

FICTION

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Wolfs Head

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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WOLF'S HEAD

By Charles Egbert Craddock

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It might well be called the country of the outlaw, this vast tract of dense mountain forests and craggy ravines, this congeries of swirling torrents and cataracts and rapids. Here wild beasts lurked out their savage lives, subsisting by fang and prey,—the panther, the bear, the catamount, the wolf,—and like unto them, ferocious and fugitive, both fearsome and afraid, the man with a "wolf's head," on which was set a price, even as the State's bounty for the scalps of the ravening brutes.

One gloomy October afternoon, the zest of a group of sportsmen, who had pitched their camp in this sequestered wilderness, suffered an abatement on the discovery of the repute of the region and the possibility of being summoned to serve on a sheriff's posse in the discharge of the grimmest of duties.

"But he is no outlaw in the proper sense of the term. The phrase has survived, but the fact is obsolete," said Seymour, who was both a prig and a purist, a man of leisure, and bookish, but a good shot, and vain of his sylvan accomplishments. "Our law places no man beyond the pale of its protection. He has a constitutional right to plead his case in court."

"What is the reward offered to hale him forth and force him to enjoy that privilege—five hundred dollars?" asked Bygrave, who was a newspaper man and had a habit of easy satire.

"Of course he would never suffer himself to be taken alive." Purcell's vocation was that of a broker, and he was given to the discrimination of chances and relative values. "Therefore he is as definitely *caput lupinum* as any outlaw of old. Nobody would be held accountable for cracking his 'wolf's head' off, in the effort to arrest him for the sake of the five hundred dollars. But, meantime, how does the fellow contrive to live!"

"Jes by his rifle, I reckon," replied the rural gossip whom intrusive curiosity occasionally lured to their camp-fire. "Though sence that thar big reward hev been n'ised abroad, I'd think he'd be plumb afraid ter fire a shot. The echoes be mighty peart these dumb, damp fall days."

The old jeans-clad mountaineer had a certain keen spryness of aspect, despite his bent knees and stooped shoulders. His deeply grooved, narrow, thin face was yet more elongated by the extension of a high forehead into a bald crown, for he wore his broad wool hat on the back of his head. There was something in his countenance not dissimilar to the facial contour of a grasshopper, and the suggestion was heightened by his persistent, rasping chirp.

"That's what frets Meddy; she can't abide the idee of huntin' a human with sech special coursers ez money reward. She 'lows it mought tempt a' evil man or a' ignorant one ter swear a miser'ble wretch's life away. Let the law strengthen its own hands—that's what Meddy say. Don't kindle the sperit of Cain in every brother's breast. Oh, Meddy is plumb comical whenst she fairly gits ter goin', though it's all on account of that thar man what war growed up in a tree."

The dryadic suggestions of a dendroidal captivity flashed into Seymour's mind with the phrase, and stimulated his curiosity as to some quaint rural perversion of the legend.

But it was grim fact that the old mountaineer detailed in answer to the question, as he sat on a log by the fire, while the sportsmen lay on the ground about it and idly listened.

"One day—'t war 'bout two year' ago—thar war a valley-man up hyar a-huntin' in the mountings with some other fellers, an' toward sunset he war a-waitin' at a stand on a deer-path up thar nigh Headlong Creek, hopin' ter git a shot whenst the deer went down to drink. Waal, I reckon luck war ag'in' him, fer he got nuthin' but durned tired. So, ez he waited, he grounded his rifle, an' leaned himself ag'in' a great big tree ter rest his bones. And presently he jes happened ter turn his head, an', folks! he seen a sight! Fer thar, right close ter his cheek, he looked into a skellington's eye-sockets. Thar war a skellington's grisly face peerin' at him through a crack in the bark."

