

The Grass Grows Again

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Hopeless, Joe stumbled
across his flaming acres

Remember this, Joe Mardsden: No catastrophe, however terrible, can stay for long the breathing of the soil you love

THE Pennsylvania mountains were harsh and hostile, yet as soon as Joe Mardsden left the main valley and guided his cow and horse up Bitter Creek Valley, he sensed that here a man would never be asked to sign his life away for a bit of paper.

The heavy growth of beard on his face did not completely conceal the prison pallor in his cheeks. But he held his head erect as his glance embraced the bleak mountains that surrounded Bitter Creek.

He came to the place where the valley split, with a branch of the creek coming out of each. The left branch was wide, almost of river proportions, but the right was a narrow trickle.

Joe stopped, leaning on his rifle. He

had paid one hundred dollars, the last money he had in the world after buying the horse and cow, for any hundred acres of land he might select in Bitter Creek. This was to be the place. The nose of mountain, coming down between the two creeks, leveled into a bench fifty feet above the highest possible spot the creek might reach in flood time. It would be a good place for his house and barn. Only scattered trees grew in either creek bottom. That would save him work in clearing, and bottom land was best.

Not that Joe expected a fertile farm here. Land which lay within five hundred miles of New York and sold for one dollar an acre in 1939 had to be poor. But on good farms a poor man had to work for someone else. Here everything he won would be hard won. But that was all right for it would be his.

Joe cast the lead rope from his Jersey cow. Heavy with calf, she walked into the sparse grass that grew in the creek bottom and began to graze. The horse rolled in an ecstasy of freedom when its pack was cast off, then began cropping at the grass.

Across the narrow right-hand branch of the creek a spray of lush green began a hundred feet up the hill, and spread until it was almost three hundred feet wide when it reached the creek. Joe's practiced eye swept it. It was a swamp, possibly a dangerous one. Horses and cattle could bog down and smother in swamps. He'd better look it over.

But this swamp was shallow. The mountains had springs in abundance, and there were several emerging from the base of this mountain that would keep the swamp always wet. Joe crossed and criss-crossed it several times. It was all right, there were no

bog holes. He had nothing to worry about.

Then as he was emerging from the swamp, a bluejay fitted from its nest in the crotch of a low aspen tree and balanced on a limb ten feet away.

Joe approached the nest carefully. The bluejay dipped its head and bobbed its tail. Joe peered in the nest and saw there were eggs. Cautiously he backed away. He was with this country and of it now. He wanted to stay, to build, to find here what he had never before found anywhere. He would, of course, kill some things and trap some furs. But that was necessary for his own survival. There was a difference between using the birds and animals and abusing them.

The late May sun beat down hotly when he returned to the knoll where he had decided to build his house and barn. He unrolled the packs he had brought with him, and spread a section of canvas over two poles laid rectangularly over two more poles which were driven into the ground. Slowly and deliberately he made his bed under the canvas. It was to be his home until he had time to make a better one. He picked up a double-bitted ax and set to work felling trees.

The sun became pitilessly hot as it reached its peak and gradually began to descend. Joe stood erect and mopped his brow. He looked at the trees he had felled and trimmed, and knew a conscious glow of achievement. All his life he had worked hard, but always he had done someone else's bidding. Now at last he was doing something for himself.

The day waned. Joe sank his ax into the stump of a tree and left it quivering there as he set about the evening chores. He milked the cow and watched her as she sought the coolness of the

swamp. He caught the horse and stroked its smooth muzzle while he talked to it. The cow and horse were all the stock he had been able to afford, but he would have more.

Joe returned to the knoll and made a fire. He placed a skillet full of jerked meat over the fire, brewed tea in a tin can, and boiled a great kettle full of potatoes. A man who worked hard had to eat hearty. It was while the meal was cooking that he glanced down the valley and saw the man wading the broad left-hand branch of Bitter Creek.

Even in the crepuscular light, Joe recognized him. But he did not reach for his rifle; he made no hostile move. In two year's imprisonment he had forgotten all bitterness.

THE man was tall and spare, with a heavy black beard that tumbled about his chest and long unkempt hair that fell to his shoulders. Pale skin, strangely untanned by the sun, showed through his cotton shirt, held together with safety pins, and his ragged trousers. His feet were bare, but he carried an expensive repeating rifle.

But there was something about him not in harmony with his surroundings. Looking at this man, Joe knew that he lived in fear and had been frightened for a long time. Joe said, as he approached the knoll:

"Howdy, Wilse."

