

FICTION

Mary Noailles Murfree

The Riddle Of The Rocks



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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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THE RIDDLE OF THE ROCKS

By Charles Egbert Craddock

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Upon the steep slope of a certain "bald" among the Great Smoky Mountains there lie, just at the verge of the strange stunted woods from which the treeless dome emerges to touch the clouds, two great tilted blocks of sandstone. They are of marked regularity of shape, as square as if hewn with a chisel. Both are splintered and fissured; one is broken in twain. No other rock is near. The earth in which they are embedded is the rich black soil not unfrequently found upon the summits. Nevertheless no great significance might seem to attach to their isolation--an outcropping of ledges, perhaps; a fracture of the freeze; a trace of ancient denudation by the waters of the spring in the gap, flowing now down the trough of the gorge in a silvery braid of currents, and with a murmur that is earnest of a song.

It may have been some distortion of the story heard only from the lips of the circuit rider, some fantasy of tradition invested with the urgency of fact, but Roger Purdee could not remember the time when he did not believe that these were the stone tables of the Law that Moses flung down from the mountain-top in his wrath. In the dense ignorance of the mountaineer, and his secluded life, he knew of no foreign countries, no land holier than the land of his home. There was no incongruity to his mind that it should have been in the solemn silence and austere solitude of the "bald," in the magnificent ascendancy of the Great Smoky, that the law-giver had met the Lord and spoken with Him. Often as he lay at length on the strange barren place, veiled with the clouds that frequented it, a sudden sunburst in their midst would suggest anew what supernal splendors had once been here vouchsafed to the faltering eye of man. The illusion had come to be very dear to him; in this insistent localization of his faith it was all very near. And so he would go down to the slope below, among the weird, stunted trees, and look once more upon the broken tables, and ponder upon the strange signs written by time thereon. The insistent fall of the rain, the incisive blasts of the wind, coming again and again, though the centuries went, were registered here in mystic runes. The surface had weathered to a whitish-gray, but still in tiny depressions its pristine dark color showed in rugose characters. A splintered fissure held delicate fucoid impressions in fine script full of meaning. A series of worm-holes traced erratic hieroglyphics across a scaling corner; all the varied texts were illuminated by quartzose particles glittering in the sun, and here and there fine green grains of glauconite. He knew no names like these, and naught of meteorological potency. He had studied no other rock. His casual notice had been arrested nowhere by similar signs. Under the influence of his ignorant superstition, his cherished illusion, the lonely wilderness, what wonder that, as he pondered upon the rocks, strange mysteries seemed revealed to him? He found significance in these cabalistic scriptures--nay, he read inspired words! With the ramrod of his gun he sought to follow the fine tracings of the letters writ by the finger of the Lord on the stone tables that Moses flung down from the mountain-top in his wrath.

With a devout thankfulness Purdee realized that he owned the land where they lay. It was worth, perhaps, a few cents an acre; it was utterly untillable, almost inaccessible, and his gratulation owed its fervor only to its spiritual values. He was an idle and shiftless fellow, and had known no glow of acquisition, no other pride of possession. He herded cattle much of the time in the summer, and he hunted in the winter--wolves chiefly, their hair being long and finer at this season, and the smaller furry gentry; for he dealt in peltry. And so, despite the vastness of the mountain wilds, he often came and knelt beside the rocks with his rifle in his hand, and sought anew to decipher the mystic legends. His face, bending over the tables of the Law with the earnest research of a student, with the chastened subduement of devotion, with all the calm sentiments of reverie, lacked something of its normal aspect. When a sudden stir of the leaves or the breaking of a twig recalled him to the world, and he would lift his head, it might hardly seem the same face, so heavy was the lower jaw, so insistent and coercive his eye. But if he took off his hat to place therein his cotton bandana handkerchief or (if he were in luck and burdened with game) the scalp of a wild-cat--valuable for the bounty offered by the State--he showed a broad, massive forehead that added the complement of expression, and suggested a doubt if it were ferocity his countenance bespoke or force. His long black hair hung to his shoulders, and he wore a tangled black beard; his deep-set dark blue eyes were kindled with the fires of imagination. He was tall, and of a commanding presence but for his stoop and his slouch. His garments seemed a trifle less well ordered than those of his class, and bore here and there the traces of the blood of beasts; on his trousers were grass stains deeply grounded, for he knelt often to get a shot, and in meditation beside the rocks. He spent little time otherwise upon his knees, and perhaps it was some intuition of this fact that roused the wrath of certain brethren of the camp-meeting when he suddenly appeared among them, arrogating to himself peculiar spiritual experiences, proclaiming that his mind had been opened to strange lore, repeating thrilling, quickening words that he declared he had read on the dead rocks whereon were graven the commandments of the Lord. The tumultuous tide of his rude eloquence, his wild

imagery, his ecstasy of faith, rolled over the assembly and awoke it anew to enthusiasms. Much that he said was accepted by the more intelligent ministers who led the meeting as figurative, as the finer fervors of truth, and they felt the responsive glow of emotion and quiver of sympathy. He intended it in its simple, literal significance. And to the more local members of the congregation the fact was patent. "Sech a pack o' lies hev seldom been tole in the hearin' o' Almighty Gawd," said Job Grinnell, a few days after the breaking up of camp. He was rehearsing the proceedings at the meeting partly for the joy of hearing himself talk, and partly at the instance of his wife, who had been prevented from attending by the inopportune illness of one of the children. "Ez I loant my ear ter the words o' that thar brazen buzzard I eyed him constant. Fur I looked ter see the jedgmint o' the Lord descend upon him like S'phira an' An'ias."

"*Who!*" asked his wife, pausing in her task of picking up chips. He had spoken of them so familiarly that one might imagine they lived close by in the cove.

"An'ias an' S'phira--them in the Bible ez war streck by lightnin' fur lyin'," he explained.

"I 'member *her*," she said. "S'phia, I calls her."

"Waal, A'gusta, *S'phira* do me jes ez well," he said, with the momentary sulkiness of one corrected. "Thar war a man along, though. An' 'pears ter me thar war powerful leetle jestic in thar takin' off, ef Roger Purdee be 'lowed ter stan' up thar in the face o' the meetin' an' lie so ez no yearthly critter in the worl' could b'lieve him--'ceptin' Brother Jacob Page, ez 'peared plumb out'n his head with religion, an' got ter shoutin' when this Purdee tuk ter tellin' the law he read on them rocks--Moses' tables, folks calls 'em--up yander in the mounting."

He nodded upward toward the great looming range above them. His house was on a spur of the mountain, overshadowed by it; shielded. It was to him the Almoner of Fate. One by one it doled out the days, dawning from its summit; and thence, too, came the darkness and the glooms of night. One by one it liberated from the enmeshments of its tangled wooded heights the constellations to gladden the eye and lure the fancy. Its largess of silver torrents flung down its slopes made fertile the little fields, and bestowed a lilting song on the silence, and took a turn at the mill-wheel, and did not disdain the thirst of the humble cattle. It gave pasturage in summer, and shelter from the winds of the winter. It was the assertive feature of his life; he could hardly have imagined existence without "the mounting."

"Tole what he read on them rocks--yes, sir, ez glib ez swallerin' a persimmon. 'Twarn't the reg'lar ten comman'tments--some cur'ous new texts--jes a-rollin' 'em out ez sanctified ez ef he hed been called ter preach the gospel! An' thar war Brother Eden Bates a-answerin' 'Amen' ter every one. An' Brother Jacob Page: 'Glory, brother! Ye hev received the outpourin' of the Sperit! Shake hands, brother!' An' sech ez that. Ter hev hearn the commotion they raised about that thar demed lyin' sinner ye'd hev 'lowed the meetin' war held ter glorify him stiddier the Lord."

Job Grinnell himself was a most notorious Christian. Renown, however, with him could never be a superfluity, or even a sufficiency, and he gruded the fame that these strange spiritual utterances were acquiring. He had long enjoyed the distinction of being considered a miraculous convert; his rescue from the wily enticements of Satan had been celebrated with much shaking and clapping of hands, and cries of "Glory," and muscular ecstasy.

His religious experiences thenceforth, his vacillations of hope and despair, had been often elaborated amongst the brethren. But his was a conventional soul; its expression was in the formulae and platitudes of the camp-meeting. They sank into oblivion in the excitement attendant upon Purdee's wild utterances from the mystic script of the rocks.

As Grinnell talked, he often paused in his work to imitate the gesticulatory enthusiasms of the saints at the camp-meeting. He was a thickset fellow of only medium height, and was called, somewhat invidiously, "a chunky man." His face was broad, prosaic, good-natured, incapable of any fine gradations of expression. It indicated an elementary rage or a sluggish placidity. He had a ragged beard of a reddish hue, and hair a shade lighter. He wore blue jeans trousers and an unbleached cotton shirt, and the whole system depended on one suspender. He was engaged in skimming a great kettle of boiling sorghum with a perforated gourd, which caught the scum and strained the liquor. The process was primitive; instead of the usual sorghum boiler and furnace, the kettle was propped upon stones laid together so as to concentrate the heat of the fire. His wife was continually feeding the flames with chips which she brought in her apron from the wood-pile. Her countenance was half hidden in her faded pink sun-bonnet, which, however, did not obscure an expression responsive to that on the man's face. She did not grudge Purdee the salvation he had found; she only gruded him the prestige he had derived from its unique method.

"Why can't the critter elude Satan with less n'ise?" she asked, acrimoniously.

"Edzackly," her husband chimed in.

Now and then both turned a supervisory glance at the sorghum mill down the slope at some little distance, and close to the river. It had been a long day for the old white mare, still trudging round and round the mill; perhaps a long day as well for the two half-grown boys, one of whom fed the machine, thrusting into it a stalk at a time, while the other brought in his arms fresh supplies from the great pile of sorghum cane hard by.

All the door-yard of the little log cabin was bedaubed with the scum of the sorghum which Job Grinnell flung from his perforated gourd upon the ground. The idle dogs--and there were many--would find, when at last disposed to move, a clog upon their nimble feet. They often sat down with a wrinkling of brows and a puzzled expression of muzzle

to investigate their gelatinous paws with their tongues, not without certain indications of pleasure, for the sorghum was very sweet; some of them, that had acquired the taste for it from imitating the children, openly begged.

