

FICTION

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His Unquiet Ghost

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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HIS UNQUIET GHOST

By Charles Egbert Craddock

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The moon was high in the sky. The wind was laid. So silent was the vast stretch of mountain wilderness, aglint with the dew, that the tinkle of a rill far below in the black abyss seemed less a sound than an evidence of the pervasive quietude, since so slight a thing, so distant, could compass so keen a vibration. For an hour or more the three men who lurked in the shadow of a crag in the narrow mountain-pass, heard nothing else. When at last they caught the dull reverberation of a slow wheel and the occasional metallic clank of a tire against a stone, the vehicle was fully three miles distant by the winding road in the valley. Time lagged. Only by imperceptible degrees the sound of deliberate approach grew louder on the air as the interval of space lessened. At length, above their ambush at the summit of the mountain's brow the heads of horses came into view, distinct in the moonlight between the fibrous pines and the vast expanse of the sky above the valley. Even then there was renewed delay. The driver of the wagon paused to rest the team.

The three lurking men did not move; they scarcely ventured to breathe. Only when there was no retrograde possible, no chance of escape, when the vehicle was fairly on the steep declivity of the road, the precipice sheer on one side, the wall of the ridge rising perpendicularly on the other, did two of them, both revenue-raiders disguised as mountaineers, step forth from the shadow. The other, the informer, a genuine mountaineer, still skulked motionless in the darkness. The "revenuers," ascending the road, maintained a slow, lunging gait, as if they had toiled from far.

Their abrupt appearance had the effect of a galvanic shock to the man handling the reins, a stalwart, rubicund fellow, who visibly paled. He drew up so suddenly as almost to throw the horses from their feet.

"'Gevenin'," ventured Browdie, the elder of the raiders, in a husky voice affecting an untutored accent. He had some special ability as a mimic, and, being familiar with the dialect and manners of the people, this gift greatly facilitated the rustic impersonation he had essayed. "Ye're haulin' late," he added, for the hour was close to midnight.

"Yes, stranger; haulin' late, from Eskaqu--a needcessity."

"What's yer cargo?" asked Browdie, seeming only ordinarily inquisitive.

A sepulchral cadence was in the driver's voice, and the disguised raiders noted that the three other men on the wagon had preserved, throughout, a solem silence. "What we-uns mus' all be one day, stranger--a corpus."

Browdie was stultified for a moment. Then, sustaining his assumed character, he said: "I hope it be nobody I know. I be fairly well acquainted in Eskaqu, though I hail from down in Lonesome Cove. Who be dead!"

There was palpably a moment's hesitation before the spokesman replied: "Watt Wyatt; died day 'fore yestiddy."

At the words, one of the silent men in the wagon turned his face suddenly, with such obvious amazement depicted upon it that it arrested the attention of the "rev-enuers." This face was so individual that it was not likely to be easily mistaken or forgotten. A wild, breezy look it had, and a tricksy, incorporeal expression that might well befit some fantastic, fabled thing of the woods. It was full of fine script of elusive meanings, not registered in the lineaments of the prosaic man of the day, though perchance of scant utility, not worth interpretation. His full gray eyes were touched to glancing brilliancy by a moonbeam; his long, fibrously floating brown hair was thrown backward; his receding chin was peculiarly delicate; and though his well-knit frame bespoke a hardy vigor, his pale cheek was soft and thin. All the rustic grotesquery of garb and posture was cancelled by the deep shadow of a bough, and his delicate face showed isolated in the moonlight.

Browdie silently pondered his vague suspicions for a moment "Whar did he die at?" he then demanded at a venture.

"At his daddy's house, fur sure. Whar else?" responded the driver. "I hev got what's lef' of him hyar in the coffin-box. We expected ter make it ter Shiloh buryin'-ground 'fore dark; but the road is middlin' heavy, an' 'bout five mile' back Ben cast a shoe. The funeral warn't over much 'fore noon."

"Whyn't they bury him in Eskaqu, whar he died!" persisted Browdie.

"Waal, they planned ter bury him alongside his mother an' gran'dad, what used ter live in Tanglefoot Cove. But we air wastin' time hyar, an' we hev got none ter spare. Gee, Ben! Git up, John!"

The wagon gave a lurch; the horses, holding back in bracing attitudes far from the pole, went teetering down the steep slant, the locked wheel dragging heavily; the four men sat silent, two in slouching postures at the head of the coffin; the third, with the driver, was at its foot. It seemed drearily suggestive, the last journey of this humble mortality,

in all the splendid environment of the mountains, under the vast expansions of the aloof skies, in the mystic light of the unnoting moon.

"Is this bona-fide?" asked Browdie, with a questioning glance at the informer, who had at length crept forth.

