OVER PARADISE RIDGE

"I GOT A CALL—A LAND CALL THAT I HAD TO ANSWER."

OVER PARADISE RIDGE

A ROMANCE

BY

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"THE MELTING OF MOLLY" ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

TO

BERNICE LANIER DICKINSON

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

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I

THE BOOK OF FOOD

Nobody knows what starts the sap along the twigs of a very young, tender, and green woman's nature. In my case it was Samuel Foster Crittenden, though how could he have counted on the amount of Grandmother Nelson that was planted deep in my disposition, ready to spring up and bear fruit as soon as I was brought in direct acquaintance with a seed-basket and a garden hoe? Also why should Sam's return to a primitive state have forced my ancestry up to the point of flowering on the surface? I do hope Sam will not have to suffer consequences, but I can't help it if he does. What's born in us is not our fault.

"Yes, Betty, I know I'm an awful shock to you as a farmer. I ought to have impressed it on you more thoroughly before you—you saw me in the act. I'm sorry, dear," Sam comforted me gently and tenderly as I wept with dismay into the sleeve of his faded blue overalls.

"I can't understand it," I sniffed as I held on to his sustaining hand while I balanced with him on the top of an old, moss-covered stone wall he had begged me to climb to for a view of Harpeth Valley which he thought might turn my attention from him. "Have you mislaid your beautiful ambitions anywhere?"

"I must have planted them along with my corn crop, I reckon," he answered, quietly, as he steadied his shoulder against an old oak-tree that grew close to the fence and then steadied my shoulder against his.

"It is just for a little while, to get evidence about mud and animals and things like that, isn't it?" I asked, with great and undue eagerness, while an early blue jay flitted across from tree-top to tree-top in so happy a spirit that I sympathized with the admiring lady twit that came from a bush near the wall. "You are going back out into the world where I left you, aren't you?"

"No," answered Sam, in an even tone of voice that quieted me completely; it was the same he had used when he made me stand still the time his fishhook caught in my arm at about our respective sixth and tenth years. "No, I'm going to be just a farmer. It's this way, Betty. That valley you are looking down into has the strength to feed hundreds of thousands of hungry men, women, and children when they come down to us over

Paradise Ridge from the crowded old world; but men have to make her give it up and be ready for them. At first I wasn't sure I could, but now I'm going to put enough heart and brain and muscle into my couple of hundred acres to dig out my share of food, and that of the other folks a great strapping thing like I am ought to help to feed. I'll plow your name deep into the potato-field, dear," he ended, with a laugh, as he let go my hand, which he had almost dislocated while his eyes smoldered out over the Harpeth Valley, lying below us like an earthen cup full of green richness, on whose surface floated a cream of mist.

"It just breaks my heart to see you away from everything and everybody, all burned up and scratched up and muddy, and—and—" I was saying as he lifted me back into the road again beside my shiny new Redwheels that looked like an enlarged and very gay sedan-chair.

"Look, look, Betty!" Sam interrupted my distress over his farmer aspect, which was about to become tearful, and his eyes stopped regarding me with sad seriousness and lit with affectionate excitement as he peered into the bushes on the side of the road. "There's my lost heifer calf! You run your car on up to my house beyond the bend there and I'll drive her back through the woods to meet you. Get out and head her off if she tries to pass you." With which command he was gone just as I was about to begin to do determined battle for his rescue.

I did not run my car up to his farm-house. I "negotiated a turn" just as the man I bought it from in New York had taught me to do; only he hadn't counted on a rail fence on one side, a rock wall just fifty feet across from it, and two stumps besides. It was almost like a maxixe, but I finally got headed toward Providence Road, down which, five miles away, Hayesboro is firmly planted in a beautiful, dreamy, vine-covered rustication.

"Oh, I wonder if it could be a devil that is possessing Sam?" I asked myself, stemming with my tongue a large tear that was taking a meandering course down my cheek because I was afraid to take either hand off the steering-gear for fear I would run into a slow, old farm horse, with a bronzed overalled driver and wagon piled high with all sorts of uninteresting crates and bales and unspeakable pigs and chickens. As I skidded past them I told myself I had more than a right to weep over Sam when I thought of the last time I had seen him before this distressing interview; the contrast was enough to cause grief.

It had happened the night after Sam's graduation in June and just the night before I had sailed with Mabel Vandyne and Miss Greenough for a wander-year in Europe. Sam was perfectly wonderful to look at with his team ribbon in the buttonhole of his dress-coat, and I was very proud of him. We were all having dinner at the Ritz with two of Sam's classmates and the father of one, Judge Vandyne, who is one of the greatest corporation lawyers in New York. He had just offered Sam a chance in his offices, together with his own son.