One, a gaunt hound, hardly seemed so idle; he had a purpose in life, if it might not be called a profession. He lay at length, his paws stretched out before him, his head upon them; his big brown eyes were closed only at intervals; ever and again they opened watchfully at the movement of a small child, ten months old, perhaps, dressed in pink calico, who sat in the shadow formed by the protruding clay and stick chimney, and played by bouncing up and down and waving her fat hands, which seemed a perpetual joy and delight of possession to her. Take her altogether, she was a person of prepossessing appearance, despite her frank display of toothless gums, and around her wide mouth the unseemly traces of sorghum. She had the plumpest graces of dimples in every direction, big blue eyes with long lashes, the whitest possible skin, and an extraordinary pair of pink feet, which she rubbed together in moments of joy as if she had mistaken them for her hands. Although she sputtered a good deal, she had a charming, unaffected laugh, with the giggle attachment natural to the young of her sex.

Suddenly there sounded an echo of it, as it were--a shrill, nervous little whinny; the boys whirled round to see whence it came. The persistent rasping noise of the sorghum mill and the bubbling of the caldron had prevented them from hearing an approach. There, quite close at hand, peering through the rails of the fence, was a little girl of seven or eight years of age.

"I wanter kem in an' see you-uns's baby!" she exclaimed, in a high, shrill voice. "I want to pat it on the head."

She was a forlorn little specimen, very thin and sharp-featured. Her homespun dress was short enough to show how fragile were the long lean legs that supported her. The curtain of her sun-bonnet, which was evidently made for a much larger person, hung down nearly to the hem of her skirt; as she turned and glanced anxiously down the road, evidently suspecting a pursuer, she looked like an erratic sun-bonnet out for a stroll on a pair of borrowed legs.



" SHE SMILED UPON THE BABY "

She turned again suddenly and applied her thin, freckled little face to the crack between the rails. She smiled upon the baby, who smiled in response, and gave a little bounce that might be accounted a courtesy. The younger of the boys left the cane pile and ran up to his brother at the mill, which was close to the fence. "Don't ye let her do it," he said, venomously. "That thar gal is one of the Purdee fambly. I know her. Don't let her in." And he ran back to the cane.

Grinnell had seemed pleased by this homage at the shrine of the family idol; but at the very mention of the "Purdee fambly" his face hardened, an angry light sprang into his eyes, and his gesture in skimming with the perforated gourd the scum from the boiling sorghum was as energetic as if with the action he were dashing the "Purdee fambly" from off the face of the earth. It was an ancient feud; his grandfather and some contemporary Purdee had fallen out about the ownership of certain vagrant cattle; there had been blows and bloodshed; other members of the connection had been dragged into the controversy; summary reprisals were followed by counter-reprisals. Barns were mysteriously fired, hen-roosts robbed, horses unaccountably lamed, sheep feloniously sheared by unknown parties; the feeling widened

and deepened, and had been handed down to the present generation with now and then a fresh provocation, on the part of one or the other, to renew and continue the rankling old grudges.

And here stood the hereditary enemy, wanting to pat their baby on the head.

"Naw, sir, ye won't!" exclaimed the boy at the mill, greatly incensed at the boldness of this proposition, glaring at the lean, tender, wistful little face between the rails of the fence.

But the baby, who had not sense enough to know anything about hereditary enemies, bounced and laughed and gurgled and sputtered with glee, and waved her hands, and had never looked fatter or more beguiling.

"I jes wanter pat it wunst," sighed the hereditary enemy, with a lithe writhing of her thin little anatomy in the anguish of denial--"jes wunst!"

"Naw, sir!" exclaimed the youthful Grinnell, more insistently than before. He did not continue, for suddenly there came running down the road a boy of his own size, out of breath, and red and angry--the pursuer, evidently, that the hereditary enemy had feared, for she crouched up against the fence with a whimper.

"Kem along away from thar, ye miser'ble little stack o' bones!" he cried, seizing his sister by one hand and giving her a jerk--"a-foolin' round them Grinnells' fence an' a-hankerin' arter thar old baby!"

He felt that the pride of the Purdee family was involved in this admission of envy.

"I jes wanter pat it on the head wunst," she sighed.

"Waal, ye won't now," said the Grinnell boys in chorus.

The Purdee grasp was gentler on the little girl's arm. This was due not to fraternal feeling so much as to loyalty to the clan; "stack o' bones" though she was, they were Purdee bones.

"Kem along," Ab Purdee exhorted her. "A baby ain't nuthin' extry, nohow"--he glanced scoffingly at the infantile Grinnell. "The mountings air fairly a-roamin' with 'em."

"We-uns 'ain't got none at our house," whined the sun-bonnet, droopingly, moving off slowly on its legs, which, indeed, seemed borrowed, so unsteady, and loath to go they were.

The Grinnell boys laughed aloud, jeeringly and ostentatiously, and the Purdee blood was moved to retort: "We-uns don't want none sech ez that. Nary tooth in her head!"

And indeed the widely stretched babbling lips displayed a vast vacuity of gum.

Job Grinnell, who had listened with an attentive ear to the talk of the children, had nevertheless continued his constant skimming of the scum. Now he rose from his bent posture, tossed the scum upon the ground, and with the perforated gourd in his hand turned and looked at his wife. Augusta had dropped her apron and chips, and stood with folded arms across her breast, her face wearing an expression of exasperated expectancy.

The Grinnell boys were humbled and abashed. The wicked scion of the Purdee house, joying to note how true his shaft had sped, was again fitting his bow.

"An' ez bald-headed ez the mounting."

The baby had a big precedent, but although no peculiar shame attaches to the bare pinnacle of the summit, she--despite the difference in size and age--was expected to show up more fully furnished, and in keeping with the rule of humanity and the gentilities of life.

No teeth, no hair, no sign of any: the fact that she was so backward was a sore point with all the family. Job Grinnell suddenly dropped the perforated gourd, and started down toward the fence. The acrimony of the old feud was as a trait bred in the bone. Such hatred as was inherent in him was evoked by his religious jealousies, and the pious sense that he was following the traditions of his elders and upholding the family honor blended in gentlest satisfaction with his personal animosity toward Roger Purdee as he noticed the boy edging off from the fence to a safe distance. He eyed him derisively for a moment.

"Kin ye Kerry a message straight?" The boy looked up with an expression of sullen acquiescence, but said nothing. "Ax yer dad--an' ye kin tell him the word kems from me--whether he hev read sech ez this on the lawgiver's stone tables yander in the mounting: 'An' ye shall claim sech ez be yourn, an' yer neighbor's belongings shall ye in no wise boastfully medjure fur yourn, nor look upon it fur covet-iousness, nor yit git up a big name in the kentry fur ownin' sech ez be another's.'"

He laughed silently--a twinkling, wrinkling demonstration over all his broad face--a laugh that was younger than the man, and would have befitted a square-faced boy.

The youthful Purdee, expectant of a cuffing, stood his ground more doubtfully still under the insidious thrusts of this strange weapon, sarcasm. He knew that they were intended to hurt; he was wounded primarily in the intention, but the exact lesion he could not locate. He could meet a threat with a bold face, and return a blow with the best. But he was mortified in this failure of understanding, and perplexity cowed him as contention could not. He hung his head with its sullen questioning eyes, and he found great solace in a jagged bit of cloth on the torn bosom of his shirt, which

he could turn in his embarrassed fingers.

"Whar be yer dad?" Grinnell asked.

"Up yander in the mounting," replied the subdued Purdee.

"A-readin' o' mighty s'prisin' matter writ on the rocks o' the yearth!" exclaimed Grinnell, with a laugh. "Waal, jes keep that sayin' o' mine in yer head, an' tell him when he kems home. An' look a-hyar, ef enny mo' o' his stray shoats kem about hyar, I'll snip thar ears an' gin 'em my mark."

The youth of the Purdee clan meditated on this for a moment. He could not remember that they had missed any shoats. Then the full meaning of the phrase dawned upon him--it was he and the wiry little sister thus demeaned with a porcine appellation, and whose ears were threatened. He looked up at the fence, the little low house, the barn close by, the sorghum mill, the drying leaves of tobacco on the scaffold, the saltatory baby; his eyes filled with helpless tears, that could not conceal the burning hatred he was born to bear them all. He was hot and cold by turns; he stood staring, silent and defiant, motionless, sullen. He heard the melodic measure of the river, with its crystalline, keen vibrations against the rocks; the munching teeth of the old mare--allowed to come to a stand-still that the noise of the sorghum mill might not impinge upon the privileges of the quarrel; and the high, ecstatic whinny of the little sister waiting on the opposite bank of the river, having crossed the foot-bridge. There the Grinnell baby had chanced to spy her, and had bounced and grinned and sputtered affably. It was she who had made all the trouble yearning after the Grinnell baby.

He would not stay, however, to be ignominiously beaten, for Grinnell had turned away, and was looking about the ground as if in search of a thick stick. He accounted himself no craven, thus numerically at a disadvantage, to turn shortly about, take his way down the rocky slope, cross the footbridge, jerk the little girl by one hand and lead her whimpering off, while the round-eyed Grinnell baby stared gravely after her with inconceivable emotions. These presently resulted in rendering her cross; she whined a little and rubbed her eyes, and, smarting from her own ill-treatment of them, gave a sharp yelp of dismay. The old dog arose and went and sat close by her, eying her solemnly and wagging his tail, as if begging her to observe how content he was. His dignity was somewhat impaired by sudden abrupt snaps at flies, which caused her to wink, stare, and be silent in astonishment.

"Waal, Job Grinnell," exclaimed Augusta, as her husband came back and took the perforated gourd from her hand--for she had been skimming the sorghum in his absence--"ye air the longest-tongued man, ter be so short-legged, I ever see!"

He looked a trifle discomfited. He had deported himself with unwonted decision, conscious that Augusta was looking on, and in truth somewhat supported by the expectation of her approval.

"What ails ye ter say words ye can't abide by--ye 'low ye 'pear so graceful on the back track?" she asked.

He bent over the sorghum, silently skimming. His composure was somewhat ruffled, and in throwing away the scum his gesture was of negligent and discursive aim; the boiling fluid bespattered the foot of one of the omnipresent dogs, whose shrieks rent the sky and whose activity on three legs amazed the earth. He ran yelping to Mrs. Grinnell, nearly overturning her in his turbulent demand for sympathy; then scampered across to the boys, who readily enough stopped their work to examine the wounded member and condole with its wheezing proprietor.

