

rugged surfaces. The mountain had changed color; the nearest ranges were black with the myriads of the grim black branches of the denuded forest; far away they stretched in parallel lines, rising tier above tier, and showing numberless gradations of a dreary, neutral tint, which grew ever fainter in the distance, till merged in the uniform tone of the sombre sky.

In-doors it was certainly more cheerful. A hickory fire dispensed alike warmth and light. The musical whirr of a spinning-wheel added its unique charm. From the rafters depended numberless strings of bright red pepper-pods and ears of pop-corn; hanks of woolen and cotton yarn; bunches of medicinal herbs; brown gourds and little bags of seeds. On rude shelves against the wall were ranged cooking utensils, drinking vessels, etc., all distinguished by that scrupulous cleanliness which is a marked feature of the poor hovels of these mountaineers, and in striking contrast to the poor hovels of lowlanders. The rush-bottomed chairs, drawn in a semi-circle before the rough ill-adjusted stones which did duty as hearth, were occupied by several men, who seemed to be making the blacksmith a prolonged visit; various members of the family were humbly seated on sundry inverted domestic articles, such as wash tubs, and split baskets made of white oak. There was circulating among Jerry Shaw's friends a flat bottle, facetiously denominated "tickler," readily emptied, but as readily replenished from a keg in the corner. Like the widow's cruse of oil that keg was miraculously never empty. The fact of a still near by in the wild ravine might suggest a reason for its perennial flow. It was a good strong article of apple-brandy, and its effects were beginning to be distinctly visible.

Truly the ethereal woodland flower seemed strangely incongruous with these brutal and uncouth conditions of her life, as she stood at a little distance from this group, spinning at her wheel. Chevis felt a sudden sharp pang of pity for her when he glanced toward her; the next instant he had forgotten it in his interest in her work. It was altogether at variance with the ideas which he had hitherto entertained concerning that humble handicraft. There came across him a vague recollection from his city life that the peasant girls of art galleries and of the lyric stage were wont to sit at the wheel. "But perhaps they were spinning flax," he reflected. This spinning was a matter of walking back and forth with smooth, measured steps and graceful, undulatory motion; a matter, too, of much pretty gesticulation—the thread in one hand, the other regulating the whirl of the wheel. He thought he had never seen attitudes so charming.

Jerry Shaw hastened to abdicate and offer one of the rush-bottomed chairs with the eager hospitality characteristic of these mountaineers—a hospitality that meets a stranger on the threshold of every hut, presses upon him, ungrudgingly, its best, and follows him on his departure with protestations of regret out to the rickety fence. Chevis was more or less known to all the visitors, and after a little, under the sense of familiarity and the impetus of the apple-brandy, the talk flowed on as freely as before his entrance. It was wilder and more antagonistic to his principles and prejudices than anything he had hitherto heard among these people, and he looked on and listened, interested in this new development of the phase of life which he had thought he had sounded from its lowest note to the top of its compass. He was glad to remain; the scene had impressed his cultivated preceptions as an interior by Teniers might have done, and the vehemence and lawlessness of the conversation and the threats of violence had little reality for him; if he thought about the subject under discussion at all, it was with a reassuring conviction that before the plans could be carried out the already intoxicated mountaineers would be helplessly drunk. Nevertheless, he glanced ever and anon at the young girl, loath that she should hear it, lest its virulent, angry bitterness should startle her. She was evidently listening, too, but her face was as calm and untroubled as one of the pure white faces of those flower-stars of his early stay in the mountains.

"Them Peels oughtn't ter be let live!" exclaimed Elijah Burr, a gigantic fellow, arrayed in brown jeans, with the accompaniments of knife, powder-horn, etc., usual with the hunters of the range; his gun stood with those of the other guests, against the wall in a corner of the room. "They oughtn't ter be let live, an' I'd top off all three of 'em fur the skin an' horns of a deer."

"That thar is a true word," assented Jerry Shaw. "They oughter be run down an' kilt—all three o' them Peels."

Chevis could not forbear a question. Always on the alert to add to his stock of knowledge of men and minds, always analyzing his own inner life and the inner life of those about him, he said turning to his intoxicated host: "Who are the Peels, Mr. Shaw, if I may ask?"

"Who air the Peels?" repeated Jerry Shaw, making a point of seizing the question. "They air the meanest men in these hyar mountings. Yer might hunt from Copperhead Ridge ter Christel River, an' the whole spread o' the valley, an' never hear tell o' no sech no count critters."

"They oughtn't ter be let live!" again urged Elijah Burr. "No man ez treats his wife like that dad-burned scoundrel Ike Peel do oughter be let live. That thar woman is my sister an' Jerry Shaw's cousin, an' I shot him down in his own door year afore las'. I shot him ter kill; but somehow 'nother I war that shaky, an' the cussed gun hung fire a-fust, an' that thar pore wife o' his'n screamed an' hollered so that I never done nothin' arter all but lay him up for four month an' better for that thar poor critter ter nuss. He'll see a mighty differ nex' time I gits my chance. An' 't aint fur off," he added, threateningly. "Wouldn't it be better to persuade her to leave him?" suggested Chevis, pacifically, without, however, any wild idea of playing peacemaker between fire and tow.

