

Stumps of Good Timber



by Raymond S. Spears

OLD DREW NUCKLE was mad; for years and years, grim greed had led him into the depths of selfishness, grasping for other men's lands and money; his cunning had enabled him to lead his neighbors in the mountains into desperate financial straits, to his advantage. He had, at last, held in his hands a great fortune, but he lacked the knowledge that would enable him to profit by it—or even to recognize the presence of the fortune in the 2,400 rough mountain acres of the Range 4 Lots.

Now Old Drew wandered up and down the mountains crying:

“A skun log floats! A skun log floats!” People said Old Drew's madness was the direct punishment of his sins, which were many and varied; others said that it was his ignorance which had fallen upon him; others, even more philosophical, declared that if Old Drew hadn't been ignorant, he wouldn't have committed so many sins and that sin was ignorance, anyhow.

Accordingly, Old Drew became the subject and the warning of many mountain sermons in the white church, the block schoolhouse, and in the revivals. He came to the meetings and his shrill, weird voice would rise uncannily at the services as he shouted:

“A skun log floats! A skun log floats!”

All his petty little knowledge, trickery craft and perseverance in greed had come to that one phrase and fact. He would take his little hatchet in bark-peeling time, and ross the bark from hardwoods, gums, beeches, sugar-woods. He would stand the poles in the sunshine and carry them, in the autumn, to see them float in Clinch River, or any of the tributary creeks and runs. A fact that had escaped his ignorance was now all

that remained of his intelligence.

Because Sal-Bet Legere was of good heart and her man Tip was willing, she gave Old Drew a cabin to live in and kept him in eatings. Really, the old man was happier than he had ever been before. Fear of not making money, fear of being beaten in a bargain, fear of poverty had given way at least to sheer contentment of knowing one thing, the thing that had made him mad!

So now he rambled up and down, telling every one what was no longer a secret. Time had been when possession of such a secret would have led him to the meanest and most despicable of expedients to prevent others from knowing and profiting by it. Now his mad mind rejoiced in telling it to all, which was a complete reversal of habit of thought and mind. He had a madness for giving away what had been a precious secret!

So little by little the tendency to help some one else became brighter in Drew Nuckle's darkened soul. From a flickering sparkle, it widened and deepened till he would carry his hat full of berries down to the seven-pupil district school and give to each child and to the teacher a sweet handful to go with the pone lunches. He carried bushels of nuts to the wretched cabins of the poverty-stricken, where dwelt a stupidity denser than his own madness. He returned to the craftiness of his own childhood and caught mink, coon, muskrats and other furs with wire snares and deadfalls, and somehow managed to trade them off for the benefit of some one else.

The jeers and delight with which people had greeted the downfall of the old skin-flint gave way now to pity and wonder, as they saw his generosity grow before their eyes, and counted it the most remarkable phenomenon of his change of

mind.

Once mad, always mad! People liked Old Drew better insane than sane, however. No one feared him now, and he was more welcome than many a man who despised his weakness and hated him for what he had been. Away down in the madness was something which showed that he remembered the old days and acts and was ashamed of them. When he met some one whom he had misused of old, he would turn his head away, like a dog caught stealing chickens, or killing sheep. He avoided the people from whom he had taken profits, whose lands he had lawed away, or whom he had beaten in unfair trades. Yet to the children of these families he always showed special favor. He brought them wild fruits and nuts, and gave them hints for catching fish or trapping fur.

One day, in early summer, when the big war began, he disappeared. His cabin on the Gospel and Literature Lot was abandoned. He had been seen on the new Contract Road going down grade out of the mountains just at dusk, but whither he was going none could tell or know.

Days lengthened into weeks and months, and people decided that Old Drew had fallen into some deep river eddy, or he had wandered up into the mountains where he had died, perhaps from sickness, perhaps from injury. As he belonged to no one, no one went to seek him. Hard times came on for the mountain people. Markets for their timber closed; prices of furs came away down; there was no place left to sell sang or herbs. Revenuers were more active than ever, cutting off the market for their crops of grain and fruit by destroying moonshine stills. Everything that was purchased "outside" began to go up and up—sugar, coffee, flour, salt and the like, as well as all cooking utensils, all manufactured fabrics, leather and rubber boots and hats.

Poverty among poor people grew so intense that nothing else could be thought about. Old Drew had taken his departure—and the people had other things to think about, which were, as they supposed, much more important

Old Drew Nuckle, however, returned in the winter that followed. He looked ten years younger; he walked with brisk footsteps; he had a strange light in his eyes—madness, but not the old insanity. Not once did he say "A skun log floats!"

