

FICTION

Mary Noailles Murfree

Who Crosses Storm Mountain

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK



eBookTakeAway

FICTION

WHO CROSSES STORM MOUNTAIN?

By Charles Egbert Craddock

1911

The wind stirred in the weighted pines; the snow lay on the ground. Here and there on its smooth, white expanse footprints betokened the woodland gentry abroad. In the pallid glister of the moon, even amid the sparse, bluish shadows of the leafless trees, one might discriminate the impression of the pronged claw of the wild turkey, the short, swift paces of the mink, the padded, doglike paw of the wolf. A progress of a yet more ravening suggestion was intimated in great hoof-marks leading to the door of a little log cabin all a-crouch in the grim grip of winter and loneliness and poverty on the slope of the mountain, among heavy, outcropping ledges of rock and beetling, overhanging crags. With icy ranges all around as far as the eye could reach, with the vast, instarred, dark sky above, it might seem as if sorrow, the world, the law could hardly take account of so slight a thing, so remote. But smoke was slowly stealing up from its stick-and-clay chimney, and its clapboarded roof sheltered a group with scarcely the heart to mend the fire.

Two women shivered on the broad hearth before the dispirited embers. One had wept so profusely that she had much ado to find a dry spot in her blue-checked apron, thrown over her head, wherewith to mop her tears. The other, much younger, her fair face reddened, her blue eyes swollen, her auburn curling hair all tangled on her shoulders, her voice half-choked with sobs, addressed herself to the narration of their woes, her cold, listless hands clasped about her knees as she sat on an inverted bushel-basket, for there was not a whole chair in the room.

"An' then he jes' tuk an' leveled!" she faltered.

A young hunter standing on the threshold, leaning on his rifle, a brace of wild turkeys hanging over his shoulders, half a dozen rabbits dangling from his belt, stared at her through the dull, red glow of the fading fire in amazed agitation.

"What did he level, Medory--a gun?"

"Wuss'n that!" replied the younger woman. "He leveled the weepoon o' the law!"

The man turned to look again at the curious disarray of the room. "The law don't allow him to do sech ez this!" he blurted out in rising anger. "Why, everything hyar is bodaciously broke an' busted! War it the sheriff himself ez levied?"

"Twar jes' the dep'ty critter, Clem Tweed," explained Medora, "mighty joki-fied, an' he 'peared ter be middlin' drunk, an' though he said su'thin' 'bout exemptions he 'lowed ez we-uns lived at the eend o' the world."

Her mother-in-law suddenly lowered the apron from her face.

"The jumpin'-off place, war what Clem Tweed called it!" she interpolated with a fiery eye of indignant reminiscence.

"He did! He did!" Medora bitterly resented this fling at the remoteness of their poor home. "An' he said whilst hyar he'd level on everything in sight, ez he hoped never ter travel sech roads agin--everything in sight, even the baby an' the cat!"

"Shucks, Medory, ye know the dep'ty man war funnin' whenst he said that about the baby an' the cat! Ye know ez Clem admitted he hed Christmas in his bones!" the elder objected.

"Waal, war Clem Tweed funnin' whenst he done sech ez that, in levyin' an execution?" Bruce Gilhooley pointed with his ramrod at the wreck of the furniture.

The two women burst into lugubrious sobs and rocked themselves back and forth in unison. "'Twar *Dad!*" Medora moaned, in smothered accents.

A pause of bewilderment ensued. Then the young man's face took on an expression of dismay so ominous that Medora's tears were checked in the ghastly fear of disasters yet to come to her father-in-law. Now and again she glanced anxiously over her shoulder at an oblong black aperture in the dusk which betokened the open door of the shed-room. Some one lurked there, evidently cherishing all aloof a grief, an anger, a despair too poignant to share.

"Dad warn't hyar whenst the dep'ty leveled," she said. "An' mighty glad we war--kase somebody mought hev got hurt. But whenst Dad kem home an' larnt the news he jes'--he jes'--he jes' lept about like a painter."

"He did! He did!" asseverated a voice from the veiled head, all muffled in the checked apron.