The raconteur suddenly stopped short, while the group remained silent in expectancy. The camp-fire, with its elastic, leaping flames, had belpainted the darkening avenues of the russet woods with long, fibrous strokes of red and yellow, as with a brush scant of color. The autumnal air was dank, with subtle shivers. A precipice was not far distant on the western side, and there the darksome forest fell away, showing above the massive, purple mountains a section of sky in a heightened clarity of tint, a suave, saffron hue, with one horizontal bar of vivid vermilion that lured the eye. The old mountaineer gazed retrospectively at it as he resumed:

"Waal, sirs, that town-man had never consorted with sech ez skellingtons. He lit out straight! He made tracks! He never stopped till he reached Colbury, an' thar he told his tale. Then the sheriff he tuk a hand in the game. Skellingtons,

he said, didn't grow on trees spontaneous, an' he hed an official interes' in human relics out o' place. So he kem,--the tree is 'twixt hyar an' my house thar on the rise,--an', folks! the tale war plain. Some man chased off 'n the face of the yearth, hid out from the law,--that's the way Meddy takes it,--he hed clomb the tree, an' it bein' holler, he drapped down inside it, thinkin' o' course he could git out the way he went in. But, no! It monght hev been deeper 'n he calculated, or mo' narrow, but he couldn't make the rise. He died still strugglin', fer his long, bony fingers war gripped in the wood--it's rotted a deal sence then."

"Who was the man?" asked Seymour.

"Nobody knows,--nobody keers 'cept' Meddy. She hev wep' a bushel o' tears about him. The cor'ner 'lowed from the old-fashioned flint-lock rifle he hed with him that it mus' hev happened nigh a hunderd years ago. Meddy she will git ter studyin' on that of a winter night, an' how the woman that keered fer him mus' hev watched an' waited fer him, an' 'lowed he war deceitful an' de-sertin', an' mebbe held a gredge agin him, whilst he war dyin' so pitiful an' helpless, walled up in that tree. Then Meddy will tune up agin, an' mighty nigh cry her eyes out. He warn't even graced with a death-bed ter breathe his last; Meddy air partic'lar afflicted that he hed ter die afoot." Old Kettison glanced about the circle, consciously facetious, his heavily grooved face distended in a mocking grin.

"A horrible fate!" exclaimed Seymour, with a half-shudder.

"Edzac'ly," the old mountaineer assented easily.

"What's her name--Meggy?" asked the journalist, with a mechanical aptitude for detail, no definite curiosity.

"Naw; Meddy--short fer Meddlesome. Her right name is Clementina Haddox; but I reckon every livin' soul hev forgot' it but me. She is jes Meddlesome by name, an' meddlesome by natur'."

He suddenly turned, gazing up the steep, wooded slope with an expectant mien, for the gentle rustling amidst the dense, red leaves of the sumac-bushes heralded an approach.

"That mus' be Meddy now," he commented, "with her salt-risin' bread. She lowed she war goin' ter fetch you-uns some whenst I tol' her you-uns war lackin'."

For the camp-hunt had already been signaled by divers disasters: the store of loaves in the wagon had been soaked by an inopportune shower; the young mountaineer who had combined the offices of guide and cook was the victim of an accidental discharge of a fowling-piece, receiving a load of bird-shot full in his face. Though his injury was slight, he had returned home, promising to supply his place by sending his brother, who had not yet arrived. Purcell's boast that he could bake ash-cake proved a bluff, and although the party could and did broil bacon and even birds on the coals, they were reduced to the extremity of need for the staff of life.

Hence they were predisposed in the ministrant's favor as she appeared, and were surprised to find that Meddlesome, instead of masterful and middle-aged, was a girl of eighteen, looking very shy and appealing as she paused on the verge of the flaring sumac copse, one hand lifted to a swaying bough, the other arm sustaining a basket. Even her coarse gown lent itself to pleasing effect, since its dull-brown hue composed well with the red and russet glow of the leaves about her, and its short waist, close sleeves, and scant skirt, reaching to the instep, the immemorial fashion of the hills, were less of a grotesque rusticity since there was prevalent elsewhere a vogue of quasi-Empire modes, of which the cut of her garb was reminiscent. A saffron kerchief about her throat had in its folds a necklace of over-cup acorns in three strands, and her hair, meekly parted on her forehead, was of a lustrous brown, and fell in heavy undulations on her shoulders. There was a delicate but distinct tracery of bine veins in her milky-white complexion, and she might have seemed eminently calculated for meddling disastrously with the peace of mind of the mountain youth were it not for the preoccupied expression of her eyes. Though large, brown and long-lashed, they were full of care and perplexity, and a frowning, disconcerted line between her eye-brows was so marked as almost to throw her face out of drawing. Troubled about many things, evidently, was Meddlesome. She could not even delegate the opening of a basket that her little brother had brought and placed beside the camp-fire.

