

The Tale of a  
Woods  
Colt

*In the Land of Rob – A Trilogy*

G. Mason

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THE TALE OF A WOODS COLT

BOOK ONE OF THE SERIAL TRILOGY  
IN THE LAND OF ROB  
*A SAGA OF THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS*

*Fiction is fact distilled into truth.*

—Edward Albee

# PROLOGUE

In 1876, in the high reaches of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Rob Nickerson entered the world as a woods colt, the euphemism given by morally upstanding people to a child born out of wedlock. As an unwed maiden of the mountains, Lucy Nickerson knew that she and her son faced an unpromising future. Then the quirks of fate and turns of misfortune put her and young Rob under the roof of his natural father, living on a mountain farm under the rugged crest of Ragged Mountain.

As the easternmost major mountain range in the broad Appalachian system, the Virginia Blue Ridge rises like a rampart to divide the Piedmont to the east from the Shenandoah Valley to the west.

Settlement of these lands began in the mid-eighteenth century, with altitude defining the time of settlement and the eventual culture of the settlers. The desirable land lay at elevations mostly under one thousand feet, the fertile fields of the large farms lapping at the foot of the mountains.

In the heights above the prosperous farmland dwelt the mountain people. Most lived in the hollows, the many glens that wended around and between the ancient mountains, where they eked out a living farming marginal land. Further up the rocky ridges dwelt poor homesteaders who were barely able to pry a sparse livelihood from the stubborn hillsides.

The mountain hollows are of three kinds. Lower hollows range to about twelve hundred feet elevation, and are more like coves lying up against the mountains, separated from the open valleys by low hills. The inner hollows are tightly bounded by mountains, and rise to two thousand feet from their juncture with the lower hollows. The upper

hollows are mere creases or folds in the mountain slopes that extend up to the ridges at thirty-five hundred feet. The peaks top a lofty four thousand feet above sea level. Social and economic status of the inhabitants decreased as their altitude and isolation increased.

As often as not, the mountain people's eighteenth century ancestors had endured privation in the British Isles, spurring many to flee in desperation by selling themselves into indentured servitude to pay their passage by ship to colonial America. Once released from four or more years of bondage, they migrated in all directions to live in freedom and seek their fortunes in every walk of life.

Some mountain folk were descended from common seafarers who went to sea to escape the strife-torn English-Scottish borderlands. Upon landing in the Virginia colony, they took advantage of bargain land prices to acquire a toehold on the mountain frontier.

Though descended from a British sailor who had acquired large acreage in colonial times, Rob Nickerson's near ancestors were among those of slender means who fell short of the substantial resources needed to buy a viable farm, engage in business or make the arduous journey west to claim land on the frontier in the new United States of America. Instead, they migrated to the Blue Ridge Mountains to settle in the deep hollows and up on lofty heights.

Mountain land was rocky and available at rock-bottom prices, though some who settled the tortured ridges and hollows didn't buy their land. They simply squatted in isolation, with little or no interference from distant absentee owners of sprawling tracts of land. The mountains were well peopled by the middle of the nineteenth century, the hollows and hills dotted with homesteads of humble houses and tiny cabins set in clearings arduously claimed from the forest.

When the Civil War erupted, the momentous conflict had little to do with the mountain people, for though they were *in* the South they were hardly *of* the South. The War of Northern Agression, as the South called it, held no Yankee threat to the mountain way of life, poor as it

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was with little to lose. Most people living up in the mountains stood near the bottom of the socio-economic strata, and had no real stake in the conflict.

Mountain dwellers had little interest in slavery. The nearest slaves were on the large farms situated several miles away from the mountains. Those few slaves that had ever been brought into the hollows were long gone by the time the War Between the States broke out. Many of the mountain people had never seen a slave. Divergent interests and pockets of union sympathy further isolated them from loyalty to the Confederacy.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, lowlanders tended to view mountain people as inferior, and disparagingly called them *mountaineers*. Ardently independent, mountain folk possessed a stubborn streak of resistance to meddling authority. Ensnared in the isolation that suited them, they were considered by valley people to be wild and woolly.

The trilogy, *In the Land of Rob*, depicts mountain culture and portrays the interplay between lowlanders and the highland folk as it spans the ninety-four year true-to-life saga of colorful mountain man Rob Nickerson.

