The Call of the Cumberlands

By Charles Neville Buck

With Illustrations from Photographs of Scenes in the Play

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SYNOPSIS.

On Misery creek, at the foot of a rock from which he has fallen, Sally Miller finds George Lescott, a handsome painter, unconscious, and after reviving him, goes for assistance. Samson South and Sally, taking Lescott to Samson's home, are met by Spicer South, head of the family, who tells them that Jesse Purvy has been shot and that Samson is suspected of the crime. Samson denies it. The shooting of Jesse Purvy breaks the truce in the Holiman-South feud.

CHAPTER IV—Continued.

He sauntered down the road, but, when he had passed out of vision, he turned sharply into the woods, and began climbing. His steps carried him to the rift in the ridge where the white oak stood sentinel over the watch tower of rock. As he came over the edge from one side his bare feet making no sound, he saw Sally sitting there, with her hands resting on the moss and her eyes deeply troubled. She was gazing fixedly ahead, and her lips were trembling. At once Samson's face grew black. Some one had been making Sally unhappy. Then he saw beyond her a standing figure, which the tree trunk had hitherto concealed. It was the loose-knitted figure of young Tamarack Spicer.

"Spicer-scrape," Spicer was saying, "we don't low Samson shot Jesse Purvy, but them Holimans I'l 'spicion him, an' I heered just now thet them dawgs was trackin' straight up hyar from the mouth of Misery. They'll git 'hyar against sundown."

Samson leaped violently forward. With one hand he roughly seized his cousin's shoulder and wheeled him about.

"Shet up!" he commanded. "What d——d fool stuff hev ye been tellin' Sally?"

For an instant the two clansmen stood fronting each other. Samson's face was set and wrathful. Tamarack's was surly and snarling. "Hain't I got a'licensе ter tell Sally the news?" he demanded.

"Nobody hain't got no license," retorted the younger man in the quiet of cold anger, "ter tell Sally nothin' thet'll fret her."

"She air bound ter know hit all pretty soon. Them dawgs——"

"Didn't I tell ye ter shet up?" Samson clenched his fists, and took a step forward. "Ef ye opens yore mouth again, I'm a-goin' fer smash hit. Now, git!"

Tamarack Spicer's face blackened, and his teeth showed. His right hand swept to his left arm-pit. Outwardly he seemed weaponless, but Samson knew that concealed beneath the hickory shirt was a holster, worn mountain fashion.

"What air ye a-reachin' after, Tam'rack?" he inquired, his lips twisting in amusement.

"Thet's my business."

"Well, git hit out—or git out yeself, afore I throws ye offen the clift."

Sally showed no symptoms of alarm. Her confidence in her hero was absolute. The boy lifted his hand, and pointed off down the path. Slowly and with incoherent muttering, Spicer took himself away. Then only did Sally rise. She came on, and laid a hand on Samson's shoulder. In her blue eyes, the tears were welling.

"Samson," she whispered, "ef they're after ye, come ter my house. I kin hide ye out. Why didn't ye tell me Jesse Jarrey'd done been shot?"

"Hit tain't nothin' ter fret about, Sally," he assured her. He spoke awkwardly, for he had been trained to regard emotion as unmanly. "Thar hain't no danger."

She gazed searchingly into his eyes, and then, with a short sob, threw her arms around him, and buried her face on his shoulder.

"Ef anything happens ter ye, Samson," she said, brokenly, "hit'll jest kill me. I couldn't live withouten ye, Samson. I jest couldn't do hit!"

The boy took her in his arms, and pressed her close. His eyes were gazing off over her bent head, and his lips twitched. He drew his features into a scowl, because that was the only expression with which he could safeguard his feelings. His voice was husky.

"I reckon, Sally," he said, "I couldn't live withouten you, neither."

The party of men who had started at morning from Jesse Purvy's store had spent a hard day. The roads followed creek-beds, crossing and recrossing waterways in a fashion that gave the bloodhounds a hundred baffling difficulties. Often, their noses lost the trail, which had at first been so surely taken. Often, they circled and whined, and halted in perplexity, but each time they came to a point where, at the end, one of them again raised his muzzle skyward, and gave voice.

Toward evening, they were working up Misery along a course less broken. The party halted for a moment's rest, and, as the bottle was passed, the man from Lexington, who had brought the dogs and stayed to conduct the chase, put a question.

"What do you call this creek?"

"Hit's Misery."

"Does anybody live on Misery that——or that you might suspect?"

The Holimans laughed.

"This creek is settled with Souths thicker'n hops."

The Lexington man looked up. He knew what the name of South meant to a Holiman.

"Is there any special South who might have a particular grudge?"

"The Souths don't need no hurt'lar grudge, but thar's young Samson South. He's a wildcat."

"He lives this way?"

"These dogs of a-makin' a bee-line fur his house," a Holiman who was speaking. Then he added: "I've done been told that Samson denies doin' the shootin', an' claims he kin prove an alibi."

The Lexington man lighted his pipe, and poured a drink of red whisky into a flask cup.

"Well, be apt to say that," he commented. "These dogs haven't any prejudice in the matter. I'll stake my life on their telling the truth."

An hour later, the group halted again. The master of hounds mopped his forehead.

"Are we still going toward Samson South's house?" he inquired.

"We're about a quarter from hit now, an' we hain't never varied from the straight road."

