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THE MAJOR IN THE MOUNTAINS

THE quivering heat of August was giving way and the golden peace of autumn was spreading through the land. The breath of mountain-woods by day was as cool as the breath of valleys at night. In the mountains, boy and girl were leaving school for work in the fields, and from the Cumberland foothills to the Ohio, boy and girl were leaving happy holidays for school. Along a rough, rocky road and down a shining river, now sunk to deep pools with trickling riffles between—for a drouth was on the land—rode a tall, gaunt man on an old brown mare that switched with her tail now and then at a long-legged, rough-haired colt stumbling awkwardly behind. Where the road turned from the river and up the mountain, the man did a peculiar thing, for there, in that lonely wilderness, he stopped, dismounted, tied the reins to an overhanging branch and, leaving mare and colt behind, strode up the mountain, on and on, disappearing over the top. Half an hour later, a sturdy youth hove in sight, trudging along the same road with his cap in his hand, a long rifle over one

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shoulder and a dog trotting at his heels. Now and then the boy would look back and scold the dog and the dog would drop his muzzle with shame, until the boy stooped to pat him on the head, when he would leap frisking before him, until another affectionate scolding was due. The old mare turned her head when she heard them coming, and nickered. Without a moment's hesitation the lad untied her, mounted and rode up the mountain. For two days the man and the boy had been "riding and tying," as this way of travel for two men and one horse is still known in the hills, and over the mountain, they were to come together for the night. At the foot of the spur on the other side, boy and dog came upon the tall man sprawled at full length across a moss-covered boulder. The dog dropped behind, but the man's quick eye caught him:

"Where'd that dog come from, Chad?" Jack put his belly to the earth and crawled slowly forward—penitent, but determined.

"He broke loose, I reckon. He come tearin' up behind me 'bout an hour ago, like a house afire. Let him go." Caleb Hazel frowned.

"I told you, Chad, that we'd have no place to keep him."

"Well, we can send him home as easy from up thar as we can from hyeh—let him go."

"All right!" Chad understood not a whit better than the dog: for Jack leaped to his feet and

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jumped around the school-master, trying to lick his hands, but the school-master was absorbed and would none of him. There, the mountain-path turned into a wagon-road and the school-master pointed with one finger.

"Do you know what that is, Chad?"

"No, sir." Chad said "sir" to the school-master now.

"Well, that's"—the school-master paused to give his words effect—"that's the old Wilderness Road."

Ah, did he not know the old, old Wilderness Road! The boy gripped his rifle unconsciously, as though there might yet be a savage lying in ambush in some covert of rhododendron close by. And, as they trudged ahead, side by side now, for it was growing late, the school-master told him, as often before, the story of that road and the pioneers who had trod it—the hunters, adventurers, emigrants, fine ladies and fine gentlemen who had stained it with their blood; and how that road had broadened into the mighty way for a great civilization from sea to sea. The lad could see it all, as he listened, wishing that he had lived in those stirring days, never dreaming in how little was he of different mould from the stout-hearted pioneers who beat out the path with their moccasined feet; how little less full of danger were his own days to be; how little different had been his own life, and was his pur-

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pose now—how little different after all was the bourn to which his own restless feet were bearing him.

Chad had changed a good deal since that night after Jack's trial, when the kind-hearted old Major had turned up at Joel's cabin to take him back to the Bluegrass. He was taller, broader at shoulder, deeper of chest; his mouth and eyes were prematurely grave from much brooding and looked a little defiant, as though the boy expected hostility from the world and was prepared to meet it, but there was no bitterness in them, and luminous about the lad was the old atmosphere of brave, sunny cheer and simple self-trust that won people to him.

The Major and old Joel had talked late that night after Jack's trial. The Major had come down to find out who Chad was, if possible, and to take him back home, no matter who he might be. The old hunter looked long into the fire.