*The Tale of a Woods Colt* begins the story, taking Rob from his conception through his adventures as a young man seeking his future in the Shenandoah Valley, where an ill-fated romance lands him in prison.

*The Call of the Whippoorwill* carries Rob from his luckless valley sojourn back to his mountain milieu, where he eventually falls into a double life. He is caught up in the forced eviction of over five hundred mountain families to create the Shenandoah National Park, after which he despondently finds himself at the portals of old age.

*The Crags of Old Rag* concludes the trilogy with the illiterate Old Man Rob doing his best to cope with the modern world that swirls in around his mountain home.

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*“All happy families resemble each other; each unhappy family is  
unhappy in its own way.” Leo Tolstoy. Anna Karenina.*

*PART ONE*  
**LUCY**



ONE  
1876  
The Birth

**The cabin door** burst open to reveal the looming form of a stout woman, her silhouette backlit by the pale sun. Lucy stiffened at the sudden rush of cold air, but then recognized Aunt Tilly and leaned back on her bed with a sigh of relief.

Aunt Tilly stepped into the room, pushed the door shut behind her and stood with her shoes firmly planted on the pine-planked floor, surveying the dimly lit scene.

A smoky wood fire smoldered in the stone fireplace. A single small window admitted a feeble ray of light. A tin lamp sat burning on a wooden table. A small spinning wheel occupied a corner. On wall pegs hung an old double-barreled shotgun. Jesus looked down from a frame on the wall. The simple room held no other adornments.

“Bile water,” ordered Tilly, in a commanding voice.

She tossed her old coat into the corner and, with a nod to the worried looking woman at the fireplace, let out a robust, “Evenin’, Hannah.”

Aunt Tilly had arrived in force at the Nickerson home. A horse of a woman with lively eyes, her moon face beamed ruddy good health, except for lips shrunken into her nearly toothless mouth. She was a take-charge type who had midwived her mountain neighbors for over two decades.

Standing in her coarse and tattered attire, Tilly cut an imposing figure. One of the toes on her sockless feet showed through a hole in the leather of the high-laced shoes. A bonnet that once had been white, a shabby black long-sleeved blouse with fluffed shoulders, and a rough

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gingham skirt covered her head to foot. Sturdy and solid, she was, in the local jargon, “a good lifter.”

“Tilly, I’m powerful glad you’s h’yar. She hain’t got much longer,” said Hannah Nickerson from her seat on a crude chair, the bottoms of her bare feet facing the fire and showing the hard leathery soles of a mostly shoeless existence. In contrast to Tilly, Hannah was rail thin, with mousy brown hair pulled severely back to a tight bun. Her face, drawn taut by a hard life of continuous worry and work, was showing the strain of motherly anxiety.

Hannah immediately swung the black iron kettle in over the fire and laid a couple more logs on, punching the glowing embers up under the vessel. The fireplace served as cookstove and sole source of heat.

“Her pains been a-comin’ on right smart this evenin’, Tilly,” said Hannah through lips so tight they were only capable of a thin smile whenever the burdens of life allowed.

Lucy—Lucinda Nickerson—lay in rags on a rustic plank bed with a cornhusk tick for a mattress, her belly bulging under a dirty blanket. Her sweaty, drawn face showed the strain, but she was relieved to now be in Aunt Tilly’s able hands.

Lucy’s pains had started before dawn. Right after breakfast Hannah had sent the four other children away for the day, putting Otis, the oldest, in charge...

“Otis, take Jenny, Richard and Mazie up to Uncle Elwood’s. You hear me now?”

“Yassum,” said Otis, with an adolescent crack in his voice. A strong and wiry boy, he usually worked with his father, Festus, in the arduous effort of winking a bare subsistence from their rough mountain acreage. But Hannah saw to it that Festus wasn’t working this day.

“Then git right on over to Tilly’s and tell her Lucy done got the pains.”

“Yassum.”

“Then git back to Elwood’s. You stay up’par till Daddy come fer you, you hear?”

“Yassum.”

Tilly and Ernest Foster lived a mile up the trail, and Uncle Elwood wasn’t far from there. Aunt Tilly had no training as a midwife, but there were no trained midwives in that mountainous corner of the county. She had a natural talent and was trusted to handle most of the births in the highlands that rose above the tiny community of Nabors Mill, Virginia.

