



Free

By WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

Author of "On Moon Hill," etc.

Illustrations by Jay Hambidge

IT got on toward night, still raining; the clay in the bottom was deep with mud. A man stood in the dusk at the corner of a snake-fence, leaning on a shotgun, silent, motionless, as the minutes went by, peering down through the thickness at the faint, watery lights of the village. The "five-fifteen" had come and gone half an hour: he had heard the whistle, and for a moment, over yonder in Schauer's Gorge, glimpsed the file of its yellow windows swimming down toward the coast. Once he filled his pipe with clumsy fingers and forgot to light it; once he combed his hair back under his hat with an uncertain hand; beyond that he remained as expressionless and immobile as a statue.

By and by another figure came into view a little way off through the murk, climbing up the muddy track from the village.

The men hailed each other in tones constrained and excited. John Petit, who had been standing by the fence so long, started forward with a gesture of eagerness, hesi-

tated, and halted after two or three steps. Luke Petit let his straw suitcase down in the mud and put his hands into his pockets. And so, face to face, the brothers took stock of each other. Both faces showed a little gray in the gathering night.

"Shake!" said Luke Petit.

John Petit put out a hand.

"This is the day I've been waiting for, Luke; you don't know how."

"You look about the same, John."

"You look about the same, Luke. Trifle poorer about the face."

"Poorer! You ought to 'a' seen me a year ago, John, after the bit in solitary. Poorer! Did you think five years in prison was going to put flesh on to a man?"

"It 's been bad, Luke."

"Bad! I guess! I tell you one thing, John; for a man that 's been five years in a cell, when he comes out there 's nothing in the world too good for him. What 's the gun for, John?"

"Nothing. The Wallow folks are a mite ugly, 'that 's all. They won't do

anything, though. I just carried it for luck."

Luke Petit peered about him.

"Where 's the mare? I 'd 'ave thought you 'd 'ave brought the rig, John."

"I 've been sawing cord-wood with her all day, and it 's such a short step over the hill. I figured you 'd rather walk. Here, I 'll carry your suitcase."

They started off in the soggy going, Luke trailing a pace behind.

"But after supper," he said, "we 'll put the mare in the buggy all right, John."

The other stopped and looked back at him.

"To-night? Go over to Belle's to-night, Luke?"

"Why not? Say, look here, John, you got my letter about the minister?"

"Yes." John spoke slowly, his face turned half away. "But to-night, Luke—you 're pretty tired to-night."

"What of it? After five years? You try waiting five years, John."

A misty star in the kitchen window led them down the farther slope to the farmhouse. John had laid the table for their supper before he went over the hill to wait: two cans of sardines, a can of corn, heavy bread made laboriously with his own hands, a peach-pie bought in the village, coffee set on the back of the stove. That afternoon he had washed up the accumulated dishes of a fortnight, but somehow, for all he could do, they began to gather in the sink again.

"I wish it was fancier," he said, with a touch of wistfulness as Luke sank into a chair at the table. "I 've tried to get a woman to work, but there has n't been any, and none of the Wallow niggers would come since you finished Maje. They 're a mite ugly about it. They say Maje was only fooling that time, and nobody else would have thought a thing about it."

"But I would. Black or white, I 'd have done the same for any man that scared my girl like that. I 'm built that way."

"Yes, I know. You did right, Luke."

"Sure, I done right. And Belle knows

it, and honors me for it, too. She 's wrote me a letter every single day."

"And every single day," John told him in a curiously hard voice, "she 's marked off the date on the calendar and numbered the days to come. It 's made a difference in Belle, Luke. Belle 's a woman now. These five years have told."

"These five years have told"—it kept echoing in John Petit's brain as he sat there staring down at the knuckles of the hard hands on his knees, afraid to look at his brother. He would scarcely have known him at a casual meeting. Five years in prison had certainly done Luke no good.

Though John touched nothing, Luke had begun to eat ravenously, picking out sardines with his fingers from the can between his elbows. After he had done for one can, however, he pushed everything away from him with a sudden gesture of revulsion.