"Don't, Gran'dad," she exclaimed suddenly, stepping alertly forward--"*don't* put that loaf in that thar bread-box; the box 'pears ter be damp. Leave the loaf in the big basket till ter-morrer. It'll eat shorter then, bein' fraish-baked. They kin hev these biscuits fer supper,"--dropping on one knee and setting forth on the cloth, from the basket on her arm, some thick soggy-looking lumps of dough,--"I baked some dodgers, too--four, six, eight, ten,"--she was counting a dozen golden-brown cates of delectable aspect--"knowin' they would hone fer commeal arter huntin', an' nuthin' else nohow air fitten ter eat with feesh or aigs. Hev you-uns got any aigs!" She sprang up, and, standing on agile tiptoe, peered without ceremony into their wagon. Instantly she recoiled with a cry of horrified reproach. "Thar 's ants in yer short-sweetenin'! How *could* you-uns let sechez that happen!"

"Oh, surely not," exclaimed Purcell, hastening to her side. But the fact could not be gainsaid; the neglected sugar was spoiled.

Meddlesome's unwarranted intrusion into the arcana of their domestic concerns disclosed other shortcomings. "Why n't ye keep the top on yer coffee-can? Don't ye know the coffee will lose heart, settin' open?" She repaired this oversight with a deft touch, and then proceeded: "We-uns ain't got no short-sweetenin' at our house, but I'll send my

leete brother ter fetch some long-sweetenin' fer yer coffee ter night. Hyar, Sol,"--addressing the small, limber, tow-headed, barefooted boy, a ludicrous miniature of a man in long, loose, brown-jeans trousers supported by a single suspender over an unbleached cotton shirt,--"run ter the house an' fetch the sorghum-jug."

As Sol started off with the alertness of a scurrying rabbit, she shrilly called out in a frenzy of warning: "Go the other way, Sol--up through the pawpaws! Them cherty rocks will cut yer feet like a knife."

Sol had nerves of his own. Her sharp cry had caused him to spring precipitately backward, frightened, but uncomprehending his danger. Being unhurt, he was resentful! "They ain't none o' yer feet, nohow," he grumbled, making a fresh start at less speed.

"Oh, yes, Sol," said the old grandfather, enjoying the contretemps and the sentiment of revolt against Meddlesome's iron rule. "Everything belongs ter Meddlesome one way or another, 'ca'se she jes makes it hern. So take keer of yer feet for her sake." He turned toward her jocosely as the small emissary disappeared among the undergrowth. "I jes been tellin' these hunter-men, Meddy, 'bout how ye sets yerself even ter meddle with other folkses' mourning--what they got through with a hunderd year' ago--tormentatin' 'bout that thar man what war starved in the tree."

She heard him, doubtless, for a rising flush betokened her deprecation of this ridicule in the presence of these strangers. But it was rather that she remembered his words afterward than heeded them now. It would seem that certain incidents, insignificant in themselves, are the pivots on which turns the scheme of fate. She could not imagine that upon her action in the next few seconds depended grave potentialities in more lives than one. On the contrary, her deliberations were of a trivial subject, even ludicrous in any other estimation than her own.

Sol was small, she argued within herself, the jug was large and sticky. He might be tempted to lighten it, for Sol had saccharine predilections, and the helpless Jug was at his mercy. Sol had scant judgment and one suit of clothes available; the other, sopping wet from the wash, now swayed in the process of drying on an elder-bush in the dooryard. Should his integrity succumb, and the jug tilt too far, the stream of sorghum might inundate his raiment, and the catastrophe would place him beyond the pale of polite society. The seclusion of bed would be the only place for Sol till such time as the elder-bush should bear the fruit of dry clothes.

"Poor Sol!" she exclaimed, her prophetic sympathy bridging the chasm between possibility and accomplished fact. "I'll fetch the jug myself. I'll take the short cut an' head him."

