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# Way Down In Lonesome Cove



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# 'WAY DOWN IN LONESOME COVE

By Charles Egbert Craddock

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One memorable night in Lonesome Cove the ranger of the county entered upon a momentous crisis in his life. What hour it was he could hardly have said, for the primitive household reckoned time by the sun when it shone, by the domestic routine when no better might be. It was late. The old crone in the chimney-corner nodded over her knitting. In the trundle-bed at the farther end of the shadowy room were transverse billows under the quilts, which intimated that the small children were numerous enough for the necessity of sleeping crosswise. He had smoked out many pipes, and at last knocked the cinder from the bowl. The great hickory logs had burned asunder and fallen from the stones that served as andirons. He began to slowly cover the embers with ashes, that the fire might keep till morning.

His wife, a faded woman, grown early old, was bringing the stone jar of yeast to place close by the hearth, that it might not "take a chill" in some sudden change of the night. It was heavy, and she bent in carrying it. Awkward, and perhaps nervous, she brought it sharply against the shovel in his hands.

The clash roused the old crone in the corner.

She recognized the situation instantly, and the features that sleep had relaxed into inexpressiveness took on a weary apprehension, which they wore like a habit. The man barely raised his surly black eyes, but his wife drew back humbly with a mutter of apology.

The next moment the shovel was almost thrust out of his grasp. A tiny barefooted girl, in a straight unbleached cotton night-gown and a quaint little cotton night-cap, cavalierly pushed him aside, that she might cover in the hot ashes a burly sweet-potato, destined to slowly roast by morning. A long and careful job she made of it, and unconcernedly kept him waiting while she potted back and forth about the hearth. She looked up once with an authoritative eye, and he hastily helped to adjust the potato with the end of the shovel. And then he glanced at her, incongruously enough, as if waiting for her autocratic nod of approval. She gravely accorded it, and pattered nimbly across the puncheon floor to the bed.

"Now," he drawled, in gruff accents, "ef you-uns hev all had yer fill o' foolin' with this hyar fire, I'll kiver it, like I hev started out ter do."

At this moment there was a loud trampling upon the porch without. The batten door shook violently. The ranger sprang up. As he frowned the hair on his scalp, drawn forward, seemed to rise like bristles.

"Dad-burn that thar fresky filly!" he cried, angrily. "Jes' brung her noisy bones up on that thar porch agin, an' her huffs will bust spang through the planks o' the floor the fust thing ye know."

The narrow aperture, as he held the door ajar, showed outlined against the darkness the graceful head of a young mare, and once more hoof-beats resounded on the rotten planks of the porch.

Clouds were adrift in the sky. No star gleamed in the wide space high above the sombre mountains. On every side they encompassed Lonesome Cove, which seemed to have importunately thrust itself into the darkling solemnities of their intimacy.

All at once the ranger let the door fly from his hand, and stood gazing in blank amazement. For there was a strange motion in the void vastnesses of the wilderness. They were creeping into view. How, he could not say, but the summit of the great mountain opposite was marvellously distinct against the sky. He saw the naked, gaunt, December woods. He saw the grim, gray crags. And yet Lonesome Cove below and the spurs on the other side were all benighted. A pale, flickering light was dawning in the clouds; it brightened, faded, glowed again, and their sad, gray folds assumed a vivid vermilion reflection, for there was a fire in the forest below. Only these reactions of color on the clouds betokened its presence and its progress. Sometimes a fluctuation of orange crossed them, then a glancing line of blue, and once more that living red hue which only a pulsating flame can bestow.

"Air it the comin' o' the Jedgmint Day, Tobe?" asked his wife, in a meek whisper.

"I'd be afraid so if I war ez big a sinner ez you-uns," he returned.

"The woods air afire," the old woman declared, in a shrill voice.

"They be a-soakin' with las' night's rain," he retorted, gruffly.

The mare was standing near the porch. Suddenly he mounted her and rode hastily off, without a word of his intention to the staring women in the doorway.

He left freedom of speech behind him. "Take yer bones along, then, ye tongue-tied catamount!" his wife's mother apostrophized him, with all the acrimony of long repression. "Got no mo' politeness 'n a settin' hen," she muttered, as she turned back into the room.

The young woman lingered wistfully. "I wisht he wouldn't go a-ridin' off that thar way 'thout lettin' we-uns know whar he air bound fur, an' when he'll kern back. He mought git hurt some ways roun' that thar fire--git overtook by it, mebbe."

"Ef he war roasted 'twould be mighty peaceful round in Lonesome," the old crone exclaimed, rancorously.

Her daughter stood for a moment with the bar of the door in her hand, still gazing out at the flare in the sky. The unwonted emotion had conjured a change in the stereotyped patience in her face--even anxiety, even the acuteness of fear, seemed a less pathetic expression than that meek monotony bespeaking a broken spirit. As she lifted her eyes to the mountain one might wonder to see that they were so blue. In the many haggard lines drawn upon her face the effect of the straight lineaments was lost; but just now, embellished with a flush, she looked young--as young as her years.

As she buttoned the door and put up the bar her mother's attention was caught by the change. Peering at her critically, and shading her eyes with her hand from the uncertain flicker of the tallow dip, she broke out, passionately: "Wa'al, 'Genie, who would ever hev thought ez yer cake would be *all* dough? Sech a laffin', plump, spry gal ez ye useter be--fur all the wort' like a fresky young deer! An' sech a pack o' men ez ye hed the choice amongst! An' ter pick out Tobe Gryce an' marry him, an' kem 'way down hyar ter live along o' him in Lonesome Cove!"

She chuckled aloud, not that she relished her mirth, but the harlequinade of fate constrained a laugh for its antics. The words recalled the past to Eugenia; it rose visibly before her. She had had scant leisure to reflect that her life might have been ordered differently. In her widening eyes were new depths, a vague terror, a wild speculation, all struck aghast by its own temerity.

"Ye never said nuthin ter hender," she faltered.

"I never knowed Tobe, sca'cely. How's enny-body goin' ter know a man ez lived 'way off down hyar in Lonesome Cove?" her mother retorted, acridly, on the defensive. "He never courted *me*, nohows. All the word he gin me war, 'Howdy,' an' I gin him no less."

There was a pause.

Eugenia knelt on the hearth. She placed together the broken chunks, and fanned the flames with a turkey wing. "I won't kiver the fire yit," she said, thoughtfully. "He mought be chilled when he gits home."

The feathery flakes of the ashes flew; they caught here and there in her brown hair. The blaze flared up, and flickered over her flushed, pensive face, and glowed in her large and brilliant eyes.

"Tobe said 'Howdy,'" her mother bickered on. "I knowed by that ez he hed the gift o' speech, but he spent no mo' words on me." Then, suddenly, with a change of tone: "I war a fool, though, ter gin my comsent ter yer marryin' him, bein' ez ye war the only child I hed, an' I knowed I'd hev ter live with ye 'way down hyar in Lonesome Cove. I wish now ez ye hed abided by yer fust choice, an' married Luke Todd."

Eugenia looked up with a gathering frown. "I hev no call ter spen' words 'bout Luke Todd," she said, with dignity, "ez me an' him are both married ter other folks."

"I never said ye hed," hastily replied the old woman, rebuked and embarrassed. Presently, however, her vagrant speculation went recklessly on. "Though ez ter Luke's marryin', 'tain't wuth while ter set store on sech. The gal he found over thar in Big Fox Valley favors ye ez close ez two black-eyed peas. That's why he married her. She looks precisely like ye useter look. An' she laffs the same. An' I reckon *she* 'ain't hed no call ter quit laffin', 'kase he air a powerful easy-goin' man. Leastways, he useter be when we-uns knowed him."

"That ain't no sign," said Eugenia. "A saafter-spoken body I never seen than Tobe war when he fust kem a-courtin' round the settlemint."

"Sech ez that ain't goin' ter las' nohows," dryly remarked the philosopher of the chimney-corner.

This might seem rather a reflection upon the courting gentry in general than a personal observation. But Eugenia's consciousness lent it point.

"Laws-a-massy," she said, "Tobe ain't so rampa-gious, nohows, ez folks make him out. He air toler'ble peaceable, comsiderin' ez nobody hev ever hed grit enough ter make a stand agin him, 'thout 'twar the Cunnel thar."

