

Prayer

by

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Dead-eye had stumbled on to his trapper's paradise two seasons ago. He had climbed a ridge on the mountain to get a better view of an area he thought might make good trapping. The ridge initially appeared to be a part of the rocky peak behind it. But when the trapper reached the top of the ridge he found that it dropped precipitously into a two-hundred feet deep valley about an eighth of a mile wide and over a mile long. The far wall of the valley rose abruptly up to the mountain peak. The ridge blended so well with the peak beyond it, that viewed from even a short distance below, the keenest eyes would never suspect the hidden meadow nestled behind it.

The trapper could not imagine what ancient mighty force might have split the ridge away from the mountain, but the resulting valley would be perfect for his purposes if he could find a reasonable way into it. He worked his way back down the ridge to the tree-line, where he had left his horse. Mounting up, he rode parallel to the ridge, but found no entrance into the valley in either direction. Finally, as dusk approached, he dismounted near an overhang beside a mountain stream, and built a nearly smokeless fire from some dry dead fall. After frying some bacon and brewing a pot of strong coffee, he bedded down under some pine trees, well back from the light of his fire.

Early the next morning, Dead-eye resumed his search. The sun was nearly overhead before he discovered a crack in an outcropping of coarse-grained granite that seemed a bit more pronounced than most of the crevasses he'd seen along the ridge. It was about twenty feet wide, and its base was effectively concealed by the scraggly trees that struggled for survival at that altitude. A small rivulet of glacial run-off spilled down the western edge of the crevasse into a pool of crystal-clear water that filled the lower side of the crevasse floor as far back as the cleavage appeared to go. Outside the crevasse, the pool spilled over into a larger stream that carved an erratic white-water course on down the mountainside.

The trapper ground-hitched his horse and scrambled along the pool on the higher side of the floor of the crevasse. From the outside, the crevasse appeared to dead-end within thirty feet or so, but from the inside a dimly lit cave could be seen branching off at a sharp angle to the left. As Dead-eye entered the cavernous opening, he could see that the cave was actually a natural tunnel with light at the other end. A more placid stream traversed the far side of the tunnel and poured into the pool that filled the lower side of the crevasse.

The dry side of the floor of the tunnel was smooth rock that resounded eerie hollow-sounding echoes from the heels of Dead-eye's boots as he traversed the cathedral-like

passageway. He was easily through the tunnel and into a rocky canyon on the other side in less than a minute.

Dead-eye returned to the opening of the crevasse and whistled shrilly for his horse. The muscular mountain-bred stallion scrambled gamely up the debris of fallen rock and on to the crevasse floor. "Come on, Trigger," he coaxed as the animal side-stepped a bit at the entrance to the tunnel. After a few tentative steps the trembling beast's ears pricked forward, and he settled down and walked calmly through to the other side. Once out in the open, they rode through the ever-widening canyon into the valley he had seen from above.

The delighted man spent the rest of the day exploring his hidden valley. It was totally secluded, and appeared to be a box canyon without any other openings that a horse could negotiate. There would be good grass here from the spring thaws till the fall snows, plenteous enough for haying for winters. All he'd have to do to keep his pack animals contained was to put a gate at the narrow exit.

Dead-eye had a fifty foot fence with a sturdy gate built across the narrow end of the canyon within the next few days. He spent the next three weeks building a stone lean-to against an overhanging pinnacle on the valley wall that diverted the avalanche scars above it, and had no fallen rocks or talus at its base. He finished the two-room building by packing clay chinking between the stones and covering the top with freshly cut poles and overlapping pine boughs for a leak-proof roof. He'd keep his furs in the second room at the back. The finished cabin was nestled behind some large boulders that hid it from the valley floor, and provided a defensible palisade in front of the building.

The young mountain man had wandered far from the beaten path to find a secluded place to trap. He had chosen this area because of its remoteness, and the abundance of game trails and beaver dams on the mountainside. He was well aware that others would come, but he had not seen any signs of Indians or prospectors within two or three days ride in any direction. Only the wary survived, but he felt secure enough here to travel to the trader's for pack animals and supplies.

