

My Side of the MOUNTAIN



By JEAN GEORGE

294

(Scene from the PARAMOUNT PICTURE
produced by Robert R. Rodvitz)

MY SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

Written and Illustrated by
JEAN GEORGE

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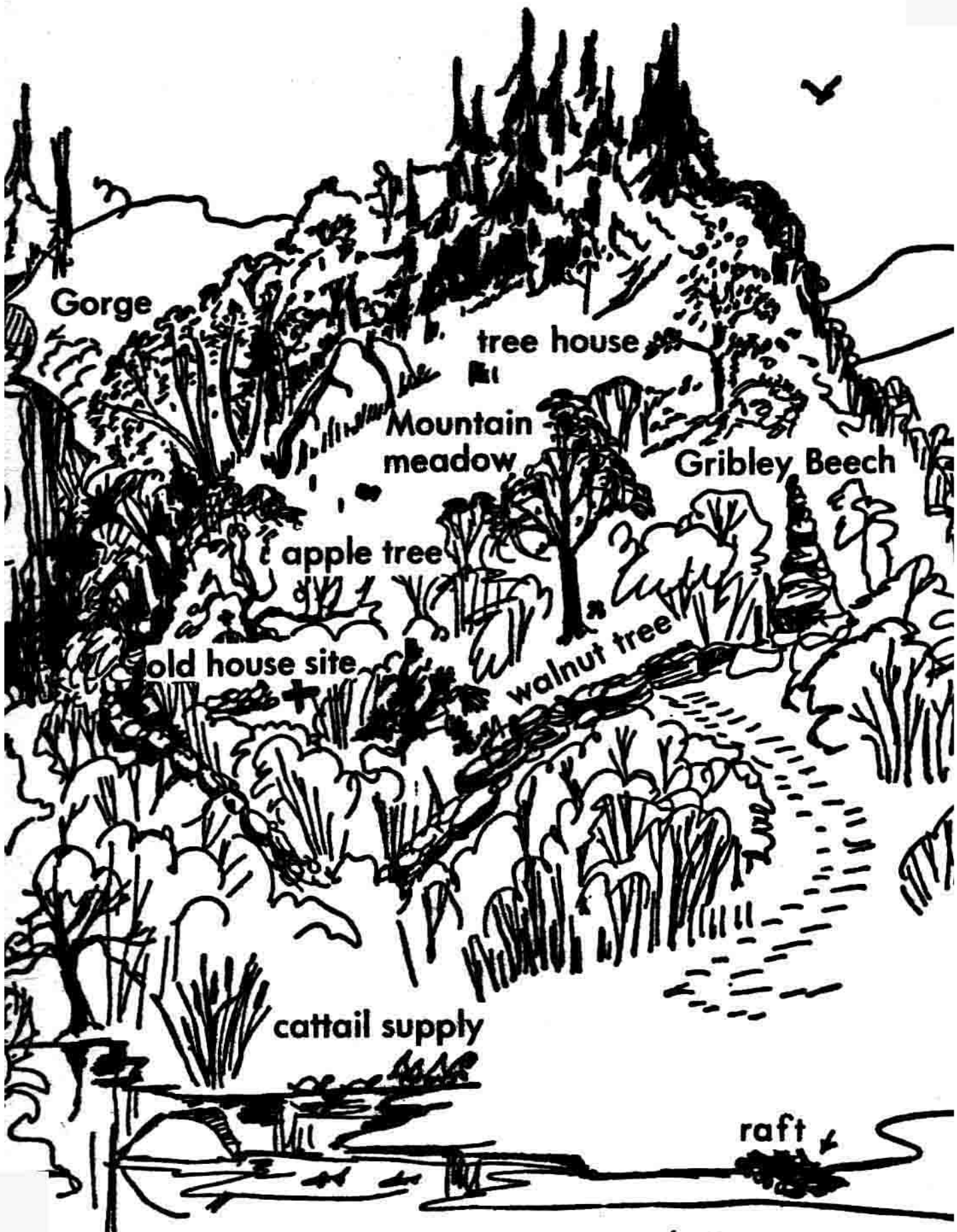
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*This book is dedicated
to many people*

*to that gang of youngsters who
inhabited the trees and waters of
the Potomac River so many years
ago, and to the bit of Sam Gibley
in the children and adults around
me now.*



My Side of the Mountain
signed S. Gribley

In Which I Hole Up in a Snowstorm

“**I** AM ON MY MOUNTAIN in a tree home that people have passed without ever knowing that I am here. The house is a hemlock tree six feet in diameter, and must be as old as the mountain itself. I came upon it last summer, and dug and burned it out until I made a snug cave in the tree that I now call home.

