

The CALL of the CUMBERLANDS

BY CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS OF SCENES IN THE PLAY

CHAPTER I.

Close to the serrated backbone of the Cumberland ridge through a sky of mountain clarity, the sun seemed hesitating before its descent to the horizon. The sugar-loaf cone that towered above a creek called Misery was pointed and edged with emerald tracery where the loftiest timber thrust up its crest plumes into the sun. On the hillside it would be light for more than an hour yet, but below, where the waters tossed themselves along in a chorus of tiny cascades, the light was already thickening into a cathedral gloom. Down there the "furriner" would have seen only the rough course of the creek between moss-velveted and shaded boulders of titanic proportions. The native would have recognized the country road in these tortuous twistings. A great block of sandstone, to whose summit a man standing in his saddle could scarcely reach his fingertips, towered above the stream, with a gnarled scrub oak clinging tenaciously to its apex. Loftily on both sides climbed the mountains cloaked in laurel and timber.

Suddenly the leafage was thrust aside from above by a cautious hand, and a shy, half-wild girl appeared in the opening. For an instant she halted, with her brown fingers holding back the brushwood, and raised her face as though listening. As she stood with the toes of one bare foot twisting in the gratefully cool moss she laughed with the sheer exhilaration of life and youth, and started out on the table top of the huge rock. But there she halted suddenly with a startled exclamation and drew instinctively back. What she saw might well have astonished her, for it was a thing she had never seen before and of which she had never heard. Finally, reassured by the silence, she slipped across the broad face of the flat rock for a distance of twenty-five feet and paused again to listen.

At the far edge lay a pair of saddle-bags, such as form the only practical equipment for mountain travelers. Near them lay a tin box, littered with small and unfamiliar-looking tubes of soft metal, all grotesquely twisted and stained, and beside the box was a strangely shaped plaque of wood smeared with a dozen hues. That this plaque was a painter's sketching palette was a thing which she could not know, since the ways of artists had to do with a world as remote from her own as the life of the moon or stars. It was one of those vague mysteries that made up the wonderful life of "down below." Why had these things been left here in such confusion? If there was a man about who owned them he would doubtless return to claim them. She crept over, eyes and ears alert, and slipped around to the front of the queer tripod, with all her muscles poised in readiness for flight.

A half-rapturous and utterly astonished cry broke from her lips. She stared a moment, then dropped to the moss-covered rock, leaning back on her brown hands and gazing intently. "Hit's purty!" she approved, in a low, musical murmur. "Hit's plumb dead beautiful!"

Of course it was not a finished picture—merely a study of what lay before her—but the hand that had placed these brush strokes on the academy board was the sure, deft hand of a master of landscape, who had caught the splendid spirit of the thing and fixed it immutably in true and glowing appreciation. Who he was; where he had gone; why his work stood there unfinished and abandoned, were details which for the moment this half-savage child-woman forgot to question. She was conscious only of a sense of revelation and awe. Then she saw other boards, like the one upon the easel, piled near the paint box. These were dry, and represented the work of other days; but they were all pictures of her own mountains, and in each of them, as in this one, was something that made her heart leap.

To her own people these steep hill-sides and "coves" and valleys were a matter of course. In their stony soil they labored by day, and in their shadows slept when work was done. Yet someone had discovered that they held a picturesque and rugged beauty; that they were not merely steep fields where the plow was useless and the hoe must be used. She must tell Samson—Samson, whom she held in an artless exaltation of her worship; Samson, who was so "smart" that he thought about things beyond her understanding; Samson, who could not only read and write, but speculate on problematical matters.

Suddenly she came to her feet with a swift-darting impulse of alarm. Her ear had caught a sound. She cast searching glances about her, but the tangle was empty of humanity. The water still murmured over the rocks undisturbed. There was no sign of human presence, other than herself, that her eyes could discover—and yet to her ears came the sound again, and this time more distinctly. It was the sound of a man's voice, and it was moaning as if in pain. She rose and searched vainly through the bushes of the hillside where the rock ran out

from the woods. She lifted her skirts and splashed her feet in the shallow creek water, wading persistently up and down. Her shyness was forgotten. The groan was a groan of a human creature in distress, and she must find and succor the person from whom it came.

Certain sounds are baffling as to direction. A voice from overhead or broken by echoing obstacles does not readily betray its source. Finally she stood up and listened once more intently—her attitude full of tense earnestness.

