

The Secret of Quaking-Asp Cabin

or, Quaking-Asp Cabin

by Zane Grey, 1872-1939

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LOG cabins have played a great part in the history of the West. The lonely deserted ones and those falling to ruin, with which any hunter is familiar, have always fascinated me. Many stories of mine tell the romance and drama of these wilderness homes.

Late one autumn afternoon I found myself lost in the forest. This had happened to me before, but not often enough to make the experience something all in the day's hunt. Hours before, the hounds had trailed a bear down over the Mogollon Rim into a canyon. My companions became separated from me. Probably they had

followed the cowboys. Already that day I had had two ringing runs after these range riders. The lowering weather threatened rain. I rode along the Rim listening to the bay of the hounds and looking out over that vast green gulf called the Tonto Basin, the wildest and roughest region in Arizona. In case the pack jumped the bear I stood as good a chance as anyone to get a shot.

A cold wind began to blow from the north and the clouds darkened. It grew hard to hear the hounds or an occasional yell of a cowboy. Eventually all sounds of the chase ceased. I turned back on the trail toward camp, keeping a sharp lookout for deer and turkeys.

The Mogollon Rim is an extraordinary geological fault which zigzags three hundred miles across Arizona into New Mexico. It has an altitude close to nine thousand feet and breaks off sheer down into the Tonto Basin. In the other direction it slopes for sixty miles to merge into the desert. The singular feature is that all water runs away from the Rim. Canyons and ridges, like the grooves and ribs of a washboard, head at the Rim and run down. All this region is densely timbered with spruce, pine and aspen.

A flock of wild turkeys lured me off the trail. I chased them for a mile or more down in the woods, without getting a shot. Then fresh deer signs augmented my excitement and drew me on. When I heard elk bugling below I descended the ridge after them. The piercing bugle of a bull elk is one of the wildest and most beautiful calls in nature. Once down off the ridge into the canyon I ascertained that the elk were moving to the north, an advantage for me, as the wind was coming from the north. The herd evidently was small, comprising some cows and yearlings, with at least two bulls.

Most of these canyons, some distance down from the Rim, opened out into grassy parks; I rode into one just in time to see a great tawny elk, with antlers like the roots of an upturned stump, glide into the pines.

They climbed the ridge and I followed. I did not need to trail them because every little while the leader bugled. Presently an answer pealed from above, and if I needed any more to whet my hunting instinct that was it.

I pursued this band of elk over the ridge, down into another canyon, up again, and on and on, until I discovered that they had either heard or scented me, and after the habit of elk, were just moving along. But it was not this that brought me up with a start. A fine rain had begun to fall; the sky was dark and gave not the slightest hint of the sun. Under such circumstances it was easy for anyone to become lost. I turned back with some concern, until I ascertained the north from moss on a pine; then I turned east. Back-trailing my own tracks would have been futile, for the day was far spent, and I had traveled miles from the Rim. The thing to do was to head east, up and down the ridges, until I crossed Beaver Canyon, in which our camp was located.

If I did come across a landmark that should have been familiar the rain deceived me. All the parks, trees, slopes and ridges looked exactly alike. I was lost, and as the shadows began trooping down the aisles of the forest I decided to find a place to camp, before darkness overtook me. On the morrow, if the sun shone enough to give me my direction, I could get out easily.

Shortly after that decision I came to the brow of a ridge from which I gazed down into a small park, perhaps a score or more acres in extent. On the far side,

at the base of the slope, I could see a log cabin, sitting black and strange against the golden blaze of quaking aspens. A vacant and eye-like door peered up at me forbiddingly.

The park, with its lonesome manifestation that someone had lived there sometime, was a welcome sight. I found a dim grass-grown trail leading down. My horse, White Stockings, snorted his approval of the green-carpeted pasture. I heard running water.

It appeared that the old log cabin sat back against a lichened cliff from the tip of which hung wet ferns and scarlet-leaved vines. The roof of split shakes was intact and covered by a thick layer of moss and pine needles. I dismounted and walked around, thrilled by the place. From under the base of the cliff boiled a magnificent spring, ten feet wide and as deep. It was the source of the brook I had forded. One of the most superb silver spruce trees that I had ever seen towered over the cabin with its top above the cliff. To the left and verging right on the west side of the cabin was a grove of quaking aspens, that even in the rain and gathering twilight blazed white and gold. Every leaf quaked as if still alive and shuddering in a last agony.

This struck me so singularly, even in that moment of satisfaction at my prospective shelter for the night, that I looked again and gazed long. Aspen trees in the fall are remarkably beautiful. They were my favorites of the high timber belts. But somehow my reaction was not as usual.

Unsaddling my horse, I haltered him with a long lasso to a bush which marked a luxuriant grass plot, and packed my saddle, blankets, canteen and rifle to the cabin. I carried them in and deposited them upon the floor. This proved to be an exception to the majority of cabins I had entered. It had been built of rough-hewn boards and was still solid. A strong odor of bear mingled with the musty scent of dust and pine. The single room was about twenty feet square, with a fireplace and chimney of yellow rock built against the west wall. Here too my quick survey grasped a good job of masonry, still intact except for crumbling corners of the fireplace.

My need was a fire for light and warmth. It behooved me to rustle dry wood while I could see to find it. There was a loft half across the ceiling and a ladder flat against the wall led up to it. I thought I might tear out some of the poles. But I found an old built-in bedstead of peeled poles in a corner, and it was covered with a layer of pine needles. From here the smell of bear emanated pungently. My hand found a round depression where bruin had made his bed. I did not relish the idea of a grizzly returning home to find his bed occupied. But there was no help on it. Only a mean bear would resent my occupancy.

In another corner I found a pile of fagots and pine cones, as dry as tinder.

„All set!“ I soliloquized with satisfaction, wondering who had gathered that firewood and how long ago.

Soon I had a fire blazing on the hearth, and it made a vast difference. I went outside and filled my canteen with water from the spring. It was as cold as ice, and like all the water in that wonderful region came from snow water running through granite. I had in my coat a big sandwich—a biscuit with a generous slice of venison. Also I had a piece of chocolate, but this I chose to save for the next day.

Sitting in front of the warm fire, I made my supper and it was sufficient. After that I put on more wood and dried my coat and saddle blankets, upon which I had been sitting. Once more warm and dry, with hunger and thirst satisfied, I felt comfortable. Nevertheless, as one might have supposed, I was neither tired nor sleepy. Furthermore the old cabin intrigued me so thrillingly at first, and then, as I began to study its features and to think, so peculiarly, that I marveled greatly and sought to analyze the reason. It was already a foregone conclusion that I would put this cabin in one of my stories. Strange to record, I never did until now, and I am sure when this one is read my readers will not wonder.