Thus she set her feet in the path of her future. It led her into dense, tangled woods, clambering over outcropping ledges and boulders. By the flare of the west she guided her progress straight to the east till she reached the banks of Headlong Creek on its tumultuous course down the mountainside. In her hasty enterprise she had not counted on crossing it, but Meddlesome rarely turned back. She was strong and active, and after a moment's hesitation, she was springing from one to another of the great, half-submerged boulders amidst the whirl of the transparent crystal-brown water, with its fleck and fringe of white foam. More than once, to evade the dizzying effect of the sinuous motion and the continuous roar, she stood still in midstream and gazed upward or at the opposite bank. The woods were dense on the slope. All in red and yellow and variant russet and brown tints, the canopy of the forest foliage was impenetrable. The great, dark boles of oak and gum and spruce contrasted sharply with the white and greenish-gray trunks of beeches and sycamore and poplar, and, thus breaking the monotony, gave long, almost illimitable avenues of sylvan vistas. She noted amidst a growth of willows on the opposite bank, at the waters-edge, a spring, a circular, rock-bound reservoir; in the marshy margin she could see the imprints of the cleft hoofs of deer, and thence ran the indefinite trail known as a deer-path. The dense covert along the steep slope was a famous "deer-stand," and there many a fine buck had been killed. All at once she was reminded of the storied tree hard by, the tragedy of which she had often bewept.

There it stood, dead itself, weird, phantasmal, as befitted the housing of so drear a fate. Its branches now bore no leaves. The lightnings of a last-year's storm had scorched out its vital force and riven the fibre of the wood. Here and there, too, the tooth of decay had gnawed fissures that the bark had not earlier known; and from one of these--she thought herself in a dream--a ghastly, white face looked out suddenly, and as suddenly vanished!

Her heart gave one wild plunge, then it seemed to cease to beat. She wondered afterward that she did not collapse, and sink into the plunging rapids to drown, beaten and bruised against the rocks. It was a muscular instinct that sustained her rather than a conscious impulse of self-preservation. Motionless, horrified, amazed, she could only gaze at the empty fissure of the tree on the slope. She could not then discriminate the wild, spectral imaginations that assailed her untutored mind. She could not remember these fantasies later. It was a relief so great that the anguish of the physical reaction was scarcely less poignant than the original shock when she realized that this face was not the grisly skeleton lineaments that had looked out thence heretofore, but was clothed with flesh, though gaunt, pallid, furtive. Once more, as she gazed, it appeared in a mere glimpse at the fissure, and in that instant a glance was interchanged. The next moment a hand appeared,--beckoning her to approach.

It was a gruesome mandate. She had scant choice. She did not doubt that this was the fugitive, the "wolf's head," and should she turn to flee, he could stop her progress with a pistol-ball, for doubtless he would fancy her alert to disclose the discovery and share in the reward. Perhaps feminine curiosity aided fear; perhaps only her proclivity to find an employ in the management of others influenced her decision; though trembling in every fibre, she crossed the

interval of water, and made her way up the slope. But when she reached the fateful tree it was she who spoke first. He cast so ravenous a glance at the basket on her arm that all his story of want and woe was revealed. Starvation had induced his disclosure of his identity.

"It's empty," she said, inverting the basket. She watched him flinch, and asked wonderingly, "Is game skeerce?"

His eyes were at once forlorn and fierce. "Oh, yes, powerful skeerce," he replied with a bitter laugh.

There was an enigma in the rejoinder; she did not stay to read the riddle, but went on to possess the situation, according to her wont. "Ye hev tuk a powerful pore place ter hide," she admonished him. "This tree is a plumb cur'osity. Gran'dad Kettison war tellin' some camp-hunters 'bout'n it jes this evenin'. Like ez not they'll kem ter view it."

His eyes dilated with a sudden accession of terror that seemed always a-smoulder. "Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!" he moaned wretchedly.

Meddlesome was true to her name and tradition. "Ye oughter hev remembered the Lawd 'fore ye done it," she said, with a repellent impulse; then she would have given much to recall the reproach. The man was desperate; his safety lay in her silence. A pistol-shot would secure it, and anger would limber the trigger.