"You'll buck right on up through center just as you do on the gridiron, old man, to the Supreme bench before you are forty. I'm glad the governor will have you, for I'll never make it. Oh, you Samboy!" said Peter Vandyne, who was their class poet and who adored Sam from every angle—from each of which Sam reciprocated.

And all the rest raised their glasses and said:

"Oh, Samboy!"

The waiters even knew who Sam was on account of the last Thanksgiving game, and beamed on him with the greatest awe and admiration. And I beamed with the rest, perhaps even more proudly. Still, that twinkle in Sam's hazel eyes ought to have made me uneasy even then. I had seen it often enough when Sam had made up his mind to things he was not talking about.

"The ladies and all of us," answered Sam to Peter's toast, as he raised his glass and set it down still full, then grinned at me as he said, so low that the others couldn't hear, "Will you meet me in Hayesboro after a year and a day, Betty?"

I don't see why I didn't understand and begin to defend Sam from himself right then instead of going carelessly and light-heartedly to Europe and letting him manage his own affairs. I didn't even write to him, except when I saw anything that interested or moved me, and then I just scribbled "remind me to tell you about this" on a post-card and sent it to him. You can seal some friends up in your heart and forget about them, and when you take them out they are perfectly fresh and good, but they may have changed flavor. That is what Sam did, and I am not surprised that the rural flavor of what he offered me out there in dirt lane shocked me slightly. I didn't think then that I liked it and I also felt that I wished I had stayed by Sam at that wobbling period of his career; but, on the other hand, it was plainly my duty to go to Europe with Mabel and Peter Vandyne and Miss Greenough. The inclination to do two things at once is a sword that slices

you in two, as the man in the Bible wanted to do to the baby to make enough of him for the two mothers; and that is the way I felt about Peter and Sam as I whirled along the road. I am afraid Sam is going to be the hardest to manage. He is harder than Peter by nature. If Sam had just taken to drink instead of farming I would have known better what to do. I reformed Peter in one night in Naples when he took too much of that queer Italian wine merely because it was his birthday. I used tears, and he said it should never happen again. I don't believe it has, or he wouldn't have got an act and a half of his "Epic of American Life" finished as he told me he had done when I dined with him in New York the night I landed. I missed Peter dreadfully when he left us in London in June, and so did Miss Greenough and Mabel, though she is his sister. We all felt that if he had been with us it wouldn't have taken us all these months of that dreadful war to get comfortably home. Peter said at the dock that he hadn't drawn a full breath since war had been declared until he got my feet off the gang-plank on to American soil. He needn't have worried quite as much as that, for we had a lovely, exciting time visiting at the Gregorys' up in Scotland while waiting for state-rooms. And it was while hearing all those Scotchmen and Englishmen talk about statesmanship and jurisprudence and international law that I realized how America would need great brains later on, more and more, as she would have to arbitrate, maybe, for the whole world.

I smiled inwardly as I listened, for didn't I know that in just a few years the nation would have Samuel Foster Crittenden to rely on? Sam is a statesman by inheritance, for he has all sorts of remarkable Tennessee ancestry back of him from Colonial times down to his father's father, who was one of the great generals of our own Civil War. And as I listened to those splendid men talk about military matters, just as Judge Crittenden had talked to Sam and me about his father, the general, ever since we were big enough to sit up and hear about it, and discuss what American brains and character could be depended upon to do, I glowed with pride and confidence in Sam. I'm glad I didn't know then about the collapsed structure of my hopes for him that Sam was even then secretly unsettling. At the thought my hand trembled on the wheel and I turned my car hastily away from two chickens and a dog in the road and my mind from the anxiety of Sam to further pleasant thoughts of Peter.

I don't believe Judge Vandyne's thoughts of Peter are as pleasant as mine, for Peter doesn't go to the office at all any more; he spends his waking moments at a club where players and play-writers and all men play

a great deal of the time. I forget its name, but it makes the judge mad to mention it.

"The dear old governor's mind is gold-bound," said Peter, sadly, after we came away from luncheon with the judge down in Wall Street. "Why should I grub filthy money when he has extracted the bulk of it that he has? I must go forward and he must realize that he should urge me on up. I ought not to be tied down to unimportant material things. I must not be. You of all people understand me and my ambitions, Betty." As he said it he leaned toward me across the tea-table at the Astor, where we had dropped exhaustedly down to finish the discussion on life which the judge's practical tirade had evoked.

"But then, Peter, you know it was a very great thing Judge Vandyne showed his bank how to do about that international war loan. In England and Scotland they speak of him with bated breath. It was so brilliant that it saved awful complications for Belgium."