By the light of the fire I made out details. The cabin was very old, but as it had been remarkably well and solidly built, it had withstood the ravages of time. There were many signs of dry rot, of crumbling chimney, of general disintegration. In some places the clay that had been used to fill the chinks between the logs was still there, shrunken and as hard as rock. I found indecipherable lettering on the irregular-shaped flat stone above the fireplace, and the imprint of a bloody hand, and bullet holes in the logs. These, however, could hardly account altogether for the powerful curiosity and emotion that stirred in me. I analyzed it presently as a kind of intuitive realization of the life, the drama, the tragedy that had abided there. No old cabin I ever entered, even those down in the Basin, on the scene of that most desperate and bloody feud, the war of sheepmen and cattlemen fought to the last man, had affected me so poignantly as this one. Surprised and perturbed, I put that down as stress from the excitement of being lost, and I sought to make light of it. But I could not, and in view of what I learned later this was no wonder.

With my saddle for a pillow, and lying between warm blankets, I stretched out to make a night of rest and sleep. While the fire burned I lay awake. The flickering shadows from the changing blaze wrote stories on the gloomy walls of that cabin. When the light waxed dim and failed I shut my eyes. The oppression in my breast persisted. Rain pattered softly on the roof. Alone in that speaking solitude, I surrendered to the phantasms induced by the mystery of what had happened there. It was the prerogative of a writer, but it was not a happy one this night.

I fell asleep. Late in the night I awoke. The radium hands on my watch told two o'clock. Presently I ascertained that the rain had ceased. A wind had arisen and the air was colder. This augured well for my finding my way to camp on the morrow. But the moan and sough and mourn of that wind added to the weird and inexplicable something which pervaded the old cabin. Always as a child I had been afraid of the dark. Even since I had attained manhood, night had always been invested with phantoms, peopled with spirits, full of queer dreams that the sunlight of day dispelled. The conflict between my imagination and my will ended as such conflicts always end, with a victory for the former. Fear of the unknown beset me. I knew perfectly well that I was in no danger physically. But the mind is strange. No scientist or psychologist has plumbed it yet. I was at the mercy of the life, the birth and death, the love and hate and passion, the terror and the ghastliness, of all that had happened in that old cabin. Even if I had never learned what it had all been I would have known it instinctively just the same. Those hours before the gray of dawn were bad ones, from the point of view of peace and sleep.

Day broke at last. I got up to pack my things outside. The morning was clear. Frost whitened the grass of the park. The nipping air had teeth. When I got White Stockings saddled and bridled my fingers stung. A rosy light over the high horizon gave me the east, from which I took my direction, and by sunrise I was up on the ridge. I was lost still, however, until two hours later, when I rode out of the colored forest into the Rim trail, from which I could see the blue haze of the Basin. How good it was to find myself again! But that somber something did not leave me. In two hours and a half I cut off the Rim trail down into Beaver Canyon, and soon rode into camp.

Babe Haught, my old bear hunter, and the Japanese cook, Takahashie, were the only ones in camp. Haught's four sons, the cowboys, and my brother were out hunting for me.

„Wal, I wasn't worried at all," said Babe, his craggy face wreathed in a smile. „Unless you get ketched in a storm, gettin' lost heah don't amount to shucks. All you got to do is foller canyon or ridge up to the Rim.“

In some detail I told Haught where I had been and especially about the old cabin.

„Say, you was lost," he replied in surprise. „Thet park's way down, ten miles an' more from the Rim, west of Leonard Canyon. Rough Jasper of a country without bein' lost.“

„I'll say it's rough. Babe, do you know anything about that old cabin, who lived there—and what might have happened?“

Haught gave his short dry laugh. „Reckon I do. Quakin'-Asp Cabin, it's known to us. Built long before I come to the Tonto, twenty-four years ago. Haven't hunted thar these last half-dozen years. You know the Apaches used to burn the grass over this woods every fall. That made fine open huntin'. But it's growed up brushy. Them jack-pine thickets are shore tough.“

„Quaking-Asp Cabin?“ I echoed ponderingly. „Babe, didn't a lot happen there?“

„Hell, yes! ... It's haunted—that cabin—Suthin' turrible happened to everyone who lived thar.“

„All right, old-timer. Get going," I said with elation.

„Wal, first thing that comes to mind," replied Haught reminiscently, as he squatted down to get a red ember from the campfire to light his pipe, „was told me by Ben Kettle, a hunter heraboos. Ben camped at Quakin'-Asp one night with a feller named Bates, a sheepman. Durin' the night Ben was waked up by a squall from his pardner. One of them coyote-bitten skunks—you know, the kind that have hydrophobia—had hold of Bates's nose. Funny how them poison varmints always bite a feller with a big nose. Ben had to choke the skunk to death to make it let go. Wal, Bates didn't go to see no doctor. He wasn't worried none by them civet-cats. Some days after that, over on the Cibique at a round-up, he was took down with rabies. My brother, Henry, was thar an' helped tie Bates in a wagon. They took him to Winslow, whar he had to be roped to a bed. He went mad. Turned black all over. An' died a horrible death... I've knowed of several other fellers bein' bit by hydrophobia skunks...“

„Tell more about Quaking-Asp Cabin," I interposed. „That's got me, Haught, I'm on the trail of something.“

„Ahuh? Wal, if you trail all thet's come off at Quakin'-Asp, you'll make tracks till doomsday... Lemme see. Next I remember thet about the Hashknife outfit. More'n twenty years ago. Thet outfit, if I never told you before, was one of Arizonie's best cow outfits. Jim Davis owned it, an' was runnin' ten thousand haid of cattle flanked with thet Hashknife brand. Lefty Dagg, son of the Dagg who was first to be killed in thet Pleasant Valley War old one-arm Matt Taylor told you about, was foreman of this outfit. Wal, Jim Davis an' his bunch camped thar at Quakin'-Asp one day in the fall of thet year. Jim had been to Pine, where he'd sold a big herd of stock to the Mormons. He had a wad of money on him, an' Dagg with his cowboys was well-heeled. Naturooly they fell to gamblin' an' from thet to fightin'. Dagg killed a cowboy Davis set much store on an' it riled the boss. Nobody ever knowed for shore the truth of what come off. They said on the range thet it was an even break an' they said also thet Dagg murdered Davis. We never got the straight of thet. But we did find out, you bet, thet Dagg an' his outfit went crooked after thet fight. They turned rustlers. In the years thet follered the Hashknife earned a hard name. They fought other cattle outfits. But it was fightin' among themselves thet snuffed thet outfit out. Thar has been a dozen Hashknife outfits since, an' all of them took on two or three gun-toters from the older outfit, which I reckon worked like a few rotten apples on a barrel of good ones. No Hashknife outfit has ever outlived thet heritage.“

„Babe, that's good—a whole story in itself. But not the one I'm on the track of,“ I replied eagerly. „Go on.“