When Dead-eye returned several weeks later, preparation for the trapping season began in earnest. He stored his traps in the hide room and his hoard of bacon, coffee, sugar, and flour at the other end of the cabin. He built an open-hearth fireplace on the down-wind side of the cabin for warmth and cooking. He made himself a bed of fine spruce tips stuffed into an old mattress ticking. He built a corral and a stone shelter with a roof for the horses, and began cutting the hay they would need for a strenuous mountain winter. He started cutting racks of firewood, and built drying racks for the venison he would preserve in the fall. He had worked from dawn till dark almost every day, but things were in good shape for a hard winter by the time the first significant snowfall smothered the valley.

Dead-eye's first trapping season on the mountain was phenomenal. He had nearly twice as many prime beaver hides as he had gotten last season, to say nothing of some prize mink and fox skins that would add to his profits. He returned from his early summer trading trip with all the supplies and ammunition he could carry on three pack horses, and a comfortable amount of credit with the trader for future supplies. He even brought a small cast-iron cook stove back to the valley with him, though it required purchasing an extra pack horse just to carry it.

The skillful trapper's second summer in the area was less hectic. He added another storage room to his lean-to cabin, and had time to explore more of the mountain side for a suitable route for a second trap line. He also spent a lot of time searching for other ways out of his hidden valley. He was able to climb out by several perilous routes, but he could not find a second way to get a horse in or out.

The second trapping season on the mountain was taxing. The extra trap line nearly doubled his take of hides, but left him exhausted by the time spring brought the season to a close. All four of his pack animals were loaded to the limit on his annual trip back to the trading post.

The trader was not so fair this time, often devaluing genuinely prime hides for no perceptible reason. He pumped the trapper for information on where he was operating throughout the haggling process. Sensing the man's greed, Dead-eye was careful not to betray even the general direction of his trap lines.

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Dead-eye was always wary, but now he was downright suspicious. He took his entire payment in supplies and gold, which visibly irked the trader. He left the trading post late in the afternoon in a direction at about ninety degrees to his final destination. Several other trappers had eyed his take with overt jealousy, and he suspected that he would be followed—especially since it was known that he carried nearly two hundred dollars in gold in a leather pouch on his belt.

Knowing that he would be at a tremendous disadvantage with his loaded pack horses, the skillful mountain man left the beaten trail where it forded a stream a few miles away from the trading post. He rode a mile or so upstream in the water, and came out in a rocky spot, being careful to leave a few poorly concealed signs to lure any trackers that way. He worked harder and harder at concealing his tracks as he worked his way upstream, and was finally reasonably sure that his trail would be lost to all but the most astute trackers. Finally, he re-entered the stream at another rocky spot, and rode downstream by the light of the moon until he had crossed the beaten path. Continuing

several more miles downstream, he finally exited the stream on a rocky shelf and rode out in the opposite direction from his real destination, doing his best to conceal his trail.

The cagey trapper never stopped that first moon-lit night. Morning found him in a forested area some twenty miles away from the trading post. Once concealed in the trees, he unloaded the horses and let them rest. He watered the animals and drank from a small stream nearby, but did not chance a fire lest any malicious followers see the smoke. By noon he had reloaded the pack horses and was on his way towards another tier of mountains at least seventy miles away from his true destination.

Dead-eye kept a close watch on his back trail, but never detected anything amiss. Still, he pressed on to his decoy destination without taking any chances. He reached the mountains on the fourth day out, and finally allowed himself the luxury of a fire. Hot coffee never tasted so good. Neither did flapjacks and bacon.

The mountaineer climbed a good ways up the first mountain on the range and chose a concealed campsite under the overhang of a cliff where he could watch over his back trail to the mountains. After a couple of days he was satisfied that he was not being followed. He had decided to strike out across the wilderness for his real destination the next morning when he caught a faint glimpse of a tiny campfire flickering in the dusk a half a mile or so below his camp sight. It was so strategically concealed that he felt fortunate to have seen it at all.

As darkness fell, Dead-eye crept soundlessly down the mountainside to the trees surrounding the fire. He fully expected to see one or more unscrupulous trappers who had managed to work out his trail, but when his arms carefully parted the last few branches obscuring his view, he was flabbergasted to see a woman crouched as close as possible to the fire. She was dressed in disheveled buckskins without a coat, and seemed to be shivering despite her proximity to the flames. She appeared to be unarmed, except for a stout length of stick that lay beside her

Suspecting a trick, Dead-eye spent a cautious hour carefully encircling the area of her campsite in the darkness without finding any evidence of horses or other people. Satisfied that she was alone, the trapper turned his attention back to the woman. Her face was swollen grotesquely, and caked with dried blood and debris. By this time she was nearly convulsed with shivering, and seemed conscious of little else than the life-giving warmth of the fire.