"Co'se I know hit 'ud be better fer Chad, but, Lawd, how we'd hate to give him up. Still, I reckon I'll have to let him go, but I can stand hit better, if you can git him to leave Jack hyeh." The Major smiled. Did old Joel know where Nathan Cherry lived? The old hunter did. Nathan was a "damned old skinflint who lived across the mountain on Stone Creek—who stole other folks' farms and if he knew anything about Chad the old hunter would squeeze it out of his throat; and if old

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Nathan, learning where Chad now was, tried to pester him he would break every bone in the skin-flint's body." So the Major and old Joel rode over next day to see Nathan, and Nathan with his shifting eyes told them Chad's story in a high, cracked voice that, recalling Chad's imitation of it, made the Major laugh. Chad was a foundling, Nathan said: his mother was dead and his father had gone off to the Mexican War and never come back: he had taken the mother in himself and Chad had been born in his own house, when he lived farther up the river, and the boy had begun to run away as soon as he was old enough to toddle. And with each sentence Nathan would call for confirmation on a silent, dark-faced daughter who sat inside: "Didn't he, Betsy?" or "Wasn't he, gal?" And the girl would nod sullenly, but say nothing. It seemed a hopeless mission except that, on the way back, the Major learned that there were one or two Bufords living down the Cumberland, and like old Joel, shook his head over Nathan's pharisaical philanthropy to a homeless boy and wondered what the motive under it was—but he went back with the old hunter and tried to get Chad to go home with him. The boy was rock-firm in his refusal.

"I'm obleeged to you, Major, but I reckon I better stay in the mountains." That was all Chad would say, and at last the Major gave up and rode back over the mountain and down the Cumberland

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alone, still on his quest. At a blacksmith's shop far down the river he found a man who had "heerd tell of a Chad Buford who had been killed in the Mexican War and whose daddy lived 'bout fifteen mile down the river." The Major found that Buford dead, but an old woman told him his name was Chad, that he had "fit in the War o' 1812 when he was nothin' but a chunk of a boy, and that his daddy, whose name, too, was Chad, had been killed by Injuns some'eres aroun' Cumberland Gap." By this time the Major was as keen as a hound on the scent, and, in a cabin at the foot of the sheer gray wall that crumbles into the Gap, he had the amazing luck to find an octogenarian with an unclouded memory who could recollect a queer-looking old man who had been killed by Indians—"a ole feller with the curiosest hair I ever did see," added the patriarch. His name was Colonel Buford, and the old man knew where he was buried, for he himself was old enough at the time to help bury him. Greatly excited, the Major hired mountaineers to dig into the little hill that the old man pointed out, on which there was, however, no sign of a grave, and, at last, they uncovered the skeleton of an old gentleman in a wig and peruke! There was little doubt now that the boy, no matter what the blot on his 'scutcheon, was of his own flesh and blood, and the Major was tempted to go back at once for him, but it was a long way, and he was

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ill and anxious to get back home. So he took the Wilderness Road for the Bluegrass, and wrote old Joel the facts and asked him to send Chad to him whenever he would come. But the boy would not go. There was no definite reason in his mind. It was a stubborn instinct merely—the instinct of pride, of stubborn independence—of shame that festered in his soul like a hornet's sting. Even Melissa urged him. She never tired of hearing Chad tell about the Bluegrass country, and when she knew that the Major wanted him to go back, she followed him out in the yard that night and found him on the fence whittling. A red star was sinking behind the mountains. "Why won't you go back no more, Chad?" she said.

"Cause I hain't got no daddy er mammy." Then Melissa startled him.

"Well, I'd go—an' I hain't got no daddy er mammy." Chad stopped his whittling.

"Whut'd you say, Lissy?" he asked, gravely.

Melissa was frightened—the boy looked so serious.

"Cross yo' heart an' body that you won't *nuver* tell *no* body." Chad crossed.

"Well, mammy said I mustn't ever tell nobody—but I *hain't* got no daddy er mammy. I heerd her a-tellin' the school-teacher." And the little girl shook her head over her frightful crime of disobedience.

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"You *hain't*?"

"I *hain't*!"

Melissa, too, was a waif, and Chad looked at her with a wave of new affection and pity.

"Now, why won't you go back just because you hain't got no daddy an' mammy?"

Chad hesitated. There was no use making Melissa unhappy.

"Oh, I'd just ruther stay hyeh in the mountains," he said, carelessly—lying suddenly like the little gentleman that he was—lying as he knew, and as Melissa some day would come to know. Then Chad looked at the little girl a long while, and in such a queer way that Melissa turned her face shyly to the red star.

"I'm goin' to stay right hyeh. Ain't you glad, Lissy?"

The little girl turned her eyes shyly back again. "Yes, Chad," she said.