She glanced around at the little girl's face framed in the frill of her night-cap, and peaceful and infantile as it lay on the pillow.

"Whenst the Cunnel war born," Eugenia went on, languidly reminiscent, "Tobe war powerful outed 'kase she war a gal. I reckon ye 'members ez how he said he hed no use for sech cattle ez that. An' when she tuk sick he 'lowed he seen no differ. 'Jes ez well die ez live,' he said. An' bein' ailin', the Cunnel tuk it inter her head ter holler. Sech holler-in' we-uns hed never hearn with none o' the t'other chil'ren. The boys war nowhar. But a-fust it never 'sturbed Tobe. He jes spoke out same ez he useter do at the t'others, 'Shet up, ye pop-eyed buzzard!' Wa'al, sir, the Cunnel jes blinked at him, an'

braced herself ez stiff, an' *yelled!* I 'lowed 'twould take off the roof. An' Tobe said he'd wring her neck ef she warn't so mewlin'-lookin' an' peaked. An' he tuk her up an' walked across the floor with her, an' she shet up; an' he walked back agin, an' she stayed shet up. Ef he sot down fur a mi nit, she yelled so ez ye'd think ye'd be deaf fur life, an' ye 'most hoped ye would be. So Tobe war obleeged ter tote her agin ter git shet o' the noise. He got started on that thar 'forced march,' ez he calls it, an' he never could git off'n it. Trot he must when the Cunnel pleased. He 'lowed she reminded him o' that thar old Cunnel that he sarved under in the wars. Ef it killed the regiment, he got thar on time. Sence then the Cunnel jes gins Tobe her orders, an' he moseys ter do 'em quick, jes like he war obleeged ter obey. I b'lieve he air, somehows."

"Wa'al, some day," said the disaffected old woman, assuming a port of prophetic wisdom, "Tobe will find a differ. Thar ain't no man so headin' ez don't git treated with perslimness by somebody some time. I knowed a man wunst ez owned fower horses an' cattle-critters quarryspondin', an' he couldn't prove ez he war too old ter be summonsed ter work on the road, an' war fined by the overseer 'cordin' ter law. Tobe will git his wheel scotched yit, sure ez ye air born. Somebody besides the Cunnel will skeer up grit enough ter make a stand agin him. I dunno how other men kin sleep o' night, knowin' how he be always darin' folks ter differ with him, an' how brigaty he be. The Bible 'pears ter me ter hev Tobe in special mind when it gits, ter mournin' 'bout'n the stiff-necked ones."

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The spirited young mare that the ranger rode strove to assert herself against him now and then, as she went at a breakneck speed along the sandy bridle-path through the woods. How was she to know that the white-wanded young willow by the way-side was not some spiritual manifestation as it suddenly materialized in a broken beam from a rift in the clouds? But as she reared and plunged she felt his heavy hand and his heavy heel, and so forward again at a steady pace. The forests served to screen the strange light in the sky, and the lonely road was dark, save where the moonbeam was splintered and the mists loitered.

Presently there were cinders flying in the breeze, a smell of smoke pervaded the air, and the ranger forgot to curse the mare when she stumbled.

"I wonder," he muttered, "what them no 'count half-livers o' town folks hev hed the shiftlessness ter let ketch afire thar!"

As he neared the brink of the mountain he saw a dense column of smoke against the sky, and a break in the woods showed the little town--the few log houses, the "gyarden spots" about them, and in the centre of the Square a great mass of coals, a flame flickering here and there, and two gaunt and tottering chimneys where once the court-house had stood. At some distance--for the heat was still intense--were grouped the slouching, spiritless figures of the mountaineers. On the porches of the houses, plainly visible in the unwonted red glow, were knots of women and children--ever and anon a brat in the scantiest of raiment ran nimbly in and out. The clouds still borrowed the light from below, and the solemn, leafless woods on one side were outlined distinctly against the reflection in the sky. The flare showed, too, the abrupt precipice on the other side, the abysmal gloom of the valley, the austere summit-line of the mountain beyond, and gave the dark mysteries of the night a sombre revelation, as in visible blackness it filled the illimitable space.

The little mare was badly blown as the ranger sprang to the ground. He himself was panting with amazement and eagerness.

"The stray-book!" he cried. "Whar's the stray-book?"

One by one the slow group turned, all looking at him with a peering expression as he loomed distorted through the shimmer of the heat above the bed of live coals and the hovering smoke.

"Whar's the stray-book?" he reiterated, imperiously.

"Whar's the court-house, I reckon ye mean to say," replied the sheriff--a burly mountaineer in brown jeans and high boots, on which the spurs jingled; for in his excitement he had put them on as mechanically as his clothes, as if they were an essential part of his attire.

"Naw, I *ain't* meanin' ter say whar's the courthouse," said the ranger, coming up close, with the red glow of the fire on his face, and his eyes flashing under the broad brim of his wool hat. He had a threatening aspect, and his elongated shadow, following him and repeating the menace of his attitude, seemed to back him up. "Ye air sech a triflin', slack-twisted tribe hyar in town, ez ennybody would know ef a spark cotched fire ter suthin, ye'd set an' suck yer paws, an' eye it till it bodaciously burnt up the court-house--sech a dad-burned lazy set o' half-livers ye be! I never axed 'bout'n the court-house. I want ter know whar's that thar stray-book," he concluded, inconsequently.

"Tobe Gryce, ye air fairly demented," exclaimed the register--a chin-whiskered, grizzled old fellow, sitting on a stump and hugging his knee with a desolate, bereaved look--"talkin' 'bout the *stray-book*, an' all the records gone! What will folks do 'bout thar deeds, an' mortgages, an' sech? An' that thar keerful index ez I had made--ez straight ez a string--all cinders!"

He shook his head, mourning alike for the party of the first part and the party of the second part, and the vestiges of

all that they had agreed together.

"An' ye ter kem mopin' hyar this time o' night arter the *stray-book*!" said the sheriff. "Shucks!" And he turned aside and spat disdainfully on the ground.

"I want that thar *stray-book*!" cried Gryce, indignantly. "Ain't nobody seen it?" Then realizing the futility of the question, he yielded to a fresh burst of anger, and turned upon the bereaved register. "An' did ye jes set thar an' say, 'Good Mister Fire, don't burn the records; what 'll folks do 'bout thar deeds an' sech?' an' hold them claws o' yourn, an' see the court-house burn up, with that thar *stray-book* in it?"

Half a dozen men spoke up. "The fire tuk inside, an' the court-house war haffen gone 'fore 'twar seen," said one, in sulky extenuation.

"Leave Tobe be--let him jaw!" said another, cavalierly.

"Tobe 'pears ter be sp'ilin' fur a fight," said a third, impersonally, as if to direct the attention of any belligerent in the group to the opportunity.

The register had an expression of slow cunning as he cast a glance up at the overbearing ranger.

"What ailed the *stray-book* ter bide hyar in the court-house all night, Tobe? Couldn't ye gin it house-room? Thar warn't no special need fur it to be hyar."

Tobe Gryce's face showed that for once he was at a loss. He glowered down at the register and said nothing.

"Ez ter me," resumed that worthy, "by the law o' the land my books war obligated ter be thar." He quoted, mournfully, "Shall at all times be and remain in his office."

He gathered up his knee again and subsided into silence.

All the freakish spirits of the air were a-loose in the wind. In fitful gusts they rushed up the gorge, then suddenly the boughs would fall still again, and one could hear the eerie rout a-rioting far off down the valley. Now and then the glow of the fire would deepen, the coals tremble, and with a gleaming, fibrous swirl, like a garment of flames, a sudden animation would sweep over it, as if an apparition had passed, leaving a line of flying sparks to mark its trail.

"I'm goin' home," drawled Tobe Gryce, presently. "I don't keer a frog's toe-nail ef the whole settle-mint burns bodaciously up; 'tain't nuthin ter me. I hev never hankered ter live in towns an' git tuk up with town ways, an' set an' view the court-house like the apple o' my eye. We-uns don't ketch fire down in the Cove, though mebbe we ain't so peart ez folks ez herd tergether like sheep an' sech."