The nearest doctor was in the village of Sperryville. But he was only willing to come seven miles up the mountain by horseback if a life was in danger. The Nickersons and most of the mountain people couldn’t afford a doctor anyway. They couldn’t afford a midwife either, but Aunt Tilly didn’t demand a fee. If someone could pay, she’d ask for fifty cents. Otherwise, she accepted whatever was offered in trade. Tilly had delivered Lucy and the other four Nickerson children.

The hill and hollow dwellers thought Aunt Tilly had the calling to be a midwife because she’d never had her own children, as though it were an alternative outlet for maternal instincts. Calling her Aunt Tilly made her an honorary family member.

Everyone knew to call on Aunt Tilly when labor pains began, just to let her know to be ready. She didn’t come right away, though. She had plenty of work at home and couldn’t spend all day waiting by the birth bed. First-birth labor could last a day or a couple of days. The family was expected to take care of housework and tend to the expectant mother. “Come fer me once’t the water’s broke,” she always instructed. Only when the birth was imminent did Tilly come to her patient.

Through the morning hours, Lucy’s contractions had become more frequent. With each spasm, Hannah took her daughter’s hand in hers and soothed her with words of encouragement.

Festus, a dour man and unkempt, ignored his daughter as he sat

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with a little jug of corn liquor cradled in the crook of his arm, sullenly staring at the fire through dark eyes peering out from sunken sockets. At Hannah's insistence, he had put off work and was attired in his good clothes for the birth—collarless shirt, vest stained by tobacco juice, baggy woolen trousers, loose suspenders and scuffed boots.

Not yet forty, Festus looked a rugged fifty. Under his scraggly hair stretched a gaunt, leathery face that sprouted week-old stubble around his sullen mouth that defaulted into a droopy frown. His upper lip twitched irregularly, signaling his cranky and crotchety mien. His head still held a few tobacco-stained teeth that were seldom seen because he never smiled.

By early afternoon, Lucy's contractions were closely spaced and increasingly painful. Then her water broke.

"Festus, git on up'par and fetch Tilly," said Hannah. "Lucy hain't got much longer."

Usually given to grouching, Festus pushed himself out of his chair without a word, put on his crumpled hat, grabbed his threadbare coat, took a few wobbly steps and ducked out the door.

Out in the yard, Festus looked back at his humble abode and pulled on his coat. Beyond the one low room, the little cabin extended only to an upstairs loft, a porch on the front, a lean-to on the rear and a mud-mortared stone chimney at one end. Cramped and totally lacking in convenience, comfort and sanitation, the rudimentary hovel was a typical dwelling in the high reaches of the Virginia Blue Ridge.

"Women's business," he muttered to himself, turning toward the rough footpath.

Festus saw no reason to celebrate the birth. He felt cursed that his daughter was adding another mouth to feed at his table. Regular nips from his jug had taken the edge off his consternation by the time it fell to him to go fetch the midwife. He hurried up the trail to the Foster cabin and found Tilly coming in from the barn with a pail hanging from her fingers.

“You best come on down,” he croaked, in his raspy closed-mouth way of speaking. “It’s a-comin’.”

Tilly carried the pail inside and came back out with a bag of rags under her arm. Festus saw her back down the trail to his cabin, then found his fishing pole and disappeared. He was a good husband. He wasn’t like some others who couldn’t be bothered with the “nonsense” of fetching the midwife. Still, he drew the line at attending the birth. Childbirth was strictly women’s business. He’d have no part of it.

Hannah Nickerson had born eight children, with five still living. At sixteen, Lucy was the oldest, and now becoming a mother herself. . .

Tilly tied on her tattered apron and sat down beside Lucy, taking the girl’s hand in hers. “You goin’ to be fine, child,” she reassured, in her best soothing voice. “Let me look in now.” She checked Lucy’s cervical dilation and made sure the baby’s head was down. A breech birth would mean trouble. She then laid out her rags. It might be another half hour.

Tilly turned to Hannah and asked, “You supposen you goin’ to have ary more children, Hannah?” Only thirty something, Hannah looked a haggard forty-five.

“Hain’t no way to know, Tilly. I reckon I’ll have many as I’m supposed to have.”

“Womens always holts up best what don’t have too many, Hannah.”

