RED-HEAD

JOHN URI LLOYD

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By JOHN URI LLOYD

Author of "STRINGTOWN ON THE PIKE,"
"WARWICK OF THE KNOBS," etc.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND DECORATIONS BY
REGINALD B. BIRCH

NEW YORK · DODD, MEAD
AND COMPANY · *MCMIII*

Published October, 1903

UNIVERSITY PRESS · JOHN WILSON
AND SON · CAMBRIDGE, U.S.A.

PREFACE

TO readers of "Stringtown on the Pike," the boy "Red Head" needs no introduction. To the author, the study of this mountain lad was intensely interesting, as a part of old-time, local conditions, familiar from childhood. But he hardly dared hope that the fragmentary description of his homely life could afford more than a passing interest to others, who might find it difficult to believe that a character so unique was drawn almost from life, as typical of a class still lingering in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. And yet he did hope that some would perceive that behind the story rested a serious attempt to preserve for students

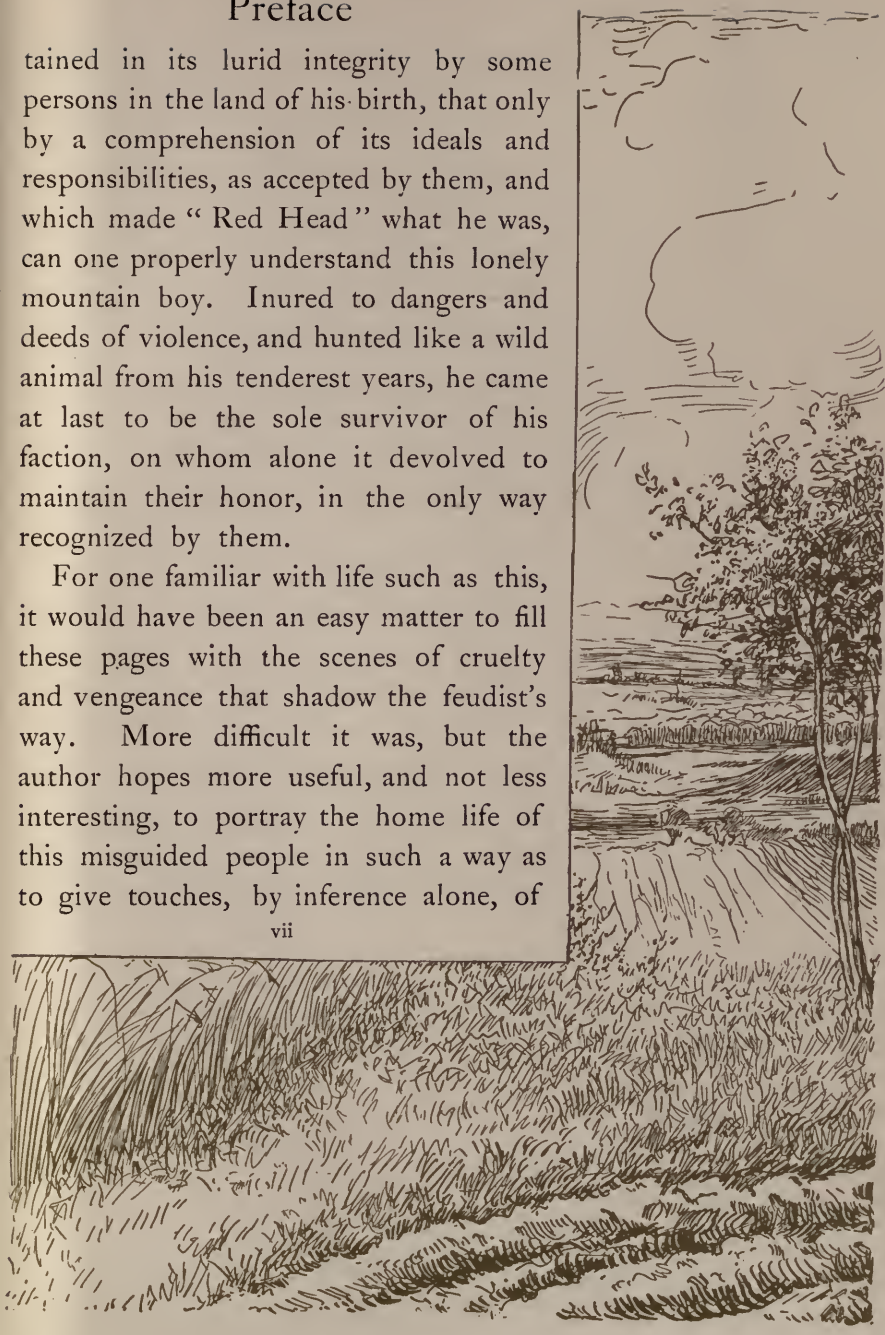
of Americana some bit of that primitive color which, so far as its lawlessness is concerned, it is to be hoped, is destined ere long to fade away.

As a pleasant surprise came, then, many cordial letters of inquiry for further information regarding this little understood people, and many appeals for the whole story of " Red Head," apart from the setting in which he was formerly placed. As a result of these letters and inquiries has come the evolution of the present volume.

In order to bring the reader into sympathetic touch with the conditions surrounding " Red Head," of which he was a part by heritage, as well as by training in traditions held sacred by his people, it was found necessary to place the events narrated in Part I, in a time long preceding that of " Red Head " himself. For so strange is the code still main-

tained in its lurid integrity by some persons in the land of his birth, that only by a comprehension of its ideals and responsibilities, as accepted by them, and which made "Red Head" what he was, can one properly understand this lonely mountain boy. Inured to dangers and deeds of violence, and hunted like a wild animal from his tenderest years, he came at last to be the sole survivor of his faction, on whom alone it devolved to maintain their honor, in the only way recognized by them.

For one familiar with life such as this, it would have been an easy matter to fill these pages with the scenes of cruelty and vengeance that shadow the feudist's way. More difficult it was, but the author hopes more useful, and not less interesting, to portray the home life of this misguided people in such a way as to give touches, by inference alone, of



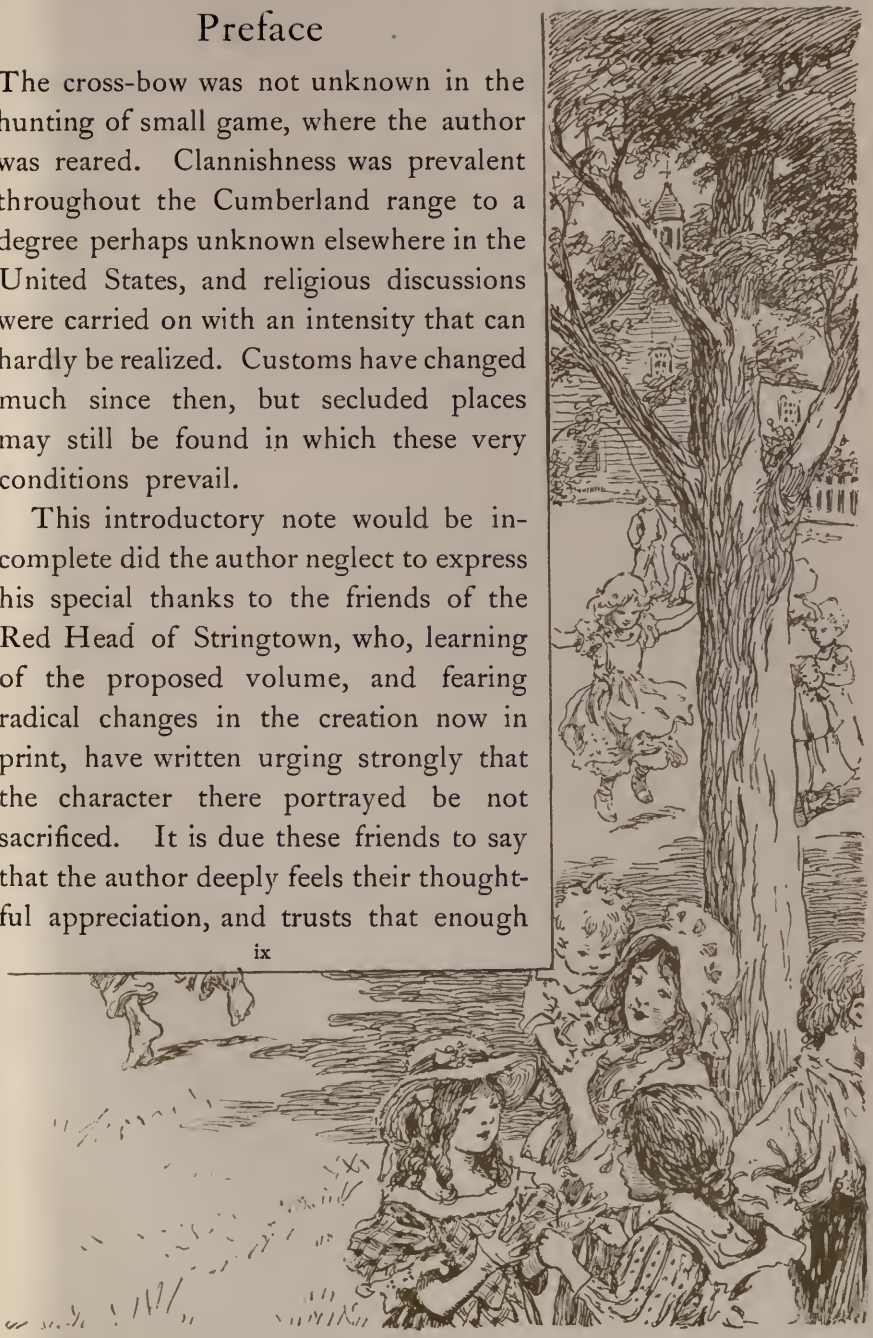
the pain and sorrow that has ever been their lot.

Tracing the origin of the feud back to mediæval English warfare may be criticised as far-fetched, and lacking historical proof. With this the author takes no issue. It may be considered in the light of an imaginative touch, intended to show the trivial nature of events which have more than once involved families of wide relationship in a warfare lasting till the very tradition of the origin of the difficulty has been lost in obscurity. And yet it must not be overlooked that in many rural sections of our country are still preserved customs, traditions, superstitions, and words once common in England, but long since become obsolete in that land. To an unusual degree is this true of certain localities in Kentucky. Fifty years ago ballads were still sung there, very like the famous Old English Ballads.

Preface

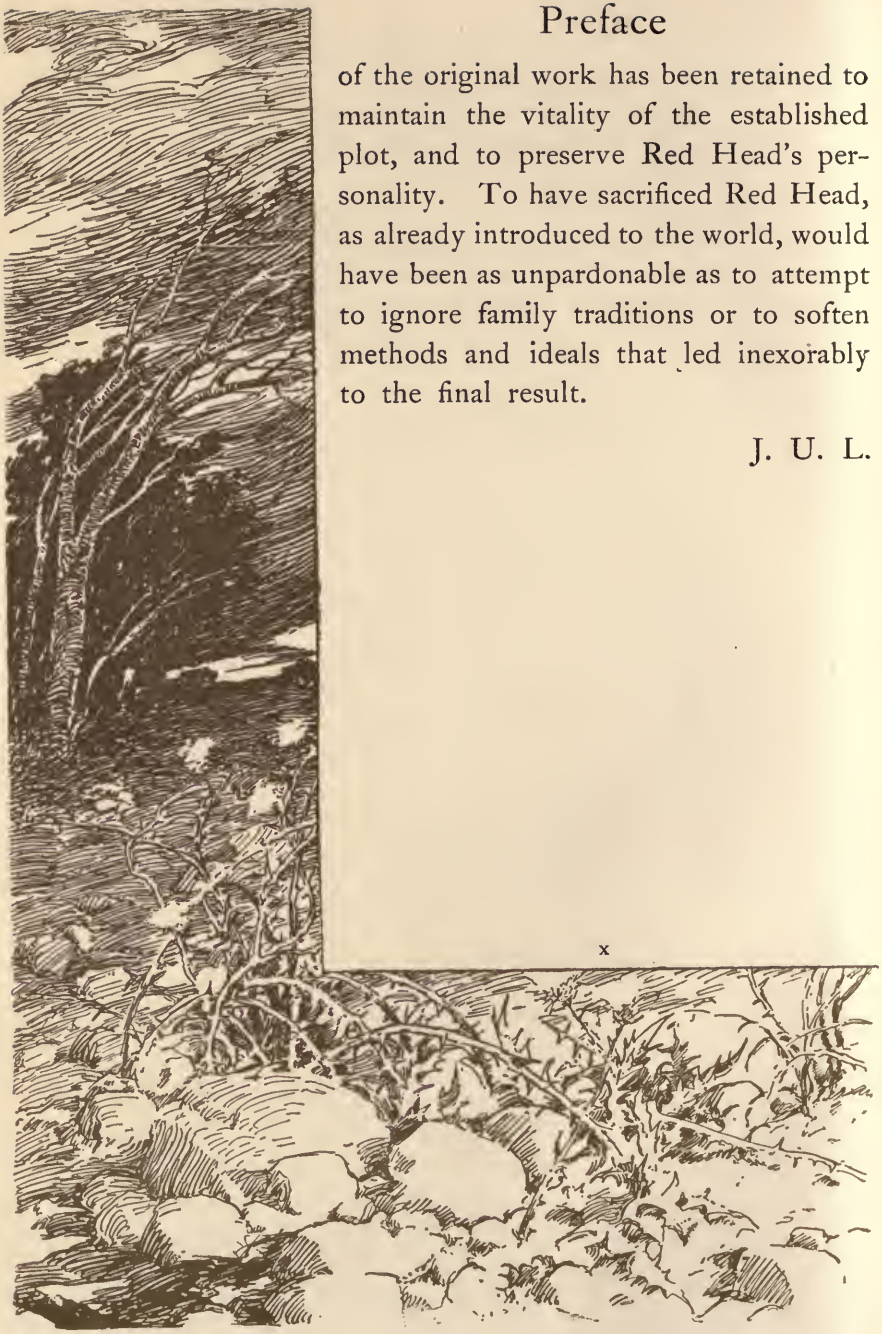
The cross-bow was not unknown in the hunting of small game, where the author was reared. Clannishness was prevalent throughout the Cumberland range to a degree perhaps unknown elsewhere in the United States, and religious discussions were carried on with an intensity that can hardly be realized. Customs have changed much since then, but secluded places may still be found in which these very conditions prevail.

This introductory note would be incomplete did the author neglect to express his special thanks to the friends of the Red Head of Stringtown, who, learning of the proposed volume, and fearing radical changes in the creation now in print, have written urging strongly that the character there portrayed be not sacrificed. It is due these friends to say that the author deeply feels their thoughtful appreciation, and trusts that enough



of the original work has been retained to maintain the vitality of the established plot, and to preserve Red Head's personality. To have sacrificed Red Head, as already introduced to the world, would have been as unpardonable as to attempt to ignore family traditions or to soften methods and ideals that led inexorably to the final result.

J. U. L.



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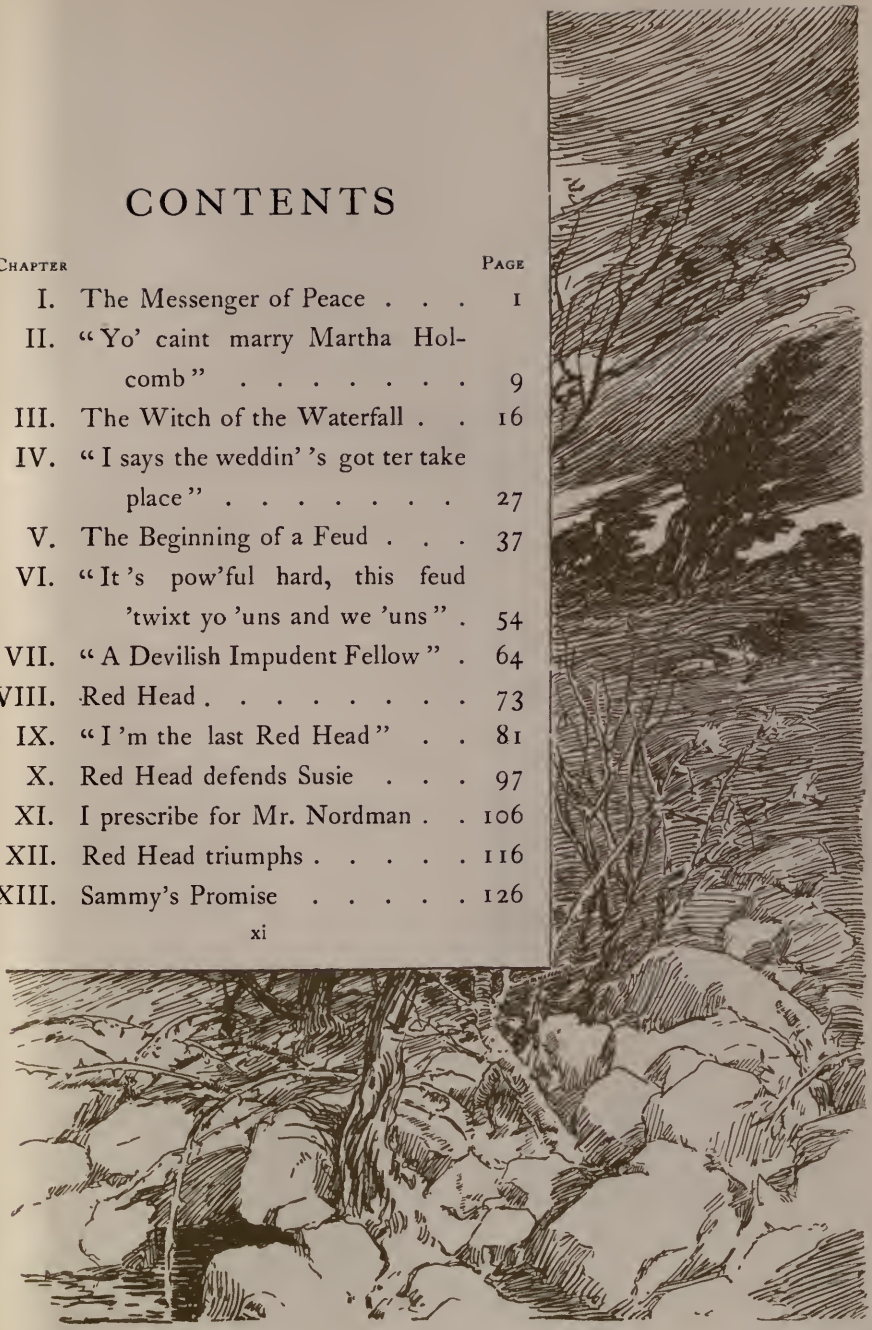

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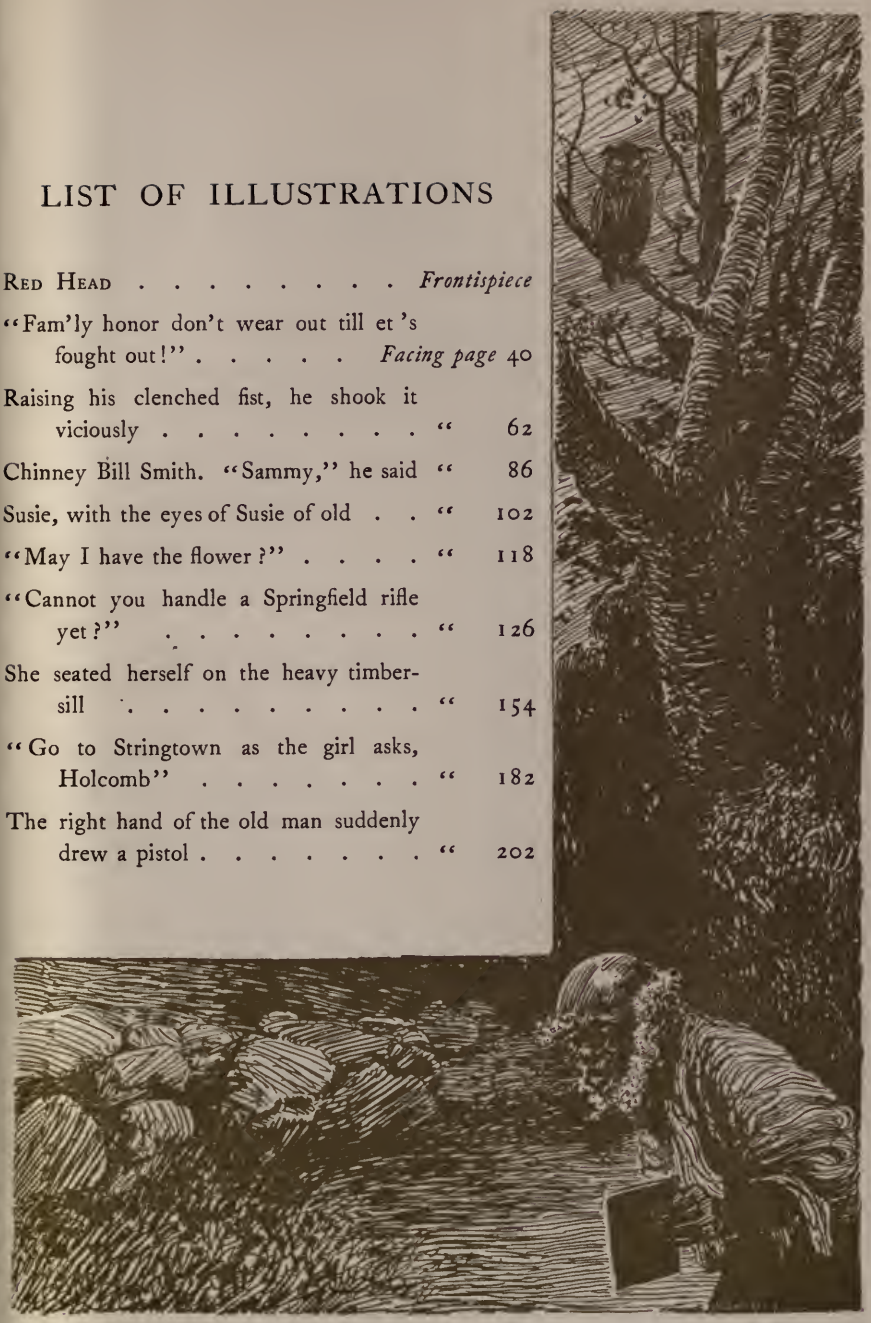


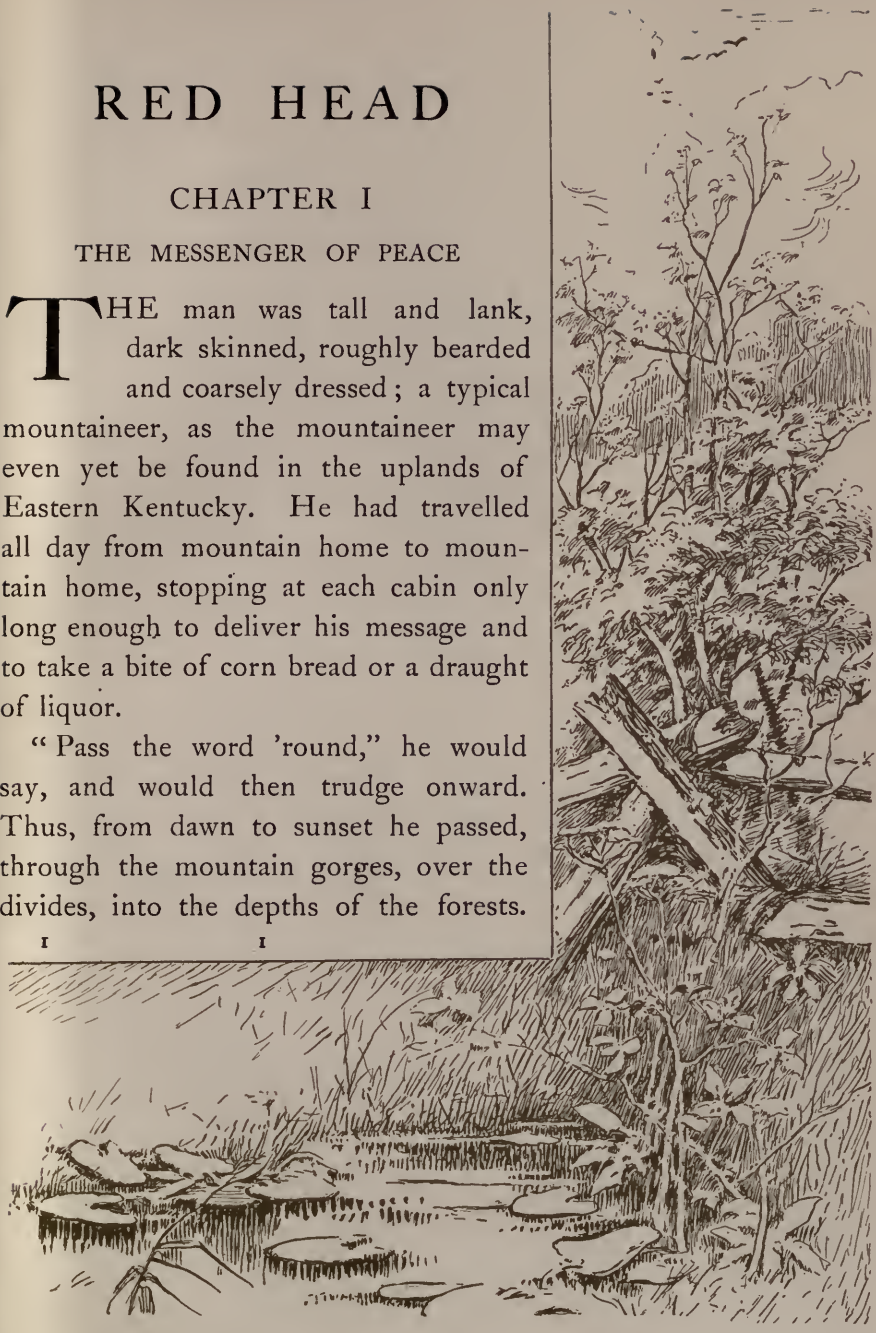
RED HEAD

CHAPTER I

THE MESSENGER OF PEACE

THE man was tall and lank, dark skinned, roughly bearded and coarsely dressed; a typical mountaineer, as the mountaineer may even yet be found in the uplands of Eastern Kentucky. He had travelled all day from mountain home to mountain home, stopping at each cabin only long enough to deliver his message and to take a bite of corn bread or a draught of liquor.

"Pass the word 'round," he would say, and would then trudge onward. Thus, from dawn to sunset he passed, through the mountain gorges, over the divides, into the depths of the forests.



At length, as dusk came down, he reached a cabin separated only by a hog-back ridge from his own home, which he had left that morning to start on his journey. The circuit had been completed; this was the last cabin to be visited.

A red-faced man, with a great shock of tangled red hair, met him at the door.

"Come in, Holcomb," said the host. "I'm mighty glad ter see you."

Holcomb was not long in making known his errand. "Thar 'll be sarvices down in the creek meetin' house next Sunday. Bring the folks and pass the word 'round."

"Who 's ter preach?"

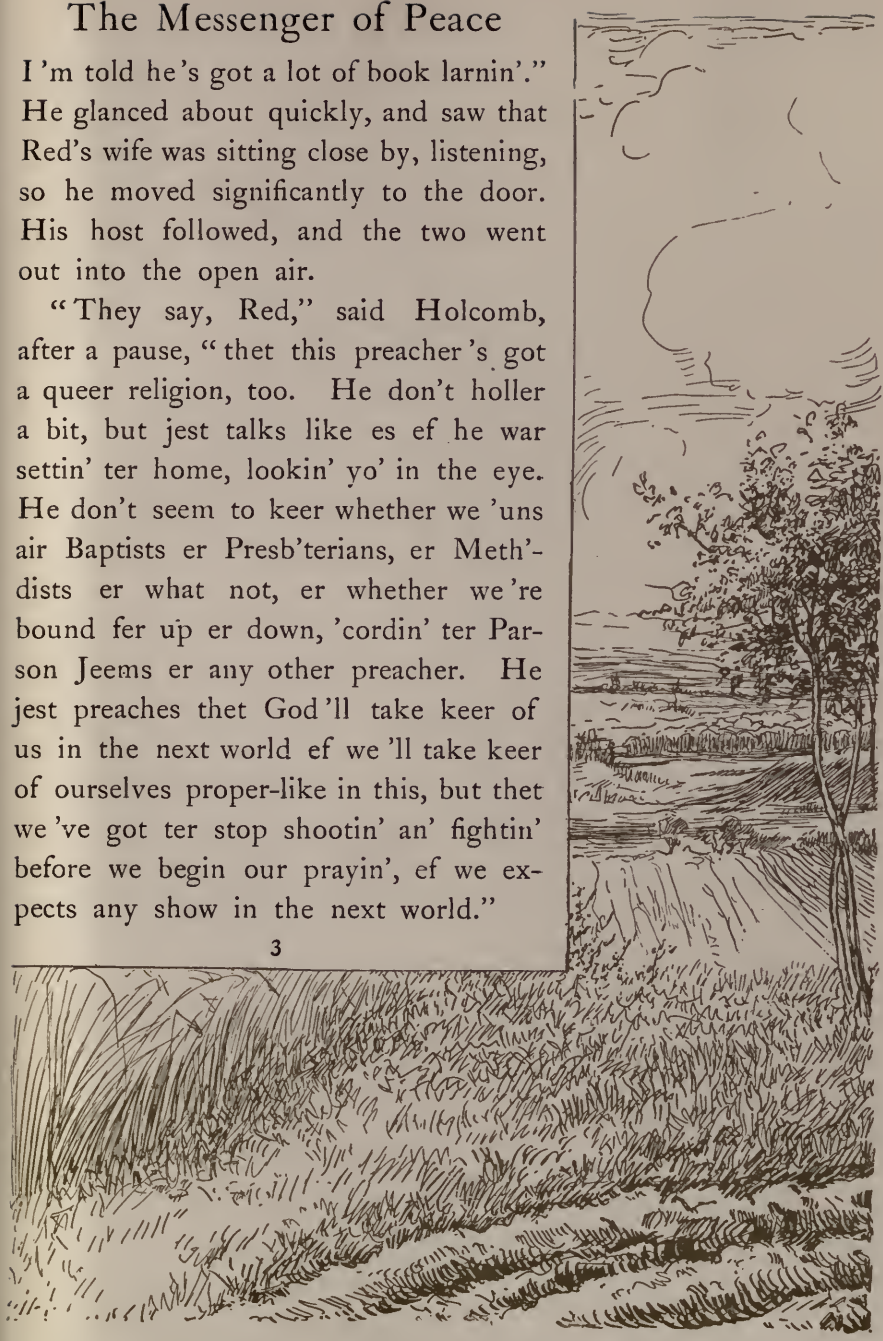
"A new man from down the state," rejoined Holcomb. "He 's said ter be pow'ful strong."

"Guess he caint beat Pappy Jeems."

"I ain't jedgin' his qualities, Red, but

I 'm told he 's got a lot of book larnin'." He glanced about quickly, and saw that Red's wife was sitting close by, listening, so he moved significantly to the door. His host followed, and the two went out into the open air.

"They say, Red," said Holcomb, after a pause, "thet this preacher 's got a queer religion, too. He don't holler a bit, but jest talks like es ef he war settin' ter home, lookin' yo' in the eye. He don't seem to keer whether we 'uns air Baptists er Presb'terians, er Meth'dists er what not, er whether we 're bound fer up er down, 'cordin' ter Parson Jeems er any other preacher. He jest preaches thet God 'll take keer of us in the next world ef we 'll take keer of ourselves proper-like in this, but thet we 've got ter stop shootin' an' fightin' before we begin our prayin', ef we expects any show in the next world."