But he did not seem indignant. His eyes, intelligent and feverishly bright, gazed down at her only in obvious dismay and surprise. "Done what?" he asked, and as, prudence prevailing for once, she did not reply, he spoke for her. "The murder, ye mean? Why, gal, I warn't even thar. I knowed nuthin' 'bout it till later. Ez God is my helper and my hope, I warn't even thar."

She stood astounded. "Then why n't ye leave it ter men?"

"I can't *prove* it ag'in' the murderers' oaths. I had been consarned in the moonshinin' that ended in murder, but I hed not been nigh the still fer a month,--I war out a-huntin'--when the revenuers made the raid. There war a scrimmage 'twixt the raiders an' the distillers, an' an outsider that hed nuthin' ter do with the Federal law--he war the constable o' the deestrick, an' jes rid with the gang ter see the fun or ter show them the way--he war killed. An' account o' *him*, the State law kem into the game. Them other moonshiners war captured, an' they swore ag'in' me 'bout the shootin' ter save tharselves, but I hearn thar false oaths hev done them no good, they being held as accessory. An' I be so ez I can't prove an alibi--I can't *prove* it, though it's God's truth. But before high heaven"--he lifted his gaunt right hand--"I am innercent, I am inner-cent."

She could not have said why,--perhaps she realized afterward,--but she believed him absolutely, implicitly. A fervor of sympathy for his plight, of commiseration, surged up in her heart. "I wisht it war so I could gin ye some pervisions," she sighed, "though ye do 'pear toler'ble triflin' ter lack game."

Then the dread secret was told. "Gal,"--he used the word as a polite form of address, the equivalent of the more sophisticated "lady,"--"ef ye will believe me, all my ammunition is spent. Not a ca'tridge lef, not a dust of powder."

Meddy caught both her hands to her lips to intercept and smother a cry of dismay.

"I snared a rabbit two days ago in a dead-fall. My knife-blade is bruk, but I reckon thar is enough lef ter split my jugular whenst the eend is kem at last."

The girl suddenly caught her faculties together. "What sorter fool talk is that!" she demanded sternly. "Ye do my bid, ef ye knows what's good fer ye. Git out'n this trap of a tree an' hide 'mongst the crevices of the rocks till seben o'clock temight. Then kem up ter Gran'dad Kettison's whenst it is cleverly dark an' tap on the glass winder--not on the batten shutter. An' I'll hev cartridges an' powder an' ball for ye an' some victuals ready, too."

But the fugitive, despite his straits, demurred. "I don't want ter git old man Kettison into trouble for lendin' ter me."

"T ain't his'n. 'T is my dad's old buckshot ca'tridges an' powder an' ball. They belong ter me. The other childern is my half-brothers, bein' my mother war married twice. Ye kin *steal* this gear from me, ef that will make ye feel easier."

"But what will yer gran'dad say ter me?" "He won't know who ye be; he will jes 'low ye air one o' the boys who air always foolin' away thar time visitin' me an' makin' tallow-dips skeerce." The sudden gleam of mirth on her face was like an illuminating burst of sunshine, and somehow it cast an irradiation into the heart of the fugitive, for, after she was gone out of sight, he pondered upon it.

But the early dusk fell from a lowering sky, and the night came on beclouded and dark. Some turbulent spirit was loosed in the air, and the wind was wild. Great, surging masses of purple vapor came in a mad rout from the dank west and gathered above the massive and looming mountains. The woods bent and tossed and clashed their boughs in the riot, of gusts, the sere leaves were flying in clouds, and presently rain began to fall. The steady downpour increased in volume to torrents; then the broad, pervasive flashes of lightning showed, in lieu of myriad lines, an unbroken veil of steely gray swinging from the zenith, the white foam rebounding as the masses of water struck the earth. The camp equipage, tents and wagons succumbed beneath the fury of the tempest, and, indeed, the hunters had much ado to saddle their horses and grope their way along the bridle-path that led to old Kettison's house.

