colade of a country teacher—the tendering of a dinner which was to say, "Well done!"

We spread it under the trees and Caldwell asked a blessing on the food. With plates, we went along and chose what we would eat and sat on the ground, or on chairs and benches brought from the schoolhouse. I doubly appreciated the people's coming today in such strength because this was a time when the ground was crying to be worked and the weather was perfect for it.

Said Caldwell: "Tomorrow's a day that hasn't been touched yet—and this is a duty as well as a pleasure."

Sally had known about the dinner yesterday and I realized that she had almost made several breaks about it last night. But there was something else she didn't know about, any more than I.

When no one could hold more, the halves of cakes and the fragments of pies and the platters of crisp-fried chicken and big loaves of homemade bread were put back into the baskets with the half jars of pickled peaches and cucumbers and such. The tablecloths were shaken free of crumbs and bits of litter from the ground and folded away. Men filled their pipes and talked and women suckled their babies and marveled that their children had so suddenly grown up:

" . . . Don't seem no time since I was in the eighth grade. . . ."

"Law me, I remember my first day of school. . . . Didn't want to go. . . . Cried all the way there. . . . But in a day or two, you couldn't keep me away. . . . An' now, here June is graduatin'. . . . June—" a sharp whisper—"pull your dress down! You're too big for such tom-boyin'!"

We went in for the program.

It was like the other programs of the year, with the emphasis on a conventionally "happy school year" and "farewell to my playmates" instead of on Christmas or Hallowe'en.

Joe and Gerald dramatized the fable of the tortoise and the hare, doing it up in fine style and drawing a big hand. Sue Anne's mother squirmed a bit as her shorn darling took the rostrum. Said Sue Anne, unexpectedly:

"I wanted to say, 'Slippers on—I mean, ribbons on my shoulder, slippers on my feet, I'm mamma's little darling, don't you think I'm sweet?' But instead, I have to say, 'Little Ol' Schoolhouse on the Hill.' It's a lot longer. . . ."

She went into it confidently. She approached the place where she always had to back up and take a new hitch, and the words rolled off her tongue. She finished in triumph, took a bow, and ran to her mother in the midst of the applause.

It was presently Mrs. Helms's turn to be embarrassed as Feelia went up, all dyked out in a new plaid dress; but she was a pretty child and I for one didn't notice the notches where Sue Anne had barbered her.

Finally the larger girls sang "In the Little Red Schoolhouse," and after that June delivered the valedictory. Delivered isn't exactly the word. Prose oratory was not her forte. She rather dragged it in and I regretted—out of sympathy with her obviously dry tongue and halting breath—that I had bowed to the silly custom which takes it for granted that he who is talented in any line must also be talented as a speaker.

When she nervously took her seat—having, in reality, done very well—I gave out the presentations and awards. The reading certificates, the attendance and achievement scrolls, and the eighth grade diplomas. And then I thanked everyone for a pleasant year and for the compliment they had given me today. I finished:

"I came to Big Piney hoping and expecting to teach the children something. I think I've done that—I know, in fact, when I consider what they have done this year in their books, that I have. But I sometimes feel that I've learned more than I've taught. . . . This has been a good year for me—a good and happy year—" with a glance at Sally—"for both of us at Big Piney. A good year."

Caldwell rose. In his halting, but direct way he said, "Today has been a pleasant occasion. For one, I'm encouraged at the year's attendance record. . . . I'm encouraged to see the people

out today to honor the teacher. I think it's an encouragement to the children for their folks to show an interest in what they're doing. . . . Brother Nelson, would you be pleased to have the school another year?"

The people leaned forward looking at me. The narrow, hard-bitten, suspicious faces and eyes which I had seen eight months ago were not there now. They were the same faces, but I was looking at them with different eyes. What I had taken for suspicion was a wall of reticence raised for protection against uppity outsiders. I knew now the deviousness of mind, the native shrewdness back of those countenances, and the warm friendliness of the hearts.

I remembered our house, serene and contentful in its simplicity, with no crowding in on all sides—the whole outdoors that was ours for the taking. I remembered a thousand things —not least that our first baby was expected in a couple of weeks— and again I looked at Sally. She nodded yes. I knew she was remembering too. That she felt in her heart as I did that these were our people and that at least for a little while this was our home.

THE END