„Wal, the first time I rode down to Quakin'-Asp Cabin I had a jar,“ resumed Haught. „Thar was a feller livin' thar alone, a lean, dark-browed man with *range rider* stamped all over him. Thet was twenty-three years ago, but I remember as well as if it was yestiddy. 'Cause thet hombre throwed his gun on me an' I had a hell of a time talkin' him out of borin' me. But I convinced him thet even if he was on the dodge he needn't fear me. I stayed all night with him an' he waxed friendly. Before I left he omitted tellin' me his name but he did tell me that there was a price on his haid. The next summer when I rode in thar again he was gone. I never saw him again. But years afterward a rich an' respected cattleman told on his deathbed a story that went the rounds heah in Arizonie. I figgered thet he an' the outlaw I had met at Quakin'-Asp had been pards, ridin' together in the same outfit. They both fell in love with the ranchman's daughter. He hisself had pulled the crooked deal thet his pard took the guilt for an' he couldn't die with it on his conscience. He told his old friend's name an' begged him to come an' stand free before the world. But the outlaw had long gone crooked of his own account. If he ever heahed of his pard's confession no one knowed. He was shot in a road-agent hold-up in New Mexico.“

„Babe, you're hot on the track of what I felt that night in haunted Quaking-Asp Cabin,“ I declared forcibly. „Come on. Come on.“

„Wal, I dunno about that,“ replied the old bear hunter dubiously. Then he told me the story of Tappan and his great burro Jenie.

Tappan had been a giant prospector, a wanderer of the wasteland, a lonely hermit whose young manhood and maturity had been given to the naked shingles and rocky fortresses of the desert, to the lure of gold. One time, way down on the barrens at the base of the Chocolate range in California, his burro gave birth to a

little one that Tappan feared he would have to kill. But it chanced that when he was about to rid the mother of her encumbrance he stumbled upon the richest pocket of gold he had ever found. He spared the life of the baby burro and called her Jenie. She grew to be the largest and finest and most intelligent burro that Tappan had ever owned. She became famous on the desert from Picacho to Death Valley. Other prospectors tried to buy her and steal her. But Jenie grew to be more than gold to Tappan.

Once Tappan was caught in one of the terrible storms of flying poison dust, and torrid blasts of heat, that prevail in Death Valley in summer. At midnight the hellish furnace winds began to blow. Blinded, lost, Tappan clung to the tail of his faithful burro, and she led him up and out of the valley of death and desolation. After that Tappan loved Jenie more than all the burros he had ever owned.

Tappan's peculiar thirst for gold led him in quest of all the lost gold mines that the desert fact and legend had left to torture prospectors. The day inevitably came when he took the trail of the famed and elusive Lost Dutchman Mine somewhere far into the wilds of the Superstitions in Arizona.

One night into his camp rode a group of riders, four men and one woman. They were not welcome, because Tappan had bags of gold and he preferred to be lonely, but the fair-spoken leader, who claimed his band were lost and hungry, and the persuasive offices of the handsome young woman, prevailed upon Tappan to be hospitable.

There had been no woman in Tappan's life. This one contrived to win his sympathy. She claimed to be virtually a prisoner and she hated her captivity. She worked upon the mind and heart of the simple prospector.

The leader of the band talked about the ranch he had up in the timbered canyons of the Tonto Basin, and what a contrast the shady cool retreat, the singing brook, the richness of verdure and toothsome-ness of venison and turkey, made to this ghastly desert of cactus and rock, down upon which the pitiless summer sun had begun to burn. Before Tappan lay down to sleep that night the woman had won him to go with them. She hinted that he might save her.

Ten long days Tappan rode with the gang, on one of their horses, while Jenie plodded on behind, loaded with his pack. They climbed to a canyon up under the gold rim of the Mogollon. The ranch and cattle did not materialize, but all the other features the leader had lauded to Tappan were there in abundance. Tappan reveled in all the rich attributes of that timbered canyon, so different from his desert. Then he fell in love with the woman Bess. It was a malady that he could not resist nor cure. Not until afterward did it occur to Tappan how strange that the men left him so much alone with Bess! And when she confessed her love he lived in his first fool's paradise.

Bess confessed that her associates were rustlers and she begged Tappan to save her from them, to take her far away and make her happy. Tappan consented to that in the only transport of his life. They planned to ride away early one night, but it would be impossible to take Jenie. To part with his faithful burro, to betray her for this woman, to leave her alone, knowing she would wait there for him until she died, filled Tappan's heart with anguish. But it had to be done.

They escaped one night on horseback, with only one pack animal, carrying Tappan's bags of gold, some food and bedding. They rode south all night and all

the next day before resting. Tappan believed they were safe, but Bess showed fear of pursuers. While they were eating at their campfire, something stampeded their horses. Tappan went to hunt them and succeeded in catching only one. Upon his return to camp he found Bess gone with his bags of gold. She left a note swearing she loved Tappan and would have gone to hell for him, but this was the only way she could save his life.

Tappan tracked that gang out of Arizona, down through California into Mexico. The blue-eyed woman and the swarthy leader who gambled and drank at every town made them easy to trail. One by one the other members of the gang disappeared. At length Tappan stood bowed over Bess's grave and he buried his love and heart there with her. And soon after that he got his great hands on the villain who had murdered her—the suave leader of the rustler gang—to break his bones and wring his neck.

Tappan retraced his steps. A year and more had passed. He remembered Jenie and he journeyed across the desert wastes, far up into Arizona, to the green-and-gold canyon where he had deserted her. To his everlasting relief and joy he found her there, waiting for him, as she had waited a thousand and more mornings on the desert. Tappan took her to the nearest hamlet and there spent his remaining gold for an outfit. Packing her more heavily than ever before, Tappan turned his back forever on the desert and climbed up over the Rim to wander down into the shady canyons and shining parks until he happened upon Quaking-Asp Cabin. There he took up his abode for the summer and fall.

But he lingered late, loath to leave this verdant, colorful retreat, the only one that had ever wholly satisfied him.

Then one day a man on foot strode upon Tappan as he sat in his doorway. This intruder claimed to be lost and hungry. Tappan guessed him to be a bad man, hunted surely, and not to be trusted. But as Tappan now had nothing to lose he arose to take the fugitive in and feed him, hoping he would be on his way next day. But Blade, as he called himself, did not leave. He stayed, day after day, though Tappan offered to see him off with a share of his diminishing store of food. Blade feared he could not find his way out of that wilderness alone, and always he tried to persuade Tappan to go. His argument was that they must start before the snow fell. If they were snowed in there they would starve to death.

But Tappan, grown surly and resentful, stayed on, until a great howling blizzard blew down upon the park. When the storm passed there was four feet of snow on the level. Winter had set in. Tappan saw the peril he would not think of before. While waiting for a crust to harden on the snow, he fashioned snowshoes. The day came. Blade raged at Tappan's intention to take Jenie with them. He argued in vain. Then in a passion he snatched up Tappan's rifle to kill the burro.