"Dad 'lowed," continued Medora, "ez Peter Petrie hev persecuted and druv him ter the wall. Fust he tricked Dad out 'n some unoccupied lan' what Dad hed begun ter clear, an' Petrie got it entered fust an' tuk out a grant an' holds the title! An' whenst Dad lay claim ter it Peter Petrie declared ef enny Gilhooley dared ter cross Storm Mounting he'd break every bone in his body!"

"A true word--the insurance of the critter!" came from the blue-checked veil.

A stir in the shed-room--a half-suppressed cough and a clearing of the throat. "An' then Dad fell on Pete Petrie at the Crossroads' store, whar the critter hed stopped with his mail-pouch, an' Dad trounced him well afore all the crowd o' loafers thar!"

"Bless the Lord, he did!" the checked apron voiced a melancholy triumph.

"An' then, ye remember whenst Dad set out fire in the woods las' fall ter burn off the trash on his own lan', the flames run jes' a leetle over his line an' on ter them woods on Storm Mounting, doin' no harm ter nobody, nor nuthin'!"

"Not a mite--not a mite," asseverated the apron.

"An' ez sech appears ter be agin the law Petrie gin information an' Dad war fined five dollars!"

"An' paid it!" cried Jane Gilhooley. "Ye know that!"

"An' then, ez it 'pears ter be the law ez one hundred dollars fur sech an offense is ter be forfeited ter ennybody ez will sue fur it," Medora resumed, "Petrie seen his chance ter git even fur bein' beat in a reg'lar knock-down-an'-drag-out fight, an'," with the rising inflection of a climax, "he hev sued and got jedgmint!"

"An' so what that half-drunk dep'ty, Clem Tweed, calls an execution war leveled!" exclaimed Jane Gilhooley, her veiled head swaying forlornly as she sobbed invisibly.

"But Dad 'lowed ez Peter Petrie shouldn't hev none o' his gear," Medora's eyes flashed with a responsive sentiment.

"His gran'mam's warpin' bars!" suggested the elder woman.

"The spinnin'-wheels she brung from No'th Carliny," enumerated Medora, "the loom an' the candle-moulds."

"The cheers his dad made fur his mam whenst they begun housekeeping" said Jane Gilhooley's muffled voice.

"The press an' the safe," Medora continued.

"The pot an' the oven," chokingly responded the apron.

"The churn an' the piggins!"

"The skillet an' the trivet!"

Medora, fairly flinching from the inventory of all the household goods, so desecrated and "leveled on," returned to the salient incident of the day. "Dad jes' tuk an axe an' bust up every yearthly thing in the house!"

"An' now we-uns ain't got nuthin'." The elder woman looked about in stunned dismay, her little black eyes a mere gleam of a pupil in the midst of their swollen lids and network of wrinkles.

One of the miseries of the very ignorant is, paradoxically, the partial character of their privations. If the unknown were to them practically non-existent they might find solace in sluggish and secure content. But even the smallest circle of being touches continually the periphery of wider spheres. The air is freighted with echoes of undistinguished sounds. Powers, illimitable, absolute, uncomprehended, seem to hold an inimical sway over their lives and of these the most dreaded is the benign law, framed for their protection, spreading above them an unperceived, unimagined aegis. Thus there was hardly an article in the house which was not exempt by statute from execution, and the house itself and land worth only a hundred or two dollars were protected by the homestead law. The facetious deputy, Clem Tweed, with "Christmas in his bones," would have committed a misdemeanor in seriously levying upon them. He had held the affair as a capital farce--even affecting with wild, appropriating gambols to seize the baby and the cat--and fully realized that malice only had prompted the whole proceeding, to humiliate Ross Gilhooley and illustrate the completeness of the victory which Peter Petrie had won over his enemy.

The younger Gilhooley, however, quaked as his limited intelligence laid hold on the fact that if the law had permitted a levy on the household goods to satisfy the judgment of Peter Petrie their destruction was in itself a balking of the process, resistance to the law, and with an unimagined penalty.

"We-uns hev got ter git away from hyar somehows!" he said with decision.