"Oh, he's the greatest ever—in all material ways," answered Peter, with hasty loyalty and some pride, "but I was speaking of those higher things, Betty, of the spirit. The things over which your soul and mine seem to draw near to each other. Betty, the second act of 'The Emergence' is almost finished, and Farrington is going to read it himself when I have it ready. He told me so at the club just yesterday. You know he awarded my junior prize for the 'Idyl.' Think of it—*Farrington*!" And Peter leaned forward and took my hand.

"Oh, Peter, I am so glad!" I said, with a catch of joy in my breath, but I drew away my hand. I knew I liked Peter in many wonderful ways, but in some others I was doubtful. I had only known Peter the three years I've been away from Hayesboro, being finished in the North, and even if I did room with his sister at the Manor on the Hudson and travel with her a year, it is not the same as being born next door to him, as in the case of Sam, for instance. But then I ought not to compare Peter and Sam. Peter is of so much finer clay than Sam. Just thinking about clay made me remember those unspeakable boots of Sam's I had encountered out on the road, and again I determinedly turned my thoughts back to that wonderful afternoon with Peter at the Astor a few short days ago. Miss Greenough kept telling Mabel and me all over Europe to look at everything as material to build nests of pleasant thoughts for our souls to rest in, as Ruskin directed in the book she had. I've made one that will last me for life of Peter, who is the most beautiful man in the whole wide world; also of the yellow shade on the Astor lamp, the fountain, and the best chicken

sandwich I ever ate. It will be a warmer place to plump down in than most of the picture-galleries and cathedrals I had used for nest-construction purposes at Miss Greenough's direction.

Yes, I drew my hand away from Peter's, but a little thing like that would never stop a poet; and before the waiter had quite swept us out with the rest of the tea paraphernalia to make way for that of dinner he had made me see that I was positively necessary to his career, especially as both his father and Mabel are so unsympathetic. It is a great happiness to a woman to feel necessary to a man, though she may not enjoy it entirely.

"Oh, I know I can write it all—all that is in my heart if I feel that it is—is for you, dearest dear Betty," was the last thing that Peter said as he put me on a train headed for the Harpeth Valley that night.

I didn't answer—I don't know that I ever did answer Peter anything, but he never noticed that when he thought of how my loving him would help out with the play.

Just here I was musing so deeply on the intricacies of love that I nearly ran over a nice, motherly old cow that had come to the middle of the road with perfectly good faith in me when she saw me coming. And as I rounded her off well to the left again my thoughts skidded back to Sam and the way he had treated me as less than a heifer calf after *I* had not seen him for a year, and *she* had just seen him that morning at feeding-time.

"Head off that saucy young cow, indeed!" I sniffed, as I ran the car into the side yard between my home and the old Crittenden house.

"I wonder if he really expected me to be waiting there in that lane for him?" I questioned myself. And the answer I got from the six-year-old girl that is buried alive in me was that Sam did expect me to do as he told me, and that something serious might happen if I didn't. As I turned Redwheels over to old Eph, who adores it because it is the only one he ever had his hands on, I felt a queer sinking somewhere in the heart of that same young self. I always had helped Sam—and suppose that unspeakable animal had got lost to him for ever just because I hadn't done as he told me! I reached out my hand for the runabout to start right back; then I realized it was too late. The night had erected a lovely spangled purple tent of twilight over Hayesboro, and the all-evening performances were about to begin.

Lovely women were lighting lamps and drawing shades or meeting the masculine population at front gates with babies in their arms or beau-catcher curls set on their cheeks with deadly intent. Negro cooks were hustling suppers on their smoking stoves, and one of the doves that lives up in the vines under the eaves of my home moaned out and was answered by one from under the vines that grow over the gables at the Crittendens'. I haven't felt as lonesome as all that since the first week of Sam's freshman year at college. As I looked across the lilac hedge, which was just beginning to show a green sap tint along its gray branches, I seemed to see my poor little blue-ginghamed, pigtailed self crouched at Judge Crittenden's feet on the front steps, sobbing my lonely heart away while he smoked his sorrow down with a long brier pipe, and the Byrd chirped his little three-year-old protest in concert with us both. Most eighteen-year-old men would have resented having a motherless little brother and a long-legged girl neighbor eternally at their heels, but Sam never had; or, if he did, he gently kicked the Byrd and me out of the way, and we never knew that was what he was doing. We even loved him for the kicks. Then as the tears misted across my eyes a woman with a baby in her arms came out and called in two children who were playing under the old willow-tree over by the side gate—the willow that had belonged to Sam and me—and my eyes dried themselves with indignant astonishment.