Dead-eye fought the temptation to slip back into the forest and strike out for his hidden valley in the morning, as he had planned. He'd already been delayed nearly a week, just making sure he wasn't being followed. Now this! Why should he get involved in someone else's problems? But try as he would, he simply could not force himself to leave a disabled person to die alone in the wilderness, especially a woman.

When the trapper stepped out into the woman's line of sight she gave a startled gasp, and rose up to run; but she didn't manage more than two or three steps before she crumpled to the ground and lay still. Bending over her unconscious form, he could see that she was gaunt from hunger. Her face and the bare parts of her arms were covered with bruises. The calves of her legs showed more bruises beneath her buckskin skirt. She didn't seem to have any belongings with her, which indicated to the trapper that she had struck out suddenly, without any preparations. She was likely fleeing from someone who had given her a vicious beating.

Suspecting that she might be chased, Dead-eye gathered up the unconscious woman and threw her lightly over his shoulder. He cautiously worked his way back to his own campsite, leaving as few signs as possible under the circumstances. Although her campsite was fairly well chosen, he had no idea how visible a trail she might have left to it, and he was well aware that the trail he was making away from it as he carried her in the darkness would be fairly easy for an experienced tracker to follow in the light. He would have to move on with the first light of morning.

Dead-eye laid the limp woman down on his only blanket near the dying embers of his own fire. He threw as much wood as he dared on the glowing coals to start warming her up. As the fire's light increased, he could see a greenish-yellow cast to her bruises, which indicated that she had avoided any attempts at capture for several days. After wrapping her awkwardly in the blanket, he shredded some jerky into the skillet full of water, and was warming it at the edge of the fire when she stirred a bit.

The woman was able to swallow several spoonfuls of his jerky broth before she drifted back into semi-consciousness again. When she seemed to be sleeping, Dead-eye retired back into the trees with his saddle blanket, and settled back to catch some rest before morning.

He awoke several hours later to the crashing rumble of a predawn thunderstorm. Erratic flashes from frequent lightning bolts revealed that the woman had wrapped herself more tightly in his blanket. He moved back under the shelter of the overhang, and threw a few more pieces of wood on the fire to keep her warm.

The outdoors man was pleased with the storm. His campsite under the cliff was staying dry, and the rain seemed strong enough to wash out all but the worst traces of any trail the woman might have left, as well as whatever trail he had made bringing her up here. They would be reasonably safe remaining at this campsite a few days, until the woman could travel on her own.

Dead-eye was too anxious to get on with his preparations for next season's trapping to be impressed by the woman's femininity. While he didn't exactly resent her presence, he viewed it as a necessary inconvenience. He was relieved to see her hobble painfully off into the woods for a few moments when the rain was over, and was glad to see her place a few more sticks on the embers before snuggling back into his blanket when she

returned. She was going to be OK; and he'd soon be able to be on his solitary way to his hidden valley.

The small woman awoke again when he approached the fire to make some coffee. She struggled out of his blanket but had difficulty raising her battered arms to smooth her hair with her hands. Having finished the task, she turned his way as if seeing him for the first time.

"Is this your camp?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yeh," he answered quietly, "But yer welcome to stay 'til yer feelin' better."

"Thanks," she answered as she moved slowly towards the stream. When she returned, the grime and dried blood was washed from her face. Her wet hair suggested that she had taken a quick bath.

"Feelin' better?" he asked as he poured coffee into his only cup and handed it to her.

"Lots." she answered, grimacing as her smile cracked her swollen lips. "How did I get here?"

"I found ya huddled over a small fire down the slope a bit last night. Ya didn't look like ya was goin' ta make it, so I brought ya up here ta warm ya up."

"Thanks," she replied. "I thought I was going to die. You probably saved my life."

"How'd ya get so cold?" he queried as he sliced enough bacon for both of them into his frying pan.

"I came over the mountain," she replied. "It was snowing awfully hard up there, but I had to get away. I'd have died a thousand times if God hadn't been with me."

When he started frying flapjacks in the bacon grease, she was so unresponsive to his questions that he could see that she could hardly concentrate on anything but the food. Still, when he handed her a plate of bacon and flapjacks she bowed her head in silent thanks before wolfing it down. He had planned to eat directly from the skillet while she used the plate, but her part of the breakfast was gone so fast that he placed his part on the plate as if he'd made it all for her. He fried more for himself while she polished off the second portion he had offered her.

