

from
THE
LAND
BREAKERS

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the east valley,
a body of clouds,
going off to the shoulders
of far-off mountains. . . .
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a picture, and
she loved to look at it.

IT GOT DARK ON THE TRAIL. The trail was still soft and dusty, but rocks were present, too, and they got to pressing on her feet; she got bruises on the arches and soles, and got her toes stumped. It was getting chilly, too, and still she wasn't nowhere. And hungry – law, she reckoned she could eat elm bark if she could get it busted up to chew on.

Somewhere off to the side there was sometimes a breaking of bushes, like the sound of an animal making its way on unknown ground. She had to sing to keep her courage up. She sang the whole story of Black Jack Davie, up to where the woman was sorry she'd gone off with Black Jack because she didn't have nothing finally but him and an old straw pad to lie on. Seemed like she had aged past sixteen, and she had come to regret not having stayed at home with a rich husband, who would give her velvet shoes and a gold ring.

Well, a body couldn't have it all, Mina thought.

Now there it went, that moving through brush. Something was in there. Must be a big animal. She knew the animals at home; they doubtless knew her, anyway, for she had walked through the woods so much. But this was strange country. She guessed if she sang, the animals would leave her alone, but she was tired of singing. She had sung all the



BY
JOHN EHLE

verses she was going to, and if it was a beast, she would have to let it take her. Everybody had to die sometime; might as well be soon as late.

It was so dark she couldn't see the trail at all well.

That sound again. Something was behind her now, out on the trail.

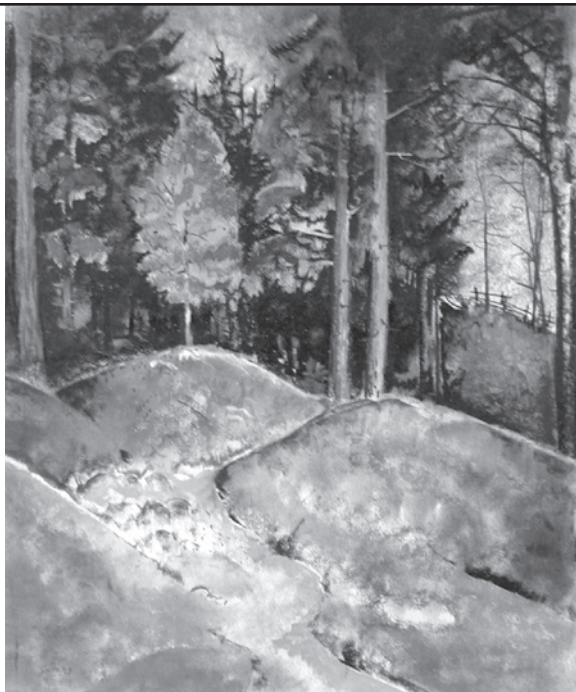
She turned slowly and saw him standing in the road, down the hill. "Why, I declare, you following me all this way?" she said, her voice trembling.

He looked black as night in the darkness, and his eyes shone. A bear's eyes always shone so brightly, anyway. He was the big bear from the valley, she suspected.

"Want me to whistle a tune? I'll sing you a song. You want me to?"

He stood without moving, listening.

"You want me to sing 'Heavenly Day'?" she said, and hummed the music of it. The bear stood



motionless, listening. Then abruptly he left the trail, went off into the woods.

Mina waited, fearful and lonely. "I don't know," she said softly. A person could hardly think of what to do.

She went limping up the road, moving slowly and listening from time to time. A wolf howled off to her right and was answered by another. Her teeth started chattering and she clamped her jaw shut. She kept climbing. Seemed like when she got to the top she'd be somewhere, to heaven if nowhere else. She'd never walked such a long distance upwards in her life.

The moon appeared, and it was close to where she was. A cloud was passing, and the cloud closed off the moonlight. She had to stop, for she couldn't see the trail.

She stood looking up at that big cloud. My, it was something. It was like a living thing; it was so close and it moved so fast. It was going faster than a horse trottin', right across the top of that mountain range. The moon was somewhere back up there, now so dim she couldn't see it. Suddenly it was there again; then it was covered over by the cloud, which looked exactly like a pearl that a man had showed her once in Virginia.

Art by Will Henry Stevens, courtesy of Blue Spiral 1

ABOVE LEFT **No. 860 Untitled (watercolor, 16x20)**

ABOVE CENTER **No. 396 Untitled (pastel on paper, 18x14)**

ABOVE RIGHT **No. 718 Untitled, 1936 (pastel on paper, 12½x16½)**



She watched the cloud go on by; then the moon was clear again. "Law, that's something," she whispered, and realized she could see the trail and went on.