"What ye mean, A'gusta?" Grinnell said at length. "Kase I 'lowed I'd cut thar ears? I ain't foolin', Kem meddlin' about remarkin' on our chill'n agin, I'll show 'em."

Augusta looked at him in exasperation. "I ain't keerin' ef all the Purdees war deaf," she remarked, inhumanly, "but what war them words ye sent fur a message ter Purdee?--'bout pridin' on what ain't them."

Grinnell in his turn looked at her--but dubiously. However much a man is under the domination of his wife, he is seldom wholly frank. It is in this wise that his individuality is preserved to him. "I war jes wantin' ter know ef them words war on the rocks," he said with a disingenuousness worthy of a higher culture.

She received this with distrust. "I kin tell ye now--they ain't," she said, discriminatingly; "Pur-dee's words don't sound like *them*."

"Waal, now, what's the differ?" he demanded, with an indignation natural enough to aspiring humanity detecting a slur upon one's literary style.

"Waal--" she paused as she knelt down to feed the fire, holding the fragrant chips in her hand; the flame flickered out and lighted up her reflective eyes while she endeavored to express the distinction she felt: "Purdee's words don't sound ter me like the words of a man sech ez men be."

Grinnell wrinkled his brows, trying to follow her here.

"They sound ter me like the words spoke in a dream--the pernouncings of a vision." Mrs. Grinnell fancied that she too had a gift of Biblical phraseology. "They sound ter me like things I hearn whenst I war a-hungered arter righteousness an' seekin' religion, an' bided alone in the wilderness a-waitin' o' the Sperit."

"Gusta!" suddenly exclaimed her husband, with the cadence of amazed conviction, "ye b'lieve the lie o' that critter, an' that he reads the words o' the Lord on the rock!"

She looked up a little startled. She had been unconscious of the circuitous approaches of credence, and shared his astonishment in the conclusion.

"Waal, sir!" he said, more hurt and cast down than one would have deemed possible. "I'm willin' ter hev it so. I'm jes nuthin' but a sinner an' a fool, ripenin' fur damnation, an' he air a saint o' the yearth!"

Now such sayings as this were frequent upon Job Grinnell's tongue. He did not believe them; their utility was in their challenge to contradiction. Thus they often promoted an increased cordiality of the domestic relations and an accession of self-esteem.

Augusta, however, was tired; the boiling sorghum and the September sun were debilitating in their effects. There was something in the scene with the youthful Purdee that grated upon her half-developed sensibilities. The baby was whimpering outright, and the cow was lowing at the bars. She gave her irritation the luxury of withholding the salve to Grinnell's wounded vanity. She said nothing. The tribute to Purdee went for what it was worth, and he was forced to swallow the humble-pie he had taken into his mouth, albeit it stuck in his throat.

A shadow seemed to have fallen into the moral atmosphere as the gentle dusk came early on. One had a sense as if bereft, remembering that so short a time ago at this hour the sun was still high, and that the full-pulsed summer day throbbed to a climax of color and bloom and redundant life. Now, the scent of harvests was on the air; in the stubble of the sorghum patch she saw a quail's brood more than half-grown, now afoot, and again taking to wing with a loud whirring sound. The perfume of ripening muscadines came from the bank of the river. The papaws hung globular among the leaves of the bushes, and the persimmons were reddening.

The vermilion sun was low in the sky above the purpling mountains; the stream had changed from a crystalline brown to red, to gold, and now it was beginning to be purple and silver. And this reminded her that the full-moon was up, and she turned to look at it--so pearly and luminous above the jagged ridge-pole of the dark little house on the rise. The sky about it was blue, refining into an exquisitely delicate and ethereal neutrality near the horizon. The baby had fallen asleep, with its bald head on the old dog's shoulder.

After the supper was over, the sorghum fire still burned beneath the great kettle, for the syrup was not yet made, and sorghum-boiling is an industry that cannot be intermitted. The fire in the midst of the gentle shadow and sheen of the night had a certain profane, discordant effect. Pete's ill-defined figure slouching over it while he skimmed the syrup was grimly suggestive of the distillations of strange elixirs and unhallowed liquors, and his simple face, lighted by a sudden darting red flame, had unrecognizable significance and was of sinister intent. For Pete was detailed to attend to the boiling; the grinding was done, and the old white mare stood still in the midst of the sorghum stubble and the moonlight, as motionless and white as if she were carved in marble. Job Grinnell sat and smoked on the porch.

Presently he got up suddenly, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and looked at it carefully before he stuck it into his pocket. He went, without a word, down the rocky slope, past the old drowsing mare, and across the foot-bridge. Two or three of the dogs, watching him as he reappeared on the opposite bank, affected a mistake in identity. They growled, then barked outright, and at last ran down and climbed the fence and bounded about it, baying the vista where he had vanished, until the sleepy old mare turned her head and gazed in mild surprise at them.

Augusta sat alone on the step of the porch.

She had various regrets in her mind, incipient even before he had quite gone, and now defining themselves momentarily with added poignancy. A woman who, in her retirement at home, charges herself with the control of a man's conduct abroad, is never likely to be devoid of speculation upon probable disasters to ensue upon any abatement of the activities of her discretion. She was sorry that she had allowed so trifling a matter to mar the serenity of the family; her conscience upbraided her that she had not besought him to avoid the blacksmith's shop, where certain men of the neighborhood were wont to congregate and drink deep into the night. Above all, her mind went back to the enigmatical message, and she wondered that she could have been so forgetful as to fail to urge him to forbear angering Purdee, for this would have a cumulative effect upon all the rancors of the old quarrels, and inaugurate perhaps a new series of reprisals.

"I ain't afeard o' no Purdee ez ever stepped," she said to herself, defining her position. "But I'm fur peace. An' ef the Purdees will leave we-uns be, I ain't a-goin' ter meddle along o' them."

She remembered an old barn-burning, in the days when she and her husband were newly married, at his father's house. She looked up at the barn hard by, on a line with the dwelling, with that tenderness which one feels for a thing, not because of its value, but for the sake of possession, for the kinship with the objects that belong to the home. A cat was sitting high in a crevice in the logs where the daubing had fallen out; the moon glittered in its great yellow eyes. A frog was leaping along the open space about the rude step at Augusta's feet. A clump of mullein leaves, silvered by the light, spangled by the dew, hid him presently. What an elusive glistening gauze hung over the valley far below, where the sense of distance was limited by the sense of sight!--for it was here only that the night, though so brilliant, must attest the incomparable lucidity of daylight. She could not even distinguish, amidst those soft sheens of the moon and the dew, the Lombardy poplar that grew above the door of old Squire Grove's house down in the cove; in the daytime it was visible like a tiny finger pointing upward. How drowsy was the sound of the katydid, now loudening, now falling,

now fainting away! And the tree-toad shrilled in the dog-wood tree. The frogs, too, by the river in iterative fugue sent forth a song as suggestive of the margins as the scent of the fern, and the mint, and the fragrant weeds.

A convulsive start! She did not know that she slept until she was again awake. The moon had travelled many a mile along the highways of the skies. It hung over the purple mountains, over the farthest valley. The cicada had grown dumb. The stars were few and faint. The air was chill.

She started to her feet; her garments were heavy with dew. The fire beneath the sorghum kettle had died to a coal, flaring or fading as the faint fluctuations of the wind might will. Near it Pete slumbered where he too had sat down to rest. And Job--Job had never returned.



THE BLACKSMITH'S SHOP

He had found it a lightsome enough scene at the blacksmith's shop, where it was understood that the neighboring politicians colloqued at times, or brethren in the church discussed matters of discipline or more spiritual affairs. In which of these interests a certain corpulent jug was most active it would be difficult perhaps to accurately judge. The great barn-like doors were flung wide open, and there was a group of men half within the shelter and half without; the shoeing-stool, a broken plough, an empty keg, a log, and a rickety chair sufficed to seat the company. The moonlight falling into the door showed the great slouching, darkling figures, the anvil, the fire of the forge (a dim ashy coal), and the shadowy hood merging indistinguishably into the deep duskiness of the interior. In contrast, the scene glimpsed through the low window at the back of the shop had a certain vivid illuminated effect. A spider web, revealing its geometric perfection, hung half across one corner of the rude casement; the moonbeams without were individualized in fine filar delicacy, like the ravellings of a silver skein. The boughs of a tree which grew on a slope close below almost touched the lintel; the leaves seemed a translucent green; a bird slept on a twig, its head beneath its wing.

Back of the cabin, which was situated on a limited terrace, the great altitudes of the mountain rose into the infinity of the night.

The drawling conversation was beset, as it were, by faint fleckings of sound, lightly drawn from a crazy old fiddle under the chin of a gaunt, yellow-haired young giant, one Ephraim Blinks, who lolled on a log, and who by these vague harmonies unconsciously gave to the talk of his comrades a certain theatrical effect.

Grinnell slouched up and sat down among them, responding with a nod to the unceremonious "Hy're, Job?" of the blacksmith, who seemed thus to do the abbreviated honors of the occasion. The others did not so formally notice his coming.

The subject of conversation was the same that had pervaded his own thoughts. He was irritated to observe how

Purdee had usurped public attention, and yet he himself listened with keenest interest.

"Waal," said the ponderous blacksmith, "I kin onderstan' mighty well ez Moses would hev been mighty mad ter see them folks a-worshippin' o' a calf--senseless critters they be! 'Twarn't no use flingin' down them rocks, though, an' gittin' 'em bruk. Sandstone ain't like metal; ye can't heat it an' draw it down an' weld it agin."

His round black head shone in the moonlight, glistening because of his habit of plunging it, by way of making his toilet, into the barrel of water where he tempered his steel. He crossed his huge folded bare arms over his breast, and leaned back against the door on two legs of the rickety chair.

"Naw, sir," another chimed in. "He mought hev knowed he'd jes hev ter go ter quarryin' agin."