The man stopped, his rifle ready instantly to snap to his shoulder. Joe faced him calmly. Two years ago he and this man had robbed a store. After a lifetime of hard living, of never seeming able to get more than a few dollars at one time, Joe had set out after easy money, with which he could buy a farm. He had been caught and convicted. Wilse had escaped. One day,

if he was ever caught, he too would face prison.

Witse Cooper said gruffly. "What you doin' here?"

Joe read the man. He was a victim of his own mind, desperate at thought of losing his freedom. Yet, freedom did him no good.

"Maybe I ain't doin' what you think," Joe said easily. "I served two years for what we did. My brother died while I was in prison. He left me enough money for a stake. I brought this land and an outfit."

Witse Cooper laughed, a cracked noise. "How much they offer you for turnin' me in?" he snapped.

Joe said, "You always was a damn fool. I was too, once. That's why I followed you. But now you're crazy. If you think what you did is so all-fired important to anybody that they're goin' to lay awake nights worryin' about it, you're cracked. I never told anybody about you, and I don't know whether there's any reward out for you.

"If you ever get caught, you'll come to trial. That's all right. But if you behave yourself, and don't bother anybody and keep hid here maybe nobody will ever bother you. I hope not. I'd hate to see anybody else go through what I did."

Witse Cooper laughed again. "Why'd you come here?" he repeated.

Joe waved a hand toward the logs he had felled, toward the horse in the creek bottom and the cow at the edge of the swamp. "Because I got tired of plowin' somebody else's field and havin' them take the harvest I raised. Because I was crazy lollin' around wonderin' if anything in my life was ever goin' to be worthwhile I came here to be a man!"

Witse Cooper's little eyes gleaned

behind the ragged mat of hair that covered his face. His mouth twisted, making his face suddenly malignant. He sighed, a long animal sigh.

"Listen," he said feverishly. "I know you're lying. You wouldn't come here to farm. But I've stayed in a shack up here for two years, and I ain't getting out now. Nobody but a few hill-billies knows I'm here, and they know what'll happen if they tell. I'll kill anybody who comes after me, and I'll kill you unless you get out. Get out! Start now!"

"I didn't even know you was here," Joe said. "But you can stay until Hell freezes for all of me. I'm stayin', and if there was fifty like you I'd still stay. I was born in a stable, and raised in an orphanage. I was bound out to a farmer who sweated the soul out of me. All my life I've been a hired man. This is the only chance I ever had, and I'm goin' to make good. Now *you* get out. Don't cross me again."

In one swift jerk, Wilse Cooper snapped the rifle to his shoulder. But as the gun moved, Joe leaped. He grasped the rifle barrel. Straining hard, the two men stood shoulder to shoulder for a space. Then, suddenly, the strength seemed to flow from Wilse Cooper. He released his grip on the rifle, and stumbled backward. Gasping, he faced Joe. He was a tree with a rotten core, that will snap all at once when the tough outer shell is broken. A wavering yellow gleam fluttered like shade in his eyes. He was a beaten man, but still a dangerous one.

Methodically Joe pumped the cartridges out of the rifle and thrust it under the canvas. The night had not brought coolness, but a chill of rage whispered up his spine. Almost, but not quite, he had been in a murdering passion then. He had to control him-

self. Murder could mean prison for the rest of his life.

"Get out!" he said. "Get out and don't come back. I'm staying here."

Dumbly Wilse Cooper looked at him. His eyes were strangely vacant, almost blank as he whirled to start back across the creek.

EARLY dawn brought with it an avalanche of heat. The sun hung over an eastern peak, a molten red ball. But Joe crawled from the leanto and entered the day feeling vibrant and alive. He went to the creek, stripped off his clothes and plunged in. The water was cold, with almost an icy touch. Joe laughed. It was a good country even though it was hard.

The green grass was shriveled, the leaves on the trees wilting under the furnace of the sky as he went back and set about the day's work. The floor of the forest, and of the creek meadow, was dry. There could not have been any rain for several weeks prior to his arrival, but that was all right. Bitter Creek Valley offered cold and heat, flood and drought—extremes of everything. But if Bitter Creek had been a desirable farming land, it would have been claimed, and he would not have been standing this moment upon his own land.

The cow moved listlessly out of the swamp when Joe went to milk, and as soon as he had finished, walked lazily back into it again. The horse stretched flat on the hillside having grazed its fill and now wanting only rest.