„We'll need the meat,“ he yelled.

„Wha-at! *Eat* my burro! My Jenie!“ roared Tappan, and made at this man.

A terrific fight for the rifle ensued. Blade was big and powerful, but no match for the giant prospector. They fought to and fro in front of Quaking-Asp Cabin, trodding the snow down, while Jenie watched meekly. At last the rifle broke in their hands. Blade getting the stock and Tappan the barrel. Tappan warded off blows until he had his opening. He brained his opponent. Blade fell back in a snowbank, his boots sticking out grotesquely.

„Huh! You would eat my burro!“ Tappan grunted, and binding his wounds he strapped a tarpaulin and his meager remnant of food upon Jenie. Then on snowshoes he set out leading the burro.

Jenie's sharp little hoofs broke through the snow crust, but not all four at once. Tappan climbed up on the ridge when the crust was harder. He headed downhill. That night he ate and slept under a spruce. All day he led Jenie, plodding along, zigzagging the slopes. Night passed and another day and another night. His food gave out. Jenie nibbled at the buckbrush and other greenery. Tappan lost track of time. When the snow began to thin out and soften he put Jenie on the tarpaulin and dragged her along. Tappan passed out of the spruce, down out of the pines, down into the cedars. At sunset one day he gazed down upon the open range, bare of snow in spots. Spent and tottering, Tappan fell upon the tarpaulin and covered himself. The night down at the edge of the open desert was bitterly cold. Tappan slept. In the morning when Jenie welcomed the sunrise with a long-drawn „Hee-haw, hee-haw, heehawee,“ and waited for Tappan, he did not awaken.

„That's the way it always seemed to me,“ concluded the old backwoods storyteller. „Shore I cain't prove it all happened that way. But Blade's skeleton was found, his skull split. An' then about the same time, next summer, the riders found all the coyotes had left of Tappan. Jenie roamed that sage an' cedar range for years, wilder'n any wild deer. Men who knowed Tappan's story an' who're still livin' saw Tappan's burro after she grew wild. But I never saw her.“

„Great stuff, Babel!“ I exclaimed, shaken to my depths. „But still that's not it. That's not all. *Who* built Quaking-Asp Cabin? *What* happened there first, before all these things you tell of?“

„Wal, I reckon thar's only one man left in these parts who can tell you if anyone knows. That's old one-arm Matt Taylor. Mebbe you can get him het up to talk, like you did about the sheep war.“

After our hunt ended and we got down to the little Tonto settlement I went to call on Matt Taylor. But he was away somewhere. The following fall on the way in I tried again, with like result. Then twice during that hunt I endeavored to find Quaking-Asp Cabin, once alone, and another time with Haught's son. We failed to locate the park. All this vain oblation only whetted my appetite for that story. The longer I had to wait the bigger it loomed.

The third season after my discovery of Quaking-Asp Cabin I met a half-breed Indian, an intelligent fellow and a great hunter, and invited him to my camp. It turned out that my bear hunters had no use for him. They were jealous no doubt, as he was the most unerring rifle shot in that region, and I had taken a decided fancy to him. The fact that he had killed a couple of men and was a sort of desperado did not influence me greatly. He was the grandest fellow to hunt with that I ever had with me. He rode a mule that could hear and scent and see game quicker than any hunter—But that is another story.

This half-breed led me straight across country, over ridge and down canyon, to Quaking-Asp Cabin. Early in October the park and wooded slopes presented a glorious blend of autumn colors. It was without doubt the most idyllic and lovely spot I ever encountered in any forest.

I rode down ahead of my guide, and along the edge of the park, where isolated pines and spruce and aspens straggled out toward the open. A troop of deer

trotted away under the trees, and turned to watch me, with long ears erect. Quick as a flash I piled off my horse, and picking out a four-point buck I let him have it in the breast. Making a prodigious leap, with front feet doubled under him, he crashed down into the brush. His action indicated a mortal wound. In my hunter's excitement at downing so fine a buck, the first in two seasons, I ran forward. Coming upon him I stood my rifle against a sapling, and drawing my hunting knife I was about to step to him when he gave a bound right at me.

His hindquarters were down and he had leaped upon me on his front feet. Surprise checked me and then horror rooted me to the spot. My bullet had gone through the deer, destroying the power of his hindquarters. He presented a bloody and terrible sight. With his last power of movement he meant to kill me. All dying beasts of the wild at bay exhibit eyes almost too appalling for the gaze of man. I was sick, frozen, paralyzed. That buck lowered his sharp antlers to rip me asunder when a rifle cracked and he fell in a heap. My guide had come upon me in my predicament and had shot from his horse.

„Never go close to a dying deer!“ he admonished.

I pulled myself together, but the incident spoiled my return to Quaking-Asp Cabin. It fit in with all the rest I had felt about that lovely strange place. I rested while the Indian cut out two haunches of the deer and packed them in his slicker. Then we walked on to the cabin, leading our horses. A reluctance to enter the cabin held me back. But my guide glided around with a somber mien that struck me most singularly. It dawned upon me that he knew the place—that it meant a great deal to him—but the effect upon him was far from happy. This slowly stirred my old curiosity. My thirst for the romance or tragedy, whatever haunted the spot, returned stronger than ever.

He came at length to sit beside me in the golden shade of the aspens. For a man who was half Indian his strong face appeared less bronze than usual. Beads of sweat stood out upon his brow, and his dark eyes burned with a somber and inscrutable fire.

„Haven't been here for nigh on twenty years. Same as ever!“ he muttered, as if to himself.

„You must have been only a kid then?“ I queried, feeling my way.

„No, I was a man then... How old do you reckon me?“

„About twenty-eight, maybe thirty,“ I ventured.

„I'm close to fifty... Do you know, sir, I wouldn't have come here for any man in the world but you?“

„Indeed! Well, thanks very much, my hunter pard. I sure appreciate that,“ I replied feelingly. „But why such reluctance? It's such a wonderful place to me.“

„*I was born here,*“ he said, huskily, and hung his dark hawk-like head.

It was not that astounding information which shocked the blood back to my heart, but a flash of intuition that at last I was on the heels of the tremendous secret of Quaking-Asp Cabin.

„Born here?“ I ejaculated wonderingly. „Haught didn't tell me that.“

„He doesn't know it.“

„Oh! ... Look here... For three years I've been trying to find out all about this Quaking-Asp Cabin. Old Matt Taylor, who told me the story of *To the Last Man*, is

the only one, Haught says, who knows what happened here. I've been trying to meet him again... But, maybe now, I won't need to, if you..."

"Old Matt worked here when I was a boy. He's over eighty now and his memory is failing... I'll tell you who built this cabin—what happened in it—why a shadow hangs over it."