"They air always a-crackin' up them folks in the Bible ez sech powerful wise men," said another, whose untrained mind evidently held the germs of advanced thinking. "'Pears ter me ez some of 'em conducted tharselves ez foolish ez enny folks I know--this hyar very Moses one o' 'em. Throwin' down them rocks 'minds me o' old man Pinner's tantrums. Sher'ff kem ter his house 'bout a jedgmint debt, an' levied on his craps. An' arter he war gone old man tuk a axe an' gashed bodaciously inter the loom an' hacked it up. Ez ef that war goin' ter do enny good! His wife war the mos' outed woman I ever see. They 'ain't got nare nother loom nuther, an' hain't hearn no advices from the Lord."

The violinist paused in his playing. "They 'lowed Moses war a meek man too," he said. "He killed a man with a brick-badger an' buried him in the sand. Mighty meek ways"--with a satirical grimace.

The others, divining that this was urged in justification and precedent for devious modern ways that were not meek, did not pursue this branch of the subject.

"S'prised me some," remarked the advanced thinker, "ter hear ez them tables o' stone war up on the bald o' the mounting thar. I hed drawed the idee ez 'twar in some other kentry somewhar--I dunno--" He stopped blankly. He could not formulate his geographical ignorance. "An' I never knowed," he resumed, presently, "ez thar war enough gold in Tennessee ter make a gold calf; they fund gold hyar, but 'twar mighty leetle."

"Mebbe 'twar a mighty leetle calf," suggested the blacksmith.

"Mebbe so," assented the other.

"Mebbe 'twar a silver one," speculated a third; "plenty o' silver they 'low thar air in the mountings."

The violinist spoke up suddenly. "Git one o' them Injuns over yander ter Quallatown right seasonable drunk, an' he'll tell ye a power o' places whar the old folks said thar war silver." He bowed his chin once more upon the instrument, and again the slow drawling conversation proceeded to soft music.

"Ef ye'll b'lieve me," said the advanced thinker, "I never war so conflusticated in my life ez I war when he stood up in meetin' an' told 'bout'n the tables of the law bein' on the bald! I 'lowed 'twar somewhar 'mongst some sort'n people named 'Gyptians."

"Mebbe some o' them Injuns air named 'Gyptians'," suggested Spears, the blacksmith.

"Naw, sir," spoke up the fiddler, who had been to Quallatown, and was the ethnographic authority of the meeting. "Tennessee Injuns be named Cher-kee, an' Chick'saw, an' Creeks."

There was a silence. The moonlight sifted through the dark little shanty of a shop; the fretting and foaming of a mountain stream arose from far down the steep slope, where there was a series of cascades, a fine water-power, utilized by a mill. The sudden raucous note of a night-hawk jarred upon the air, and a shadow on silent wings sped past. The road was dusty in front of the shop, and for a space there was no shade. Into the full radiance of the moonlight a rabbit bounded along, rising erect with a most human look of affright in its great shining eyes as it tremulously gazed at the motionless figures. It too was motionless for a moment. The young musician made a lunge at it with his bow; it sprang away with a violent start--its elongated grotesque shadow bounding kangaroo-like beside it--into the soft gloom of the bushes. There was no other traveller along the road, and the talk was renewed without further interruption. "Waal, sir, eftwarn't fur the testimony o' the words he reads ez air graven on them rocks, I couldn't-git my comsent ter b'lieve ez Moses ever war in Tennessee," said the advanced thinker. "I ain't onder-takin' ter say what State he settled in, but I 'lowed 'twarn't hyar. It mus' hev been, though, 'count o' the scripture on them broken tables."

"I never knowed a meetin' woke ter sech a pint o' holiness. The saints jes rampaged around till it fairly sounded like the cavortin's o' the ungodly," a retrospective voice chimed in.

"I raised thirty-two hyme chunes," said the musician, who had a great gift in quiring, and was the famed possessor of a robust tenor voice. "A leetle mo' gloryin' aroun' an' I'd hev kem ter the eend o' my row, an' hev hed ter begin over agin." He spoke with acrimony, reviewing the jeopardy in which his *repertoire* had been placed.

"Waal," said the blacksmith, passing his hand over his black head, as sleek and shining as a beaver's, "I'm a-goin' up ter the bald o' the mounting some day soon, ef so be I kin make out ter shoe that mare o' mine"--for the blacksmith's mount was always barefoot--"I'm afeard ter trest her unshod on them slippery slopes; I want ter read some o' them sayin's on the stone tables myself. I likes ter git a tex' or the eend o' a hyme set a-goin' in my head--seems somehow ter teach itself ter the anvil, an' then it jes says it back an' forth all day. Yestiddy I never seen its beat--'Christ--war--born--

in--Bethlehem! The anvil jes rang with that ez ef the actual metal hed the gift o' prayer an' praise."

"Waal, sir," exclaimed Job Grinnell, who had been having frequent colloquies aside with the companionable jug, "ye mought jes ez well save yer shoes an' let yer mare go barefoot. Thar ain't nare sign o' a word writ on them rocks."

They all sat staring at him. Even the singing, long-drawn vibrations of the violin were still.

"By Hokey!" exclaimed the young musician, "I'll take Purdee's word ez soon ez youm."

The whiskey which Grinnell had drunk had rendered him more plastic still to jealousy. The day was not so long past when Purdee's oath would have been esteemed a poor dependence against the word of so zealous a brother as he--a pillar in the church, a shining light of the congregation. He noted the significant fact that it behooved him to justify himself; it irked him that this was exacted as a tribute to Purdee's newly acquired sanctity.

"Purdee's jes a-lyin' an' a-foolin' ye," he declared. "Ever been up on the bald?"

They had lived in its shadow all their lives.

Even by the circuitous mountain ways it was not more than five miles from where they sat. But none had chanced to have a call to go, and it was to them as a foreign land to be explored.

"Waal, I hev, time an' agin," said Grinnell. "I dunno who gin them rocks the name of Moses' tables o' the Law. Moses must hev hed a powerful block an' tackle ter lift sech tremenjious rocks. I hev known 'em named sech fur many a year. But I seen 'em not three weeks ago, an' thar ain't nare word writ on 'em. Thar's the mounting; thar's the rocks; ye kin go an' stare-gaze 'em an' sat'fy yerse'fs."

Whether it were by reason of the cumulative influences of the continual references to the jug, or of that sense of reviviscence, that more alert energy, which the cool Southern nights always impart after the sultry summer days, the suggestion that they should go now and solve the mystery, and meet the dawn upon the summit of the bald, found instant acceptance, which it might not have secured in the stolid daylight.

The moon, splendid, a lustrous white encircled by a great halo of translucent green, swung high above the duskiy purple mountains. Below in the valleys its progress was followed by an opalescent gossamer presence that was like the overflowing fulness, the surplusage, of light rather than mist. The shadows of the great trees were interlaced with dazzling silver gleams. The night was almost as bright as the day, but cool and dank, full of sylvan fragrance and restful silence and a romantic liberty.

The blacksmith carried his rifle, for wolves were often abroad in the wilderness. Two or three others were similarly armed; the advanced thinker had a hunting-knife, Job Grinnell a pistol that went by the name of "shootin'-iron." The musician carried no weapon. "I ain't 'feared o' no wolf," he said; "I'll play 'em a chune." He went on in the vanguard, his tousled yellow hair idealized with many a shimmer in the moonlight as it hung curling down on his blue jeans coat, his cheek laid softly on the violin, the bow glancing back and forth as if strung with moonbeams as he played. The men woke the solemn silences with their loud mirthful voices; they startled precipitate echoes; they fell into disputes and wrangled loudly, and would have turned back if sure of the way home, but Job Grinnell led steadily on, and they were fain to follow. They lagged to look at a spot where some man, unheeded even by tradition, had dug his heart's grave in a vain search for precious metal. A deep excavation in the midst of the wilderness told the story; how long ago it was might be guessed from the age of a stalwart oak that had sunk roots into its depths; the shadows were heavy about it; a sense of despair brooded in the loneliness. And so up and up the endless ascent; sometimes great chasms were at one side, stretching further and further, and crowding the narrow path--the herder's trail--against the sheer ascent, till it seemed that the treacherous mountains were yawning to engulf them. The air was growing colder, but was exquisitely clear and exhilarating; the great dewy ferns flung silvery fronds athwart the way; vines in stupendous lengths swung from the tops of gigantic trees to the roots. Hark! among them birds chirp; a matutinal impulse seems astir in the woods; the moon is undimmed; the stars faint only because of her splendors; but one can feel that the earth has roused itself to a sense of a new day. And there, with such feathery flashes of white foam, such brilliant straight lengths of translucent water, such a leaping grace of impetuous motion, the currents of the mountain stream, like the arrows of Diana, shoot down the slopes. And now a vague mist is among the trees, and when it clears away they seem shrunken, as under a spell, to half their size. They grow smaller and smaller still, oak and chestnut and beech, but dwarfed and gnarled like some old orchard. And suddenly they cease, and the vast grassy dome uprises against the sky, in which the moon is paling into a dull similitude of itself; no longer wondrous, transcendent, but like some lily of opaque whiteness, fair and fading. Beneath is a purple, deeply serious, and sombre earth, to which mists minister, silent and solemn; myriads of mountains loom on every hand; the half-seen mysteries of the river, which, charged with the red clay of its banks, is of a tawny color, gleams as it winds in and out among the white vapors that reach in fantastic forms from heaven above to the valley below. There is a certain relief in the mist--it veils the infinities of the scene, on which the mind can lay but a trembling hold.

"Folks tell all sort'n cur'ous tales 'bout'n this hyar spot," said Job Grinnell, his square face, his red hair hanging about his ears, and his ragged red beard visible in the dull light of the coming day.

"I hev hearn folks 'low ez a pa'tridge up hyar will look ez big ez a Dominicky rooster. An' ef ye listens ye kin hear

words from somewhar. An' sometimes in the cattle-herdin' season the beastises will kem an' crowd tergether, an' stan' on the bald in the moonlight all night."

"I dunno," said the advanced thinker, "ez I be s'prised enny ef Purdee, ez be huntin' up hyar so constant, hev got sorter teched in the head, ter take up sech a cur'ous notion 'bout'n them rocks."

He glanced along the slope at the spot, visible now, where Moses flung the stone tables and they broke in twain. And there, standing beside them, was a man of great height, dressed in blue jeans, his broad-brimmed hat pushed from his brow, and his meditative dark eyes fixed upon the rocks; a deer, all gray and antlered, lay dead at his feet, and his rifle rested on the ground as he leaned on the muzzle.