Joe dreamed as he stood with the pail of milk in his hand. Not for years would he have enough money to purchase more stock. But he could find some way of breeding those he had—Wilse Cooper had spoken of others in

the hills who would have stock. For the first time since Joe could remember he felt entirely happy and unrestrained.

His place, his stock, his work! And all of it good.

Sweat rolled unheeded from his brow as he toiled with the ax. He lost himself in work. Every chip his ax bit from a tree was one step nearer his cherished goal. A barn that would winter his stock could be erected in two weeks. The house would take about as long, but first he must plant a garden. That notion took possession of him as he worked—to plant something and to harvest and keep it for himself. It was a wonderful idea.

At noon he threw the ax down and repaired to the creek bottom with the spade. A little wind fanned his face, and when he looked again at the sky, there was a single murky cloud in it. Contentedly he plunged the spade into the earth. It would rain soon, all things came to a strong man in a strong country. Memory of his many defeats faded and became dim as he made a garden.

It would not be easy.

The dry grass rustled and complained as he trampled it down, and the spade turned up thin earth that never would nourish corn higher than a man's head. But it could be fertilized, and it was his. When the garden was spaded, he smoothed it with a rake, and worked far into the night pressing seeds into it in long, even rows.

There were more clouds in the sky at night, and the wind was stronger. Joe sat in front of the leanto, staring into the gathering darkness. It seemed to him that he had been hundreds of years finding this place. Wilse Cooper was not going to drive him from it.

When morning came he hurried out of bed, and went eagerly down to the

garden he had planted. The earth over it was hot and dry. Joe got down on his knees and peered carefully at each row he had planted. Nothing had sprouted as yet; it was absurd to suppose that anything had. Yet he wanted to see.

IN THE east, the sky was a yellow bank of clouds and the wind blew so steadily that it leveled the grass in the meadow. Rain would come on the wings of that wind but it might hold off for two or three days and Joe wanted to be sure of his garden. He carried pail after pail of water from the creek to the garden. It must grow. It had to grow.

And with it would grow the new Joe Marsden: confident and secure, with the right to be proud.

The cow was nervous and fretful when he drove her out of the swamp; she trotted back into it as soon as he had milked. Joe inspected her critically. She would calf soon. He had to watch her. He carried the pail of milk back to the leanto and covered it. He left it there to cool.

He felled trees all morning. The task became almost fascinating. From these logs, that had been trees, would spring a shelter for himself and his stock—realization of the dream he had always dreamed. There were many trees more than enough to build the great barn that would be his one day. Bitter Creek was not wholly bitter. Some things it offered in surfeit.

He did not glance up from his work. Consequently his nose first warned him that something was wrong. An alien scent, a faint something that should not have been there, tickled his nostrils. Barely conscious of it, Joe worked on. Then he looked toward the fire over which he had cooked his morning's

meal. It must be out, he had put it out. He heard the horse scream, a rolling, blood-chilling sound of fear. Joe looked toward the meadow, to stand with mouth agape.

A thin screen of smoke was curling up from the meadow. It gathered volume. Flame, driven by the wind, roared up as he looked. Joe saw his cow, with tail held high, careen out of the meadow, struggle a second in a yellow sheet of fire, and go down. After that he saw the cow no more. He was suddenly, violently, sick. His horse pounded down the meadow to splash across Bitter Creek and gallop up the mountain on the other side.

He saw Wilse Cooper crawling across the meadow, stopping at intervals to throw another match down. Where the meadow met the side of the mountain, Wilse arose to shake a fist at Joe. Then he ran, scuttling up the side of the mountain toward a patch of laurel.

The flames gathered strength and breath as the blast they created met and mingled with the wind in the valley. A burning clump of grass arose to be whirled high in the air. It scattered. Piece by piece it drifted back to earth. A thin trail of smoke followed a burning bit back into the laurel on the hillside. Smoke poured up from there. A moment later the laurel was a white-hot bed of snapping flame.

Joe saw all that—and more.

Witse Cooper turned to run back down the mountain. But the fire he had set had swept far down the meadow. Desperately he ran. Inexorably the fire closed the great pincer of flame between the meadow and the laurel on the mountain. The last Joe saw of Wilse, he was hopping, like a toy man, into a hanging sheet of smoke. He did not come out again.

FOR a moment Joe stood his ground. He saw this thing happening, but he did not believe it. Then as realization became complete, he thought wildly of getting a blanket, wetting it in the creek, and beating the flames out. But it was impossible. The fire had too great a start. And the cow was dead, he knew that. The horse had escaped, but the horse was less than the cow. Now that he had no cow to help him build his farm, he might never be able to buy another.