"You'll never be sorry," I rejoined with deep gratitude.

"I was born here—played and roamed and hunted—worked here and loved until *she* died."

"Friend, I'm primed for a great story. I've waited years. But before you start, tell me... how does it come that you speak so fluently and well, if it's true, as you told me, you're half Apache, and lived here in this wilderness till you were twenty years old?"

"Sounds queer, but it's simple enough. *Her* mother was from the East. She was educated—taught us both."

"Was *her* mother yours, too?"

"No, mine was Apache. I never was sure which of the brothers was my father. But when my heart broke and the devil came up in me and I drifted from hunter to a hard-nut cowboy, to rustler, and gunman, then I suspected my father was he—the brother who cast the evil spell over this homestead."

Then for hours this somber-eyed white Apache talked, living over the past. What he related would have filled a volume. From all he saw and heard and felt and suffered there I embodied, with the privilege and license of the writer, my own tragic tale of Quaking-Asp Cabin.

* * * * *

AMONG the passengers on the first Santa Fe train to reach Flagerstown, Arizona, in the seventies, were Richard Starke, his young wife Blue, and his brother Len. They left the train at this town because the wildness of the black timbered mountains all around appeared a refuge for an eloping girl under age and the erring brother, Len, who had fled to escape prison.

The frontier town, with its Indians and cowboys, its brawling streets and noisy gambling hells, was thrillingly new and strange to the Easterners. A vast contrast to conventional Boston! The brothers felt the leap of primitive blood and that the life of adventure they had read and dreamed of as boys was to become a reality.

Richard Starke had been ten years old when his only brother, Len, an unwanted child, had come into the world; and all of Len's nineteen years Richard had loved him, shielded him, and had at last saved the weakling from jail, if not from disgrace. Len was a handsome stripling, careless, lovable, too weak to curb bad instincts. Blue was pretty and spoiled, wild as any schoolgirl, mad with love and freedom from restraint. Richard had converted considerable property into cash, which he carried with him, and which must be carefully conserved to last for years. Long before Richard reached Flagerstown the West had called deeply to him and had claimed him forever. What life he chose must necessarily be Blue's and Len's. There they stood, then, on the wide dusty street of this unlawful frontier settlement, like so many thousands of Easterners and Southerners who had journeyed toward the setting sun, many of them keen to put their shoulders to the

wheel of empire, many of them fugitives, outcasts, adventurers, all of them a part of this great movement of an expanding people.

Richard left wife and brother at the hotel and went up to mingle with the men of Flagerstown. A stranger among a crowd of strangers, he excited no notice, and his queries were the natural ones of a newcomer. The upshot of this contact was that under cover of the darkness of the spring night he drove a team and heavily laden wagon down the lonely road to the south, headed for the wildest section of Arizona. Blue sat beside him, speechless from excitement and rapture. Len lounged at the back, dragging three horses by their halters.

In eight days' travel down toward the Tonto Basin the Starkes passed but two homesteads. The road passed through a virgin forest, its green and brown solemnity broken here and there by grassy parks, where game abounded. At last on the rim of a vast blue basin the homeseekers encountered a road, cut through the forest toward the east. They camped at that intersection, undecided whether to venture along this wild rim, or follow the main road down into this deep mountain-encompassed valley of green and gold.

A caravan of three wagons caught up with them at this camp, and the leader made friends with Richard. He said he was a Mormon and belonged to the little settlement of Pine, down in the basin. It was plain that any new homesteaders traveling this way would be welcome among the Mormons. Richard acknowledged no creed, nor did he frown upon the proselyte's kindly advances. Richard said to him, „Lead me to a secluded place deep in the wilderness. Help me build a log cabin. Sell me stock and things to plant.“

Next day the Mormon sent his wagons on, and mounting a horse he led the Starkes all day along that rim road, with the silver-green wall of forest on one side, and the ragged rim and dim blue basin on the other. This road had lately been cut through the forest by General Crook and his soldiers, in their campaign against the Apache Indians.

From that camp on the rim the guide drove Richard's wagon zigzagging down a ridge until the windfalls made further progress on wheels impossible. Then he packed the horses, except the one that Blue was to ride, and led miles and miles down into an ever-increasing wilderness of giant trees and swales and rocky fortresses, at last to come out into an open park, level as a lake, shining like a gun, dotted with wild game, and surrounded by slopes of tufted pine crests and fern-festooned cliffs. A solitude and silence such as these Easterners had not dreamed of lay heavily and sweetly upon the park.

„Here we will live!“ said Richard in deep elation.

„Oh, Dick... it's paradise!“ cried Blue.

Len gazed from a survey of the lovely spot to turn a grateful light of tear-dimmed eyes upon the brother who had saved him.

They pitched camp under the great spruce that shaded the spring. The Mormon took the rest of this day packing down the remaining supplies from the wagon. On the following morning he said, „I will go. My sons and I will fetch what you need, and cut timber and throw up your cabin and plant your grain. God abide with you here!“

The days that came passed like magic. They made a pioneer out of Richard Starke. Strong and shapely, skillfully designed and built, the homestead of yellow

peeled pine logs went up, back wall against the cliff, stone chimney rising sturdily, at length to send its column of blue smoke lazily aloft to mingle with the green foliage. The brown tilled park, rich with its many fallow years, grew green with beans and maize and cabbage and turnips, and with the orchard and vineyard transplanted from Pine. Calves bawled in the white aspen-pole pens; chickens learned to run from the shadows of swooping hawks; the bray of burros mingled with the bugle of elk.

Blue was rapturously happy despite the housewifely duties so difficult for her. Richard had encouraged an Apache family to stay and live in the canyon at the head of the park. And the Mormons left one of their number, Matthew Taylor, a young farmer and experienced hunter, to help the Starkes. Len Starke hated work and he ran wild in the woods, along the trout brooks. The frosty autumn days, with their colored falling leaves, saw Len roaming the forest with the buckskin-clad Taylor, and that season brought up the one unplumbed strong instinct in him.

When snow fell Taylor and the Indians went back down into the basin for the winter. But for the Starkes, to be snowed in meant only a climax to their adoption by the wilderness. With cords of firewood, meat hanging under the eaves, stored fruit and vegetables, books and light and warmth, they welcomed the roar of the north wind in the pines and the white drifting clouds of snow.

Winter passed and spring returned. Matt Taylor came back with the Apaches. That summer saw Letith, the daughter of the Apache squaw, develop from a child to a slim, voluptuous creature, dusky-eyed, wild as a deer, restless at her work, shy before the bold-eyed Len, ever running from him only to be pursued.

Richard worked in the fields. He had grown to love this park and cabin. His cattle had begun to multiply. He would prosper here. And as the months passed, dread of that reaching hand from out the East gradually folded its sable coat and faded away.