By the time the woman was through eating, her lids were drooping. Almost involuntarily, she lay back on the blanket and dropped into a deep slumber. Dead-eye flipped the unused half of the blanket over her and slipped noiselessly down to a grassy meadow he had noted while watching his back trail from the vantage point of his camp. She was still asleep when he returned with a field dressed deer in the afternoon. When

he was nearly done skinning it out, he was startled by her shadow falling across his own. As sore as she was, she could move as soundlessly as he could. While he cut some of the venison into strips for smoking, she disappeared with the hide; and when he returned from cutting poles for a drying rack, she had a good-sized roast on a spit over the fire.

Night fell as they finished eating the roast. Suddenly she broke the silence, as if she had decided to trust him. "My name is Betsy, she announced. My Dad called me 'Bitsy,' 'cause I'm so small, and the Indians called me 'Little Deer.' What's your name?"

"I'm Dead-eye," he answered. "Tell me who yer running from, an' why."

"Dad and I came out West after Mom died, when I was sixteen," She began. "We were going to preach the gospel to the Indians, but we were such greenhorns that we got caught by an Indian war party. They killed Dad and made me a slave of the chief's squaw. It didn't take me long to get used to Indian life. I learned how to cook over an open fire, tan hides, and sew doeskin clothing. More importantly, as we gathered food and herbs I learned how the Indians hid their trails, how they picked their campsites, and how to survive in the wilderness. I always watched for a chance to escape, but they watched me too closely for me to get away."

"Last week they announced that I was being given as a second wife to the most obnoxious brave in the village. I refused, and the village squaws beat me and left me unconscious behind his tepee. When I woke up just before dawn no one was watching me, so I crawled into the forest. When I came to a stream, I waded upstream because I knew they would figure I'd have enough sense to go down the mountain. When the stream got too small, I climbed way on up to the tree line and hid in a cave for two days. On the third day I saw them coming, so I climbed over to this side of the mountain. That's when God sent a late snowfall that would keep them from being able to follow my trail. I was afraid to stop, so I kept going downward until it got dark. When I was too weak to go any further I built a fire, but I couldn't seem to get warm. I was too exhausted to gather more wood, and thought I was going to die, but I woke up here instead."

"I was going ta stay here 'til you got well 'nuff ta be on yer way," Dead-eye told her. "But since they know ya come down this side a' the mountain, we'd best be a-leavin' at dawn tomorry. I'll load three a' the pack horses heavy, an' you kin ride the fourth un." But when Dead-eye went to get the horses in the morning, they were gone.

A quick glance at the cut ropes told Dead-eye that the horses had been stolen. Hurrying back to the camp site, he grabbed the blanket off of Betsy. She jumped up quickly and glided silently behind him into the trees without a word of explanation. He handed her his knife and the blanket and struck out noiselessly in the opposite direction from where the horses had been, with his rifle ready in his hands. As Betsy followed him, he saw that she knew how to run without leaving a trail as well as he did.

After an hour of running she seemed to be falling behind, so they stopped to reconnoiter. They had left everything behind except his rifle, the blanket, and the knife, but they were still alive. Fortunately, his money was still in the pouch on his belt. He could have gone on at this pace all day, but she was just too weak to keep it up. They would have to slow down for now, and hole up before the day was over.

As he stood there thinking, she suddenly dropped to her knees. Thinking she had fallen from exhaustion, he bent over her only to hear her muttering a prayer for God's guidance for him. It angered him that she was not keeping her eyes opened for a possible attack, but she was back up and watchful within a few seconds. He let the matter drop. He'd never understand women!

When the fugitives resumed their flight, they came across a sizable stream. As they waded in, she looked to him for which direction to go. He chose upstream, and they waded slowly for nearly an hour before emerging on the opposite side in a heavily forested area. It seemed that the coldness of the water had literally drained whatever energy she had left out of her, and he knew that they'd have to stop soon. When her feet started dragging, he picked her up and carried her up to a rocky overhang in the side of the mountain. There would be no fire for several days, so he wrapped her in the blanket and let her sleep while he kept watch from slightly above her position. She awoke in the early evening, and felt able to move on, though at a much slower pace than before.