The footfalls of the little black mare annotated the silence of the place as he rode away into the darkling woods. The groups gradually disappeared from the porches. The few voices that sounded at long intervals were low and drowsy. The red fire smouldered in the centre of the place, and sometimes about it appeared so doubtful a shadow that it could hardly argue substance. Far away a dog barked, and then all was still.

Presently the great mountains loom aggressively along the horizon. The black abysses, the valleys and coves, show dun-colored verges and grow gradually distinct, and on the slopes the ash and the pine and the oak are all lustrous with a silver rime. The mists are rising, the wind springs up anew, the clouds set sail, and a beam slants high.

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"What I want ter know," said a mountaineer newly arrived on the scene, sitting on the verge of the precipice, and dangling his long legs over the depths beneath, "air how do folks ez live 'way down in Lonesome Cove, an' who nobody knowed nuthin about noways, ever git 'lected ranger o' the county, ennyhow. I ain't s'prised none ter hear 'bout Tobe Gryce's goin's-on hyar las' night. I hev looked fur more'n that."

"Wa'al, I'll tell ye," replied the register. "Nuthin' but favoritism in the county court. Ranger air 'lected by the jesticies. Ye know," he added, vainglorious of his own tenure of office by the acclaiming voice of the sovereign people, "ranger ain't 'lected, like the register, by pop'lar vote."

A slow smoke still wreathed upward from the charred ruins of the court-house. Gossiping groups stood here and there, mostly the jeans-clad mountaineers, but there were a few who wore "store clothes," being lawyers from more sophisticated regions of the circuit. Court had been in session the previous day. The jury, serving in a criminal case--still strictly segregated, and in charge of an officer--were walking about wearily in double file, waiting with what patience they might their formal discharge.

The sheriff's dog, a great yellow cur, trotted in the rear. When the officer was first elected, this animal, observing the change in his master's habits, deduced his own conclusions. He seemed to think the court-house belonged to the sheriff, and thenceforward guarded the door with snaps and growls; being a formidable brute, his idiosyncrasies invested the getting into and getting out of law with abnormal difficulties. Now, as he followed the disconsolate jury, he bore the vigilant mien with which he formerly drove up the cows, and if a juror loitered or stepped aside from the path, the dog made a slow detour as if to round him in, and the melancholy cortege wandered on as before. More than one looked wistfully at the group on the crag, for it was distinguished by that sprightly interest which scandal excites so readily.

"Ter my way of thinking" drawled Sam Peters, swinging his feet over the giddy depths of the valley, "Tobe ain't sech ez oughter be set over the county ez a ranger, nowadays. 'Pears not ter me, an' I hev been keepin' my eye on him mighty sharp."

A shadow fell among the group, and a man sat down on a bowlder hard by. He, too, had just arrived, being lured to the town by the news of the fire. His slide had been left at the verge of the clearing, and one of the oxen had already lain down; the other, although hampered by the yoke thus diagonally displaced, stood meditatively gazing at the distant blue mountains. Their master nodded a slow, grave salutation to the group, produced a plug of tobacco, gnawed a fragment from it, and restored it to his pocket. He had a pensive face, with an expression which in a man of wider culture we should discriminate as denoting sensibility. He had long yellow hair that hung down to his shoulders, and a tangled yellow beard. There was something at once wistful and searching in his gray eyes, dull enough, too, at times. He lifted them heavily, and they had a drooping lid and lash. There seemed an odd incongruity between this sensitive, weary face and his stalwart physique. He was tall and well proportioned. A leather belt girded his brown jeans coat. His great cowhide boots, were drawn to the knee over his trousers. His pose, as he leaned on the rock, had a muscular picturesque-ness.

"Who be ye a-talkin' about?" he drawled.

Peters relished his opportunity. He laughed in a distorted fashion, his pipe-stem held between his teeth.

"*You-uns* ain't wantin' ter swop lies 'bout sech ez him, Luke! We war a-talkin' 'bout Tobe Gryce."

The color flared into the new-comer's face. A sudden animation fired his eye.

"Tobe Gryce air jes the man I'm always wantin' ter hear a word about. Jes perceed with yer rat-killin'. I'm with ye." And Luke Todd placed his elbows on his knees and leaned forward with an air of attention.

Peters looked at him, hardly comprehending this ebullition. It was not what he had expected to elicit. No one laughed. His fleer was wide of the mark.

"Wa'al" --he made another effort--"Tobe, we war jes sayin', ain't fitten fur ter be ranger o' the county. He be ez peart in gittin' ter own other folkses' stray cattle ez he war in courtin' other folkses' sweetheart, an', ef the truth mus' be knowed, in marryin' her." He suddenly twisted round, in some danger of falling from his perch. "I want ter ax one o' them thar big-headed lawyers a question on a p'int o' law," he broke off, abruptly.

"What be Tobe Gryce a-doin' of now?" asked Luke Todd, with eager interest in the subject.

"Wa'al," resumed Peters, nowise loath to return to the gossip, "Tobe, ye see, air the ranger o' this hyar county, an' by law all the stray horses ez air tuk up by folks hev ter be reported ter him, an' appraised by two householders, an' swore to afore the magistrate an' be advertised by the ranger, an' ef they ain't claimed 'fore twelve months, the taker-up kin pay into the county treasury one-haffen the appraisement an' hev the critter fur his'n. An' the owner can't prove it away arter that."

"Thanky," said Luke Todd, dryly. "S'pose ye teach yer gran'mammy ter suck aigs. I knowed all that afore."

Peters was abashed, and with some difficulty collected himself.

"An' I knowed ye knowed it, Luke," he hastily conceded. "But hyar be what I'm a-lookin' at--the law 'ain't got no pervision fur a stray horse ez kem of a dark night, 'thout nobody's percuremint, ter the ranger's own house. Now, the p'int o' law ez I wanted ter ax the lawyers 'bout air this--kin the ranger be the ranger an' the taker-up too?"

He turned his eyes upon the great landscape lying beneath, flooded with the chill matutinal sunshine, and flecked here and there with the elusive shadow's of the fleecy drifting clouds. Far away the long horizontal lines of the wooded spurs, converging on either side of the valley and rising one behind the other, wore a subdued azure, all unlike the burning blue of summer, and lay along the calm, passionless sky, that itself was of a dim, repressed tone. On the slopes nearer, the leafless boughs, massed together, had purplish-garnet depths of color wherever the sunshine struck aslant, and showed richly against the faintly tinted horizon. Here and there among the boldly jutting gray crags hung an evergreen-vine, and from a gorge on the opposite mountain gleamed a continuous flash, like the waving of a silver plume, where a cataract sprang down the rocks. In the depths of the valley, a field in which crab-grass had grown in the place of the harvested wheat showed a tiny square of palest yellow, and beside it a red clay road, running over a hill, was visible. Above all a hawk was flying.

"Afore the winter fairly set in las' year," Peters resumed, presently, "a stray kem ter Tobe's house. He 'lowed ter me ez he fund her a-standin' by the fodder-stack a-pullin' off'n it. An' he 'quired round, an' he never hearn o' no owner. I reckon he never axed outside o' Lonesome," he added, cynically.

He puffed industriously at his pipe for a few moments; then continued: "Wa'al, he 'lowed he couldn't feed the critter fur fun. An' he couldn't work her till she war appraised an' sech, that bein' agin the law fur strays. So he jes undertook ter be ranger an' taker-up too--the bandedest consarn in the kentry! Ef the leetle mare hed been wall-eyed, or lame, or ennything, he wouldn't hev wanted ter be ranger an' taker-up too. But she air the peartest little beastis--she war jes bridle-wise when she fust kem--young an' spry!"

Luke Todd was about to ask a question, but Peters, disregarding him, persisted:

"Wa'al, Tobe tuk up the beastis, an' I reckon he reported her ter hisself, bein' the ranger--the critter makes me laff--an' he hed that thar old haffen-blind uncle o' his'n an' Perkins Bates, ez be never sober, ter appraise the vally o' the mare, an' I s'pose he delivered thar certificate ter hisself, an' I reckon he tuk oath that she kem 'thout his procuremint ter his place, in the presence o' the ranger."

"I reckon thar ain't no law agin the ranger's bein' a ranger an' a taker-up too," put in one of the bystanders. "'Tain't like a sher'ff's buyin' at his own sale. An' he hed ter pay haffen her vally into the treasury o' the county arter twelve months, ef the owner never proved her away."