"I dunno," sullenly responded the mountaineer. He had acquainted the two officers, who were of a posse of revenue-raiders hovering in the vicinity, with the mysterious circumstance that a freighted wagon now and then made a midnight transit across these lonely ranges. He himself had heard only occasionally in a wakeful hour the roll of heavy wheels, but he interpreted this as the secret transportation of brush whisky from the still to its market. He had thought to fix the transgression on an old enemy of his own, long suspected of moonshining; but he was acquainted with none of the youngsters on the wagon, at whom he had peered cautiously from behind the rocks. His actuating motive in giving information to the emissaries of the government had been the rancor of an old feud, and his detection meant certain death. He had not expected the revenue-raiders to be outnumbered by the supposed moonshiners, and he would not fight in the open. He had no sentiment of fealty to the law, and the officers glanced at each other in uncertainty.

"This evidently is not the wagon in question," said Browdie, disappointed.

"I'll follow them a bit," volunteered Bonan, the younger and the more active of the two officers. "Seems to me they'll bear watching."

Indeed, as the melancholy cortege fared down and down the steep road, dwindling in the sheeny distance, the covert and half-suppressed laughter of the sepulchral escort was of so keen a relish that it was well that the scraping of the locked wheel aided the distance to mask the incongruous sound.

"What ailed you-uns ter name *me* as the corpus, 'Gene Barker?" demanded Walter Wyatt, when he had regained the capacity of coherent speech.

"Oh, I hed ter do suddint murder on somebody," declared the driver, all bluff and reassured and red-faced again, "an' I couldn't think quick of nobody else. Besides, I helt a grudge agin' you fer not stuffin' mo' straw 'twix them jimmyjohns in the coffin-box."

"That's a fac'. Ye air too triflin' ter be let ter live, Watt," cried one of their comrades. "I hearn them jugs clash tergether in the coffin-box when 'Gene checked the team up suddint, I tell you. An' them men sure 'peared ter me powerful suspectin'."

"I hearn the clash of them jimmyjohns," chimed in the driver. "I really thunk my hour war come. Some informer must hev set them men ter spyin' round fer moonshine."

"Oh, surely nobody wouldn't dare," urged one of the group, uneasily; for the identity of an informer was masked in secrecy, and his fate, when discovered, was often gruesome.

"They couldn't hev noticed the clash of them jimmyjohns, nohow," declared the negligent Watt, nonchalantly. "But namin' *me* fur the dead one! Supposin' they air revenuers fur true, an' hed somebody along, hid out in the bresh, ez war acquainted with me by sight----"

"Then they'd hev been skeered out'n thar boots, that's all," interrupted the self-sufficient 'Gene. "They would hev 'lowed they hed viewed yer brazen ghost, bold ez brass, standin' at the head of yer own coffin-box."

"Or mebbe they mought hev recognized the Wyatt favor, ef they warn't acquainted with *me*," persisted Watt, with his unique sense of injury.

Eugene Barker defended the temerity of his inspiration. "They would hev jes thought ye war kin ter the deceased, an' at-tendin' him ter his long home."

"'Gene don't keer much fur ye ter be alive nohow, Watt Wyatt," one of the others suggested tactlessly, "'count o' Minta Elladine Biggs."

Eugene Barker's off-hand phrase was incongruous with his sudden gravity and his evident rancor as he declared: "I ain't carin' fur sech ez Watt Wyatt. An' they *do* say in the cove that Minta Elladine Biggs hev gin him the mitten, anyhow, on account of his gamesome ways, playin' kyerds, a-bet-tin' his money, drinkin' apple-jack, an' sech."

The newly constituted ghost roused himself with great vitality as if to retort floutingly; but as he turned, his jaw suddenly fell; his eyes widened with a ghastly distension. With an unsteady arm extended he pointed silently. Distinctly outlined on the lid of-the coffin was the simulacrum of the figure of aman.

One of his comrades, seated on the tailboard of the wagon, had discerned a significance in the abrupt silence. As he turned, he, too, caught a fleeting glimpse of that weird image on the coffin-lid. But he was of a more mundane pulse. The apparition roused in him only a wonder whence could come this shadow in the midst of the moon-flooded road. He lifted his eyes to the verge of the bluff above, and there he descried an indistinct human form, which suddenly disappeared as he looked, and at that moment the simulacrum vanished from the lid of the box.

The mystery was of instant elucidation. They were suspected, followed. The number of their pursuers of course they could not divine, but at least one of the revenue-officers had trailed the wagon between the precipice and the great wall

of the ascent on the right, which had gradually dwindled to a diminished height. Deep gullies were here and there washed out by recent rains, and one of these indentations might have afforded an active man access to the summit. Thus the pursuer had evidently kept abreast of them, speeding along in great leaps through the lush growth of huckleberry bushes, wild grasses, pawpaw thickets, silvered by the moon, all fringing the great forests that had given way on the shelving verge of the steeps where the road ran. Had he overheard their unguarded, significant words? Who could divine, so silent were the windless mountains, so deep a-dream the darksome woods, so spellbound the mute and mystic moonlight?