If it mattered, now . . .

The instinct of self-preservation asserted itself sluggishly. Wilse Cooper must have been a little mad. The wide branch of Bitter Creek was only a few hundred feet from where Joe stood. He could cross it easily and escape the fire. Wilse could not kill him with the fire in which he himself had died, but it might have been kinder if he had. Wilse had killed most of his dream, more important than life itself.

Dully Joe stooped to gather up the blankets, the canvas, the few utensils and parcels of food he had brought with him. He carried them, along with his rifle and Wilse's gun, down to Bitter Creek and threw them in. A trout left the open water and flitted for the shelter of the bank as Joe's shadow fell across the creek. Joe stared at the fish enviously. Life was so simple, so good to it.

Only when the flames were licking within feet of him did Joe wade across the pool. He sat indifferently on the other side, watching the fire. Two hours ago he had had everything, now it was wiped out. The curse that had been with him all his life would never be wiped out. He would always be haunted.

Above him, on the barren hillside where it had paused, he saw his horse.

The horse, too was fortunate. It had no worries other than getting sufficient fodder to fill its belly. When the horse had thought it would be trapped by the fire it had known the depths of terror. But now that it had escaped all peril, already it was thinking of its belly again, beginning to crop the sparse shrubbery that grew on the hillside.

Well, that was all right.

Stolidly, Joe shifted his eyes back to the fire. He was crushed, but dimly thankful that the blow had descended in such overwhelming measure. It left no room for reproaches, resentment, self-denunciation. All he knew was a sense of bitter hopelessness. He watched the fire flare higher as it licked the outer edges of the logs he had cut, and smolder as it began to feed its vast hunger on their sap-wet cores. It raced through the green trees, nourishing itself on the dead leaves at their feet.

Leaving nothing.

In a billowing roll of yellow smoke, the fire reached the top of the mountain that rose behind the knoll where he had wanted to build his home. Joe had not yet had time to climb to the top of the mountain, but from the rapid progress of the fire after it reached there he knew that the top must be covered with laurel, sweet fern, and other waxy foliage that burned fast.

Then, like a sudden benediction, the rains came.

JOE sat unmoving on the banks of Bitter Creek. The rain had been falling for fifteen minutes, was pouring down with all the violence of a mountain storm, before he was aware of it. Stolidly he rose to his feet. He saw the rain falling in the creek, making the surface come alive with a har-

rage of heavy drops. The creek surged about his knees as he waded into it. Its coolness was strangely soothing, as if the water were offering him salve for deep wounds.

He did not need to go to the logs he had cut to know that they were destroyed. A mixed drizzle, half-mist, half-smoke, floated softly into the air from where they had been. The place where he had cut the trees opened like a raw wound on the hillside. He had brought his curse here. If he had not come, Bitter Creek would still be peaceful.

Yet there was one spot that the fire had spared.

The swamp was still green. He had last seen the cow running out of it and he found her scorched body, stiff legs asprawl, where she had fallen. He glanced at her soberly, meaninglessly and walked on into the swamp. It was strange, he thought he had figured everything, but never once had he thought that the cow would die one day. With eyes straight before him he walked on.

The fire had bitten gaping chunks out of the earth at the edge of the swamp. Little tendrils of smoke curled through cracks in the ground, betraying the flame that was still eating the roots deep in the earth. Joe walked around such places.

Then, at the very edge of the swamp, the bluejay hopped from its nest and flitted uncertainly to the crotch of a nearby tree. Joe stopped again. The trunk of the tree in which the bluejay nested was blackened and burned. A blacksnake, intent on robbing the nest, had been overtaken by the fire a third of the way up the tree and hung there in scorched stiffness.

But the bluejay had returned. Nothing had daunted it or kept it from it

nest and all the hopes it had formed there. If a bird had that much courage, he himself could build again. It was a lesson to a hard man in a hard country. Joe looked wonderingly toward the bluejay; he followed its gaze, and saw the calf.

The calf was on the little knoll where its mother had abandoned it, standing on wobbly legs and looking at the earth around it with wide eyes. Joe ap-

proached it gently, and cradled it in his arms. It was hungry, but he still had the pail of milk in the spring. That would feed the calf until he could get more milk. The pelting rain washed the dead ashes from the creek meadow and revealed the green grass just beneath as Joe started toward the knoll where he would have his home.

It was surprising how quickly the grass would grow again after a fire.