Instead he cried:

"Boys! They wouldn't take me for warring, but I kin he'p! I kin he'p!"

Crazy? Crazier than ever? Poor Old Drew had something wrong in his head, somewhere. A laugh went up, but Drew persisted in saying that they could all help up there in the mountains.

He set the example for them; He went out into the clearings and old cutovers and gathered up chunks of the old stumps that stood in the fields—the pieces of wood that had set and weather hardened while all the rest of the stumps and roots decayed. He had lost his mind, people reminded one another, in a dicker over 2,400 acres of land where black walnut grew in fine stand. Now he gathered pieces of black walnut stumps, gnarled boles and knots and roots. He dug them out with pick, ax and shovel, and toted them down to his Gospel and Literature Lot cabin, piece by piece. Some of the chunks were no larger than his forearm; others were so large and heavy that he had to up-end them over and over, or roll them down to his front yard.

"What are yo' doin', Drew?" people would ask.

"I'm he'pin' in the war!" the old man would reply, not pausing in his efforts, "I'm a he'pin'!"

There was a laugh in every time Drew Nuckle made his reply. The old man had somehow picked up the notion that he was helping wage war for civilization, liberty and oppressed nations by gathering the material fit for a snag-stump fence. He was not satisfied to work alone, at that.

When he went mad he had had several thousands of dollars buried in the ground, and for a long time neither he nor any one else could find the money. Now he brought out mysterious gold, silver, nickel and copper coins. Shrewdly he held silence about the source of his supply, and no one could follow him to where he tapped his hidden board. He hired help gathering those ridiculous chunks of wood.

Old Drew's madness was a boon to his mountain neighbors; the pennies and small silver which he paid the little children for gathering black walnut chunks salted many a dinner, got raising for many a mess of hot bread, and added necessities to many a poverty-stricken cabin.

The unfeeling laughed as they gazed at that

shimmering, gnarled, black heap of walnut chunks rising in Old Drew Nuckle's yard. From a little pile, like a section of stump fence, it grew till it covered square yards, then square rods. The mass increased till it was as large as a cabin, and finally, till it was as big as the famous Marble palace over on Holston.

From a few score chunks, it grew until there were fairly hundreds of cords of chunks, to which thousands of acres of cut-over lands had contributed. Only black walnut pieces were in the mass. Old Drew Nuckle knew woods, none better. He could recognize by feel the smooth, beautiful texture in the blackest night, when some mountain fugitive from justice dickered with him; he knew the smell of a shaving of walnut from any other kind of wood; light knot or dead-weight bole, he was not to be fooled.

"What yo' goin' to do with it?" a man asked.

"I'm gwine to he'p fight in the war!" Old Drew grinned.

"But how are you goin' to he'p fight the war with that stuff?" the man persisted.

Old Drew puzzled to find the answer. The observers saw his mad face twitching and his tongue wrapping itself around, trying to put forth the answer that clove in his throat. He could not answer. Out of the days before he was insane had lingered the old reticence—he could not betray this secret of his industry, much as he wanted to, so strong had been the habit of silence that he had lost the power of clear expression.

The Legeres, in their friendliness, tried, to stop Old Drew from spending all his money which he had now begun to recover from its hiding places. He refused to take their advice. Instead, he begged them to take money in return for the hundreds of unrotted black walnut stumps up onto the Range 4 Lots. Out of the pity in their hearts, they took the ten-cent, fifty-cent and dollar silver pieces, even pieces of gold, but saved his money for him for the day, when he should need it again.

They watched Old Drew and his young helpers grubbing out the old stumps and dragging them down to his cabin, which was beside the new Contract Road, over which the automobile stage now carried the mail and down which the Legeres drove their own little gasoline machine.

Old Drew Nuckle's industry and perseverance never flagged. He put himself in

possession of all the old black walnut stumps and chunks on that side of the mountains, for miles and miles around. Old fields were grubbed out, new cut-overs cleaned, even old fences replaced by new, and the abandoned ruins of log cabins were axed, seeking the waste for which Old Drew would pay real money.

At the last, adults were bringing in old timber on their wagons or even strapped across the saddles of their horses, glad to have the pennies which the madman would give for them.

How long Old Drew would have gone on collecting those chunks no one can tell. Somewhere, somehow, he had caught one fleeting fact in the welter of ideas and opportunities that grew up with the outbreak of the big war. Somehow, his mad mind had seized upon the fact of one real need in the world crisis. He had set about trying to supply that need. He had gathered thousands upon thousands of chunks, every one of black walnut, some whole stumps, others short, wind polished roots and knots.