The group maintained a cautious reticence now, each revolving the problematic disclosure of their secret, each canvassing the question whether the pursuer himself was aware of his betrayal of his stealthy proximity. Not till they had reached the ford of the river did they venture on a low-toned colloquy. The driver paused in midstream and stepped out on the pole between the horses to let down the check-reins, as the team manifested an inclination to drink in transit; and thence, as he stood thus perched, he gazed to and fro, the stretch of dark and lustrous ripples baffling all approach within ear-shot, the watering of the horses justifying the pause and cloaking its significance to any distant observer.

But the interval was indeed limited; the mental processes of such men are devoid of complexity, and their decisions prompt. They advanced few alternatives; their prime object was to be swiftly rid of the coffin and its inculpating contents, and with the "revenuer" so hard on their heels this might seem a troublous problem enough.

"Put it whar a coffin b'longs--in the churchyard," said Wyatt; for at a considerable distance beyond the rise of the opposite bank could be seen a barren clearing in which stood a gaunt, bare, little white frame building that served all the country-side for its infrequent religious services.

"We couldn't dig a grave before that spy--ef he be a revenuer sure enough--could overhaul us," Eugene Barker objected.

"We could turn the yearth right smart, though," persisted Wyatt, for pickax and shovel had been brought in the wagon for the sake of an aspect of verisimilitude and to mask their true intent.

Eugene Barker acceded to this view. "That's the dinctum--dig a few jes fer a blind. We kin slip the coffin-box under the church-house 'fore he gits in sight,--he'll be feared ter follow too close,--an' leave it thar till the other boys kin wagon it ter the cross-roads' store ter-morrer night."

The horses, hitherto held to the sober gait of funeral travel, were now put to a speedy trot, unmindful of whatever impression of flight the pace might give to the revenue-raider in pursuit. The men were soon engrossed in their deceptive enterprise in the churchyard, plying pickax and shovel for dear life; now and again they paused to listen vainly for the sound of stealthy approach. They knew that there was the most precarious and primitive of foot-bridges across the deep stream, to traverse which would cost an unaccustomed wayfarer both time and pains; thus the interval was considerable before the resonance of rapid footfalls gave token that their pursuer had found himself obliged to sprint smartly along the country road to keep any hope of ever again' viewing the wagon which the intervening water-course had withdrawn from his sight. That this hope had grown tenuous was evident in his relinquishment of his former caution, for when they again caught a glimpse of him he was forging along in the middle of the road without any effort at concealment. But as the wagon appeared in the perspective, stationary, hitched to the hedge of the graveyard, he recurred to his previous methods. The four men still within the in-closure, now busied in shovelling the earth back again into the excavation they had so swiftly made, covertly watched him as he skulked into the shadow of the wayside. The little "church-house," with all its windows whitely aglare in the moonlight, reflected the pervasive sheen, and silent, spectral, remote, it seemed as if it might well harbor at times its ghastly neighbors from the quiet cemetery without, dimly ranging themselves once more in the shadowy ranks of its pews or grimly stalking down the drear and deserted aisles. The fact that the rising ground toward the rear of the building necessitated a series of steps at the entrance, enabled the officer to mask behind this tall flight his crouching approach, and thus he ensconced himself in the angle between the wall and the steps, and looked forth in fancied security.

The shadows multiplied the tale of the dead that the head-boards kept, each similitude askew in the moonlight on the turf below the slanting monument. To judge by the motions of the men engaged in the burial and the mocking antics of their silhouettes on the ground, it must have been obvious to the spectator that they were already filling in the earth. The interment may have seemed to him suspiciously swift, but the possibility was obvious that the grave might have been previously dug in anticipation of their arrival. It was plain that he was altogether unprepared for the event when they came slouching forth to the wagon, and the stalwart and red-faced driver, with no manifestation of surprise, hailed him as he still crouched in his lurking-place. "Hello, stranger! Warn't that you-uns runnin' arter the wagon a piece back yonder jes a while ago?"

The officer rose to his feet, with an intent look both dismayed and embarrassed. He did not venture on speech; he merely acceded with a nod.

"Ye want a lift, I reckon."

The stranger was hampered by the incongruity between his rustic garb, common to the coves, and his cultivated

intonation; for, unlike his comrade Browdie, he had no mimetic faculties whatever. Nevertheless, he was now constrained to "face the music."

"I didn't want to interrupt you," he said, seeking such excuse as due consideration for the circumstances might afford; "but I'd like to ask where I could get lodging for the night."

"What's yer name?" demanded Barker, unceremoniously.

"Francis Bonan," the raider replied, with more assurance. Then he added, by way of explaining his necessity, "I'm a stranger hereabouts."

"Ye air so," assented the sarcastic 'Gene. "Ye ain't even acquainted with yer own clothes. Ye be a town man."

"Well, I'm not the first man who has had to hide out," Ronan parried, seeking to justify his obvious disguise.

"Shot somebody?" asked 'Gene, with an apparent accession of interest.

"It's best for me not to tell."

"So be." 'Gene acquiesced easily. "Waal, ef ye kin put up with sech accommodations ez our'n, I'll take ye home with me."