When Dead-eye stopped just before dusk, he was in a quandary about what to do for food. He did not dare to discharge the rifle to shoot game, and they wouldn't have been able to cook it without advertising their position with a fire anyway. As bad as she needed nourishment, they slept on empty stomachs. When he awoke at dawn her blanket was empty. A half hour later she returned with handful of bulbous roots that she encouraged him to share with her. The taste was not unpleasant, and he felt his depleted energy returning a bit after eating them.

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That morning, while Betsy prayed, Dead-eye made his decision. He would have to take her to his hidden valley, where both of them would be safe. He had an axe, traps, spare cooking utensils, and a hoard of ammunition there. They could survive in the valley until she was well enough to make it on her own. They spent the morning descending the mountain while keeping an extra close watch on their back trail. Betsy slept throughout the afternoon, and he did not waken her until dark.

They started over the plains that night under cover of darkness. There was no moon, but the stars were so bright that navigation by them was easy. Betsy was so weak that they had to travel slowly, only covering about fifteen miles before stopping in a clump of cottonwoods by a stream before daybreak. They slept through the day, taking turns on watch, and covered another fifteen miles the next night. The next morning Dead-eye shot a deer coming to drink near their campsite. They cooked some of the best meat on a smokeless fire of dead cottonwood branches before dropping off to sleep. They traveled another fifteen miles the next night, and stopped in the edge of the forest at the far edge of the plains. That afternoon they made another ten miles to the foothills of Dead-eye's trapping range before sleeping through the night. They'd travel the rest of the way to the hidden valley by day.

The next morning Betsy was so exhausted that they stayed at the campsite. Dead-eye killed another deer, and they spent the next two days smoking some of the meat. With the better rest and adequate food to eat, Betsy was strong enough to travel the third morning. It took the greater part of the next day to reach the vicinity of the entrance to Hidden Valley. Dead-eye camped a couple of miles from the entrance, and spent most of the next day scouting the area to be sure no one was around before leading Betsy into the tunnel.

Betsy was dumfounded at how perfectly concealed the natural entrance to Hidden Valley was. She marveled at the beauty of the tunnel. And as the canyon opened into the idyllic valley she was completely overwhelmed. Looking up into the sky, she blurted out, "Thank you Lord, for bringing us into this haven of safety."

Her prayer of thanksgiving to God was the last straw for Dead-eye frustrated frame of mind. "God didn't bring ya here," he spat out. "I did!"

"I'm sorry," she said apologetically. "But don't you think both are true? I mean, don't you think God helped you get me away from the Indians?"

"No," he replied hotly. "I done it myself! Un' I lost my horses and a whole season's worth a' supplies doin' it," he gritted out as his anger mounted.

"I wish I had some way to repay you," she whispered contritely

"Forget it," he grunted as he saw a pair of unbidden tears spill down her cheeks.

"I can't," she answered mournfully. "I owe you my life as well as all you lost while saving me."

His anger melted as he gazed at her forlorn face. The grotesqueness of her bruises and swelling was almost gone, and for the first time he saw her more as a person than a miserable inconvenience. "Sorry I mentioned it," he said gruffly. "I jist don't buy this 'God' stuff, that's all."

“Why not?” she asked quietly.

“If God was a-helpin’ me, why’d He let them Indians get my stuff? If there is a God at all, He sure didn’t go out a His way none ta make it any easier for me ta help a prayin’ person like you. An’ if He’s a-helpin’ you, why’d he let them Indians capture ya in the first place?”

“I don’t know,” she answered thoughtfully. “But I know that He sent His Son to die for my sins. And if He loved me enough to give His Son to save me from hell, He won’t let anything happen to me that isn’t for my good.”

“You’re telling me gettin’ beat half-to-death was fer yer good?” he asked sarcastically.

“It led to us meeting each other,” she whispered to herself as she turned away from him.

“Lord,” she began praying that evening, “Please repay Dead-eye for all the things he lost because of me.”

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When they arrived at Dead-eye’s lean-to, he moved his traps and hide stretchers to the stable, and made a temporary bed for Betsy in the hide room. She kept the blanket she had been using; and he resurrected an ancient one for himself. “Soon as she gits strong ‘nuff ta travel I’ll take her ta the trader’s, where she kin find ‘er way back East,” he told himself. “Then I kin git a horse an’ some supplies, an’ come back here an’ git to work.”