The rude comfort of the interior had a heightened emphasis by reason of the elemental turmoils without. True, the rain beat in a deafening fusillade upon the roof, and the ostentation of the one glass window, a source of special pride

to its owner, was at a temporary disadvantage in admitting the fierce and ghastly electric glare, so recurrent as to seem unintermittent. But the more genial illumination of hickory flames, red and yellow, was streaming from the great chimney-place, and before the broad hearth the guests were ensconced, their outstretched boots steaming in the heat. Strings of scarlet peppers, bunches of dried herbs, gourds of varied quaint shapes, hung swaying from the rafters. The old man's gay, senile chirp of welcome was echoed by his wife, a type of comely rustic age, who made much of the fact that, though housebound from "rheumatics," she had reared her dead daughter's "two orphin famblies," the said daughter having married twice, neither man "bein' of a lastin' quality," as she seriously phrased it. Meddy, "the eldest fambly," had been guide, philosopher, and friend to the swarm of youngsters, and even now, in the interests of peace and space and hearing, was seeking to herd them into an adjoining room, when a sudden stentorian hail from without rang through the splashing of the rain from the eaves, the crash of thunder among the "balds" of the mountains, with its lofty echoes, and the sonorous surging of the wind.

"Light a tallow-dip, Meddy," cried old Kettison, excitedly. "An' fetch the candle on the porch so ez we-uns kin view who rides so late in sech a night 'fore we bid 'em ter light an' hitch."

But these were travelers not to be gainsaid--the sheriff of the county and four stout fellows from the town of Colbury, summoned to his aid as a posse, all trooping in as if they owned the little premises. However, the officer permitted himself to unbend a trifle under the influence of a hospitable tender of home-made cherry-bounce, "strong enough to walk from here to Colbury," according to the sheriff's appreciative phrase. He was a portly man, with a rolling, explanatory cant of his burly head and figure toward his interlocutor as he talked. His hair stood up in two tufts above his forehead, one on each side, and he had large, round, grayish eyes and a solemn, pondering expression. To Meddy, staring horror-stricken, he seemed as owlshly wise as he looked while he explained the object of his expedition.

"This district have got a poor reputation with the law, Mr. Kettison. Here is this fellow, Boyston McGurny, been about here two years, and a reward for five hundred dollars out for his arrest."

"That's Boy's fault, Sher'ff, not our'n," leered the glib old man. He, too, had had a sip of the stalwart cherry-bounce. "Boy's in no wise sociable."

"It's plumb flying in the face of the law," declared the officer. "If I had a guide, I'd not wait a minute, or if I could recognize the man whenst I viewed him. The constable promised to send a fellow to meet me here,--what's his name!--yes, Smith, Barton Smith,--who will guide us to where he was last glimpsed. I hope to take him alive." he added with an inflection of doubt.

Certainly this was a dreary camp-hunt, with all its distasteful sequelae. Purcell, who had no more imagination than a promissory note, silently sulked under the officer's intimation that, being able-bodied men, he would expect the hunters also to ride with him. They were not of his county, and doubted their obligation, but they would not refuse to aid the law. Bygrave, however, realized a "story" in the air, and Seymour was interested in the impending developments; for being a close observer, he had perceived that the girl was in the clutch of some tumultuous though covert agitation. Her blood blazed at fever-heat in her cheeks; her eyes were on fire; every muscle was tense; and her brain whirled. To her the crisis was tremendous. This was the result of her unwarranted interference. Who was she, indeed, that she should seek to command the march of events and deploy sequences? Her foolish maneuvering had lured this innocent man to ruin, capture, anguish, and death. No warning could he have; the window was opaque with the corrugations of the rainfall on the streaming panes, and set too high to afford him a glimpse from without. And, oh, how he would despise the traitor that she must needs seem to be! She had not a moment for reflection, for counsel, for action. Already the signal,--he was prompt at the tryst,--the sharp, crystalline vibration of the tap on the glass!

The sheriff rose instantly with that cumbrous agility sometimes characterizing portly men. "There he is now!" he exclaimed.

But Meddy, with a little hysterical cry, had sprung first to the opening door. "Barton Smith!" she exclaimed, with shrill significance. "Hyar is yer guide, Sher'ff, wet ez a drowned rat."