Ronan stood aghast. But there was no door of retreat open. He was alone and helpless. He could not conceal the fact that the turn affairs had taken was equally unexpected and terrifying to him, and the moonshiners, keenly watchful, were correspondingly elated to discern that he had surely no reinforcements within reach to nerve him to resistance or to menace their liberty. He had evidently followed them too far, too recklessly; perhaps without the consent and against the counsel of his comrades, perhaps even without their knowledge of his movements and intention.

Now and again as the wagon jogged on and on toward their distant haven, the moonlight gradually dulling to dawn, Wyatt gave the stranger a wondering, covert glance, vaguely, shrinkingly curious as to the sentiments of a man vacillating between the suspicion of capture and the recognition of a simple hospitality without significance or danger. The man's face appealed to him, young, alert, intelligent, earnest, and the anguish of doubt and anxiety it expressed went to his heart. In the experience of his sylvan life as a hunter Wyatt's peculiar and subtle temperament evolved certain fine-spun distinctions which were unique; a trapped thing had a special appeal to his commiseration that a creature ruthlessly slaughtered in the open was not privileged to claim. He did not accurately and in words discriminate the differences, but he felt that the captive had sounded all the gamut of hope and despair, shared the gradations of an appreciated sorrow that makes all souls akin and that even lifts the beast to the plane of brotherhood, the bond of emotional woe. He had often with no other or better reason liberated the trophy of his snare, calling after the amazed and frantically fleeing creature, "Bye-bye, Buddy!" with peals of his whimsical, joyous laughter.

He was experiencing now a similar sequence of sentiments in noting the wild-eyed eagerness with which the captured raider took obvious heed of every minor point of worthiness that might mask the true character of his entertainers. But, indeed, these deceptive hopes might have been easily maintained by one not so desirous of reassurance when, in the darkest hour before the dawn, they reached a large log-cabin sequestered in dense woods, and he found himself an inmate of a simple, typical mountain household. It held an exceedingly venerable grandfather, wielding his infirmities as a rod of iron; a father and mother, hearty, hospitable, subservient to the aged tyrant, but keeping in filial check a family of sons and daughters-in-law, with an underfoot delegation of grandchildren, who seemed to spend their time in a bewildering manouver of dashing out at one door to dash in at another. A tumultuous rain had set in shortly after dawn, with lightning and wind,—"the tail of a harricane," as the host called it,—and a terrible bird the actual storm must have been to have a tail of such dimensions. There was no getting forth, no living creature of free will "took water" in this elemental crisis. The numerous dogs crowded the children away from the hearth, and the hens strolled about the large living-room, clucking to scurrying broods. Even one of the horses tramped up on the porch and looked in ever and anon, solicitous of human company.

"I brung Ben up by hand, like a bottle-fed baby," the hostess apologized, "an' he ain't never fund out fur sure that he ain't folks."

There seemed no possible intimation of moonshine in this entourage, and the coffin filled with jugs, a-wagoning from some distillers' den in the range to the cross-roads' store, might well have been accounted only the vain phantasm of an overtired brain surcharged with the vexed problems of the revenue service. The disguised revenue-raider was literally overcome with drowsiness, the result of his exertions and his vigils, and observing this, his host gave him one of the big feather beds under the low slant of the eaves in the roof-room, where the other men, who had been out all night, also slept the greater portion of the day. In fact, it was dark when Wyatt awakened, and, leaving the rest still torpid with slumber and fatigue, descended to the large main room of the cabin.

The callow members of the household had retired to rest, but the elders of the band of moonshiners were up and still actively astir, and Wyatt experienced a prescient vicarious qualm to note their lack of heed or secrecy—the noisy shifting of heavy weights (barrels, kegs, bags of apples, and peaches for pomace), the loud voices and unguarded words. When a door in the floor was lifted, the whiff of chill, subterranean air that pervaded the whole house was heavily freighted with spirituous odors, and gave token to the meanest intelligence, to the most unobservant inmate,

that the still was operated in a cellar, peculiarly immune to suspicion, for a cellar is never an adjunct to the ordinary mountain cabin. Thus the infraction of the revenue law went on securely and continuously beneath the placid, simple, domestic life, with its reverent care for the very aged and its tender nurture of the very young.

It was significant, indeed, that the industry should not be pretermitted, however, when a stranger was within the gates. The reason to Wyatt, familiar with the moonshiners' methods and habits of thought, was only too plain. They intended that the "revenuer" should never go forth to tell the tale. His comrades had evidently failed to follow his trail, either losing it in the wilderness or from ignorance of his intention. He had put himself hopelessly into the power of these desperate men, whom his escape or liberation would menace with incarceration for a long term as Federal prisoners in distant penitentiaries, if, indeed, they were not already answerable to the law for some worse crime than illicit distilling. His murder would be the extreme of brutal craft, so devised as to seem an accident, against the possibility of future investigation.

