



# A Cumberland Vendetta

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## *Chapter One*

**T**HE cave had been their hiding-place as children; it was a secret refuge now against hunger or darkness when they were hunting in the woods. The primitive meal was finished; ashes were raked over the red coals; the slice of bacon and the little bag of meal were hung high against the rock wall; and the two stepped from the cavern into a thicket of rhododendrons.

Parting the bushes toward the dim light, they stood on a massive shoulder of the mountain, the river girding it far below, and the afternoon shadows at their feet. Both carried guns—the tall mountaineer, a Winchester; the boy, a squirrel rifle longer than himself. Climbing about the rocky spur, they kept the same level over log and boulder and through bushy ravine to the north. In half an hour, they ran into a path that led up home from the river, and they stopped to rest on a cliff that sank in a solid black wall straight under them. The sharp edge of a steep corn-field ran near, and, stripped of blade and tassel, the stalks and hooded ears looked in the coming

dusk a little like monks at prayer. In the sunlight across the river the corn stood thin and frail. Over there a drought was on it; and when drifting thistle-plumes marked the noontide of the year, each yellow stalk had withered blades and an empty sheath. Every-where a look of vague trouble lay upon the face of the mountains, and when the wind blew, the silver of the leaves showed ashen. Autumn was at hand.

There was no physical sign of kinship between the two, half-brothers though they were. The tall one was dark; the boy, a foundling, had flaxen hair, and was stunted and ~lender. He was a dreamy~looking little fellow, and one may easily find his like throughout the Cumberland -paler than his fellows, from staying much indoors, with half-haunted face, and eyes that are deeply pathetic when not cunning; ignorantly credited with idiocy and uncanny powers; treated with much forbearance, some awe, and a little contempt; and suffered to do his pleasure-nothing, or much that is strange-without comment.

"I tell ye, Rome," he said, taking up the thread of talk that was broken at the cave, "when Uncle Gabe says he's afeard thar's trouble comm', hit's a-comm'; 'n' I want you to git me a Winchester. I'm a-gittin' big enough now. I kin shoot might' nigh as good as you, 'n' whut am I fit fer with this hyeh old pawpaw pop-gun?"

"I don't want you fightin', boy, I've told ye. Y'u air too little 'n' puny, 'n' I want ye to stay home 'n' take keer o' mam 'n' the cattle-ef fightin' does come, I reckon thar won't be triuch."

Don't ye? " cried the boy, with sharp contempt-" with ole Jas Lewallen a-devilin' Uncle Rufe, 'n' that blackheaded young Jas a-

climbin' on stumps over thar 'cross the river, n' crowin' n' sayin' out open in Hazlan that ye air afeard o him? Yes; 'n' he called me a idgit." The boy's voice broke into a whimper of rage.

"Shet up, Isom! Don't you go gittin' mad now. You'll be sick ag'in. I'll tend to him when the time comes." Rome spoke with rough kindness, but ugly lines had gathered at his mouth and forehead. The boy's tears came and went easily. He drew his sleeve across his eyes, and looked up the river. Beyond the bend, three huge birds rose into the sunlight and floated toward them. Close at hand, they swerved side-wise.

"They hain't buzzards," he said, standing up, his anger gone; "look at them straight wings!

Again the eagles swerved, and two shot across the river. The third dropped with shut wings to the bare crest of a gaunt old poplar under them.

"Hit's a young un, Rome Y" said the boy, excitedly. "He's goin' to wait thar till the old uns come back. Gimme that gun!

Catching up the Winchester, he slipped over the ledge; and Rome leaned suddenly forward, looking down at the river.

A group of horsemen had ridden around the bend, and were coming at a walk down the other shore. Every man carried something across his saddle-bow. There was a gray horse among them - young Jasper's - and an evil shadow came into Rome's face, and quickly passed. Near a strip of woods the gray turned up the mountain from the party, and on its back he saw the red glint of a woman's dress. With a half-smile he watched the scarlet figure ride from the woods, and climb slowly up through the sunny corn. On the

spur above and full in the rich yellow light, she halted, half turning in her saddle. He rose to his feet, to his full height, his head bare, and thrown far back between his big shoulders, and, still as statues, the man and the woman looked at each other across the gulf of darkening air. A full minute the woman sat motionless, then rode on. At the edge of the woods she stopped and turned again.

The eagle under Rome leaped one stroke in the air, and dropped like a clod into the sea of leaves. The report of the gun and a faint cry of triumph rose from below. It was good marksmanship, but on the cliff Rome did not heed it. Something had fluttered in the air above the girl's head, and he laughed aloud. She was waving her bonnet at him.



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