“I hain’t got nothin’ to do with it, Tilly. Yer goin’ to have yer number,” said Hannah, reflecting the fatalism prevalent in the mountains.

“Some womens can stop,” said Tilly.

“It’s up to the Lord,” declared Hannah.

“Dicey Simpson, she done had six,” said Tilly, persisting. “I done tolt her she best not have no more lest she die. Her man, he done vow he hain’t agoin’ to let her die. He sleep in a separate bed now, and she hain’t had no more, neither,” said Tilly, making her point.

Hannah sat quietly in her homespun dress and a course sweater of no defined color, staring into the fire without responding.

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But Tilly kept at it.

“Ritchie, he thinks a heap of Dicey. Some womens reckon they man’s got to always be satisfied. But Ritchie, he a mighty good husband to Dicey,” she said, hinting.

“I cain’t say nothin’ like that to Festus!” protested Hannah.

“But he might...”

“He won’t hear of it!”

“Hannah, womens got ways of sayin’ without actual sayin’.”

“It’s just manners for a woman to obey her man,” insisted Hannah.

“Wahl, I’m just a-sayin’, Hannah, you best not have no more neither,” said Tilly.

“Wahl, I hain’t had none fer about six yahrs. May be I hain’t goin’ to have no more children. May be I *cain’t* have no more, Tilly.”

“Wahl, could be that...”

Lucy shrieked, grimacing at the sharp pain of a contraction, pulling Tilly back to her patient.

The contractions started coming quickly. With each one, Tilly coached Lucy, who did not need coaching. Natural forces were in charge.

“Poosh.”

Lucy’s face contorted in a paroxysm of pain. Between contractions she breathed heavily, rolling her eyes in the agony of giving birth and the ecstasy of giving life.

“Poosh, Lucy!”

Lucy screamed with another strong contraction.

“Poosh harder!”

Lucy cried out again, but with a little less pain as the baby began moving.

“POOSH!”

Tilly wiped Lucy’s brow with a rag. “Yer doin’ good child, yer doin’ good.”

Hannah took over holding Lucy’s hand, which Lucy gripped and

squeezed tightly with every intolerable contraction. Presently the baby's head appeared.

"It's a—comin', it's a—comin', cried Tilly. "Poosh! Poosh!"

"Ah..AH..AHHHH!!!" screamed Lucy, her pain spiking at the final push; the head was out, and then the shoulders. The baby, all slick and red, slid into Tilly's waiting hands.

"It's a boy!" exclaimed Hannah with shining eyes and a rare grin. Her voice was a dam breaking, releasing a flood of pent-up apprehension. Childbirth was a regular and ordinary occurrence, not something to make a big to-do over. Still, Hannah was charged with anticipation, and not a little anxiety. Things could easily go wrong.

After carefully cleaning the quivering newborn's nose and mouth, Tilly held the baby up, the tiny feet kicking and tiny fingers curling. She gently smacked the little bottom, inducing a hearty scream and the first breath of life. Only then did she tie off the umbilical cord, cutting it with a small knife pulled from her apron pocket. She dipped a rag into the kettle of hot water and held it up to cool. She gently wiped the infant clean, swathed it in more rags and laid the newborn in Lucy's arms with a sense of relief that the birth had gone smoothly.

Despite the primitive conditions and lack of sanitary methods, Tilly rarely lost a mother in childbirth. If a woman dies giving birth, mountain people accept it with stoic fatalism. If a woman's time to die has come—she will die. "It wahr her time to go," they would say. Still, the midwife took special pride in her high success rate.

The birth was over; there was no birth certificate or written record.

Tilly picked up her remaining rags and stood up to leave. "She strong but best give her three, four days in the bed," she said to Hannah, turning toward the door to go.

Hannah rushed up and grabbed her arm. "You done brung my first grandchild into this world!" she gushed in a flood of relief. "I cain't thank you enough, Tilly!" It was one of the few times Hannah showed

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strong emotion.

“I just done what I do,” replied Tilly, with a professional air of mission completed. “I just done my callin’, Hannah.”

She stepped out the door, off the porch and headed up the trail in the dimming light.

Dusk had deepened nearly to darkness by the time Festus appeared on the path into the yard, the four children straggling out behind him. “*Git on down h’yar now!*” he barked in his coarse voice. Three fish hung from his hand.

