

FAIRIES

There are fairies at the bottom of our garden! It's not so very, very far away; You pass the gardener's shed and you just keep straight ahead, I do so hope they're really come to stay. There's a little wood, with moss in it and beetles, And a little stream that quietly runs through...

POISON.

"She's an odd little thing—'fey' the Scotch would call her." Preacher Meister flecked Circus, his snow-white horse, who could take an Ozark hill or ford a mountain stream better than any car man ever made. Alec Graham snorted. "Fey! Murderess is the word I'd use!" "Faith-healing isn't murder," the other reminded him mildly.

Meister tossed reins over the whip and climbed out. Alec followed. "Won't you talk to her, make her see—" "I have. But it's no use, Alec." "Then I will." He strode ahead. Meister followed, shaking his head: two of your fanatics on his hands, one the Apostle of Science, the other, the Disciple of Faith. A fire was laid on the hard yellow clay that was caked and split in the August sun, and over it swung a huge black kettle from which came the odor of lye and fat. A woman was stirring the mixture—an awkward creature in gray calico. In this year of our Lord making soap. Suddenly a guest of wind swept around the shack, whirled a few parched leaves and an eddy of dust, fanned the fire into smoke and flames that licked the black pot fantastically and twined the shapeless figure and wreathed the white face with edusa looks. Or an angel's halo. For, while Alec Graham thought of Old Salem and the witches his father had burned at the stake, Preacher Meister saw the Maid of Domremy. Then the wind ceased and the fire died and it was only an ozark girl with ash-colored hair and thin, pale face and eyes now dull and lifeless. "Prey's down yonder," she volunteered. Mournfully there floated up from the bottom-land the rich raucous voice of Billy Babb: "Will the waters be chilly, Will the waters be chilly, Will the waters be chilly, When I am called to die? 'Not if Jesus is with me, Not if Jesus is with me—"

the believin'—just like it says right here." The book fell open at the page and she read with throbbing voice: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. "So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God." The book closed and she looked up in triumph. "Ain't it simple? Ain't it clear and plain? 'Them that believe... they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover.'" Her slim fingers caressed the covers as she laid the book back on the table and went on wistfully. "Parson says it don't mean now, that it was just for those days and His own disciples. But it don't say that, does it? Them that believe... A mystic quality crept into her tone. You or me—Parson—anyone—we're all His disciples, ain't we? See them hills yonder?" She pointed through the window to the great mounds of white oak. "Why; you could move them if you just had faith enough—even so much 'as a grain of mustard,' she quoted softly. "Why don't you try that?" he asked curiously. "I ain't testin' my Lord," she answered with dignity, "but doin' His will." "Of all senseless, idiotic, criminals—Alec broke out in disgust. His hand accidentally fell on the Bible and in sheer nervous exasperation he gave it a shove. It fell to the floor. Her eyes widened, she gasped and swayed, then slowly sank on her knees beside it. She shook with sobs and gathered it to her heart, then slowly lifted her head. Her face was set and her eyes were black: a lean mountain girl who