"Will they be apt to give us trouble?"

Jim Holiman smiled.

"I hain't never heered of no South submittin' ter arrest by a Holiman."

The trailers examined their rifle-arms, and loosened their holster-flaps. The dogs went forward at a trot.

CHAPTER V.

From time to time that day, neighbors had ridded up to Spicer South's cattle, and drawn rein for gossip. These men brought bulletins as to the progress of the hounds, and near sundown, as a postscript to their information, a volley of gunshot signals sounded from a mountain top. No word was spoken, but in common accord the kinsmen rose from their chairs, and drifted toward their leaning rifles.

"They're a-comin' hyar," said the head of the house, curtly. "Samson ought ter be home. What's Tam'rack?"

No one had noticed his absence until that moment, nor was he to be found. A few minutes later, Samson's figure swung into sight, and his uncle met him at the fence.

"Samson, I've done asked ye all the questions I'm a-goin' ter ask ye," he said, "but them dawgs is makin' fer this house. They've jest been sighted a mile below."

Samson nodded.

"Now"—Spicer South's face hardened—"I owns down thar ter the road. No man kin cross that fence without'n I choose ter give him leave. Ef ye wants ter go indoors an' stay thar, ye kin do hit—an' no dawg ner no man hain't a-goin' ter ask ye no questions. But, ef ye sees fit ter face hit out, I'd love ter prove ter these hyar men thet the Souths don't break our word. We done agreed ter this truce. I'd like ter invite 'em in, an' let them damn dawgs sniff around the feet of every man in my house—an' then, when they're plumb teetotally dam satisfied, I'd like ter tell 'em all ter go ter hell. Thet's the way I feels, but I'm a-goin' ter do jest what ye says."

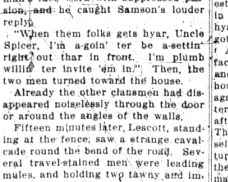
Lescott did not overhear the conversation in full, but he saw the old man's face work with suppressed passion, and he caught Samson's louder reply.

"When them folks gets hyar, Uncle Spicer, I'm a-goin' ter be a-settin' right out thar in front. I'm plumb willin' ter invite 'em in"; Then, the two men turned toward the house.

Already the other clansmen had disappeared noiselessly through the door or around the angles of the walls.

Fifteen minutes later, Lescott, standing at the fence, saw a strange cavalcade round the bend of the road. Several travel-stained men were leading mules, and holding two tawny and impatient dogs in leash. In their number, the artist recognized his host of two nights ago.

They halted at a distance, and in their faces the artist read dismay, for, while the dogs were yelping confidently and tugging at their cords, young Samson South—who should, by their prejudiced convictions, be hiding out in some secret stronghold—sat at the top step of the stile, smoking his pipe, and regarded them with a lack-luster absence of interest. Such a calm reception was uncanny. After a whispered conference, the Lexington man



"They Have Followed Their Noses Here."

came forward alone. Old Spicer South had been looking on from the door, and was now strolling out to meet the envoy, ingratiatingly.

And the envoy, as he came, held his hands unnecessarily far away from his sides, and walked with an ostentatious show of peace.

"Evenin', stranger," hailed the old man. "Come right in."

"Mr. South," began the dog-owner, with some embarrassment, "I have been employed to furnish a pair of bloodhounds to the family of Jesse Purvy, who has been shot."

"I heerd tell thet Purvy was shot," said the head of the Souths in an affable tone, which betrayed no deeper note of interest than neighborhood gossip might have elicited.

"I have no personal interest in the matter," went on the stranger, hastily, as one bent on making his attitude clear, "except to supply the dogs and manage them. I do not in any way direct their course; I merely follow."

"Ye can't hardly foller a dawg," Old Spicer eagerly nodded his head as he made the remark. "A dawg jest natcher'ly follers his own nose."

"Exactly—and they have followed their noses here." The Lexington man found the embarrassment of his position growing as the colloquy proceeded. "I want to ask you whether, if these dogs want to cross your fence, I have your permission to let them?"

The master of the house crossed the stile, the low sun shining on his sheaf of gray hair, and stood before the man-hunter. He spoke as that his voice carried to the waiting group in the road.

"Ye're plumb welcome ter turn them dawgs loose, an' let 'em ramble, stranger. Nobody hain't a-goin' ter hurt 'em. I sees some fellers out thar with ye thet mustn't cross my fence. Ef they does"—the voice rang menacingly—"hit'll mean thet they're a-bustin' the truce—an', they won't never go out alive ter tell on it. Ye're safe in hyar. I gives yer my hand on thet. Ye're welcome, an' yore dawgs is welcome. I hain't got nothin' 'gainst dawgs thet comes on four legs, but I shore bars the two-legged kind."

There was a murmur of astonishment from the road. Disregarding it, Spicer South turned his face toward the house.

"You boys kin come out," he shouted, "an' leave yore guns inside."

The trailers slipped from the dogs. They leaped forward, and made directly for Samson, who sat as unmoving as a lifeless image on the top step of the stile. There was a half-moment of terrific suspense, when the dogs clambered by the seated figure, sniffing on each side and circled aimlessly about the yard—their quest unended. They sniffed indifferently about the trouser legs of the men who sauntered indolently out of the door. They trotted into the house and out again, in sad disregard of the