The idea of bluff Ross Gilhooley in the clutches of the law because of one fierce moment of goaded and petulant despair, with the ignominy of a criminal accusation, with all the sordid concomitants of arrest and the jail, was infinitely terrible to his unaccustomed imagination. He revolted from its contemplation with a personal application. For an honest man, however poor, feels all the high prerogatives of honor.

There was a step in the shed-room where Ross Gilhooley had lurked and listened. His wrath now spent, his mind had traveled the obvious course to his son's conclusion. He stood a gigantic, bearded shadow in the doorway, half ashamed, wholly repentant, dimly, vaguely fearful, and all responsive and quivering to the idea of flight. "I been studyin' some 'bout goin' ter Minervy Sue's in Georgy," he said creakingly, as if his voice had suffered from its

unwonted disuse.

"An' none too soon," said Bruce doggedly. "The oxen is Medory's, bein' lef' ter her whenst her dad died, an' the wagin is mine! Quit foolin' along o' that thar fire, Medory!" For with her bright hair hanging curling over her cheeks his young wife had leaned forward to start it anew.

"Never ter kindle it agin on this ha'th-stone!" she cried with a poignant realization of the significance of the uprooting of the roof-tree and the wide, vague world without. And still once more the two women fell to bemoaning their fate of exile beside the expiring embers, while the elder Gilhooley's voice sounded bluffly outside calling the oxen, and his son was rattling their heavy yoke in the corner.

They were well advanced on their journey ere yet the snowy Christmas dawn was in the sky. So slow a progress was ill-associated with the idea of flight. It was almost noiseless--the great hoofs of the oxen fell all muffled on the deep snow still whitely a-glitter with the moon, hanging dense and opaque in the western sky, and flecked with the dendroidal images of the overshadowing trees. The immense bovine heads swayed to and fro, cadenced to the deliberate pace, and more than once a muttered low of distaste and protest rose with the vapor curling upward from lip and nostril into the icy air. On the front seat of the cumbrous, white, canvas-covered vehicle was Medora, her bright hair blowing out from the folds of a red shawl worn hood-wise; she held a cord attached to the horns of one of the oxen by which she sought to guide the yoke in those intervals when her husband, who walked by their side with a goad, must needs fall to the rear to drive up a cow and calf. Inside the wagon Ross Gilhooley did naught but bow his head between his hands as if he could not face the coming day charged with he knew not what destiny for him. His wife was adjusting and readjusting the limited gear they had dared to bring off with them--their forlorn rags of clothing and bedding, all in shapeless bundles; sundry gourds full of soft soap, salt, tobacco, and a scanty store of provisions, which she feared would not last them all the way to Georgia to the home of Minervy Sue, their daughter.

No one touched a space deeply filled with straw, but now and again Medora glanced back at it with the dawning of a smile in her grief-stricken face that cold, nor fear, nor despair could wholly overcast. Three small heads, all golden and curly, all pink-cheeked and fair, all blissfully slumbering, rested there as if they had been so many dolls packed away thus for fear of breaking. But they had no other couch than the straw, for Ross Gilhooley had not spared the featherbeds, and the little cabin at the Notch was now half full of the fluff ripped out by his sharp knife from the split ticks.

Down the mountain the fugitives went, as silent as their shadows; and at last, when one might hardly know if it were the sheen of the moon that still illuminated the wan and wintry scene, or the reflection from the snow, or the dawning of the dark-gray day, the river came in sight, all a rippling, steely expanse under the chill wind between its ice-girt crags and snowy banks.

The oxen went down to the ford in a lumbering run. Bruce sprang upon the tailboard to ride, the dogs chased the cow and calf to the crossing. The wheels grated ominously against great submerged boulders; the surging waves rose almost to the wagon-bed; the wind struck aslant the immense, cumbrous cover, threatening to capsize it; and, suddenly, in the midst of the transit, a sound, as clear as a bugle in the rare icy air, as searchingly sweet!

All were motionless for an instant, doubtful, anxious, listening--only the wintry wind with its keen sibillance; only the dash of the swift current; only the grating of the wheels on the sand as the oxen reached the opposite margin!