“My bed is on the right as you enter, and is made of ash slats and covered with deer-skin. On the left is a small fireplace about knee-high. It is of clay and stones. It has a chimney that leads the smoke out through a knothole. I chipped out three other knotholes to let fresh air in. The air coming in is bitter

cold. It must be below zero outside, and yet I can sit here inside my tree and write with bare hands. The fire is small, too. It doesn't take much fire to warm this tree room.

"It is the fourth of December, I think. It may be the fifth. I am not sure because I have not recently counted the notches in the aspen pole that is my calendar. I have been just too busy gathering nuts and berries, smoking venison, fish, and small game to keep up with the exact date.

"The lamp I am writing by is deer fat poured into a turtle shell with a strip of my old city trousers for a wick.

"It snowed all day yesterday and today. I have not been outside since the storm began, and I am bored for the first time since I ran away from home eight months ago to live on the land.

"I am well and healthy. The food is good. Sometimes I eat turtle soup, and I know how to make acorn pancakes. I keep my supplies in the wall of the tree in wooden pockets that I chopped myself.

"Every time I have looked at those pockets during the last two days, I have felt just like a squirrel — which reminds me: I didn't see a squirrel one whole day before that storm

began. I guess they are holed up and eating their stored nuts too.

“I wonder if The Baron — that’s the wild weasel who lives behind the big boulder to the north of my tree — is also denned up. Well, anyway, I think the storm is dying down, because the tree is not crying so much. When the wind really blows, the whole tree moans right down to the roots, which is where I am.

“Tomorrow I hope The Baron and I can tunnel out into the sunlight. I wonder if I should dig the snow. But that would mean I would have to put it somewhere, and the only place to put it is in my nice snug tree. Maybe I can pack it with my hands as I go. I’ve always dug into the snow from the top — never up from under.

“The Baron must dig up from under the snow. I wonder where he puts what he digs. Well, I guess I’ll know in the morning.”

When I wrote that last winter, I was scared and thought maybe I’d never get out of my tree. I had been scared for two days — ever since the first blizzard hit the Catskill Mountains. When I came up to the sunlight, which I did by simply poking my head into

the soft snow and standing up, I laughed at my dark fears.

Everything was white, clean, shining, and beautiful. The sky was blue, blue, blue. The hemlock grove was laced with snow, the meadow was smooth and white, and the gorge was sparkling with ice. It was so beautiful and peaceful that I laughed out loud. I guess I laughed because my first snowstorm was over and it had not been so terrible after all.

Then I shouted, "I did it!" My voice never got very far. It was hushed by the tons of snow.

I looked for signs from The Baron Weasel. His footsteps were all over the boulder — also slides where he had played. He must have been up for hours, enjoying the new snow.

Inspired by his fun, I poked my head into my tree and whistled. Frightful, my trained falcon, flew to my fist, and we jumped and slid down the mountain, making big holes and trenches as we went. It was good to be whistling and carefree again, because I was sure scared by the coming of that storm.

I had been working since May, learning how to make a fire with flint and steel, find-

ing what plants I could eat, learning how to trap animals and catch fish — all this so that when the curtain of blizzard struck the Catskills, I could crawl inside my tree and be comfortably warm and have plenty to eat.

During the summer and fall I had thought about the coming of winter. However, on that third day of December when the sky blackened, the temperature dropped, and the first flakes swirled around me, I must admit that I wanted to run back to New York. Even the first night that I spent out in the woods, when I couldn't get the fire started, was not as frightening as the snowstorm that gathered behind the gorge and mushroomed up over my mountain.