Another golden-scarlet Indian summer merged into white winter. At nineteen Blue had outgrown her girlish frailty. Outdoors three-fourths of the year, she had grown strong and brown and beautiful. Richard reached the summit of his fullness of joy. His sacrifice had been rewarded. Blue seemed to be changing, growing. Len was content with his lonely fishing, hunting, dreaming. The future held prospects beyond a lonely seclusion. The snow fell and melted, and again it was summer.

While Richard was absent, having gone to Pine to pack up supplies, during one of Taylor's frequent trips to the railroad, the Indian girl Letith gave birth to a baby boy. This happened in Richard's cabin, where Blue had kept the girl for her confinement. Len swore that the baby was not his. Letith did not betray him in words, but her great dusky eyes, fixed upon Len with the strange worship of the savage maiden for the white man, appeared to be conclusive evidence for Richard.

Blue repudiated his opinion with a passion that amazed him. But presently when Letith's father dragged her away, leaving the baby there, Blue took it to her heart, and seemed all at once to blossom into a woman. When Blue's daughter, Hillie, was born the following summer, Richard accepted the idea of adopting the Apache maiden's boy.

Then the threatening shadow that had revived in Richard's mind, to haunt him again with its mocking inevitableness, retreated with a subtle and welcome change

in Len. The boy seemed to be growing into a man, and up until the hunting season that year he worked hard around the ranch. What with these precious truths, and the multiplying cattle and the mounting grain, Richard was too busy working and being happy to count the months until they had grown into years. Also these same things, added to his loving faith, blinded him to what he came bitterly to learn.

One day in midautumn he was up in the woods with Matt Taylor rounding up calves that had become too numerous to brand. Something, he forgot afterward what, gave him occasion to make a short cut on foot down the slope to the park, at a point near the cabin. As he was about to emerge from the wooded slope to enter the straggling spruces and aspens he heard Blue's high sweet laughter ringing out, with a rich bell-like note he had never heard. She came in sight running, looking back, her eyes wide and dark, her breasts shaking under her thin garment. She hid behind a tent-shaped spruce that spread its lower branches on the ground. Then Len appeared, flushed of face, his hair disheveled, his eyes shooting ardent flames everywhere. He found Blue. She had only run to be pursued, only hidden to be found. Len seized her with a low exultant cry, and as he enveloped her tightly her arms slid up his shoulders to clasp round his neck. That moment, so shockingly fraught with amaze and panic, froze Richard in his tracks. And the next, when his brother's handsome rosy face bent to his wife's, and their lips came together, and she stood tense, her eyelids closed heavy and rapt, was one in which Richard's heart broke, and a horrible hell bellowed into his soul.

It was Len who broke that embrace, not Blue. She clung to him as they wended a slow way back to the cabin. The children were playing and shrieking around the door. Richard watched the lovers enter and stood stricken until he saw Blue's scarlet face flash against the blackness of the open doorway. She peered out into the park, then disappeared.

Richard plunged up the slope like a mortally wounded bull and at length slunk under a dense spread of spruce to lie like a log. When, hours or minutes later, his mind awoke to clear thought again, he saw the catastrophe. He understood then the change in Len—his staying at home, his frenzied labors, his unusual gaiety. He understood Blue's glamorous beauty, the pale glow of her face, the silver music of her laughter, the moods that alternated in her. He recalled now the look he had seen in Len's bold eyes, across the cabin room, in the firelight. He recalled his wife meeting him in the door, at his return from work, too innocent-eyed, too sweet and loving to be true. Len and Blue had fallen in love, terribly, not as boy and girl, but as man and woman.

The husband reasoned that they had only recently discovered their love, that they had just begun to surrender to the ecstasy of it, and not yet wholly and shamelessly. Richard had to save them. But how? He could not send Len adrift, after all these years of protection, to become an outcast among the vicious characters of the Basin. He would have to hide from Blue his knowledge of her duplicity, if that were possible. Still, was it duplicity? Could she help falling in love with his brother, younger, handsomer, wilder? Richard blamed himself. This was the penalty of eloping with a sentimental girl, of forcing her into womanhood. This was the price he had to pay for taking his brother from the world, which would have made him pay for his weaknesses.

Richard plodded down toward the park. It was the hour of sunset in which the golden rays of light shone down upon the manifold autumn hues with a beauty and glory that made this lovely place all-satisfying. Richard saw it once more—and saw it die and become transformed with an appalling shadow.

He changed as had the aspect of nature. He went back to the cabin with a gnawing rat in his heart, a burning jealousy, a clouded mind, all at bitter war with his better self. Blue thought he was tired; Len spoke of Matt returning alone from work, and he gave Richard a strange glance. Their gaiety went into eclipse. It never pealed out again in that cabin.

From that hour Richard confined himself to labors in the fields close at hand. He never left the park. And as the fineness of him disintegrated under this wreck of love, so the reaction upon Blue and Len was correspondingly great. The shadow deepened over that household. Len knew that his perfidy had been discovered—that he was permitted to stay on there through the incredible loyalty of his brother. He ceased to work; he roamed the forest; he lay idle and brooding under the spruce; he rode to Pine and came back smelling of rum.

Blue's bloom left her, and so did the dancing light of her violet eyes. She tried to remedy the evil, to get back to Richard, but there was a stronger will than hers at work, a power that dragged her down. Richard divined it was Len's love and Blue's mad response to it that had enslaved her. They never realized, these two misguided and fated lovers, that when Richard plodded the furrows of the fields or stood leaning on his hoe, or sat brooding before the fire at night, that he was fighting himself, his baser physical side, to beat it down and go away forever, leaving them to a possible happiness. But that was what obsessed him. Greater love hath no man! This was triumphing in Richard's soul.

One day in early fall he had gone to the upper end of the park, taking his shotgun with him to kill a grouse or wild turkey. Len had gone hunting early that morning. Taylor was picking beans with Hillie and the Indian boy Starke. Richard avoided passing them. Of late the Mormon had watched him with covert sympathy.

In the aspen swale where the park converged there was a huge pile of dead hardwood that Richard had snaked down to chop up for winter cooking fires. Day after day he had labored at this task, finding mental relief in physical violence. But today, which was to see the fruition of his struggle, he never lifted up the ax. For hours he sat in the melancholy forest, his soul naked to his inner gaze. All around him were the amber and purple blaze of leaves, the passing brown rumps of elk, the frisky gray squirrels, the drumming grouse and scratching turkeys, to which sights and sounds he was oblivious.

Toward sundown he arose like a giant casting off a burden and bent his stride toward the distant cabin, with his mind made up. He would give Blue to his brother with enough money for them to make a new start in life, far away somewhere. But the mother must part with Hillie.

The trail kept to the straggling spruce and pine trees along the edge of the park. Richard had not gone far when a rustling in the brush reminded him that he had not thought of the meat Blue had importuned him to hunt.