"I 'll bet Belle 's got supper ready for me," he said—"chicken and mashed potatoes and squash-pie and things. I 've lived on hogwash for five years, and now I 'm out; I 've got something fancy coming to me. I 've had plenty of time to think over there, John, and I 've figured it out if a fellow goes to work and does a fine, brave thing, and gets jugged for it, why, the world 's got nothing he can't have when he gets out if he wants it. Is there anything to drink in the house, John, old boy?"

The other arose, got a dipper from the sink, and was starting heavily for the cellar stairs when Luke protested across the table:

"Not *cider!* Good Lord, John, cider for a man just out of hell!"

John stopped, and stared into the shining bottom of the dipper. A faint perspiration dampened his brow.

"You used to be sparing of—the other," he muttered. "A bit at Christmas, maybe, and—and—"

"*Christmas!* Well, if this ain't better 'n *Christmas!*" Luke hung over the table, pounding the oil-cloth with ecstatic fingers. The whites of his eyes seemed

more than usually prominent. John lifted a blanched face.

"I 'm sorry, Luke, but there 's none in the house."

Luke tipped his chair over backward, walked to the cupboard above the sink, rummaged on the top shelf, and returned to the table, carrying a three-cornered black bottle. He poured out a coffee-cup of the spirits and drank it down before he spoke.

"I would n't 'ave believed it, the day I come out of prison, denying me, your own blood-brother! Denying Luke! *Luke!*"

Color whipped John Petit's face; the features were set in a grimace of pain. Leaning across the table, he confronted his brother.

"It 's not that, Luke. God knows you can never be paid, nor half, nor a quarter paid, for what you 've gone through. Don't you think I 'd do it if I could? I 'm doing my best, Luke. I 've made over my share in the farm to you, and I 'm clearing out. I 'm going West to-night on the twelve-two. It 's a good farm, Luke; the wheat 's splendid this year. You 'll do well."

"And—and with Belle's place, too—" Luke looked up abruptly. "Going West, you say? Where to?"

"I don't know. I 'm just clearing out." John's eyes left his brother's and passed from object to object about the room, half frightened, half wistful. He grew nervous, like one hunted, and shifted toward the staircase door. "I 've got a few things to pack," he mumbled.

Luke turned in his chair to speak after him.

"When you 're ready, John, put the mare in the buggy, and I 'll go along. You 've got plenty of time to go round by the mountain, and you can drop me at Belle's."

John's heavy footfalls paused on the stairs, half-way up.

"All right," the leaden answer came down out of the dark.

Alone in the kitchen, Luke put his elbows farther apart on the oil-cloth and settled his cheeks deeper in his palms.

Twice he filled the coffee-cup from the bottle and emptied it. At rest so, in the pitiless, yellow rays of the lamp, his face showed more plainly than ever the price that had been asked of him. The skin hung colorless and loose, and beneath it one felt that there was no longer anything to bind it together. The circular muscles about the lips had lost elasticity and let them fall apart. In the eyes alone remained anything penetrating and alive. And they dreamed of the plunder of a new world. Why not? To a man famished in the desert five long years for a brave deed, who will deny all he will drink at the springs?

His finger-nails kept up a continuous, rapid thrumming on the table, and outside the rain droned its dun orchestration across the world. His eyelids drooped as the liquor mounted to his brain, and the rhythm of the beating fingers slowed by imperceptible degrees.

He shook himself out of it suddenly, lifting his head, and inclined an ear toward the outer door. Then, with a muffled exclamation, he leaped up, flung it open, and ran out into the streaming dark.

"John!" he cried. "John! John! John!"

The wheels ahead stopped, and his brother's voice came back.

"Yes?"

Luke came to the buggy, panting with the unaccustomed exertion.

"What you doing? Where you going?" he cried. "Trying to trick me?"

John's hands were in his lap, and his chin was buried in his collar.