reached for the gun behind the door—it was the harsh voice of Billy Babb's daughter that spoke: "Git out! You don't know our mountains, you don't know we 'uns and you don't want to. You've come here to tear down our faith with your blasted old science and I'll see you in Hell first—git out!" He looked at the young Roundhead—Bible clasped to her heart with one hand, gun pointed at him with the other; a symbol of the new, bigoted intolerance he so despised. Meister was waiting in the buggy. "Well, any luck?" His tone was cheerful. Alec shook his head. The other grinned sympathetically. "I thought not." The young man paused a moment, then turned abruptly. "There's one question more—" He was back at the door where she stood, without Bible, without gun, with eyes serene and blue. "Where did you get it—that Victory?" He indicated the statue. She turned. "Stephen sent it to me." Stephen Meister, the minister's son, his college friend still in the East—as they called Kentucky. He looked at her with new eyes. Stephen had never mentioned her, and yet he had sent, to be jogged over twenty miles of mountain road, this lovely winged figure. "Are you—are you in love with Stephen?" he heard a dry voice ask. It was his own—he had to know. She eyed him calmly. "No, I shall never love anyone—ever." Strange that his question had not been, does Stephen Meister love you? That was what he meant; that was what he was glad that the friend he cherished most deeply had not been so ensnared. Then, too, it would have been hard to fight, as he meant to fight, to the very death, a woman dear to Stephen. He stumbled back to the road. He could scarcely see. And there pounded in his ears, like a medieval chant—the renunciation of a nun, the vow of a religious—throughout the long drive and the days and nights that followed: "I shall never—love—anyone ever." Why had she said it, this mountain girl with ash-colored hair and eyes now black, now blue? And why had she said it to him? He did not see her again for several months. And it seemed somehow that he must have dreamed the whole affair; it was too fantastic—what was the word Meister had used?—too fey, for the practical, workaday world about him. For life in the Ozarks was very practical that fall. First, there had been a drouth. There was always a drouth, or a flood, or hoof-and-mouth disease, or cholera, or rust—always something that sapped the hope and vitality of those who lived on the water depression, prey for every disease of mind and body. Then the water supply of the little town had become polluted, and typhoid followed. And there were, of course, the usual epidemics of measles, mumps, chicken-pox, and whooping cough, to which each child was deliberately exposed on the theory that "he might as well have it now and git it over with." And always the ever-present "chills and ager." And Doctor Shoemaker, the other physician, jogged comfortably on the way he'd followed for thirty years, treating each case with physics, and pills and powders, knowing that an all-wise Father sent sickness and pestilence to try the soul of man and that the best he could do was to alleviate the immediate suffering of the individual. But to Alec it was not just a challenge to his medical skill but a glittering opportunity to lay the foundation for a sound, scientific attitude toward disease. It did not come from God in His infinite wisdom but from man in his careless ignorance. He practiced medicine but he preached prevention. And he managed to enlist various

