

Wild Cat Ridge



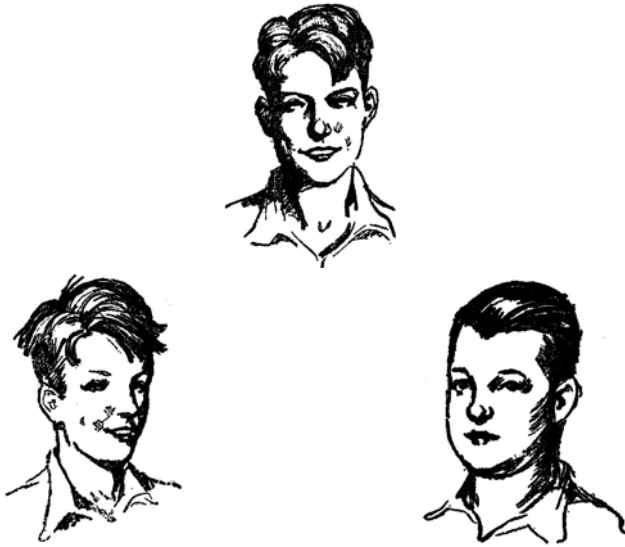
Maristan Chapman



Wild Cat Ridge

by Maristan Chapman

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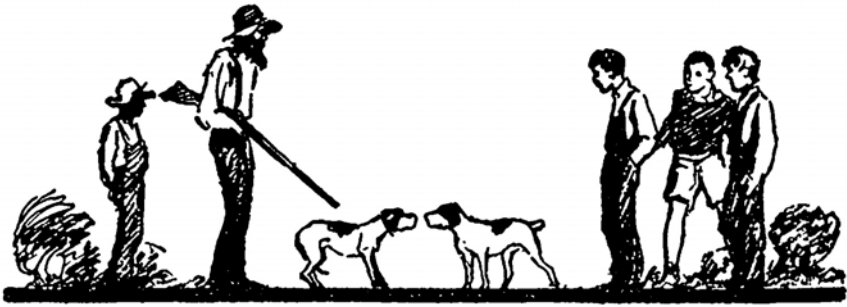
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To

CHARLES KNICKERBOCKER

*in return for pleasant hours and certain
stern criticism, this book is dedicated by
his affectionate friend, the author*



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1. Dale Has a Notion

FAR back in the mountains of east Tennessee, in the Over Hill country, there is the town of Glen Hazard. The town is cramped down in a narrow valley between two high hills. The valley is just wide enough for Black Wolf Creek to run through it, and, beside the creek, there is the railroad track. There is one big house in Glen Hazard, and a few very small ones, and some big stacks of lumber that have been brought down the mountain to be shipped away to furniture factories. The houses have so little room that they are built here and there, and look as if they were playing hop-scotch over Black Wolf Creek. Up on the sides of the tall hills among the trees are some more houses, clinging to the steep slopes as if afraid of being shaken down whenever a train goes through.

The two roads leading out of Glen Hazard twist up the hills as best they can. One winds its way up to Red Hill, where the worn-out coal mine is, and the other goes up Cragg Hill. This Cragg Hill road goes up past the church and school house, through the forest westward to Wild Cat Ridge.

One June day three boys ran down the Cragg Hill road from the school house, playing Last Touch with their strapped books, dodging behind rocks and racing for the shelter of the trees.

Dale Gillow was far ahead, for he was long and lanky and could jump sideways like a spider. He hid behind a tree, waiting till the tempting, plump figure of Sadler Jones should come by. He held his strap loose, so as to give Sadler a good thump. Directly, Sadler Jones came paddling on down the hill, peering this way and that, and behind him came Vester Lane, skipping like a goat. Vester caught sight of Dale's blue overalls behind the tree. "Watch out, Sad!" he shouted. But it was too late. Dale's books shot out and caught Sad squarely between the shoulders and sent him rolling helpless down the hill. Dale and Vester ran after him, and all three brought up in a laughing heap by the bridge over Black Wolf Creek.