Hannah stood hunched over the fireplace, boiling up a pot of turnips and cabbage, frying a skillet of fatback, and baking ashcake for supper. Looking over her shoulder at her husband and children filing through the door, she announced, “It’s a boy.”

Jenny and Mazie, grinning and giggling, looked over at Lucy. No one said anything and Hannah didn’t expect much excitement. Gaining and losing family members was a regular occurrence. Life and death were predestined. “You cain’t do nothin’ to change it” went the saying. Few families went two years without one or the other.

“H’yar’s some fish fer supper,” were Festus’ only words as he handed over the brook trout, which Hannah quickly cleaned, filleted and fried.

Hannah knew Festus would take little notice of the new baby. He’d taken little interest in the birth of his own children and now here was Lucy with a baby and no husband. In his coarse way, he’d made his view clear. “A girl orter git her a man afore she git’s her a child,” he had grumbled. “Trouble is, iffen she gits it in her head she goin’ to git it in her ass, because hain’t hardly nary a man that gon’ say no.”

Hannah looked over at Lucy lying on the bed in exhausted contentment with her little one nuzzling her nourishing breast. Only Hannah felt any actual excitement about the birth, though the two girls were showing amused interest. She saw Festus throw a quick glance Lucy’s way as he took his seat at the table.

Each of the four children went over to the bed for a curiosity look at their new nephew.

Jenny asked, “Can I holt him?” Lucy detached her infant from her nipple and gently handed the little rag-wrapped bundle to her sister’s cradled arms. “He so itty bitty!” cooed Jenny.

Little Mazie peeked up over her sister’s arms. “Why he so *red*, Lucy?” she wanted to know, as the miniature fingers clenched and the tiny mouth erupted in discontent.

“They always red the first day,” said Lucy, retrieving the infant and reconnecting him to his supper. The siblings all found their positions on the table bench to connect to their own suppers.

Hannah served up the food in clayware table bowls, with a bedside plateful for Lucy. Table grace was not part of the Nickerson meal. They were religious in the sense of believing in the Lord and His control over life, and in the hereafter, but not in the sense of prayer and worship, or petitioning, or even giving thanks.

Festus helped himself by stabbing fish, vegetables and fatback with his knife and plopping each in turn onto his battered tin plate. He sprinkled salt across it all. They had no other spices or condiments.

Then the children dug in, forking food onto their bent and dented plates. Hannah filled her plate last. Dessert was dried apple slices soaked in water, with a little honey she’d saved for special occasions.

Festus wiped his sleeve across his mouth and looked across the table at Otis. “We gon’ cut fahrwood most the entahr day tomorrow, boy.”

Then Hannah caught Jenny and Richard’s eyes, “I’m sendin’ the both of you up to Tilly in the mornin’.”

There was no more table talk. There wasn’t much to talk about. Supper was about eating. Late winter meant a lean diet of food stored from the previous harvest. They still had ample salted fatback and some smoked pork from the hogs butchered the prior fall. A supply of potatoes and turnips remained in the damp root cellar and the loft held enough corn, but the cabbage had dwindled and only one cask of

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dried apple slices remained. Their cow had been bred and was now dry. So today's fish was a special treat.

Dinner lapsed into dead time. They had no books, not even a Bible. None of them could read. There was nothing much to talk about, not even the new baby. Life was about getting by today, not reflecting on the past or envisioning the future. Some mountain families had a fiddle, banjo or mandolin, and the talent to entertain themselves, but not the Nickersons.

Hannah and Jenny washed out the dinnerware, leaving little Mazie to gravitate back over to Lucy and the baby. Festus and the boys sat staring into the fire; their eyes had begun to droop by the time supper cleanup was complete.

"Let's git on up," said Hannah, announcing bedtime. Day was done and the next morning began at dawn, so up they filed to the sleeping loft. Bed was a cornhusk tick on the floor, and heavy blankets, each shared by two children. Hannah and Festus, having given up their first floor bed to Lucy, slept up with the other children.

The Nickersons and all the near neighbors could neither write nor spell their names, and could only count and figure by using fingers, which was how Hannah kept track of the children's ages. Some mountain people lost count of exactly how old they were, not because they couldn't track the years but because it didn't matter much to them.