forces in his aid. The water question became a political issue that threatened to split churches, and Alec threw himself into the fight with a zest that won him a place on the county ticket for the spring election; and better still gave him access to the two local weeklies, which started by carrying statistical items on methods of purifying water and ended with flaming—as only mountaineers can flame!—editorials in favor of vaccination. The teachers, of course, were his best allies—some of them young girls and their enthusiasm for the removal of adenoids and tonsils, Better Health Week with its tooth-brush drill, may have been the result of their normal-school enlightenment or a tribute to Alec's profile. And through it all Hetty went her way quietly, and believed and prayed and healed. That was the curious thing—"and healed." And the maddening thing, for it made him feel his were only paper victories. He tried to tell himself his activities were on a large plane, that he was laying the broad foundation for a generation that would be free from such ignorance and superstition, but in his heart he envied, even as he resented, the intimate personal contact of the girl. Then suddenly he began to realize that the seed of his propaganda was taking root. Mountain families no longer related eagerly how she had prayed Uncle Mort through pneumonia or told in awe how her coming had stayed the passing of little Ann. It is true they would still relate some "miracle" they'd "heard tell" she'd performed, but with a superior skepticism that quickened his pride. Except the mothers, who were steadfastly loyal. For Hetty, it seemed, had a way with children. Grown people she just prayed over; but babies she held in her arms till the fever was gone and they slept once more. Consequently his baby clinic was a very hollow affair. So long as there was no need they were willing to come for advice on diet and routine, but at the first hint of danger they'd stay away; and when they'd creep back some two weeks later he'd know by their expression, either shamefaced or defiant, that they had sent for Hetty. Strange to say, they preferred her super-love to his scientific diagnosis; and it was hard, he found to recapture their zeal for orange juice and no kissing when this girl by the touch of her hand had banished death itself, or so they believed. Therefore he centered his attention on the clinic, redoubled his energy, and waited. His chance came with the Tanner baby, a wizened six-months-old-mite—the fourth child in five years. (How he longed for the day when he could preach birth control!) The Tanners were "hers" completely except for Rose, the stepdaughter of thirteen. So it was something of a triumph when the thin, dark-eyed girl caught hold of his arm one evening after school and awkwardly said that Mr. would like for him to look at the baby. He did, and saw in a second's glance that a very simple operation was all that was needed. He shut the mother from the room but let Rose stay; a swift incision, a quick turn and jerk, a few tiny stitches, and the youngest of the Tanners took up life again with only the natural handicaps of a depleted heredity and depressing environment. The news spread instantly that the Doc had saved the Tanner baby when Hetty Babb had failed, and although he was annoyed by their tendency to give him the worship formerly accorded the girl, he was glad for such an illustration of the harm in faith-healing. Suppose, it rumbled over the country, the Tanners hadn't called him in. Suppose they had let her go on. Suppose... And several citizens came to him to see about stopping "that girl, she means well, but—" He stopped in a few nights later at Preacher Meister's to go over a list of the needy poor. As he sat waiting for the parson, in the next room he heard sobs and then a voice he had once thought dull and monotonous: "I could have done it if they'd only believed. But they doubted, Parson, and sent me away. They shouldn't 'a' done that, should they?" A quiet, steady murmur from Meister. A pause. Then a sharp cry from the girl—a cry of physical pain. Alec leaped to his feet and stood tense as Meister hurried in. "Sorry to've kept you waiting." He motioned to a chair but Alec still looked toward the door. "What—what—" He could not finish. "Hetty Babb." The man understood his question. "Just binding a cut or so on her forehead—rocks thrown at her by some boys." "They need a playground—they're too careless in the street." "This wasn't play." Hetty stood in the doorway, white and tired, like a nun, with a bandage across her head. "This wasn't play. They meant it." she gave a little gasp—"meant for them to hit me. And they shrieked and yelled and called me names—a witch." Meister patted her shoulder. "Don't pay 'em any heed—you know boys, Hetty." "Children don't say such things of themselves—some older head—And last Sunday at church a woman moved into another pew when I came. And in the store yesterday—Nicholas—they all stopped talking and—" She lifted her head and turned to Alec with sudden fire. "You've done this—turned 'em against me, made 'em lose faith." Alec thrilled. He was sorry, of course, angry, in fact, that they were using such stupid, childish methods of expression, but still it marked the turn of the tide. She gathered her cape about her. "Good-by, Parson." "You—you can't go alone. The boys—" The room was suddenly blurred and Alec saw the slim figure through a