A glance was interchanged between the others. Their intention, the promptings of curiosity, had flagged during the long tramp and the gradual waning of the influence of the jug. The coincidence of meeting Purdee here revived their interest. Grinnell, remembering the ancient feud, held back, being unlikely to elicit Purdee's views in the face of their contradiction. The blacksmith and the young fiddler took their way down toward him.

He looked up with a start, seeing them at some little distance. His full, contemplative eyes rested upon them for a moment almost devoid of questioning. It was not the face of a man who finds himself confronted with the discovery of his duplicity and his hypocrisy. There was a strange doubt stirring in the blacksmith's heart. As he approached he looked upon the storied cocks with a sort of solemn awe, as if they had indeed been given by the hand of the Lord to his servant, who broke them here in his wrath. He knew that the step of the musician slackened as he followed. What holy mysteries were they not rushing in upon? He spoke in a bated voice.

"Roger," he said, "we'uns hearn ye tell 'bout the scriptures graven on these hyar tables ez Moses flung down, an' we'uns 'lowed we'uns would kem an' read some fur ourselves."



“ THE TABLES OF THE LAW ”

Purdee did not speak nor hesitate; he moved aside that the blacksmith might stand where he had been--as it were at the foot of the page.

But what transcendent glories thronged the heavens--what august splendors of dawn! Had the sun ever before risen like this, with the sky an emblazonment of red, of gold, of darting gleams of light; with the mountains most royally purple or most radiantly blue; with the prismatic mists in flight; with the slow climax of the dazzling sphere ascending to dominate it all?

The blacksmith knelt down to read. The musician, his silent violin under his chin, leaned over his comrade's shoulder. The hunter stood still, expectant.

Alas! the corrugations of time; the fissile results of the frost; the wavering line of ripple-marks of Seas that shall ebb no more; growth of lichen; an army of ants in full march; a passion-flower trailing from a crevice, its purple blooms lying upon the gray stone near where it is stamped with the fossil imprint of a sea-weed, faded long ago and forgotten. Or is it, alas! for the eyes that can see only this?

The blacksmith looked up with a twinkling leer; the violinist recovered his full height, and drew the bow dashingly across the strings; then let his arm fall.

"Roger," the blacksmith said, "dad-burned ef I kin read ennything hyar."

The young musician looked over his brawny shoulder in silence.

"Whar d'ye make out enny letters, Roger?" persisted Spears.

Purdee leaned over and eagerly pointed with his ramrod to a curious corrugation of the surface of the rock. Again the blacksmith bent down; the musician craned forward, his yellow hair hanging about his bronzed face.

"I hev been toler'ble well acquainted with the alphabit," said Spears, "fur goin' on thirty year an' better, an' I'll swar ter Heaven thar ain't nare sign of a letter thar."

Purdee stared at him in wild-eyed amazement for a moment. Then he flung himself upon his knees beside the great rock, and guiding his ramrod over the surface, he exclaimed, "Hyar, Spears; right hyar!"

The blacksmith was all incredulous as he lent himself to a new posture, and leaned forward to look with the languid indulgence of one who will not again entertain doubt.

"Nare A, nor B, nor C, nor none o' the fambly," he declared. "These hyar rocks ain't no Moses' tables sure enough; Moses never war in Tennessee. They be jes like enny other rock, an' thar ain't a word o' writin' on 'em."

He looked up with a curious questioning at Pur-dee's face--a strange face for a man detected in a falsehood, a trick. The deep-set eyes were wide as if straining for perception denied them. Despite the chill, rare air, great drops had started on his brow, and were falling upon his beard, and upon his hands. These strong hands were quivering; they hovered above the signs on the rocks. The mystic letters, the inspired words, where were they? Grope as he might, he could not find them. Alas! doubt and denial had climbed the mountain--the awful limitations of the more finite human creature--and his inspiration and the finer enthusiasms of the truth were dead.

Dead with a throe that was almost like a literal death. This--on this he had lived; the ether of ecstasy was the breath of his life. He clutched at the stained red handkerchief knotted about his throat as if he were suffocating; he tore it open as he swayed backward on his knees. He did not hear--or he did not heed--the laugh among the little crowd on the bald--satirical, rallying, zestful. He was deaf to the strains of the violin, jeeringly and jerkily playing a foolish tune. It was growing fainter, for they had all turned about to betake themselves once more to the world below. He could have seen, had he cared to see, their bearded grinning faces peering through the stunted trees, as descending they came near the spot where he had lavished the spiritual graces of his feeling, his enthusiasm, his devotion, his earnest reaching for something higher, for something holy, which had refreshed his famished soul; had given to its dumbness words; had erased the values of the years, of the nations; had made him friends with Moses on the "bald"; had revealed to him the finger of the Lord on the stone.

He took no heed of his gestures, of which, indeed, he was unconscious. They were fine dramatically, and of great power, as he alternately rose to his full height, beating his breast in despair, and again sank upon his knees, with a pondering brow and a searching eye, and a hovering, trembling hand, striving to find the clew he had lost. They might have impressed a more appreciative audience, but not one more entertained than the cluster of men who looked and paused and leered in amusement at one another, and thrust out satirical tongues. Long after they had disappeared, the strains of the violin could be heard, filling the solemn, stricken, strangely stunted woods with a grotesquely merry presence, hilarious and jeering.

Purdee found it possible to survive the destruction of illusions. Most of us do. It wrought in him, however, the saturnine changes natural upon the relinquishment of a dear and dead fantasy. This ethereal entity is a more essential component of happiness than one might imagine from the extreme tenuity of the conditions of its existence. Purdee's fantasy may have been a poor thing, but, although he could calmly enough close its eyes, and straighten its limbs, and bury it decently from out the offended view of fact, he felt that he should mourn it in his heart as long as he should live. And he was bereaved.

There is a certain stage in every sorrow when it rejects sympathy. Purdee, always taciturn, grave, uncommunicative, was, invested with an austere aloofness, and was hardly to be approached as he sat, silent and absent, brooding over the fire at his own home. When roused by some circumstance of the domestic routine, and it became apparent that his mood was not sullenness or anger, but simple and complete introversion, it added a dignity and suggested a remoteness that were yet less reassuring. His son, who stood in awe of him--not because of paternal severity, but because no boy could refrain from a worshipping respect for so miraculous a shot, a woodsman so subtly equipped with all elusive sylvan instincts and knowledge--forbore to break upon his meditations by the delivery of Grinnell's message. Nevertheless the consciousness of withholding it weighed heavily upon him. He only pretermitted it for a

time, until a more receptive state of mind should warrant it. Day by day, however, he looked with eagerness when he came into the cabin in the evening to ascertain if his father were still seated in the chimney-corner silently smoking his pipe. Purdee had seldom remained at home so long at a time, and the boy had a daily fear that the gun on the primitive rack of deer antlers would be missing, and word left in the family that he had taken the trail up the mountain, and would return "'cord-in' ter luck with the varmints." And thus Job Grinnell's enigmatical message, that had the ring of defiance, might remain indefinitely postponed.

Abner had not realized how long a time it had been delayed, until one evening at the wood-pile, in tossing off a great stick to hew into lengths for the chimney-place, he noticed that thin ice had formed in the moss and the dank cool shadows of the interstices. "I tell ye now, winter air a-comm'," he observed. He stood leaning on his axe-handle and looking down upon the scene so far below; for Pur-dee's house was perched half-way up on the mountain-side, and he could see over the world how it fared as the sun went down. Far away upon the levels of the valley of East Tennessee a golden haze glittered resplendent, lying close upon an irradiated earth, and ever brightening toward the horizon, and it seemed as if the sun in sinking might hope to fall in fairer spheres than the skies he had left, for they were of a dun-color and an opaque consistency. Only one horizontal rift gave glimpses of a dazzling ochreous tint of indescribable brilliancy, from the focus of which the divergent light was shed upon the western limits of the land. Chilhowee, near at hand, was dark enough--a purplish gamet hue; but the scarlet of the sour-wood gleamed in the cove; the hickory still flared gallantly yellow; the receding ranges to the north and south were blue and more faintly azure. The little log cabin stood with small fields about it, for Purdee barely subsisted on the fruits of the soil, and did not seek to profit. It had only one room, with a loft above; the barn was a makeshift of poles, badly chinked, and showing through the crevices what scanty store there was of corn and pumpkins. A black-and-white work-ox, that had evidently no deficiency of ribs, stood outside of the fence and gazed, a forlorn Tantalus, at these unattainable dainties; now and then a muttered low escaped his lips. Nobody noticed him or sympathized with him, except perhaps the little girl, who had come out in her sun-bonnet to help her brother bring in the fuel. He gruffly accepted her company, a little ashamed of her because she was a girl; since, however, there was no other boy by to laugh, he permitted her the delusion that she was of assistance.

As he paused to rest he reiterated, "Winter air a-comin', I tell ye."

"D'ye reckon, Ab," she asked, in her high, thin little voice, her hands full of chips and the basket at her feet, "ez Grinnell's baby knows Chris'mus air a-comin'?"

He glowered at her as he leaned on the axe. "I reckon Grinnell's old baby dunno B from Bull-foot," he declared, gruffly.

The recollection of the message came over him. He had a pang of regret, remembering all the old grudges against the Grinnells. They were re-enforced by this irrepressible yearning after their baby, this admission that they had aught which was not essentially despicable. Nevertheless, he suddenly saw a reason for the Grinnell baby's existence; he loaded up both arms with the sticks of wood, and, followed by the peripatetic sun-bonnet, conscientiously weighed down with one billet, he strode into the house, and let his burden fall with a mighty clatter in the corner of the chimney. The sun-bonnet staggered up and threw her stick on the top of the pile of wood.

Purdee, sitting silently smoking, glanced up at the noise. Abner took advantage of the momentary notice to claim, too, the attention of his mother. "I wish ye'd make Eunice quit talkin' 'bout the Grinnells' old baby, like she war actially demented--uglies' bald-headed, slab-sided, slobbery old baby I ever see--nare tooth in its head! I do despise them Grinnells."

As he anticipated, his father spoke suddenly: "Ye jes keep away from thar," he said, sternly. "I trest them folks no furder 'n a rattlesnake."