"How'll the folks here-about take sech religion?" asked Red. "Mebbe thet's all right for the bottom land people, but seems ter me et's pow'ful out of place in the moun'ns."

"Thet's what I'm thinkin'," assented Holcomb, "an' thet's what makes his doctrine dang'rous."

"Dang'rous ter we 'uns, Holcomb?"

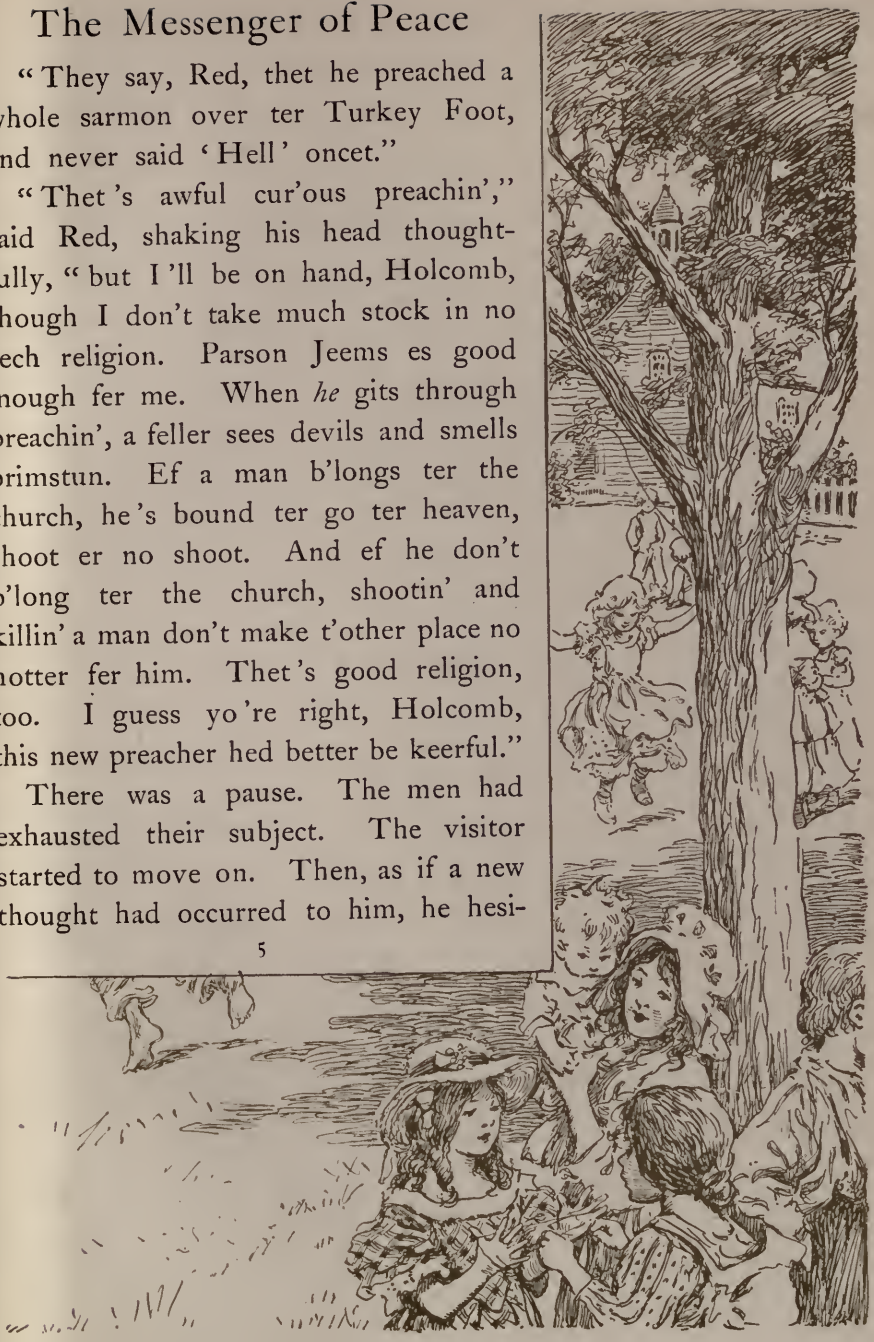
"No, ter the new preacher," said the other, drily. "But they say he's grit and talks out, right in the face of men who travel with thar hands on thar guns. He don't seem ter skeer er flinch a mite. He jest looks a man in the eye and says his say. Queer religion, ain't it, Red, thet consarns itself most in feedin' and clothin' children, and lovin' a feller yo' wants ter shoot, and bein' kind ter neighbors one hates like sin."

"I don't see much *religion* ter sech preachin' es thet," replied Red, doggedly.

"They say, Red, thet he preached a whole sarmon over ter Turkey Foot, and never said 'Hell' oncet."

"Thet 's awful cur'ous preachin'," said Red, shaking his head thoughtfully, "but I 'll be on hand, Holcomb, though I don't take much stock in no sech religion. Parson Jeems es good 'nough fer me. When *he* gits through preachin', a feller sees devils and smells brimstun. Ef a man b'longs ter the church, he 's bound ter go ter heaven, shoot er no shoot. And ef he don't b'long ter the church, shootin' and killin' a man don't make t'other place no hotter fer him. Thet 's good religion, too. I guess yo 're right, Holcomb, this new preacher hed better be keerful."

There was a pause. The men had exhausted their subject. The visitor started to move on. Then, as if a new thought had occurred to him, he hesi-



tated. "By the way," he said, "yore oldest boy's pow'ful sweet on our Martha, and I've obsarved she ain't shy no more when he's 'bout. Guess yo've noticed 'em, though."

At this, a shadow passed over the ruddy face of the cabin's owner.

"Holcomb, yo're right," he said at length. "I've noticed them chicks, and now's the best time fer me'n you ter talk fam'ly matters over. P'raps yo've noticed thar hain't never been a weddin' 'twixt we 'uns and yo 'uns." Holcomb's countenance hardened.

"Thar ain't no reason I knows of why a weddin' should n't be. They're a pow'ful nice couple, and both fam'lies air grit."

"Thar is a reason, Deacon Holcomb, and till et's settled, my boy caint marry inter the Holcombs."

Holcomb turned quickly. Deliber-

ately drawing a pistol, he shoved its muzzle close to the face of Red. But Red, looking him straight in the eye, showed not the slightest sign of fear. The seconds passed until Holcomb broke the silence.

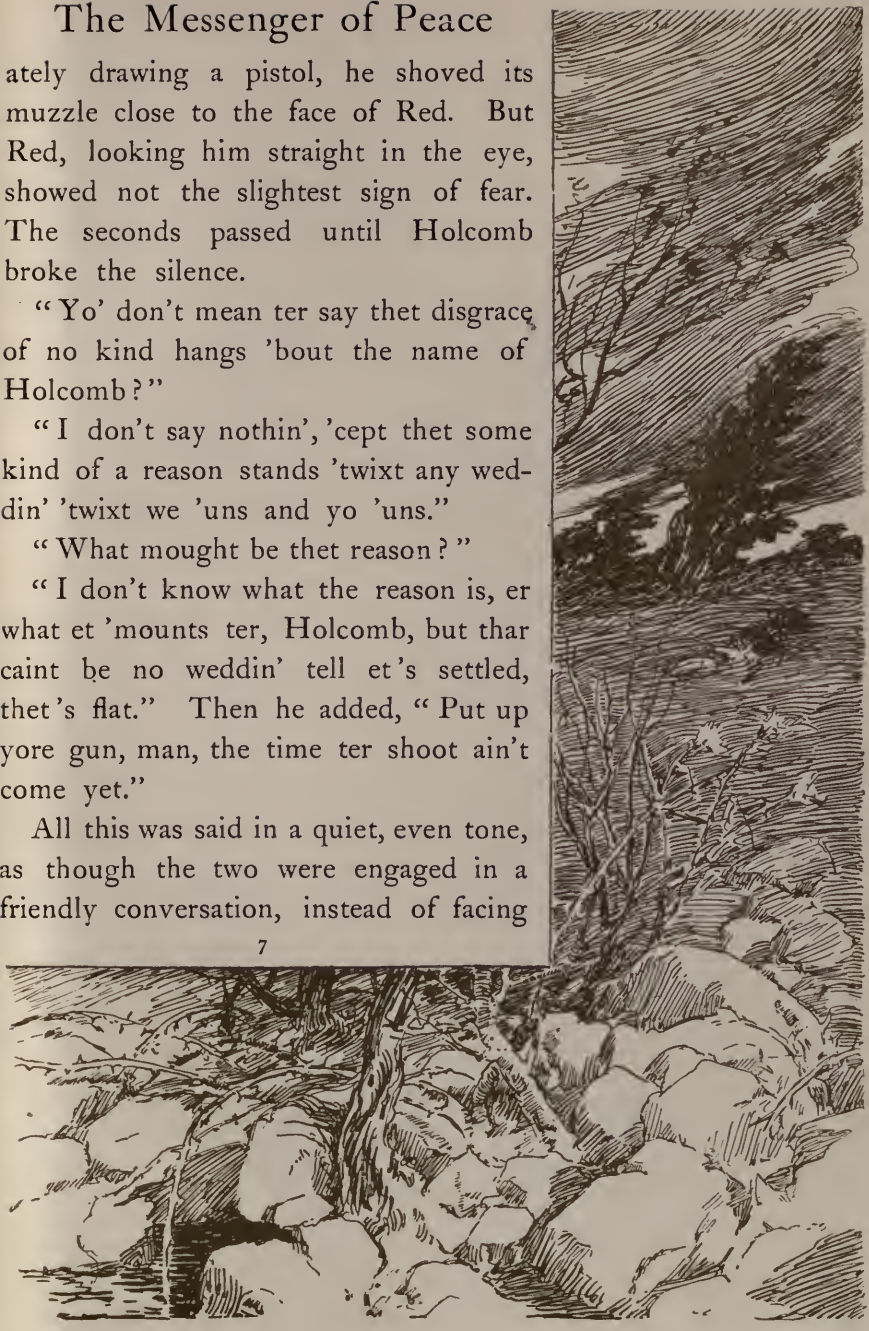
"Yo' don't mean ter say thet disgrace of no kind hangs 'bout the name of Holcomb?"

"I don't say nothin', 'cept thet some kind of a reason stands 'twixt any weddin' 'twixt we 'uns and yo 'uns."

"What mought be thet reason?"

"I don't know what the reason is, er what et 'mounts ter, Holcomb, but thar caint be no weddin' tell et's settled, thet's flat." Then he added, "Put up yore gun, man, the time ter shoot ain't come yet."

All this was said in a quiet, even tone, as though the two were engaged in a friendly conversation, instead of facing



each other pistol in hand. Then Holcomb slowly lowered and replaced his weapon.

"Them words mean thet the gun comes out ag'in, ef thet reason touches the Holcombs."

"Thar'll be more 'n one gun pulled ef shootin''s ter be did," replied Red.

"P'raps; but let's git ter the reason."

"The reason 'll be ready fer the next time we meet."

For a moment each stood as though undecided about the next movement.

"Guess yo're right," said Holcomb, at last. "The reason kin be given next time we meet, but I wants et *then* and I wants et bad." He turned to go. "Be sure yo' come ter hear the new preacher."

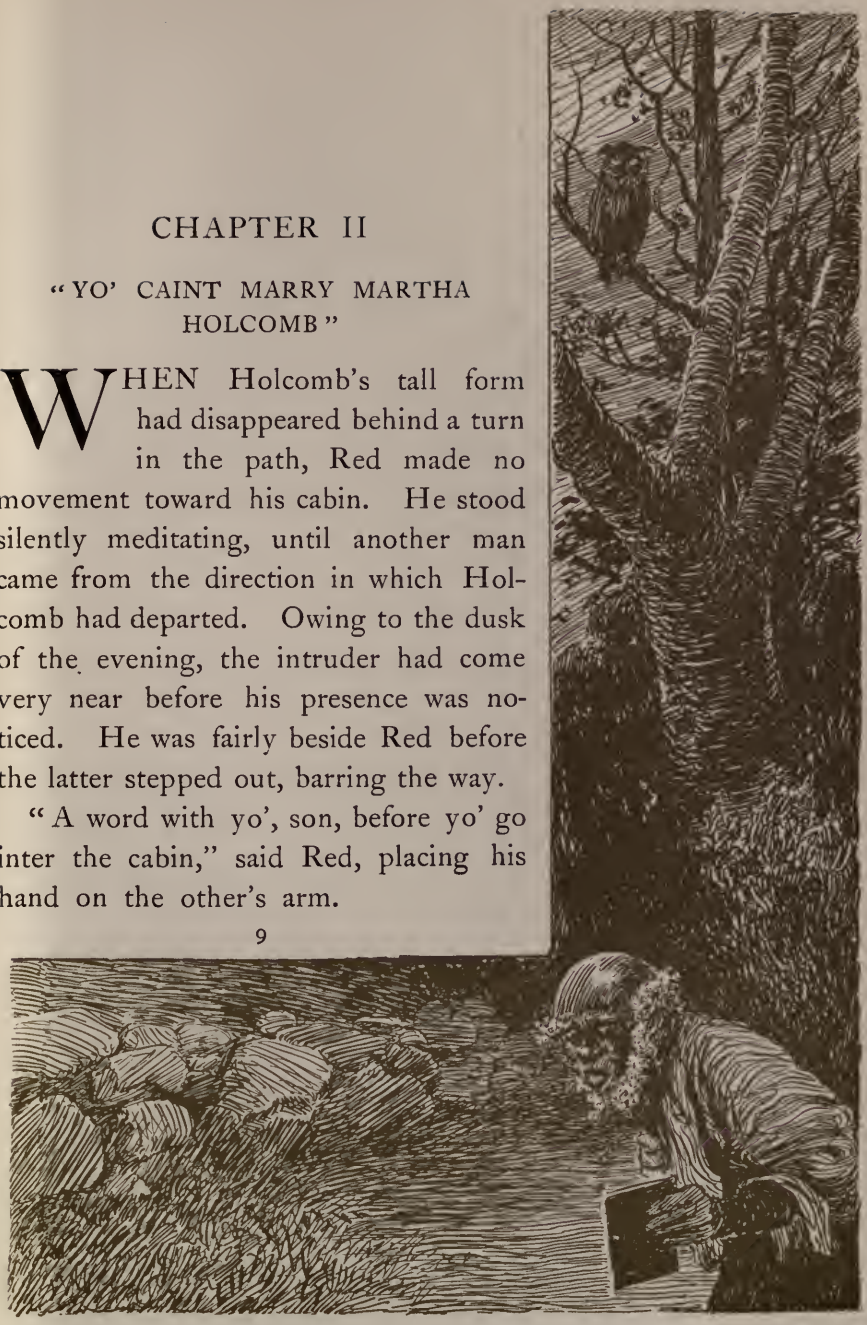
"We'll all be on hand," said Red, grimly.

CHAPTER II

"YO' CAINT MARRY MARTHA HOLCOMB"

WHEN Holcomb's tall form had disappeared behind a turn in the path, Red made no movement toward his cabin. He stood silently meditating, until another man came from the direction in which Holcomb had departed. Owing to the dusk of the evening, the intruder had come very near before his presence was noticed. He was fairly beside Red before the latter stepped out, barring the way.

"A word with yo', son, before yo' go inter the cabin," said Red, placing his hand on the other's arm.



"What is it, dad?"

"'Peers ter me, yo' and Martha Holcomb air gittin' right sweet on each other."

"Well, pap," answered the boy, "she 's a pow'ful nice gearl."

"The Holcombs air grit, and no one kin say a word 'g'inst 'em, young er old. I says, too, the gearl 's a nice one," admitted Red.

"Thet 's fact, pap, an' thet 's why we shine up ter each other."

"Yes, I says all thet, but thar caint be no weddin' 'twixt we 'uns and the Holcombs."

"What does yer mean, dad?" said the young man, looking anxiously into his father's face.

"I mean," said Red, doggedly, averting his eyes, "thet thar air reasons fer what I says. Yo' caint marry Martha Holcomb."

The youth started, and an anxious pallor came over his face. "Dad," he said quickly, "I've done spoke ter Martha, and she's said yes."

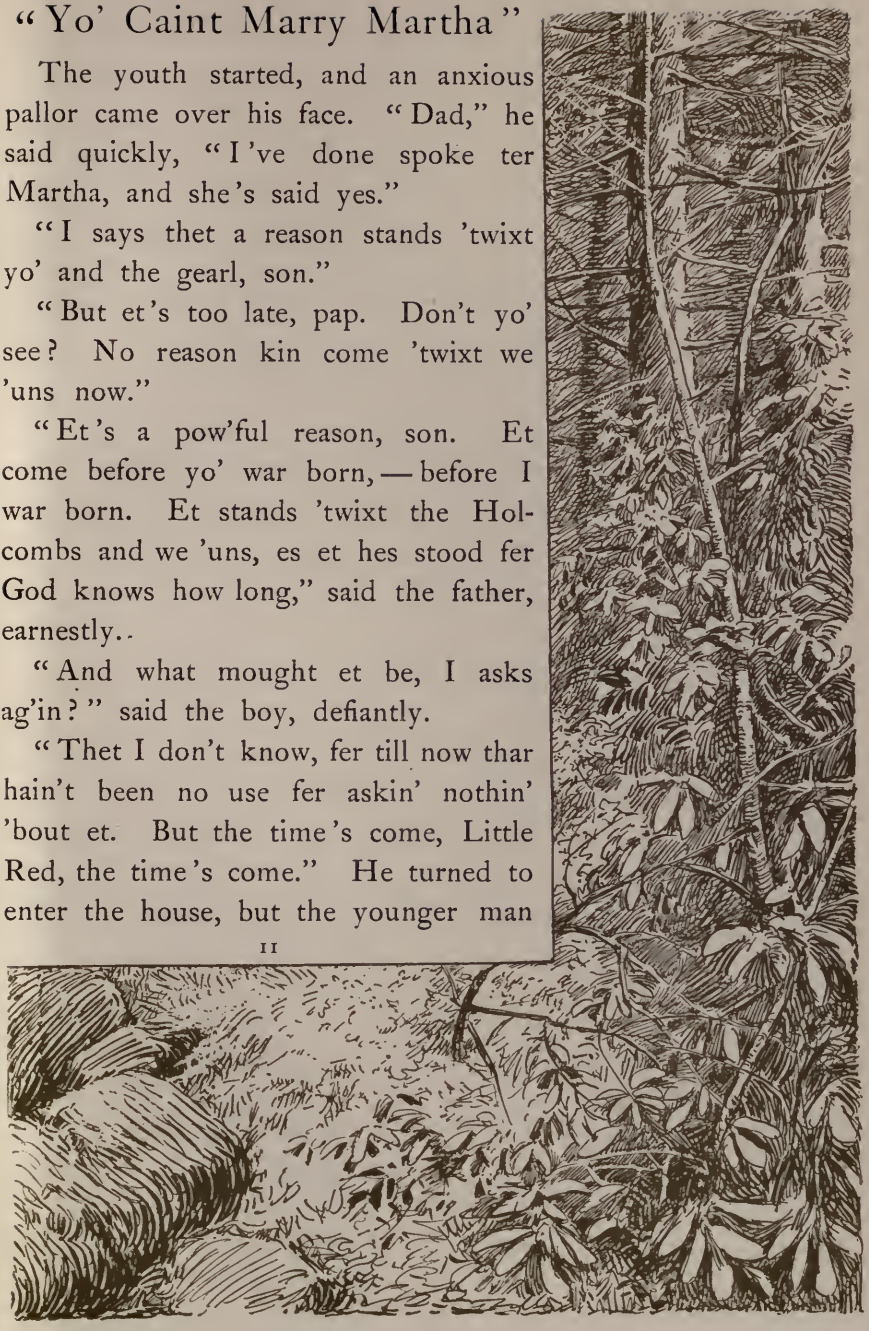
"I says thet a reason stands 'twixt yo' and the gearl, son."

"But et's too late, pap. Don't yo' see? No reason kin come 'twixt we 'uns now."

"Et's a pow'ful reason, son. Et come before yo' war born, — before I war born. Et stands 'twixt the Holcombs and we 'uns, es et hes stood fer God knows how long," said the father, earnestly..

"And what mought et be, I asks ag'in?" said the boy, defiantly.

"Thet I don't know, fer till now thar hain't been no use fer askin' nothin' 'bout et. But the time's come, Little Red, the time's come." He turned to enter the house, but the younger man



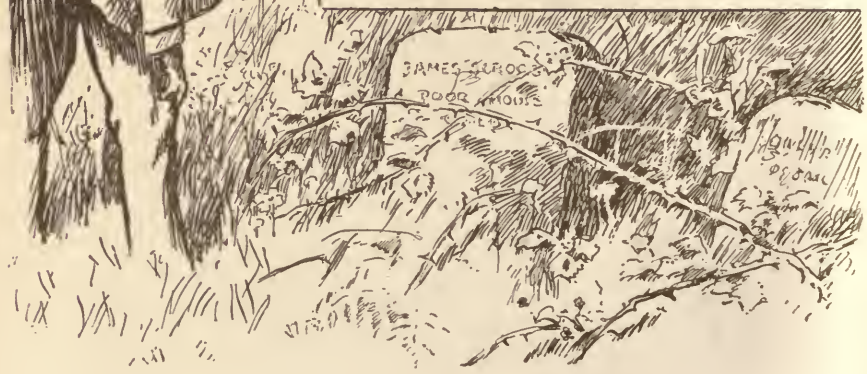
caught him by the arm with a grip that could not be shaken off.

"Wait," said Red, "we'll talk of et later. I'll git the dokyments, and then Holcomb an' me'll settle the question. Thar ain't nothin' yo' kin do, nothin' but keep yore tongue from talkin' 'bout what yo' hev heerd."

The boy sullenly assented, and together they entered the cabin and sat down with the family to their frugal supper of corn bread and fried bacon. After it was finished and the children had gone to bed, the youth took his hat and left the room, telling his parents that he would be home along about morning. "Thar's a dance 'crost the ridge," he explained.

Red looked at his wife. "Whar?" he asked.

"Over ter Holcomb's," said his son, closing the door behind him. The

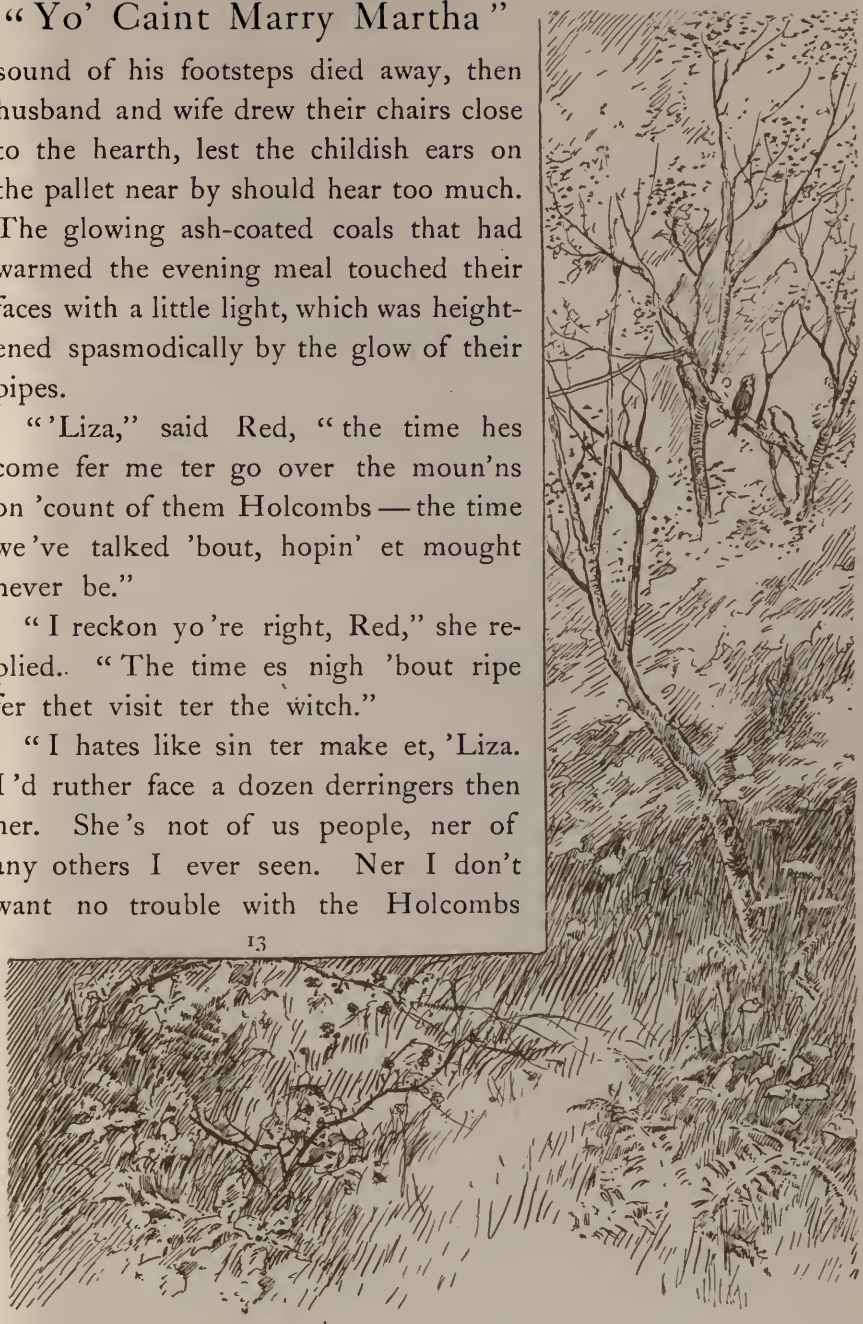


sound of his footsteps died away, then husband and wife drew their chairs close to the hearth, lest the childish ears on the pallet near by should hear too much. The glowing ash-coated coals that had warmed the evening meal touched their faces with a little light, which was heightened spasmodically by the glow of their pipes.

"'Liza," said Red, "the time hes come fer me ter go over the moun'ns on 'count of them Holcombs — the time we've talked 'bout, hopin' et mought never be."

"I reckon yo're right, Red," she replied.. "The time es nigh 'bout ripe fer thet visit ter the witch."

"I hates like sin ter make et, 'Liza. I'd ruther face a dozen derringers then her. She's not of us people, ner of any others I ever seen. Ner I don't want no trouble with the Holcombs



neither, but et's comin', 'Liza, sure es fate."

"Must yo' go, Red?"

"Yes, I caint see no way of gittin' out of et. 'When thar's danger of a weddin' 'twixt the Holcombs and we 'uns,' I said ter dad as he lay dyin', 'I'll go ter the witch's house, es yo' makes me promise ter do.' Then pap reached out his hand. 'Et must be in the night,' he said. 'Liza, thar ain't no way es I kin see of 'scapin' thet promise." They remained for a time in silence.

"Pow'ful cur'ous how a witch kin see 'cross the days thet's not been born, Red."

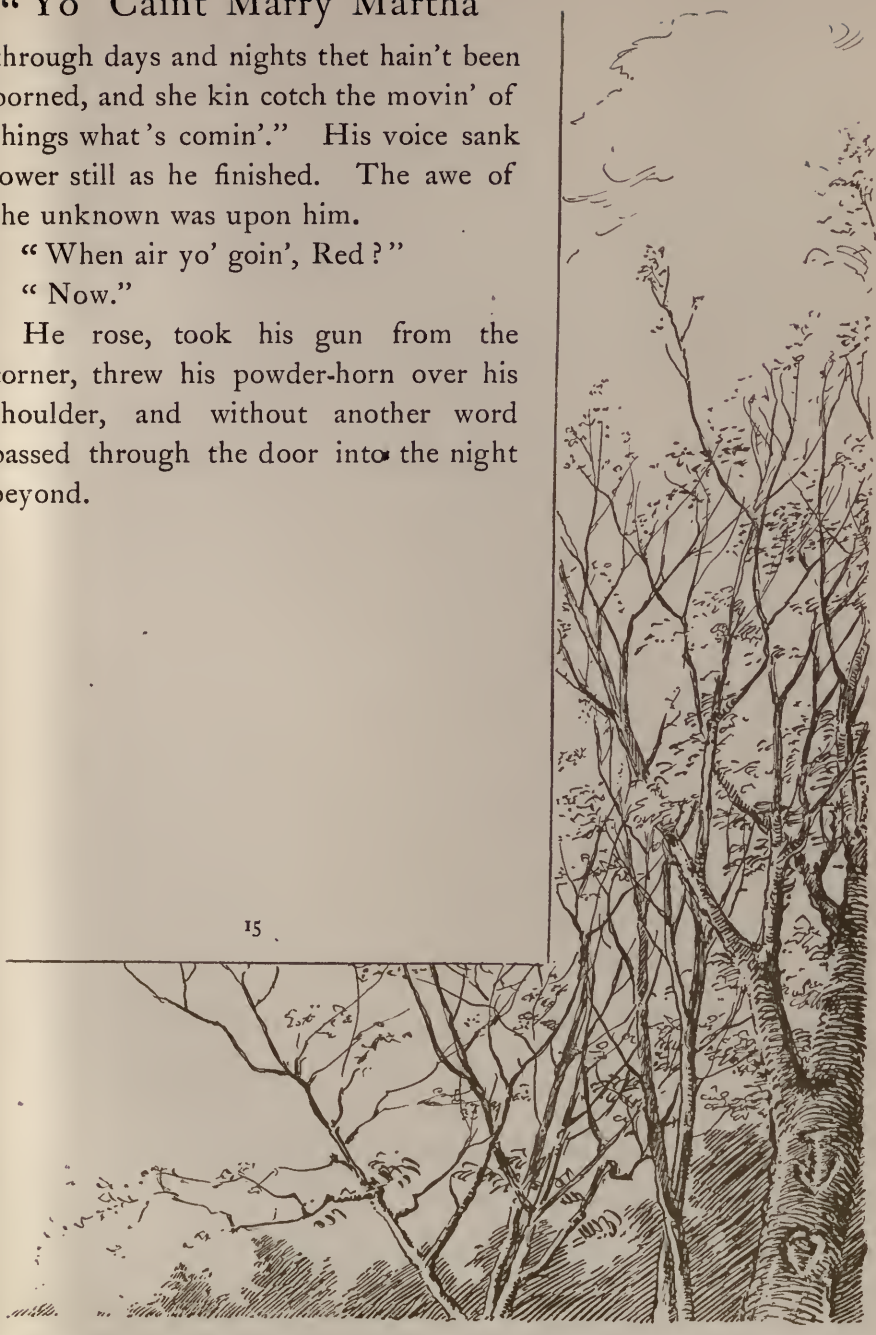
"But she kin, jest es easy es I kin stand on a moun'n-top and see 'crost the valleys and ridges 'twixt, ter the next big moun'n. 'Liza, a man kin see in the day what's made, an owl in the night thet's gloamin', but a witch kin see

through days and nights thet hain't been borned, and she kin cotch the movin' of things what 's comin'." His voice sank lower still as he finished. The awe of the unknown was upon him.

"When air yo' goin', Red?"

"Now."

He rose, took his gun from the corner, threw his powder-horn over his shoulder, and without another word passed through the door into the night beyond.



CHAPTER III

THE WITCH OF THE WATERFALL

THE art of the woodsman comes near to the craft of the seer who peers into things covered from common folks. The manner in which he passes in darkness from point to point, where neither object, way, nor self is visible, approaches dangerously near the occult.