"I read in a book," Sadler said, as he got up and dusted his clothes, "about a man who did that in an Indian fight. Only it was a gun he had and not a bunch of books, o' course, and . . ."

Dale interrupted him: "Great forever! You all time reading a book, and it doesn't do you a mite o' good."

"All the same," Sadler answered, "things you read come in handy at times!"

"Me, I'm not going to read a thing till next fall," Vester Lane shouted. "School's out! School's out!"

The boys crossed the bridge toward the big house where Dale lived. Dale's dog sent up a great barking to see them come, and ran out to meet them as if he knew as well as any one that holidays had started. The dog was called Rock Bottom, because Dale had got him from Vester in a marble trade, and Vester had bought him cheap out of a fight. They had never decided who really owned him now, but Rock did not care. He spent half his time at the Gillows' house and often as not stayed up at Vester Lane's and sometimes went home with Sadler Jones, so he was all of their dog.

Rock Bottom was a common hound dog, with a rabbit-colored coat and floppy ears, one of which was split from much fighting. He had quiet, sensible eyes and a foolish stump of a tail. The boys thought that Rock had as much sense as a person, and, as Dale said, "He can make his tail talk so any person can know what he means."

The boys went into the house by the side door, because the front of the house was the General Store and Post Office, kept by Dale's father, Ranson Gillow. Dale's mother was in the living room fitting a new dress on Beth, the little sister.

Mrs. Gillow called out: "My gracious! what a clutterment you do make! Put up your books. There's lemonade and cookies in the kitchen for a special treat; and when you've had some, get gone the house and stay out. Hold still, Beth."

"School's out!" Dale cried, as he tossed his books across the room and into the corner of the sofa.

"My school was out this morning," Beth put in. "Mom, can I go now? I've stood still a perfect hour."

Mrs. Gillow got up and went out kitchen to tend the boys, while Beth slipped into her old frock.

"School-out is no fun to me!" Mrs. Gillow sighed. "Now I'll have you children under foot all summer." But her eyes twinkled in her plump face, and she bustled about as if she did not mind so very much after all.

When they had finished eating, Mrs. Gillow shoo—d them out, and they started off for Vester Lane's house up on top of Red Hill.

“Me, too!” Beth cried. But her mother said: “You can’t have a new dress and go racing with the boys, too. You stay here.”

So they got off, as Dale said: “Without having to drag the young’un along.”

“You’re lucky not having kid sisters,” he told the others. “Beth all time craves to go every place I do.”

“She’s all right,” Vester Lane said. Vester lived with his grown-up sister and brother and he thought that in some ways a little sister was more fun than a big sister, who could order a person around.

Sadler Jones said: “I don’t know. I read in a book where a man had a sister who. . . .”

When Sadler got started on what he had read, there was no telling where he would stop, so Dale told him to hush and then added: “I’ve got a plan to do something this summer.”

“What?” cried Vester.

“Wait, can’t you? I fail of knowing *what*. Only I got the notion to do something other than just play around.”

They had come up as far as the flat rock on Red Hill where there was a spring and a resting place.

“Let’s sit down and study about it,” Dale said.

They scrambled up from the road and sat cross-legged, facing each other, while Rock Bottom raced around in the laurel bushes playing he had found a rabbit.

Vester Lane got a bag of marbles out of his pocket.

“Put that up!” Dale commanded. “We’re not playing now. Sit still and think.”

“I crave to be doing, whilst I think!” Vester said, and began playing jacks with the marbles. Vester was a thin, wiry boy, and his sparkling brown eyes looked out eagerly from a sunburnt face that was topped off with stiff, tow-colored hair. He was always getting himself into scrapes by leaping first and looking afterward.

Dale Gillow sat quite still, gazing over the valley of Glen Hazard. He was a slim, pale boy, too tall for his thickness. He had unruly fair hair, and thoughtful blue eyes, for he was sober-minded. With the gift for thinking things out, he combined the ability to make things with his long, slender fingers and had earned the nickname of “Fix-it.” His engine models and other mechanical contrivances were the envy of the other boys. He spent most of his time in his workshop, tinkering.