"Thar ain't no sign he ever paid a cent," said Peters, with a malicious grin, pointing at the charred remains of the court-house, "an' the treasurer air jes dead."

"Wa'al, Tobe hed ter make a report ter the jedge o' the county court every six months."

"The papers of his office air cinders," retorted Peters.

"Wa'al, then," argued the optimist, "the stray-book will show ez she war reported an' sech."

"The ranger took mighty partic'lar pains ter hev his stray-book in that thar court-house when 'twar burnt."

There was a long pause while the party sat ruminating upon the suspicions thus suggested.

Luke Todd heard them, not without a thrill of satisfaction. He found them easy to adopt. And he, too, had a disposition to theorize.

"It takes a mighty mean man ter steal a horse," he said. "Stealin' a horse air powerful close ter murder. Folkses' lives fairly depend on a horse ter work thar corn an' sech, an' make a support fur em. I hev' knowed folks ter kem mighty close ter starvin' through hevin thar horse stole. Why, even that thar leetle filly of our'n, though she hedn't been fairly bruk ter the plough, war mightily missed. We-uns hed ter make out with the old sorrel, ez air nigh fourteen year old, ter work the crap, an' we war powerful disappointed. But we ain't never fund no trace o' the filly sence she war tolled off one night las' fall a year ago."

The hawk floating above the valley and its winged shadow disappeared together in the dense glooms of a deep gorge. Luke Todd watched them as they vanished.

Suddenly he lifted his eyes. They were wide with a new speculation. An angry flare blazed in them. "What sort'n beastis is this hyar mare ez the ranger tuk up?" he asked.

Peters looked at him, hardly comprehending his tremor of excitement. "Seems sorter sizable," he replied, sibilantly, sucking his pipe-stem.

Todd nodded meditatively several times, leaning his elbows on his knees, his eyes fixed on the landscape. "Hev she got enny particular marks, ez ye knows on?" he drawled.

"Wa'al, she be ez black ez a crow, with the nigh fore-foot white. An' she hev got a white star spang in the middle o' her forehead, an' the left side o' her nose is white too."

Todd rose suddenly to his feet. "By gum!" he cried, with a burst of passion, "she air *my* filly! An' 'twar that thar durned horse-thief of a ranger ez tolled her off!"

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Deep among the wooded spurs Lonesome Cove nestles, sequestered from the world. Naught emigrates thence except an importunate stream that forces its way through a rocky gap, and so to freedom beyond. No stranger intrudes; only the moon looks in once in a while. The roaming wind may explore its solitudes; and it is but the vertical sunbeams that strike to the heart of the little basin, because of the massive mountains that wall it round and serve to isolate it. So nearly do they meet at the gap that one great assertive crag, beetling far above, intercepts the view of the wide landscape beyond, leaving its substituted profile jaggedly serrating the changing sky. Above it, when the weather is fair, appear vague blue lines, distant mountain summits, cloud strata, visions. Below its jutting verge may be caught glimpses of the widening valley without. But pre-eminent, gaunt, sombre, it sternly dominates "Lonesome," and is the salient feature of the little world it limits.

Tobe Gryce's house, gray, weather-beaten, moss-grown, had in comparison an ephemeral, modern aspect. For a hundred years its inmates had come and gone and lived and died. They took no heed of the crag, but never a sound was lost upon it. Their drawling iterative speech the iterative echoes conned. The ringing blast of a horn set astir some phantom chase in the air. When the cows came lowing home, there were lowing herds in viewless company. Even if one of the children sat on a rotting log crooning a vague, fragmentary ditty, some faint-voiced spirit in the rock would sing. Lonesome Cove?--home of invisible throngs!

As the ranger trotted down the winding road, multitudinous hoof-beats, as of a troop of cavalry, heralded his approach to the little girl who stood on the porch of the log-cabin and watched for him.

"Hy're, Cunnel!" he cried, cordially.

But the little "Colonel" took no heed. She looked beyond him at the vague blue mountains, against which the great

grim rock was heavily imposed, every ledge, every waving dead crisp weed, distinct.

He noticed the smoke curling briskly up in the sunshine from the clay and slick chimney. He strode past her into the house, as Eugenia, with all semblance of youth faded from her countenance, haggard and hollow-eyed in the morning light, was hurrying the corn-dodgers and venison steak on the table.

Perhaps he did not appreciate that the women were pining with curiosity, for he vouchsafed no word of the excitements in the little town; and he himself was ill at ease.

"What ails the Cunnel, 'Genie?" he asked, presently, glancing up sharply from under his hat brim, and speaking with his mouth full.

"The cat 'pears ter hev got her tongue," said Eugenia, intending that the "Colonel" should hear, and perhaps profit. "She ain't able ter talk none this mornin'."

The little body cast so frowning a glance upon them as she stood in the doorway that her expression was but slightly less lowering than her father's. It was an incongruous demonstration, with her infantile features, her little yellow head, and the slight physical force she represented. She wore a blue cotton frock, fastened up the back with great horn buttons; she had on shoes laced with leather strings; one of her blue woollen stockings fell over her ankle, disclosing the pinkest of plump calves; the other stocking was held in place by an unabashed cotton string. She had a light in her dark eyes and a color in her cheek, and albeit so slight a thing, she wielded a strong coercion.

"Laws-a-massy, Cunnel!" said Tobe, in a harried manner, "couldn't ye find me nowhar? I'm powerful sorry. I couldn't git back hyar no sooner."

But not in this wise was she to be placated. She fixed her eyes upon him, but made no sign.

He suddenly rose from his half-finished breakfast. "Look-a-hyar, Cunnel," he cried, joyously, "don't ye want ter ride the filly?--ye knew ye hanker ter ride the filly."

Even then she tried to frown, but the bliss of the prospect overbore her. Her cheek and chin dimpled, and there was a gurgling display of two rows of jagged little teeth as the doughty "Colonel" was swung to his shoulder and he stepped out of the door.

He laughed as he stood by the glossy black mare and lifted the child to the saddle. The animal arched her neck and turned her head and gazed back at him curiously. "Hold on tight, Cunnel," he said as he looked up at her, his face strangely softened almost beyond recognition. And she gurgled and laughed and screamed with delight as he began to slowly lead the mare along.

The "Colonel" had the gift of continuance. Some time elapsed before she exhausted the joys of exaltation. More than once she absolutely refused to dismount. Tobe patiently led the beast up and down, and the "Colonel" rode in state. It was only when the sun had grown high, and occasionally she was fain to lift her chubby hands to her eyes, imperiling her safety on the saddle, that he ventured to seriously remonstrate, and finally she permitted herself to be assisted to the ground. When, with the little girl at his heels, he reached the porch, he took off his hat, and wiped the perspiration from his brow with his great brown hand.

"I tell ye, jouncin' round arter the Cunnel air powerful hot work," he declared.

The next moment he paused. His wife had come to the door, and there was a strange expression of alarm among the anxious lines of her face.

"Tobe," she said, in a bated voice, "who war them men?"

He stared at her, whirled about, surveyed the vacant landscape, and once more turned dumfound-ed toward her. "What men?" he asked.

"Them men ez acted so cur'ous," she said. "I couldn't see thar faces plain, an' I dunno who they war."

"Whar war they?" And he looked over his shoulder once more.

"Yander along the ledges of the big rock. Thar war two of 'em, hidin' ahint that thar jagged aidge. An' ef yer back war turned they'd peep out at ye an' the Cunnel ridin'. But whenst ye would face round agin, they'd drap down ahint the aidge o' the rock. I 'lowed wunst ez I'd holler ter ye, but I war feared ye moughtn't keer ter know." Her voice fell in its deprecatory cadence.

He stodd in silent perplexity. "Ye air a fool, 'Genie, an' ye never seen nuthin'. Nobody hev got enny call ter spy on me."

He stepped in-doors, took down his rifle from the rack, and went out frowning into the sunlight.

The suggestion of mystery angered him. He had a vague sense of impending danger. As he made his way along the slope toward the great beetling crag all his faculties were on the alert. He saw naught unusual when he stood upon its dark-seamed summit, and he went cautiously to the verge and looked down at the many ledges. They jutted out at irregular intervals, the first only six feet below, and all accessible enough to an expert climber. A bush grew in a niche. An empty nest, riddled by the wind, hung dishevelled from a twig. Coarse withered grass tufted the crevices.