Red but expressed the wonder others have felt when confronted with the fact that some persons seemingly have the power of projecting their vision across the light and shadows of approaching day and night. Yet he was not aware of his own rare gift of treading the dark

trails that skirted the bluff's edge and lined the very torrent's brink. In confidence he trudged along the mountain ways, across the valley, along the hillside, through the forest, where twilight deepens into darkness, over the crest of the ridge, down into the hollows beyond. There he struck the edge of a mountain creek. Turning to follow up its course, he came to where, in the stillness, could be caught a moaning that seemed rather to be felt than heard. He went on. The moan became a distant groan, then a roar, and next,—a mountain waterfall, wrapped in darkness, thundered by his side. Clambering up a tortuous trail to the rock above, he stood upon a flat stone plateau. Near him, in the very spray of the waterfall, yawned the mouth of a cavern.

But so dense was the darkness that only because he knew it to be there did

this cavern exist for him. The fall of water was close below, yet the sound seemed now to come as an echo from the distance, the shelving rock cutting off its directness. Then, from the darkness of the cavern's mouth, came the sound of a human voice — a voice that now low, now almost shrill, chanted and wailed an old English ballad, which seemed sadly out of place in those Eastern Kentucky wilds.

"Like to the falling of a star,
Or as the flights of eagles are,
Or like the fresh spring's gaudy hue,
Or silver drops of morning dew,
Or like a wind that chafes the flood,
Or bubbles which on water stood —
Even such is man, whose borrowed light
Is straight called in, and paid to-night."

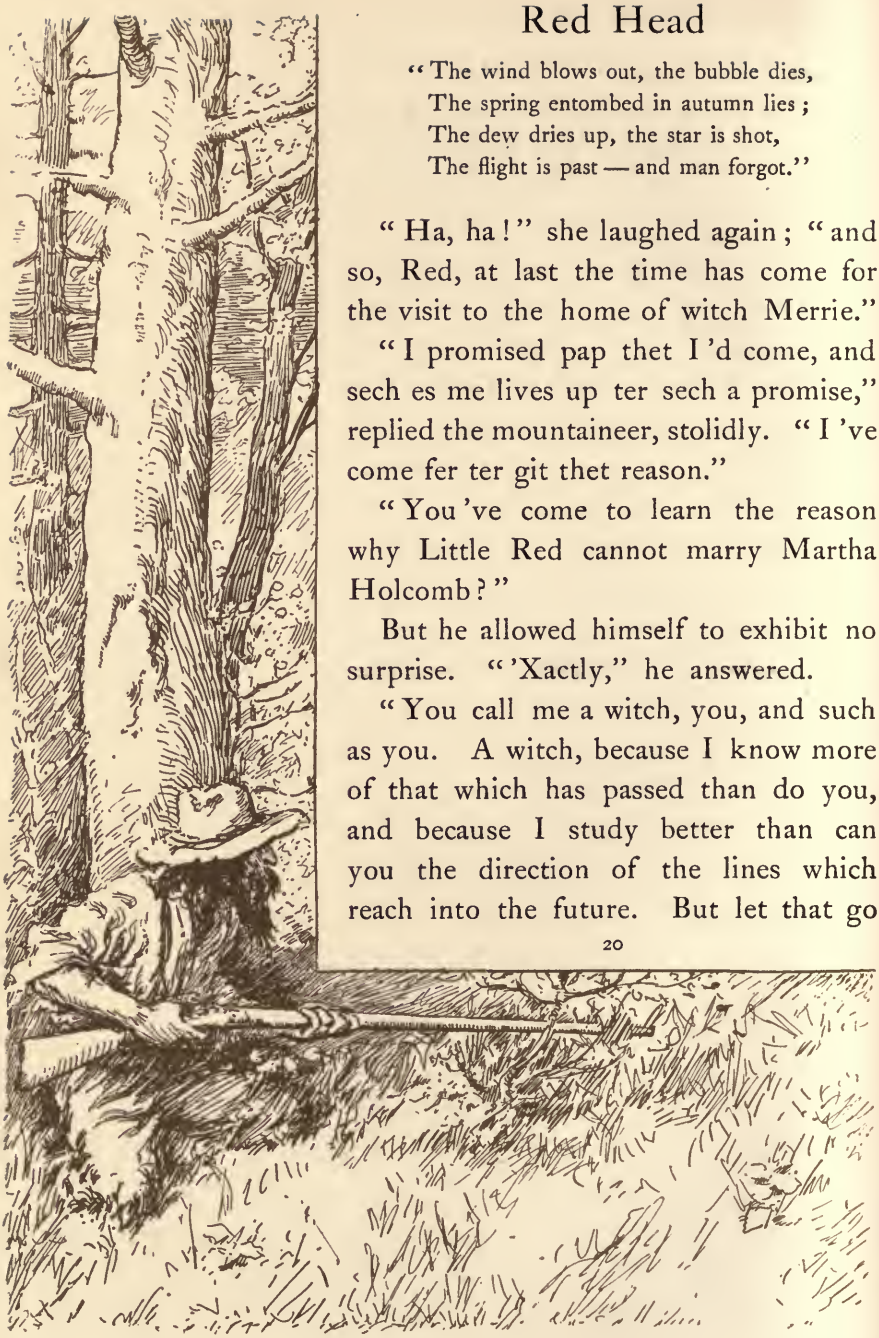
Red stood listening until the last word, and then moved forward cautiously. Suddenly a laugh rang out, so

loud and shrill, so weird and startling, that it made him start and hesitate.

"Ha, ha, my man! and has the time come for the visit to the witch? Ha, ha!"

He shuddered at the uncanny reception. Again the voice rang out. "Come in, man, come in out of the night!"

Advancing, he passed through the entrance of the cavern, turned an angle in the stone crevice, and moved toward the flickering ray of light. A flaming sycamore ball, floating in a pan of grease, lighted the rude apartment. By its side, with upturned face, sat a form, indistinct in the shifting lights and shadows. As he drew nearer, the form rose and stood before him, revealing a woman, tall, very tall. Placing both hands on his shoulders she looked him full in the face, and in a low dirge chanted the remainder of the verse that had just sounded in his ear:



Red Head

"The wind blows out, the bubble dies,
The spring entombed in autumn lies;
The dew dries up, the star is shot,
The flight is past — and man forgot."

"Ha, ha!" she laughed again; "and so, Red, at last the time has come for the visit to the home of witch Merrie."

"I promised pap thet I 'd come, and sech es me lives up ter sech a promise," replied the mountaineer, stolidly. "I 've come fer ter git thet reason."

"You 've come to learn the reason why Little Red cannot marry Martha Holcomb?"

But he allowed himself to exhibit no surprise. "'Xactly," he answered.

"You call me a witch, you, and such as you. A witch, because I know more of that which has passed than do you, and because I study better than can you the direction of the lines which reach into the future. But let that go

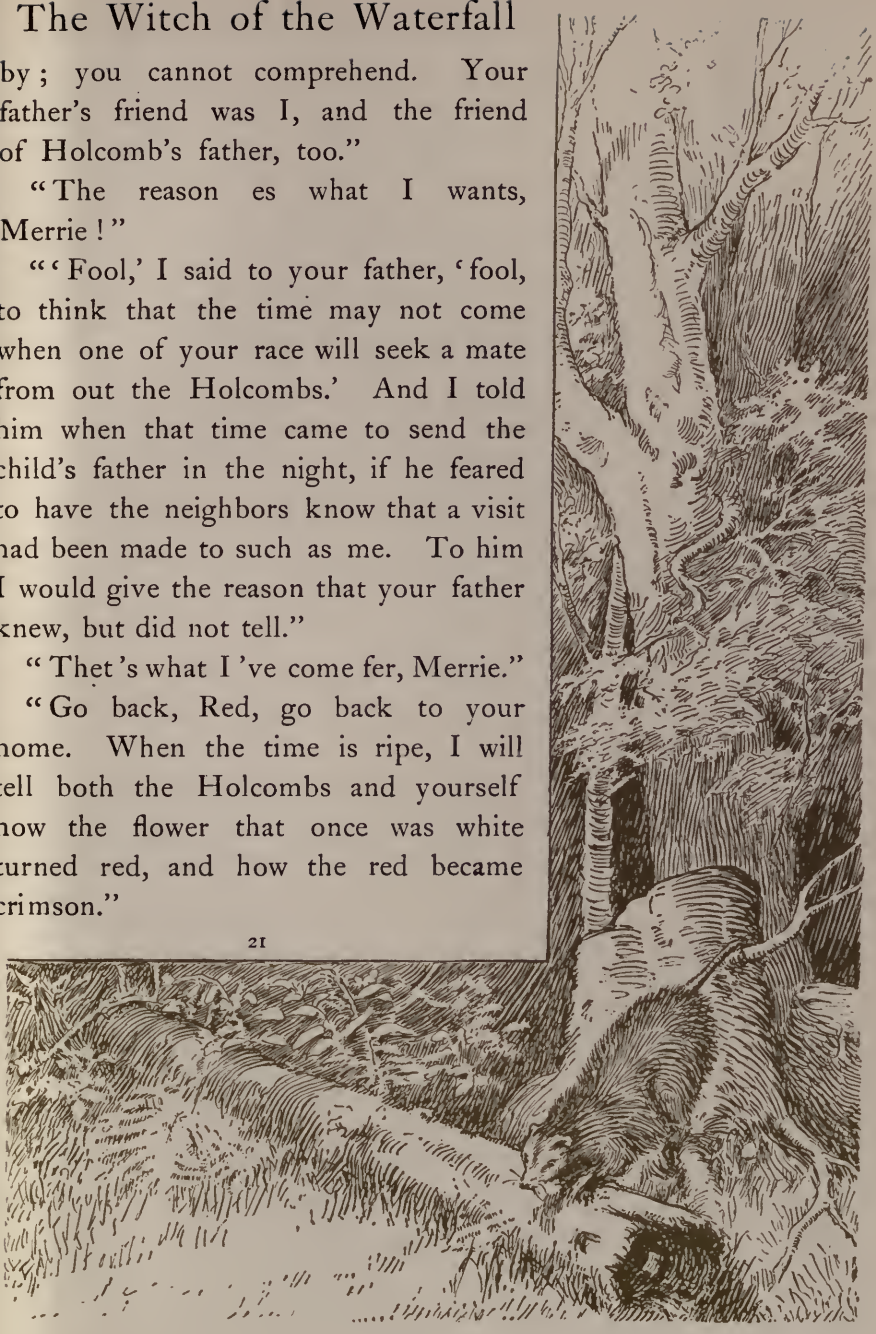
by; you cannot comprehend. Your father's friend was I, and the friend of Holcomb's father, too."

"The reason es what I wants, Merrie!"

"'Fool,' I said to your father, 'fool, to think that the time may not come when one of your race will seek a mate from out the Holcombs.' And I told him when that time came to send the child's father in the night, if he feared to have the neighbors know that a visit had been made to such as me. To him I would give the reason that your father knew, but did not tell."

"Thet 's what I 've come fer, Merrie."

"Go back, Red, go back to your home. When the time is ripe, I will tell both the Holcombs and yourself how the flower that once was white turned red, and how the red became crimson."



"I don't keer nothin' fer flowers, red ner white, ner Holcomb don't, neither."

But Merrie turned quickly on him. "Did your father not tell you to care for the bush before the cabin door, care for it when everything else was gone?"

"The bush es all right, Merrie. But flowers! Shucks! What air they ter me? The moun'ns air full of 'em."

"And how about Holcomb? Has n't he a rose-bush, too?"

"Yes. He 's got a row."

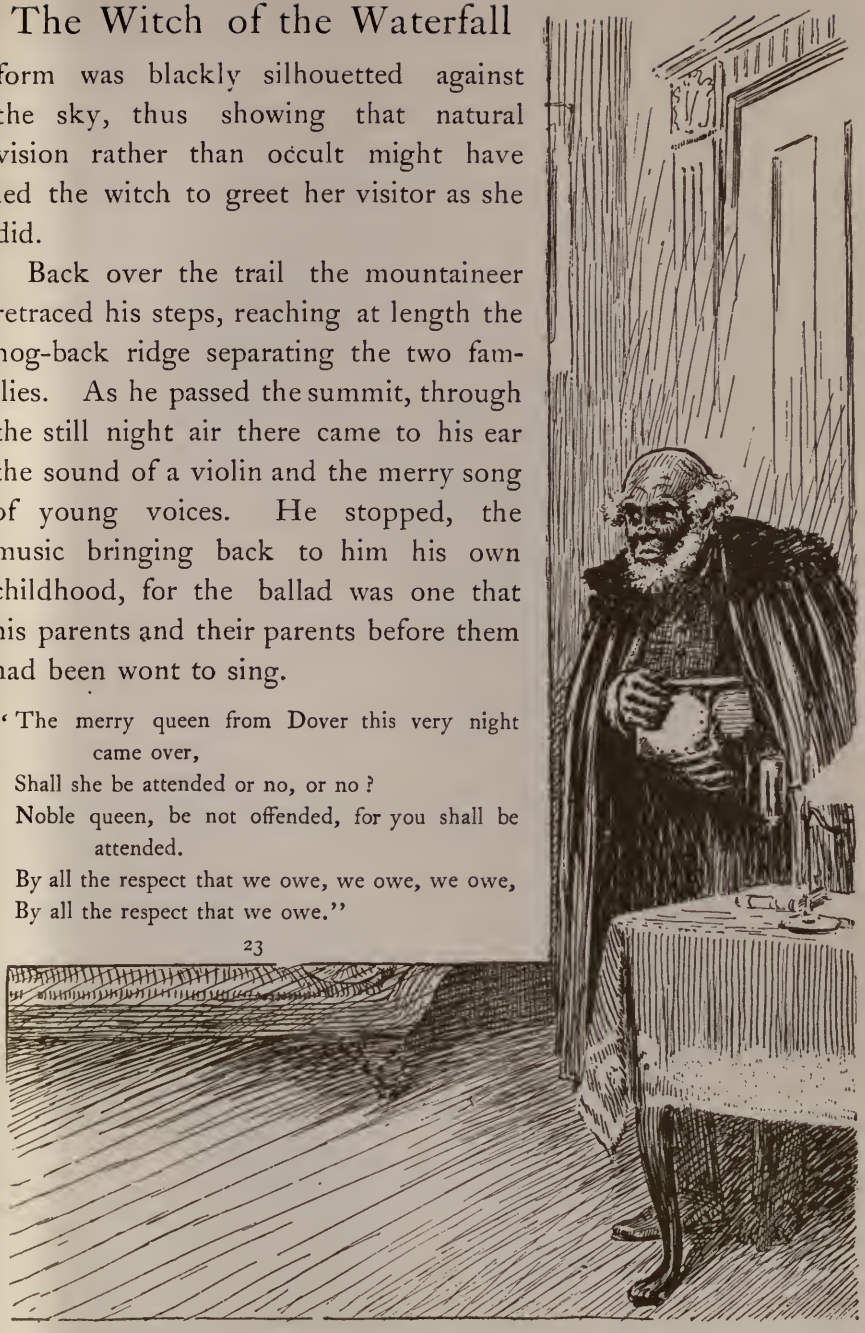
"And his are red. Go back," she cried, pointing the way. "Go back. When the time comes both you and he shall learn why there must not be a marriage between Holcomb's folks and your own."

Red attempted to expostulate, but the old woman relapsed into obstinate silence, and he reluctantly turned to go. As he passed through the cavern's opening, his

form was blackly silhouetted against the sky, thus showing that natural vision rather than occult might have led the witch to greet her visitor as she did.

Back over the trail the mountaineer retraced his steps, reaching at length the hog-back ridge separating the two families. As he passed the summit, through the still night air there came to his ear the sound of a violin and the merry song of young voices. He stopped, the music bringing back to him his own childhood, for the ballad was one that his parents and their parents before them had been wont to sing.

"The merry queen from Dover this very night came over,
Shall she be attended or no, or no?
Noble queen, be not offended, for you shall be attended.
By all the respect that we owe, we owe, we owe,
By all the respect that we owe."



He hesitated, turned to resume his march, and then stopped again as a second familiar refrain rang out in the night air.

"Sister Pheeby and me, how happy were we,
The night we sat under the Juniper tree;
The Juniper tree,
Heigh-O, Heigh-O,
The Juniper tree,
Heigh-O."

A flood of memories swept over the mountaineer. He saw again the troop of young people of his childhood days circling about a comrade, singing in unison the ballad to which he was listening. Then came the chorus —

"Put this hat on your head, keep your head warm,
And take a sweet kiss, it will do you no harm;
And another won't hurt you, I know, I know,
Another won't hurt you, I know."

Passing strange these transplanted songs, this recognition of royalty, this

reference to a tree foreign to our land, — the English juniper tree, — this tribute to Old England, and these love songs, in the home of the illiterate mountaineer. Strange that in the depths of these Kentucky mountains should be treasured songs that had passed from view even in England.

Rousing himself as the refrain died away, Red moved onward as they struck up another familiar ballad which began as follows:

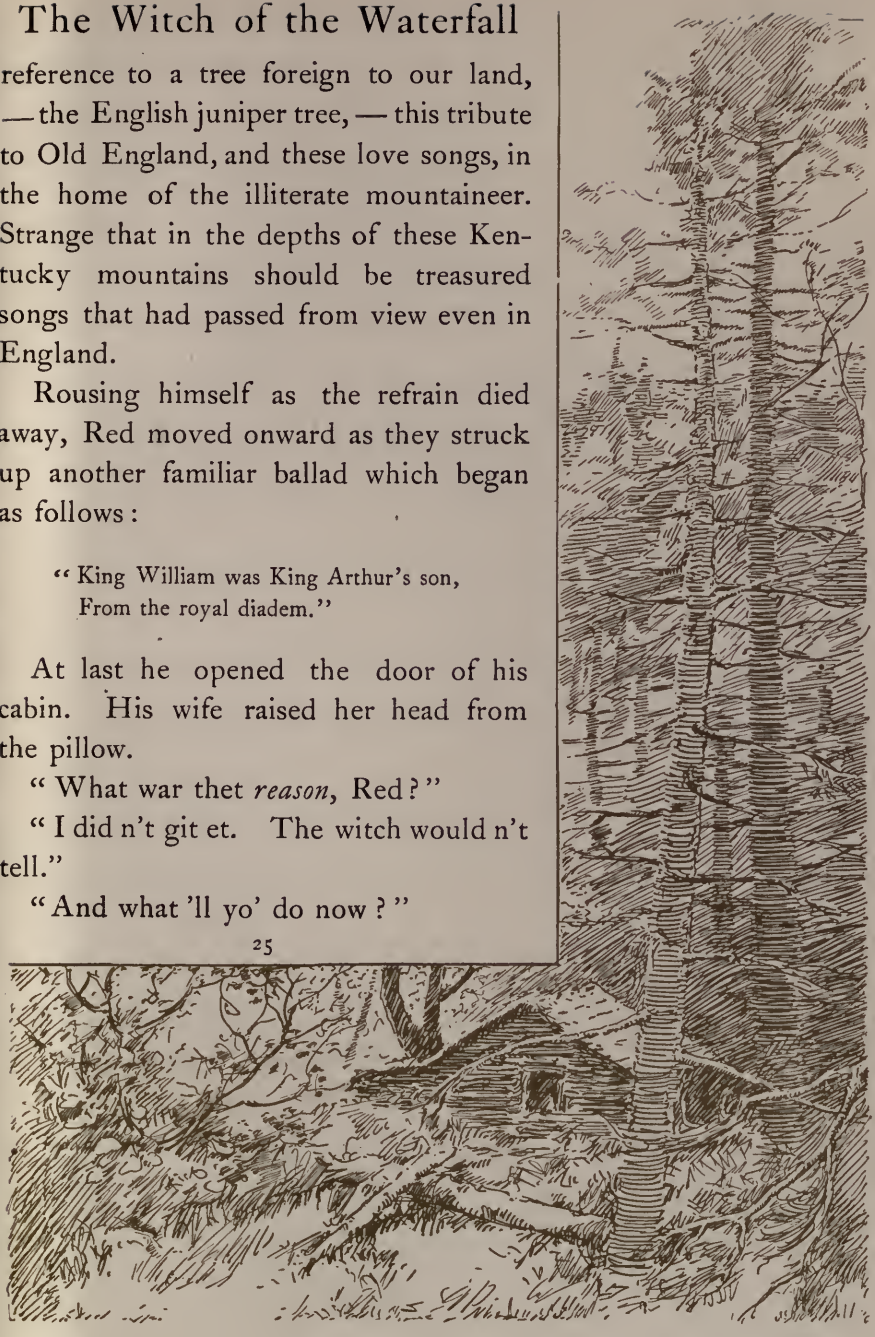
> "King William was King Arthur's son,
> From the royal diadem."

At last he opened the door of his cabin. His wife raised her head from the pillow.

"What war thet *reason*, Red?"

"I did n't git et. The witch would n't tell."

"And what 'll yo' do now?"



"Holcomb 'll ax me fer et next time we meet, sure."

"And what 'll yo' tell him?"

"I caint tell him nothin'. We 'll jest fight et out."

CHAPTER IV

"I SAYS THE WEDDIN'S GOT TER TAKE PLACE"

FROM near and far the mountain-dwellers came that Sabbath morning to the "preachin'" announced by Deacon Holcomb, making their way from their homes in the valleys, on the cliffs, and in the forest's depths. Among them were old men, too old, seemingly, to stand the journey, for most of the worshippers came on foot. There were many children, too, led by careworn mothers or lank fathers. Friends grasped hands and gave hearty greetings, while others brushed elbows, but cast no glance of recognition.

Red Head

The new preacher, he of the mild religion, was a tall, slender, white-faced young man of great depth of character, but too refined in word and manner favorably to impress an audience such as this. In a low voice he lined the psalm, in the simple fashion of the day, and musically led the tune. It was a strange text that he took, and from it he preached an equally curious sermon. A pleading it was for love of man to man. He depicted the joy of one who lived for kindness, who lived to love; and contrasted therewith the sorrow and distress of those dependent upon men swayed by passion and the mad impulse to fight. Strange, above all, did it seem to those who listened within those rude log walls. Many significant glances were exchanged; many a head was shaken in token of inward protest.

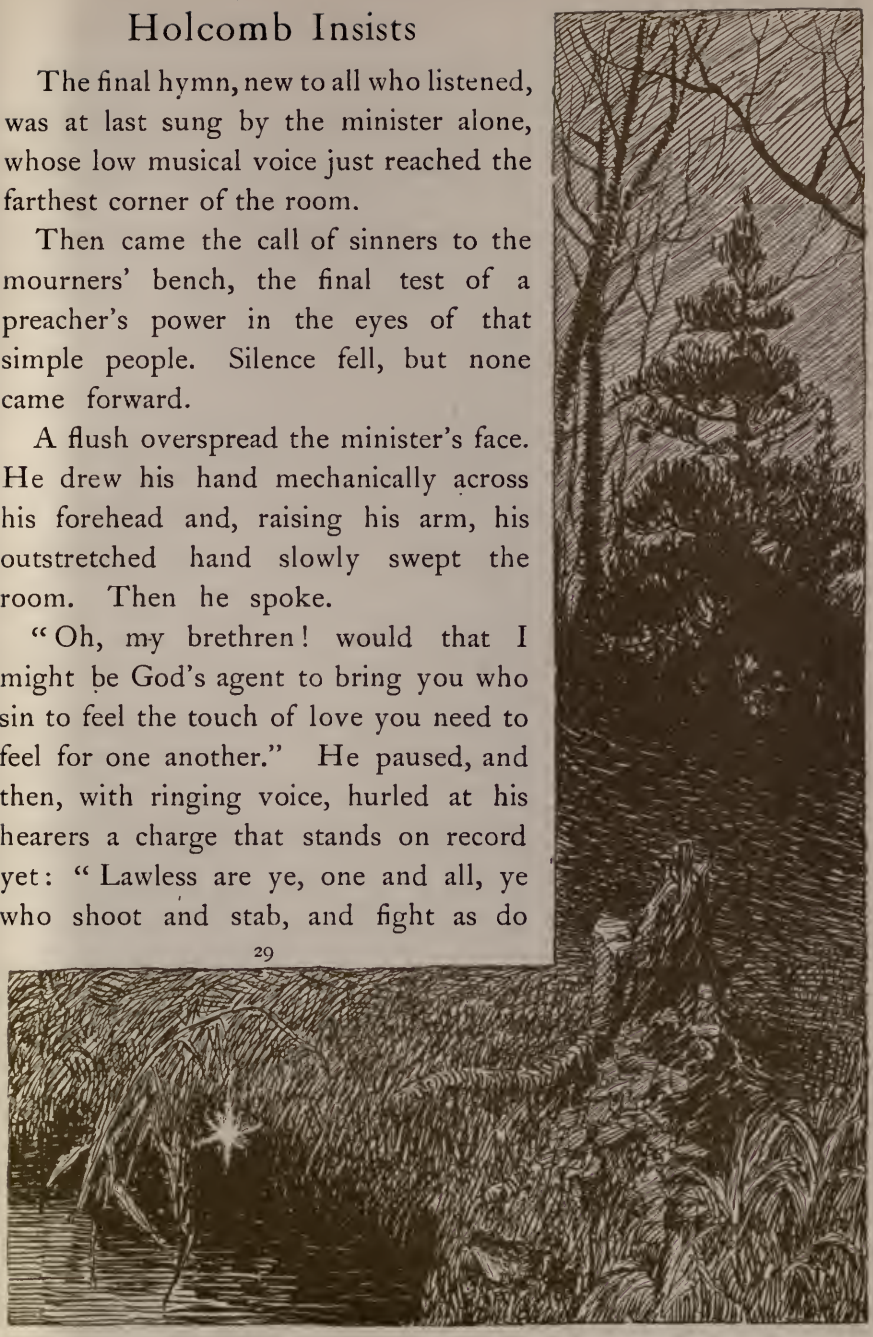
Holcomb Insists

The final hymn, new to all who listened, was at last sung by the minister alone, whose low musical voice just reached the farthest corner of the room.

Then came the call of sinners to the mourners' bench, the final test of a preacher's power in the eyes of that simple people. Silence fell, but none came forward.

A flush overspread the minister's face. He drew his hand mechanically across his forehead and, raising his arm, his outstretched hand slowly swept the room. Then he spoke.

"Oh, my brethren! would that I might be God's agent to bring you who sin to feel the touch of love you need to feel for one another." He paused, and then, with ringing voice, hurled at his hearers a charge that stands on record yet: "Lawless are ye, one and all, ye who shoot and stab, and fight as do



brutes, and yet dare not do your Master's bidding. Know, men of these mountains, that which you call bravery is cowardice — sin-begotten cowardice. Know that gods such as you worship are devils!"

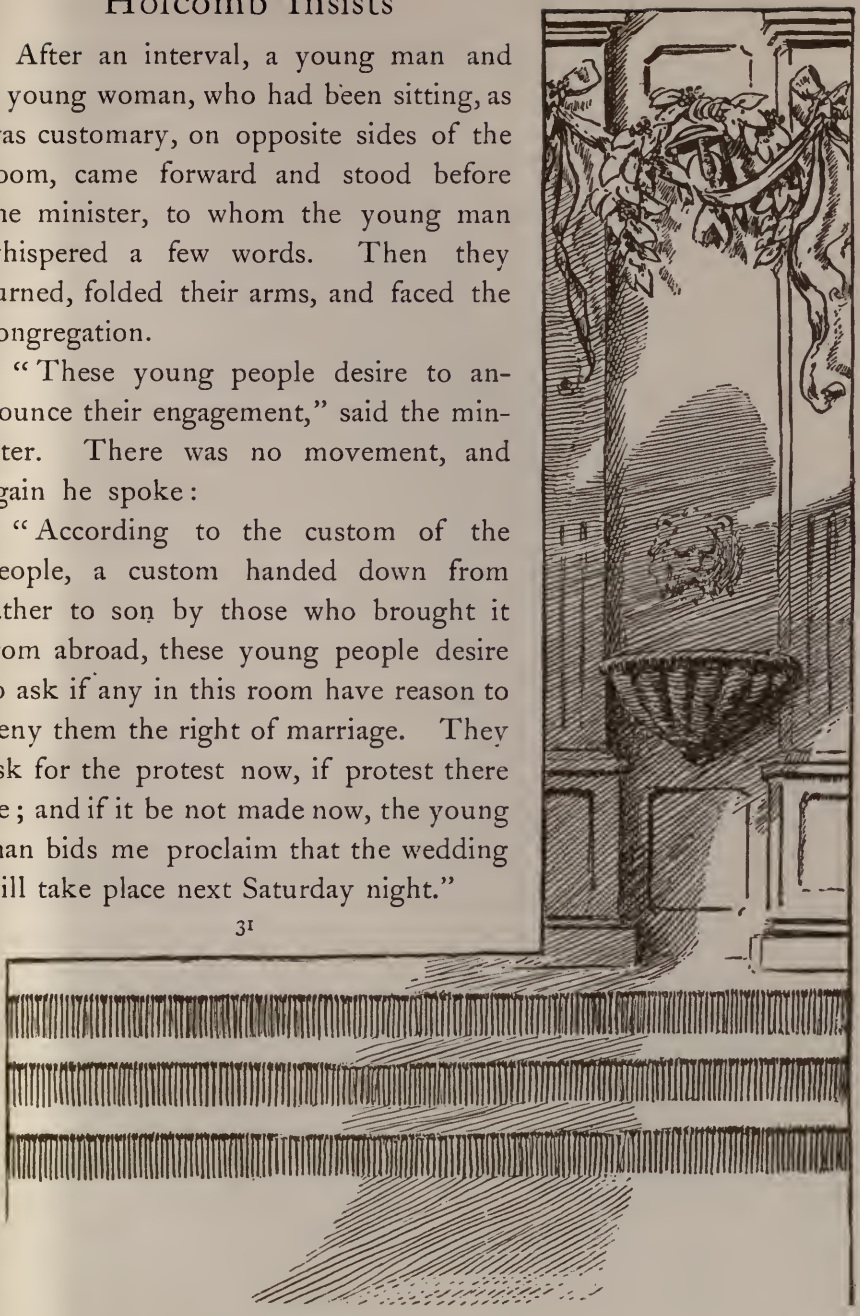
He held the Bible aloft. "You who belong not to the church dare not do your duty to God and man. You who confess by reason of fear of the devil and not of love to man and kindred lie to your God upon this sacred book." In silence he stood for a moment. Then his eyes dropped, the flush passed from his cheeks; he raised his hands and in a quiet voice pronounced the benediction. Next, as was the custom, he asked if there were any announcements, for, in that sparsely settled country, items of general interest could be more widely voiced by public announcement after church service than in any other way.

Holcomb Insists

After an interval, a young man and a young woman, who had been sitting, as was customary, on opposite sides of the room, came forward and stood before the minister, to whom the young man whispered a few words. Then they turned, folded their arms, and faced the congregation.

"These young people desire to announce their engagement," said the minister. There was no movement, and again he spoke:

"According to the custom of the people, a custom handed down from father to son by those who brought it from abroad, these young people desire to ask if any in this room have reason to deny them the right of marriage. They ask for the protest now, if protest there be; and if it be not made now, the young man bids me proclaim that the wedding will take place next Saturday night."



He stopped, and there was a momentary hush. Then Red rose awkwardly to his feet.

"Parson," he said, "thet weddin' caint come off."

"On what ground do you object?"

"Thar es a *reason*. No Red kin marry inter the Holcombs."

Like a flash another man was on his feet, tall and lank, dark and lowering. It was Holcomb.

"And I says the weddin''s got ter take place." He turned on the other speaker. "Yo 've insulted the name of Holcomb twict already, Red. Now's the time fer thet *reason*, now's the time set, fer we 've met ag'in."

Those nearest knew too well that neither of the men would flinch nor retract. They knew, too, what the next move meant.