The reflection turned Wyatt deathly cold, he who could not bear unmoved the plea of a wild thing's eye. He sturdily sought to pull himself together. It was none of his decree; it was none of his deed, he argued. The older moonshiners, who managed all the details of the enterprise, would direct the event with absolute authority and the immutability of fate. But whatever should be done, he revolted from any knowledge of it, as from any share in the act. He had risen to leave the place, all strange of aspect now, metamorphosed,—various disorderly details of the prohibited industry ever and anon surging up from the still-room below,—when a hoarse voice took cognizance of his intention with a remonstrance.

"Why, Watt Wyatt, *ye* can't go out in the cove. *Ye* air dead! *Ye* will let that t'other revenue-raider *ye* seen into the secret o' the bresh whisky in our wagon ef *ye* air viewed about whenst 'Gene hev spread the report that *ye* air dead. Wait till them raiders hev cleared out of the kentry."

The effort at detention, to interfere with his liberty, added redoubled impetus to Wyatt's desire to be gone. He suddenly devised a cogent necessity. "I be feared my dad mought hear that fool tale. I ain't much loss, but dad would feel it."

"Oh, I sent Jack thar ter tell him better whenst he drove ter mill ter-day ter git the meal fer the mash. Jack made yer dad understand 'bout yer sudden demise."

"Oh, yeh," interposed the glib Jack; "an' he said ez *he* couldn't abide sech jokes."

"Shucks!" cried the filial Wyatt. "Dad war full fresky himself in his young days; I hev hearn his old frien's say so."

"I tried ter slick things over," said the diplomatic Jack. "I 'lowed young folks war giddy by nature. I 'lowed 't war jes a flash o' fun. An' he say: 'Flash o' fun be con-sarned! My son is more like a flash o' lightning; ez suddint an' mischeevious an' totally ondesirable."

The reproach obviously struck home, for Wyatt maintained a disconsolate silence for a time. At length, apparently goaded by his thoughts to attempt a defense, he remonstrated:

"Nobody ever war dead less of his own free will. I never elected ter be a harnt. 'Gene Barker hed no right ter nominate *me* fer the dear departed, nohow."

One of the uncouth younger fellows, his shoulders laden with a sack of meal, paused on his way from the porch to the trap-door to look up from beneath his burden with a sly grin as he said, "'Gene war wishin' it war true, that's why."

"'Count o' Minta Elladine Riggs," gaily chimed in another.

"But 'Gene needn't gredge Watt foothold on this yearth fer sech; *she* ain't keerin' whether Watt lives or dies," another contributed to the rough, rallying fun.

But Wyatt was of sensitive fibre. He had flushed angrily; his eyes were alight; a bitter retort was trembling on his lips when one of the elder Barkers, discriminating the elements of an uncontrollable fracas, seized on the alternative.

"Could you-uns *sure* be back hyar by daybreak, Watt!" he asked, fixing the young fellow with a stern eye.

"No 'spectable ghost roams around arter sun-up," cried Wyatt, fairly jovial at the prospect of liberation.

"*Ye* mus' be heedful not ter be viewed," the senior admonished him.

"I be goin' ter slip about keerful like a reg'lar, stiddy-goin' harnt, an' eavesdrop a bit. It's worth livin' a hard life ter view how a feller's friends will take his demise."

"I reckon ye kin make out ter meet the wagin kemin' back from the cross-roads' store. It went out this evenin' with that coffin full of jugs that ye lef' las' night under the church-house, whenst 'Gene seen you-uns war suspicioned. They will hev time ter git ter the cross-roads with the whisky on' back little arter midnight, special' ez we-uns hev got the raider that spied out the job hyar fast by the leg."

The mere mention of the young prisoner rendered Wyatt the more eager to be gone, to be out of sight and sound. But he had no agency in the disaster, he urged against some inward clamor of protest; the catastrophe was the logical result of the fool-hardiness of the officer in following these desperate men with no backing, with no power to apprehend or hold, relying on his flimsy disguise, and risking delivering himself into their hands, fettered as he was

with the knowledge of his discovery of their secret.

"It's nothin' ter *me*, nohow," Wyatt was continually repeating to himself, though when he sprang through the door he could scarcely draw his breath because of some mysterious, invisible clutch at his throat.

He sought to ascribe this symptom to the density of the pervasive fog without, that impenetrably cloaked all the world; one might wonder how a man could find his way through the opaque white vapor. It was, however, an accustomed medium to the young mountaineer, and his feet, too, had something of that unclassified muscular instinct, apart from reason, which guides in an oft-trodden path. Once he came to a halt, from no uncertainty of locality, but to gaze apprehensively through the blank, white mists over a shuddering shoulder. "I wonder ef thar be any other harnts aloose ter-night, a-boguing through the fog an' the moon," he speculated. Presently he went on again, shaking his head sagely. "I ain't wantin' ter collogue with sech," he averred cautiously.

Occasionally the moonlight fell in expansive splendor through a rift in the white vapor; amidst the silver glintings a vague, illusory panorama of promontory and island, bay and inlet, far ripples of gleaming deeps, was presented like some magic reminiscence, some ethereal replica of the past, the simulacrum of the seas of these ancient coves, long since ebbed away and vanished.