"I ain't consortin' along o' 'em," declared the boy. "But I actially hed ter take Eunice by the scalp o' her head an' lug her off one day when she hung on thar fence a-stare-gazin' Grinnell's baby like 'twar fatten ter eat."

The child's mother, a cadaverous, pale woman, was listlessly stringing the warping-bars with hanks of variegated yarn. The grandmother, who conserved a much more active and youthful interest in life, took down a brown gourd used as a scrap-basket that was on a protruding lath of the clay-and-stick chimney, and hunted among the scraps of homespun and bits of yarn stowed within it. The room was much like the gourd in its aged brown tint; its indigenous aspect, as if it had not been made with hands, but was some spontaneous production of the soil; with its bits of bright color--the peppers hanging from the rafters, the rainbow-hued yarn festooning the warping-bars, the red coals of the fire, the blue and yellow ware ranged on the shelf, the brown puncheon floor and walls and ceiling and chimney--it might have seemed the interior of a similar gourd of gigantic proportions. She dressed a twig from the pile of wood in a gay scrap of cloth, casting glances the while at the little girl, and handed it to her.

"I hain't never seen ez good a baby ez this," she said, with the convincing coercive mendacity of a grandmother.

The little girl accepted it humbly; it was a good baby doubtless of its sort, but it was not alive, which could not be denied of the Grinnell baby, Grinnell though it was.

"An' Job Grinnell he kem down ter the fence, an' 'lowed he'd slit our ears, an' named us shoats," continued her brother. Purdee lifted his head. "An' sent a word ter dad," said the boy, tremulously.



“ ‘WHAT WORD DID HE SEND TER—ME?’ ”

"What word did he send ter--*me*?" cried Purdee.

The boy quailed to tell him. "He tole me ter ax ye ef ye ever read sech ez this on Moses' tables in the mountings--! An' ye shell claim sech ez be yer own, an' yer neighbors' belongings shell ye in no wise boastfully medjure fur youm, nor look upon it fur covetiousness, nor yit git a big name up in the kentry fur ownin' sech ez be another's," faltered the sturdy Abner.

The next moment he felt an infinite relief. He suddenly recognized the fact that he had been chiefly restrained from repeating the words by an unrealized terror lest they prove true--lest something his father claimed was not his, indeed.

But the expression of anger on Purdee's face was merged first in blank astonishment, then in perplexed cogitation, then in renewed and overpowering amazement.

The wife turned from the warping-bars with a vague stare of surprise, one hand poised uncertainly upon a peg of the frame, the other holding a hank of "spun truck." The grandmother looked over her spectacles with eyes sharp enough to seem subsidized to see through the mystery.

"In the name o' reason and religion, Roger Purdee," she adjured him, "what air that thar perverted Philistine talkin' 'bout?"

"It air more'n I kin jedge of," said Purdee, still vainly cogitating.

He sat for a time silent, his dark eyes bent on the fire, his broad, high forehead covered by his hat pulled down over it, his long, tangled, dark locks hanging on his collar.

Suddenly he rose, took down his gun, and started toward the door.

"Roger," cried his wife, shrilly, "I'd leave the critter be. Lord knows thar's been enough blood spilt an' good shelter burned along o' them Purdees' an' Grinnells' quar'ls in times gone. Laws-a-massy!--she wrung her hands, all hampered though they were in the "spun truck"--"I'd ruther be a sheep 'thout a soul, an' live in peace."

"A sca'ce ch'ice," commented her mother. "Sheep's got ter be butchered. I'd ruther be the butcher, myself--healthier."

Purdee was gone. He had glanced absently at his wife as if he hardly heard. He waited till she paused; then, without answer, he stepped hastily out of the door and walked away.

The cronies at the blacksmith's shop latterly gathered within the great flaring door, for the frost lay on the dead leaves without, the stars scintillated with chill suggestions, and the wind was abroad on nights like these. On shrill pipes it played; so weird, so wild, so prophetic were its tones that it found only a shrinking in the heart of him whose ear it constrained to listen. The sound of the torrent far below was accelerated to an agitated, tumultuous plaint, all unknown when its pulses were bated by summer languors. The moon was in the turmoil of the clouds, which, routed in some wild combat with the winds, were streaming westward.

And although the rigors of the winter were in abeyance, and the late purple aster called the Christmas-flower bloomed in the sheltered grass at the door, the forge fire, flaring or dully glowing, overhung with its dusky hood, was a friendly thing to see, and in its vague illumination the rude interior of the shanty--the walls, the implements of the trade, the bearded faces grouped about, the shadowy figures seated on whatever might serve, a block of wood, the shoeing-stool, a plough, or perched on the anvil--became visible to Roger Purdee from far down the road as he approached. Even the head of a horse could be seen thrust in at the window, while the brute, hitched outside, beguiled the dreary waiting by watching with a luminous, intelligent eye the gossips within, as if he understood the drawling colloquy. They were suffering some dearth of timely topics, supplying the deficiency with reminiscences more or less stale, and had expected no such sensation as they experienced when a long shadow fell athwart the doorway,--the broad aperture glimmering a silvery gray contrasted with the brown duskiness of the interior and the purple darkness of the distance; the forge fire showed Purdee's tall figure leaning on the doorframe, and lighted up his serious face beneath his great broad-brimmed hat, his intent, earnest eyes, his tangled black beard and locks. He gave no greeting, and silence fell upon them as his searching gaze scanned them one by one.

"Whar's Job Grinnell?" he demanded, abruptly.

There was a shuffling of feet, as if those members most experienced relief from the constraint that silence had imposed upon the party. A vibration from the violin--a sigh as if the instrument had been suddenly moved rather than a touch upon the strings--intimated that the young musician was astir. But it was Spears, the blacksmith, who spoke.

"Kem in, Roger," he called out, cordially, as he rose, his massive figure and his sleek head showing in the dull red light on the other side of the anvil, his bare arms folded across his chest. "Naw, Job ain't hyar; hain't been hyar for a right smart while."

There was a suggestion of disappointment in the attitude of the motionless figure at the door. The deeply earnest, pondering face, visible albeit the red light from the forge-fire was so dull, was keenly watched. For the inquiry was fraught with peculiar meaning to those cognizant of the long and bitter feud.

"I ax," said Purdee, presently, "kase Grinnell sent me a mighty cur'ous word the t'other day." He lifted his head. "Hev enny o' you-uns hearn him 'low lately ez I claim ennything ez ain't mine?"

There was silence for a moment. Then the forge was suddenly throbbing with the zigzagging of the bow of the violin jauntily dandering along the strings. His keen sensibility apprehended the sudden jocosity as a jeer, but before he could say aught the blacksmith had undertaken to reply.

"Waal, Purdee, ef ye hedn't axed me, I warn't layin' off ter say nuthin 'bout'n it. 'Tain't no con-sarn o' mine ez I knows on. But sence ye *hev* axed me, I hold my jaw fur the fear o' no man. The words ain't writ ez I be feared ter pernounce. An' ez all the kentry hev hearn 'bout'n it 'ceptin' you-uns, I dunno ez I hev enny call ter hold my jaw. The Lord 'ain't set no seal on my lips ez I knows on."

"Naw, sir!" said Purdee, his great eyes glooming through the dusk and flashing with impatience. "He 'ain't set no seal on yer lips, ter jedge by the way ye wallop yer tongue about inside o' 'em with fool words. Whyn't ye bite off what ye air tryin' ter chaw?"

"Waal, then," said the admonished orator, bluntly, "Grinnell 'lows ye don't own that thar lan' around them rocks on the bald, no more'n ye read enny writin' on 'em."

"Not them rocks!" cried Purdee, standing suddenly erect--"the tables o' the Law, writ with the finger o' the Lord--an' Moses flung 'em down thar an' bruk 'em. All the kentry knows they air Moses' tables. An' the groun' whar they lie air mine."

"'Tain't, Grinnell say 'tain't."

"Naw, sir," chimed in the young musician, his violin silent. "Job Grinnell declars he owns it hisself, an' ef he war willin' ter stan' the expense he'd set up his rights, but the lan' ain't wuth it. He 'lows his line runs spang over them rocks, an' a heap furdur."

Purdee was silent; one or two of the gossips laughed jeeringly; he had been proved a liar once. It was well that he did not deny; he was put to open shame among them.

"An' Grinnell say," continued Blinks, "ez ye hev gone an' tole big tales 'mongst the brethren fur ownin' sech ez ain't yourn, an' readin' of s'prisin' sayin's on the rocks."

He bent his head to a series of laughing harmonics, and when he raised it, hearing no retort, the silvery gray square of the door was empty. He saw the moon glimmer on the clumps of grass outside where the Christmas flower bloomed.

The group sat staring in amaze; the blacksmith strode to the door and looked out, himself a massive, dark silhouette upon the shimmering neutrality of the background. There was no figure in sight; no faint foot-fall was audible, no rustle of the sere leaves; only the voice of the mountain torrent, far below, challenged the stillness with its insistent cry.

He looked back for a moment, with a vague, strange doubt if he had seen aught, heard aught, in the scene just past. "Hain't Purdee been hyar?" he asked, passing his hand across his eyes. The sense of having dreamed was so strong

upon him that he stretched his arms and yawned.

The gleaming teeth of the grouped shadows demonstrated the merriment evoked by the query. The chuckle was arrested midway.

"Ye 'pear ter 'low ez suthin' hev happened ter Purdee, an' that thar war his harnt," suggested one.

The bold young musician laid down his violin suddenly. The instrument struck upon a keg of nails, and gave out an abrupt, discordant jangle, startling to the nerves. "Shet up, ye durned squeeched-owl!" he exclaimed, irritably. Then, lowering his voice, he asked: "Didn't they 'low down yander in the Cove ez Widder Peters, the day her husband war killed by the landslide up in the mounting, heard a hoe a-scrapin' mightily on the gravel in the gyarden-spot, an' went ter the door, an' seen him thar a-workin', an' axed him when he kem home? An' he never lifted his head, but hoed on. An' she went down thar 'mongst the corn, an' she couldn't find nobody. An' jes then the John's boys rid up an' 'lowed ez Jim Peters war dead, an' hed been fund in the mounting, an' they war a-fetchin' of him then."

The horse's head within the window nodded violently among the shadows, and the stones rolled beneath his hoof as he pawed the ground.

"Mis' Peters she knowed suthin' were a-goin' ter happen when she seen that harnt a-hoein'."

