

RED BELTS

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Red belts by Hugh Pendexter

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HUGH PENDEXTER

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"On the ground lay Elsie Tonpitt, hurled there by a bandit, a huge brute of a man, bending over her."

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BY
HUGH PENDENTER



FRONTISPIECE BY
RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1920

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FOREWORD

IN 1784 North Carolina's share of the national debt was a ninth, or about five millions of dollars — a prodigious sum for a commonwealth just emerging from a colonial chrysalis to raise. Yet North Carolina was more fortunate than some of her sister débutantes into Statehood, in that she possessed some twenty-nine million acres of virgin country beyond the Alleghanies. This noble realm, from which the State of Tennessee was to be fashioned, had been won by confiscation and the rifles of the over-mountain settlers and had cost North Carolina neither blood nor money.

The republic was too young to have developed coalescence. A man might be a New Yorker, a New Englander, a Virginian and so on, but as yet seldom an American. The majority of the Northern representatives to the national Congress believed the Union was full grown, geographically; that it covered too much territory already. To all such narrow visions the Alleghanies appealed as being the natural western boundary. These conservatives insisted the future of the country was to be found on the seaboard.

Charles III of Spain heartily approved of this policy of restriction and set in motion his mighty machinery to prevent further expansion of the United States. He knew the stimuli for restoring his kingdom to a world plane could be found only in his American possessions.

As a result of those sturdy adventurers, crossing the mountains to plunge into the unknown, carried with them scant encouragement from their home States or the central Government. In truth, the national Congress was quite powerless

to protect its citizens. And this, perhaps, because the new States had not yet fully evolved above the plan of Colonial kinship. It was to be many years before the rights of States gave way to the rights of the nation. The States were often at odds with one another and would stand shoulder to shoulder only in face of a general and overwhelming peril.

Spain, powerful, rapacious and cunning, stalked its prey beyond the mountains. She dreamed of a new world empire, with the capital at New Orleans, and her ambitions formed a sombre back-curtain before which Creek and Cherokee warriors — some twenty thousand fighting men — manœuvred to stop the white settlers straggling over the Alleghanies. These logical enemies of the newcomers were augmented by white renegades, a general miscellany of outlaws, who took toll in blood and treasure with a ferocity that had nothing to learn from the red men.

So the over-mountain men had at their backs the indifference of the seaboard.

Confronting them were ambushes and torture. But there was one factor which all the onslaughts of insidious intrigue and bloody violence could not eliminate from the equation — the spirit of the people. The soul of the freeman could not be bought with foreign gold or consumed at the stake. Men died back on the seaboard, and their deaths had only a biological significance, but men were dying over the mountains whose deaths will exert an influence for human betterment so long as these United States of America shall exist.

The fires of suffering, kindled on the western slopes of the Alleghanies to sweep after the sun, contained the alchemy of the spiritual and were to burn out the dross. From their clean ashes a national spirit was to spring up, the harbinger of a mighty people following a flag of many stars, another incontestable proof that materiality can never satisfy the soul of man.

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