Farther along she saw below her in the left, the east valley, a body of clouds, going off to the shoulders of far-off mountains, and she stopped to consider it. The scene was like a picture, and she loved to look at it.

She stood there long enough to realize how cold she was, though. It was chilly up there, she'd say that, cold as a baby's tail when it had wet itself in a cold loft. She clutched her arms around herself and wished she had a fire.

She should move on, she knew, but she liked the sight too well. It was all rolling clouds, billowing and changing as if a giant were underneath them, blowing them around. He was lying on his back in the valley, she thought, breathing in big gasps of air, and when he had his fourteen lungs full, he blew and the clouds rolled as the breaths came through.

He had a family of giants down there with him, and he just did it to pleasure the little giants. He just did it of a night afore they had to go to sleep. He told them stories and blew, so they'd have big notions in their heads by the time of sleep.

And those little mountain peaks jutting up here and there in the clouds were his toes.

He was snoring now. She laughed at the idea of that.

The clouds began billowing differently, and the sight beat the feather stuffin' out of anything she had ever seen, or that anybody had seen, she guessed, for she'd never heard tell of anything like this in her life.

The light went away and she looked up and another one of those racing clouds was going across the moon. Law, it was almost within touch. What a wonder to be up here on this high place tonight. Where in all this country could a body be to equal it, with the clouds putting on a show, and the moon hiding and coming out again, and the tall, black pine-sap trees jutting up so high. It was more'n a person could stand to think about.

A rumble came louder than before. A bolt of lightning struck and she stared, her eyes wide, for the lightning was below her. It had come out of that sea of clouds in the valley and had struck downward toward the ground. She was standing up there above the storm, and the storm below was brewing like pot likker over an oak fire, and she shouted out. She shouted as loud as she could. She was up there above the storm and she wanted somebody to know it afore she got carried off. She had never been above a storm before in her life. There was nobody she knew who had ever done it. There went more lightning, and thunder rolled down and up and around her; it caught her and shook her; it scared her heart and made her hold herself tight as a bear hug. It was seething and roaring down on that giant down there. It was bubbling with fury.

She laughed. She'd tell about it someday, if she could. "The rocks can rend" – the words went through her mind suddenly – "the earth can quake; / The seas can roar, the mountains shake . . .

Of feeling, all things show
some sign,
But this unfeeling heart of mine.

◆◆◆

She awoke in daylight. She lay without moving for a moment, for she had awakened strangely, she knew, and she thought at first she was up high on the mountain in back of her cabin and that it was afternoon, that on a walk she had bathed herself and had gone to sleep.

She remembered about the giant and looked down into the valley, but there was a thick mist, so

that she couldn't see far in it. There was the trail, not dusty but settled down with dew, and maybe a rain had fallen.

She felt her dress. Yes, a little rain had fallen.

She jumped up, agile and lithe, stretched her arms and yawned. She rubbed her nose. She was hungry as a bear. She yawned again, not even wanting to, and sniffed in the cool, pine-scented air. She rubbed her eyes.

Law, it was morning.

She ran her hand through her hair. She rolled her hair up, pinched it tight and fastened it with a vine, but the vine broke, so she let it hang loose.

She guessed she was ready to go, but where she was going she didn't know. As far as she could see through the mist there was no clearing.

Nothing but the tall trees and endless land her grandpa had got her into.

She brushed her hair back out of her face. Didn't even have a comb. Here she was seventeen

years old and her dowry was a length of broken vine. She didn't have a sheep to her name, much less a calf. A man marrying her would just have her and a bed, like that Black Jack gave his girl. He wouldn't have a gold ring from her hand, that was for certain, and not much food, either.

Her stomach growled. "Hush," she said. It was going to be growling loud as her father's fiddle playing by noon, she suspected.

Her mind stopped on a thought. Surprised as anything, she looked down at the road beside her. There in the soft earth were the tracks of a bear.

Her gaze moved along the tracks. They led to a dry place about the size of a huge bear's body, not more than ten feet from where she had slept. There were tracks that led from that place into the forest, that had been made since the rain.

She rubbed her stomach and looked about reflectively. "Well, I'm obliged," she said aloud. "You staying out here in the cold and keeping watch was the nicest thing you could a done for me."

There was not an answering sign in that great forest, except the green, heavy leaves blowing on the hardwood trees and the evergreens bowing their limbs slowly up and down. ■

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