The pale face in the dark aperture of the doorway, as the fire-light flashed on it, grew ghastly white with terror and lean with amazement. For a moment the man seemed petrified. Seymour, vaguely fumbling with his suspicions, began to disintegrate the plot of the play, and to discriminate the powers of the dramatis personae.

"Now, my man, step lively," said the officer in his big, husky voice. "Do you know this Royston McGurny?"

To be sure, Seymour had no cause for suspicion but his own intuition and the intangible evidence of tone and look all as obvious to the others as to him. But he was at once doubtful and relieved when the haggard wretch at the door, mustering his courage, replied: "Know Royston McGurny! None better. Knowed him all my life."

"Got pretty good horse?"

"Got none at all; expect ter borry Mr. Kettison's."

"I'll go show ye whar the saddle be," exclaimed Meddy, with her wonted officious-ness, and glibly picking up the bits of her shattered scheme. Seymour fully expected they would not return from the gloom without, whither they had

disappeared, but embrace the immediate chance of escape before the inopportune arrival of the real Barton Smith should balk the possibility. But, no,—and he doubted anew all his suspicions,—in a trice here they both were again, a new courage, a new hope in that pallid, furtive face, and another horse stood saddled among the equine group at the door. Meddlesome was pinning up the brown skirt of her gown, showing a red petticoat that had harmonies with a coarse, red plaid shawl adjusted over her head and shoulders.

"Gran'dad," she observed, never looking up, and speaking with her mouth full of pins, "Barton Smith say he kin set me down at Aunt Drusina's house. Ye know she be ailin', an' sent for me this evenin'; but I hed no way ter go."

The sheriff looked sour enough at this intrusion; but he doubtless imagined that this relative was no distant neighbor, and as he had need of hearty aid and popular support, he offered no protest.

There was a clearing sky without, and the wind was laid. The frenzy of the storm was over, although rain was still falling. The little cavalcade got to horse deliberately enough amid the transparent dun shadows and dim yellow flare of light from open door and window. One of the mounts had burst a girth, and a strap must be procured from the plow-gear in the shed. Another, a steed of some spirit, reared and plunged at the lights, and could not be induced to cross the illuminated bar thrown athwart the yard from the open door. The official impatience of the delay was expressed in irritable comments and muttered oaths; but throughout the interval the guide, with his pallid, strained face, sat motionless in his saddle, his rifle across its pommel, an apt presentment of indifference, while, perched behind him, Meddy was continually busy in readjusting her skirts or shawl or a small bundle that presumably contained her rustic finery, but which, to a close approach, would have disclosed the sulphurous odor of gunpowder. When the cluster of horsemen was fairly on the march, however, she sat quite still, and more than once Seymour noted that, with her face close to the shoulder of the guide, she was whispering in his ear. What was their garnet he marvelled, having once projected the idea that this late comer was, himself, the "wolf's head" whom they were to chase down for a rich reward, incongruously hunting amidst his own hue and cry. Or, Seymour again doubted, had he merely constructed a figment of a scheme from his own imaginings and these attenuations of suggestion? For there seemed, after all, scant communication between the two, and this was even less when the moon was unveiled, the shifting shimmer of the clouds falling away from the great sphere of pearl, gemming the night with an incomparable splendor. It had grown almost as light as day, and the sheriff ordered the pace quickened. Along a definite cattle-trail they went at first, but presently they were following through bosky recesses a deer-path, winding sinuously at will on the way to water. The thinning foliage let in the fair, ethereal light, and all the sylvan aisles stood in sheeny silver illumination. The drops of moisture glittered jewel-wise on the dark boughs of fir and pine, and one could even discriminate the red glow of sourwood and the golden flare of hickory, so well were the chromatic harmonies asserted in this refined and refulgent glamour.

"Barton Smith!" called the sheriff, suddenly from the rear of the party. There was no answer, and Seymour felt his prophetic blood run cold. His conscience began to stir. Had he, indeed, no foundation for his suspicion?

"Smith! *Smith*" cried the irascible officer. "Hey, there! Is the man deaf!"

"Not deaf, edzac'ly," Meddlesome's voice sounded reproachfully; "jes a leetle hard o' hear in'." She had administered a warning nudge.