He would stay in the mountains and work hard; and when he grew up he would marry Melissa and they would go away where nobody knew him or her: or they would stay right there in the mountains where nobody blamed him for what he was nor Melissa for what she was; and he would study law like Caleb Hazel, and go to the Legislature—but Melissa! And with the thought of Melissa in the mountains came always the thought of dainty Margaret in the Bluegrass and the chasm that lay

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between the two—between Margaret and him, for that matter; and when Mother Turner called Melissa from him in the orchard next day, Chad lay on his back under an apple-tree, for a long while, thinking; and then he whistled for Jack and climbed the spur above the river where he could look down on the shadowed water and out to the clouded heaps of rose and green and crimson, where the sun was going down under one faint white star. Melissa was the glow-worm that, when darkness came, would be a watch-fire at his feet—Margaret, the star to which his eyes were lifted night and day—and so runs the world. He lay long watching that star. It hung almost over the world of which he had dreamed so long and upon which he had turned his back forever. Forever? Perhaps, but he went back home that night with a trouble in his soul that was not to pass, and while he sat by the fire he awoke from the same dream to find Melissa's big eyes fixed on him, and in them was a vague trouble that was more than his own reflected back to him.

Still the boy went back sturdily to his old life, working in the fields, busy about the house and stable, going to school, reading and studying with the school-master at nights, and wandering in the woods with Jack and his rifle. And he hungered for spring to come again when he should go with the Turner boys to take another raft of logs down the river to the capital. Spring came, and going

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out to the back pasture one morning, Chad found a long-legged, ungainly creature stumbling awkwardly about his old mare—a colt! That, too, he owed the Major, and he would have burst with pride had he known that the colt's sire was a famous stallion in the Bluegrass. That spring he did go down the river again. He did not let the Major know he was coming and, through a nameless shyness, he could not bring himself to go to see his old friend and kinsman, but in Lexington, while he and the school-master were standing on Cheapside, the Major whirled around a corner on them in his carriage, and, as on the turnpike a year before, old Tom, the driver, called out:

“Look dar, Mars Cal!” And there stood Chad.

“Why, bless my soul! Chad—why, boy! How you have grown!” For Chad had grown, and his face was curiously aged and thoughtful. The Major insisted on taking him home, and the school-master, too, who went reluctantly. Miss Lucy was there, looking whiter and more fragile than ever, and she greeted Chad with a sweet kindness that took the sting from his unjust remembrance of her. And what that failure to understand her must have been Chad better knew when he saw the embarrassed awe, in her presence, of the school-master, for whom all in the mountains had so much reverence. At the table was Thanky-ma'am waiting. Around the quarters and the sta-

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ble the pickaninnies and servants seemed to remember the boy in a kindly genuine way that touched him, and even Jerome Conners, the overseer, seemed glad to see him. The Major was drawn at once to the grave school-master, and he had a long talk with him that night. It was no use, Caleb Hazel said, trying to persuade the boy to live with the Major—not yet. And the Major was more content when he came to know in what good hands the boy was, and, down in his heart, he loved the lad the more for his sturdy independence, and for the pride that made him shrink from facing the world with the shame of his birth; knowing that Chad thought of him perhaps more than of himself. Such unwillingness to give others trouble seemed remarkable in so young a lad. Not once did the Major mention the Deans to the boy, and about them Chad asked no questions—not even when he saw their carriage passing the Major's gate. When they came to leave the Major said:

“Well, Chad, when that filly of yours is a year old, I'll buy 'em both from you, if you'll sell 'em, and I reckon you can come up and go to school then.”

Chad shook his head. Sell that colt? He would as soon have thought of selling Jack. But the temptation took root, just the same, then and there, and grew steadily until, after another year in the mountains, it grew too strong. For, in that year, Chad grew to look the fact of his birth

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steadily in the face, and in his heart grew steadily a proud resolution to make his way in the world despite it. It was curious how Melissa came to know the struggle that was going on within him and how Chad came to know that she knew—though no word passed between them: more curious still, how it came with a shock to Chad one day to realize how little was the tragedy of his life in comparison with the tragedy in hers, and to learn that the little girl with swift vision had already reached that truth and with sweet unselfishness had reconciled herself. He was a boy—he could go out in the world and conquer it, while her life was as rigid and straight before her as though it ran between close walls of rock as steep and sheer as the cliff across the river. One thing he never guessed—what it cost the little girl to support him bravely in his purpose, and to stand with smiling face when the first breath of one sombre autumn stole through the hills, and Chad and the school-master left the Turner home for the Bluegrass, this time to stay.

She stood in the doorway after they had waved good-by from the bend of the river—the smile gone and her face in a sudden dark eclipse. The wise old mother went in-doors. Once the girl started through the yard as though she would rush after them and stopped at the gate, clinching it hard with both hands. As suddenly she became quiet.