Just now, notions were spinning in Dale's head like gear-wheels.

A train roared through Glen Hazard, its whistle shrieking; and it wriggled out of the valley and around the spurs of the mountains like a snake afraid of getting its tail caught.

Dale said: "Times a train comes through here, it cries out 'hoot-toot!' like it was surprised to see a town hereabouts. There's a heap o' folks in this world that's unknown of Glen Hazard. I got it in head to do a thing that the outland world will hear of."

"That's right," Sadler Jones agreed. "There's no sense living in a little old town that nobody knows about. We're going to waste."

Rock Bottom came back to them and stood nosing the air and growling, and before they could wonder what, the boys heard footsteps coming down the hill toward them. They scrambled back into the laurel scrub and lay peering out.

A man with a gun over his shoulder came mooching past, and behind him a boy and a dog. Dale, from where he lay hidden, kept his right arm around Rock's neck, for this man was Squirrel Misery, the most dangerous man in the mountains. Fearful stories were told of him, how he got his living by ill-doing. The Squirrel had got his name by his quick shooting, the way he kept the squirrels in torment by hunting them down till he had heaps of them dead, for no reason except the love of killing. Meanness was written all over the Squirrel's skinny body. He was a twisted, limping man, owing to having one leg bowed where it had been broken and not properly set. His face was weather-tanned and wrinkled; and there was a slant in one eye that gave him an eerie look. He had unkempt black hair, straggling from beneath a battered hat. And he had a very dirty neck.

The boy who followed Squirrel Misery was Martin Morgan, a poorlander boy, a shabby, tattered fellow, yet with a likeable freckled face and wild red hair. And Dale was surprised to see him in such company, for Martin was a school-mate of his and a quiet, shy boy.

Suddenly, Rock Bottom broke from Dale's grasp and streaked out into the road and was all at once in a fight with Squirrel Misery's hound dog.

Dale called him off, and himself crept out, since it was no use hiding now. Vester Lane dashed past him and, just as Squirrel

Misery raised his rifle and took aim, Vester threw himself on top of the fighting dogs.

All three boys were out in the road by now, though Sadler Jones kept close to the edge of the bushes. Martin Morgan, the poor-lander, backed away to safety on the far side of the road.

“Git away offen them dawgs!” Squirrel Misery roared, as Vester and the hounds threshed about in a cloud of dust. “Git outer thar, e’er I let daylight through you!”

Vester rolled to one side, dragging Rock Bottom with him, and Squirrel Misery came up and kicked his own dog into a whimpering heap.

“You keep that hound o’ yourn outer my sight hereafter!” the Squirrel warned. “Next time he mixes with that pup o’ mine, I’ll blow the hide offen him!” And he started off down the hill with his dog groveling after.

Martin Morgan waited, hoping he might be forgotten, but the Squirrel looked back and with a jerk of his head ordered Martin to follow. Martin looked hopelessly toward the other boys, and none knew what to say.

Sadler Jones said: “Hello, Mart!”

But Martin only looked more frightened, and said: “I got to go on.” And he slunk after Squirrel Misery.

“Here’s mess and plenty of it!” Dale said, as he went over to where Vester Lane sat, still holding the angry Rock Bottom. “Did you get hurt, Ves? I’ve a mind to lick Rock for a fool hound. Get away from me!” he told Rock, who now came up to him. “Little more and you’d have got Ves killed. You got no sense.”

Rock Bottom rolled his red eyes up, asking forgiveness, but Dale was stern. For the split minute, when Squirrel Misery had threatened to shoot, he had had a picture of Vester being killed, and the fright was still with him.

He turned to Vester again. “I’m obliged to you,” he said.

Vester turned red as a beet. “Aw, go on! He’s half my dog, isn’t he? All is, Squirrel Misery’d have shot the dogs, but I reckon he would jib at killing folks, so I mixed in.”

“Rock’s got sense all the same,” Sadler Jones said. And, at the sight of Sadler’s round face, with its sleek black hair and shoe-button eyes, peering from a sheltering bush, both boys took a fit of laughing.