"I reckon she did," said the blacksmith, stretching himself, his nerves still under the delusion of recent awakening. "Jim never hoed none when he war alive. She mought hev knowed he war dead ef she seen him hoein'."

"Waal, sir," exclaimed the violinist, "I'm a-goin' up yander ter Purdee's ter-morrer ter find out what he died of, an' when."

That he was alive was proved the next day, to the astonishment of the smith and his friends. The forge was the voting-place of the district, and there, while the fire was flaring, the bellows blowing, the anvil ringing, the echo vibrating, now loud, now faint, with the antiphonal chant of the hammer and the sledge, a notice was posted to inform the adjacent owners that Roger Purdee's land, held under an original grant from the State, would be processioned according to law some twenty days after date, and the boundaries thereof defined and established. The fac-simile of the notice, too, was posted on the court-house door in the county town twenty miles away, for there were those who journeyed so far to see it.

"I wonder," said the blacksmith, as he stood in the unfamiliar street and gazed at it, his big arms, usually bare, now hampered with his coat sleeves and folded upon his chest--"I wonder ef he footed it all the way ter town at the gait he tuk when he lit out from the forge?"

It was a momentous day when the county surveyor planted his Jacob's-staff upon the State line on the summit of the bald. His sworn chain-bearers, two tall young fellows clad in jeans, with broad-brimmed wool hats, their heavy boots drawn high over their trousers, stood ready and waiting, with the sticks and clanking chain, on the margin of the ice-cold spring gushing out on this bleak height, and signifying more than a fountain in the wilderness, since it served to define the southeast corner of Purdee's land. The two enemies were perceptibly conscious of each other. Grinnell's broad face and small eyes laden with fat lids were persistently averted. Purdee often glanced toward him gloweringly, his head held, nevertheless, a little askance, as if he rejected the very sight. There was the fire of a desperate intention in his eyes. Looking at his face, shaded by his broad-brimmed hat, one could hardly have doubted now whether it expressed most ferocity or force. His breath came quick--the bated breath of a man who watches and waits for a supreme moment. His blue jeans coat was buttoned close about his sun-burned throat, where the stained red handkerchief was knotted. He wore a belt with his powder-horn and bullet-pouch, and carried his rifle on his shoulder; the hand that held it trembled, and he tried to quell the quiver. "I'll prove it fust, an' kill him arterward--kill him arterward," he muttered.

In the other hand he held a yellowed old paper. Now and then he bent his earnest dark eyes upon the grant, made many a year ago by the State of Tennessee to his grandfather; for there had been no subsequent conveyances.

The blacksmith had come begirt with his leather apron, his shirt-sleeves rolled up, and with his hammer in his hand, an inopportune customer having jeopardized his chance of sharing in the sensation of the day. The other neighbors all wore their coats closely buttoned. Blinks carried his violin hung upon his back; the sharp timbre of the wind, cutting through the leafless boughs of the stunted woods, had a kindred fibrous resonance. Clouds hung low far beneath them; here and there, as they looked, the trees on the slopes showed above and again below the masses of clinging vapors. Sometimes close at hand a peak would reveal itself, asserting the solemn vicinage of the place, then draw its veil slowly about it, and stand invisible and in austere silence. The surveyor, a stalwart figure, his closely buttoned coat giving him a military aspect, looked disconsolately downward.

"I hoped I'd die before this," he remarked. "I'm equal to getting over anything in nature that's flat or oblique, but the vertical beats me."

He bent to take sight for a moment, the group silently watching him. Suddenly he came to the perpendicular, and strode off down the rugged slope over gullies and bowlders, through rills and briery tangles, his eyes distended and eager as if he were led into the sylvan depths by the lure of a vision. The chain-bearers followed, continually bending

and rising, the recurrent genuflections resembling the fervors of some religious rite. The chain rustled sibilantly among the dead leaves, and was ever and anon drawn out to its extremest length. Then the dull clank of the links was silent.

"Stick!" called out the young mountaineer in the rear.

"Stuck!" responded his comrade ahead.

And once more the writhing and jingling among the withered leaves. The surveyor strode on, turning his face neither to the right nor to the left, with his Jacob's-staff held upright before him. The other men trooped along scatteringly, dodging under the low boughs of the stunted trees. They pressed hastily together when the great square rocks--Moses' tables of the Law--came into view, lying where it was said the man of God flung them upon the sere slope below, both splintered and fissured, and one broken in twain. The surveyor was bearing straight down upon them. The men running on either side could not determine whether the line would fall within the spot or just beyond. They broke into wild exclamations.

"Ye may hammer me out ez flat ez a skene," cried the blacksmith, "ef I don't b'lieve ez Purdee hev got 'em."

"Naw, sir, naw!" cried another fervent amateur; "thar's the north. I jes now viewed Grinnell's dad's deed; the line undertakes ter run with Pur-dee's line; he hev got seven hunderd poles ter the north; ef they air a-goin' ter the north, them tables o' the Law air Grinnell's."

A wild chorus ensued.

"Naw!" "Yes!" "Thar they go!" "A-bear-in' off that-a-way!" "Beats my time!" as they stumbled and scuttled alongside the acolytes of the Compass, who bowed down and rose up at every length of the chain. Suddenly a cry from the chain-bearers.

"Out!"

Stillness ensued.

The surveyor stopped to register the "out." It was a moment of thrilling suspense; the rocks lay only a few chains further; Grinnell, into whose confidence doubt had begun to be instilled, said to himself, all a-tremble, that he would hardly have staked his veracity, his standing with the brethren, if he had realized that it was so close a matter as this. He had long known that his father owned the greater part of the unproductive wilderness lying between the two ravines; the land was almost worthless by reason of the steep slants which rendered it utterly untillable. He was sure that by the terms of his deed, which his father had from its vendor, Squire Bates, his line included the Moses' tables on which Purdee had built so fallacious a repete of holiness. He looked once more at the paper--"thence from Crystal Spring with Purdee's line north seven hundred poles to a stake in the middle of the river."

Purdee too was all a-quiver with eagerness. He had not beheld those rocks since that terrible day when all the fine values of his gifted vision had been withdrawn from him, and he could read no more with eyes blinded by the limitations of what other men could see--the infinitely petty purlieu of the average sense. He had a vague idea that should they say this was his land where those strange rocks lay, he would see again, he would read undreamed-of words, writ with a pen of fire. He started toward them, and then with a conscious effort he held back.

The surveyor took no heed of the sentiments involved in processioning Purdee's land. He stood leaning on his Jacob's-staff, as interesting to him as Moses' rocks, and in his view infinitely more useful, and wiped his brow, and looked about, and yawned. To him it was merely the surveying for a foolish cause of a very impracticable and steep tract of land, and the only reason it should be countenanced by heaven or earth was the fees involved. And this was what he saw at the end of Purdee's line.

Suddenly he took up his Jacob's-staff and marched on with a long stride, bearing straight down upon the rocks. The whole *cortege* started anew--the genuflecting chain-bearers, the dodging, scrambling, running spectators. On one of the strange stunted leafless trees a colony of vagrant crows had perched, eerie enough to seem the denizens of those weird forests; they broke into raucous laughter--Haw! haw! haw!--rising to a wild commotion of harsh, derisive discord as the men once more gave vent to loud, excited cries. For the surveyor, stalking ahead, had passed beyond the great tables of the Law; the chain-bearers were drawing Purdee's line on the other side of them, and they had fallen, if ever they fell here from Moses' hand and broke in twain, upon Purdee's land, granted to his ancestor by the State of Tennessee.

He could not speak for joy, for pride. His dark eyes were illumined by a glancing, amber light. He took off his hat and smoothed with his rough hand his long black hair, falling from his massive forehead. He leaned against one of the stunted oaks, shouldering his rifle that he had loaded for Grinnell--he could hardly believe this, although he remembered it. He did not want to shoot Grinnell; he would not waste the good lead!

And indeed Grinnell had much ado to defend himself against the sneers and rebukes with which the party beguiled the way through the wintry woods. "Ter go a-claimin' another man's land, an' put him ter the expense o' processionin' it, an' git his line run!" exclaimed the blacksmith, indignantly. "An' ye 'ain't got nare sign o' a show at Moses' tables!"

"I dunno how this hyar line air a-runnin'," declared Grinnell, sorely beset. "I don't b'lieve it air a-runnin' north."

The surveyor was hard by. He had planted his staff again, and was once more taking his bearings. He looked up for a second.

"Northwest," he said.

Grinnell stared for a moment; then strode up to the surveyor, and pointed with his stubby finger at a word on his deed.

The official looked with interest at it; he held up suddenly Purdee's grant and read aloud, "From Crystal Spring seven hundred poles *northwest* to a stake in the middle of the river."

He examined, too, the original plat of survey which he had taken to guide him, and also the plat made when Squire Bates sold to Grinnell's father; "*northwest*" they all agreed. There was evidently a clerical error on the part of the scrivener who had written Grinnell's deed.

In a moment the harassed man saw that through the processioning of Purdee's land he had lost heavily in the extent of his supposed possessions. He it was who had claimed what was rightfully another's. And because of the charge Purdee was the richer by a huge slice of mountain land--how large he could not say, as he ruefully followed the line of survey.

But for this discovery the interest of processioning Purdee's land would have subsided with the determination of the ownership of the limited environment of the stone tables of the Law. Now, as they followed the ever-diverging line to the northwest, the group was pervaded by a subdued and tremulous excitement, in which even the surveyor shared. Two or three whispered apart now and then, and Grinnell, struggling to suppress his dismay, was keenly conscious of the glances that sought him again and again in the effort to judge how he was taking it. Only Purdee himself was withdrawn from the interest that swayed them all. He had loitered at first, dallying with a temptation to slip silently from the party and retrace his way to the tables and ascertain, perchance, if some vestige of that mystic scripture might not reveal itself to him anew, or if it had been only some morbid fancy, some futile influence of solitude, some fevered condition of the blood or the brain, that had traced on the stone those gracious words, the mere echo of which--his stuttered, vague recollections--had roused the camp-meeting to fervid enthusiasms undreamed of before. And then he put from him the project--some other time, perhaps, for doubts lurked in his heart, hesitation chilled his resolve--some other time, when his companions and their prosaic influence were all far away. He was roused abruptly, as he stalked along, to the perception of the deepening excitement among them. They had emerged from the dense growths of the mountain to the lower slope, where pastures and fields--whence the grain had been harvested--and a garden and a dwelling, with barns and fences, lay before them all. And as Purdee stopped and stared, the realization of a certain significant fact struck him so suddenly that it seemed to take his breath away. That divergent line stretching to the northwest had left within his boundaries the land on which his enemy had built his home.