But hark, again! A clear tenor voice in the fag end of an old song:

*"An' my bigges' bottle war my bes' friend,
An' my week's work was all at an end!"*

It issued from beyond the right fork of the road in advance, and an instant panic ensued. Discovery was hard upon them. Their laborious device was brought to naught should any eye espy them in their hasty flight to the State line. It had not seemed impossible that ere the day should dawn they might be far away in those impenetrable forests where one may journey many a league, meeting naught more inimical or speculative than bear or deer. It still was worth the effort.

With a sudden spring from the tailboard of the wagon Bruce Gilhooley reached the yoke, fiercely goading the oxen onward. With an abrupt lurch, in which the vehicle swayed precariously and ponderously from side to side, they started up the steep, snowy bank, and breaking into their ungainly rim were guided into the left fork of the road. It was a level stretch and fringed about with pines, and soon all sight of the pilgrims was lost amidst the heavy snow-laden boughs.

The river bank was silent and solitary; and after a considerable interval a man rode down from the right fork to the ford.

More than once his horse refused the passage. A sort of parrot-faced man he was, known as Tank Dysart, young, red-haired, with a long, bent nose and a preposterous air of knowingness and turbulent inquiry. He cocked his head on one side with a snort of surprised indignation, and beat with both heels, but again the horse, sidling about the drifts, declined the direct passage and essayed to cross elsewhere.

All at once a bundle of red flannel, lying in the drift close to the water's edge, caught his attention, and suddenly

there issued forth a lusty bawl. The horseman would have turned pale but for the whisky which had permanently incarnadined the bend of his nose. As it was, however, he looked far more dismayed than the facts might seem to warrant.

"It's the booze--I got 'em again fur sartain!" he quavered in plaintive helplessness, his terrified eyes fixed on the squirming bundle.

Then, drunk as he was, he perceived the rift in his logic "Gol-darn ye!" he exclaimed, violently kicking the horse, "you-uns ain't got no call ter view visions an' see sights--ye old water-bibber!"

As the horse continued to snort and back away from the object Tank Dysart became convinced of its reality. Still mounted, he passed close enough alongside for a grasp at it. The old red-flannel cape and hood disclosed a plump infant about ten months of age, whimpering and cruelly rubbing his eyes with his fists, and now bawling outright with rage; as he chanced to meet the gaze of his rescuer he paused to laugh in a one-sided way, displaying two pearly teeth and a very beguiling red tongue, but again stiffening himself he yelled as behooves a self-respecting baby so obviously misplaced.

Tank Dysart held him out at arm's length in his strong grasp, surveying him in mingled astonishment and delight. "Why, bless my soul, Christmas gift!" he addressed him. "I'm powerful obligated fur yer company!"

For the genial infant giggled and sputtered and gurgled inconsistently in the midst of his bawling, and banteringly kicked out one soft foot in a snug, red sock, faking Tank full in the chest; then he stiffened, swayed backward and screamed again as if in agonies of grief.

"Sufferin' Moses!" grinned the drunkard. "I wouldn't take nuthin' fur ye! Ye air a find, an' no mistake!" The word suggested illusion. "Ye ain't no snake, now--nary toad--nary green rabbit--no sort'n jim-jam?" he stipulated apprehensively.

The baby babbled gleefully, and, as if attesting its reality, delivered half a dozen strong kicks with those active plump feet, encased in the smart red socks.

It suddenly occurred to the drunkard that here was a duty owing--to seek out the child's parents. Even to his befuddled brain that fact was plain enough. The little creature had been lost evidently from some family of travelers who would presently retrace their way seeking him.

When Bruce Gilhooley had sprung from the tailboard of the wagon in that moment of tumultuous panic he had not noticed the bundle of straw dislodged. Falling with it softly into the deep snowdrift the child had continued to slumber quietly till awakened by the cold to silence and loneliness, and then this strange rencontre.

With a half-discriminated idea of overtaking the supposed travelers, Tank Dysart briskly forded the river, and, pressing his horse to a canter, made off in the opposite direction.