Far below he saw the depths of the Cove--the tops of the leafless trees, and, glimpsed through the interlacing boughs, the rush of a mountain rill, and a white flash as a sunbeam slanted on the foam.

He was turning away, all incredulous, when with a sudden start he looked back. On one of the ledges was a slight depression. It was filled with sand and earth. Imprinted upon it was the shape of a man's foot. The ranger paused and gazed fixedly at it. "Wa'al, by the Lord!" he exclaimed, under his breath. Presently, "But they hev no call!" he argued. Then once more, softly, "By the Lord!"

The mystery baffled him. More than once that day he went up to the crag and stood and stared futilely at the footprint. Conjecture had license and limitations, too. As the hours wore on he became harassed by the sense of espionage. He was a bold man before the foes he knew, but this idea of inimical lurking, of furtive scrutiny for unknown purposes, preyed upon him. He brooded over it as he sat idle by the fire. Once he went to the door and stared speculatively at the great profile of the cliff. The sky above it was all a lustrous amber, for the early sunset of the shortest days of the year was at hand. The mountains, seen partly above and partly below it, wore a glamorous purple. There were clouds, and from their rifts long divergent lines of light slanted down upon the valley, distinct among their shadows. The sun was not visible--only in the western heavens was a half-veiled effulgence too dazzlingly white to be gazed upon. The ranger shaded his eyes with his hand.

No motion, no sound; for the first time in his life the unutterable loneliness of the place impressed him.

"Genie," he said, suddenly, looking over his shoulder within the cabin, "be you-uns *sure* ez they war--*folks*?"

"I dunno what you mean," she faltered, her eyes dilated. "They *looked* like folks."

"I reckon they war," he said, reassuring himself. "The Lord knows I hope they war."

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That night the wind rose. The stars all seemed to have burst from their moorings, and were wildly adrift in the sky. There was a broken tumult of billowy clouds, and the moon tossed hopelessly amongst them, a lunar wreck, sometimes on her beam ends, sometimes half submerged, once more gallantly struggling to the surface, and again sunk. The bare boughs of the trees beat together in a dirgelike monotone. Now and again a leaf went sibilantly whistling past. The wild commotion of the heavens and earth was visible, for the night was not dark. The ranger, standing within the rude stable of unhewn logs, all undaubed, noted how pale were the horizontal bars of gray light alternating with the black logs of the wall. He was giving the mare a feed of corn, but he had not brought his lantern, as was his custom. That mysterious espionage had in some sort shaken his courage, and he felt the obscurity a shield. He had brought, instead, his rifle.

The equine form was barely visible among the glooms. Now and then, as the mare noisily munched, she lifted a hoof and struck it upon the ground with a dull thud. How the gusts outside were swirling up the gorge! The pines swayed and sighed. Again the boughs of the chestnut-oak above the roof crashed together. Did a fitful blast stir the door?

He lifted his eyes mechanically. A cold thrill ran through every fibre. For there, close by the door, somebody--something--was peering through the space between the logs of the wall. The face was invisible, but the shape of a man's head was distinctly defined. He realized that it was no supernatural manifestation when a husky voice began to call the mare, in a hoarse whisper, "Cobe! Cobe! Cobe!" With a galvanic start he was about to spring forward to hold the door. A hand from without was laid upon it.

He placed the muzzle of his gun between the logs, a jet of red light was suddenly projected into the darkness, the mare was rearing and plunging violently, the little shanty was surcharged with roar and reverberation, and far and wide the crags and chasms echoed the report of the rifle.

There was a vague clamor outside, an oath, a cry of pain. Hasty footfalls sounded among the dead leaves and died in the distance.

When the ranger ventured out he saw the door of his house wide open, and the firelight flickering out among the leafless bushes. His wife met him halfway down the hill.

"Air ye hurt, Tobe?" she cried. "Did yer gun go off suddint?"

"Mighty suddint," he replied, savagely.

"Ye didn't fire it a-purpose?" she faltered.

"Edzactly so," he declared.

"Ye never hurt nobody, did ye, Tobe?" She had turned very pale. "I 'lowed it couldn't be the wind ez I hearn a-hollerin'."

"I hopes an' prays I hurt 'em," he said, as he replaced the rifle in the rack. He was shaking the other hand, which had been jarred in some way by the hasty discharge of the weapon. "Some dad-burned horse-thief war arter the mare. Jedgin' from the sound o' thar running 'peared like to me ez thar mought be two o' 'em."

The next day the mare disappeared from the stable. Yet she could not be far off, for Tobe was about the house most of the time, and when he and the "Colonel" came in-doors in the evening the little girl held in her hand a half-munched ear of corn, evidently abstracted from the mare's supper.

"Whar be the filly hid, Tobe?" Eugenia asked, curiosity overpowering her.

"Ax me no questions an' I'll tell ye no lies," he replied, gruffly.

In the morning there was a fall of snow, and she had some doubt whether her mother, who had gone several days before to a neighbor's on the summit of the range, would return; but presently the creak of unoled axes heralded the approach of a wagon, and soon the old woman, bundled in shawls, was sitting by the fire. She wore heavy woollen socks over her shoes as protection against the snow. The incompatibility of the shape of the hose with the human foot was rather marked, and as they were somewhat inelastic as well, there was a muscular struggle to get them off only exceeded by the effort which had been required to get them on. She shook her head again and again, with a red face, as she bent over the socks, but plainly more than this discomfort vexed her.

"Laws-a-massy, 'Genie! I hearn a awful tale over yander 'mongst them Jenkins folks. Ye oughter hev married Luke Todd, an' so I tole ye an' fairly beset ye ter do ten year ago. *He* keered fur ye. An' Tobe--shucks! Wa'al, laws-a-massy, child! I hearn a awful tale 'bout Tobe up yander at Jenkinses'."

Eugenia colored.

"Folks hed better take keer how they talk 'bout Tobe," she said, with a touch of pride. "They be powerful keerful ter do it out'n rifle range."

With one more mighty tug the sock came off, the red face was lifted, and Mrs. Pearce shook her head ruefully.

"The Bible say 'words air foolishness.' Ye dun-no what ye air talkin' 'bout, child."

With this melancholy preamble she detailed the gossip that had arisen at the county town and pervaded the countryside. Eugenia commented, denied, flashed into rage, then lapsed into silence. Although it did not constrain credulity, there was something that made her afraid when her mother said:

"Ye hed better not be talkin' 'bout rifle range so brash, 'Genie, nohows. They 'lowed ez Luke Todd an' Sam Peters kem hyar--'twar jes night before las'--aimin' ter take the mare away 'thout no words an' no lawin', 'kase they didn't want ter wait. Luke hed got a chance ter view the mare, an' knowed ez she war hisn. An' Tobe war hid in the dark beside the mare, an' fired at 'em, an' the rifle-ball tuk Sam right through the beam o' his arm. I reckon, though, ez that warn't true, else ye would hev knowed it."

She looked up anxiously over her spectacles at her daughter.

"I hearn Tobe shoot," faltered Eugenia. "I seen blood on the leaves."

"Laws-a-massy!" exclaimed the old woman, irritably. "I be fairly feared ter bide hyar; 'twouldn't s'prise me none ef they kem hyar an' hauled Tobe out an' lynched him an' sech, an' who knows who mought git hurt in the scrimmage?"

They both fell silent as the ranger strode in. They would need a braver heart than either bore to reveal to him the suspicions of horse-stealing sown broadcast over the mountain. Eugenia felt that this in itself was coercive evidence of his innocence. Who dared so much as say a word to his face?

The weight of the secret asserted itself, however. As she went about her accustomed tasks, all bereft of their wonted interest, vapid and burdensome, she carried so woe-begone a face that it caught his attention, and he demanded, angrily,

"What ails ye ter look so durned peaked?"

This did not abide long in his memory, however, and it cost her a pang to see him so unconscious.

She went out upon the porch late that afternoon to judge of the weather. Snow was falling again. The distant summits had disappeared. The mountains near at hand loomed through the myriads of serried white flakes. A crow flew across the Cove in its midst. It heavily thatched the cabin, and tufts dislodged by the opening of the door fell down upon her hair. Drifts lay about the porch. Each rail of the fence was laden. The ground, the rocks, were deeply covered. She reflected with satisfaction that the red splotch of blood on the dead leaves was no longer visible. Then a sudden idea struck her that took her breath away. She came in, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright, with an excited dubitation.