"No, no, Luke. I—I just thought maybe you 'd decide you were too tired to go over there, after all. I—I was just figuring to drive down to the village the short way and wait for the twelve-two. I 'd leave the mare in Kolquist's stable and have him fetch her up in the morning."

Luke leaned his head on the wheel and began to sob. His tears, uncontrolled and painless, mingled with the rain. He could have done nothing more spectacular.

John reached across the wheel with a sudden excess of tenderness mingled with

self-abasement and patted the sunken shoulders; then, with an urging hand under the other's arm, pulled him into the buggy.

"Dear me, don't take on so!" he pleaded. "Yes, yes, Luke, old fellow, I'll drive you over. I'm going to take you to Belle's. Don't you hear me?"

He got around into the mountain road and drove slowly, letting the animal find her way. After a few moments he pulled up, took off his rubber coat, and threw it over Luke's drooping shoulders, then went on again. Neither spoke. By and by the mare stopped dead in the road.

"Here 's Tolley's Hill," John suggested tentatively. "Remember?"

Luke settled down a little farther in the seat.

"I 'll feel stouter in a few days," he protested in a weak voice. "I been shut up five years."

"That 's right." John got down, and, going to the mare's head, led her up the steep, slippery incline, helping her along by a strong pull on the head-stall. And so, dragging and blowing in the blind deluge, they came finally over the ridge.

A dog started barking a little way off to the right of the road. There came a sudden rectangle of light in the night, streaming with oblique jewels and framing the figure of a woman. Her voice was heard, calling to the dog:

"Stop it, Shep! Be quiet, can't you, Shep!" And then, lifted: "Who 's there? Is that—you?"

Neither man answered. The buggy had stopped in the road, and from the seat Luke Petit stared upward at the bright vision, his body still half crouching, one hand writhing on the other wrist, his face muscles moving painfully as realization struggled with the lees of the liquor he had drunk. Twice he rubbed the rain out of his eyes, as if he could not really believe.

John Petit, at the mare's head, was not looking up at the door, but down into the darkness about his boots. His square shoulders seemed to have fallen in upon themselves as if by their own weight.

"John! John!" the voice came down once more, lifted in a tenser note. "John Petit, has he come? Have you brought him, John?"

"Yes, Belle."

With a jerk at the head-stall, John swung the mare into the yard. The dog was snapping at his legs; it was a comfort to kick out at him with vicious jabs of the boot. The door faded out of sight as they approached. John cramped the wheels to let Luke get down.

"You coming in?" Luke asked him.

"No, I guess not. I guess I 'll go on down to the village and wait for the train. Good-by, Luke, old man."

And then, as if with another thought, he flung the blanket over the mare and hurried to catch up with his brother at the porch steps.

They opened the door without knocking, being already announced. The room was full of the comforting glow of a big oil lamp and the red shaft from the door of the "air-tight." A table was set with a white cloth and good things to eat—chicken, mashed potatoes, squash-pie, precisely. Luke's eyes took fire, gleaming, gloating, unstable; the tip of his tongue followed the perimeter of his lips; he rubbed his palms together.

"Look at that, will you?" he cried to his brother. Sinking down into a chair, he leaned forward on his elbows, encircling a plate with his forearms. "Did n't I tell you? Poor Luke! The best in the land for Luke, who 's been in a cell five years for her. Ha! ha! ha! And you thought I was too tired to come, John! That 's a joke on you, old boy. Belle was waiting for me."

"Yes," said John, moving painful lips. "I tell you she 's been waiting for you all these five years."

"But where is she? Where 's she gone?" Luke started up, jerking his eyes this way and that. On John's face there was a flame of shame and anger running up his cheeks to his forehead. His hands knotted behind his back, and then, as if getting away from him, reached out suddenly and thrust Luke back into his chair.

"Look here, Luke." His voice lost its edge then. His words began to stumble.