Betsy slept a lot her first couple of days in the valley, and ate as if famished from meals prepared from a deer Dead-eye killed, and the few supplies he had left over from the trapping season. On the third day she was up early, made the coffee, and fried some flapjacks for both of them. Somehow, her flapjacks were better than his. When he went out to kill another deer for more jerky, she found the hide of the first one, scraped it well, and weighted it down with stones in the bottom of the stream that ran through the valley. Two days later she scraped off the hair and coated both sides of the hide with a gooey paste she made by squashing the deer’s brains. On the fourth day she soaked it clean in the stream again, and smoked it over a fire to make it water proof. By starting each hide as he brought it in, she was able to tan several hides a week while they dried jerky over an opened fire.

By the end of the third week in the valley Betsy seemed fairly well recovered from her beating and subsequent flight from the Indians. As the time of their departure

approached she spent more and more time alone in her room, which suited Dead-eye just fine. He wasn't used to "Jawin'" much "Enyhow."

On the evening of the day that he announced that they would be leaving for the trading post at dawn the next morning she presented him with a new pair of buckskin trousers and a matching jacket. They were decorated with fringes and bits of buckskin embroidery. "Sorry I didn't have time to make some beads for it," she apologized as he held it up to examine her workmanship.

"I had no idear you was doin' this," he told her appreciatively. "They're beautiful," he added admiringly as he sat down on his stool and bent over to examine the intricacies of her workmanship.

"Not good enough for the man who's done so much for me," she replied with a blush. Then, fleeing to her own room, she threw herself on the bed and sobbed out the ache in her breaking heart. How could she live without this gentle he-man who had been so kind and considerate of her without any obvious ulterior motives?

"Wimmen!" he muttered to himself bewilderedly, without the slightest inkling of why she had taken off so precipitously. No wonder he didn't want one hangin' around!

When Dead-eye emerged from the lean-to early the next morning, he had a heavy backpack of jerky and other necessities for their journey to the trader's on his back, and his rifle in his hands. As he stood there in the golden morning light Betsy thought he was the most handsome and manly figure she had ever seen. A sigh escaped her quivering lips as he headed down the path towards the tunnel that led to the lonely world outside his valley. Shouldering her own lighter pack of blankets and cooking utensils, she fell in bleakly a few steps behind him.

As Dead-eye stepped cautiously outside the exit of the tunnel, the sound of a heavy rifle shot startled Betsy from her depression. Dead-eye was spinning around as he fell back into the tunnel. His rifle clattered heavily to the ground at her feet.

Instantly alert, the Betsy grabbed the rifle in one hand and the collar of Dead-eye's new jacket in the other. Born by a strength she did not naturally possess, the little woman dragged the fallen man about thirty feet further back into the tunnel. Leaving him barely conscious in the center of the tunnel floor, she moved deeper into the tunnel and threw herself into a prone shooting position in the dim light along the edge of the passageway. She pulled the hammer back to cock the gun when she saw the shadow of a man creeping towards the opening on the far wall of the crevasse.

"O Lord," she prayed, "I've never shot a man before. Please help me to protect Dead-eye."

Part of the intruder's face showed as he craned his head around the outside edge of the tunnel. Knowing that he probably hadn't seen her because she had been several steps inside the tunnel, Betsy held a steady bead on the center of the villain's chest and waited as he crept up to Dead-eye's fallen form. When he stretched out a knife to finish Dead-eye off, she pulled the trigger. She couldn't bear to look as the assailant jerked backwards and fell dead on the floor.

The crash of the shot reverberating through the tunnel brought Dead-eye wildly to a sitting position. He tried to rise, but the thigh-bone of his right leg was broken by the unknown enemy's bullet, and would not support his weight. A wave of semi-consciousness from the pain of his efforts dropped him back to the floor. In the reeling blackness he had a vague impression of an incredibly lovely angelic face kissing him back to consciousness. As the blackness faded Betsy was bending anxiously over him with tears in her eyes.

"How'd I get back into the cave?" he asked as she stood up.

"I dragged you back here," she answered.

"I gotta get back to the cabin," he told her, as if she couldn't figure it out for herself.

"First, you'd better see if you know who that is," she replied, pointing to the body at his feet.

"Turn 'is face toward me," he requested.

Gagging all the while, she raised the head of the hapless outlaw and turned it towards him.