"Hey? What ye want?" said the "Wolf's Head," suddenly checking his horse.

"Have you any idea of where you are going, or how far?" demanded the officer, sternly.

"Just acrost the gorge," the guide answered easily.

"I heard he had been glimpsed in a hollow tree. That word was telephoned from the cross-roads to town. It was the tree the skeleton was in."

"That tree? It's away back yander," observed one of the posse, reluctant and disaffected.

"Oh, he has quit that tree; he is bound for up the gorge now," said the guide.

"Well, I suppose you know, from what I was told," said the sheriff, discontentedly; "but this is a long ja'nt. Ride up! Ride up!"

Onward they fared through the perfumed woods. The wild asters were blooming, and sweet and subtle distillations of the autumnal growths were diffused on the air. The deer are but ill at road-making,—such tangled coverts, such clifty ledges, such wild leaps; for now the path threaded the jagged verge of precipices. The valley, a black abyss above which massive, purplish mountains loomed against a sky of pearly tints, was visibly narrowing. They all knew that presently it would become a mere gorge, a vast indentation in the mountain-side. The weird vistas across the gorge were visible how, craggy steeps, and deep woods filled with moonlight, with that peculiar untranslated intendment which differentiates its luminosity in the wilderness from the lunar glamour 'of cultivated Scenes—something weird, melancholy, eloquent of a meaning addressed to the soul, but which the senses cannot entertain or words express.

With a sudden halt, the guide dismounted. The girl still sat on the saddle-blanket, and the horse bowed his head and pawed. The posse were gazing dubiously, reluctantly, at a foot-bridge across a deep abyss. It was only a log, the upper side hewn, with a shaking hand-rail held by slight standards.

"Have we got to cross this?" asked the officer, still in the saddle and gazing downward.

"Ef ye foller me," said the guide, indifferently.

But he was ahead of his orders. He visibly braced his nerves for the effort, and holding his rifle as a balancing-pole, he sped along the light span with a tread as deft as a fox or a wolf. In a moment he had gained the farther side.

They scarcely knew how it happened. So unexpected was the event that, though it occurred before their eyes, they did not seem to see it. They remembered, rather than perceived, that he stooped suddenly; with one single great effort of muscular force he dislodged the end of the log, heaved it up in the air, strongly flung it aside, whence it went crashing down into the black depths below, its own weight, as it fell, sufficing to wrench out the other end, carrying with it a mass of earth and rock from the verge of the precipice.

The horses sprang back snorting and frightened; the officer's, being a fine animal in prime condition, tried to bolt. Before he had him well in hand again, the man on the opposite brink had vanished. The sheriff's suspicions were barely astir when a hallooing voice in the rear made itself heard, and a horseman, breathless with haste, his steed flecked with foam, rode up, indignant, flushed, and eager.

"Whyn't ye wait for me, Sher'ff? Ye air all on the wrong track," he cried. "Boyston McGurny be hid in the skellington's tree. I glimpsed him thar myself, an' gin information."

The sheriff gazed down with averse and suspicious eyes. "What's all this!" he said sternly. "Give an account of yourself."

"Me!" exclaimed the man in amazement. "Why, I'm Barton Smith, yer guide, that's who. An' I'm good for five hundred dollars' reward."

But the sheriff called off the pursuit for the time, as he had no means of replacing the bridge or of crossing the chasm.

Meddlesome's share in the escape was not detected, and for a while she had no incentive to the foolhardiness of boasting. But her prudence diminished when the reward for the apprehension of Boyston McGurny was suddenly withdrawn. The confession of one of the distillers, dying of tuberculosis contracted in prison, who had himself fired the fatal shot, had established the alibi that McGurny claimed, and served to relieve him of all suspicion.

He eventually became a "herder" of cattle on the bald of the mountain and a farmer in a small way, and in these placid pursuits he found a contented existence. But, occasionally, a crony of his olden time would contrast the profits of this tame industry at a disadvantage with the quick and large returns of the "wild cat," when he would "confess and avoid."

"That's true, that's all true; but a man can't help it no ways in the world whenst he hev got a wife that is so out-an'-out meddlesome that she won't let him run ag'in' the law, nohow he kin fix it."