"You know it 's—it 's kind of hard for the girl, Luke. It 's a big thing, after all, and she 's got to—to kind of get her breath when it comes to the minute. I would n't give a cent for her if she was n't like that, and you would n't, either. She 'll be round in a second, Luke. Give her time."

"Time! More time!" An unhealthy rancor moved the man's face.

"I 'm hungry," he protested, "starved. Here, John; sit down and let 's eat. She 'll be round when she finds I 'm not running after her." He began pulling off flakes of meat from the chicken's breast and putting them between his teeth. "Belle," he called aloud, with a taunting gaiety, "we 're eating!"

The note of the rain booming through the darkened rooms beyond was all the answer he got. John, falling in eagerly with his mood, took a chair himself and made a laborious pretense of eating. Luke seemed to forget what he was doing, his hands moving more and more mechanically from plate to lips, and his eyes, fixed on the cloth, filled with dreams. Now and then the corners of his lips twitched. He passed a hand over his brow like a man awakening, and then looked up quickly.

"Wh-wh-where 's the minister, John? I forgot. Where—John, you promised to have the minister here to-night."

John's eyes dropped to his own plate.

"Mr. Teele 's off to conference," he said. "I did n't know it till late to-day."

He did n't want to look at Luke, but the continuing silence made him. What he saw in his brother's eyes brought him jumping to his feet.

"But he 'll be back *to-morrow*," he cried.

"*To-morrow!* You can say '*to-morrow!*' You 've never been five years in prison, or you could n't say it like that—'*to-morrow!*'"

A thwarted devil crept into Luke's eyes. They became less erratic, and moving with a new slowness, they sought the doorway

toward the living-room and the stairs. John, studying him, retreated behind the stove and fumbled in the bottom of the boot-closet. His hand brought out an old earthenware jug, stopped with a roll of paper.

"By Christmas!" he feigned surprise, "here 's Uncle Witte's whisky-jug, stood here in the closet since the day he died. What say, Luke? Let 's have one to your coming out."

When Luke had asked for whisky down at their own house, it had given John a moment of sickness; for he, too, had been waiting for Luke and thinking about Luke and depending upon Luke for five years. But now he watched his brother drink, leaning forward on the table and keeping track of Luke's eyes as a surgeon with a blessed and desperate anesthetic, and the sweat rolled the furrows between his brows.

Luke began to talk. Though John's eyes were staring at him, he seemed not to realize that John was there in front of him.

After a while John was n't there, for he had slipped away and out through the door leading to the living-room. He passed through the living-room on tiptoe, peering at the shadowy furnishings, through the black hall beyond and the blacker parlor, calling "Belle! Belle!" under his breath. He received no answer. He lifted his voice slightly, moved by the mystery of silence. He turned back and ascended the stairs, groping and calling. Still she failed to answer. His hand touched her form, huddled on the bed in her own room.

She started at the touch, and he had a sense of her cringing.

"Luke!" she gasped. "Luke Petit!"

"It 's John," he told her in a heavy whisper.

"Oh!"

For a time there was no sound in the chamber beyond the ceaseless drone of the rain on the shingles. Belle's hand, groping, found his and clung to it. He could not see her face, and he was glad she could not see his just then. He could not un-



"HE FUMBLING IN HIS POCKET FOR A MATCH, LIGHTED IT, AND BLINKED
DOWN AT THE FIGURE SPRAWLED OVER THE SILL."

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derstand himself; he was shivering all over without any reason.

"Belle," he pleaded a little wildly, "don't take on so!"

Her fingers tightened on his hand.

"I did n't know it was going to be like this, John." She was talking into the hollow of her arm. "I—was all right till—till the minute I heard you outside and knew he was there, and then—oh, I don't know—I don't know—"

John did n't know either.

"I suppose," she said, "it 's because I 've been thinking about him so long."

John had, too. That was the trouble with them both; they had been thinking about Luke Petit so long. After a while the girl began to speak as if to herself:

"It 's like having a prince coming for me—a prince that 's been through fire. I 'm lucky. I 'm an awful' lucky girl. It is n't many girls who are as lucky as I am, who have fellows who 've done what Luke 's done for me. It makes it somehow—*John! J-o-h-n!*"

She raised herself suddenly on an elbow, and her fingers were like wires on his wrist.