He had them, but his poor enfeebled mind did not tell him what to do with them. He was like the young, untrained robin with the instinct to build a nest, gathering bushels and bushels of twigs and mud and grass and other materials, spreading it along all the beams of a barn, but not understanding building.

Sal-Bet Legere wondered about his idea. She grappled with the fact that the old fellow must have some incentive, somewhere, to start him gathering those chunks. Little by little, she applied the shrewdness inherited from her father, Old Crumby, first at one point, then at another.

Black walnut, in log timber was valuable, of course. Her own fortune was based on the sales of walnut-tree logs. But here was a vast mass of mere little chunks. Old Drew had paid as high as five cents a dozen for walnut pieces, no larger than her wrist and hand. He had received an impulse somewhere. he had seen an opportunity—seized it, worked it out, and now he had forgotten what it was. He could not remember what he had had in mind.

"He's like a miser who sets out to get money enough to buy a farm, and then forgets what he wants the gold for, and he keeps on saving, and saving, never knowing when he has enough, or when to stop!" she thought.

One day she heard a rumor. Some of the wild young men were going to have some fun with Old Drew. They were going down to the old man's place and build a fire in one end of the great snag pile, and set back and enjoy seeing the old fellow romp and rage around. Sal-Bet knew that the young scoundrels would do what they were talking about. It seemed to her to be a wanton shame, but she could not see her way clear to preventing it. Teasing the crazy old man was common enough.

"It's his own wood!" she argued with one youth. "You've got no right to burn it!"

"Yah—hit's no 'count—old sticks an' stumps!" she was told. "Hit'd be fun to see it blaze up, an' old Drew rearin', tearin' around—"

"He'd sure kill somebody," she suggested.

"Shucks!" the youth retorted. "He ain't got no gun—"

"Well, I have!" she exclaimed. "I'm goin' down there, an' I'll shoot any young scoundrel I find tryin' to burn Old Drew's wood pile!"

She had a rifle of her own, a 25-35 caliber, which her husband had given her to shoot at wild turkeys and squirrels and other game. She took it and started on her horse down the road, with her belt of ammunition. She found Old Drew sitting on the sunny side of his heap of chunks, fondling a piece about 20 inches long, seven, inches wide and shaped like the folded wing of a bird.

"Hit's a purty! Hit's a purty!" he was mumbling to himself. "Yas, suh, hit's a purty!"

"Hello, Drew!" she roused him from his dreams. "Some young scoundrels 'lowed they'd burn yo' wood pile, an' hyar's a rifle, if they try hit!"

"Burn my wood pile?" he repeated, stupidly. "I ain't got no wood pile, but, Lawse! I got these yeah chunks—look't, Mis' Legere! Yo' kin have this yeah one, 'count of yo' bein' good to me. See—fo' yo' rifle, an' hyar, fo' yo' hand grip—when yo' fight them as—them as ain' peaceable to'd we'uns, an' rowdys aroun'!"

"Wha-wha—" the shrewd mountain woman

gasped, as she saw what the old man had almost forgotten, "yas, suh, Drew! Hit's so! Yo'-all's he'pin' make rifles!"

"Jes' so!" he smiled, "Hit's my little share, yes, indeedy! I were too mean an' ornery, back in our Civil War times, to he'p ary side. Now, I'm too ole to fight, so I grubbed out these yeah—all these yeah! I couldn't do no mo', Mis' Sal-Bet! I see yo' got yo' rifle. This yeah'd make a purtier butt, hit'd fit better, an' when yo' young'uns git to shootin'—Lawse! Mebby—mebby yo'-all will sort of think of me, all crippled up an' no 'count, he'pin' make yo' rifles!"

"Indeed the boys'll remember!" she cried, and as she turned her horse to gallop to find her man, she called, "I'm a coming right back, Drew!"

When Tip Leger heard the thing that Sal-Bet had divined, and when he knew that Old Drew Nuckle had collected black walnut for tens of thousands of rifle butts and barrel grips, he laughed aloud with joy. It was just so! He rode out, then, and gathered young men to guard that great heap of chunks, stumps, knots and pieces, so that they would be preserved against any raider.

Then he rode down to the railroad station, and when he returned he brought a telegram offering a fortune for Old Drew's collection of odd pieces of black walnut, fit especially for making rifle butts and hand grips.

And with that message Old Drew's mind opened up a little more. He could see a brighter light. He felt that he had been doing something to help.

"I cayn't shoot none," he shook his head, "but I kin he'p make rifles, yes, indeedy."

No one laughed now when they heard him say that. They pitied him; they remembered, too, that he had spent all his money, keeping them in salt and sugar, coffee and shoots, trying with all his feeble mind's might to atone for the things that he had neglected to do in the war of his youthful years, there in the mountains.