Gayly they fared along for a time, Tank frequently refreshing himself from a "tickler," facetiously so-called, which he carried in his pocket. Occasionally he generously offered the baby the stopper to suck, and as the child smacked his lips with evident relish Tank roared out again in his fine and flexible tenor:

"For my bigges' bottle war my bes' friend, an' my week's work war all at an end!"

The horse, by far the nobler animal of the two, stood still ever and anon when the drunken creature swayed back and forth in his saddle, imperiling his equilibrium. Even to his besotted mind, as he grew more intoxicated, the danger to the child in his erratic grasp became apparent.

"I got ter put him in a safe place--a Christmas gift," he now and then stuttered.

When he came at last within reach of a human habitation he had been for some time consciously on the point of falling from the saddle with the infant, who was now quietly asleep. He noted, as in a dream, the Crossroads' store, which was also the post-office; standing in front of the log cabin was a horse already saddled hanging down a dull, dispirited head as he awaited the mail-rider through a long, cold interval, and bearing a United States mail-pouch, mouldy, flabby, nearly empty. The door of the store was closed against the cold; the blacksmith's shop was far down the road; the two or three scattered dwellings showed no sign of life but the wreaths of blue smoke curling up from the clay-and-stick chimneys.

Perhaps it was the impunity of the moment that suggested the idea to Dysart's whimsical drunken fancy. He never knew. He suddenly tried the mouth of the pouch. It was locked. Nothing daunted, a stroke of a keen knife slit the upper part of the side seam, the sleeping baby was slipped into the aperture, and Tank Dysart rode off chuckling with glee to think of the dismay of the mail-rider when the mail-pouch should break forth with squeals and quiver with kicks, which embarrassment would probably not befall him until far away in the wilderness with his perplexity, for there had been something stronger on that stopper than milk or cambric tea.

As Tank went he muttered something about the security of the United States mail, wherein he had had the forethought to deposit his Christmas gift, and forthwith he flung himself into the shuck-pen, where he fell asleep, and was not found till half-frozen, his whereabouts being at last disclosed to the storekeeper by the persistent presence of

his faithful steed standing hard by. Tank was humanely cared for by this functionary, but several days elapsed before he altogether recovered consciousness; it was naturally a confused, disconnected train of impressions which his mind retained. At first, in a maudlin state, he demanded of the storekeeper, in his capacity as postmaster also, a package, a Christmas gift, which he averred he should receive by mail. Albeit this was esteemed merely an inebriated fancy, such is the sensitiveness of the United States postal service on the subject of missing mail matter that the postmaster, half-irritated, half-nervous, detailed it to the mail-rider. "Tank 'lows ez he put it into the mail hyar himself!"

Peter Petrie, a lowering-eyed, severe-visaged, square-jawed man, gave Tank Dysart only a glance of ire from under his hat-brim, as if the matter were not worth the waste of a word.

Dysart, wreck though he was, had not yet lost all conscience. He was in an agony of remorse and doubt. It kept him sober longer than he had been for five years, for he was a professed drunkard and idler, scarcely considered responsible. He could not be sure that he had experienced aught which he seemed to remember--he hoped it was all only his drunken fancy, for what could have been the fate of the child subject to the freaks of his imbecile folly! He was reassured to hear no rumors of a lost child, and yet so definite were the images of his recollection that they must needs constrain his credulity.

He felt it in the nature of a rescue one day when, as he chanced to join a group of gossips loitering around the fire of the forge, he heard the smith ask casually: "Who is that thar baby visitin' at Peter Petrie 's over yander acrost Storm Mounting?"

"Gran'child, I reckon," suggested his big-boned, bare-armed, soot-grimed striker.

"Peter Petrie hain't got nare gran'-child," said one of the loungers.

Tank, sober for once, held his breath to listen.

"Behaves powerful like a gran'dad," observed the smith, holding a horseshoe with the tongs in the fire while the striker laid hold on the bellows and the sighing sound surged to and fro and the white blaze flared forth, showing the interested faces of the group in the dusky smithy, and among them the horse whose shoe was making, while another stood at the open door defined against the snow. "Behaves like he ain't got a mite o' sense. I war goin' by thar one day las' week an' I stepped up on the porch ter pass the time o' day with Pete an' his wife, an' the door war open. And' what d'ye s'pose I seen! Old Peter Petrie a-goin' round the floor on all fours, an' a-settin' on his back war a baby--powerful peart youngster--jes' a-grinnin' an' a-whoopin' an' a-poundin' old Peter with a whip! An' Pete galloped, he did! Didn't seem beset with them rheumatics he used ter talk about--peartest leetle 'possum of a baby!"