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She went in-doors to her work and worked quietly and without a word. Thus she did all day while her mind and her heart ached. When she went after the cows before sunset she stopped at the barn where Beelzebub had been tied. She lifted her eyes to the hay-loft where she and Chad had hunted for hens' eggs and played hide-and-seek. She passed through the orchard where they had worked and played so many happy hours, and on to the back pasture where the Dillon sheep had been killed and she had kept the Sheriff from shooting Jack. And she saw and noted everything with a piteous pain and dry eyes. But she gave no sign that night, and not until she was in bed did she with covered head give way. Then the bed shook with her smothered sobs. This is the sad way with women. After the way of men, Chad proudly marched the old Wilderness Road that led to a big, bright, beautiful world where one had but to do and dare to reach the stars. The men who had trod that road had made that big world beyond, and their life Chad himself had lived so far. Only, where they had lived he had been born—in a log-cabin. Their weapons—the axe and the rifle—had been his. He had had the same fight with Nature as they. He knew as well as they what life in the woods in "a half-faced camp" was. Their rude sports and pastimes, their log-rollings, house-raisings, quilting parties, corn-huskings, feats of

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strength, had been his. He had the same lynx eyes, cool courage, swiftness of foot, readiness of resource that had been trained into them. His heart was as stout and his life as simple and pure. He was taking their path and, in the far West, beyond the Bluegrass world where he was going, he could, if he pleased, take up the same life at the precise point where they had left off. At sunset, Chad and the school-master stood on the summit of the Cumberland foothills and looked over the rolling land with little less of a thrill, doubtless, than the first hunters felt when the land before them was as much a wilderness as the wilds through which they had made their way. Below them a farmhouse shrank half out of sight into a little hollow, and toward it they went down.

The outside world had moved swiftly during the two years that they had been buried in the hills as they learned at the farm-house that night. Already the national storm was threatening, the air was electrically charged with alarms, and already here and there the lightning had flashed. The underground railway was busy with black freight, and John Brown, fanatic, was boldly lifting his shaggy head. Old Brutus Dean was even publishing an abolitionist paper at Lexington, the aristocratic heart of the State. He was making abolition speeches throughout the Bluegrass with a dagger thrust in the table before him—shaking

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his black mane and roaring defiance like a lion. The news thrilled Chad unaccountably, as did the shadow of any danger, but it threw the school-master into gloom. There was more. A dark little man by the name of Douglas and a sinewy giant by the name of Lincoln were thrilling the West. Phillips and Garrison were thundering in Massachusetts, and fiery tongues in the South were flashing back scornful challenges and threats that would imperil a nation. An invisible air-line shot suddenly between the North and the South, destined to drop some day and lie a dead-line on the earth, and on each side of it two hordes of brothers, who thought themselves two hostile peoples, were shrinking away from each other with the half-conscious purpose of making ready for a charge. In no other State in the Union was the fratricidal character of the coming war to be so marked as in Kentucky, in no other State was the national drama to be so fully played to the bitter end.

That night even, Brutus Dean was going to speak near by, and Chad and Caleb Hazel went to hear him. The fierce abolitionist first placed a Bible before him.

"This is for those who believe in religion," he said; then a copy of the Constitution: "this for those who believe in the laws and in freedom of speech. And this," he thundered, driving a dagger into the table and leaving it to quiver there, "is

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for the rest!" Then he went on and no man dared to interrupt.

And only next day came the rush of wind that heralds the storm. Just outside of Lexington Chad and the school-master left the mare and colt at a farm-house and with Jack went into town on foot. It was Saturday afternoon, the town was full of people, and an excited crowd was pressing along Main Street toward Cheapside. The man and the boy followed eagerly. Cheapside was thronged—thickest around a frame building that bore a newspaper sign on which was the name of Brutus Dean. A man dashed from a hardware store with an axe, followed by several others with heavy hammers in their hands. One swing of the axe, the door was crashed open and the crowd went in like wolves. Shattered windows, sashes and all, flew out into the street, followed by showers of type, chair-legs, table-tops, and then, piece by piece, the battered cogs, wheels, and forms of a printing-press. The crowd made little noise. In fifteen minutes the house was a shell with gaping windows, surrounded with a pile of chaotic rubbish, and the men who had done the work quietly disappeared. Chad looked at the school-master for the first time—neither of them had uttered a word. The school-master's face was white with anger, his hands were clinched, and his eyes were so fierce and burning that the boy was frightened.