

be apt to think them an unsocial set. Old Platte puffed steadily at his pipe, blinking and winking at the fire, which he poked occasionally with a stick or fed with a log of wood from the pile by his side. Thompson worked quietly with knife and awl at his dilapidated shoes, and the pale, patient face beyond still gazed dreamily into the fire. There were old scenes, doubtless, in among those burning logs—old familiar faces, dear memories of the past, and weird fantastic visions pictured in the glowing coals. At last the eyes left the fire for a moment, resting on the two that sat by it, and he said, "Boys, it's Christmas Eve."

Thompson started, for he had not heard him speak with so much energy for weeks.

"Christmas Eve!" he repeated absently. "Christmas Eve, and tomorrow will be Christmas Day. Last Christmas was not like this: all was bright and fair, and she—"

The rest of the sentence was lost as he muttered it uneasily to himself and resumed his watching of the fire. Christmas Eve! So it was, they had not thought of it. Christmas Eve! The name seemed out of place among those rocky fastnesses. What could the pines and the solitude, the snow and the ice, have in common with Christmas? Christmas Eve down in that desolate valley, in the quiet depths of the forest, away, miles away, from human habitation of any kind? Christmas Eve! It seemed absurd, but Christmas Eve it was nevertheless, there as everywhere else.

Old Platte took his blackened old pipe from between his lips and mechanically repeated the words. "Christmas Eve!" he half growled, as if some perplexing ideas had been called into existence by the suggestion, and his pipe went out as he listlessly shoved some stray coals back into the fire with his foot. But his meditations, to judge from his countenance, were neither interesting nor profitable. Probably his Christmases had never been passed in a way that was calculated to make them pleasingly conspicuous in the background of his life. Most of his early recollections were associated with a villainous roadside groggery in Pike county, Missouri, of which his father was the proprietor. Any questions relating to this parent and home he had been known to invariably evade, and whenever conversation tended in that direction he strenuously discouraged it. Why he did so never very clearly appeared. Some people who pretended to know used to say that the old gentleman had been doing a lively trade in horseflesh without going through the customary formalities of finance, and that some people with whom his dealings had been unsatisfactory, in consequence of this unbusiness-like habit of his, had called at his house one evening and invited him to walk out with them. The invitation was one he would have liked to decline, but extra inducements in the shape of the cold muzzle of a revolver pressed against his forehead and a low but determined "Dry up and come along!" caused him to put on his hat and step out. He was found next morning hanging from a branch of a neighbouring tree with a brief but expressive obituary written in pencil on a scrap of paper and pinned on his coat: "Horse-thief! Jerry Moon and Scotty, take notice." Inasmuch as one of the latter individuals was the chief authority for the story, and had expedited his departure from Pike county in consequence of the intimation contained in the lines on the same bit of paper, it may be safely inferred that there was some foundation for the numerous