Holcomb thrust his hand into his

pocket, a like movement being made by his antagonist, who, having himself failed in getting the "reason" both men equally desired, had now no choice but to fight.

"Hold, men; this is the House of God!" cried the minister.

"A man's fam'ly honor comes first, Parson," answered Holcomb. "I asks Red fer thet reason, and I wants et *now*."

The tension of the scene was suddenly relieved by an unexpected interruption. A laugh, loud and shrill, rang harsh upon their ears. In the doorway stood the witch of the waterfall, she who had never before been known to shadow a church's portal. All eyes were turned toward her. Men who, without a qualm, had seen the rival antagonists' hands move toward their weapons shuddered; women shrank to-

gether, children clung to their parents. "The witch! witch Merrie!" was the whisper.

The minister alone seemed not to be awed. Down the aisle he came, closer, until he stood between the men, facing the witch in the doorway. Those of the congregation nearest the group shrank back. Red, Holcomb, and the preacher stood together.

"Be seated, mother," said the preacher.

Passing the vacated benches, to whose farthest ends, as she passed, slipped the awe-struck worshippers, she moved slowly into the room.

"What do you want, mother?" asked the minister.

"I would speak to these men."

"Be careful, woman. Give me your message. Trust in me," said the preacher.

"No!" Her face darkened. "No!

Holcomb Insists

I shall speak my words only to them. Holcomb, you want to know why these two young people cannot marry?"

"I 've asked more 'n once fer thet *reason*."

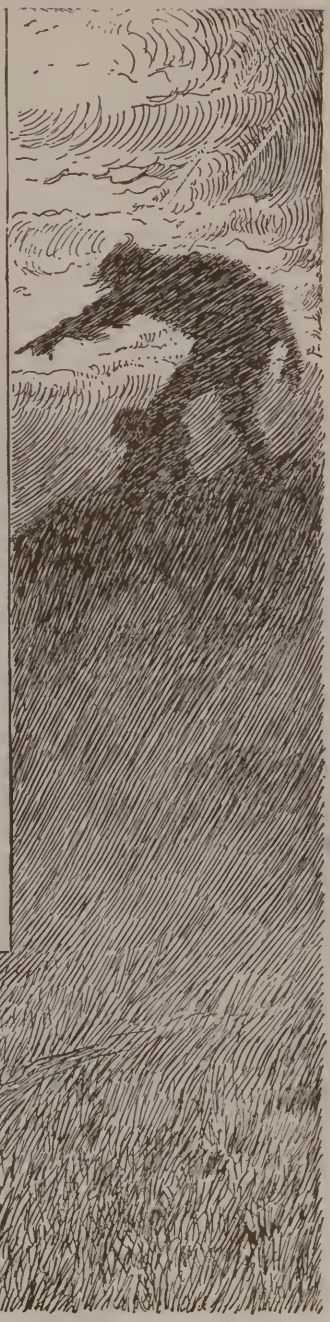
"Come to-night to the home of Red, and you shall learn. Bring the girl, for she, too, must know. "And *you* come, too, Mr. Man of God, you who preach of peace and love, for when the *reason* is given, you 'll need to preach a mighty powerful sermon, if you keep peace between these two men and their kindred."

"The meeting cannot be held to-night." It was the preacher again who spoke. The witch turned upon him.

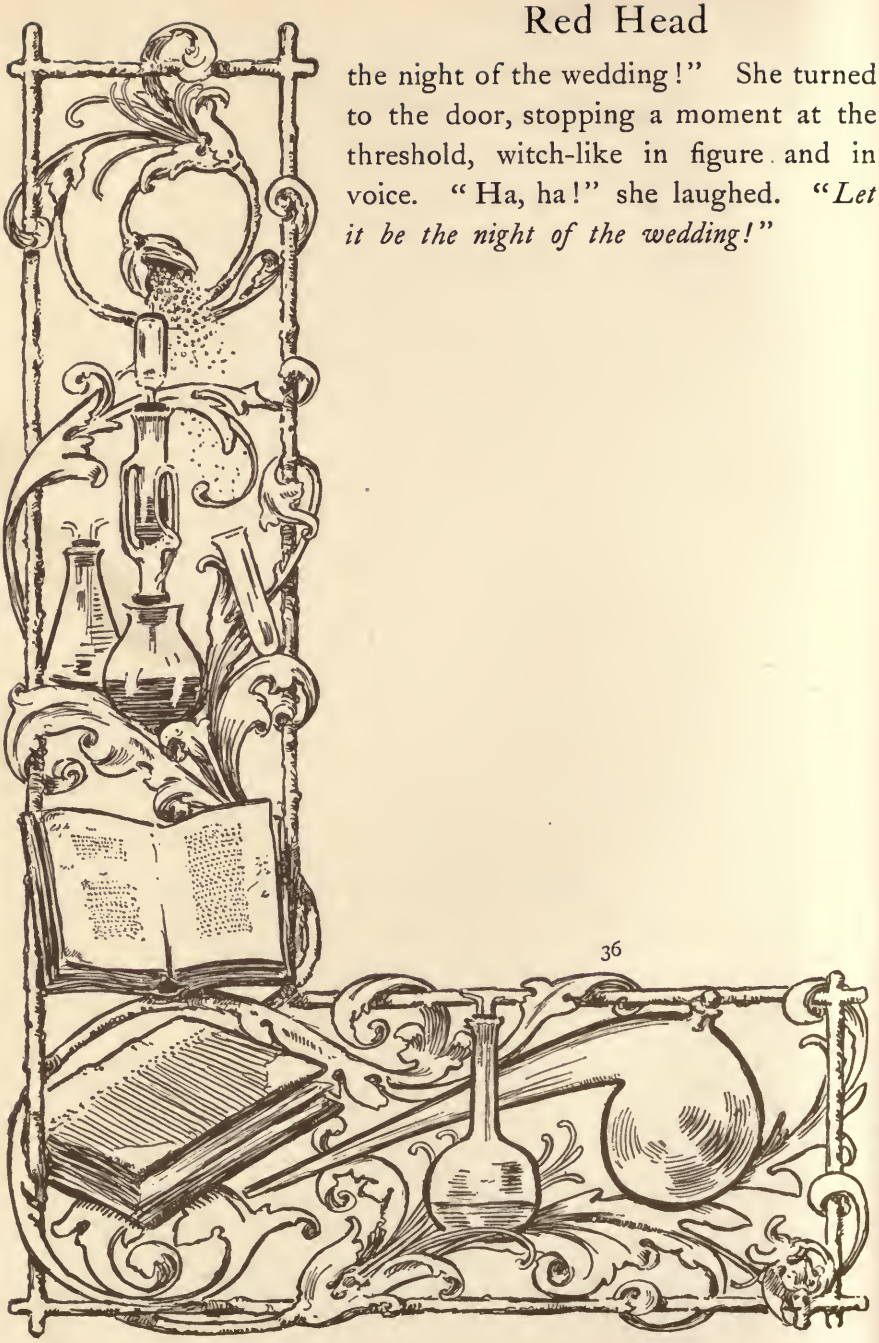
"And why not?"

"Because this is the Sabbath."

She meditated a moment. "Very well, then, let it be next Saturday night,



the night of the wedding!" She turned to the door, stopping a moment at the threshold, witch-like in figure and in voice. "Ha, ha!" she laughed. "*Let it be the night of the wedding!*"



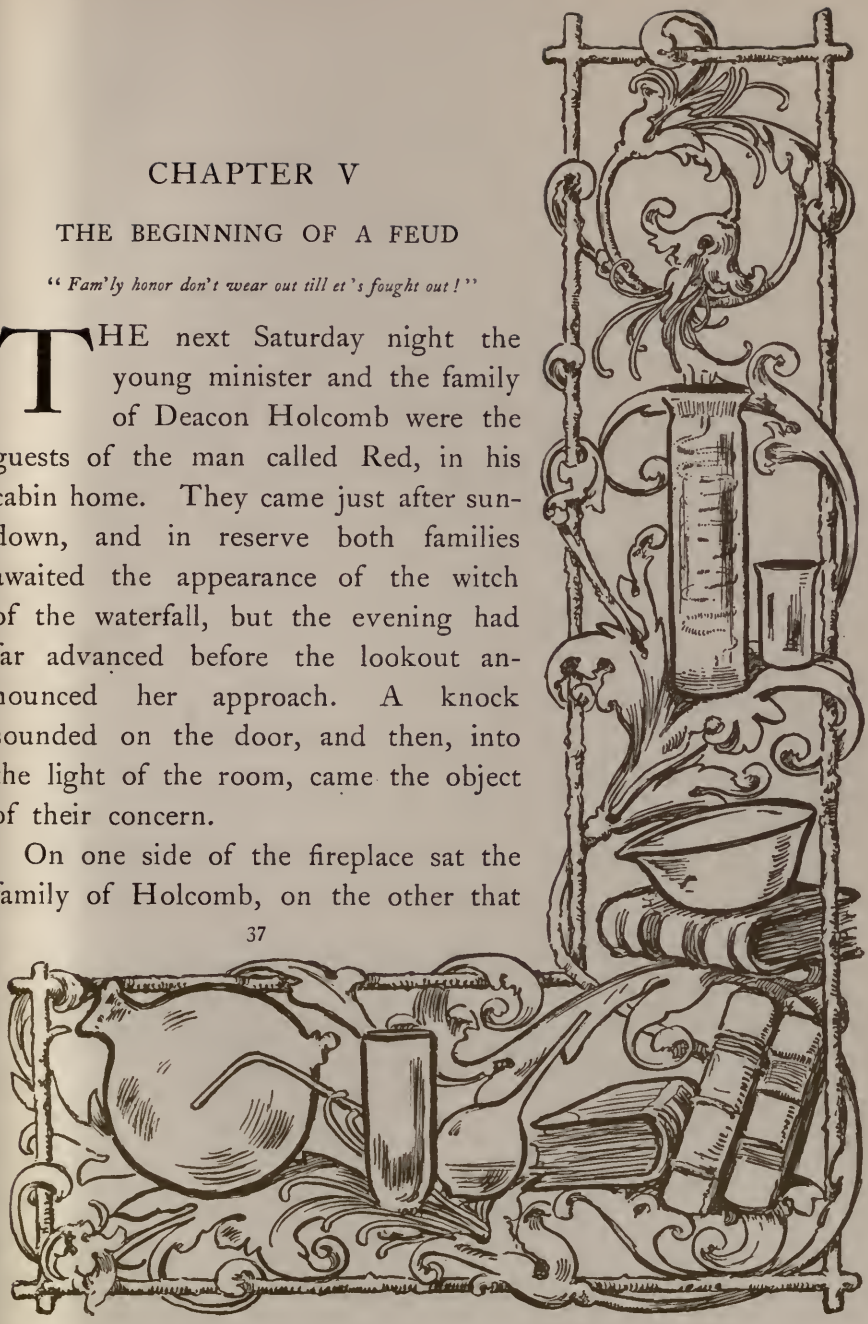
CHAPTER V

THE BEGINNING OF A FEUD

"Fam'ly honor don't wear out till et 's fought out!"

THE next Saturday night the young minister and the family of Deacon Holcomb were the guests of the man called Red, in his cabin home. They came just after sundown, and in reserve both families awaited the appearance of the witch of the waterfall, but the evening had far advanced before the lookout announced her approach. A knock sounded on the door, and then, into the light of the room, came the object of their concern.

On one side of the fireplace sat the family of Holcomb, on the other that



of their host; while between, where, but for his presence, the families would have met, sat the minister.

For a moment the woman stood with her back to the closed door, scanning the faces successively, beginning with Holcomb, who sat next the chimney on the right, and ending with Red, who stoically opposed him on the left. Then she stepped into the little room, while the minister moved his chair that she might pass. But, without heeding the proffered courtesy, Merrie stopped just at his side, and again scanned the faces. Her demeanor cast a deeper shadow on the already estranged assemblage. Without speaking, the minister pointed to the vacant chair.

"No," was the reply; and again she scanned by turns the faces of Red and of Holcomb. Then, in a subdued tone, not at all in accord with the demonstra-

tive air exhibited when she appeared in the church, she continued:

"I come to-night to fulfil a promise made, years ago, to one who is long since dead."

The minister did not resume his chair. Together they stood, a strange couple in a strange company.

"And I am here to listen," he replied.

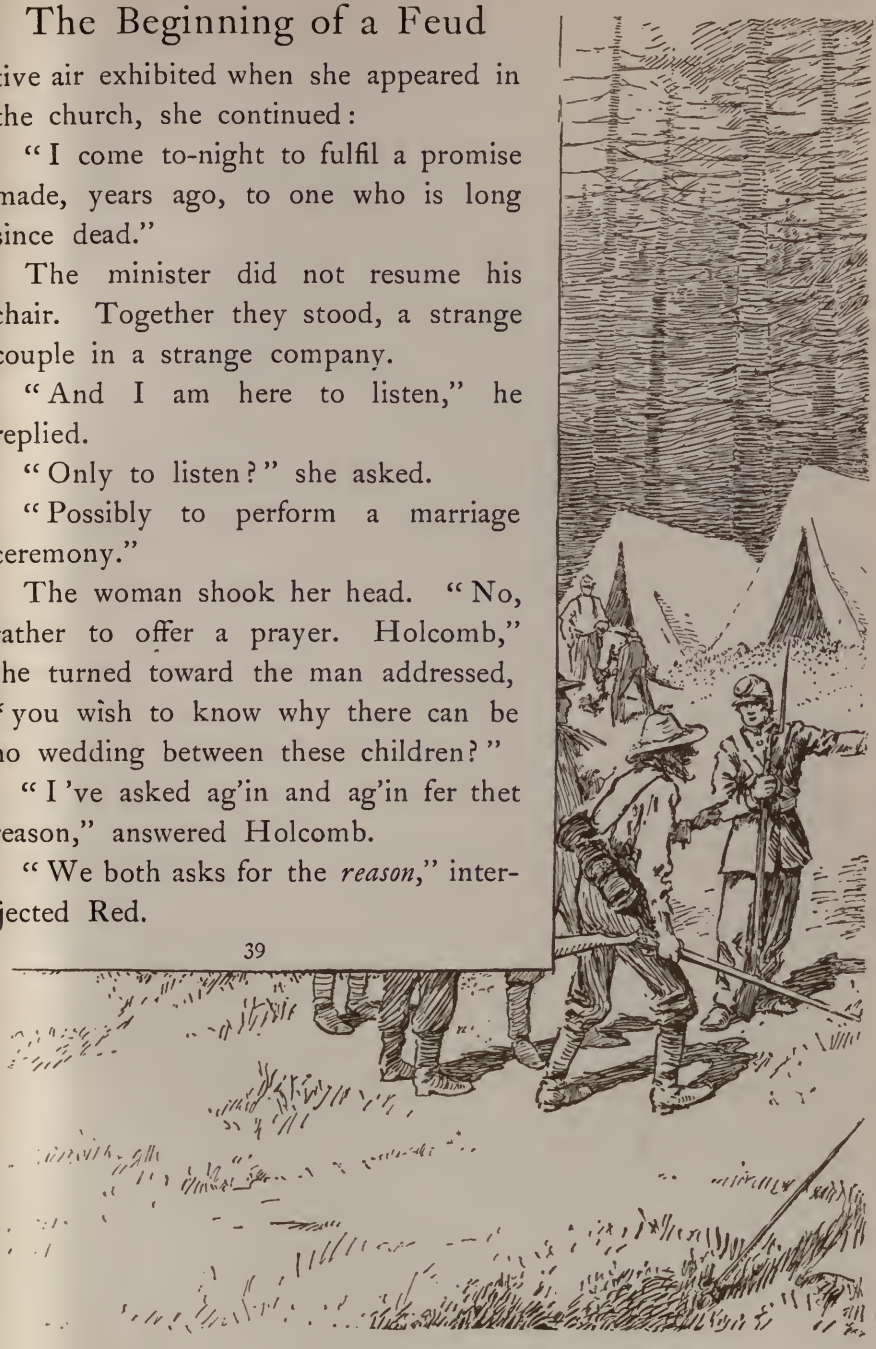
"Only to listen?" she asked.

"Possibly to perform a marriage ceremony."

The woman shook her head. "No, rather to offer a prayer. Holcomb," she turned toward the man addressed, "you wish to know why there can be no wedding between these children?"

"I 've asked ag'in and ag'in fer thet reason," answered Holcomb.

"We both asks for the *reason*," interjected Red.



"The reason is because of a lasting enmity between your families, because of the death, persecution, destruction, of those of whose cause you are heirs. Kentucky mountain men, concerned as are you, need but know the facts to raise again forgotten feudal emblems."

"What mought an emblem be, Merrie?"

"One stands now before your door."

"Tell us what you mean, mother," interrupted the minister.

"I mean that the father of Red directed, when the time arrived, that he be told that his family emblem is a white rose, and that of the Holcombs, red."

"You speak in riddles. What matters a color or a flower at a time like this?" asked the minister, impatiently.

"I wants ter know the reason fer swearin' off this weddin', witch," interrupted Holcomb, angrily.

"FAM'LY *honor don't wear out till et's fought out!*"—Page 49

The Beginning of a Feud

The woman waved her hand. "Listen. *You* are descended from the house of Lancaster, Holcomb, and *you*, Red, from that of York."

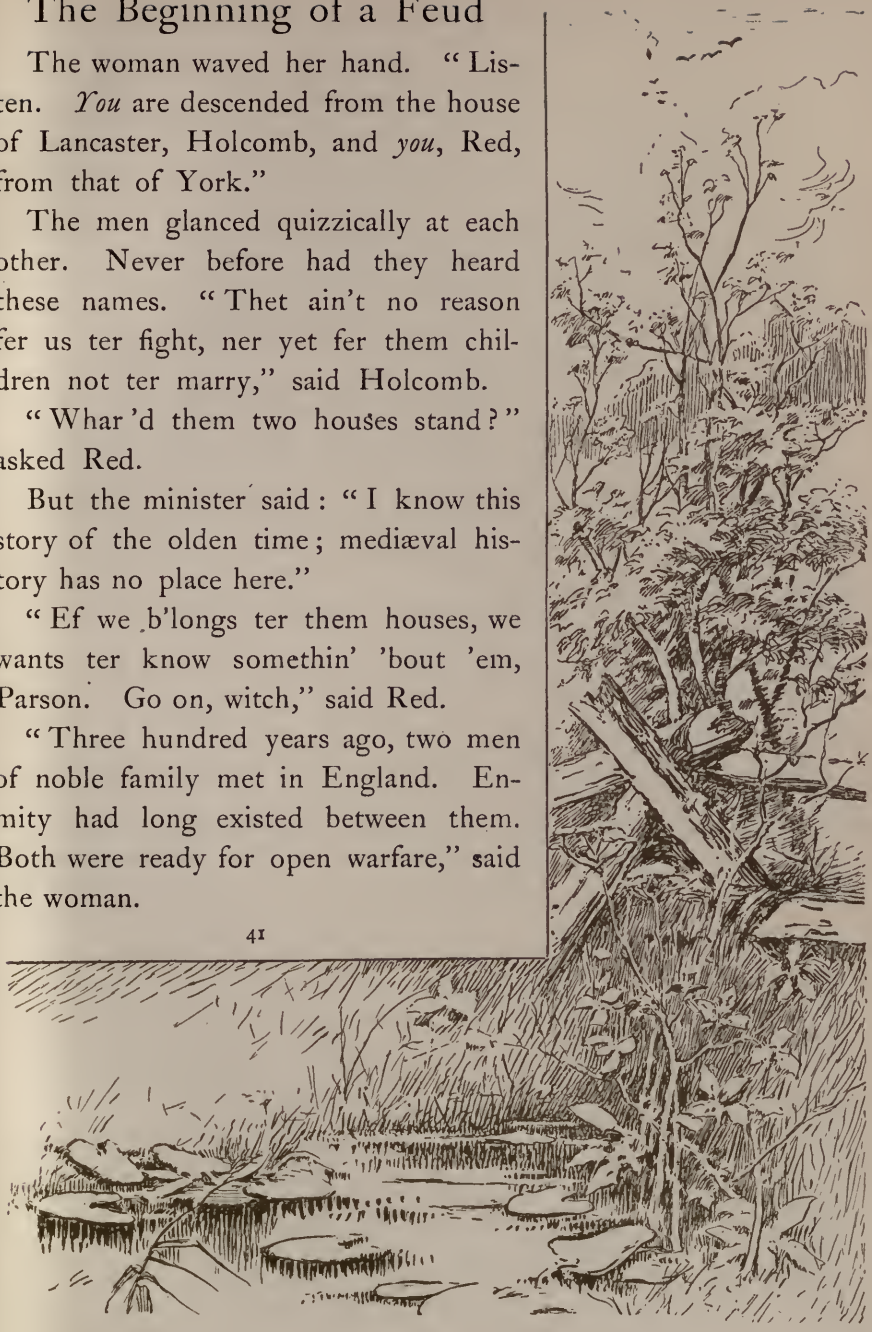
The men glanced quizzically at each other. Never before had they heard these names. "Thet ain't no reason fer us ter fight, ner yet fer them children not ter marry," said Holcomb.

"Whar 'd them two houses stand?" asked Red.

But the minister said: "I know this story of the olden time; mediæval history has no place here."

"Ef we b'longs ter them houses, we wants ter know somethin' 'bout 'em, Parson. Go on, witch," said Red.

"Three hundred years ago, two men of noble family met in England. Enmity had long existed between them. Both were ready for open warfare," said the woman.



"Men meet every day, ef they live thick enough anywheres, I reckon, and most men wants ter fight somebody. Et don't consarn us, this meetin' of two men three hunderd years ago," interjected Holcomb.

"We mean bis'ness, witch," added Red.

"They stood in a flower garden. One picked a red rose, the other a white. 'These shall be our emblems,' they said."

The two men cast looks across the fireplace. A ray of light seemed to break over the face of Red.

"Dad told me somethin' 'bout them old times," said he, "but I 'd nigh 'bout fergotten."

"For thirty years the ancestors of these men fought under the banners of the roses. Thousands were killed."

Again the men looked at each other. Concern had evidently taken the place of indifference.

"That was three centuries ago," spoke the minister. He caught the kindled interest of the men. "Woman," he whispered, "can you not see that, by reason of this story you have told, trouble even now lies before these families? Why revive such long-buried records?"

Paying no attention to the speaker, the witch continued. "Holcomb, your ancestors fought for the Red Rose. They gave their lives and property to the House of Lancaster."

"Thet old war caint stop this weddin'," muttered Holcomb.

"That is but tradition, why speak of it now," said the preacher.

"Yes, but this tradition passed from father to son, till the grandfathers of these men came to America; and when their sons came to these mountains, they were from necessity friendly. They set-

tled near each other, and wisely did they keep to themselves the story of past differences."

Ignoring this dialogue, the substance of which he could not comprehend, Red asked: "Thet row of white roses before this door stands fer we 'uns, witch?"

"Yes, your father planted them there."

"Son," Red spoke earnestly, in a low tone; "fam'ly honor comes first. There caint be no weddin'."

"Woman," said the minister, "why do you stir these burned-out embers? Why have you revived this story of long-gone wars to disturb these simple folks? What matters it to a Kentucky mountaineer, if the Houses of Lancaster and York, in England's days, did fight and murder each other, and involve the innocent as well as themselves? A trifle such as this may turn the friend-

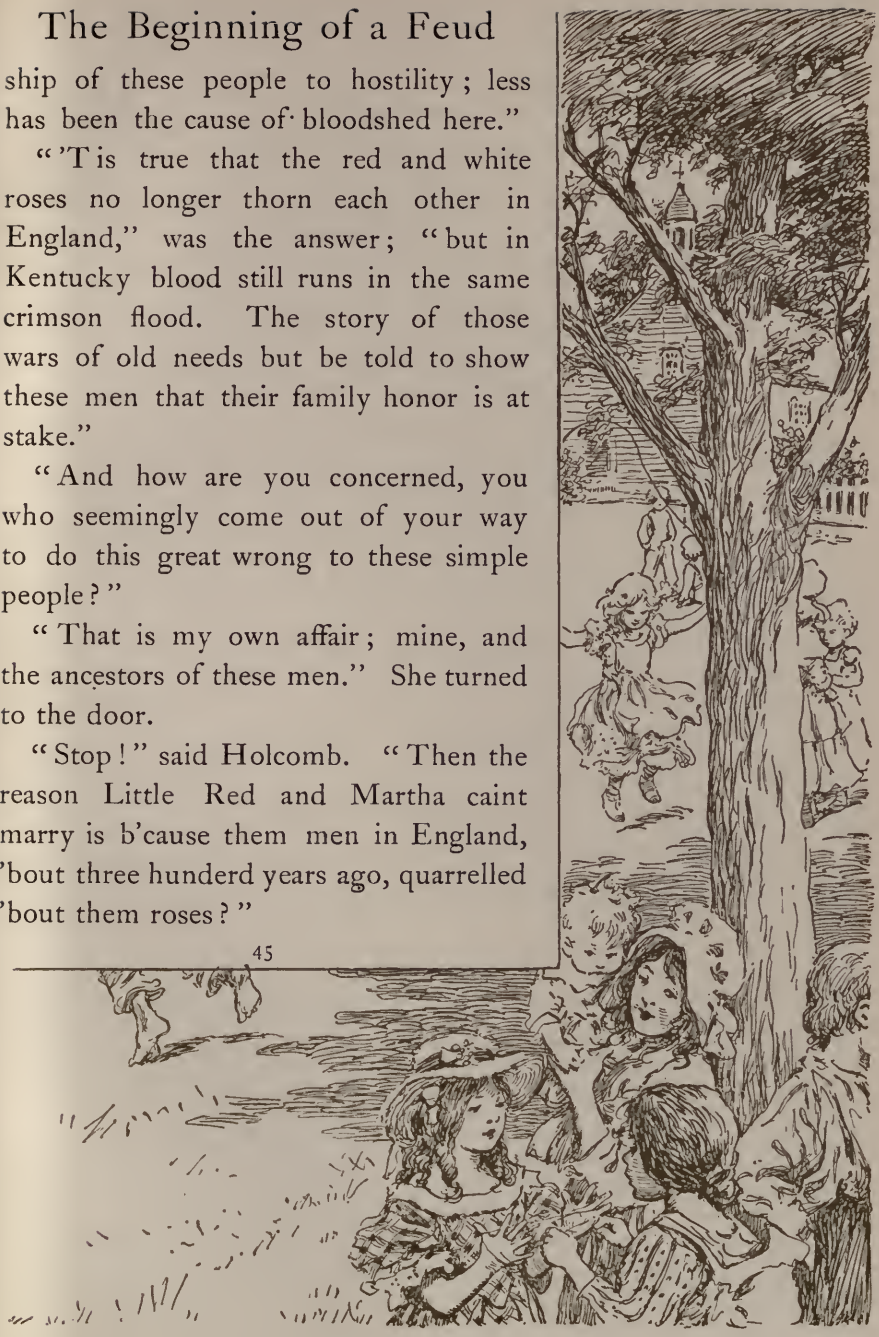
ship of these people to hostility; less has been the cause of bloodshed here."

"'T is true that the red and white roses no longer thorn each other in England," was the answer; "but in Kentucky blood still runs in the same crimson flood. The story of those wars of old needs but be told to show these men that their family honor is at stake."

"And how are you concerned, you who seemingly come out of your way to do this great wrong to these simple people?"

"That is my own affair; mine, and the ancestors of these men." She turned to the door.

"Stop!" said Holcomb. "Then the reason Little Red and Martha caint marry is b'cause them men in England, 'bout three hunderd years ago, quarrelled 'bout them roses?"



"Yes, and if you be men, you will take upon yourselves their quarrel." She closed the door and disappeared.

"The flowers were only their emblems," said the minister.

"But es et fact," asked Red, "thet my fam'ly and Holcomb's fam'ly war in a feud and killed each other?"

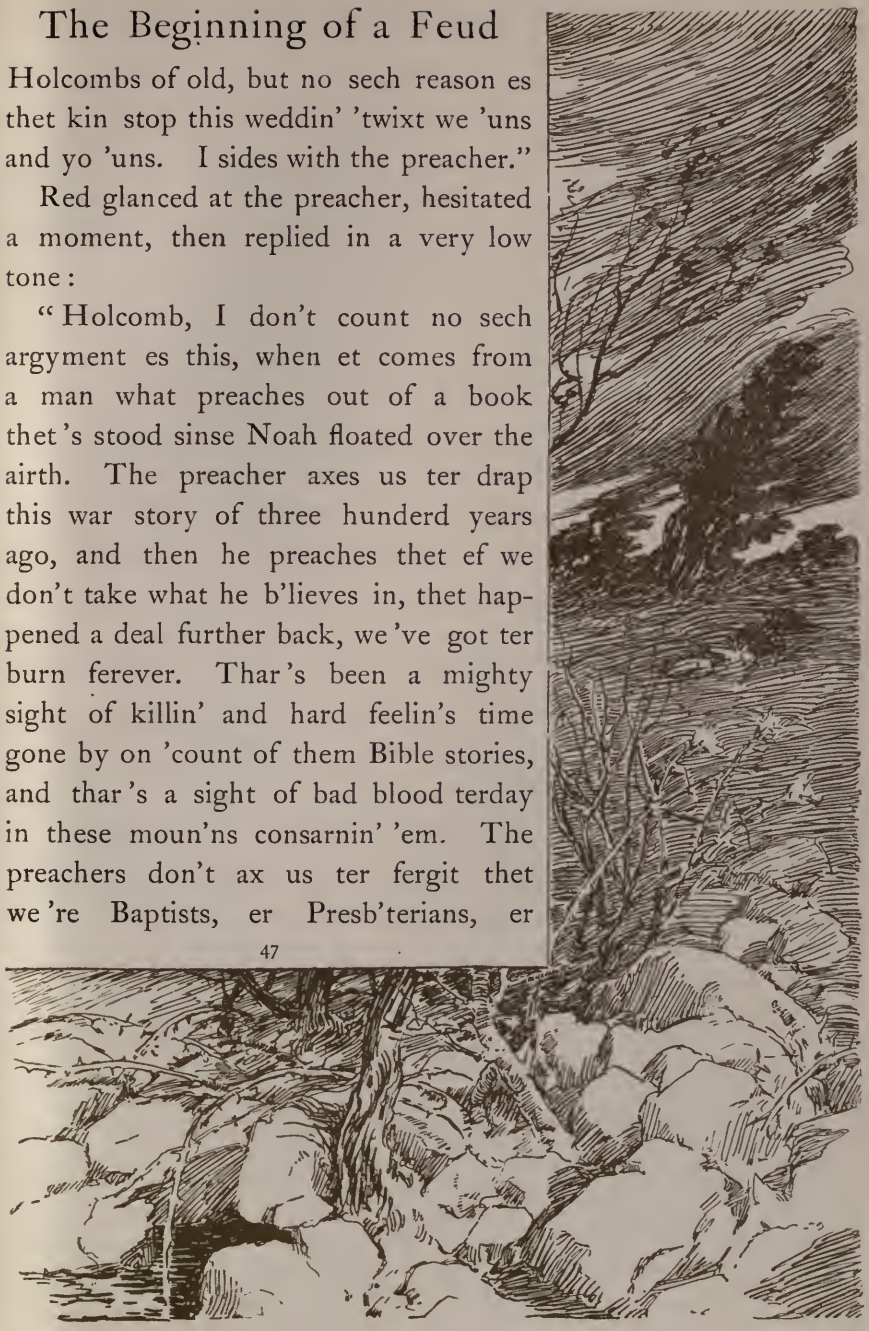
"This story may be but an invention so far as your people are concerned. Besides, that was years ago, and the incidents live only in the minds of people like this woman who, knowing your failings, seeks an excuse to stir up a quarrel between you," urged the minister, trying to avert the coming storm.

