A Knight of the Cumberland

John Fox Jr.

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I. THE BLIGHT IN THE HILLS

High noon of a crisp October day, sunshine flooding the earth with the warmth and light of old wine and, going single−file up through the jagged gap that the dripping of water has worn down through the Cumberland Mountains from crest to valley−level, a gray horse and two big mules, a man and two young girls. On the gray horse, I led the tortuous way. After me came my small sister and after her and like her, mule− back, rode the Blight dressed as she would be for a gallop in Central Park or to ride a hunter in a horse show.

I was taking them, according to promise, where the feet of other women than mountaineers had never trod beyond the crest of the Big Black to the waters of the Cumberland the lair of moonshiner and feudsman, where is yet pocketed a civilization that, elsewhere, is long ago gone. This had been a pet dream of the Blight's for a long time, and now the dream was coming true. The Blight was in the hills.

Nobody ever went to her mother's house without asking to see her even when she was a little thing with black hair, merry face and black eyes. Both men and women, with children of their own, have told me that she was, perhaps, the most fascinating child that ever lived. There be some who claim that she has never changed and I am among them. She began early, regardless of age, sex or previous condition of servitude she continues recklessly as she began and none makes complaint. Thus was it in her own world thus it was when she came to mine. On the way down from the North, the conductor's voice changed from a command to a request when he asked for her ticket. The jacketed lord of the dining−car saw her from afar and advanced to show her to a seat that she might ride forward, sit next to a shaded window and be free from the glare of the sun on the other side. Two porters made a rush for her bag when she got off the car, and the proprietor of the little hotel in the little town where we had to wait several hours for the train into the mountains gave her the bridal chamber for an afternoon nap. From this little town to ``The Gap" is the worst sixty−mile ride, perhaps, in the world. She sat in a dirty day−coach; the smoke rolled in at the windows and doors; the cars shook and swayed and lumbered around curves and down and up gorges; there were about her rough men, crying children, slatternly women, tobacco juice, peanuts, popcorn and apple cores, but dainty, serene and as merry as ever, she sat through that ride with a radiant smile, her keen black eyes noting everything unlovely within and the glory of hill, tree and chasm without. Next morning at home, where we rise early, no one was allowed to waken her and she had breakfast in bed for the Blight's gentle tyranny was established on sight and varied not at the Gap.

When she went down the street that day everybody stared surreptitiously and with perfect respect, as her dainty black plumed figure passed; the post−office clerk could barely bring himself to say that there was no letter for her. The soda−fountain boy nearly filled her glass with syrup before he saw that he was not strictly minding his own business; the clerk, when I bought chocolate for her, unblushingly added extra weight and, as we went back, she met them both Marston, the young engineer from the North, crossing the street and, at the same moment, a drunken young tough with an infuriated face reeling in a run around the corner ahead of us as though he were being pursued. Now we have a volunteer police guard some forty strong at the Gap and from habit, I started for him, but the Blight caught my arm tight. The young engineer in three strides had reached the curb−stone and all he sternly said was:

``Here! Here!''

The drunken youth wheeled and his right hand shot toward his hip pocket. The engineer was belted with a pistol, but with one lightning movement and an incredibly long reach, his right fist caught the fellow's jaw so that he pitched backward and collapsed like an empty bag. Then the engineer caught sight of the Blight's bewildered face, flushed, gripped his hands in front of him and simply stared. At last he saw me:

``Oh,'' he said, ``how do you do?'' and he turned to his prisoner, but the panting sergeant and another policeman also a volunteer were already lifting him to his feet. I introduced the boy and the Blight then, and for the first time in my life I saw the Blight shaken. Round− eyed, she merely gazed at him.

``That was pretty well done,'' I said.

``Oh, he was drunk and I knew he would be slow.'' Now something curious happened. The dazed prisoner was on his feet, and his captors were starting with him to the calaboose when he seemed suddenly to come to his senses.