"That's one uv the trappers that seemed a-way too innersted in my hides ut the trader's," he murmured pensively. "They call 'im "Gunner" 'cause everyone spect's 'im of gunnin' down other trappers from a distance, an' stealin' their stuff. I wonder how 'e got here?"

Dead-eye struggled to a sitting position. Sweat stood out on his brow as he tried to scoot backwards through the tunnel. After gaining less than three feet in as many minutes, he flopped back to a supine position. "I can't make it," he uttered hopelessly.

"I'll try to drag you again," she offered. But try as hard as she would, she could barely move him along the stony floor of the tunnel without jerking him so painfully that he begged her to stop.

"If we had a horse I could make a travois, like the Indians use," she mused aloud.

"Why don't ya pray fer one?" He jabbed cynically.

"I'm going to!" she answered, bowing her head. "Father," she spoke confidently. We need a horse, please...and Dead-eye needs to see that you can provide one. I'm asking for one in Jesus's name. Your will be done. Amen."

"Too bad Trigger got stolen," Dead-eye commented, pointedly ignoring her prayer. "If he was around all I'd have ta do ud be ta whistle like this...an' he'd come a-runnin'." He had interrupted himself with a loud whistle between his teeth at the appropriate place in his statement. "'E was the best horse I ever owned," he finished pensively.

Both Dead-eye and Betsy fell silent as the echoes of the whistle died out, each lost in his own thoughts. Suddenly there was a clatter of hooves, and Trigger rounded the bend into the tunnel and skidded on his haunches, stopping not three feet from where Dead-eye lay.

"Trigger," Dead-eye yelled happily as the horse lowered his head to take a tentative sniff at the injured trapper's outstretched hand. After patting the horse for a few seconds, Dead-eye suddenly gasped with amazement.

"God," he called out hesitantly, "I'm sorry I doubted Ya. Ya really did answer Betsy's prayer."

"He's done more than that for you, Dead-eye," Betsy interjected. "He sent His son to die for your sins too."

"Why don't ya git a couple uv poles from the dryin' rack an' make that travois?" he suggested. "You kin tell me more 'bout God when we git back ta the lean-to."

Getting Dead-eye on the travois was awful. Every movement of his leg was agonizing. Each tiny bump that jarred the travois along the trail to the lean-to sent groans through his tightly clinched teeth. He passed out completely when Betsy dragged him through the door to his bed on his blanket. She rolled the unconscious man into the bed and covered him with the blanket before going back outside to unhitch Trigger. She led the gentle stallion to the stream for water before turning him lose in the corral.

After a quick snack of jerky, Betsy put a pot of water on the stove to boil. When it was hot, she used Dead-eye's knife to cut his trouser leg off a few inches above the gunshot wound. Despite his groans, she washed both the entry and the jagged exit wounds with hot water and lye soap. When she was done, she tied a rag from an old shirt she found in the lean-to around the wound.

When Dead-eye looked at his leg that afternoon, he decided that it would have to be set. He directed Betsy to cut a few stout green poles about an inch or more in diameter and about three feet in length. Then he had her tie his foot to the bed frame with wide buckskin strips. When he was ready, he asked her to try to line up the bone while he stretched the leg by shoving back with his other foot. She could see the leg stretch as he

gritted his teeth and heaved away. She struggled valiantly to align the two halves of the bone, and finally felt the broken edges snap into place in a fairly straight position. Sweat poured from his temples as he held tension on the leg until she had the splints bound tightly in place with stretchy strips of buckskin cut from a tanned deer hide she had on hand. He fell into a deep slumber shortly after he was able to let the tension off the leg.

The morning after Dead-eye was wounded, his leg was swollen and purple from the blood in the tissues, but he was not fevered. As they talked it over, both of them vaguely recalled that a broken thighbone would take at least six weeks to heal enough to hobble on, and a lot longer to be ready for any strenuous activity. That meant that Betsy would have to do the hunting as well as whatever else needed doing until Dead-eye could get about. He would be lucky to be able to trap at all this winter.

When Betsy stepped out of the lean-to the next day, Dead-Eye's four loaded pack horses were grazing outside the corral next to Trigger. She opened the gate and they all plodded over to the stable as if waiting to be unloaded. The trapper could scarcely believe his eyes when she started carrying sacks of flour and sugar and coffee into the lean-to. "There's more stuff there than I bought from the trader," he marveled.