The sailing moon visibly rocked, as the pulsing tides of the cloud-ocean rose and fell, and ever and anon this supernal craft was whelmed in its surgings, and once more came majestically into view, freighted with fancies and heading for the haven of the purple western shores.

In one of these clearances of the mists a light of an alien type caught the eye of the wandering spectre--a light, red, mundane, of prosaic suggestion. It filtered through the crevice of a small batten shutter.

The ghost paused, his head speculatively askew. "Who sits so late at the forge!" he marvelled, for he was now near the base of the mountain, and he recognized the low, dark building looming through the mists, its roof aslant, its chimney cold, the big doors closed, the shutter fast. As he neared the place a sudden shrill guffaw smote the air, followed by a deep, gruff tone of disconcerted remonstrance. Certain cabalistic words made the matter plain.

"High, Low, Jack, *and* game! Fork! Fork!" Once more there arose a high falsetto shriek of jubilant laughter.

Walter Wyatt crept noiselessly down the steep slant toward the shutter. He had no sense of intrusion, for he was often one of the merry blades wont to congregate at the forge at night and take a hand at cards, despite the adverse sentiment of the cove and the vigilance of the constable of the district, bent on enforcing the laws prohibiting gaming. As Wyatt stood at the crevice of the shutter the whole interior was distinct before him--the disabled wagon-wheels against the walls, the horse-shoes on a rod across the window, the great hood of the forge, the silent bellows, with its long, motionless handle. A kerosene lamp, perched on the elevated hearth of the forge, illumined the group of wild young mountaineers clustered about a barrel on the head of which the cards were dealt. There were no chairs; one of the gamesters sat on a keg of nails; another on an inverted splint basket; two on a rude bench that was wont to be placed outside the door for the accommodation of customers waiting for a horse to be shod or a plow to be laid. An onlooker, not yet so proficient as to attain his ambition of admission to the play, had mounted the anvil, and from this coign of vantage beheld all the outspread landscape of the "hands." More than once his indiscreet, inadvertent betrayal of some incident of his survey of the cards menaced him with a broken head. More innocuous to the interests of the play was a wight humbly ensconced on the shoeing-stool, which barely brought his head to the level of the board; but as he was densely ignorant of the game, he took no disadvantage from his lowly posture. His head was red, and as it moved erratically about in the gloom, Watt Wyatt thought for a moment that it was the smith's red setter. He grinned as he resolved that some day he would tell the fellow this as a pleasing gibe; but the thought was arrested by the sound of his own name.

"Waal, sir," said the dealer, pausing in shuffling the cards, "I s'pose ye hev all hearn 'bout Walter Wyatt's takin' off."

"An' none too soon, sartain." A sour visage was glimpsed beneath the wide brim of the speaker's hat.

"Waal," drawled the semblance of the setter from deep in the clare-obscuré, "Watt war jes a fool from lack o' sense."

"That kind o' fool can't be cured," said another of the players. Then he sharply adjuxed the dealer. "Look out what ye be doin'! Ye hev gimme *two* kyerds."

"Gene Barker will git ter marry Minta Elladine Biggs now, I reckon," suggested the man on the anvil.

"An' I'll dance at the weddin' with right good will an' a nimble toe," declared the dealer, vivaciously. "I'll be glad ter see that couple settled. That gal couldn't make up her mind ter let Walter Wyatt go, an' yit no woman in her senses would hev been willin, ter marry him. He war ez irresponsible ez--ez--fox-fire."

"An' ez onstiddy ez a harricane," commented another.

"An' no more account than a mole in the yearth," said a third.

The ghost at the window listened in aghast dismay and became pale in sober truth, for these boon companions he had accounted the best friends he had in the world. They had no word of regret, no simple human pity; even that facile meed of casual praise that he was "powerful pleasant company" was withheld. And for these and such as these he had

bartered the esteem of the community at large and his filial duty and obedience; had spurned the claims of good citizenship and placed himself in jeopardy of the law; had forfeited the hand of the woman he loved.

"Minta Elladine Biggs ain't keerin' nohow fer sech ez Watt," said the semblance of the setter, with a knowing nod of his red head. "I war up thar at the mill whenst the news kem ter-day, an' she war thar ter git some seconds. I hev hearn women go off in high-strikes fer a lovyer's death--even Mis' Simton, though hern was jes her husband, an' 'a mighty pore one at that. But Minta Elladine jes listened quiet an' composed, an' never said one word."

The batten shutter was trembling in the ghost's hand. In fact, so convulsive was his grasp that it shook the hook from the staple, and the shutter slowly opened as he stood at gaze.