His quick glance caught a movement of parting leaves. Then not ten steps distant he saw two round black holes, and he looked along the brown barrels of a shotgun, into eyes that blazed murderous hate and hell. Len!

The gun belched smoke and fire. A terrific shock knocked Richard flat and his ears clapped with a crash. His faculties sustained a stunning check, but instantly rallied. He lay still, expecting his brother to emerge from the brush to see if he was dead. He heard rustlings and retreating steps.

Richard's effort to sit up ended in a fall. He had tried to use his right arm. It had been blown off with part of his shoulder. Blood poured down his side in a red deluge. He feared part of his lung had been shot away. Something hot and salty welled up into his mouth.

Using his left arm, he got to his knees and began to crawl along the trail toward the cabin. He met the imminence of death with an appalling supremacy of spirit. He would not die. He would face this perfidious brother who had meant to destroy him. He must look into Blue's eyes to see if she was a party to this lecherous crime. On he crawled, and the colored maple leaves along the trail were the redder for his passing. He reached the corner of the cabin and struggled erect, holding to the logs. Children's mirth struck Richard incongruously. Taylor at the woodpile with ax aloft saw him and stiffened. Richard got to the door—held to the lintel.

Blue appeared inside, her face set, white, strained. Her starting eyes saw first his bloody boots—traveled upward—over his dripping garments—to the gory side with its missing sleeve and arm. They met Richard's gaze. Conscious and insupportable truth gleamed in them. They betrayed the intelligence that he was not dead, but alive. Then they protruded and fixed in horror. She shrieked and fell back into the cabin.

Richard staggered inside. As he lurched for the chair his hand left a perfect crimson imprint upon the yellow stone over the fireplace. Then Taylor rushed in, panting, mute with fright.

„Shot—myself,“ gasped Richard, and strangling, he succumbed to faintness.

When he recovered consciousness he found himself on the couch along the wall where the light from the door fell. Either his body was bound so tightly that he could scarcely breathe or the excruciating agony made it feel so. Matt Taylor knelt beside him, feeling his pulse.

„Dick,“ he said hoarsely. „I reckon you'll die—pronto.“

Richard's lips framed an almost inaudible „No!“

„Your arm's gone—shoulder—top of your lung! Man, tell me what to do when—when—“

„Matt... I'll... not die.“

„I hope not. But I reckon you will. Did all I could, Dick... Listen, man! What'll I tell—do? ... I trailed you—found your gun. It hadn't been fired!“

„Tell—do—nothing.“

„Ahuh!“ The Mormon's dark and grim glance rested wonderingly upon Richard. „Shall I pray for you?“

„Yes—that—I live.“

This religious Mormon bowed his head over Richard and prayed in husky fervid whisper, the last of which grew intelligible: „And damn their cursed souls to hell!“

„Yes!“ whispered Richard, echoing that in his own soul. „Where—are they?“

„Outside. Waiting for me to tell them you’ve passed on.“

„Matt—stay by me,,, Give me whiskey—water... I shall not die!“

Richard knew that nights and days passed, because his consciousness registered light and dark through his closed eyelids. His senses were in the grip of a transcendent and superhuman will. He refused to die. His mind must conquer his body. A terrible and insupportable revenge upon these traitors would be to live. Agony was nothing. Time was nothing. Love would have let him die. But hate would save his life.

The days passed. If Richard could have looked at himself lying prostrate there he would not have seen any perceptible improvement in his condition, but his inward eye told him differently. His spirit swore and his mind believed that it had known beforehand he could have been killed outright and yet would have come back to life.

Often he felt the children near him, and the time came when he opened his eyes and whispered to them. Violet-eyed Hillie, with her curly nut-brown hair, was six years old. The Apache boy Starke, Len’s son, was seven, a tall lad, inscrutable, fated to tragedy. They both were that. Richard could not resurrect the love he had felt for his little girl.

But when Blue was in the cabin Richard never opened his eyes. Often he heard her and Len whispering outside. They were waiting for him to die.

One night in the gloaming at the end of this belated fall, when the children were asleep, the low voices of the lovers floated to Richard on the still air.

„Matt says Dick will live.“

„Oh, I hope to God he will, but I fear he won’t,“ cried Blue poignantly.

„I can’t stay here longer, Blue... I’m tortured.“

„You are tortured! For God’s sake, what am I?“

„Let us run away, Blue. You can’t stand it either. When you come out of this cabin you look like—like death...“

„Yes. Death! There is death in there. All that Dick was! Love, home, child, happiness—dead!“

„But it’s too late, Blue... We might find those things—somewhere—after we forgot... Come. Let’s take Hillie and go.“

„Oh, how can you? ... Len, I loved you—love you still. I gave you the best of me—what he never had. I share your guilt... Oh, God—help me! My eyes were wide open. If Dick had died I’d have been his murderer, equally with you... But now—it’s all different. While he lives I must stay here—and suffer—and work my fingers to the bone for him... and never dare to look him in the face again!“

„What will become of me?“

„That doesn’t matter, any more than what becomes of me. Go away. Leave me peace in retribution... But if you have any manhood, you will let this terrible deed—this fruit of our passion—be a turning point in your life.“

„Manhood! Am I my brother’s keeper? I want you, Blue. You, my woman, else I’ll go to hell!“

„Len, if you stayed here, you’d make me loathe you. Leave—while I still love you! Leave me to give my life to him.“

„I’ll go, you white-livered cheat!“ he cried in bitter passion. „It’s the end. I knew—I always knew this lonely hole would be our ruin. We were not savages. But

we became savages—like that bastard son of mine in there... This wilderness cabin is accursed. If it were not cursed by nature, by a primitive something as raw as these yellow logs we threw up, then I cursed it—my crooked, rotten, selfish self—and you cursed it—with your pretense of wifhood and motherhood—with your damned sweet lure—with the female in you that couldn't be satisfied... Good-by, Blue Starke!

* * * * *

MATT TAYLOR stayed at the cabin until winter set in and then went out on snowshoes. Richard lay on his couch, sleeping, mending, his mind warped in one narrow orbit. He never spoke to Blue—never looked at her when she might observe it. But he saw her carry water, chop wood, bake and cook and mend, and use what hours these tasks left her to teach the children. What little communication there was between her and him was carried by Hillie, and sometimes by Starke. The Indian boy revealed a somber affection for Richard, and through that long solemn winter Hillie grew to worship him. Richard saw this, marveled that it made no change in him. But he was dead to all save hate. He survived to make this woman suffer, and the days were as moments.

Spring came, and with it Matt Taylor with a pack train of supplies. He said his prayers had been answered. That summer Richard arose from his couch to walk about, a shell of a man, ghastly of visage, marvelously and imperceptibly gaining.