"John, he 's coming up! No, no! Don't let him, John!"

John reassured her after a moment.

"I don't hear anything, Belle," he said.

He did n't understand what was wrong with her. She was beginning to understand, and when she spoke again the sense of the treachery of her own soul struck through her words.

"I did n't know it would be like this. It—it frightens me. John, you 've been awful' good to me. And now that Luke 's back, I—I—I suppose you won't have to look after me. You won't have to come over the ridge every day—now. I suppose it 's good riddance, is n't it? Have—have I been an awful bother, John?"

He could see her face now, a gray shape, curiously near and tense and appealing.

He shook his head and muttered:

"No." And then, almost roughly, "I 'm going West to-night—on the twelve-two."

"You 're going away,"—her voice was slow and wondering,—"you mean you 're going away and leave me alone, John?"

"With Luke."

It seemed to bewilder her, as if in a moment's interim she had forgotten.

"With Luke," she echoed—"with Luke." She sank back on the bed, taking her face out of sight. Her words came to him after a moment, lifeless, unreal:

"I suppose he 's waiting for me downstairs. I suppose I ought to go down right away. He 's probably wondering why I don't hurry and come down."

"He looked to find Mr. Teele here. He was cut up."

"Yes, yes. He wanted to be married to-night. Yes; I suppose when a person 's been in prison five years—"

Her face was near him again.

"John," she whispered in panic, "I tell you, he *is* coming up! I *hear* him!"

"No, Belle; no—"

He had stopped to listen. In the booming silence the stairs outside the door were creaking under a slow and uncertain weight; creaking and groaning and muttering nearer and nearer. There was something incredibly sinister about this insensate advance upon them. Scarcely knowing what he did, John put an arm about the girl's shoulders and drew her up toward him.

"What—what is he saying?" she whispered.

"Nothing."

The footfalls and the thick, muttering voice came nearer all the while. Luke was in the hall now, at the top of the stairs, groping and fumbling in the blind place. John lifted his voice like a sudden cannon among the little noises:

"Stop it, Luke! Stop it, or, damn you, I 'll—I 'll—"

He broke off, appalled at himself.

The horrible thing was that there was no answer from the hall; nothing but the rain, a muffled whinny from the mare, wretched in the pouring yard beneath, and the almost inaudible crying of the bed as the girl took her weight away from it and stood up straight and rigid beside him.

And then there was the ticking of his watch in his pocket; he could hear that, and he could n't hear Luke. His scalp began to prickle. The girl at his side was trying to hold her breath. It was all very queer.

There was a sudden sound in the hall of something coming to the floor, not a boot-sole this time; the impact was heavier and of a metallic quality. And then followed a leaden chuckle, prolonged, introspective, shaking with a naughty glee.

Belle was saying in John's ear:

"He 's got hold of Uncle Witte's shotgun." Her voice was flat and matter-of-fact, almost lazy.

Her spirit of acceptance took hold of John.

"Oh, yes," he murmured, "the gun."

Luke must have come crawling on his hands and knees, for the first sense they had of him was a shadow crouching on the threshold of the doorway, perfectly quiet for a long while. He had said nothing since his last chuckle in the hall.

Now he seemed to be in trouble; they could hear him making obscure noises in his throat, grumbling, impatient, exasperated, changing to maudlin determination, then oaths, incoherent and menacing. And along with these ran the soft, busy fumbling of his hands. By and by he sighed with a daft content. His fumbling hands had found what they were after at last, and the listeners beside the bed heard the sharp click as the hammer came back under his thumb and the trigger was set.

Time went on; in John's pocket it ticked itself away into the past with measured and infinitesimal beats. The rain was lulling on the roof. To John Petit, strangely, it was a space of profound peace. He was bearing the girl's weight in his arms now, and as the dragging seconds passed, her head came over to his and rested there, the soft hair light on his cheek. Perspiration wet his face and neck, running down in channels on his skin, but he did not realize it.