Her husband commented on the change. "Ye air a powerful cur'ous critter, 'Genie," he said: "a while ago ye looked some fower or five hundred year old--now ye favors yerself when I fust kem a-courtin' round the settlemint."

She hardly knew whether the dull stir in her heart were pleasure or pain. Her eyes filled with tears, and the irradiated iris shone through them with a liquid lustre. She could not speak.

Her mother took ephemeral advantage of his softening mood. "Ye useter be mighty perlite and saaft-spoken in them days, Tobe," she ventured.

"I hed ter be," he admitted, frankly, "'kase thar war sech a many o' them mealy-mouthed cusses a-waitin' on 'Genie. The kentry 'peared ter me ter bristle with Luke Todd; he 'minded me o' brumsaidge--*everywhar* ye seen his yaller head, ez homely an' ez onwelcome."

"I never wunst gin Luke a thought arter ye tuk ter comin' round the settlemint," Eugenia said, softly.

"I wisht I hed knowed that then," he replied; "else I wouldn't hev been so all-fired oneasy an' beset I wasted mo' time

a-studyin' 'bout ye an' Luke Todd 'n ye war both wuth, an' went 'thout my vittles an' sot up o' nights. Ef I hed spent that time a-moanin' fur my sins an' settin' my soul at peace, I'd be 'quirin' roun' the throne o' Grace now! Young folks air powerful fursaken fools."

Somehow her heart was warmer for this allusion. She was more hopeful. Her resolve grew stronger and stronger as she sat and knitted, and looked at the fire and saw among the coals all her old life at the settlement newly aglow. She was remembering now that Luke Todd had been as wax in her hands. She recalled that when she was married there was a gleeful "sayin'" going the rounds of the mountain that he had taken to the woods with grief, and he was heard of no more for weeks. The gossips relished his despair as the corollary of the happy bridal. He had had no reproaches for her. He had only looked the other way when they met, and she had not spoken to him since.

"He set store by my word in them days," she said to herself, her lips vaguely moving. "I misdoubts ef he hev furgot."

All through the long hours of the winter night she silently canvassed her plan. The house was still noiseless and dark when she softly opened the door and softly closed it behind her.

It had ceased to snow, and the sky had cleared. The trees, all the limbs whitened, were outlined distinctly upon it, and through the boughs overhead a brilliant star, aloof and splendid, looked coldly down. Along dark spaces Orion had drawn his glittering blade. Above the snowy mountains a melancholy waning moon was swinging. The valley was full of mist, white and shining where the light fell upon it, a vaporous purple where the shadows held sway. So still it was! the only motion in all the world the throbbing stars and her palpitating heart. So solemnly silent! It was a relief, as she trudged on and on, to note a gradual change; to watch the sky withdraw, seeming fainter; to see the moon grow filmy, like some figment of the frost; to mark the gray mist steal on apace, wrap mountain, valley, and heaven with mystic folds, shut out all vision of things familiar. Through it only the sense of dawn could creep.

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She recognized the locality; her breath was short; her step quickened. She appeared, like an apparition out of the mists, close to a fence, and peered through the snow-laden rails. A sudden pang pierced her heart.

For there, within the enclosure, milking the cow, she saw, all blooming in the snow--herself; the azalea-like girl she had been!

She had not known how dear to her was that bright young identity she remembered. She had not realized how far it had gone from her. She felt a forlorn changeling looking upon her own estranged estate.

A faint cry escaped her.

The cow, with lifted head and a muttered low of surprise, moved out of reach of the milker, who, half kneeling upon the ground, stared with wide blue eyes at her ghost in the mist.

There was a pause. It was only a moment before Eugenia spoke; it seemed years, so charged it was with retrospect.

"I kem over hyar ter hev a word with ye," she said.

At the sound of a human voice Luke Todd's wife struggled to her feet. She held the piggin with one arm encircled about it, and with the other hand she clutched the plaid shawl around her throat. Her bright hair was tossed by the rising wind.

"I 'lowed I'd find ye hyar a-milkin' 'bout now."

The homely allusion reassured the younger woman.

"I hev ter begin toler'ble early," she said. "Spot gins 'bout a gallon a milkin' now."

Spot's calf, which subsisted on what was left over, seemed to find it cruel that delay should be added to his hardships, and he lifted up his voice in a plaintive remonstrance. This reminded Mrs. Todd of his existence; she turned and let down the bars that served to exclude him.

The stranger was staring at her very hard. Somehow she quailed under that look. Though it was fixed upon her in unvarying intensity, it had a strange impersonality. This woman was not seeing her, despite that wide, wistful, yearning gaze; she was thinking of something else, seeing some one else.

And suddenly Luke Todd's wife began to stare at the visitor very hard, and to think of something that was not before her.

"I be the ranger's wife," said Eugenia. "I kem over hyar ter tell ye he never tuk yer black mare nowise but honest, bein' the ranger."

She found it difficult to say more. Under that speculative, unseeing look she too faltered.

"They tell me ez Luke Todd air powerful outed 'bout'n it. An' I 'lowed ef he knowed from me ez 'twar tuk fair, he'd b'lieve me."

She hesitated. Her courage was flagging; her hope had fled. The eyes of the man's wife burned upon her face.

"We-uns useter be toler'ble well 'quainted 'fore he ever seen ye, an' I 'lowed he'd b'lieve my word," Eugenia

continued.

Another silence. The sun was rising; long liquescent lines of light of purest amber-color were streaming through the snowy woods; the shadows of the fence rails alternated with bars of dazzling glister; elusive prismatic gleams of rose and lilac and blue shimmered on every slope--thus the winter flowered. Tiny snow-birds were hopping about; a great dog came down from the little snow-thatched cabin, and was stretching himself elastically and yawning most portentously.

"An' I 'lowed I'd see ye an' git you-uns ter tell him that word from me, an' then he'd b'lieve it," said Eugenia.

The younger woman nodded mechanically, still gazing at her.

And was this her mission! Somehow it had lost its urgency. Where was its potency, her enthusiasm? Eugenia realized that her feet were wet, her skirts draggled; that she was chilled to the bone and trembling violently. She looked about her doubtfully. Then her eyes came back to the face of the woman before her.

"Ye'll tell him, I s'pose?"

Once more Luke Todd's wife nodded mechanically, still staring.

There was nothing further to be said. A vacant interval ensued. Then, "I 'lowed I'd tell ye," Eugenia reiterated, vaguely, and turned away, vanishing with the vanishing mists.

Luke Todd's wife stood gazing at the fence through which the apparition had peered. She could see yet her own face there, grown old and worn. The dog wagged his tail and pressed against her, looking up and claiming her notice. Once more he stretched himself elastically and yawned widely, with shrill variations of tone. The calf was frisking about in awkward bovine elation, and now and then the cow affectionately licked its coat with the air of making its toilet. An assertive chanticleer was proclaiming the dawn within the henhouse, whence came too an impatient clamor, for the door, which served to exclude any marauding fox, was still closed upon the imprisoned poultry. Still she looked steadily at the fence where the ranger's wife had stood.

"That thar woman favors me," she said, presently. And suddenly she burst into tears.

Perhaps it was well that Eugenia could not see Luke Todd's expression as his wife recounted the scene. She gave it truly, but without, alas! the glamour of sympathy.

"She 'lowed ez ye'd b'lieve her, bein' ez ye use-ter be 'quainted."

His face flushed. "Wa'al, sir! the insurance o' that thar woman!" he exclaimed. "I war 'quainted with her; I war mighty well 'quainted with her." He had a casual remembrance of those days when "he tuk ter the woods ter wear out his grief."

"She never gin me no promise, but me an' her war courtin' some. Sech dependence ez I put on her war mightily wasted. I dunno what ails the critter ter 'low ez I set store by her word."

Poor Eugenia! There is nothing so dead as ashes. His flame had clean burned out. So far afield were all his thoughts that he stood amazed when his wife, with a sudden burst of tears, declared passionately that she knew it--she saw it--she favored Eugenia Gryce. She had found out that he had married her because she looked like another woman.