I was smoking three trout. It was nine o'clock in the morning. I was busy keeping the flames low, so they would not leap up and burn the fish. As I worked, it occurred to me that it was awfully dark for that hour of the morning. Frightful was leashed to her tree stub. She seemed restless and pulled at her tethers. Then I realized that the forest was dead quiet. Even the woodpeckers that had been tapping around me all morning were silent. The squirrels were nowhere to be seen. The juncos and chickadees and nut-

hatches were gone. I looked to see what The Baron Weasel was doing. He was not around. I looked up.

From my tree you can see the gorge beyond the meadow. White water pours between the black wet boulders and cascades into the valley below. The water that day was as dark as the rocks. Only the sound told me it was still falling. Above the darkness stood another darkness — the clouds of winter, black and fearsome. They looked as wild as the winds that were bringing them. I grew sick with fright. I knew I had enough food. I knew everything was going to be perfectly all right. But knowing that didn't help. I was scared. I stamped out the fire and pocketed the fish.

I tried to whistle for Frightful, but couldn't purse my shaking lips tight enough to get out anything but *pfffff*. So I grabbed her by the hide straps that are attached to her legs and we dove through the deerskin door into my room in the tree.

I put Frightful on the bedpost and curled up in a ball on the bed. I thought about New York and the noise and the lights, and how a snowstorm always seemed very friendly there. I thought about our apartment, too. At

that moment it seemed bright and lighted and warm. I had to keep saying to myself: there were eleven of us in it! Dad, Mother, four sisters, four brothers, and me. And not one of us liked it, except perhaps little Nina, who was too young to know. Dad didn't like it even a little bit. He had been a sailor once, but when I was born he gave up the sea and worked on the docks in New York. Dad didn't like the land. He liked the sea, wet and big and endless.

Sometimes he would tell me about Great-grandfather Gribley, who owned land in the Catskill Mountains and felled the trees and built a home and plowed the land — only to discover that he wanted to be a sailor. The farm failed, and Great-grandfather Gribley went to sea.

As I lay with my face buried in the sweet greasy smell of my deerskin, I could hear Dad's voice saying, "That land is still in the family's name. Somewhere in the Catskills is an old beech with the name *Gribley* carved on it. It marks the northern boundary of Gribley's folly — the land is no place for a Gribley."

"The land is no place for a Gribley," I said. "The land is no place for a Gribley, and

here I am three hundred feet from the beech with *Gribley* carved on it.”

I fell asleep at that point, and when I awoke I was hungry. I cracked some walnuts, got down the acorn flour I had pounded, with a bit of ash to remove the bite, reached out the door for a little snow, and stirred up some acorn pancakes. I cooked them on a top of a tin can, and as I ate them, smothered with blueberry jam, I knew that the land was just the place for a *Gribley*.

In Which I Get Started on This Venture

I LEFT NEW YORK in May. I had a penknife, a ball of cord, an ax, and forty dollars, which I had saved from selling magazine subscriptions. I also had some flint and steel, which I had bought at a Chinese store in the city. The man in the store had showed me how to use it. He had also given me a little purse to put it in, and some tinder to catch the sparks. He had told me that if I ran out of tinder, I should burn cloth and use the charred ashes.

I thanked him and said, "This is the kind of thing I am not going to forget."

On the train north to the Catskills, I unwrapped my flint and steel and practiced hit-

ting them together to make sparks. On the wrapping paper I made these notes:

“A hard brisk strike is best. Remember to hold the steel in the left hand and the flint in the right, and hit the steel with the flint.

“The trouble is the sparks go every which way.”

And that *was* the trouble. I did not get a fire going that night, and as I mentioned, this was a scary experience.

I hitched rides into the Catskill Mountains. At about four o'clock a truck driver and I passed through a beautiful dark hemlock forest, and I said to him, “This is as far as I am going.”

He looked all around and said, “You live here?”

“No,” I said, “but I am running away from home, and this is just the kind of forest I have always dreamed I would run to. I think I'll camp here tonight.” I hopped out of the cab.

“Hey, boy,” the driver shouted. “Are you serious?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Well, now, ain't that sumpin'? You know,