"Who are those people over at the Crittendens', mother?" I asked, in a stern voice, as I walked in and interrupted mother counting the fifteenth row on a lace mat she was making.

"Why, the Burtons bought the place from Sam after the judge's death. Don't you remember I wrote you about it, Betty dear?" she answered, with the gentle placidity with which she has always met all my tragic moments. Mother raised seven boys before she produced me, and her capacity for any sort of responsive excitement gave out long before I needed it. After her sons a woman seems to consider a daughter just a tame edition of a child. Mother has calmly crocheted herself through every soul-storm I have ever had, and she is the most dear and irresponsible parent an executive girl would wish to have leave her affairs alone. As for daddy, he has always smiled and beckoned me away from her into a corner and given me what I was making a stand for. My father loves me with such confidence that he pays no attention to me whatever except when he thinks it is about time for him to write my name on a check. His phosphate deals have made him rich in an un-Hayesboro-like way, and all the boys are in business for him in different states, except the oldest one, who is

Congressman from this district, and one other who is in a Chicago bank. Yes, I know I have the most satisfactorily aloof family in the wide world. I can just go on feeding on their love and depend upon them not to interfere with any of my plans for living life. However, if anything happens to me I can be sure that their love will spring up and growl.

Now, when I stalked into the room and asked about the Crittenden home, daddy reared his head from his evening paper and immediately took notice of whatever it was in my voice that sounded as if something had hurt me.

"Daddy," I asked him, with a little gulp, "did Sam—Sam sell his ancestral home even to the third and fourth generation and go to farming just for sheer wickedness?"

"No, madam, he did not," he answered, looking at me over his glasses, and I could see a pain straighten out the corners of his mouth under his fierce white mustache. "The judge's debts made a mortgage that nicely blanketed the place, and Sam had only to turn it over to the creditors and walk out to that little two-hundred-acre brier-patch the judge had forgot to mortgage."

"Then Sam can sell it for enough to go out and take his place in the world," I said, with the greatest relief in my voice.

"He could, but he won't," answered daddy, looking at me with keen sympathy. "I tried that out on him. Just because that brier-patch has never had a deed against it since the grant from Virginia to old Samuel Foster Crittenden of 1793 he thinks it is his sacred duty to go out and dig a hole in a hollow log for Byrd and himself and get in it to sentimentalize and starve."

"Oh, I think that is a beautiful thought about the land, and I wish I had known it earlier! But could they be really hungry—hungry, daddy?" I said, with a sudden vacant feeling just under my own ribs in the region between my heart and my stomach.

"Oh no," answered daddy, comfortably. "They both looked fat enough the last time I saw Sam coming to town in a wagon with Byrd, leading a remarkably fine Jersey calf. We'll go out in that new flying-machine you brought home with you and pull them out of their burrow some day when you get the time. Fine boy, that; and, mother, when is that two-hundred-pound black beauty in your kitchen going to have supper?"

I didn't tell daddy I had gone to the ends of the earth to hunt for Sam in less than thirty-six hours after I had landed in Hayesboro, but I went up to my room to slip into something clean and springy, walking behind a thin mist of tears of pure sentiment. That was the third time in about seven hours I had been crying over Sam Crittenden, and then I had to eat a supper of fried chicken and waffles that would have been delicious if it hadn't been flavored by restrained sobs in my throat. I was so mad at my disloyal thoughts about a beautiful character, which Sam's reverence for his ancestral land proves his to be, and so afraid of what I had done to him about the calf, and so hungry to see him, that by the time the apple-float came on the table I thought it would have to be fed to me by old Eph. Mother made it worse by remarking, as she put a lovely dab of thick cream right on top of my saucer:

"Did you hear, father, that all of Sam's cows had been sick and that he has lost his two finest calves?"

I couldn't stand any more. I gulped the cream, remarked huskily on how warm the April night was, and escaped down the front walk to the old purple lilac-bush by the gate where up to my seventh year I had always kept house with and for Sam whenever he would enter into the bonds of an imaginary marriage with me for an hour or two. Sam made a good father of a hollyhock doll family whenever he undertook the relation, and provided liberally for us all in the way of honey, locusts, and grass nuts.

"And I, maybe, let him lose the last calf he has when he is noble and poor and alone," I sobbed into my silk sleeve, which was so thin that I shivered in the cool April moonlight as I leaned against the gate and looked away out at the dim blue hills that rim the Harpeth Valley, at the foot of one of which I seemed to see Sam's and Byrd's hollow log.