"'Genie Gryce hev got powerful little ter do ter kem a-jouncin' through the snow over hyar ter try ter set ye an' me agin one another," he exclaimed, angrily. "Stealin' the filly ain't enough ter sati'fy her!"

His wife was in some sort mollified. She sought to reassure herself.

"Air we-uns of a favor?"

"I dunno," he replied, sulkily. "I 'ain't seen the critter fur nigh on ter ten year. I hev furgot the looks of her. 'Pears like ter me," he went on, ruminating, "ez 'twar in my mind when I fust seen ye ez thar war a favor 'twixt ye. But I misdoubts now. Do she 'low ez I hev hed nuthin ter study 'bout sence?"

Perhaps Eugenia is not the only woman who overrates the strength of a sentimental attachment. A gloomy intuition of failure kept her company all the lengthening way home. The chill splendors of the wintry day grated upon her dreary mood. How should she care for the depth and richness of the blue deepening toward the zenith in those vast skies? What was it to her that the dead vines, climbing the grim rugged crags, were laden with tufts and corollated shapes wherever these fantasies of flowers might cling, or that the snow flashed with crystalline scintillations? She only knew that they glimmered and dazzled upon the tears in her eyes, and she was moved to shed them afresh. She did not wonder whether her venture had resulted amiss. She only wondered that she had tried aught. And she was humbled.

When she reached Lonesome Cove she found the piggin where she had hid it, and milked the cow in haste. It was no great task, for the animal was going dry. "Their'n gins a gallon a milkin'," she said, in rueful comparison.

As she came up the slope with the piggin on her head, her husband was looking down from the porch with a lowering brow. "Why n't ye spen' the day a-milkin' the cow?" he drawled. "Dawdlin' yander in the cow-pen till this time in the mornin'! An' ter-morrer's Chrismus!"

The word smote upon her weary heart with a dull pain. She had no cultured phrase to characterize the sensation as a presentiment, but she was conscious of the prophetic process. To-night "all the mounting" would be riotous with that

dubious hilarity known as "Chrismus in the bones," and there was no telling what might come from the combined orgy and an inflamed public spirit.

She remembered the familiar doom of the mountain horse-thief, the men lurking on the cliff, the inimical feeling against the ranger. She furtively watched him with forebodings as he came and went at intervals throughout the day.

Dusk had fallen when he suddenly looked in and beckoned to the "Colonel," who required him to take her with him whenever he fed the mare.

"Let me tie this hyar comforter over the Cunnel's head," Eugenia said, as he bundled the child in a shawl and lifted her in his arms.

"Tain't no use," he declared. "The Cunnel ain't travellin' fur."

She heard him step from the creaking porch. She heard the dreary wind without.

Within, the clumsy shadows of the warping-bars, the spinning-wheel, and the churn were dancing in the firelight on the wall. The supper was cooking on the live coals. The children, popping corn in the ashes, were laughing; as her eye fell upon the "Colonel's" vacant little chair her mind returned to the child's excursion with her father, and again she wondered futilely where the mare could be hid. The next moment she was heartily glad that she did not know.

It was like the fulfillment of some dreadful dream when the door opened. A man entered softly, slowly; the flickering fire showed his shadow--was it?--nay, another man, and still another, and another.

The old crone in the corner sprang up, screaming in a shrill, tremulous, cracked voice. For they were masked. Over the face of each dangled a bit of homespun, with great empty sockets through which eyes vaguely glanced. Even the coarse fibre of the intruders responded to that quavering, thrilling appeal. One spoke instantly:

"Laws-a-massy! Mis' Pearce, don't ye feel interrupted none--nor Mis' Gryce nuther. We-uns ain't harmful noways--jes want ter know whar that thar black mare hev disappeared to. She ain't in the barn."

He turned his great eye-sockets on Eugenia. The plaid homespun mask dangling about his face was grotesquely incongruous with his intent, serious gaze.

"I dunno," she faltered; "I dunno."

She had caught at the spinning-wheel for support. The fire crackled. The baby was counting aloud the grains of corn popping from the ashes. "Six, two, free," he babbled. The kettle merrily sang.

The man still stared silently at the ranger's wife. The expression in his eyes changed suddenly. He chuckled derisively. The others echoed his mocking mirth. "Ha! ha! ha!" they laughed aloud; and the eye-sockets in the homespun masks all glared significantly at each other. Even the dog detected something sinister in this laughter. He had been sniffing about the heels of the strangers; he bristled now, showed his teeth, and growled. The spokesman hastily kicked him in the ribs, and the animal fled yelping to the farther side of the fireplace behind the baby, where he stood and barked defiance. The rafters rang with the sound.

Some one on the porch without spoke to the leader in a low voice. This man, who seemed to have a desire to conceal his identity which could not be served by a mask, held the door with one hand that the wind might not blow it wide open. The draught fanned the fire. Once the great bowing, waving white blaze sent a long, quivering line of light through the narrow aperture, and Eugenia saw the dark lurking figure outside. He had one arm in a sling. She needed no confirmation to assure her that this was Sam Peters, whom her husband had shot at the stable door.

The leader instantly accepted his suggestion. "Wa'al, Mis' Gryce, I reckon ye dunno whar Tobe be, nuther?"

"Naw, I dunno," she said, in a tremor.

The homespun mask swayed with the distortions of his face as he sneered:

"Ye mean ter say ye don't 'low ter tell us."

"I dunno whar he be." Her voice had sunk to a whisper.

Another exchange of glances.

"Wa'al, ma'am, jes gin us the favor of a light by yer fire, an' we-uns 'll find him."

He stepped swiftly forward, thrust a pine torch into the coals, and with it all whitely flaring ran out into the night; the others followed his example; and the terror-stricken women, hastily barring up the door, peered after them through the little batten shutter of the window.

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The torches were already scattered about the slopes of Lonesome Cove like a fallen constellation. What shafts of white light they cast upon the snow in the midst of the dense blackness of the night! Somehow they seemed endowed with volition, as they moved hither and thither, for their brilliancy almost cancelled the figures of the men that bore them--only an occasional erratic shapeless shadow was visible. Now and then a flare pierced the icicle-tipped holly bushes, and again there was a fibrous glimmer in the fringed pines.

The search was terribly silent. The snow deadened the tread. Only the wind was loud among the muffled trees, and

sometimes a dull thud sounded when the weight of snow fell from the evergreen laurel as the men thrashed through its dense growth. They separated after a time, and only here and there an isolated stellar light illumined the snow, and conjured white mystic circles into the wide spaces of the darkness. The effort flagged at last, and its futility sharpened the sense of injury in Luke Todd's heart.

He was alone now, close upon the great rock, and looking at its jagged ledges all cloaked with snow. Above those soft white outlines drawn against the deep clear sky the frosty stars scintillated. Beneath were the abysmal depths of the valley masked by the darkness.

His pride was touched. In the old quarrel his revenge had been hampered, for it was the girl's privilege to choose, and she had chosen. He cared nothing for that now, but he felt it indeed a reproach to tamely let this man take his horse when he had all the mountain at his back. There was a sharp humiliation in his position. He felt the pressure of public opinion.

"Dad-burn him!" he exclaimed. "Ef I kin make out ter git a glimge o' him, I'll shoot him dead--dead!"

He leaned the rifle against the rock. It struck upon a ledge. A metallic vibration rang out. Again and again the sound was repeated--now loud, still clanging; now faint, but clear; now soft and away to a doubtful murmur which he hardly was sure that he heard. Never before had he known such an echo. And suddenly he recollected that this was the great "Talking Rock," famed beyond the limits of Lonesome. It had traditions as well as echoes. He remembered vaguely that beneath this cliff there was said to be a cave which was utilized in the manufacture of saltpetre for gunpowder in the War of 1812.

As he looked down the slope below he thought the snow seemed broken--by footprints, was it? With the expectation of a discovery strong upon him, he crept along a wide ledge of the crag, now and then stumbling and sending an avalanche of snow and ice and stones thundering to the foot of the cliff. He missed his way more than once. Then he would turn about, laboriously retracing his steps, and try another level of the ledges. Suddenly before him was the dark opening he sought. No creature had lately been here. It was filled with growing bushes and dead leaves and brambles. Looking again down upon the slope beneath, he felt very sure that he saw footprints.