Holcomb broke in, ignoring the preacher. He spoke decidedly. "Thet's too fur back, Red. No man thet lived three hunderd years ago hes any right ter say what's ter be did terday. I'm pow'ful keerful of what consarns the

Holcombs of old, but no sech reason es thet kin stop this weddin' 'twixt we 'uns and yo 'uns. I sides with the preacher."

Red glanced at the preacher, hesitated a moment, then replied in a very low tone:

"Holcomb, I don't count no sech argyment es this, when et comes from a man what preaches out of a book thet's stood sinse Noah floated over the airth. The preacher axes us ter drap this war story of three hunderd years ago, and then he preaches thet ef we don't take what he b'lieves in, thet happened a deal further back, we've got ter burn ferever. Thar's been a mighty sight of killin' and hard feelin's time gone by on 'count of them Bible stories, and thar's a sight of bad blood terday in these moun'ns consarnin' 'em. The preachers don't ax us ter fergit thet we're Baptists, er Presb'terians, er



Meth'dists, ner ter stop them kind of quarrels b'cause them differences started so fur back. I says thet et ain't fair ter say thet we 'uns hev got ter fergit what consarns our two fam'lies, and then side with quarrels what 's a sight further back, and thet, so fer es I knows, we hed n't no hand in gittin' up."

Holcomb shook his head. "I sides with the preacher, Red, and thet ends et. The question ain't the Bible, er a preacher, er no war, nowhar ner notime. Et 's whether this weddin' 's goin' ter be or not. Yo 've said no, and I 've said yes."

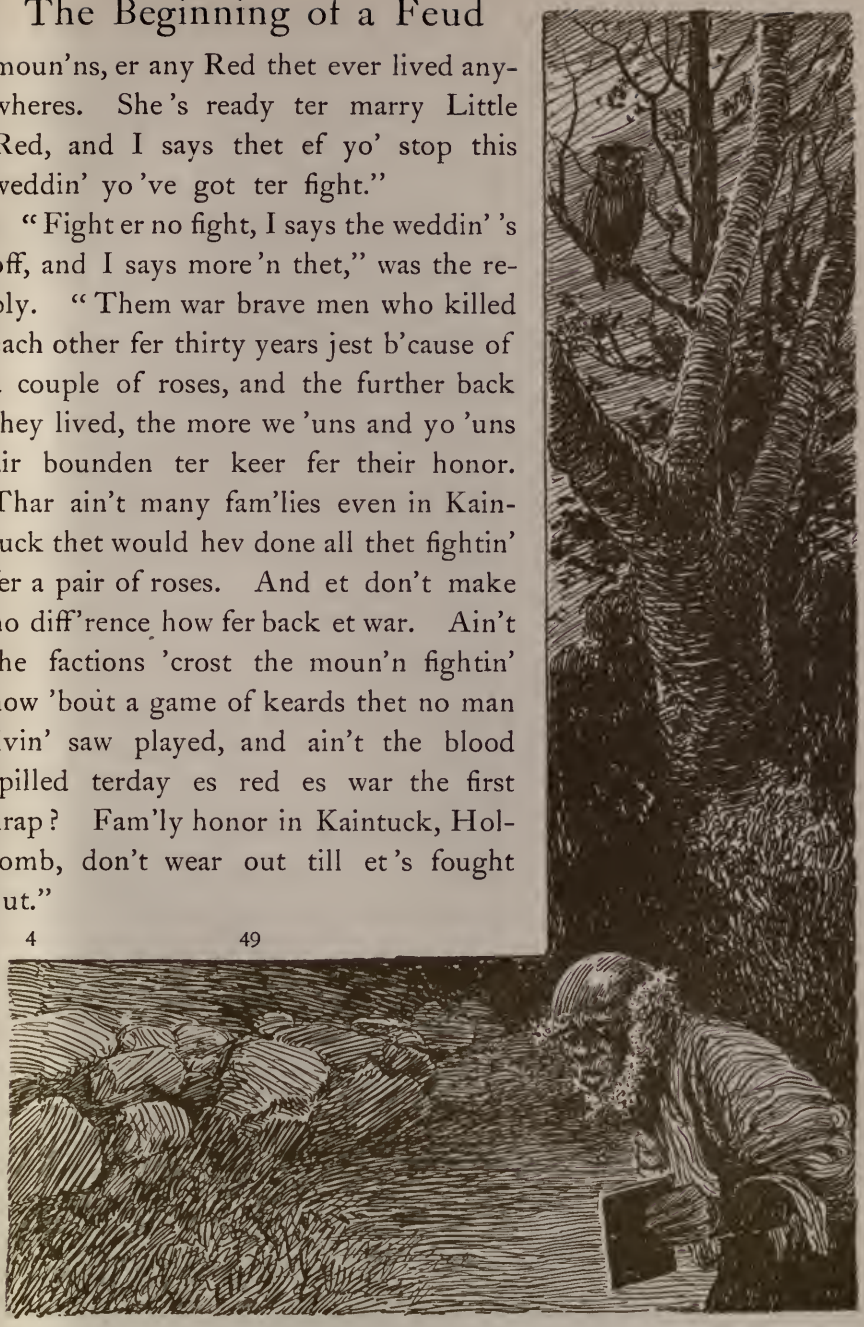
"Leave it to the two young people concerned," pleaded the minister.

"Et 's not thar consarn, now, et 's ourn. Martha Holcomb, stand up," said her father.

"Red, Martha Holcomb 's es good es any Red thet ever breathed in these

moun'ns, er any Red thet ever lived anywheres. She 's ready ter marry Little Red, and I says thet ef yo' stop this weddin' yo 've got ter fight."

"Fight er no fight, I says the weddin' 's off, and I says more 'n thet," was the reply. "Them war brave men who killed each other fer thirty years jest b'cause of a couple of roses, and the further back they lived, the more we 'uns and yo 'uns air bounden ter keer fer their honor. Thar ain't many fam'lies even in Kaintuck thet would hev done all thet fightin' fer a pair of roses. And et don't make no diff'rence how fer back et war. Ain't the factions 'crost the moun'n fightin' now 'bout a game of keards thet no man livin' saw played, and ain't the blood spilled terday es red es war the first drap? Fam'ly honor in Kaintuck, Holcomb, don't wear out till et 's fought out."

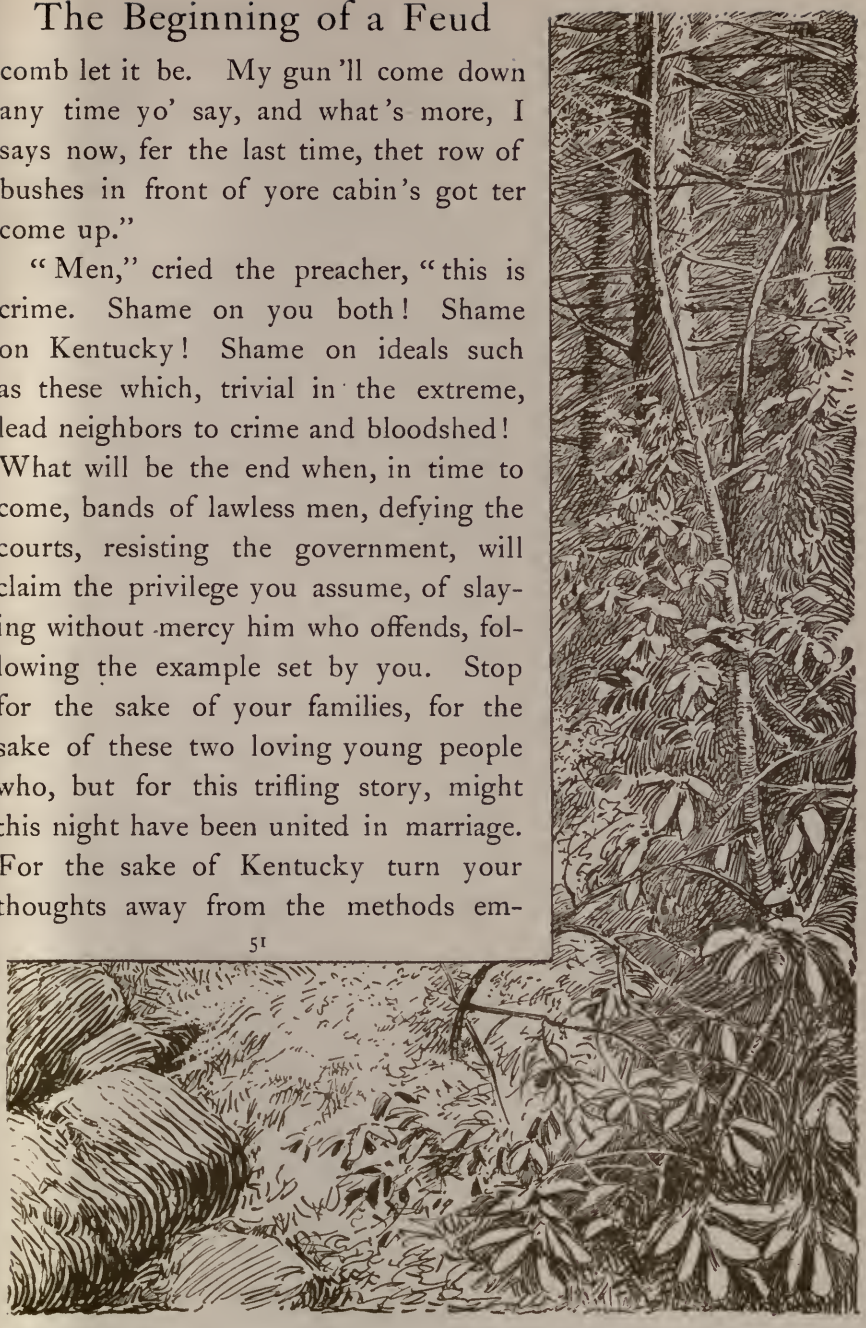


The Holcombs arose. The man spoke for all. "Red," he said, "the honor of the Holcombs livin' now es worth more 'n a moun'n of roses. Martha, yo' and Little Red stood up in meetin' and axed fer reasons why the weddin' could n't be, and we 've all listened ter what the witch and the preacher said. Witches air Scriptural, and so air preachers. Mind yo', Red, I don't blame no one fer takin' ter which side er t'other. But es fer me, I sticks ter the folks thet 's livin'. Red, me 'n yo 've been friends sense we war born, but this weddin' 's got ter be, er we 've got ter fight."

"I 've hed my say, and yo 've hed yo 'rn," said Red doggedly. "I hain't got nothin' ag'in no Holcomb, livin' ner dead, much less 'n ag'in Martha. She 's a mighty sweet gearl, but thet 's no reason we should n't fight. Red 'g'inst Hol-

comb let it be. My gun 'll come down any time yo' say, and what's more, I says now, fer the last time, thet row of bushes in front of yore cabin's got ter come up."

"Men," cried the preacher, "this is crime. Shame on you both! Shame on Kentucky! Shame on ideals such as these which, trivial in the extreme, lead neighbors to crime and bloodshed! What will be the end when, in time to come, bands of lawless men, defying the courts, resisting the government, will claim the privilege you assume, of slaying without mercy him who offends, following the example set by you. Stop for the sake of your families, for the sake of these two loving young people who, but for this trifling story, might this night have been united in marriage. For the sake of Kentucky turn your thoughts away from the methods em-



ployed in those times of old. Do you even know which side was right and which was wrong?"

"Et don't matter in a faction 'bout the right er wrong. Et's a question of Kaintuck fam'ly, Parson, of Holcomb 'g'inst Red. Ner et don't matter, neither, 'bout the names of them old English houses. The feud's on 'twixt we 'uns and the Reds."

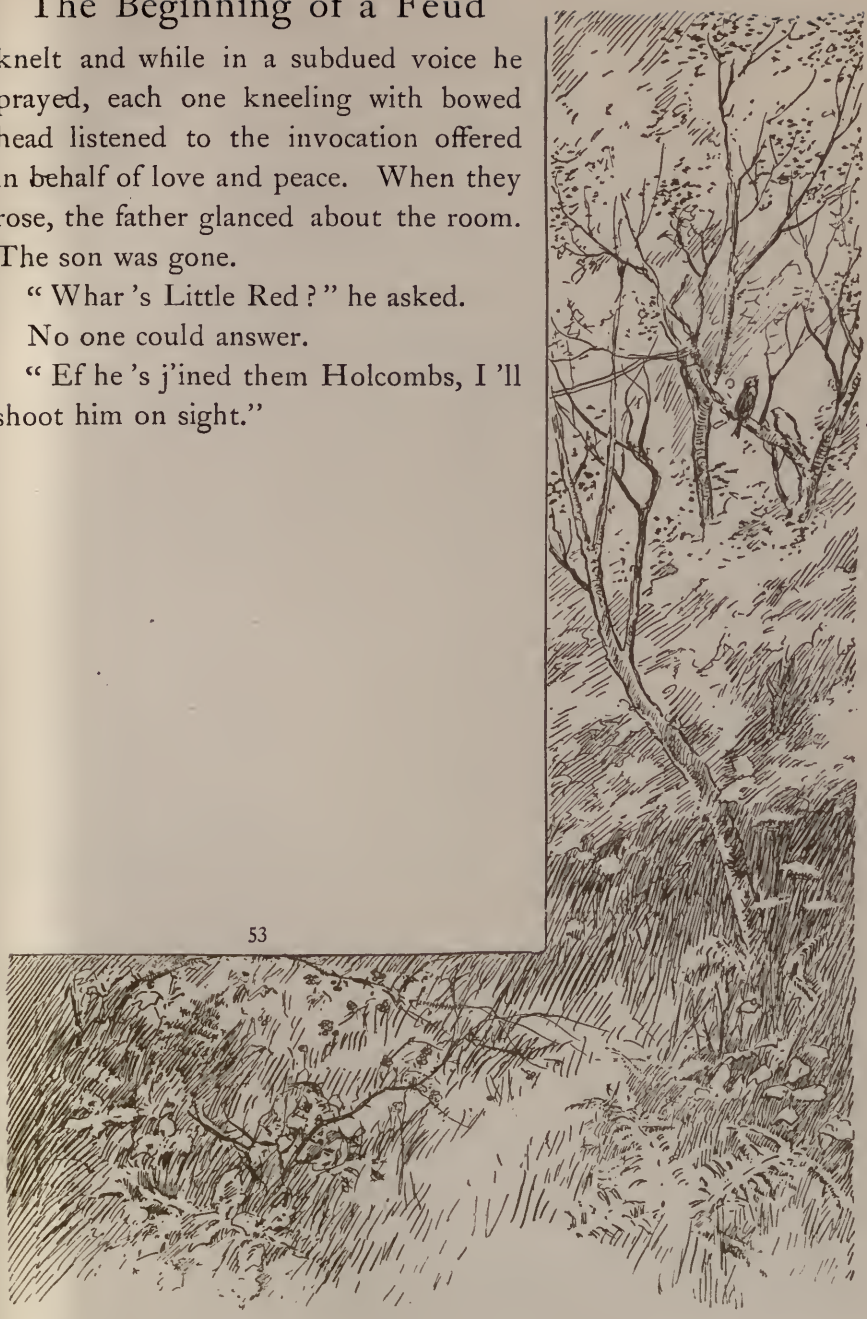
With this the Holcombs filed out of the door, the last to go being the girl who, hoping so soon to be a bride, had stood so demurely in the church the previous Sabbath. Her eyes were riveted on the tall young man in the shadows, but no word was spoken. The minister stood sad and silent, frustrated in every attempt to bring about peace. He knew well that further argument would be of no use. The door closed, and then, overcome by emotion, the good man

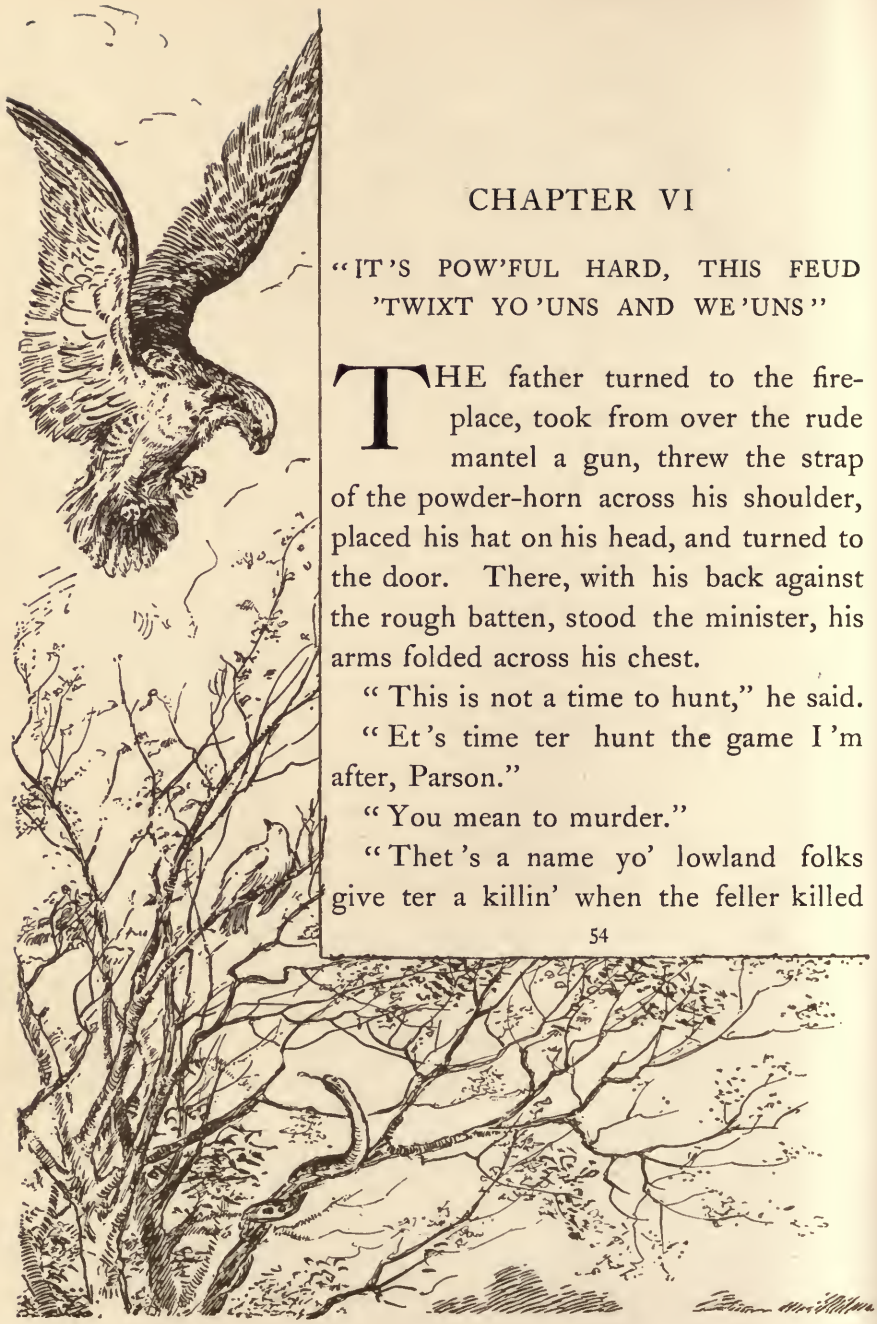
knelt and while in a subdued voice he prayed, each one kneeling with bowed head listened to the invocation offered in behalf of love and peace. When they rose, the father glanced about the room. The son was gone.

"Whar 's Little Red?" he asked.

No one could answer.

"Ef he 's j'ined them Holcombs, I 'll shoot him on sight."





CHAPTER VI

"IT'S POW'FUL HARD, THIS FEUD 'TWIXT YO'UNS AND WE'UNS"

THE father turned to the fireplace, took from over the rude mantel a gun, threw the strap of the powder-horn across his shoulder, placed his hat on his head, and turned to the door. There, with his back against the rough batten, stood the minister, his arms folded across his chest.

"This is not a time to hunt," he said.

"Et's time ter hunt the game I'm after, Parson."

"You mean to murder."

"Thet's a name yo' lowland folks give ter a killin' when the feller killed

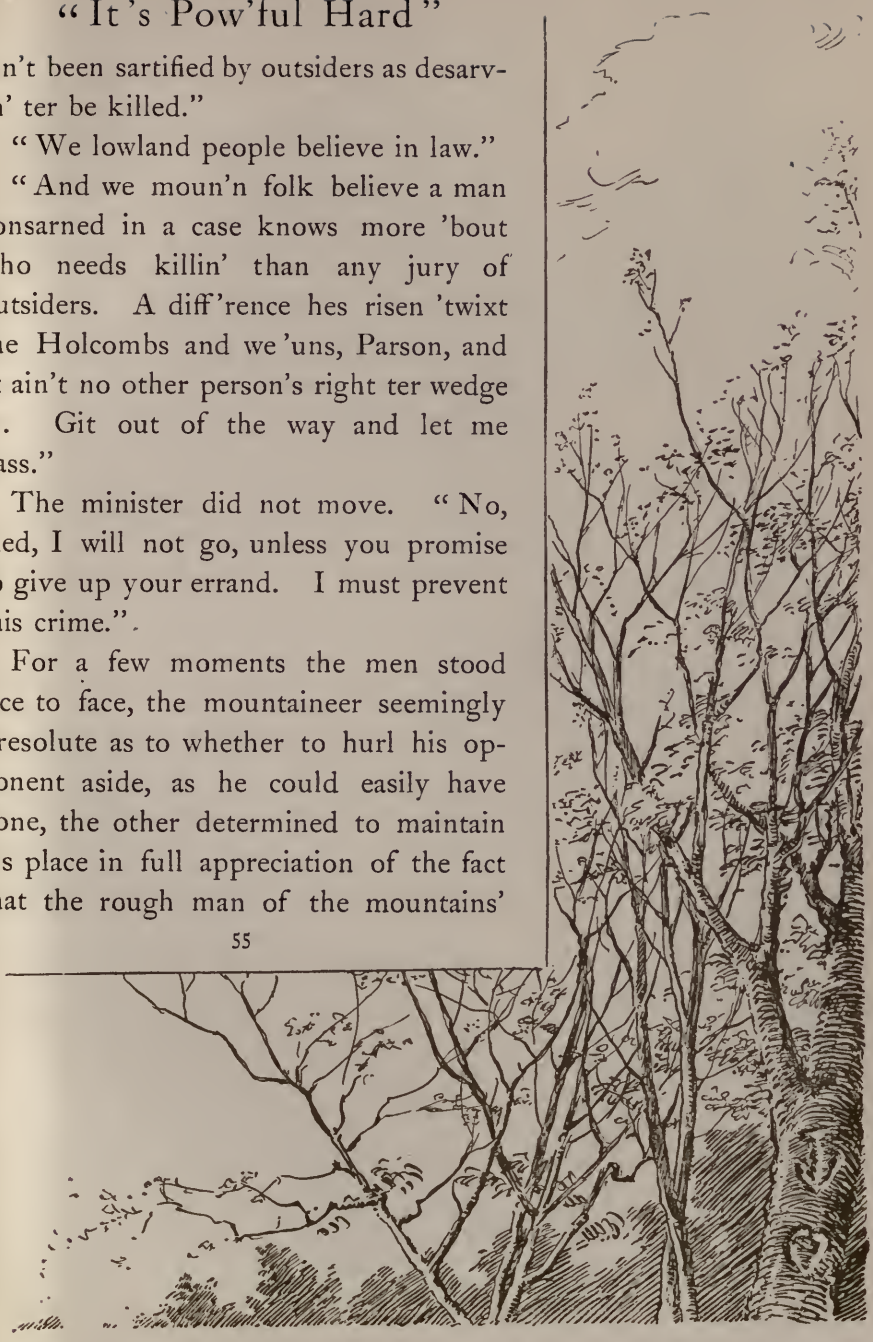
ain't been sartified by outsiders as desarvin' ter be killed."

"We lowland people believe in law."

"And we moun'n folk believe a man consarned in a case knows more 'bout who needs killin' than any jury of outsiders. A diff'rence hes risen 'twixt the Holcombs and we 'uns, Parson, and et ain't no other person's right ter wedge in. Git out of the way and let me pass."

The minister did not move. "No, Red, I will not go, unless you promise to give up your errand. I must prevent this crime."

For a few moments the men stood face to face, the mountaineer seemingly irresolute as to whether to hurl his opponent aside, as he could easily have done, the other determined to maintain his place in full appreciation of the fact that the rough man of the mountains'



regard for a minister would prevent any form of personal violence.

"We kin wait, I guess, Parson," said Red, at length. "Let's set down."

Just then the door was pushed open from the outside; the minister stepped back and the son entered.

He evidently caught the sense of the scene at a glance, for, turning to his father, he said:

"Put up yore gun, pap."

"Whar hev yo' been, Little Red," demanded the father.

"Thet's my bus'ness, pap."

"Hev you been with them Holcombs?"

"Yes."

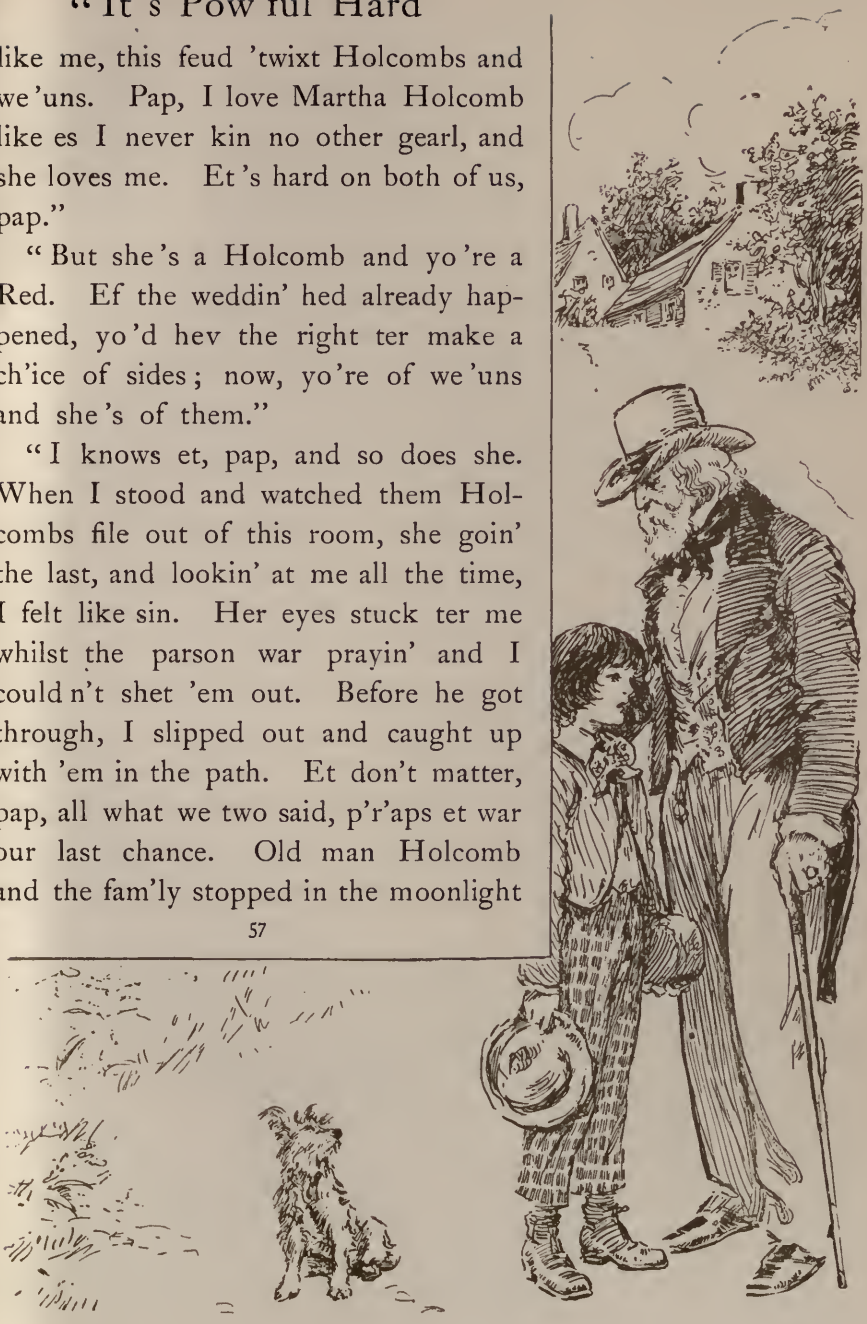
"Little Red, ef I 'd got sight of you with them Holcombs, I 'd hev drawn a bead," said the father without apparent emotion.

"Pap, et's mighty hard on a feller

like me, this feud 'twixt Holcombs and we'uns. Pap, I love Martha Holcomb like es I never kin no other gearl, and she loves me. Et's hard on both of us, pap."

"But she's a Holcomb and yo're a Red. Ef the weddin' hed already happened, yo'd hev the right ter make a ch'ice of sides; now, yo're of we'uns and she's of them."

"I knows et, pap, and so does she. When I stood and watched them Holcombs file out of this room, she goin' the last, and lookin' at me all the time, I felt like sin. Her eyes stuck ter me whilst the parson war prayin' and I could n't shet 'em out. Before he got through, I slipped out and caught up with 'em in the path. Et don't matter, pap, all what we two said, p'r'aps et war our last chance. Old man Holcomb and the fam'ly stopped in the moonlight



and waited a bit. Et war pow'ful kind in 'em. Thar war a minit er two of sayin' good-by, then Martha moved off, and I come back home. Thet's all, pap."

"You do not mean to say that you intend to fight the family of your sweetheart, possibly to kill her father or brother?" asked the minister.