smoky haze, but her voice rang out clear and solemnly sweet: "I shall always go alone—always." The door closed after her softly. Ten days later they met again at the bedside of Jimmie Basset, a little cripple with curvature of the spine, and both of them knew this case was the crux of their struggle, that the whole town and county about were waiting eagerly for Hetty either to vindicate herself or... When he entered she was kneeling in prayer with the child, wild-eyed and delirious, clasped to her heart. And all around were weeping women—Miss Mattie, his aunt, a plump little seamstress, the hysterical mother, neighbors. Angry, disgusted, Alec strode swiftly toward her and took the hot burden from her arms. The child stiffened and screamed—hysteria, spasms, convulsions. A neighbor rushed in with hot water, another made mustard compress. Miss Mattie paced the floor and Hetty still babbled in prayer. "O Lord, let Miss Mattie believe, and Thy servant—help Thou my unbelief." Finally the struggle ceased; the tired little body relaxed, the head fell back on the pillow, and the eyelids were closed in peace. She rose with an eerie: "Give him to me!" Alec pushed her back. "Go home; you have done enough—you have killed an innocent child." He turned to Miss Mattie briefly. "You called me too late." The neighboring woman stared; it was true—Jimmie was dead—an innocent child—killed. And stole out to whisper it to the town. Two hours later old Circus had crossed Niangua and clacked his heavy hoofs on the ribbonwhite road. No light in the little shack on the hill—Preacher Meister's anxiety doubled. She must be home, he must see her first, before... A quick knock at the door as she came, dull and dry-eyed. She had not been crying. He was sorry, for that would have given relief. "Oh, it's you. Come in." She lighted the kerosene lamp. "Won't you set? I reckon you've heard," she went on, hands plumped on her knees like an old woman. "It's gone, all gone—I can never heal again." He pitied her suffering, but was glad for the statement. "Never any more, for my faith is gone. That's what it was this time. They all kept crowdin' around—wonderin', doubtin', just waitin' for me to fail. Even his mother and Miss Mattie—I heard 'em whisperin' about it in the hall before supper, sayin' they'd give me one more chance before they called—she hesitated and did not speak Alec's name—"him. And I thought of all that when I looked at Jimmie—it's hard to think of God when folks crowd around and other thoughts come in." She brushed her eyes to shut out the picture. "I can see him now, with his little peaked face and his eyes all big and bright. And his heart—I could feel it beatin' faster and faster—fairly fightin' to git out." Meister laid a quiet hand on her arm. "It's better for Jimmie, my dear; God giveth His beloved sleep." "It's all right for Jimmie, yes," she answered bitterly, "but the rest of us—it's gone, Parson, my faith!" He was thankful; she had broken at last, and he let her exhaust herself in tears before he answered: "You haven't lost faith, Hetty. Maybe you don't believe in yourself as an instrument any longer, but God's still there—you believe in Him." She stared at him a moment, then caught her breath. "That's true! It ain't God that failed—it was me!" She gave a little laugh of joy and flung herself on her knees beside Him. "You've give it back to me—God still lives and His promise is true!" Then she stopped in sudden thought. "But the people—they won't understand. They'll think it's God, that He's gone back on His word. But I'll show 'em next time, prove to 'em—" It had to be done. He dreaded it, hated it, feared it, but she must be told before... "There can be no other time, Hetty." She stared inquiringly and he went on quietly. "I hate to tell you—don't take it hard; but you've got to promise to quit healing." Her lips repeated the words: "To quit healin'..." He stumbled on: "The town people—you know how things are, and they feel—well, you've got to quit, Hetty." Her voice throbbed in answer: "Not as long as I live! Would you have me deny my Master?" "I've come out to get your promise. Otherwise in the morning they're going to the court house and charge you with—murder." It was done. The Bible dropped from her hands. She heard again Alec's metallic voice: "Go home; you have done enough—you have killed an innocent child." Murder... The people she had healed would charge her with murder. They had turned against her because of—him. "I can't stop, Parson," she answered gently. "I've got to give 'em back their faith. You see, if they think God failed 'em in that promise, why, they won't believe, none of 'em." He reasoned, he argued, he pleaded, and she listened with tears, but her answer was always the same. They were interrupted by a quick knock. Meister answered and hurriedly stepped outside. She waited, Bible in hand, then was suddenly caught by a tone; it was him, the man who had betrayed her. Fragments of the talk floated in—hushed, hurried whispers. "They've lost their minds, gone completely mad... I tried to stop them... I never dreamt they'd would act like this! A whipping!"—the shocked horror of his tone!—"and a woman! We've got to do something. And they're on their way now!" She knew what they meant: there'd been "ridings" before in the mountains. Once, long ago, they'd taken Ned Warfly and whipped him all