"The old folks useter 'low ez thar war two openings ter this hyar cave," he said. "Tobe Gryce mought hev hid hyar through a opening down yan-der on the slope. But *I'll* go the way ez I hev hearn tell on, an' peek in, an' ef I kin git a glimge o' him, I'll make him tell me whar that thar filly air;--or I'll let daylight through him, sure!"

He paused only to bend aside the brambles, then he crept in and took his way along a low, narrow passage. It had many windings, but was without intersections or intricacy. He heard his own steps echoed like a pursuing footfall. His labored breathing returned in sighs from the inanimate rocks. It was an uncanny place, with strange, sepulchral, solemn effects. He shivered with the cold. A draught stole in from some secret crevice known only to the wild mountain winds. The torch flared, crouched before the gust, flared again, then darkness. He hesitated, took one step forward, and suddenly--a miracle!

A soft aureola with gleaming radiations, a low, shadowy chamber, a beast feeding from a manger, and within it a child's golden head.

His heart gave a great throb. Somehow he was smitten to his knees. Christmas Eve! He remembered the day with a rush of emotion. He stared again at the vouchsafed vision. He rubbed his eyes. It had changed.

Only hallucination caused by an abrupt transition from darkness to light; only the most mundane facts of the old troughs and ash-hoppers, relics of the industry that had served the hideous carnage of battle; only the yellow head of the ranger's brat, who had climbed into one of them, from which the mare was calmly munching her corn.



**"YET THIS WAS CHRISTMAS EVE"**

Yet this was Christmas Eve. And the Child did lie in a manger.

Perhaps it was well for him that his ignorant faith could accept the illusion as a vision charged with all the benignities of peace on earth, good-will toward men. With a keen thrill in his heart, on his knees he drew the charge from his rifle, and flung it down a rift in the rocks. "Chrismus Eve," he murmured.

He leaned his empty weapon against the wall, and strode out to the little girl who was perched up on the trough.

"Chrismus gift, Cunnell!" he cried, cheerily. "Ter-morrer's Chrismus."

The echoes caught the word. In vibratory jubilation they repeated it. "Chrismus!" rang from the roof, scintillating with calcspar; "Chrismus!" sounded from the colonnade of stalactites that hung down to meet the uprising stalagmites; "Chrismus!" repeated the walls incrustated with roses that, shut in from the light and the fresh air of heaven, bloomed forever in the stone. Was ever chorus so sweet as this?

It reached Tobe Gryce, who stood at his improvised corn-bin. With a bundle of fodder still in his arms he stepped forward. There beside the little Colonel and the black mare he beheld a man seated upon an inverted half-bushel measure, peacefully lighting his pipe with a bunch of straws which he kindled at the lantern on the ash-hopper.

The ranger's black eyes were wide with wonder at this intrusion, and angrily flashed. He connected it at once with the attack on the stable. The hair on his low forehead rose bristlingly as he frowned. Yet he realized with a quaking heart that he was helpless. He, although the crack shot of the county, would not have fired while the Colonel was within two yards of his mark for the State of Tennessee.

He stood his ground with stolid courage--a target.

Then, with a start of surprise, he perceived that the intruder was unarmed. Twenty feet away his rifle stood against the wall.

Tobe Gryce was strangely shaken. He experienced a sudden revolt of credulity. This was surely a dream.

"Ain't that thar Luke Todd? Why air ye a-wait-in' thar?" he called out in a husky undertone.

Todd glanced up, and took his pipe from his mouth; it was now fairly alight.

"Kase it be Chrismus Eve, Tobe," he said, gravely.

The ranger stared for a moment; then came forward and gave the fodder to the mare, pausing now and then and looking with oblique distrust down upon Luke Todd as he smoked his pipe.

"I want ter tell ye, Tobe, ez some o' the mounting boys air a-sarchin fur ye outside."

"Who air they?" asked the ranger, calmly.

His tone was so natural, his manner so unsuspecting, that a new doubt began to stir in Luke Todd's mind.

"What ails ye ter keep the mare down hyar, Tobe?" he asked, suddenly. "Tears like ter me ez that be powerful comical."

"Kase," said Tobe, reasonably, "some durned horse-thieves kem arter her one night. I fired at t'em. I hain't hearn on

'em sence. An' so I jes hid the mare."

Todd was puzzled. He shifted his pipe in his mouth. Finally he said: "Some folks 'lowed ez ye hed no right ter take up that mare, bein' ez ye war the ranger."

Tobe Gryce whirled round abruptly. "What war I a-goin' ter do, then? Feed the critter fur nuthin till the triffin' scamp ez owned her kem arter her? I couldn't work her 'thout takin' her up an' hev in her appraised. Thar's a law agin sech. An' I couldn't git somebody ter toll her off an' take her up. That ain't fair. What ought I ter hev done?"

"Wa'al," said Luke, drifting into argument, "the town-folks 'low ez ye hev got nuthin ter prove it by, the stray-book an' records bein' burnt. The town-folks 'low ez ye can't prove by writin' an' sech ez ye ever tried ter find the owner." "The town-folks air fairly sodden in foolishness," exclaimed the ranger, indignantly.

He drew from his ample pocket a roll of ragged newspapers, and pointed with his great thumb at a paragraph. And Luke Todd read by the light of the lantern the advertisement and description of the estray printed according to law in the nearest newspaper.

The newspaper was so infrequent a factor in the lives of the mountain gossips that this refutation of their theory had never occurred to them.

The sheet was trembling in Luke Todd's hand; his eyes filled. The cavern with its black distances, its walls close at hand sparkling with delicate points of whitest light; the yellow flare of the lantern; the grotesque shadows on the ground; the fair little girl with her golden hair; the sleek black mare; the burly figure of the ranger--all the scene swayed before him. He remembered the gracious vision that had saluted him; he shuddered at the crime from which he was rescued. Pity him because he knew naught of the science of optics; of the bewildering effects of a sudden burst of light upon the delicate mechanism of the eye; of the vagaries of illusion.

"Tobe," he said, in a solemn voice--all the echoes were bated to awed whispers--"I hev been gin ter view a vision this night, bein' 'twar Chris-mus Eve. An' now I want ter shake hands on it fur peace."

Then he told the whole story, regardless of the ranger's demonstrations, albeit they were sometimes violent enough. Tobe sprang up with a snort of rage, his eyes flashing, his thick tongue stumbling with the curses crowding upon it, when he realized the suspicions rife against him at the county town. But he stood with his clinched hand slowly relaxing, and with the vague expression which one wears who looks into the past, as he listened to the recital of Eugenia's pilgrimage in the snowy wintry dawn. "Mighty few folks hev got a wife ez set store by 'em like that," Luke remarked, impersonally.

The ranger's rejoinder seemed irrelevant.

"'Genie be a-goin' ter see a powerful differ arter this," he said, and fell to musing.

Snow, fatigue, and futility destroyed the ardor of the lynching party after a time, and they dispersed to their homes. Little was said of this expedition afterward, and it became quite impossible to find a man who would admit having joined it. For the story went the rounds of the mountain that there had been a mistake as to unfair dealing on the part of the ranger, and Luke Todd was quite content to accept from the county treasury half the sum of the mare's appraisement--with the deduction of the stipulated per cent.--which Tobe Gryce had paid, the receipt for which he produced.

The gossips complained, however, that after all this was settled according to law, Tobe wouldn't keep the mare, and insisted that Luke should return to him the money he had paid into the treasury, half her value, "bein' so brigaty he wouldn't own Luke Todd's beast. An' Luke agreed ter so do; but he didn't want ter be outdone, so fur the keep o' the filly he gin the Cunnel a heifer. An' Tobe war mighty nigh tickled ter death fur the Cunnel ter hev a cow o' her own."

And now when December skies darken above Lonesome Cove, and the snow in dizzying whirls sifts softly down, and the gaunt brown leafless heights are clothed with white as with a garment, and the wind whistles and shouts shrilly, and above the great crag loom the distant mountains, and below are glimpsed the long stretches of the valley, the two men remember the vision that illumined the cavernous solitudes that night, and bless the gracious power that sent salvation 'way down to Lonesome Cove, and cherish peace and good-will for the sake of a little Child that lay in a manger.