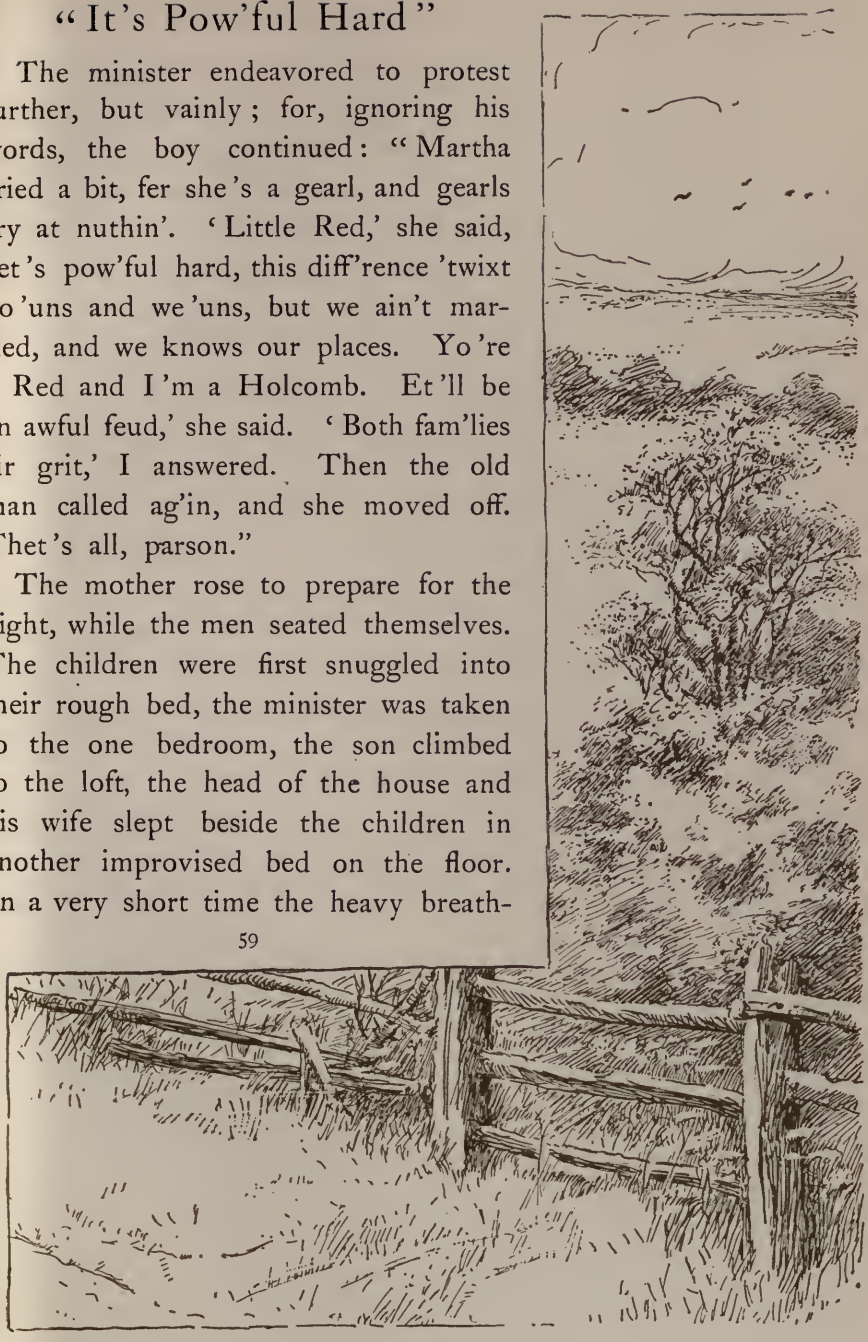
The youth turned and replied respectfully. "Parson, et ain't a question of 'ntendin' ter do nothin'. Et's a question of honor ter the two fam'lies. I've either got ter fight er run. Ef I'd run, Martha Holcomb would be ashamed she ever stood up with me in thet meetin'-house before all them people. She'd be disgraced first of all ef I'd show the white feather."

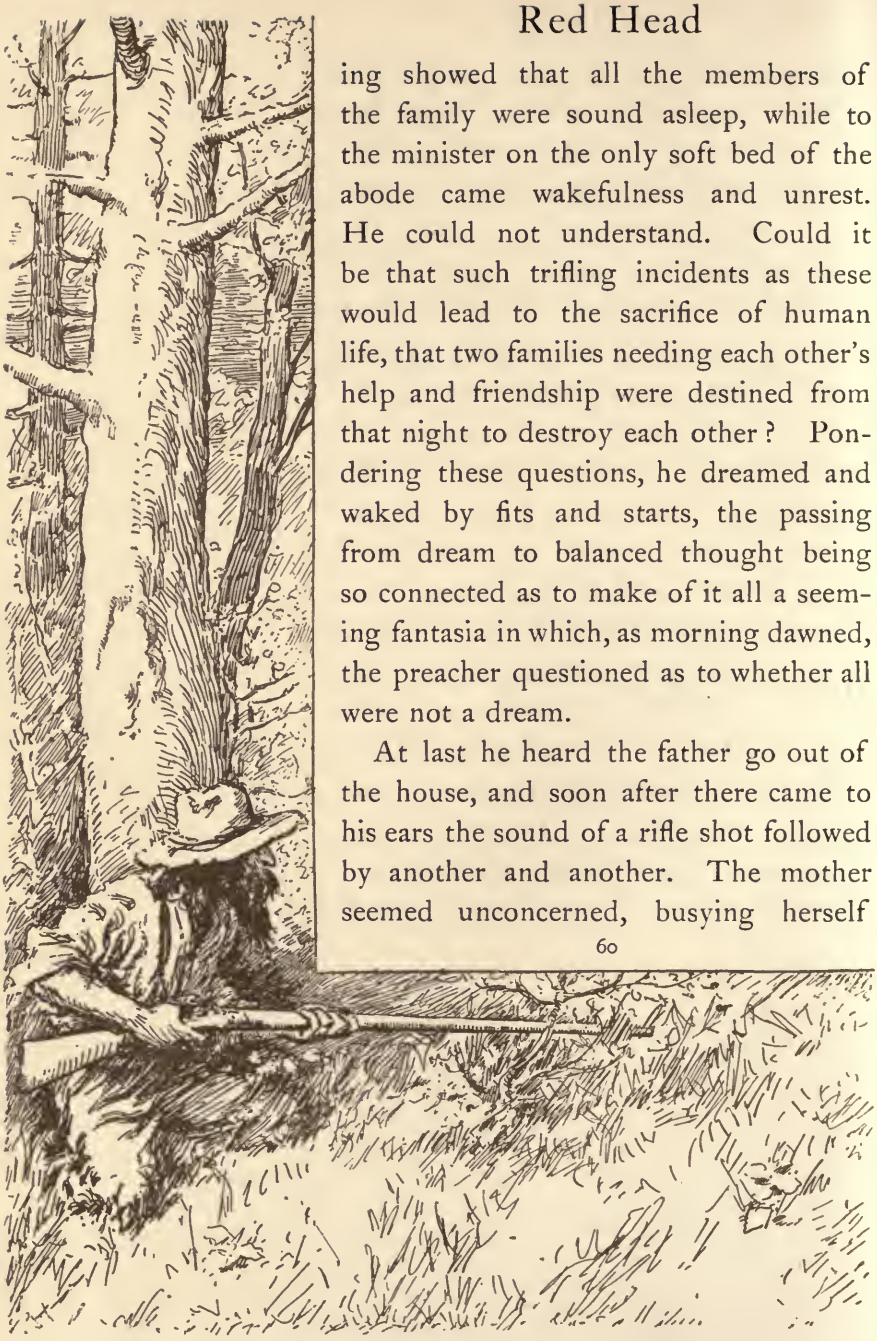
The father reached over and grasped his son by the hand. "Thet's bis'ness! Yo're a Red!" he said proudly.

"It's Pow'ful Hard"

The minister endeavored to protest further, but vainly; for, ignoring his words, the boy continued: "Martha cried a bit, fer she's a gearl, and gearls cry at nuthin'. 'Little Red,' she said, 'et's pow'ful hard, this diff'rence 'twixt yo'uns and we'uns, but we ain't married, and we knows our places. Yo're a Red and I'm a Holcomb. Et'll be an awful feud,' she said. 'Both fam'lies air grit,' I answered. Then the old man called ag'in, and she moved off. Thet's all, parson."

The mother rose to prepare for the night, while the men seated themselves. The children were first snuggled into their rough bed, the minister was taken to the one bedroom, the son climbed to the loft, the head of the house and his wife slept beside the children in another improvised bed on the floor. In a very short time the heavy breath-





ing showed that all the members of the family were sound asleep, while to the minister on the only soft bed of the abode came wakefulness and unrest. He could not understand. Could it be that such trifling incidents as these would lead to the sacrifice of human life, that two families needing each other's help and friendship were destined from that night to destroy each other? Pondering these questions, he dreamed and waked by fits and starts, the passing from dream to balanced thought being so connected as to make of it all a seeming fantasia in which, as morning dawned, the preacher questioned as to whether all were not a dream.

At last he heard the father go out of the house, and soon after there came to his ears the sound of a rifle shot followed by another and another. The mother seemed unconcerned, busying herself

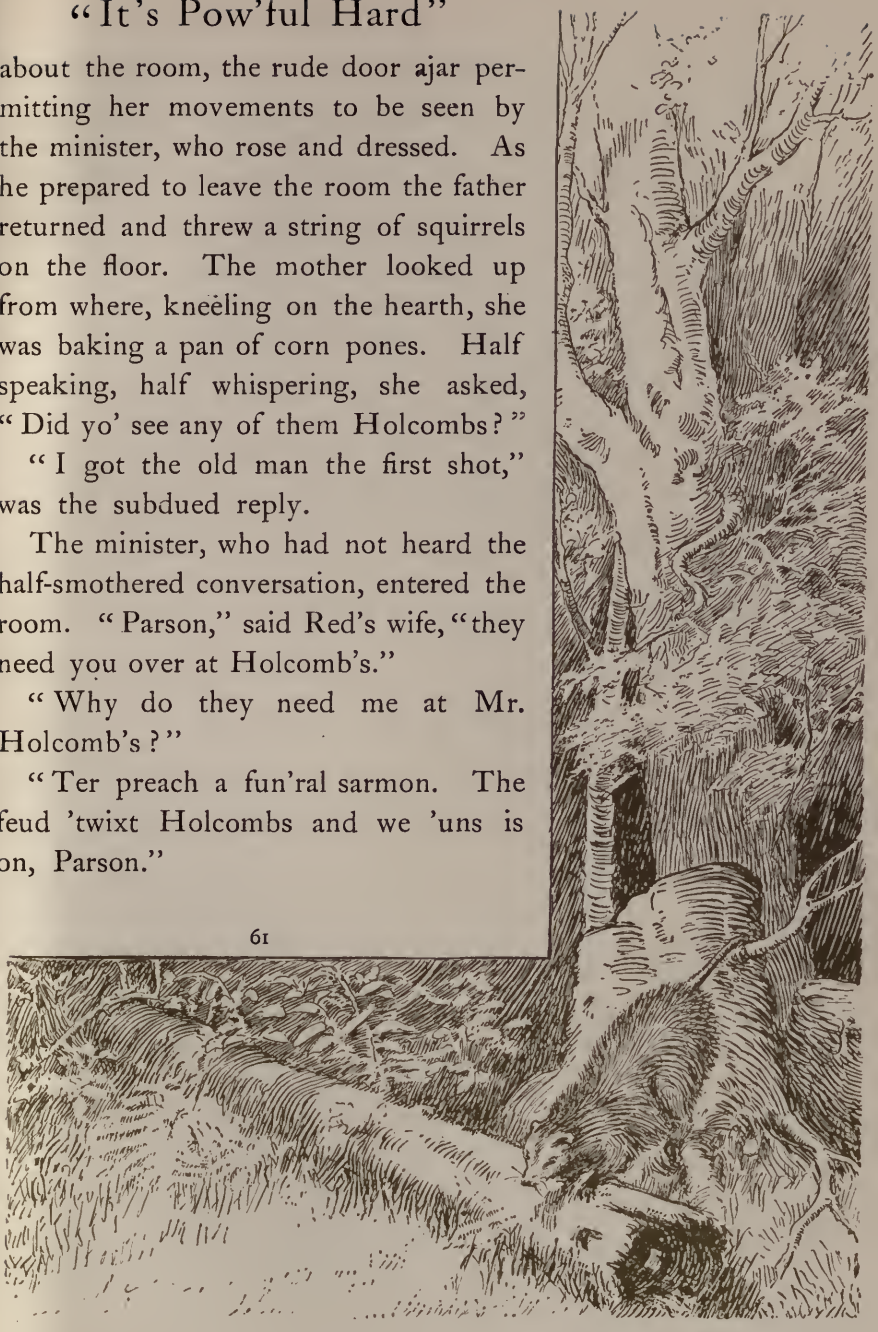
about the room, the rude door ajar permitting her movements to be seen by the minister, who rose and dressed. As he prepared to leave the room the father returned and threw a string of squirrels on the floor. The mother looked up from where, kneeling on the hearth, she was baking a pan of corn pones. Half speaking, half whispering, she asked, "Did yo' see any of them Holcombs?"

"I got the old man the first shot," was the subdued reply.

The minister, who had not heard the half-smothered conversation, entered the room. "Parson," said Red's wife, "they need you over at Holcomb's."

"Why do they need me at Mr. Holcomb's?"

"Ter preach a fun'ral sarmon. The feud 'twixt Holcombs and we 'uns is on, Parson."



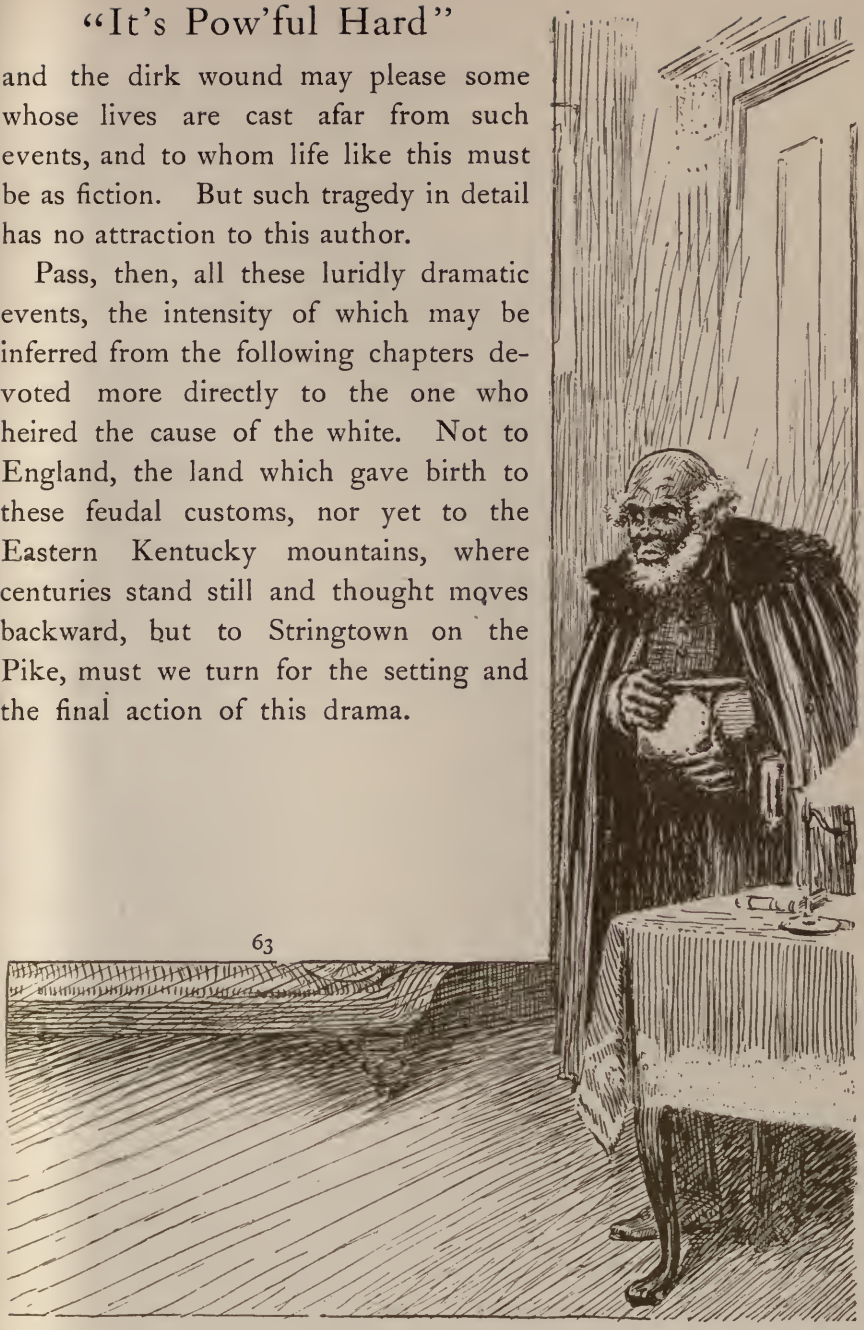
Red Head

The events portrayed in the preceding chapters have been set in the Eastern Kentucky mountains, the time being about the close of the eighteenth century. Between that day and 1864, the Holcombs and the Red Heads, as well as all who married into either family, maintained their honor according to the code peculiar to a people whose heritage of right and wrong was founded on shadowy traditions from out feudal England, intensified by inbred local ideas of right and wrong, as well as the way to right a wrong. True, occasional truces were established between the factions; but these periods of respite were in reality fuel collectors for succeeding flames which, however, were restricted to the two clans of kinsmen. It is not our purpose to give in detail the many harrowing incidents that came into the lives of these people. The gunshot

RAISING his clenched fist, he shook it viciously. — Page 100

and the dirk wound may please some whose lives are cast afar from such events, and to whom life like this must be as fiction. But such tragedy in detail has no attraction to this author.

Pass, then, all these luridly dramatic events, the intensity of which may be inferred from the following chapters devoted more directly to the one who heired the cause of the white. Not to England, the land which gave birth to these feudal customs, nor yet to the Eastern Kentucky mountains, where centuries stand still and thought moves backward, but to Stringtown on the Pike, must we turn for the setting and the final action of this drama.



CHAPTER VII

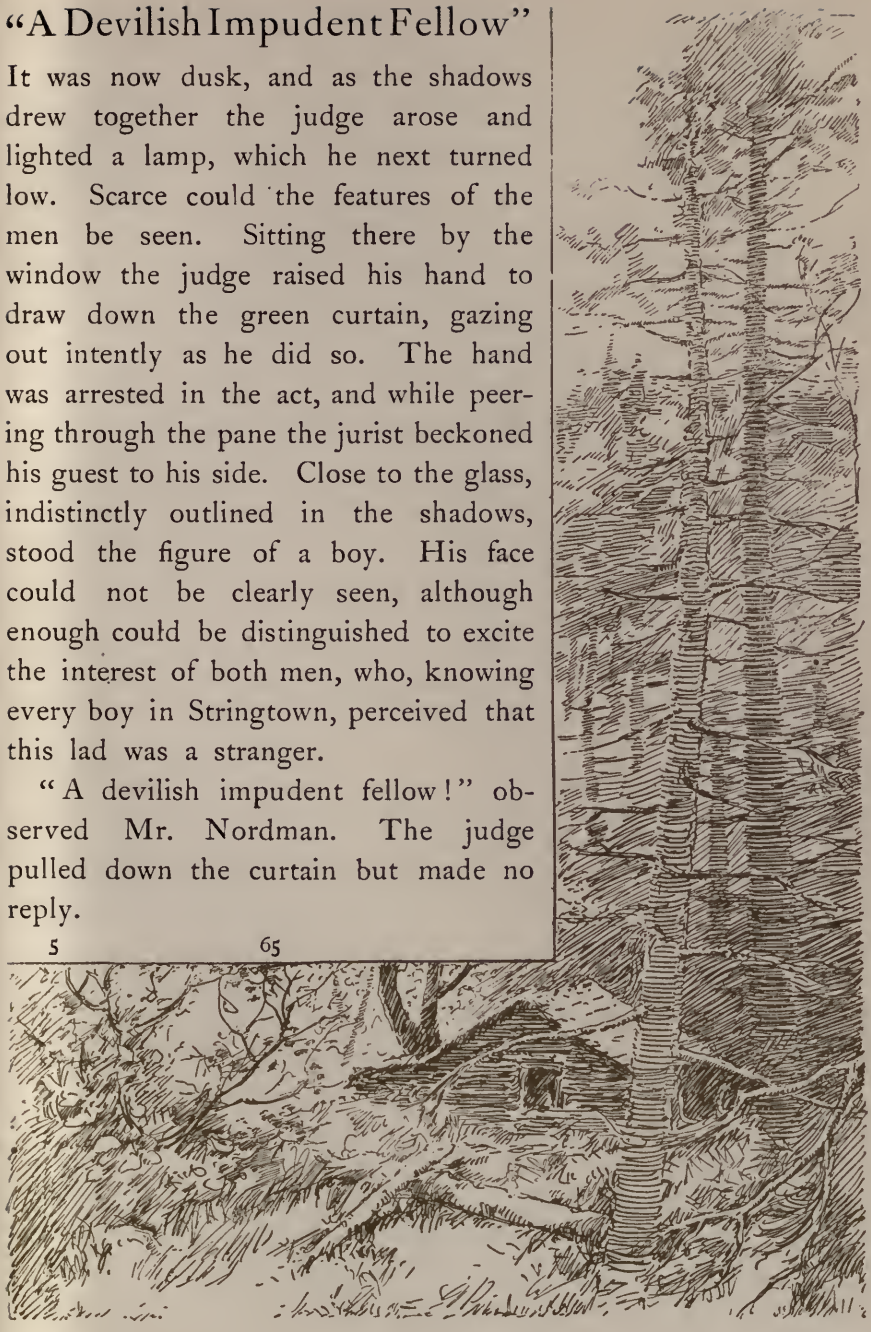
"A DEVILISH IMPUDENT FELLOW"

IN the spring of 1864 Judge Elford, of Stringtown, sat in the front room of his little home, his companion being Mr. Nordman, a gentleman of culture, a wealthy farmer whose colonial home was near the pike just south of the village. Old friends were these men, free to talk and joke and drink and discuss times and conditions, as can men of comprehensive minds and well-stored intellects. Between them on the table stood a bottle, from which occasionally, as the afternoon passed, a glass had been filled and leisurely sipped.

"A Devilish Impudent Fellow"

It was now dusk, and as the shadows drew together the judge arose and lighted a lamp, which he next turned low. Scarce could the features of the men be seen. Sitting there by the window the judge raised his hand to draw down the green curtain, gazing out intently as he did so. The hand was arrested in the act, and while peering through the pane the jurist beckoned his guest to his side. Close to the glass, indistinctly outlined in the shadows, stood the figure of a boy. His face could not be clearly seen, although enough could be distinguished to excite the interest of both men, who, knowing every boy in Stringtown, perceived that this lad was a stranger.

"A devilish impudent fellow!" observed Mr. Nordman. The judge pulled down the curtain but made no reply.



Red Head

The friends had just reseated themselves when the door opened and, without ceremony, the boy stepped into the room. Closing the door he stood looking at the men, but did not say a word.

"A devilish impudent boy, I say!" repeated Mr. Nordman in an undertone. Still the judge made no reply. He turned up the light; the boy's features became distinct. Almost grotesque were they in some particulars; yet in that child-face, the jurist, a reader of character, saw more than did his companion. A moment he sat in silence, scrutinizing the intruder. The boy's movements, that to Mr. Nordman suggested impudence, seemed to him due simply to lack of cultivation. The mind of the judge caught in that homely face an expression which bespoke trouble; the wandering eye-glance, the drawn mouth, the forlorn

countenance, disconsolate in it all, and yet independent.

"What can we do for you, my boy?" the judge asked kindly.

The lad stooped and set a well-worn carpet-sack on the floor. "I'm lookin' fer old man Nordman," he said, and his eyes glanced from one to the other of the men before him.

"Devilish impertinent, I say, Judge—" began Mr. Nordman, when the judge interrupted:

"Mr. Nordman is here, my boy, and will listen to your message. Sit down." Rising, he placed a chair, into which the lad dropped with an air of weariness which suggested almost complete exhaustion.

"You are tired."

"I 'm used ter bein' tired." His eyes fell upon the bottle; the glance was understood by the host.

"You are from the mountains?"

"Yes, from Eastern Kaintuck. I've walked and walked and walked."

Without a word the judge filled a glass, which the lad drained at a draught.

"Thet's the first licker I've tasted sense Sissie war shot."

"You're a fool, Judge!" Mr. Nordman spoke earnestly.

"Kin I see Uncle Nordman?"

"*Uncle* Nordman! What do you mean, Impudence?" broke in Mr. Nordman.

"Mam said thet Uncle Nordman lived in Stringtown on the Pike. Him's who I'm lookin' fer."

"I am the only Nordman in Stringtown, but I'm no uncle to such as you."

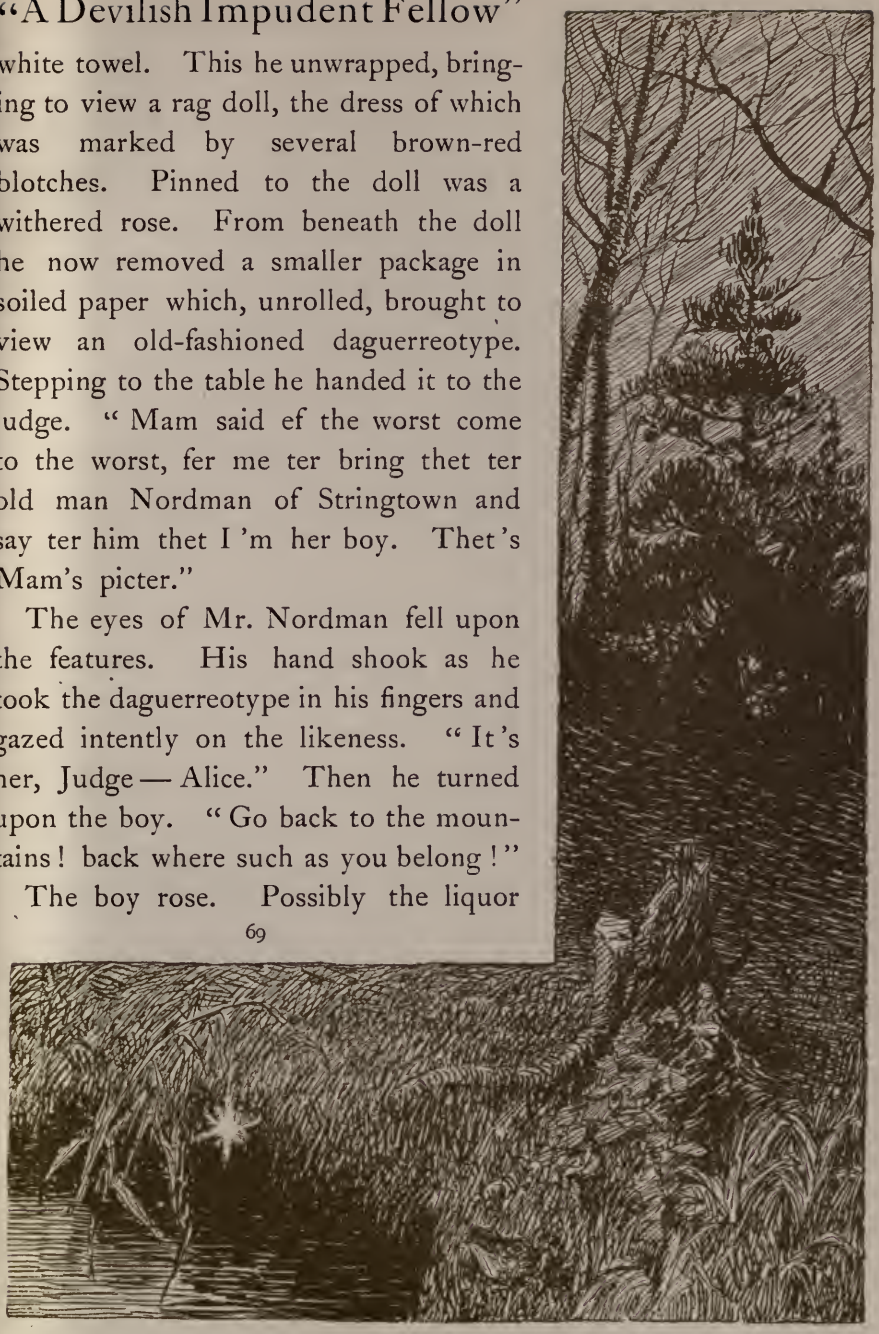
"Be patient, Nordman. Let's hear the boy's story."

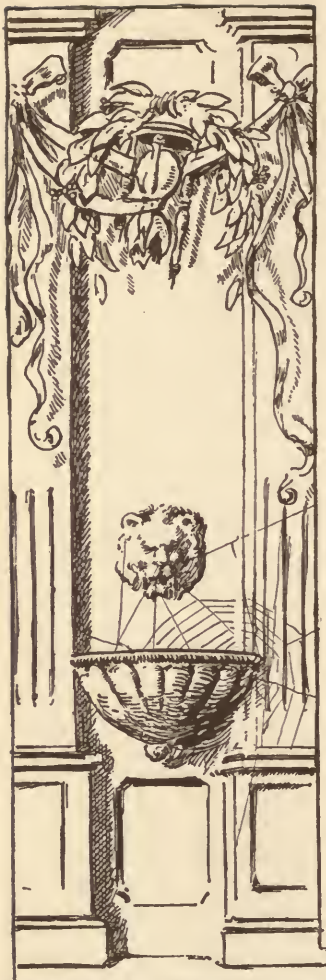
The lad opened the carpet-sack, carefully taking out a package wrapped in a

white towel. This he unwrapped, bringing to view a rag doll, the dress of which was marked by several brown-red blotches. Pinned to the doll was a withered rose. From beneath the doll he now removed a smaller package in soiled paper which, unrolled, brought to view an old-fashioned daguerreotype. Stepping to the table he handed it to the judge. "Mam said ef the worst come to the worst, fer me ter bring thet ter old man Nordman of Stringtown and say ter him thet I 'm her boy. Thet 's Mam's picter."

The eyes of Mr. Nordman fell upon the features. His hand shook as he took the daguerreotype in his fingers and gazed intently on the likeness. "It 's her, Judge — Alice." Then he turned upon the boy. "Go back to the mountains! back where such as you belong!"

The boy rose. Possibly the liquor





nerved him. His eye flashed, a look of defiance overspread his countenance. "Et 's awful hard ter be hunted like a wolf, but when a wolf, er a skunk, er a bear, er any other varment es driven ter ets hole by the hounds, ets own kind and kin gives et a home. I 'm of yo're people and I 'm nigh 'bout hunted ter death."

The voice of the man trembled as he replied: "Back to the mountains, I say! where your mother made her bed among the mountain varments!"

The eye of the boy held the gaze of the speaker. "Mam lived in heaps of trouble but she died game. I 'll git even with yo' yet fer them words." He turned to go.

"Nordman," spoke the judge, "there comes a time when passion needs be forgotten, when forgiveness becomes one 's duty. Alice, your youngest sister, of-

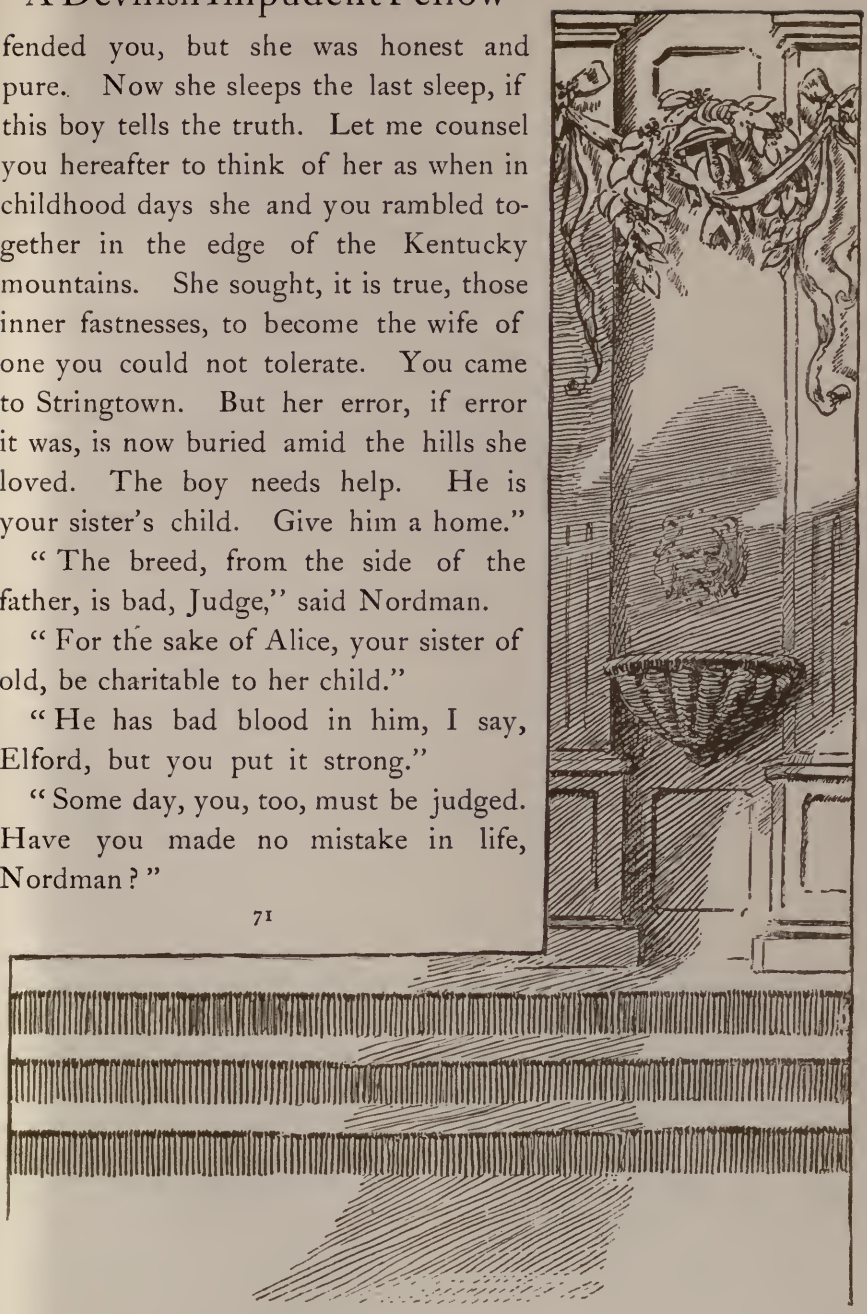
fended you, but she was honest and pure. Now she sleeps the last sleep, if this boy tells the truth. Let me counsel you hereafter to think of her as when in childhood days she and you rambled together in the edge of the Kentucky mountains. She sought, it is true, those inner fastnesses, to become the wife of one you could not tolerate. You came to Stringtown. But her error, if error it was, is now buried amid the hills she loved. The boy needs help. He is your sister's child. Give him a home."