Tank Dysart lost no time in his investigations and he had the courage of his convictions. He did not scruple to call Peter Petrie to his face a mail-robber.

"Ye tuk a package deposited in the United States' mail and converted it to your own use," he vociferated.

"Twar neither stamped nor addressed," old Petrie gruffly contended, albeit obviously disconcerted.

Dysart even sought to induce the postmaster to send a complaint of the rider to the postal authorities.

"I got too much respec' fur my job," replied that worthy, jocosely eying Tank across the counter of the store. "I ain't goin' ter let on ter the folks in Washington that we send babies about in the mail-bags hyar in the mountings."

The social acquaintance of the little man had necessarily been rather limited, but one day a neighbor, attracted to the Petrie cabin by idle curiosity concerning the waif robbed from the mails, gazed upon him for one astonished instant and then proclaimed his identity.

"Nare Gilhooley should ever cross Storm Mounting, 'cordin ter yer saying Petey, an' hyar ye hev been totin' Boss Gilhooley 's gran'son back an' forth across Old Stormy, an' all yer spare time ye spend on yer hands an' knees bar kin' like a dog jes' ter pleasure him."

Peter Petrie changed countenance suddenly. His square, bristly, grim jaw hardened and stiffened, so dear to him were all his stubborn convictions and grizzly, ancient feuds. But he bestirred himself to cause information to be conveyed to Bruce Gilhooley of his son's whereabouts for he readily suspected that the family had fled to Minervy Sue's in Georgia. Peter Petrie sustained in this act of conscience a grievous wrench, for it foreshadowed parting with the choice missive filched from the mail-bag, but he was not unmindful of the anguish and bereavement of the mother, and somehow the thought was peculiarly coercive at this season.

"I don't want ter even up with King Herod, now, sure!" he averred to himself one night as he sat late over the embers, reviewing his plans all made. He thought much in these lone hours as he heard the wind speed past, the trees crack under their weight of snow, and noted through the tiny window the glister of a great star of a supernal lustre, high above the pines, what a freight of joy the tidings of this child would bear to the bleeding hearts of his kindred. Albeit so humble, the parallel must needs arise suggesting the everlasting joy the existence of another Child had brought to the souls of all kindreds, all peoples. "Peace, peace," he reiterated, as the red coals crumbled and the gray ash spread; "Peace an' good-will!"

The words seemed to epitomize all religion, all value, all hope' and somehow they so dwelt in his mind that the next

day he was moved to add a personal message to old Boss Gilhooley in sending the more important information to Bruce.

"Let on ter Boss," he charged the envoy, "ez--ez--that thar jedgmint an' execution issued war jes' formal--ye mought say--jes' ter hev all the papers reg'lar."

By virtue of more attrition with the world the mail-rider was more sophisticated than his enemy, and sooth to say, more sophistical.

"Boss is writ-proof, the old fool, though he war minded ter cut me out'n my levy if he could! But waal, jes' tell him from me ez we-uns hev hed a heap o' pleasure in the baby's company in the Chris 'mus, an' we-uns expec' ter borry him some whenst they all gits home!"

To the child's kindred the news was as if he had risen from the dead, and the gratitude of the Gilhooleys to Petrie knew no bounds. They had accounted the baby drowned when, missing him, they had retraced their way, finding naught but a bit of old blanket on which he had lain, close to the verge of the cruel river. Boss Gilhooley, softened and rendered tractable by exile and sorrow, upon his return lent himself to an affected warmth toward Peter Petrie which gradually assumed all the fervors of sincerity. The neighbors indeed were moved to say that the two friends and ancient enemies, when both on all fours and barking for the delight of the baby, were never so little like dogs in all their lives.

Thus a child shall lead them.