It was as if his brain had been set free and allowed to wander back into memory, without care now of what it saw; and it

saw the procession of the days of those five years suddenly and incredibly radiant with the moving picture of this woman at his side. He looked back across that dim, day-to-day battle with his soul, that interminable agony of turning his face the other way. He was glad it was all over. This moment in the silence and the dark, standing side by side with Belle Muller on the edge of things, beyond hope or despair, beyond conscience, beyond right and wrong—this was a gift princely and splendid. And that crouching spider-shade in the doorway was the giver of the gift. A queer, irrational wave of gratitude passed over him. The watch ticked in his pocket. Why did n't it happen?

Belle's lips touched his cheek at the corner of his lips. He turned his head slowly and looked down into her eyes. And then she spoke to him out loud and with an incredible carelessness:

"I did n't know it would be like this—John."

He seemed to have been dreaming, and that woke him up. He became aware suddenly of the sweat streaming cold down his face and of what he was doing. He turned his eyes toward the door.

"Don't shoot, Luke! If you love dear God, Luke, don't shoot yet! You would n't want to hurt Belle, would you? Wait! Can you see me?"

He pushed the girl off with a ruthless violence, flinging her hands away.

"See," he pleaded. "I'm going over to the left here. Here, Luke. See, I'm all alone here now. Can you see me?"

And still the trigger in the dark hung fire, squeezing out one more moment of sweet suspense. And still Luke Petit would not speak.

John begged him passionately, hearing Belle stir.

"Quick! For God's sake, Luke, pull that trigger quick before she comes!"

His voice, raised, echoed through the narrow space. He felt Belle groping for him, and he fled, batting out at the invisible hands, forgetting everything but the fact that he must remain a fair target, alone. His boot struck something and sent

it spinning across the floor. He knew by the ring of it that it was the shot-gun.

For an instant, standing quite still, with his eyelids pressed together, he seemed to sink a great way into a void. When he had struggled back again, he fumbled in his pocket for a match, lighted it, and blinked down at the figure sprawled over the sill. One of the arms hunched up a little in unconscious protest against the light, and then heavily sank back again.

John Petit's voice sounded shallow and idiotic.

"Why, he 's asleep! He—he 's gone to sleep!"

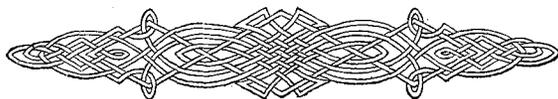
They went down-stairs, leaving him there in the deep peace of oblivion. Once, in the glowing kitchen, their eyes met for a moment, but there was no need of words. Everything that need be said had

been said between them in the waiting silence of that upper room.

Belle Muller took nothing with her except the cloak which John threw over her shoulders. She did not so much as glance about the familiar stage of her girlhood before she stepped out of it forever, a kind of fugitive.

"He can have it all," she said, and turned her back on it.

A sense of miraculous liberation carried them along. After the unstirring air in the house, there was something incredibly soothing in the wild whips of the rain, the crying of the strained harness, the grunting mare, the lunge in the unseen and the unknown, the sense of the "twelve-two" roaring westward toward them somewhere out there in the blind chaos of the night.



Revelation

By HELEN HOYT

"ONE friend shall know me utterly," I said;
 "All that I am to him I will disclose.
 Surely it is from perfect knowledge grows
 The perfect love that makes two natures wed."
 With fearful care before him then I spread
 All of my life: the doors I ne'er unclose
 Now opened wide; each grace of me, each pose,
 Dissolved for him, till there remained no shred
 Of cloak between me and love's fullest gaze.
 Faults, virtues, dreams I made myself confess,
 And every part and pattern, every phase.
 With unbecoming answers, eyes adaze,
 He stopped my words; with an old, gay caress.
 No stranger could have wished to know me less.

