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THE STAR OF THE VALLEY.

By CHARLES EGBERT CRADDOCK.



HE first saw it in the twilight of a clear October evening. As the earliest planet sprang into the sky, an answering gleam shone red amid the glooms in the valley. A star too it seemed. And later, when the myriads of the fairer, whiter lights of a moonless night were all athrob in the great concave vault bending to the hills, there was something very impressive in that solitary star of earth, changeless and motionless beneath the ever-changing skies.

Chevis never tired of looking at it. Somehow it broke the spell that draws all eyes heavenward on starry nights. He often strolled with his cigar at dusk down to the verge of the crag, and sat for hours gazing at it and vaguely speculating about it. That spark seemed to have kindled all the soul and imagination within him, although he knew well enough its prosaic source, for he once questioned the gawky mountaineer whose services he had secured as guide through the forest solitudes during this hunting expedition.

"That thar spark in the valley?" Hi Bates had replied, removing the pipe from his lips and emitting a cloud of strong tobacco smoke. "Tain't nothin' but the light in Jerry Shaw's house, 'bout haffen mile from the foot of the mounting. Yer pass that thar house when yer goes on the Christel road, Backbone. That's Jerry Shaw's house—what leads down the mounting of the thar's what it is. He's a blacksmith, an' he kin shoe a horse toler'ble well when he ain't drunk, ez he mos'ly is."

"Perhaps that is the light from the forge," suggested Chevis.

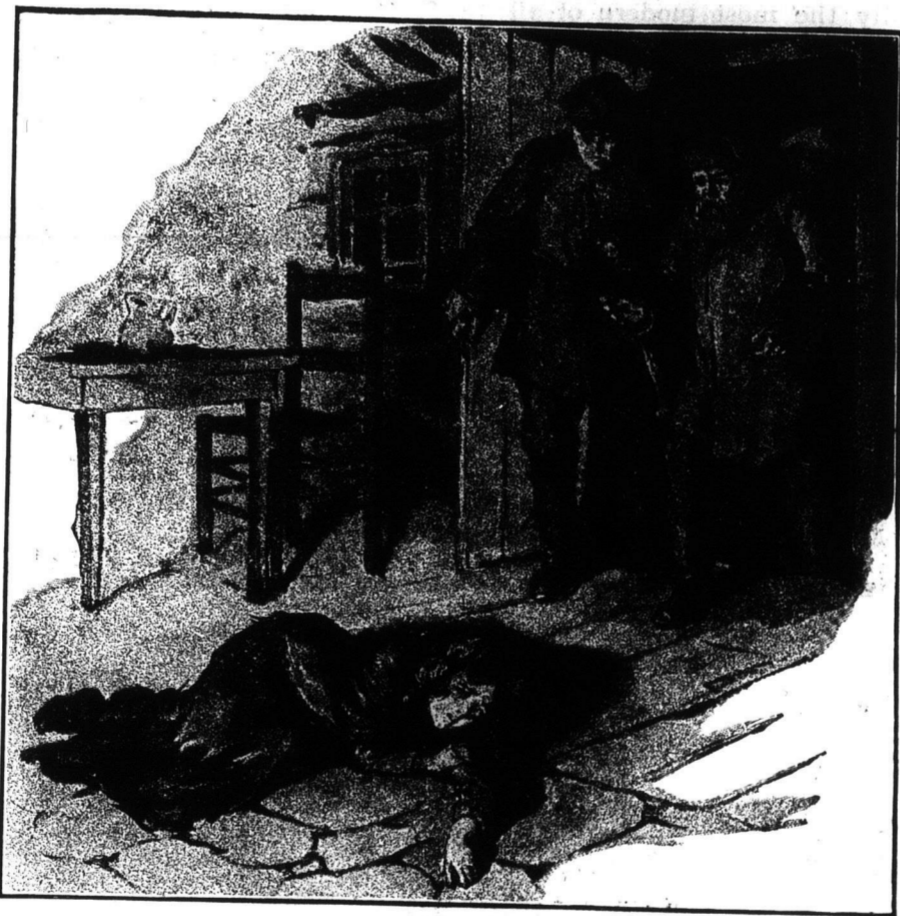
"That thar forge ain't run more'n half the day, let 'one o' nights. I hev never hearn tell on Jerry Shaw's a-workin' o' nights—nor in the daytime nuther, ef he kin get shet of it. No sech no-count critter 'twixt hyar an' the Settlement."

So spake Chevis's astronomer. Seeing the star even through the prosaic lens of stern reality did not detract from its poetic aspect. Chevis never failed to watch for it. The first faint glinting in the azure evening sky sent his eyes to that red reflection suddenly aglow in the valley; even when the mists rose above it and hid it from him, he gazed at the spot where it had disappeared, feeling a calm satisfaction to know that it was still shining beneath the cloud-curtain. He encouraged himself in this bit of sentimentality. These unique eventide effects seemed a fitting sequel to the picturesque day, passed in flying, with the horn and hounds, after the deer through the gorgeous autumnal forest; or silently stalking amid their hidden haunts; or lying deep in the odorous ferns, with rod and reel, beside the swirling mountain stream; or hunting the timid wild fowl with a thoroughly traped dog; and coming back in the crimson sunset to a well-appointed tent and a smoking supper

of venison, or grouse, or bass—the trophies of his skill. The vague dreaminess of his cigar and the charm of that bright bit of color in the night-shrouded valley added a sort of romantic zest to these primitive enjoyments, and ministered to that keen susceptibility of impressions which Reginald Chevis considered eminently characteristic of a highly wrought mind and nature.