Summer and fall went by, and winter, similar to the preceding one, except that Richard read and brooded before the fire. There was never a moment, waking or sleeping, in which he was not conscious of the tragic presence of his wife. She seemed sustained, too, by a spirit that neither hard work nor misery could break. The measure of her sin was a faithfulness and repentance that came too late. Her beauty augmented, but it was no longer the bloom and freshness of a girl. At twenty-five all that she had lived, all the havoc she had wrought, all the soul that anguish had burned to gold, showed under the marble of her face, in the terror of wide-open, staring eyes.

When planting season came again Blue worked in the fields, with Hillie and Starke to help. They were springing up like the weeds they had to pull. Taylor came once more with supplies, for which this time he received no recompense. During the succeeding years he visited the cabin every summer, as if the place haunted him, as he said it haunted Len Starke. It was rumored, Taylor said, that Len lived in the forest like an Indian, and cattlemen of the Tonto called him hard names. More than once he had been seen by riders in the vicinity of Quaking-Asp Cabin, by which Richard's home had become known. It was conceivable that the man found an irresistible urge to return to the scene of his great crime, to take a hidden look at the spot which had so fatally influenced his life. Richard did not allow Matt to tell Blue of Len's visits, and in his own mind he sustained a surprise that Len showed character enough to make them. Blue should have no sympathy. There might have been solace in the proof of Len's remembrance, perhaps in the thought that he wanted to see her.

Then Matt Taylor did not visit the park for five years. Sometimes forest riders rode down and in the fall hunters blundered in there, or came out of curiosity. Richard saw that the mystery of Quaking-Asp Cabin was guessed at if not known.

His cattle were rustled or they wandered down into the dense thickets and canyons to be killed by lions and bears, or to become as wild as the beasts that preyed upon them. The once fertile fields of maize and beans returned to grass and weeds again. Richard, like a ghost of his old self, worked desultorily in the little garden that Blue, with Hillie and Starke, planted each summer. Prosperity had long departed and poverty came in the gloomy cabin door.

The Mormon friend rode down again, after his long absence, and stayed in the park awhile. But it was evident that despite his interest in Richard and Blue, and his affection for Hillie and Starke, he could not endure to stay long.

The white winters succeeded the brown autumns, as the summers fled on the heels of spring. Such was the peculiarity of Richard's malady that he did not see the swift flight of time, nor the development of the children. He saw only this woman who had laid waste his heart and his life; and in proportion to the wretchedness she evinced, his vitality survived.

In the spring of the tenth year after the catastrophe, Hillie died. This thing wedged thought and feeling and realization into the almost impenetrable sepulcher of Richard's mind. Death, in a strange flash, brought back his love for his child. She had grown to be a frail girl of sixteen, lovely as one of the columbines under the cliff, and like them shadowed by the mystery of Quaking-Asp Cabin. She had never known the secret of her father's deadness to her worship. He divined now, with terror gathering in a heart which had harbored only hate, that his insane passion for revenge had struck the child of the mother down.

All at once he saw Starke, a fine upstanding lad who adored Hillie, as the one to whom his starved heart had gone. And the Apache, stony-faced and sloe-eyed over her grave, buried his heart there, and left the homestead without farewell to the couple who had raised him. Richard never saw him again.

Richard was left alone with Blue. And hate, the fierce consumer, turned to ashes. It died without a flicker. Perhaps for long it had been unconsciously cooling. But the habit of silence abided with him. At the moment of death he could forgive Blue and Len. And he had strange inward tremors and loosening, as if the knotted cords of life had been untied. His hate, his passion might have kept him alive indefinitely. But these had perished and he saw himself as hideous of soul as he was deformed in body. If he relinquished this hold on life he would not last long.

When Matt came up again that spring Richard took him out to Hillie's grave, which was near the babbling brook, out of sight of the cabin. The Mormon did not hide his grief.

„Gone—that lovely child—without love or God!“ he exclaimed at length. „Dick, you failed in fatherhood.... And Blue will be next to go.“

„Friend, if I had it to live over... but no matter. I am a broken vessel... Do you ever see my brother?“

„Only seldom. But I can find him if you—“

„Fetch him, Matt. Then your loyal service to me will be ended. It bears this fruit. I shall ask you to pray to your God, as you prayed over me ten years ago, for mercy in the beyond.“

Richard's decision seemed a letting go of the terrible force that had sustained him. If he let go utterly he knew that would be the end. He bade the Mormon depart and make haste on his errand.

That night, when the early twilight of autumn darkened the park, Richard looked out of the door. There were deer grazing with the cows. Frost breathed down from the heights. The moan of the pines, eternal it seemed to him, spoke of the long years, the travail, the end, the ways of the inscrutable. It was good that this lovely park and Quaking-Asp Cabin should go back to the wild. He would invest them with the shadow that had hovered over him, and which would deny this place to an abiding love of men.

Richard turned away from the door. Blue had just put a light upon the table, which was her mute signal that his supper was ready. But he approached his old armchair and sank into it.

„Blue!“ How strange—how hollow—mocking—the sound of that name on his lips—the first time in ten years! „I shall not eat tonight... Come here.“

She fell upon her knees beside him, and her hands like steel, clutched at his one arm.

„I have sent Matt to fetch Len.“

„Oh, my—God!“ and the strength to go on seemed shaken out of her. White as it would ever be, her face dropped to his shoulder.

„I forgive you, Blue—and him. I should have forgiven long ago. But jealousy and hate have the power of hell... I might not last till he comes. For I have let go—and the fire that heated my heart is growing cold... Tell him what I say... And this I leave you—not my wish, but my due—that you go away from Quaking-Asp forever. My doom has fallen upon it... See that bloody hand—there on the chimney stone? By that Len marked this cabin—and I have fostered the shadow. It would blight any lives here—much more yours and Len's—who still have your great battle. If he has repented, as you have, my Blue, then there surely will be... But if he has sunk low—lift him up. He had a terrible strength of love for you... There is money left that I hoarded—enough for you to go far away—as we all did once before—and begin life—over again.“

All day Richard had sat in his chair as if holding on to a taut and stretching cord, waiting for the clip-clap of hoofs. Blue flitted to and fro in the calm—silent, hovering back of him, peering out the door. In the silence he could hear her heart beat. But he could not even feel his own. Dusk stole in at the door and with it a cool sweet tang of the pines and the smell of burning leaves. That dusk darkened the room, accentuating the flickering sparks of the hearth. Or was it the creeping shadow that had darkened his mind? The old phantasms trooped back, detached, illusive. And on the moment when Blue's poignant cry rang out and the beat of hoofs pierced Richard's ear, a darkness came before his eyes to obliterate the mark of a spread hand on the chimney stone. And he thought it presaged the mantle of time—the generous years—the alchemy that had worked in him—the thing which lifted his failing heart to piercing gladness at the sound of the hoofbeats coming—faintly—fainter—lost.