"The breed, from the side of the father, is bad, Judge," said Nordman.

"For the sake of Alice, your sister of old, be charitable to her child."

"He has bad blood in him, I say, Elford, but you put it strong."

"Some day, you, too, must be judged. Have you made no mistake in life, Nordman?"



Nordman sat in silence. The last question seemed to have struck home. Then he spoke to the boy, who stood with carpet-sack in hand.

"Have you had any supper?"

"No, ner dinner, neither. I 'm nigh 'bout starved."

"Come." They passed together out of the room. The judge sat alone. Then he filled his glass and sipped in silence.

CHAPTER VIII

RED HEAD

"A MOUNTAIN boy! a mountain boy!" These were the whispered welcomings that a few days later met the ears of the same boy brought to the Stringtown school by Mr. Nordman. A strange bit of humanity was he, both in appearance and in action. His hair was red, fiery red. His face partook of the same hue and, strangely enough, the freckles over his cheeks were not brown but a deep brown-red. Awkward in demeanor and in movement, reserved to the point of impudence, but independent in it all. Alone in the very northernmost tip of Kentucky, without a friend or com-

panion, separated from the home of his childhood by the Eagle Hills and the great tableland beyond, known as the Blue Grass section, ready to study or to fight was this child from the mountains. And that he might expect enough of the latter is evident from the fact that between the mountaineers and us lowland people existed inborn clannish antagonisms, which always led to acts of violence.

"What is your name?" asked the teacher, as that morning the lad stood before him.

"Red Head," was the reply; and as he turned to his desk we cast our eyes again upon our books. But by this name he came to be called, first by the children ever ready to fasten a nickname upon another, then by all who knew him.

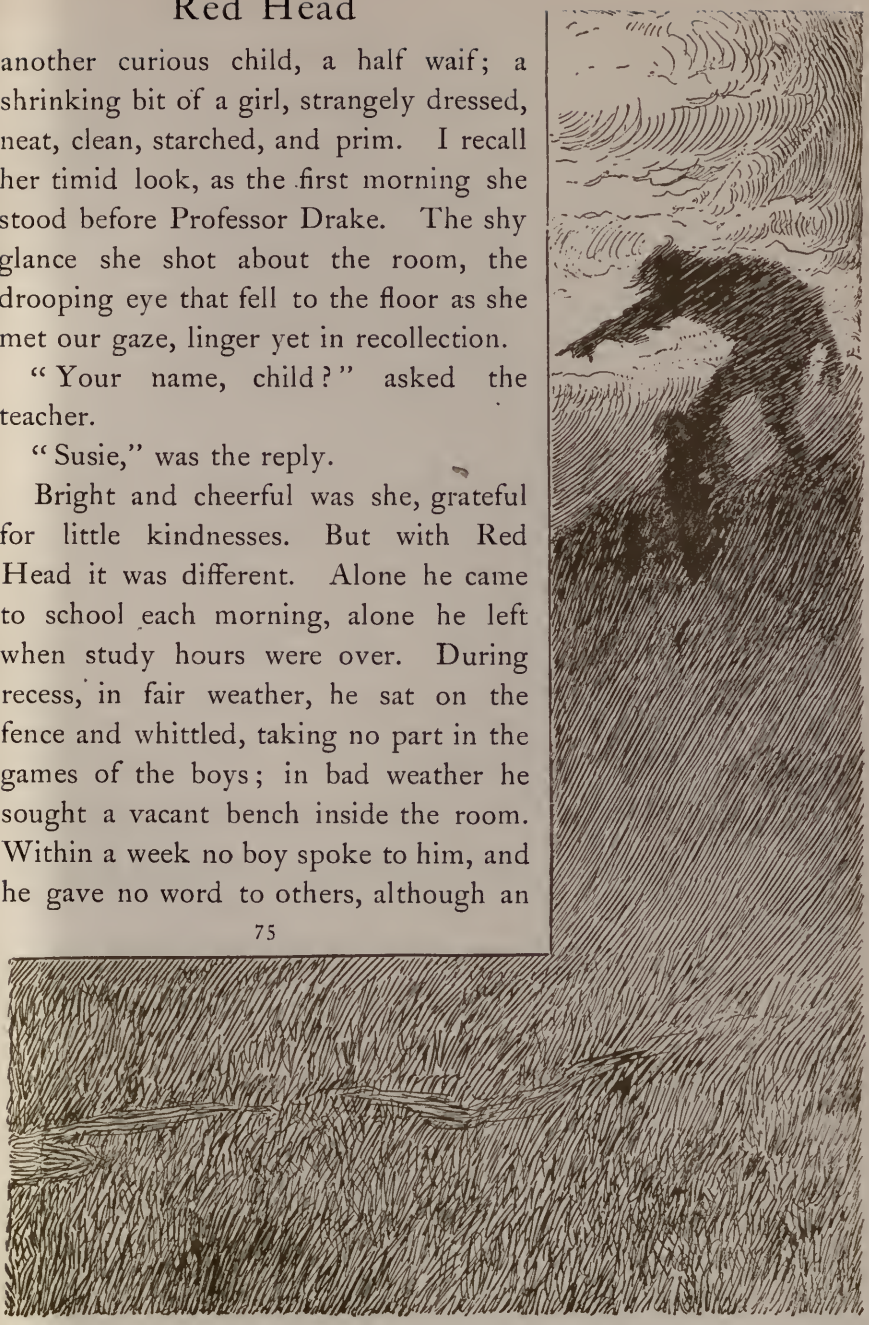
About this date came to our school

another curious child, a half waif; a shrinking bit of a girl, strangely dressed, neat, clean, starched, and prim. I recall her timid look, as the first morning she stood before Professor Drake. The shy glance she shot about the room, the drooping eye that fell to the floor as she met our gaze, linger yet in recollection.

"Your name, child?" asked the teacher.

"Susie," was the reply.

Bright and cheerful was she, grateful for little kindnesses. But with Red Head it was different. Alone he came to school each morning, alone he left when study hours were over. During recess, in fair weather, he sat on the fence and whittled, taking no part in the games of the boys; in bad weather he sought a vacant bench inside the room. Within a week no boy spoke to him, and he gave no word to others, although an



occasional cat wail could be heard when his back was turned.

Every "new boy" in our school was expected to establish his position by right of fist, and Red Head met this ordeal with a will that bespoke his courage. I chanced to have been his first antagonist, but it was a drawn battle. By common consent we became thereafter conspicuous in that we never looked at each other and gave no taunt when accident brought us together. We lived in a temporary truce; peace could not come between us until the fight was finished.

Red Head's favorite place during school recess and noon hours was a conspicuous locust post near the pike-line. His employment consisted in sitting on this fence post and watching the road, whittling a stick and sharpening his great horn-handled knife. His main

object seemed to be to scan the pike, for, even while whittling, his bright little eyes were ever glancing about as though he were expecting some one. Watchful may better express the recollection that comes now to my mind as I reflect over his method and deportment. Indifferent to our games or pastimes he held himself aloof; and yet, once, he did take part in a contest of skill.

We were shooting at a mark, the weapon being a rifle of small bore (a squirrel rifle), the "mark" a sheet of paper on a plank against a distant tree. "Strange amusement that for children," some may say. True, but I speak of Kentucky in the Sixties. A defiant boy singled out Red Head and challenged him to join us — *dared* him to shoot. Climbing down from the fence, he stepped to the line and, before we could anticipate his object, from

an inside pocket of his jacket drew a bright revolver. Raising it, without aiming, he fired. Several boys sprang to the mark; there was the bullet hole in the plank far above the wildest shot we had made. A cry of derision, a series of cat mews, a chorus of sarcastic jeers, rang upon the air.

"Better git a rest," sneered one.

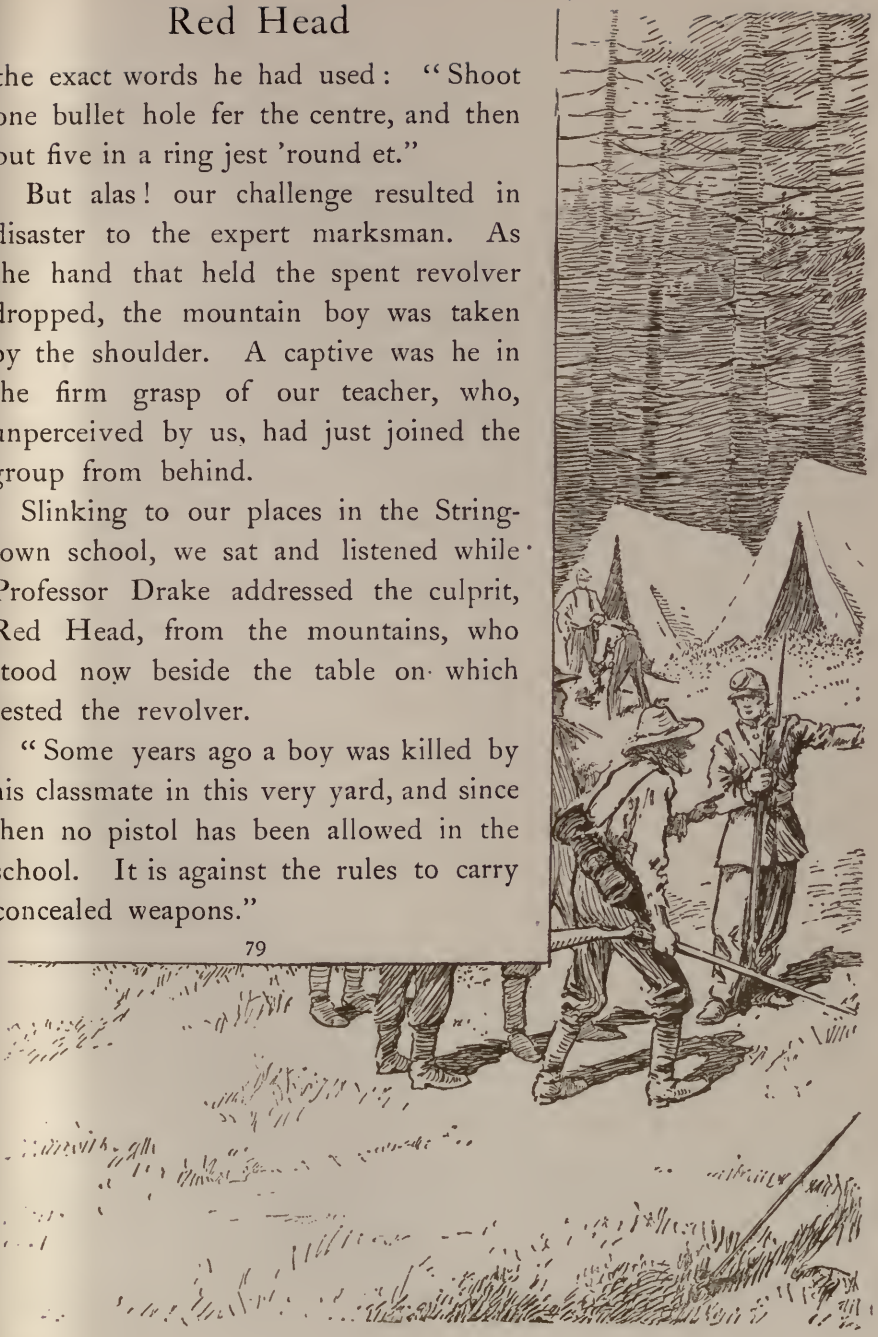
"Fools!" he said, "thet's no mark ter shoot at. Ef you war raised in the moun'ns and would shoot at a whole sheet of paper, they'd take yore gun away and drive yo' off. Thet's no mark, I say — shoot one bullet hole fer the centre, and then put five in a ring jest 'round et." As he spoke, his arm was again raised, and as fast as the trigger could be pulled came five shots. We sprang to the distant mark, and there, in a close circle, equal distances apart, was a ring of little holes. I recall

the exact words he had used: "Shoot one bullet hole fer the centre, and then put five in a ring jest 'round et."

But alas! our challenge resulted in disaster to the expert marksman. As the hand that held the spent revolver dropped, the mountain boy was taken by the shoulder. A captive was he in the firm grasp of our teacher, who, unperceived by us, had just joined the group from behind.

Slinking to our places in the Stringtown school, we sat and listened while Professor Drake addressed the culprit, Red Head, from the mountains, who stood now beside the table on which rested the revolver.

"Some years ago a boy was killed by his classmate in this very yard, and since then no pistol has been allowed in the school. It is against the rules to carry concealed weapons."



"I hain't hurt nobody, teacher."

"But surely you know it is wrong to carry a weapon like this?"

"Et ain't wrong fer *me* ter carry et."

"It is never right to carry a pistol in a civilized community."

"Teacher, ef yo' knew my story, yo' would n't say et 's wrong fer *me* ter carry a gun. Ef yo 'd been through what I hev and war lookin' fer what 's bound ter come, yo 'd carry one, too. I did n't hurt nuthin' ner nobody when I shot thet mark."

"Tell me why it is not wrong for you to carry a pistol."

"Et 's too long and don't consarn nobody but me."

"Tell me, child, tell me why you need that weapon." The teacher spoke very kindly.

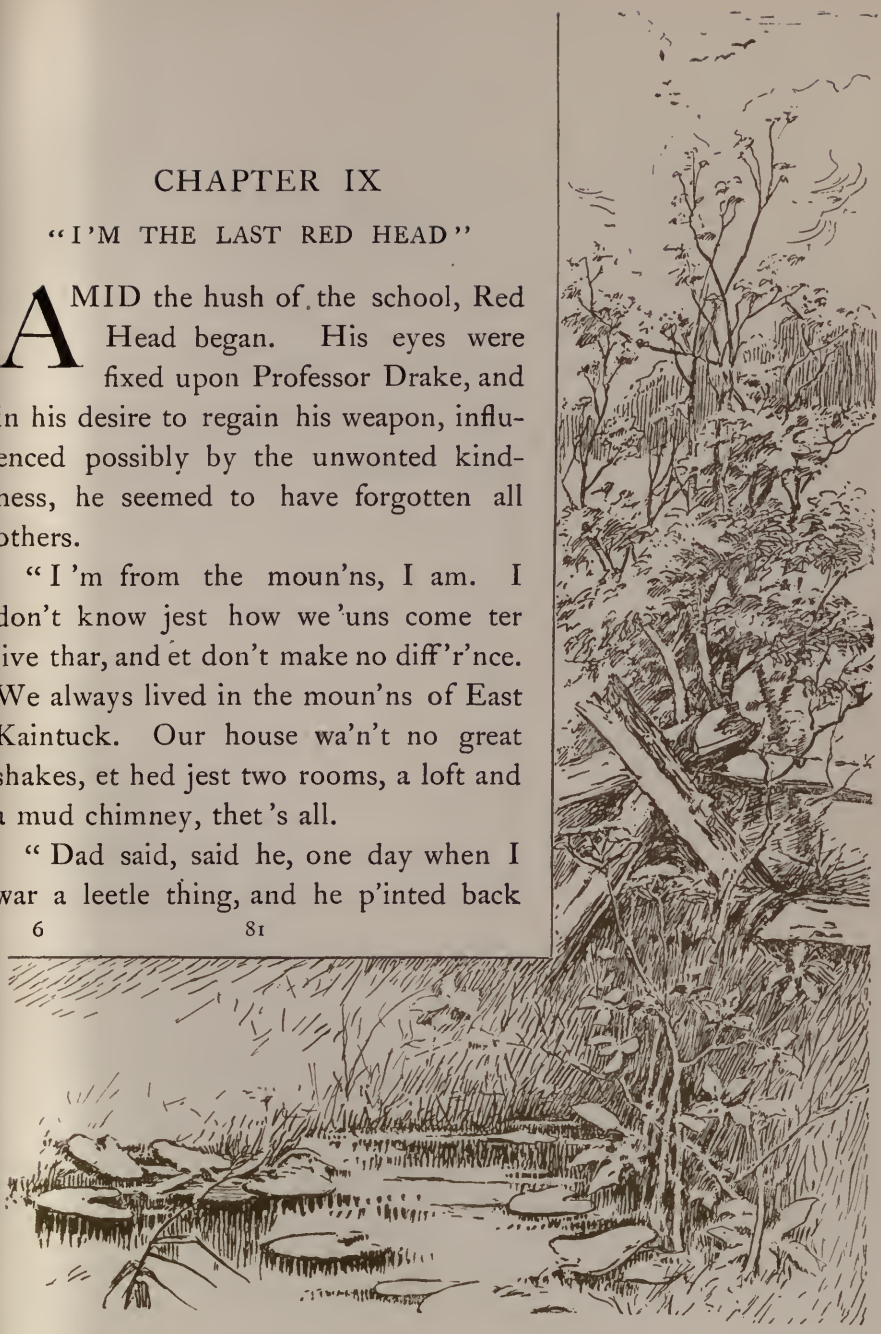
CHAPTER IX

"I'M THE LAST RED HEAD"

AMID the hush of the school, Red Head began. His eyes were fixed upon Professor Drake, and in his desire to regain his weapon, influenced possibly by the unwonted kindness, he seemed to have forgotten all others.

"I 'm from the moun'ns, I am. I don't know jest how we 'uns come ter live thar, and et don't make no diff'r'nce. We always lived in the moun'ns of East Kaintuck. Our house wa'n't no great shakes, et hed jest two rooms, a loft and a mud chimney, thet 's all.

"Dad said, said he, one day when I war a leetle thing, and he p'inted back



over the hog-back hill b'hind the cabin —'Don't none of you chil'n never cross the divide. Keep this side of Bald Hill, fer thar's a faction 'twixt Holcombs and we 'uns.' I can't remember when he fust said this, et war when I war too leetle ter remember, but he said et of'en. An' we never did cross the hog-back hill. Jim ner me ner none of us, fer Dad said the old feud war off till the Holcombs er we 'uns broke et by cross'n' the divide. And es we grew bigger, brother Jim and me, Mam kept us up in the story of the feud.

"'Ef et ever happens thet the feud es on ag'in,' says she, 'thar won't be no let up ter et es long es thar's a Holcomb er a Red livin'.' She said es how et hed been one of the bloodiest feuds of the moun'ns, and oodlins of people hed been killed on both sides; and she used ter show us the row of Holcombs on one

side of the graveyard, and the row of we 'uns on t' other side. I axed her what the fight war 'bout, and she said, said she: 'I don't jest remember. Et b'gun befo' I come inter the fam'ly, 'bout a witch story. But et don't make no diff'r'nce 'bout the beginnin', thet don't consarn us.'

"And Dad, he did n't talk much 'bout et nuther, but es soon es brother Jim and me could 'hold a gun he taught us all 'bout shootin'. 'Et air fer bus'ness p'r'aps,' he said; 'ef the feud begins ag'in yo' boys 'll be in et.' Thar ain't no more ter say, teacher, 'bout the feud, and I don't know nothin' more. Jim and me l'arned ter shoot, and et did n't make much diff'r'nce what et war we shot at, we hit et. And Dad grew monstrous proud of us, and one day I heerd him say ter Mam thet he did n't keer now ef the feud war on ag'in. But

he kept tellin' me 'n Jim ter keep this side of Bald Hill and we did. Jim war 'bout two years older 'n me, teacher.

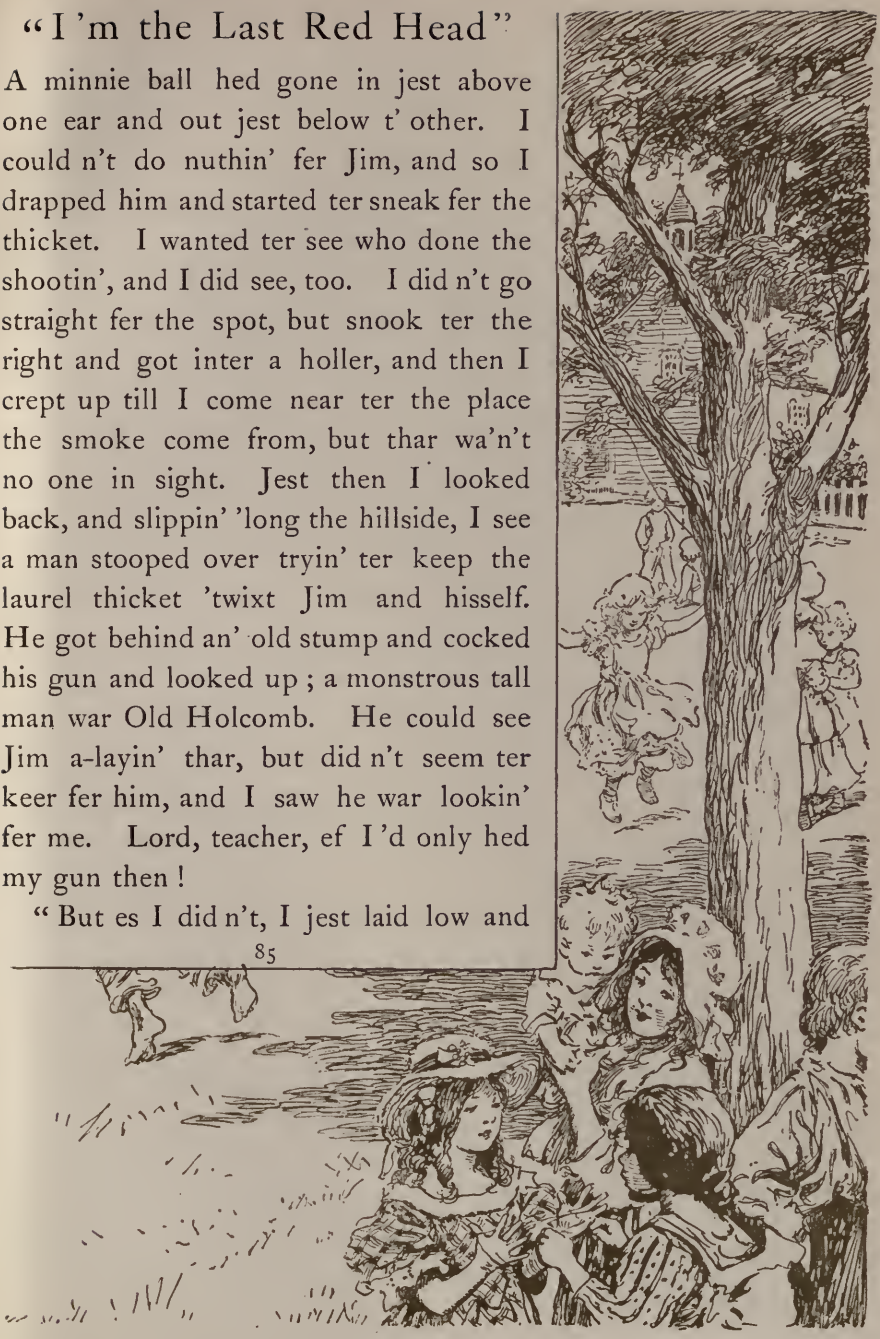
"But one day we started a young deer, and et run fer the divide. We hed n't no guns, fer we war out fishin', but es et war a leetle critter, we started ter try and run et down. We did n't notice whar et run, and befo' I knew et, we war goin' down the moun'n t' other side of Bald Hill. Jim war ahead and mighty close on ter the deer, when bang! went a gun in the thicket, and Jim drapped."

The boy stopped, hung his head and drew his coarse sleeve across his eyes. "'Scuse me, teacher," he said, "I ain't used t' talkin' and et makes me tired t' speak so long."

In a moment he resumed: "I run t' Jim and raised his head, but et war n't no use, he did n't know me. He war dead.

A minnie ball hed gone in jest above one ear and out jest below t' other. I could n't do nuthin' fer Jim, and so I drapped him and started ter sneak fer the thicket. I wanted ter see who done the shootin', and I did see, too. I did n't go straight fer the spot, but snook ter the right and got inter a holler, and then I crept up till I come near ter the place the smoke come from, but thar wa'n't no one in sight. Jest then I looked back, and slippin' 'long the hillside, I see a man stooped over tryin' ter keep the laurel thicket 'twixt Jim and hisself. He got behind an' old stump and cocked his gun and looked up ; a monstrous tall man war Old Holcomb. He could see Jim a-layin' thar, but did n't seem ter keer fer him, and I saw he war lookin' fer me. Lord, teacher, ef I 'd only hed my gun then !

" But es I did n't, I jest laid low and



slipped inter the briars and snook 'round the hill and made fer home. Mam and Dad and little Sis war sittin' at the table eatin' supper when I stepped inter the door. 'Whar's Jim?' Mam asked.

"'Shot!'

"Dad got up and p'inted over towards Bald Hill. 'Hev yo' boys crost the divide?'

"'Yes.'

"'Es he dead?'

"I jest put a finger on each side of my head. 'Minnie ball,' war all I said. 'Brother's lyin' jest over the hog-back.'

"Dad turned ter the fireplace and took down his big gun — the big b'ar gun. 'I'll bring Jim home,' he said. 'Keep in the cabin till I come. Don't yo 'uns go out.'

"'The feud's on ag'in,' war all Mam said. But she blew the coals up and commenced ter run bullets fer the big

CHINNEY BILL SMITH. "Sammy," he said. — Page 107

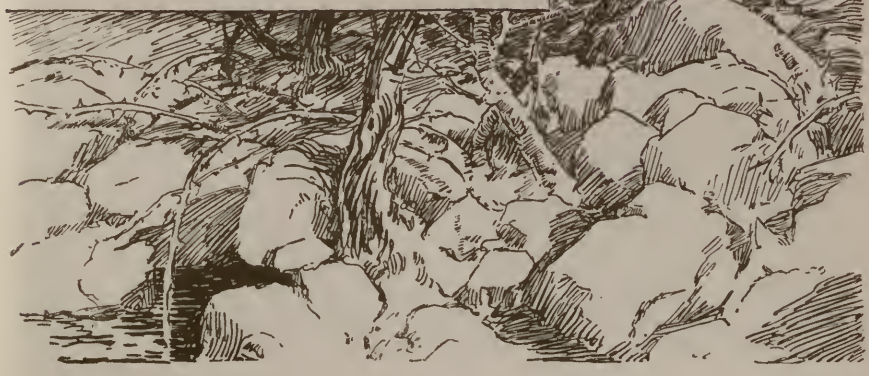
gun, and she sot me ter cleanin' up the rifle and revolvers.

"But Dad did n't come home till long after dark, and he did n't come home then nuther. Sis and I went ter sleep, but I guess Mam did n't, fer 'bout daylight I war waked by a knock on the door, and es I opened my eyes I saw she war dressed. She took down the ir'n bar from 'crost the door and let Dad in; he hed Jim in his arms. 'Thar 'll be a grave dug 'crost the hill, when we bury Jim. I hed ter watch till mornin'; et war a long shot, but I cotched him through the winder.'

"'Who 'd you git?' asked Mam.

"'Don't know whether it 's the old man er the boy, they 're 'bout the same size, but et 's one of 'em.'

"Well, teacher, we buried Jim in our graveyard row, and next day Sam Holcomb war buried in their'n. Then we



all got ready ter kill er be killed. Thar wa'n't much ter do but ter kiver the winders close, keep the guns clean, and then sneak in and out the house. Et war watch and sneak, and hunt and sneak. We killed all our dogs 'ceptin' one leetle fice thet stayed in the house ter bark, fer they hed n't sense 'nough ter keep out of sight; and ef a dog war seen in the bushes, et would give us away. One night Mam war shot by a ball thet come through the winder. Et war jest a little crack, but big 'nough ter let light out and a bullet in. She wa' n't killed dead, but she could n't live long and she knowed et. 'Red,' she said ter me, 'take good care of little Sissie. She air too young ter fight, but when she 's growed up she 'll marry and raise a fam'ly ter help carry on the feud. And, Red,' she said, 'make me one promise.'

"'Go on, Mam, I 'll do et,' I told her.

"'Don't you never let up on the feud, Red. Et must be fought ter the end.'

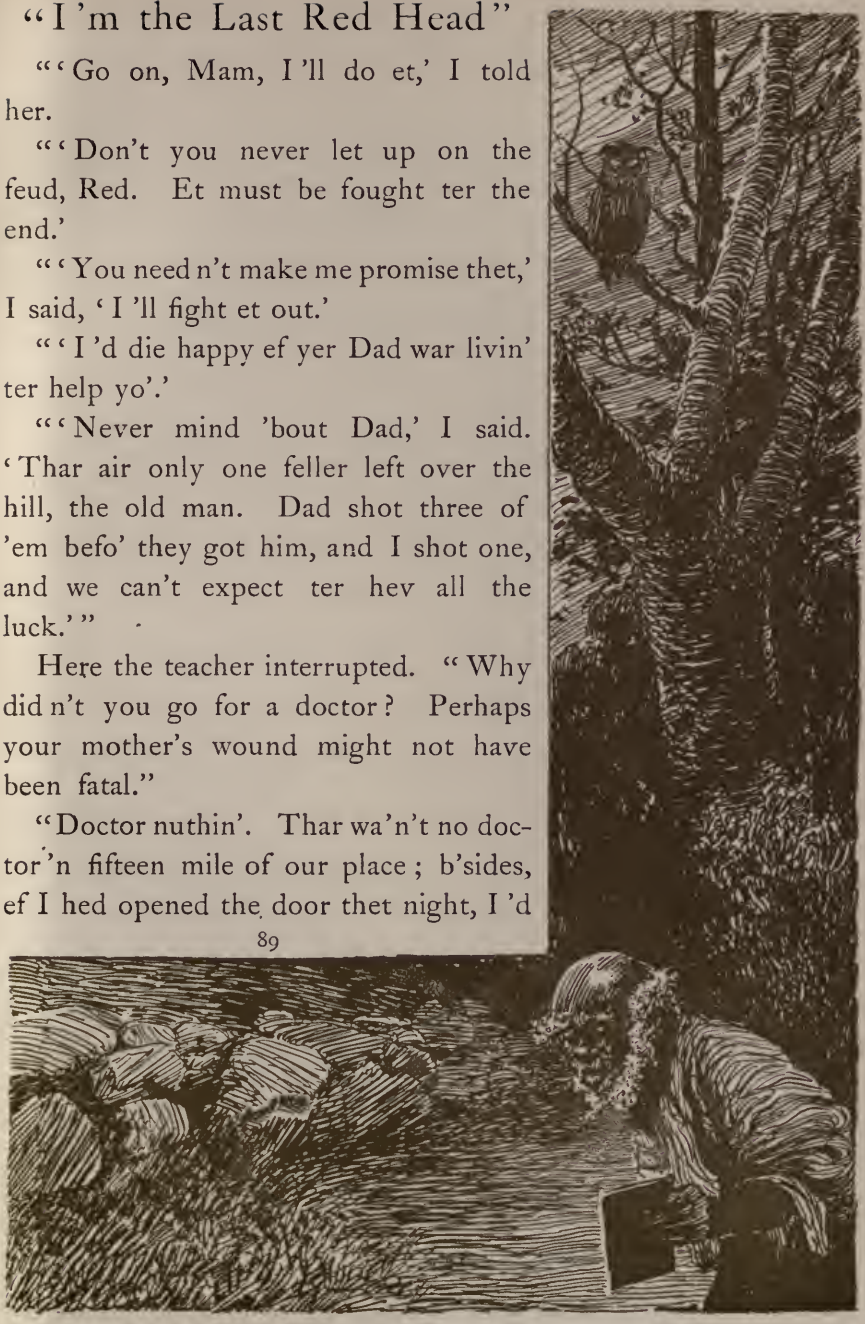
"'You need n't make me promise thet,' I said, 'I 'll fight et out.'