He said nothing of his fancies, however, to his fellow sportsman, Ned Varney, nor to the mountaineer. Infinite as was the difference between these two in mind and cultivation, his observation of both had convinced him that they were alike incapable of appreciating and comprehending his

from the crag in all the many miles of long, narrow valley and parallel tiers of ranges. Sometimes Chevis and Varney caught sight of it from lower down on the mountain side, whence was faintly distinguishable the little log house and certain vague lines marking a rectangular inclosure; near at hand, too, the forge, silent and smokeless. But it did not immediately occur to either of them to theorize concerning the inmates and their lives in this lonely place; for a time, not even to the speculative Chevis. As to Varney, he gave his whole mind to the matter in hand—his breech-loader, his dog, his game—and his note-book was as systematic as the ledger at home.



"On the rough stones before the dying fire, Celia Shaw, falling asleep and waking by fitful star."

delicate and dainty musings. Varney was essentially a man of this world; his mental and moral conclusions had been adopted in a calm, mercantile spirit, as giving the best return for the outlay, and the market was not liable to fluctuations. And the mountaineer could go no further than the prosaic fact of the light in Jerry Shaw's house. Thus Reginald Chevis was wont to sit in contemplative silence on the crag, until his cigar was burnt out, and afterwards to lie awake deep in the night, listening to the majestic lyric welling up from the thousand nocturnal voices of these Alleghany wilds.

During the day in place of the red light a gauzy little curl of smoke was barely visible, the only sign or suggestion of human habitation to be seen

It might be accounted an event in the history of that log hut when Reginald Chevis, after riding past it eighty yards or so, chanced one day to meet a country girl walking toward the house. She did not look up, and he caught only an indistinct glance of her face. She spoke to him, however, as she went by, which is the invariable habit with the inhabitants of the sequestered nooks among the encompassing hills, whether meeting stranger or acquaintance. He lifted his hat in return with that punctilious courtesy which he made a point of according to persons of low degree. In another moment she had passed down the narrow sandy road, overhung with gigantic trees, and, at a deft, even pace, hardly slackened as she traversed the great log extending

across the rushing stream, she made her way up the opposite hill, and disappeared gradually over its brow.

The expression on her face, half-seen though it was, had attracted his attention. He rode slowly along meditating. "Did she go into Shaw's house, just around the curve of the road?" he wondered. "Is she Shaw's daughter, or some visiting neighbor?"

That night he looked with a new interest at the red star, set like a jewel in the floating mists of the valley.

"Do you know," he asked of Hi Bates, when the three men were seated, after supper, around the camp-fire, which sent lurid tongues of flame and a thousand bright sparks leaping high in the darkness, and illumined the vistas of the woods on every side, save where the sudden crag jutted over the valley—"Do you know whether Jerry Shaw has a daughter—a young girl?"

"Ye-es," drawled Hi Bates, disparagingly, "he hev."

"Is she pretty," asked Chevis.

"Waal, no, she ain't," said Bates, decisively. "She's a poor no-count critter." Then he added, as if he were afraid of being misapprehended, "Not ez thar is any harm in the gal, yer onderstand. She's a mighty good, soft-spoken quiet sort o' gal, but she's a pore white-faced, slim little critter. She looks like she hain't got no sort'n grit in her. She makes me think o' one o' them slim little slips o' willow every time nor I sees her. She hain't got long to live, I reckon," continued Bates, dismally.

Reginald Chevis asked him no more questions about Jerry Shaw's daughter.

Not long afterwards, when Chevis was hunting through the deep woods about the base of the mountain near the Christel road, his horse happened to cast a shoe. He congratulated himself upon his proximity to the forge, for there was a possibility that the blacksmith might be at work; according to the account which Hi Bates had given of Jerry Shaw's habits, there were half a dozen chances against it. But the shop was at no great distance, and he set out to find his way back to the Christel road, guided by sundry well-known landmarks on the mountain side; certain great crags hanging above the tree-tops, showing in grander sublimity through the thinning foliage, or beetling bare and grim; a dismantled and deserted hovel; the red-berried vines twining amongst the rotten logs; the full flow of a tumultuous stream making its last leap down a precipice eighty feet high, with yeasty, maddening waves below and a rainbow-crowned crystal sheet above. And here again the curves of the woodland road. As the sound of the falling water grew softer and softer in the distance, till it was hardly more than a drowsy murmur, the faint vibrations of a far-off anvil rang upon the air. Welcome indeed to Chevis, for however enticing might be the long rambles through the redolent October woods with dog and gun, he had no mind to tramp up the mountain to his tent, five miles distant, leading the resisting horse all the way. The afternoon was so clear