Perhaps it was the motion that attracted the attention of the dealer, perhaps the influx of a current of fresh air. He lifted his casual glance and beheld, distinct in the light from the kerosene lamp and imposed on the white background of the mist, that familiar and individual face, pallid, fixed, strange, with an expression that he had never seen it wear hitherto. One moment of suspended faculties, and he sprang up with a wild cry that filled the little shanty with its shrill terror. The others gazed astounded upon him, then followed the direction of his starting eyes, and echoed his frantic fright. There was a wild scurry toward the door. The overturning of the lamp was imminent, but it still burned calmly on the elevated hearth, while the shoeing-stool capsized in the rush, and the red head of its lowly occupant was lowlier still, rolling on the dirt floor. Even with this disadvantage, however, he was not the hindmost, and reached the exit unhurt. The only specific damage wrought by the panic was to the big barnlike doors of the place. They had been stanchly barred against the possible intrusion of the constable of the district, and the fastenings in so critical an emergency could not be readily loosed. The united weight and impetus of the onset burst the flimsy doors into fragments, and as the party fled in devious directions in the misty moonlight, the calm radiance entered at the wide-spread portal and illuminated the vacant place where late had been so merry a crew.

Walter Wyatt had known the time when the incident would have held an incomparable relish for him. But now he gazed all forlorn into the empty building with a single thought in his mind. "Not one of 'em keered a mite! Nare good word, nare sigh, not even, 'Fare ye well, old mate!'"

His breast heaved, his eyes flashed.

"An' I hev loant money ter Jim, whenst I hed need myself; an' holped George in the mill, when his wrist war sprained, without a cent o' pay; an' took the blame when 'Dolphus war faulted by his dad fur lamin' the horse-critter; an' stood back an' let Pete git the meat whenst we-uns shot fur beef, bein' he hev got a wife an' chil'ren ter feed. All *leetle* favors, but nare *leetle* word."

He had turned from the window and was tramping absently down the road, all unmindful of the skulking methods of the spectral gentry. If he had chanced to be observed, his little farce, that had yet an element of tragedy in its presentation, must soon have reached its close. But the fog hung about him like a cloak, and when the moon cast aside the vapors, it was in a distant silver sheen illumining the far reaches of the valley. Only when its light summoned forth a brilliant and glancing reflection on a lower level, as if a thousand sabers were unsheathed at a word, he recognized the proximity of the river and came to a sudden halt.

"Whar is this fool goin'?" he demanded angrily of space. "To the graveyard, I declar', ez ef I war a harnt fur true, an' buried sure enough. An' I wish I war. I wish I war."

He realized, after a moment's consideration, that he had been unconsciously actuated by the chance of meeting the wagon, returning by this route from the cross-roads' store. He was tired, disheartened; his spirit was spent; he would be glad of the lift. He reflected, however, that he must needs wait some time, for this was the date of a revival-meeting at the little church, and the distillers' wagon would lag, that its belated night journey might not be subjected to the scrutiny and comment of the church-goers. Indeed, even now Walter Wyatt saw in the distance the glimmer of a lantern, intimating homeward-bound worshipers not yet out of sight.

"The saints kep' it up late ter-night," he commented.

He resolved to wait till the roll of wheels should tell of the return of the moonshiners' empty wagon.

He crossed the river on the little footbridge and took his way languidly along the road toward the deserted church. He was close to the hedge that grew thick and rank about the little inclosure when he suddenly heard the sound of lamentation from within. He drew back precipitately, with a sense of sacrilege, but the branches of the unpruned growth had caught in his sleeve, and he sought to disengage the cloth without such rustling stir as might disturb or alarm the mourner, who had evidently lingered here, after the dispersal of the congregation, for a moment's indulgence of grief and despair. He had a glimpse through the shaking boughs and the flickering mist of a woman's figure kneeling on the crude red clods of a new-made grave. A vague, anxious wonder as to the deceased visited him, for in the sparsely settled districts a strong community sense prevails. Suddenly in a choking gust of sobs and burst of tears he recognized his own name in a voice of which every inflection was familiar. For a moment his heart seemed to stand still. His brain whirled with a realization of this unforeseen result of the fantastic story of his death in Eskaqua Cove, which the moonshiners, on the verge of detection and arrest, had circulated in Tanglefoot as a measure of safety. They had

fancied that when the truth was developed it would be easy enough to declare the men drunk or mistaken. The "revenuers" by that time would be far away, and the pervasive security, always the sequence of a raid, successful or otherwise, would once more promote the manufacture of the brush whisky. The managers of the moon-shining interest had taken measures to guard Wyatt's aged father from this fantasy of woe, but they had not dreamed that the mountain coquette might care. He himself stood appalled that this ghastly fable should delude his heart's beloved, amazed that it should cost her one sigh, one sob. Her racking paroxysms of grief over this gruesome figment of a grave he was humiliated to hear, he was woeful to see. He felt that he was not worth one tear of the floods with which she bewept his name, uttered in every cadence of tender regret that her melancholy voice could compass. It must cease, she must know the truth at whatever cost. He broke through the hedge and stood in the flicker of the moonlight before her, pale, agitated, all unlike his wonted self.