``Jes wait a minute, will ye?'' he said quietly, and his captors, thinking perhaps that he wanted to say something to me, stopped. The mountain youth turned a strangely sobered face and fixed his blue eyes on the engineer as though he were searing every feature of that imperturbable young man in his brain forever. It was not a bad face, but the avenging hatred in it was fearful. Then he, too, saw the Blight, his face calmed magically and he, too, stared at her, and turned away with an oath checked at his lips. We went on the Blight thrilled, for she had heard much of our volunteer force at the Gap and had seen something already. Presently I looked back. Prisoner and captors were climbing the little hill toward the calaboose and the mountain boy just then turned his head and I could swear that his eyes sought not the engineer, whom we left at the corner, but, like the engineer, he was looking at the Blight. Whereat I did not wonder particularly as to the engineer. He had been in the mountains for a long time and I knew what this vision from home meant to him. He turned up at the house quite early that night.

``I'm not on duty until eleven,'' he said hesitantly, `` and I thought I'd ''

``Come right in.''

I asked him a few questions about business and then I left him and the Blight alone. When I came back she had a Gatling gun of eager questions ranged on him and happy withal he was squirming no little. I followed him to the gate.

``Are you really going over into those God−forsaken mountains?'' he asked.

``I thought I would.''

``And you are going to take HER?''

``And my sister."

``Oh, I beg your pardon." He strode away.

``Coming up by the mines?" he called back.

``Perhaps will you show us around?"

``I guess I will," he said emphatically, and he went on to risk his neck on a ten− mile ride along a mountain road in the dark.

``I LIKE a man," said the Blight. ``I like a MAN."

Of course the Blight must see everything, so she insisted on going to the police court next morning for the trial of the mountain boy. The boy was in the witness chair when we got there, and the Hon. Samuel Budd was his counsel. He had volunteered to defend the prisoner, I was soon told, and then I understood. The November election was not far off and the Hon. Samuel Budd was candidate for legislature. More even, the boy's father was a warm supporter of Mr. Budd and the boy himself might perhaps render good service in the cause when the time came as indeed he did. On one of the front chairs sat the young engineer and it was a question whether he or the prisoner saw the Blight's black plumes first. The eyes of both flashed toward her simultaneously, the engineer colored perceptibly and the mountain boy stopped short in speech and his pallid face flushed with unmistakable shame. Then he went on: ``He had liquered up," he said, ``and had got tight afore he knowed it and he didn't mean no harm and had never been arrested afore in his whole life."

``Have you ever been drunk before?" asked the prosecuting attorney severely. The lad looked surprised.

``Co'se I have, but I ain't goin' to agin leastwise not in this here town." There was a general laugh at this and the aged mayor rapped loudly.

``That will do," said the attorney.

The lad stepped down, hitched his chair slightly so that his back was to the Blight, sank down in it until his head rested on the back of the chair and crossed his legs. The Hon. Samuel Budd arose and the Blight looked at him with wonder. His long yellow hair was parted in the middle and brushed with plaster−like precision behind two enormous ears, he wore spectacles, gold−rimmed and with great staring lenses, and his face was smooth and ageless. He caressed his chin ruminatingly and rolled his lips until they settled into a fine resultant of wisdom, patience, toleration and firmness. His manner was profound and his voice oily and soothing.

``May it please your Honor my young friend frankly pleads guilty." He paused as though the majesty of the law could ask no more. ``He is a young man of naturally high and somewhat naturally, too, no doubt bibulous spirits. Homoepathically if inversely the result was logical. In the untrammelled life of the liberty− breathing mountains, where the stern spirit of law and order, of which your Honor is the august symbol, does not prevail as it does here thanks to your Honor's wise and just dispensations the lad has, I may say, naturally acquired a certain recklessness of mood indulgence which, however easily condoned there, must here be sternly rebuked. At the same time, he knew not the conditions here, he became exhilarated without malice, prepensey or even, I may say, consciousness. He would not have done as he has, if he had known what he knows now, and, knowing, he will not repeat the offence. I need say no more. I plead simply that your Honor will temper the justice that is only yours with the mercy