"I figure ole Gunner must a' managed to track me ta our campsite without gettin' seen," he mused. "It was probably him 'stead a' the Indians, that stole the horses. He probably thought he'd found my trappin' area, an' was a-plannin' ta shoot me in the back at the first oppertunity. When we gave 'im the slip, 'e probably took the horses back ta the vicinity of the tradin' post un' gave Trigger his head, knowin' that the mountain stallion would be smart 'nough ta find 'is way home from there. I think if God wasn't lookin' out fer me, I'd be dead right now."

"By the way," he asked Bitsy, "What'd you mean the other day 'bout Christ dyin' fer my sins?"

"Dead-eye," she said. "You are a very good person, compared to anyone else I know. You went out of your way and risked your life to save mine. And despite what it was costing you, you took generous care of me until I was well enough to look out for myself. But you were sinning by refusing to believe that there was a God, when all creation tells you that there has to be a God. The Bible says that we are all sinners. You are sinning when you refuse to believe that you are a sinner and deserve to go to hell. You are sinning when you insult God by refusing to accept the death of His Son as the payment for your sins."

"I don't understand it, Betsy. I always thunk I was purty good. I try ta be 'sponsible. I don't drink, er steal, er pick fights with other men. What does God want from me, enyhow?"

"He wants your heart, Dead-eye. He wants you to quit justifying yourself and start worshiping Him as your Savior and your Lord."

“But I really ain't been that bad.” He replied.

“Dead-eye, did you ever just want to clobber someone?” she asked.

“Of course,” he replied. “But I didn’t do it.”

“But God says the very desire to do wrong is sin,” she answered.

“I think I see it,” he said slowly. “Even the desire ta do wrong shows that we’re sinful inside.”

“That’s it!” she exclaimed. But Christ took our sinfulness as His own and died for us so we wouldn’t have to go to hell.”

“I guess I orta thank Him for dyin’ in my place,” he said as he bowed his head in silent prayer.

When he looked up she was gone, pouring out her heart in thanksgiving to God for saving his soul. “Lord I love him,” she prayed earnestly. “Now that he’s one of Yours, can I have him?” And somehow she felt that He was answering, “What did you think I sent him to you for?”

* * *

Dead-eye’s convalescence went smoothly. The soft tissue wounds healed quickly, and the bone healed slowly. Betsy cooked, kept the cabin clean, washed their clothes, hunted deer, chopped firewood, and even started cutting grass for next winter’s hay.

After a couple weeks, Dead-eye could drag himself around a bit without putting any weight on his leg. Betsy hitched Trigger to a dead fall and drug it up close to the lean-to so he could while away the time sitting outside in the sun. She ignored her own exhaustion and began teaching him to read and write in the evenings. She was impressed at how fast he was catching on. Besides, it seemed to her that he might actually be appreciating her company a bit.

Then, one day when she leaned over to help him sound out a word, it started to happen. “God,” he breathed wonderingly, “That’s the face a’ that angel what kissed me in the tunnel.”

A few days later he was idly watching her cut hay from his perch on the log. He was impressed with the expertise she had developed at swinging the scythe. But the

rhythmic choreographics of the task accentuated her feminine attributes in a way that was impossible not to notice. He became so spellbound by the intrigue of her profile that he had no concept of how much he might be invading her privacy. "Lord," he breathed up reverently, "She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

From that time on, he was obsessed by a stronger and stronger urge to fold her into his arms and kiss her. He hardly dared to hope that she might even return the kisses. He watched her hungrily from dawn until dark. He could hardly wait for evenings to come so she would sit beside him to help him read, but he couldn't seem to keep his thoughts on the lessons. She meant everything to him. He had never dreamed that it would be possible to love a woman so much.

Finally, when Dead-eye was able to bear most of his weight on his injured leg, he suddenly announced that it was time to get ready to go to the trading settlement. He was standing facing her, and she looked up into his face to ask, "Why so soon?" As she waited for an answer he saw a tear start down her cheek. He stooped over impulsively and kissed it away. When she did not draw back, he wrapped his arms around her as his hungry lips sought hers. Her hands slipped around his neck as her trembling lips rose to meet his. It was the first real kiss for either of them.

After a brief eternity of bliss he broke it off to utter, "'Cause we need ta find a preacher ta marry us."

"Yeh," she agreed breathlessly as he drew her back into another kiss. "Let's get started."