Burr growled a fierce oath, and then was silent.

A slow fellow on the opposite side of the fireplace explained: "Thar's whar all the trouble kem from. She wouldn't leave him, fur all he treated her awful. "She said ez how he war mighty good ter her when he warn't drunk. So 'Lijah shot him."

This way of cutting the Gordian knot of domestic difficulties might have proved efficacious but for the shakiness induced by the thrill of fraternal sentiment, the infusion of apple-brandy, the protest of the bone of contention, and the hanging fire of the treacherous gun. Elijah Burr could remember no other failure of aim for twenty years.

"He won't git shet of me that easy agin!" Burr declared, with another pull at the flat tickler. "But ef it hedn't hev been fur what happend las' week, I mought hev let him off fur awhile," he continued, evidently actuated by some curiously distorted sense of duty in the premises. "I oughter hev kilt him afore. But now the cussed critter is a gone coon. Dad-burn the whole tribe!"

Chevis was desirous of knowing what had happened last week. He did not, however, feel justified in asking more questions. But "apple-jack" is a potent tongue-loosener, and the unwonted communicativeness of the stolid and silent mountaineers attested its strength in this regard. Jerry Shaw, without inquiry, enlightened him.

"Yer see," he said, turning to Chevis, "Lijah he thought ez how ef he could git that fool woman ter come ter his house, he could shoot Ike fur his meanness 'thut bo'herin' of her, an' thirgs would all git easy again. Waal, he went thar one day when all them Peels, the whole layout, war gone down ter the Settlement ter hear the rider preach, an' he jes' run away with two of the brats—the littlest ones, yer onderstand—a-thinkin' he mought tole her off from Ike that thar way. We hearn ez how the poor critter war nigh onter distracted 'bout 'em, but Ike never let her come arter 'em. Leastaways, she never come. Las' week Ike come fur 'em hisself—him an' them two cussed brothers o' his'n. All 'Lijah's folks war out'n the way; him an' his boys war off a-huntin', an' his wife hed gone down ter the spring, a haffen mile an' better, a-washin' clothes; nobody war ter the

house 'ceptin' them two children o' Ike's. An' Ike an' his brothers jes' tuk the children away an' set fire ter the house; an' time 'Lijah's wife got thar, 't war nothin' but a pile o' ashes. So we've determinated ter go up under ter Laurel Notch, twenty mile along the ridge of the mounting, ter-night, an' wipe out them Peels—kase they air a-goin' ter move away. That thar wife o' Ike's what made all the trouble, hev fretted 'at Ike till he hev determinated ter break up an' wagon across the range ter Kaintucky, whar his uncle lives in the hills thar. Ike hev gin his consent ter go jes' ter pleasure her, kase she air mos' crazed ter git Ike away whar 'Lijah can't kill him. Ike's brothers is a-goin', too. I hearn ez how they'll make a start at noon ter-morrer."

"They'll never start ter Kaintucky the poor critter war nigh on ter dis-ter-morrer," said Burr, grimly. "They'll git off, afore that, fur some other place. I hev been a-tryin' ter make out ter shoot that thar man ever sense that thar gal war married ter him, seven year ago—seven year an' better. But what with her a-foolin' round an' a-talkin', an' a-goin' on like she war distracted—she run right 'twixt him an' the muzzle of my gun wunst, or I would hev hed him that time fur sure—an' somehow 'nother that critter makes me so shaky with her ways o' goin' on that I feel like I hain't got no good sense and can't get no good aim at nothin'. Nex' time though thar'll be a differ. She hain't a-goin' ter Kaintucky ter be beat fur nothin' when he's drunk."

It was a pitiable picture presented to Chevis's open-eyed imagination—this woman standing for years between the two men she loved; holding back her brother from his vengeance of her wrongs by that subtle influence that shook his aim; and going into exile with her brute of a husband when that influence had waned and failed, and her wrongs were supplemented by deep and irreparable injuries to her brother. And the curious, moral attitude of the man; the strong fraternal feeling that alternately nerved and weakened his revengeful hand.

"We air goin' thar 'bout two o'clock ter-night," said Jerry Shaw, "and wipe out all three o' them Peels—Ike an' his two brothers."

"They oughtn't ter be let live," reiterated Elijah Burr, moodily. Did he speak to his faintly stirring conscience, or to a woful premonition of his sister's grief?

