

I / Philip Crosses Green Shoal

NEAR THE summit of Green Shoal Mountain, Philip stopped to scoop up the cold, clear water of the spring that seemed to pour from the heart of the mountain. He drank slowly, enjoying the coolness, splashing water over his face and neck. Climbing from the Guyandotte River valley to where he could see Big Ugly Creek was hot work on an August day.

He thought of his mother, who had marched both Union and Confederate renegade soldiers over the mountains between Big Creek and the Union prison at Charleston. As a child, he would beg her to tell him how she kept her rifle trained on her prisoners during the long walk. She told him she was not going to let anybody steal food from her children, and those thieves soon found out that she could use that rifle.

Philip's daddy, Philip Hager II, was a Baptist preacher who hadn't wanted to get into a war he did not believe in, so he hid in a cave till one side or the other found him. "Philip," he told his son, "don't make any mistake about it. Wars are fought for rich people. Mountain folks don't have any stake in any war."

Standing on the rocky north side of Green Shoal, Philip remembered his father but knew himself to be different. He would not be a preacher. He would be the doctor his mother wanted him to be. He told Mr. Smith over at the county seat about his mother eating lots of onions to keep from getting sick at the prison. Mr. Smith laughed and said, “That probably did protect her. But, Philip, your mother was born strong. Best thing your daddy ever did was to marry her. You watch who you marry.” Philip had blushed, and he felt his face getting hot as he remembered.

Mr. Smith had more books than anyone in the county, and he loaned them to Philip, all that Philip had time to read. He advised Philip to plan to go to Richmond and learn to be a doctor. “But you will need more money than you can save from digging sang,” he warned.

Philip had known already about the money and had a plan. He had helped cut timber along One Mile. It was hard work, and the money went mostly to the man who owned the trees. So Philip bought land along Big Ugly, determined to cut the timber and float the logs down the Guyandotte to the Ohio River. But first he had to find some labor along this wild creek.

Going down the steep trail, his knees protested. He thought about how the body never quite adjusts to new demands without practice. He knew people who used their hands like cavemen with clubs, couldn’t write for anything. He didn’t suppose doctors could do much about that, but they could help men with bullets in their sides and beautiful women with TB.

Tears came to his eyes as he remembered his young sister, Emma Jane. He hadn't been able to help her when she got TB. She had been married only two years to Albert Adkins before she died. But Philip had some hard walking yet to do and these thoughts weren't helping. He began to whistle. It was tuneless but brisk. Anybody who knew the song could tell what he was whistling by the timing, he told himself, and smiled.

Whistling passed the time as he made his long-legged way along the dusty trail that lay between the hillside and the creek. He was on his way to the Ferrell home to see Clint Ferrell. They had met when both were serving on the grand jury at the county seat. He could tell that Clint was a hard worker in spite of his fiddle playing and moonshine. Philip knew Clint couldn't read, but a lot of jurors couldn't read. Philip had to have someone who lived on Ugly if he was ever going to get people living there to work for him. It was going to be hard to get the logs down to the creek. They would have to use mules and go along the creek-side trail with some of them, maybe most.

Ahead of him was a well-built log house on the creek side of the trail where there was some bottomland. The Holleys lived there, according to the map he had made with the help of Clint's information. "Howdy," an older man called from the garden. "Howdy," Philip answered. The man came to the split rail fence and extended his hand to Philip.

"I'm on my way up to the Ferrells'," Philip explained.

"Well, come on in and set. My name is Jacob Holley."

“Philip Hager, Mr. Holley, from over on One Mile.”

“You are a long way from home. Yonder is my woman and she probably has dinner ready. You are welcome.”

Philip knew the ready hospitality of people in these lonely valleys. He would have outside news for them.

Mrs. Holley was a tall, gaunt woman whose smile showed gaps in her teeth. As their seven boys filed in to eat, Philip saw how she had lost her teeth—at least one for every birth.

The dinner was fit for men who would do hard outdoor work till sundown. There was side meat, green beans cooked with onions, and potatoes. The corn bread was coarse and hot. Milk had been hanging in the well, Philip supposed, but it was still warm. Mrs. Holley kept bringing tomatoes and onions but she did not eat with the men.

“Mrs. Holley, this is the best corn bread I’ve had since I left my mother’s house.”

“Have some more coffee, Mr. Hager,” she said, taking his cup to the woodstove to pour the potent brew from a gallon coffeepot.

There was banter among the sons. “Hobe here builds the straightest chimneys you ever did see, Mr. Hager.” Philip looked at the tall young man with strong features and curling brown hair. “Only when he ’haint courtin’ Sarah Ferrell,” a younger brother teased. They all laughed and Philip joined in.

Later, on the porch, he remarked to Mr. Holley that he could tell good farmers by looking at their chimneys. “That a fact?” Mr. Holley asked.

“Yes, it is,” Philip said. “If their chimney is straight they are careful workers. I can see that your sons take after you. Would they like to work for me cutting timber? They could lay off whenever you needed one of them.”

“Heard that you was coming and I studied it. I can spare the middle two. I have to have Hobe here, he is the best of the lot. Their ma won’t let the young ones go.”

“That is good thinking and I thank you. Clint Ferrell will be working with me.”

“I know that.” Mr. Holley was just stating a fact. Clint had let everyone in the valley know about Philip Hager and his plans. Philip smiled to himself and rose to leave, wondering how he could thank Mrs. Holley.

“Thank you, sir, for the dinner and the good talk,” he said, shaking Mr. Holley’s hand. Just then he saw Mrs. Holley smiling from the open door. He returned her smile and waved as he started on down the creek-side trail. He was anxious to reach the Ferrells’ before evening. The sun set early down here in the valley.

He was dusty, with cooling sweat pouring over his face, when he reached the footbridge across the creek to the Ferrell place. There were sweet peas on the rail fence and deep red velvet roses grew along the path to the porch. There was a neat garden of corn, potatoes, onions, beans, and cucumbers. At the sandy end of the garden there were watermelons that looked ready to pick.

Later he would remember how the vines on the porch posts framed the slender woman who stood shading her eyes against the sun low on the horizon. Her dress was

the pink of the sweet peas and her hair shone deep brown, even a little bit red, in the sun. “Howdy,” she called, “you must be Philip Hager. Clint is expecting you.” She smiled and, for the first time in his life, Philip Hager had no words.