night for beating his wife. She was only a child then, but she remembered clearly the great purple welts and cuts on his face and body when they brought him home at dawn. And another time Dave Montross, who ran the blind tiger. And Mark Beckley. But those were long ago and the victims were men. She moved to the door and flung it open; the two men turned in the shaft of yellow light. "Come in." They entered without a word. "I've heard what you said." Parson crossed to her in swift pity. "Now don't you worry, Hetty." "I'm not afraid." "You needn't be." Alec's face was white with agony, but his voice was hard and determined—the same voice that had turned her away from the dead, now used in her defense. "But they musn't do this—this—what they're plannin'!" "They won't." "Don't you see," she went on, weaving her thin fingers in and out in a constant pattern, "it don't matter about me—they do to me—but them—it's somethin' they'll allus regret when they come to their senses—somethin' that can never be wiped out. The whole county will be shamed." "I'll talk to them," said Meister, "make them see." "Talkin's no good now." Her tone was not bitter, but Alec flushed. "No, nor that," she added as his eyes fell on the gun. "It's me—I've got to do it. I thought it could wait, that my next case would show 'em, but it's got to be now." "But Hetty—what—" "I've thought it all out—it's simple as can be. You know what the Bible says—" Alec interrupted; there was no time for a religious harangue. He turned to Meister. "We've got to get her away—hide her some place until—" "And this'll do more than jest save me or them," she went on thoughtfully. "It will give 'em their faith back, let 'em believe once more." She swayed mystically and opened to the Bible verse. "And these signs shall follow them that believe... and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them..." There was silence a moment. Then she eagerly outlined her plan; she would drink "any deadly thing" from Alec's medicine case; then when the crowd came he could tell them the test she had made. "For they'll believe you. It don't matter what kind, just so it's deadly poison, I'll fetch some water to take it with." She went to the kitchen, an outer door slammed, and a few minutes later they heard her priming the rusty pump. "I wanted her stopped by law. I never dreamt this." Alec stared down the moonlit road and listened for the beat of hoofs. "It's easy to start changes, but the pendulum don't always stop where you want it to." Suddenly the younger man swung around from the door. "There's no other way—she'll have to do it: make the test." Meister stared. You'd let her—die? Alec shook his head. "Of course not! I'll substitute something as harmless as sugar or soda. Then I'll tell them she made the test, they'll believe me—and they'll be right back where they were!" Meister shook his head. "No, they'll never be there again!" Alec went on passionately: "It'll undo everything I've fought for, but I can't let them take her. I can't let her die!" He swiftly opened his medicine case and took out a bottle with a small red seal. "The only bit of real poison in the lot." He thrust it carefully in his inner pocket and took another from the case. "And this, plain sodium." Hetty returned with a cup of water. He silently dumped into it the entire contents of the bottle. "Would you mind tellin' me what it's like—what happens—other times?" she asked timidly. Alec hesitated an instant before fabricating. "It isn't painful; a slight fever, quickening pulse, drowsiness, a little dizziness, perhaps; swollen veins; the damp chill—and a long, long sleep." "Does it take long?" He shook his head impatiently—his mind was intent on the hoof beats that would soon trip-hammer the road. She turned earnestly to Meister. "If I succeed they'll believe again. But if I should fail, Parson, you tell them it still is true—His promise to them that believe—but that it was my weakness, some tiny doubt that entered in me." She drained the cup and turned to them with a look of radiance. Alec stumbled to the door. That was more than he could bear. All her life she would face him serenely and in a superior consciousness of her "miracle," and he could never reveal the truth—to her or to anyone. She would go down in history with Saint Elizabeth. He could never discount faith again. With one impulsive gesture he had torn down the structure of months and had, by the same stroke, made it impossible ever to rebuild. He had tossed over his life's work, past and future, for that girl—"fey, the Scotch would call her." "Let's walk and meet them." His voice was thick. Anything to get out of that room, to leave that effulgent presence. He hated her, loathed her, for what she had made him do. Meister followed him and she watched them go, through the pines to the moonlit road. She stared at the pale moon that hung on the farthest hilltop and a quiet peace settled upon her. The troubles and worries of yesterday were gone; and she took no thought of the morrow. Content to live in the present, at one with the gentle forces about her, and closer to God, she felt, than ever before. Even Jimmie's death, which had tortured her only three hours ago, now seemed unreal and far-away, like