He looked; then he smote his thigh and laughed aloud.

The rocks on the river-bank caught the sound, and echoed it again and again, till the air seemed full of derisive voices. Under their stings of jeering clamor, and under the anguish of the calamity which his reeling senses could scarcely measure, Job Grinnell's composure suddenly gave way. He threw up his arms and called upon Heaven; he turned and glared furiously at his enemy. Then, as Purdee's laughter still jarred the air, he drew a "shooting-iron" from his pocket. The blacksmith closed with him, struggling to disarm him. The weapon was discharged in the turmoil, the ball glancing away in the first quiver of sunshine that had reached the earth to-day, and falling spent across the river.

Grinnell wrested himself from the restraining grasp, and rushed down the slope to his gate to hide himself from the gaze of the world--his world, that little group. Then remembering that it was no longer his gate, he turned from it in an agony of loathing. And knowing that earth held no shelter for him but the sufferance of another man's roof, he plunged into the leafless woods as if he heavily dragged himself by a power which warred within him with other strong motives, and disappeared among the myriads of holly bushes all aglow with their red berries.

The spectators still followed the surveyor and his Jacob's-staff, but Purdee lingered. He walked around the fence with a fierce, gloating eye, a panther-like, loping tread, as a beast might patrol a fold before he plunders it. All the venom of the old feud had risen to the opportunity. Here was his enemy at his mercy. He knew that it was less than seven years since the enclosures had been made, acres and acres of tillable land cleared, the houses built--all achieved which converted the worthlessness of a wilderness into the sterling values of a farm. He--he, Roger Purdee--was a rich man for the "mountings," joining his little to this competence. All the cruelties, all the insults, all the traditions of the old vendetta came thronging into his mind, as distinctly presented as if they were a series of hideous pictures; for he was not used to think in detail, but in the full portrayal of scenes.

The Purdee wrongs were all avenged. This result was so complete, so baffling, so ruinous temporally, so humiliating spiritually! It was the fullest replication of revenge for all that had challenged it.

"How Uncle Ezra would hev rej'iced ter hev lived ter see this day!" he thought, with a pious regret that the dead might not know.

The next moment his attention was suddenly attracted by a movement in the door-yard. A woman had been hanging

out clothes to dry, and she turned to go in, without seeing the striding figure patrolling the enclosure. A baby--a small bundle of a red dress--was seated on the pile of sorghum-cane where the mill had worked in the autumn; the stalks were broken, and flimsy with frost and decay, and washed by the rains to a pallid hue, yet more marked in contrast with the brown ground. The baby's dress made a bright bit of color amidst the dreary tones. As Purdee caught sight of it he remembered that this was "Grinnell's old baby," who had been the cause of the renewal of the ancient quarrel, which had resulted so benignantly for him. "I owe you a good turn, sis," he murmured, satirically, glaring at the child as the unconscious mother lifted her to go in the house. The baby, looking over the maternal shoulder, encountered the stern eyes staring at her. She stared gravely too. Then with a bounce and a gurgle she beamed upon him from out the retirement of her flapping sun-bonnet; she smiled radiantly, and finally laughed outright, and waved her hands and again bounced beguilingly, and thus toothlessly coquetting, disappeared within the door.

Before Purdee reached home, flakes of snow, the first of the season, were whirling through the gray dusk noiselessly, ceaselessly, always falling, yet never seeming to fall, rather to restlessly pervade the air with a vacillating alienation from all the laws of gravitation. Elusive fascinations of thought were liberated with the shining crystalline aerial pulsation; some mysterious attraction dwelt down long vistas amongst the bare trees; their fine fibrous grace of branch and twig was accented by the snow, which lay upon them with exquisite lightness, despite the aggregated bulk, not the densely packed effect which the boughs would show to-morrow. The crags were crowned; their grim faces looked frowningly out like a warrior's from beneath a wreath. Nowhere could the brown ground be seen; already the pine boughs bent, the needles failing to pierce the drifts. On the banks of the stream, on the slopes of the mountain, in wildest jungles, in the niches and crevices of bare cliffs, the holly-berries glowed red in the midst of the ever-green snow-laden leaves and ice-barbed twigs. When his house at last came into view, the roof was deeply covered; the dizzying whirl had followed every line of the rail-fence; scurrying away along the furthest zigzags there was a vanishing glimpse of a squirrel; the boles of the trees were embedded in drifts; the chickens had gone to roost; the sheep were huddling in the broad door of the rude stable; he saw their heads lifted against the dark background within, where the ox was vaguely glimpsed. He caught their mild glance despite the snow that in-starred with its ever-shifting crystals the dark space of the aperture, and intervened as a veil. They suddenly reminded him of the season--that it was Christmas Eve; of the sheep which so many years ago beheld the angel of the Lord and the glory of the great light that shone about the shepherds abiding in the fields. Did they follow, he wondered, the shepherds who went to seek for Christ? Ah, as he paused meditatively beside the rail-fence--what matter how long ago it was, how far away!--he saw those sheep lying about the fields under the vast midnight sky. They lift their sleepy heads. Dawn? not yet, surely; and they lay them down again. And one must bleat aloud, turning to see the quickening sky; and one, woolly, white, white as snow, with eyes illumined by the heralding heavens, struggles to its feet, and another, and the flock is astir; and the shepherds, drowsing doubtless, are awakened to good tidings of great joy.

What a night that was!--this night--Christmas Eve. He wondered he had not thought of it before. And the light still shines, and the angel waits, and the eternal hosts proclaim peace on earth, good-will toward men, and summon us all to go and follow the shepherds and see--what? A little child cradled in a manger. The mountaineer, leaning on his gun by the rail-fence, looked through the driving snow with the lights of divination kindling in his eyes, seeing it all, feeling its meaning as never before. Christ came thus, he knew, for a purpose. He could have come in the chariots of the sun or on the wings of the wind. But He was cradled as a little child, that men might revere humanity for the sake of Him who had graced it; that they, thinking on Him, might be good to one another and to all little children.

As he burst into the door of his house the elations of his high religious mood were rudely dispelled by shrill cries of congratulation from his wife and her mother. For the news had preceded him. Ephraim Blinks with his fiddle had stopped there on his way to play at some neighboring merry-making, and had acquainted them with the result of processioning Purdee's land.

"We'll go down thar an' live!" cried his wife, with a gush of joyful tears. "Arter all our scratch-in' along like ten-toed chickens all this time, we'll hev comfort an' plenty! We'll live in Grinnell's good house! But ter think o' our trials, an' how pore we hev been!"

"This air the Purdees' day!" cried the grandmother, her face flushed with the semblance of youth. "Arter all ez hev kem an' gone, the jedg-mint o' the Lord hev descended on Grinnell, an' he air cast out. An' his fields, an' house, an' bin, an' barn, air Purdee's!"

The fire flared and faded; shadows of the night gloomed thick in the room--this night of nights that bestowed so much, that imposed so much on man and on his fellow-man!

"Ain't the Grinnell baby got *no* home?" whimpered the hereditary enemy.

The mountaineer remembered the Lord of heaven and earth cradled, a little Child, in the manger. He remembered, too, the humble child smiling its guileless good-will at the fence. He broke out suddenly.

"How kem the fields Purdee's," he cried, leaning his back against the door and striking the puncheon floor with the butt of the gun till it rang again and again, "or the house, or the bin, or the barn? Did he plant 'em? Did he build 'em? Who made 'em his'n?"

"The law!" exclaimed both women in a breath.

"Thar ain't no law in heaven or yearth ez kin gin an' honest man what ain't his'n by rights," he declared.

An insistent feminine clamor arose, protesting the sovereign power of the law. He quaked for a moment; dominant though he was in his own house, he could not face them, but he could flee. He suddenly stepped out of the door, and when they opened it and looked after him in the snowy dusk and the whitened woods, he was gone.

And popular opinion coincided with them when it became known that he had formally relinquished his right to that portion of the land improved by Grinnell. He said to the old squire who drew up the quit-claim deed, which he executed that Christmas Eve, that he was not willing to profit by his enemy's mistake, and thus the consideration expressed in the conveyance was the value of the land, considered not as a farm, but as so many acres of wilderness before an axe was laid to the trunk of a tree or the soil upturned by a plough. It was the minimum of value, and Grinnell came cheaply off.

The blacksmith, the mountain fiddler, and the advanced thinker, who had been active in the survey, balked of the expected excitement attendant upon the ousting of Grinnell, and some sensational culmination of the ancient feud, were not in sympathy with the pacific result, and spoke as if they had given themselves to unrequited labors.

"Thar ain't no way o' settlin' what that thar critter Purdee owns 'ceptin' ez consarns Moses' tables o' the Law. He clings ter them," they said, in conclave about the forge fire when the big doors were closed and the snow, banking up the crevices, kept out the wind. "There ain't no use in percessionin' Purdee's land."

And indeed Purdee's possessions were wider far than even that divergent line which the county surveyor ran out might seem to warrant; for on the mountain-tops largest realms of solemn thought were open to him. He levied tribute upon the liberties of an enthused imagination. He exulted in the freedom of the expanding spaces of a spiritual perception of the spiritual things. When the snow slipped away from the tables of the Law, the man who had read strange scripture engraven thereon took his way one day, doubtful, but faltering with hope, up and up to the vast dome of the mountain, and knelt beside the rocks to see if perchance he might trace anew those mystic runes which he once had some fine instinct to decipher. And as he pondered long he found, or thought he found, here a familiar character, and there a slowly developing word, and anon--did he see it aright?--a phrase; and suddenly it was discovered to him that, whether their origin were a sacred mystery or the fantastic scroll-work of time as the rock weathered, high thoughts, evoking thrilling emotions, bear scant import to one who apprehends only in mental acceptance. And he realised that the multiform texts which he had read in the fine and curious script were but paraphrases of the simple mandate to be good to one another for the sake of that holy Child cradled in manger, and to all little children.