

The Song of Sourwood Mountain

A novel by Ann H. Gabhart

Chapter 1

When Mira Dean left her rooms for church on Sunday morning, she had no idea that she would hear a proposal of marriage before she returned for her midday meal.

“I-I don’t know what to say.” Her hazel eyes widened with shock at Gordon Covington’s words. She barely knew the man watching her with what seemed the polite smile of someone who had said nothing more than “Good day.”

Perhaps she misheard him. Surely she had misheard him.

He glanced around at the people lingering in the church and kept his voice low. “I suppose I should not have been so direct.”

When she had approached him after his message to compliment him on his work, he pulled her aside for a private word. Had she any idea what he intended those private words to be, she would have smiled, disengaged her arm, and hurried out the door.

Now she stared past him at the stained-glass window and let those words run through her thoughts again. “*Would you consider marriage, Miss Dean? To me.*” She moistened her lips, but he began speaking again before she could give him the only possible answer. No.

“I did not mean to unsettle you, but I have discovered in my time of service to the Lord in the hills of Kentucky that it is nearly always best to plunge forward whenever the Lord prompts me, Miss Dean.”

She obviously had not heard wrong. He not only had said the words, he was implying the Lord wanted him to do so.

She pulled her gaze away from the window to peer at him from under the brim of her hat. He was head and shoulders taller than her, but then she did lack appreciable height. Petite, her mother always claimed for her. A prettier word than *short*.

His coat hung loosely on him as if he might have missed too many meals since she’d known him when they were teens. Not well, although they had attended the same school. At the time, she had her life planned out. Marriage to Edward Hamilton. A houseful of children to love. She had no need to consider other pathways then. That was before Edward contracted tuberculosis and went to a sanatorium.

For over two years, she had stormed heaven with prayers for him. The Lord had to heal him, but her prayers weren’t answered. Edward had not recovered and instead died without ever leaving the sanatorium. Quite suddenly, or so it seemed to Mira.

This man, Reverend Gordon Covington, with the intense dark blue-gray eyes little resembled the classmate she remembered. That boy was the first out of the schoolhouse to get to the ballfield. She had been interested in seeing him again when she found out he would be visiting their church to talk about his missionary work in the Kentucky Appalachian Mountains. He’d spoken with passion about the church and school he hoped to establish there.

His words touched her heart. When he talked about the mountain children who had no school, tears had filled her eyes. How terrible it would be to have no way to learn to read. She

could hardly believe such a thing was possible here in 1910. All children in Louisville had public schools they could attend, were even required to attend.

She had led many students along a learning path since she began teaching while praying for Edward to regain his health so they could marry. When that did not happen, she had given her life to her students with the thought that they would be her only children.

She had no desire to marry. Besides, even if she were so foolish to dream of love again, at her age she would be unlikely to find a husband. After all, she was twenty-five years old. Gordon was a year older than that, but age mattered less to a man when it came to marriage.

Marriage. The word crashed into her thoughts again. This was absurd. But she was a lady. A mature lady. She could handle this with grace.

“Did the Lord prompt you to be so forward, Mr. Covington?”

She didn’t know where those words came from. They weren’t at all what she had intended to say. She had meant to step away from him with a murmured refusal to end their uncomfortable encounter. At least she was uncomfortable. Her heart pounded so hard it thumped in her ears. He, on the other hand, looked completely at ease. “Yes, I do believe that is true. I’ve prayed with diligence and hope for someone to share my work among the people in Sourwood. The children there need a teacher.” His eyes on her were intense. “I need a helpmate.”

“I will join my prayers to yours that the Lord will answer your prayers.” It was time to make her escape from this impossible conversation. As she started to turn away, he caught her arm.

“But can you not believe you already are that answer?” His gaze didn’t waver. “I have no doubt the Lord led us both here on this day. At this very moment. The children need you.”

He didn’t grip her arm, merely touched it, but his words froze her in place. She did feel a tug at her heart. Not for the man staring at her, but for the children he mentioned. Children with no teacher. The force of his calling seemed to go from his hand to her heart.

“I barely know you.”

Her head was spinning. If not for his hand on her arm, she might have swooned. She never swooned, but now it seemed his touch was all that kept her grounded. Or perhaps not him. Perhaps his talk of the Lord. Yes, that was what she should cling to. His mission for the Lord. A mission he was inviting her to join.

When he didn’t say anything, she added, “You barely know me.”

“The Lord knows us both and he knows the need. A need you and I can fill in Sourwood. You wouldn’t be a teacher hired by the county. Ours would be a mission school with our own rules for the position of teacher. A teacher chosen by the Lord.” Now he did tighten his fingers on her arm the slightest bit. “I think you feel the calling too. Think of the children you will help.”

“I already teach here in Louisville.”

“City children have many teachers. In Sourwood they have none, but we have faith the Lord will provide the perfect teacher for the schoolhouse we’re building.” He leaned closer to her.

“And here you are.”

She felt captured, not only by his hand, but by his mission. “The need for a teacher doesn’t explain your—” She hesitated before continuing. “Your proposal. You do know that teachers are required to be single.”

A flicker of a frown tightened his face, but only for a moment. “A foolish policy, in my opinion. Don’t you agree?”

“I-I have never considered it, as I knew it would not apply to me.”

“You never thought of marriage?”