"I'm shore a fool," she announced, half aloud. "I'm shore a plumb fool." Then she turned and disappeared in the deep cleft between the gigantic boulder upon which she had been sitting and another—small only by comparison. There, ten feet down, in a narrow alley littered with ragged stones, lay the crumpled body of a man. It lay with the left arm doubled under it, and from a gash in the forehead trickled a thin stream of blood. Also, it was the body of such a man as she had not seen before.

Although from the man came a low groan mingled with his breathing, it was not such a sound as comes from fully conscious lips, but rather that of a brain dulled into coma.

Freed from her fettering excess of shyness by his condition, the girl stepped surely from foothold to foothold until she reached his side. She stood for a moment with one hand on the dripping walls of rock, looking down while her hair fell about her face. Then, dropping to her knees, she shifted the doubled body into a leaning posture, straightened the limbs, and began exploring with efficient fingers for broken bones.

She had found the left arm limp above the wrist, and her fingers had diagnosed a broken bone. But unconsciousness must have come from the blow on the head, where a bruise was already blackening, and a gash still trickled blood.

She lifted her skirt and tore a long strip of cotton from her single petticoat. Then she picked her bare-footed way swiftly to the creek bed, where she drenched the cloth for bathing and bandaging the wound. When she had done what she could by way of first aid she sat supporting the man's shoulders and shook her head dubiously.

Finally the man's lids fluttered and his lips moved. Then he opened his eyes.

"Hello!" said the stranger, vaguely. "I seem to have—" He broke off, and his lips smiled. It was a friendly, understanding smile, and the girl, fight-

Her lips and eyes were sober as she replied. "I reckon that's all right." "And what's worse, I've got to be more trouble. Did you see anything of a brown mule?" She shook her head. "He must have wandered off. May I ask to whom I am indebted for this first aid to the injured?" "I don't know what ye means." She had propped him against the rocks and sat near by, looking into his face with almost disconcerting steadiness; her solemn-pupiled eyes were unblinking, unsmiling.

"Why, I mean who are you?" he laughed. "I hain't nobody much. I jest lives over yon." "But," insisted the man, "surely you have a name." She nodded. "Hit's Sally."

"Then, Miss Sally, I want to thank you." Once more she nodded, and, for the first time, let her eyes drop, while she sat nursing her knees. Finally she glanced up and asked with plucked-up courage: "Stranger, what mout yore name be?"

"Lescott—George Lescott." "How'd ye git hurt?" He shook his head. "I was painting—up there," he said; "and I guess I got too absorbed in the work. I stepped backward to look at the canvas and forgot where the edge was. I stepped too far."

The man rose to his feet, but he tottered and reeled against the wall of ragged stone. The blow on his head had left him faint and dizzy. He sat down again.

"I'm afraid," he ruefully admitted, "that I'm not quite ready for discharge from your hospital."

"You jest set where yer at." The girl rose and pointed up the mountainside. "I'll light out across the hill and fetch Samson an' his mule."

"Who and where is Samson?" he inquired. He realized that the bottom of the valley would shortly thicken into darkness, and that the way out, unguided, would become impossible. "It sounds like the name of a strong man."

"I means Sameon South," she enlightened, as though further description of one so celebrated would be redundant. "He's over thar 'bout three-quarters of a mile?"

"Three-quarters of a mile?" She nodded. "What else could three-quarters mean?" "How long will it take you?" he asked.

She deliberated. "Samson's hoin' corn in the fur hill field. He'll hev ter catch his mule. Hit mo'gt tek a half-hour."

"What air hit?" she tensely demanded. "What air hit, Samson? What fer hev ye fatched yer gun ter the field?" The boy laughed. "Oh, hit ain't nothin' pertic'lar," he reassured. "Hit hain't nothin' fer a gal ter fret herself erbout, only I kinder suspicious strangers jest now."

"Air the truce busted?" She put the question in a tense, deep-breathed whisper, and the boy replied casually, almost indifferently.

"No, Sally, hit hain't jest ter say busted, but 'pears like hit's right smart cracked. I reckon, though," he added in half-disgust, "nothin' won't come of hit."

Somewhat reassured, she bethought herself again of her mission. "This here furriner hain't got no harm in him, Samson," she pleaded. "He 'pears ter be more like a gal than a man. He's real puny. He's got white skin and a bow of ribbon on his neck—an' he paints plectchers."

The boy's face had been hardening with contempt as the description advanced, but at the last words a glow came to his eyes, and he demanded almost breathlessly: "Paints plectchers? How do ye know that?"