"They'll all three be stiff an' stark afore day break," resumed Jerry Shaw. "We air all kin ter 'Lijah, an' we air goin' ter help him top off them Peels. Thar's ten of us an' three of them, an' we won't hev no trouble 'bout it, an' we'll bring that pore critter, Ike's wife, an' her chillen hyar ter stay. She's welcome ter live along of us till 'Lijah kin fix some sort'n place fur her an' the little chillen. Thar won't be no trouble a-gettin' rid of the men folks, ez thar is ten of us an' three o' them, an' we air goin' ter take 'em in the night."

There was a protest from an unexpected quarter. The whirr of the spinning-wheel was abruptly silenced. "I don't see no sense," said Celia Shaw, her singing monotone vibrating in the sudden hush—"I don't see no sense in shootin' folks down like they war nothin' better nor bear, nor deer, nor suthin' wild. I don't see no sense in it. An' I never did see none."

There was an astonished pause. "Shet up, Cely! Shet up!" exclaimed Jerry Shaw, in mingled anger and surprise. "Them folks ain't no better nor bear, nor sech. They ain't got no right ter live—them Peels."

"No, that they ain't!" said Burr. "They is powerful no-count critters, I know," replied the little woodland flower, the firelight bright in her opaline eyes and on the flakes of burnished gold gleaming in the dark masses of her hair. "They is always a-hangin' round the still an' a-gittin' drunk; but I don't see no sense in a-huntin' 'em down an' a-killin' 'em off. 'Pears ter me like they air better nor the dumb ones. I don't see no sense in shootin' 'em."

"Shet up, Cely! Shet up!" reiterated Shaw.

Celia said no more. Reginald Chevis

was pleased with this indication of her sensibility; the other women—her mother and grandmother—had heard the whole recital with the utmost indifference, as they sat by the fire monotonously carding cotton. She was beyond her station in sentiment, he thought. However, he was disposed to recant this favorable estimate of her higher nature when, twice afterward, she stopped her work, and, filling the bottle from the keg, pressed it upon her father, despite her unfavorable criticism of the hangers-on of stills. Nay, she insisted, "Drink some more," she said, "Yer hain't got half enough yet." Had the girl no pity for the already drunken creature? She seemed systematically trying to make him even more helpless than he was.

He had fallen into a deep sleep before Chevis left the house, and the bottle was circulating among the other men with a rapidity that boded little harm to the unconscious Ike Peel and his brothers at Laurel Notch, twenty miles away. As Chevis mounted Strathspey he saw the horses of Jerry Shaw's friends standing partly within and partly without the blacksmith's shop. They would stand there all night, he thought. It was darker when he commenced the ascent of the mountain than he had anticipated. And what was this driving against his face—rain? No, it was snow. He had not started a moment too soon. But Strathspey, by reason of frequent travel, knew every foot of the way, and perhaps there would only be a flurry. And so he went on steadily up and up the wild, winding road among the great, bare, black trees and the grim heights and chasms. The snow fell fast—so fast and so silently; before he was half-way to the summit he had lost the vague companionship of the sound of his horse's hoofs, now muffled in the thick carpet so suddenly flung upon the road. Still the snow fell, and when he had reached the mountain's brow the ground was deeply covered, and the whole aspect of the scene was strange. But though obscured by the bosom of the white valley there glittered still that changeless star.

"Still spinning, I suppose," he said to himself, as he looked toward it and thought of the interior of the log-cabin below. And then he turned into the tent to enjoy his cigar, his æsthetic reveries, and a bottle of wine.

But the wheel was no longer awlirl. Both music and musician were gone. Toiling along the snow-filled mountain ways; struggling with the fierce gusts of wind as they buffeted and hindered her, and fluttered derisively among her thin, worn, old garments; shivering as the driving flakes came full into the pale, calm face, and fell in heavier wreaths upon the dappled calico sun-bonnet; threading her way through unfrequented woodland paths, that she might shorten the distance; now deftly on the verge on a precipice, whence a false step of those coarse rough shoes would fling her into the unimaginable abysses below; now on the sides of steep ravines, falling sometimes with the treacherous, sliding snow, but never faltering; tearing her hands on the shrubs and vines she clutched to help her forward, and bruised and bleeding, but still going on; trembling more than with the cold but never turning back, when a sudden noise in the terrible loneliness of the sheeted woods suggested the proximity of a wild beast, or perhaps, to her ignorant, superstitious mind, a supernatural presence—thus she journeyed on her errand of deliverance.

Her fluttering breath came and went in quick gasps; her failing limbs wearily dragged through the deep drifts; the cruel winds untiringly lashed her; the snow soaked through the faded green cotton dress to the chilled white skin—it seemed even to the dull blood coursing feebly through her freezing veins. But she had small thought for herself during these long, slow hours of endurance and painful effort. Her pale lips moved now and then with muttered speculations: how the time went by; whether they had discovered her absence at home; and whether the fleetest horsemen were even now plowing their way through the longer, winding mountain road. Her only hope was to outstrip their speed. Her prayer—this untaught being! she had no prayer, except perhaps her life; the life she was so ready to imperil. She had no