She did not hear, amid the tumult of her weeping, the rustling of the boughs, but some subtle sense took cognizance of his presence. She half rose, and with one hand holding back her dense yellow hair, which had fallen forward on her forehead, she looked up at him fearfully, tremulously, with all the revolt of the corporeal creature for the essence of the mysterious incorporeal. For a moment he could not speak. So much he must needs explain. The next instant he waswhelmed in the avalanche of her words.

"Te hev kem!" she exclaimed in a sort of shrill ecstasy. "Te hev kem so far ter hear the word that I would give my life ter hev said before. Te knowed it in heaven! an' how like ye ter kem ter gin me the chanst ter say it at last! How like the good heart of ye, worth all the hearts on yearth--an' *buried hyar!*"

With her open palm she smote the insensate clods with a gesture of despair. Then she went on in a rising tide of tumultuous emotion. "I love ye! Oh, I *always* loved ye! I never keered fur nobody else! an' I war tongue-tied, an' full of fool pride, an' faultin' ye fur yer ways; an' I wouldn't gin ye the word I knowed ye war wantin' ter hear. But now I kin tell the pore ghost of ye--I kin tell the pore, pore ghost!"

She buried her swollen, tear-stained face in her hands, and shook her head to and fro with the realization of the futility of late repentance. As she once more lifted her eyes, she was obviously surprised to see him still standing there, and the crisis seemed to restore to him the faculty of speech.

"Minta Elladine," he said huskily and prosaically, "I ain't dead!"

She sprang to her feet and stood gazing at him, intent and quivering.

"I be truly alive an' kicking an' ez worthless ez ever," he went on.

She said not a word, but bent and pallid, and, quaking in every muscle, stood peering beneath her hand, which still held back her hair.

"It's all a mistake," he urged. "This ain't no grave. The top war dug a leetle ter turn off a revenuer's suspicions o' the moonshiners. They put that tale out."

Still, evidently on the verge of collapse, she did not speak.

"Ye needn't be afeared ez I be goin' ter take fur true all I hearn ye say; folks air gin ter vauntin' the dead," he paused for a moment, remembering the caustic comments over the deal of the cards, then added, "though I reckon *I* hev had some curious 'speriences ez a harnt."

She suddenly threw up both arms with a shrill scream, half nervous exhaustion, half inexpressible delight. She swayed to and fro, almost fainting, her balance failing. He caught her in his arms, and she leaned sobbing against his breast.

"I stand ter every word of it," she cried, her voice broken and lapsed from control. "I love ye, an' I despise all the rest!"

"I be powerful wild," he suggested contritely.

"I ain't keerin' ef ye be ez wild ez a deer."

"But I'm goin' to quit gamesome company an' playin' kyerds an' sech. I expec' ter mend my ways now," he promised eagerly.

"Ye kin mend 'em or let 'em stay tore, jes ez ye please," she declared recklessly. "I ain't snatched my lovyer from the jaws o' death ter want him otherwise; ye be plumb true-hearted, *I know.*"

"I mought ez well hev been buried in this grave fer the last ten year' fer all the use I hev been," he protested solemnly; "but I hev learnt a lesson through bein' a harnt fer a while--I hev jes kem ter life. I'm goin' ter *live* now. I'll make myself some use in the world, an' fust off I be goin' ter hinder the murder of a man what they hev got trapped up yander at the still."

This initial devoir of his reformation, however, Wyatt found no easy matter. The event had been craftily planned to seem an accident, a fall from a cliff in pursuing the wagon, and only the most ardent and cogent urgency on Wyatt's part prevailed at length. He argued that this interpretation of the disaster would not satisfy the authorities. To take the raider's life insured discovery, retribution. But as he had been brought to the still in the night, it was obvious that if he

were conveyed under cover of darkness and by roundabout trails within striking distance of the settlements, he could never again find his way to the locality in the dense wilderness. In his detention he had necessarily learned nothing fresh, for the only names he could have overheard had long been obnoxious to suspicion of moonshining, and afforded no proof. Thus humanity, masquerading as caution, finally triumphed, and the officer, blindfolded, was conducted through devious and winding ways many miles distant, and released within a day's travel of the county town.

Walter Wyatt was scarcely welcomed back to life by the denizens of the cove generally with the enthusiasm attendant on the first moments of his resuscitation, so to speak. He never forgot the solemn ecstasy of that experience, and in later years he was wont to annul any menace of discord with his wife by the warning, half jocose, half tender: "Ye hed better mind; ye'll be sorry some day fur treatin' me so mean. Remember, I hev viewed ye a-weepin' over my grave before now."

A reformation, however complete and salutary, works no change of identity, and although he developed into an orderly, industrious, law-abiding citizen, his prankish temperament remained recognizable in the fantastic fables which he delighted to recount at some genial fireside of what he had seen and heard as a ghost.

"Pears like, Watt, ye hed more experiences whenst dead than living" said an auditor, as these stories multiplied.

"I did, fur a fack," Watt protested. "I war a powerful onchancy, onquiet ghost. I even did my courtin' whilst in my reg'lar line o' business a-hanatin' a graveyard."