"I seen 'em. He was paintin' one when he fell offen the rock and busted his arm. It's shore as beautiful es—" she broke off, then added with a sudden peal of laughter—"es er plectcher."

The young man slipped down from the fence, and reached for the rifle. The hoe he left where it stood.

"I'll git the nag," he announced briefly, and swung off without further parley toward the curling spiral of smoke that marked a cabin a quarter of a mile below. Ten minutes later his bare feet swung against the ribs of a gray mule and his rifle lay balanced across the unsaddled withers. Sally sat mountain fashion behind him, facing straight to the side.

So they came along the creek bed and into the sight of the man who still sat propped against the mossy rock. As Lescott looked up he closed the case of his watch and put it back into his pocket with a smile.

"Snappy work, that!" he called out. "Just thirty-three minutes. I didn't believe it could be done."

Samson's face was masklike, but as he surveyed the foreman, only the ingrained dictates of the country's hospitable code kept out of his eyes a gleam of scorn for this frail member of a sex which should be stalwart.

"Howdy?" he said. Then he added suspiciously: "What mout yer business be in these parts, stranger?"

Lescott gave the Odyssey of his wanderings, since he had rented a mule at Hixon and ridden through the country, sketching where the mood prompted and sleeping wherever he found a hospitable roof at the coming of the evening.

"Ye come from over on Cripple-shin?" The boy flashed the question with a sudden hardening of the voice, and, when he was affirmatively answered, his eyes contracted and bored searchingly into the stranger's face.

"Where'd ye put up last night?" "Red Bill Hollman's house, at the mouth of Meeting House fork; do you know the place?"

Samson's reply was curt. "I knows hit all right."

There was a moment's pause—rather an awkward pause. Lescott's mind began piecing together fragments of conversation he had heard, until he had assembled a sort of mental jigsaw puzzle.

The South-Hollman feud had been mentioned by the more talkative of his informers, and carefully tabooed by others—notable among them his host of last night. It now dawned on him that he was crossing the boundary and coming as the late guest of a Hollman to ask the hospitality of a South.

"I didn't know whose house it was," he hastened to explain, "until I was benighted and asked for lodging. They were very kind to me. I'd never seen them before. I'm a stranger hereabouts."

Samson only nodded. If the explanation failed to satisfy him, it at least seemed to do so.

"I reckon ye'd better let me help ye up on that old mule," he said; "hit's a-comin' on ter be night."

With the mountaineer's aid, Lescott clambered astride the mount, then he turned dubiously.

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Tamarack South.

often a rock an' got hurt. I loved I'd fatch him home ter stay all night."

"The elderly man who had hailed the boy nodded, but with an evident annoyance. It seemed that to him the others deferred to a commanding officer. The cortege remounted and rode slowly toward the house. At last the elderly man came alongside the mule and inquired:

"Samson, where was ye last night?" "That's my business."

"Mebbe hit ain't." The old mountaineer spoke with no resentment, but deep gravity. "We've been powerful oneasy erbout ye. Hev ye heered the news?"

"What news?" The boy put the question noncommittally.

"Jesse Purry was shot this morning."

The boy vouchsafed no reply.

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A Low Groan Mingled With His Breathing.

ing hard the shy impulse to drop his shoulders and flee into the kind masking of the bushes, was in a measure reassured.

"You must hev fell offen the rock," she enlightened.

"I think I might have fallen into worse circumstances," replied the unknown.

CHAPTER II.

Sally clambered lightly over the fence and started on the last stage of her journey, the climb across the young corn rows. It was a field stood on end, and the hoed ground was uneven; but with no seeming of weariness her red dress flashed steadfastly across the green spears, and her voice was raised to shout: "Hello, Samson!"

The young man looked up and waved a languid greeting. He did not remove his hat or descend from his place of rest, and Sally, who expected no such attention, came smilingly on. Samson was her hero. Slow of utterance and diffident with the stranger, words now came fast and fluently as she told her story of the man who lay hurt at the foot of the rock.

"Hit hain't long now tel sundown," she urged. "Hurry, Samson, an' git yore mule. I've done give him my promise ter fatch ye right straight back."

Samson took off his hat, and tossed the heavy lock upward from his forehead. His brow wrinkled with doubts.

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Then followed a silence unbroken until the mule reached the group, revealing that besides the boy another man—and a strange man—had joined their number.

"Evenin', stranger," they greeted him, gravely; then again they fell silent, and in their silence was evident constraint.

"This hyar man's a furriner," announced Samson, briefly. "He fell