"Hello, Bettykin! Out putting our hollyhock family to bed?" laughed a crisp, comforting, jolly voice right at my elbow as a big, rough hand ruffled my beautifully smoothed hair and then gave a friendly shake to my left shoulder. "How do you find all our children after a three-year foreign sojourn?"

"I told you five years ago, when I put it up on my head, to stop ruffing my hair, Sam Crittenden; and did you find that cow?" I answered, with both defiance and anxiety in my voice.

"I did," answered Sam, cheerfully, "but how did I lose you in the shuffle? I tied her up in the shack with a rope and then beat it in all these five miles, partly by foot and partly by a neighbor's buggy, to find and—er—rope you

in. I am glad to see you are standing quietly at the bars waiting for me, and as soon as I've greeted your mother and Dad Hayes and got a little of the apple-float that I bet was the fatted calf they killed for your prodigal return, I'll foot it the five miles back in a relieved and contented frame of mind."

"How did you happen to let your cows get sick, Sam?" I demanded, sternly, instead of putting my arms around his neck to tell him how noble I had found out he was, and how glad I was that he had come all that way to see me, and not to be mad at me because I didn't obey him out in the lane.

"I don't know, Betty, I just don't know," answered Sam, as he lit a corn-cob pipe and leaned closer to me in a thoughtful manner. "Cows are such feminine things and so contrary. I don't know what I will do if I lose any more. I—I may get discouraged."

"Have you had a doctor?" I asked, briskly and unfeelingly, though I did take his big rough hand in my own and hold on to it with a sympathy that was not in my voice.

"No, I've sorter doctored them by a book I have. The only good veterinary doctor about here lives way over by Spring Hill, and it would take him a day to drive over and back, besides costing me about ten dollars. Still, I ought to get him. Buttercup is pretty sick," answered Sam, and I could see that his broad shoulders under his well-cut blue serge coat of last season seemed to sag with the weight of his animal responsibilities.

"I can take my car over to Spring Hill in less than an hour, get the doctor, and have you and the doctor out to those animals by ten. This moon will last all night; and you go get the apple-float from mother while I make Eph run out the car and jump into my corduroys. Come on, quick!" And as I talked I opened the gate, drew him in, and started leading him up the front walk by the sleeve of his coat.

"Not if I know myself, Betty, will I let you undertake such a red-cross expedition as that. They'll have to wait. I came in to call on you and whisper sweet nothings to you in the parlor while you tell me—"

"Eat the float in a hurry if you want it," I interrupted him, as I deposited him beside mother, who was still sipping a last cup of coffee with her jelly-cake, and went for my room and my motor clothes.

And it was one grand dash that Redwheels and I made out Providence Road and over Paradise Ridge down to Spring Hill in less than thirty-five

minutes. In the moonlight the road was like a lovely silver ribbon that we wound up on a spool under the machine, and a Southern spring breeze seemed to be helping the gasoline to waft us on more rapidly in our flight as it stung our faces with its coolness, which was scented with the sap that was just beginning to rise against bark and bud in the meadows and woods past which we sped.

"It will be great to die together, won't it, Betty?" said Sam once as Redwheels ran a few yards on two wheels, then tried the opposite two before it settled back to the prosaic though comfortable use of four as we took a flying leap across a little creek ditch.

"We can't die sentimentally; we've got to get back to those suffering cows," I answered him, firmly, as I whirled into Spring Hill and stopped Redwheels, panting and hot, in front of the dry-goods, feed, and drug store. There I knew we could find out anything we wanted to know about the whereabouts or profession of any of the fifteen hundred inhabitants of the little old hamlet which has nestled under the hills for a hundred years or more. "Ask where the cow physician lives. Quick!"

And at my urge Sam sprang out and across the old, uneven brick pavement that lay between us and the store door. Then in less than two minutes he appeared with a round, red-faced, white-headed old man who wheezed chuckles as he talked.

His fear of the car was only equaled by his fascination at the idea of the long ride in it, which would be the first motor-driven sortie he had ever made out into life.

"Air ye sure, little missie, that you can drive the contraption so as not to run away with us? Old folks is tetchy, like a basket of pullet eggs," he said, as Sam seated him in the back seat and sprang to my side.

"I wish I had a rope to tie him in," he muttered, as he sank into his seat. "If you run as you did coming, we'll sure lose him. He'll bounce like a butter-ball."

"I'm not taking any risks," I answered, and it was with greatest mildness that we sauntered up Paradise Ridge and started down the other side. And as I drove along carefully my mind began to work out into the byways of the situation. I don't see how my athletic and executive generation is going to do its appointed work in its day if we are going to go on using the same set of social conventions that tied up our mothers. As we neared the cross-road that turned off to Sam's brier-patch I began to wonder how long