"'I 'd die happy ef yer Dad war livin' ter help yo'.'

"'Never mind 'bout Dad,' I said. 'Thar air only one feller left over the hill, the old man. Dad shot three of 'em befo' they got him, and I shot one, and we can't expect ter hev all the luck.'"

Here the teacher interrupted. "Why did n't you go for a doctor? Perhaps your mother's wound might not have been fatal."

"Doctor nuthin'. Thar wa'n't no doctor 'n fifteen mile of our place; b'sides, ef I hed opened the door thet night, I 'd



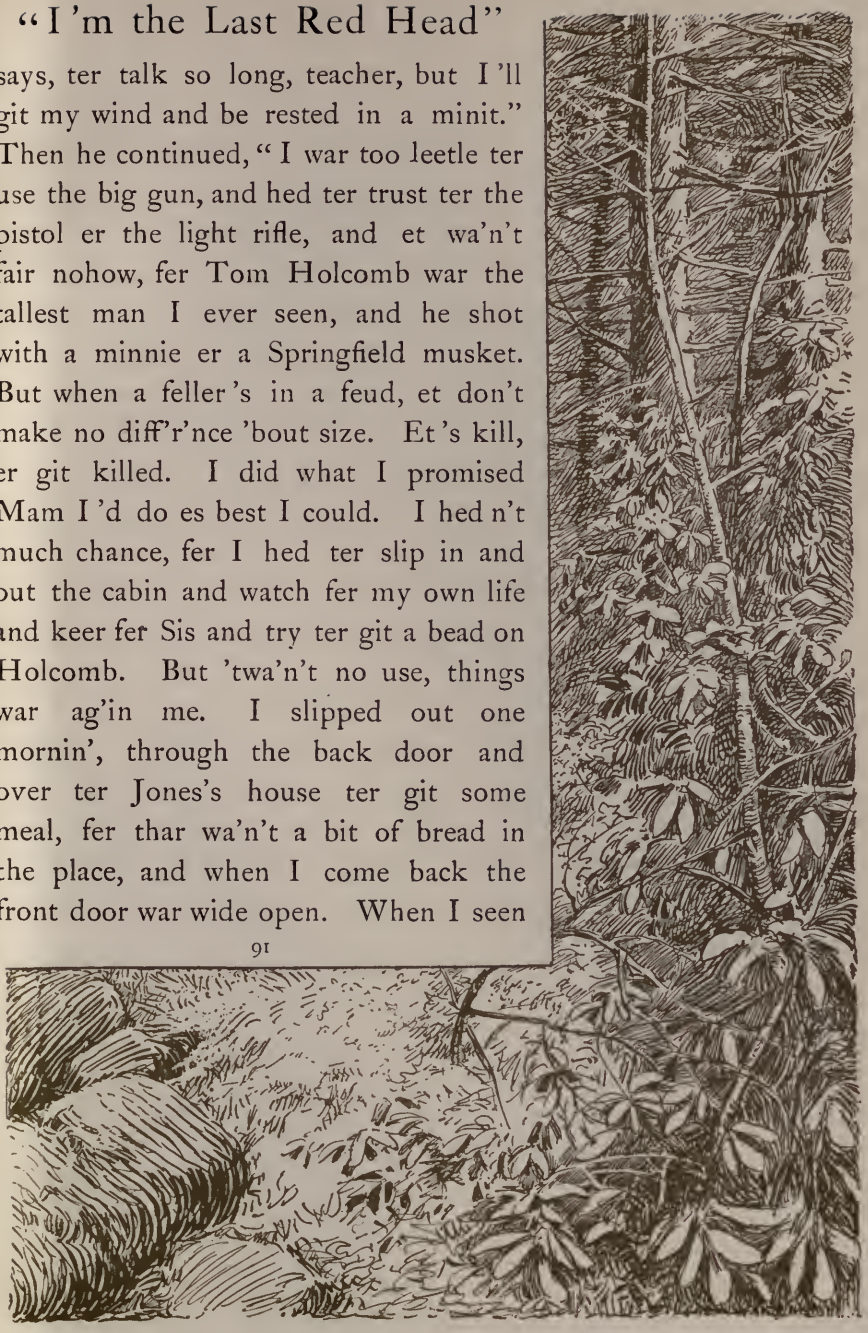
hev got a ball too. You don't know nuthin' 'bout moun'ns and feuds, teacher."

"You say your father had been killed?"

"Fergot ter mention et, but he'd been shot down 'bout a month before. Next mornin' I shut Sis in the cabin and sneaked over ter Jones's and axed him ter come and bury Mam; and I tell yer, teacher, things war mighty quiet 'bout our place fer a time after thet. Sis hed l'arned ter keep still and stay in the house. She war only a bit of a gearl, but she hed seen some bad days, teacher, and hed lots of sense fer sech a leetle thing. Jim war shot, Dad war shot, and Mam war shot, but thar wa'n't but one Holcomb left. Et war Sis and me next ef I could n't git him first!"

For the second time the narrator stopped and drew the sleeve of his jacket across his eyes. "Et makes me tired, I

says, ter talk so long, teacher, but I'll git my wind and be rested in a minit." Then he continued, "I war too leetle ter use the big gun, and hed ter trust ter the pistol er the light rifle, and et wa'n't fair nohow, fer Tom Holcomb war the tallest man I ever seen, and he shot with a minnie er a Springfield musket. But when a feller's in a feud, et don't make no diff'r'nce 'bout size. Et's kill, er git killed. I did what I promised Mam I'd do es best I could. I hed n't much chance, fer I hed ter slip in and out the cabin and watch fer my own life and keer fer Sis and try ter git a bead on Holcomb. But 'twa'n't no use, things war ag'in me. I slipped out one mornin', through the back door and over ter Jones's house ter git some meal, fer thar wa'n't a bit of bread in the place, and when I come back the front door war wide open. When I seen



thet door open, I war a-feared et meant trouble. I crept inter the house the back way, and thar in the open door, huggin' her leetle rag doll, sat Sissie. I could see the head of the doll over her shoulder. The sun war shinin' bright in her face, her back war towards me, her little head leaned ag'in the side of the door, and she looked es sweet es a pictur. 'Sis,' I said, 'Sissie, yo' mus'n't sit in the door; Tom Holcomb 'll git you, Sis.' But she did n't say nuthin'. 'Guess she 's 'sleep,' I thought, and slipped ter her side and jumped at her and cried, 'Boo! Boo!' But she did n't move."

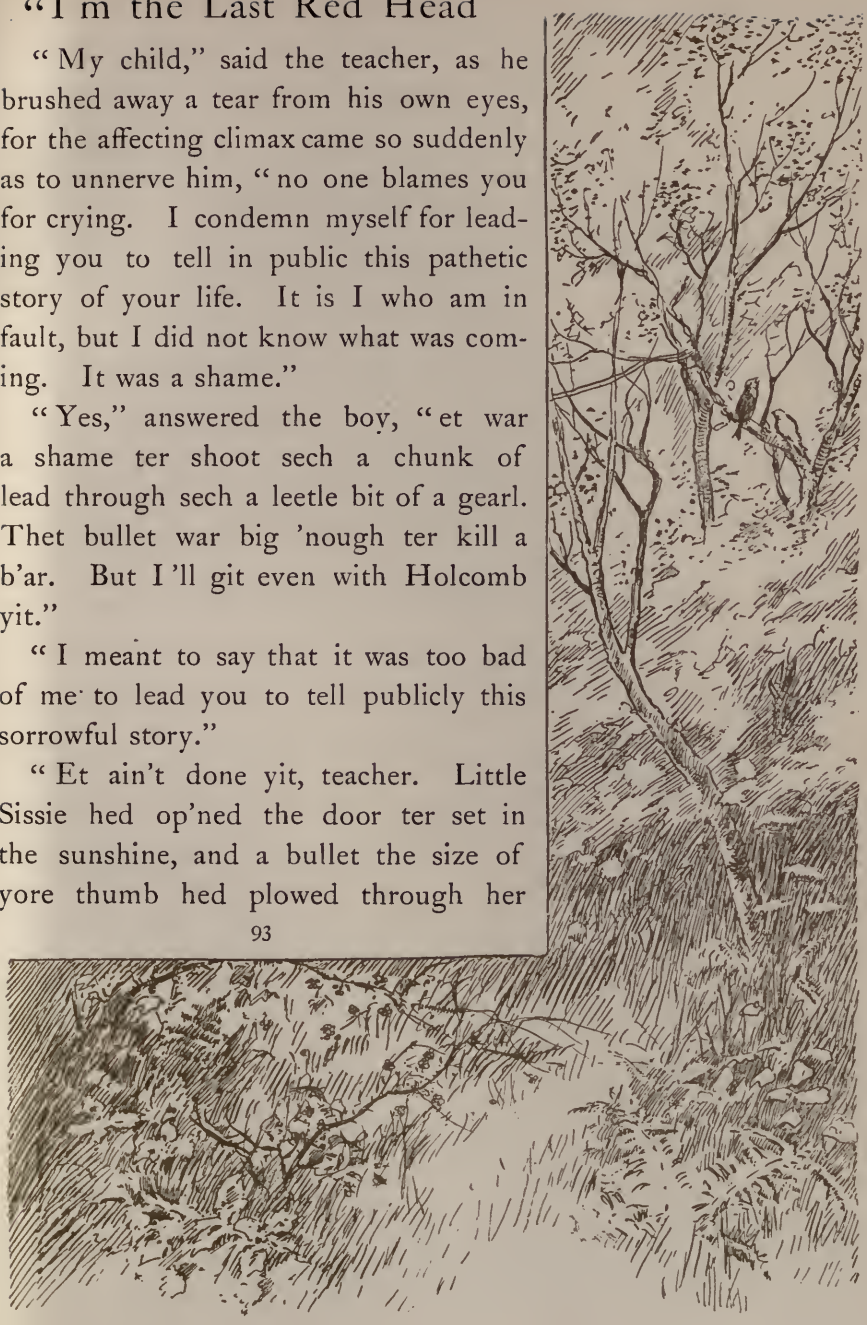
The boy's head dropped again, his chest heaved convulsively. Sob after sob broke the air. Suddenly controlling himself, he turned defiantly toward us boys. "I 'll thrash the feller what laughs et me. I ain't a coward ef I did cry."

"My child," said the teacher, as he brushed away a tear from his own eyes, for the affecting climax came so suddenly as to unnerve him, "no one blames you for crying. I condemn myself for leading you to tell in public this pathetic story of your life. It is I who am in fault, but I did not know what was coming. It was a shame."

"Yes," answered the boy, "et war a shame ter shoot sech a chunk of lead through sech a leetle bit of a gearl. Thet bullet war big 'nough ter kill a b'ar. But I'll git even with Holcomb yit."

"I meant to say that it was too bad of me to lead you to tell publicly this sorrowful story."

"Et ain't done yit, teacher. Little Sissie hed op'ned the door ter set in the sunshine, and a bullet the size of yore thumb hed plowed through her



chest and out her back. I picked her up and laid her on the bed, and then took an old satchel and put a few things inter et (thar wa'n't much), and wrapped up the leetle bloody doll, and Mam's pictur an' a white rose thet I picked from the bush before the door, and put 'em on top. I hain't got nuthin' else now ter 'mind me of Sissie but thet doll, ner of the old home but thet rose. I barred the front door and slipped out the back way, out and 'round the spur ter Jones's house. I took my pistol — thet 's the very one" (he pointed to the weapon on the table) — "and left the guns and everything else.

"'Et ain't fair,' I said ter Jones; 'Holcomb 's too big fer me.'

"'Goin' ter let him run yo' off?' said Jones.

"'No, goin' ter go away ter grow bigger. Tell Tom Holcomb ef he

wants me, I'll be in Stringtown on the Pike.'

"'And ef he don't foller yo'?'

"'When I'm big 'nough ter handle a Springfield gun I'll be back ag'in. Tell him the feud's on till one er t' other of us es shot.'

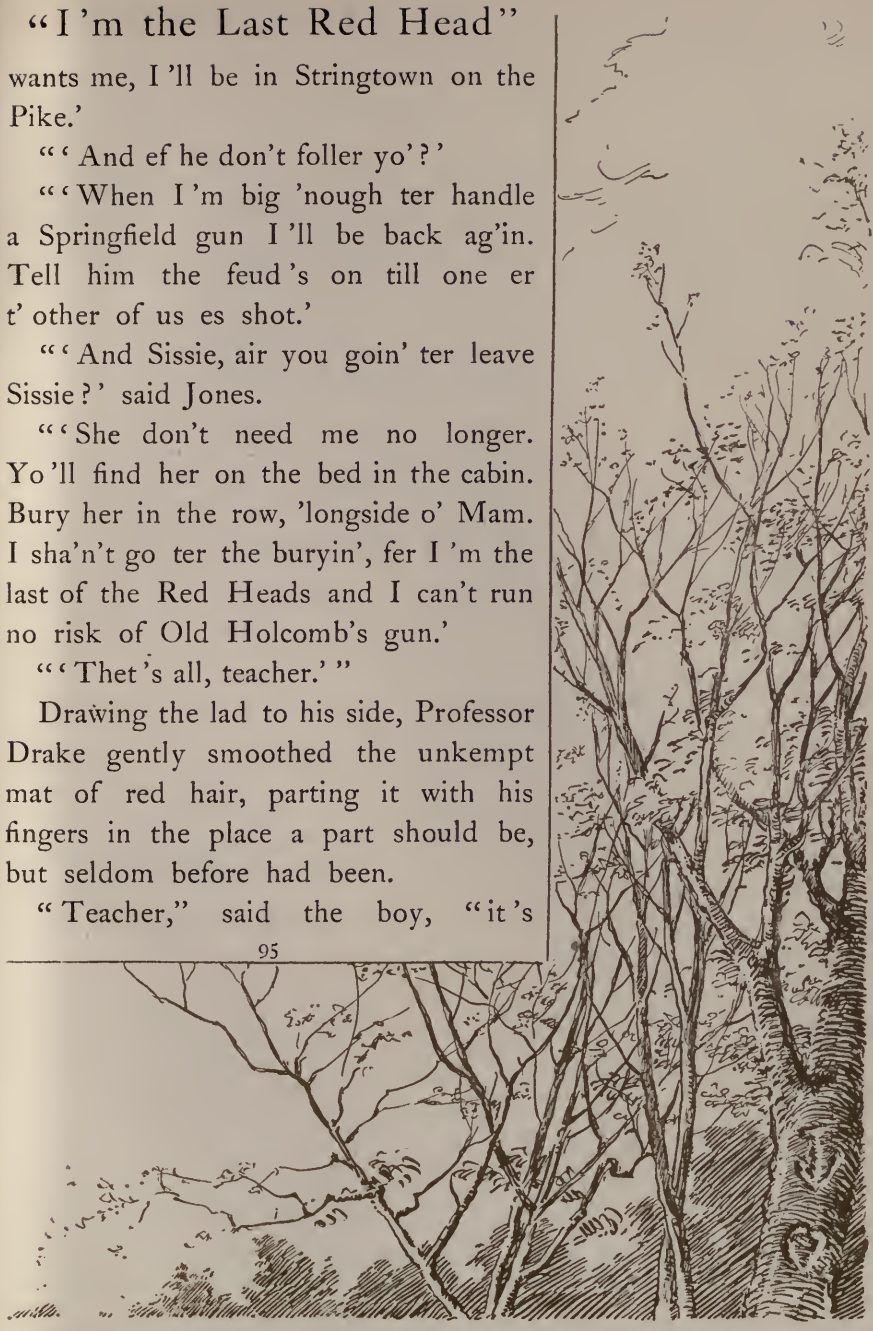
"'And Sissie, air you goin' ter leave Sissie?' said Jones.

"'She don't need me no longer. Yo'll find her on the bed in the cabin. Bury her in the row, 'longside o' Mam. I sha'n't go ter the buryin', fer I 'm the last of the Red Heads and I can't run no risk of Old Holcomb's gun.'

"'Thet's all, teacher.'"

Drawing the lad to his side, Professor Drake gently smoothed the unkempt mat of red hair, parting it with his fingers in the place a part should be, but seldom before had been.

"Teacher," said the boy, "it's



pow'ful kind in you ter do thet. You don't know what et is ter be all alone in a town like this whar every one hates you like sin. I've got ter fight ev'ry boy in Stringtown after I whip Sammy Drew; but I ain't keerin' fer thet. Yo' don't know, teacher, how et feels ter be hunted like er fox all yer life."

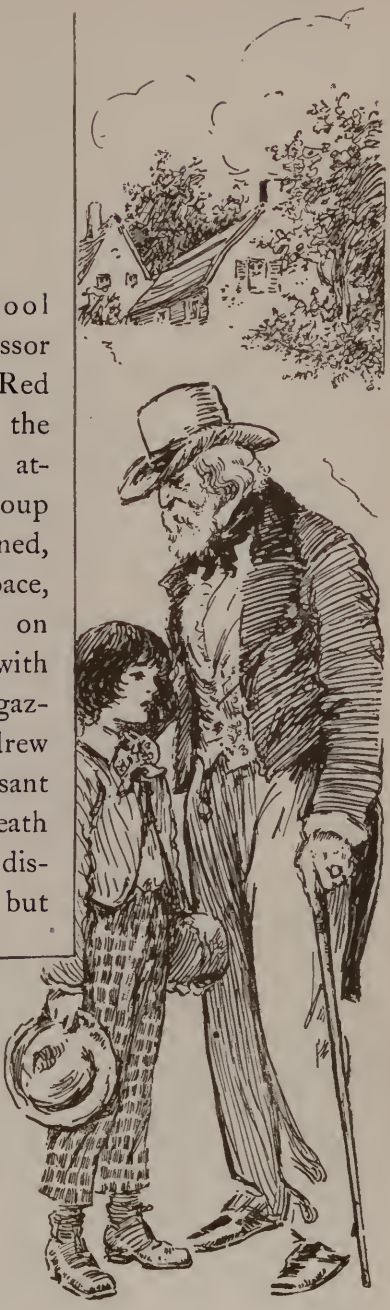
"You expect Mr. Holcomb to follow you to Stringtown?"

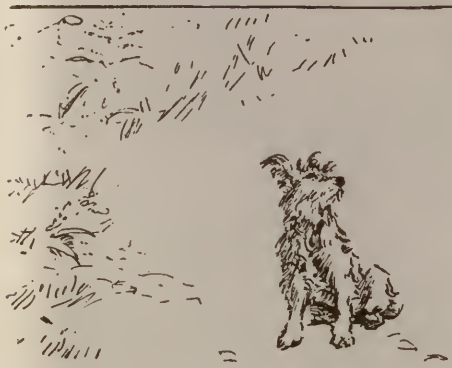
"Et's him er me fer et, teacher. He's the last of the Holcombs, and I'm the last Red Head."

CHAPTER X

RED HEAD DEFENDS SUSIE

ONE morning before school opened and before Professor Drake's arrival, both Red Head and I were in place on the boys' side of the room, when our attention was drawn to a whispering group of girls. Just then the door opened, and Susie passed down the open space, until she reached the girls, who, on opposing seats, leaning across, sat with heads together. Back they shrank, gazing intently into her face as she drew near, making no return to her pleasant greeting beyond a cold stare, beneath which the smile on Susie's face disappeared. She was only a child, but



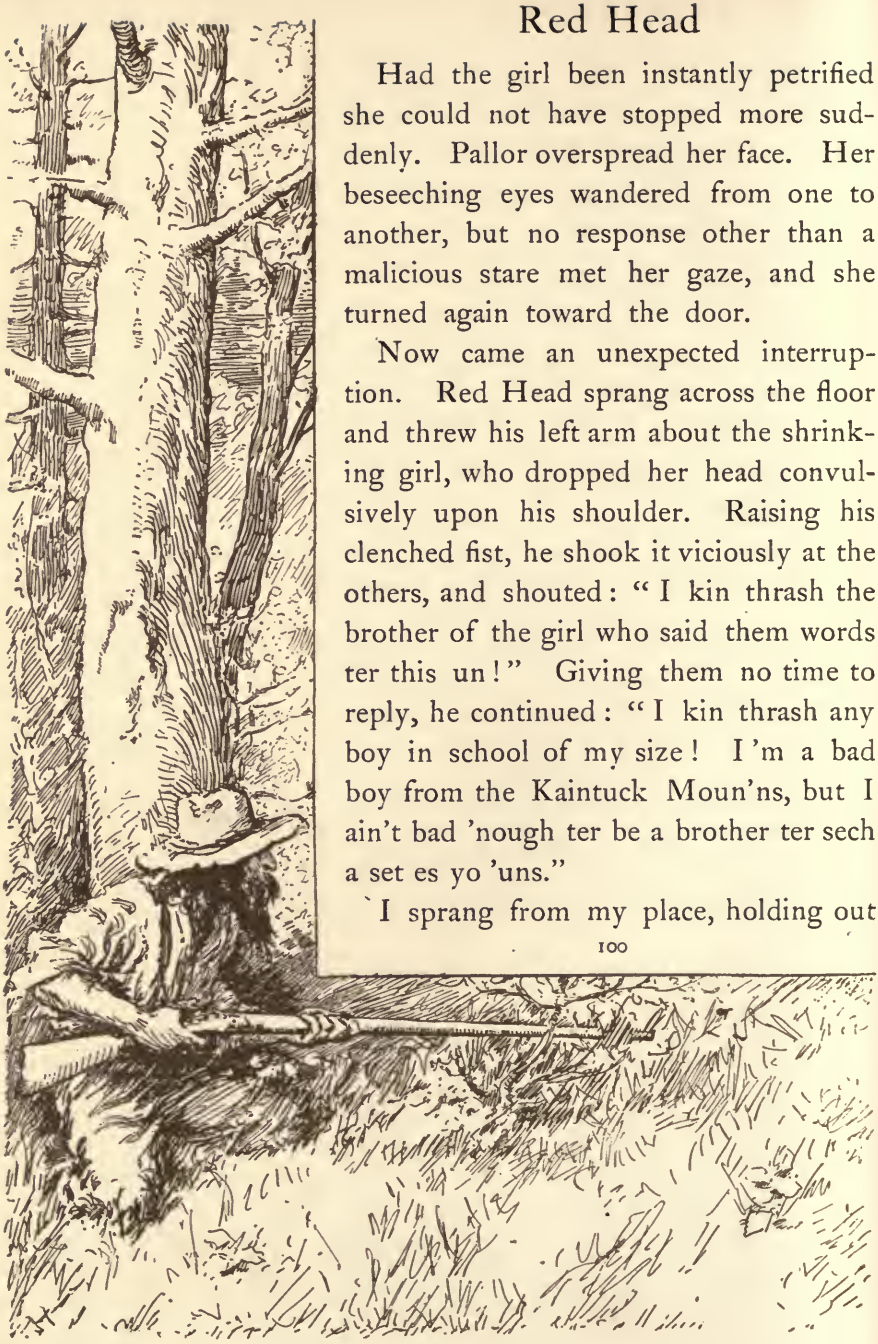


no words were necessary to tell the story carried by those unfeeling eyes and shrinking forms. With downcast face she passed along, her satchel of books hanging upon her arm. From her cheeks the blood had fled; I saw those roses fade as I have sometimes seen a beautiful evening-tinted cloud deaden and turn to leaden hue. Toward her own desk passed the child, while on either side, peering at her as can girls who have the devil in their hearts, sat those Stringtown girls. But Susie looked neither to the right nor to the left, although it could be seen that she felt the touch of their hateful eyes. Her desk-mate sat in her place; but as Susie approached she too drew away as though the touch of her garment might be unclean. The child stopped short, the satchel slipped from her nerveless arm and fell upon the floor.

Pleadingly she raised her clasped hands, then dropped into her seat and imploringly turned her pallid face upward. Her words were low and tremulous, but I caught them.

"Tell me, Jennie! tell me what it is!"

For reply the girl again drew back. Then came whispers from about; the busy tongues of Stringtown girls were loosed. Slowly the child arose, and turned toward the door; she did not stop to pick up the fallen satchel; a rosy apple touched by her foot rolled across the floor to the rostrum; but she did not heed it. The whispers grew louder, and as she reached the middle of the open space before the door, one tongue, bolder and more vicious than the others, sang in sarcastic monotone, 'Only Susie, Nigger Susie, Nigger Susie!"



Had the girl been instantly petrified she could not have stopped more suddenly. Pallor overspread her face. Her beseeching eyes wandered from one to another, but no response other than a malicious stare met her gaze, and she turned again toward the door.

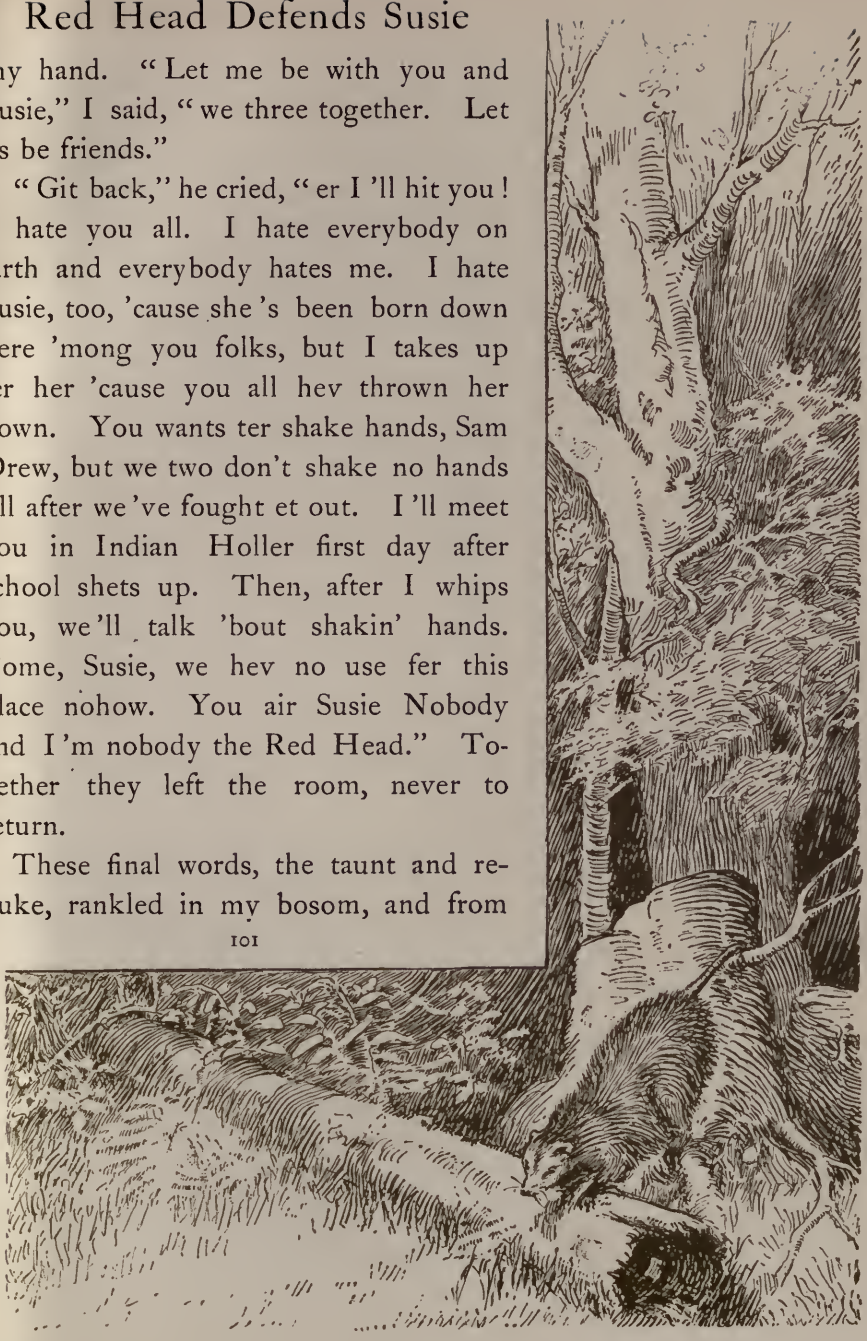
Now came an unexpected interruption. Red Head sprang across the floor and threw his left arm about the shrinking girl, who dropped her head convulsively upon his shoulder. Raising his clenched fist, he shook it viciously at the others, and shouted: "I kin thrash the brother of the girl who said them words ter this un!" Giving them no time to reply, he continued: "I kin thrash any boy in school of my size! I'm a bad boy from the Kaintuck Moun'ns, but I ain't bad 'nough ter be a brother ter sech a set es yo 'uns."

I sprang from my place, holding out

my hand. "Let me be with you and Susie," I said, "we three together. Let us be friends."

"Git back," he cried, "er I 'll hit you! I hate you all. I hate everybody on 'arth and everybody hates me. I hate Susie, too, 'cause she 's been born down here 'mong you folks, but I takes up fer her 'cause you all hev thrown her down. You wants ter shake hands, Sam Drew, but we two don't shake no hands till after we 've fought et out. I 'll meet you in Indian Holler first day after school shets up. Then, after I whips you, we 'll talk 'bout shakin' hands. Come, Susie, we hev no use fer this place nohow. You air Susie Nobody and I 'm nobody the Red Head." Together they left the room, never to return.

These final words, the taunt and rebuke, rankled in my bosom, and from



that day I longed for the end of the school term, anxious to fight it out with Red Head of the mountains. At last the session closed, and the next morning found me seeking the appointed place.

Into the meadow, over the next ridge, and down its side into Indian Hollow, I passed. As I turned the top of the last ridge I caught sight of a distant form, that of a boy about my own size, who directed his steps down the opposing slope toward the point I was approaching. It was Red Head, my expected antagonist, who, true to his agreement, met me in the ravine, where tradition said, rested the dead Indians. No word did either of us say as we slowly neared each other; there was no necessity for words, we knew our errand. I raised my fists and prepared for the tussle, but instead of a like movement, he folded

SUSIE, with the eyes of Susie of old. — Page 122

his arms across his chest and said: "Hit me in the face; hit me hard!"

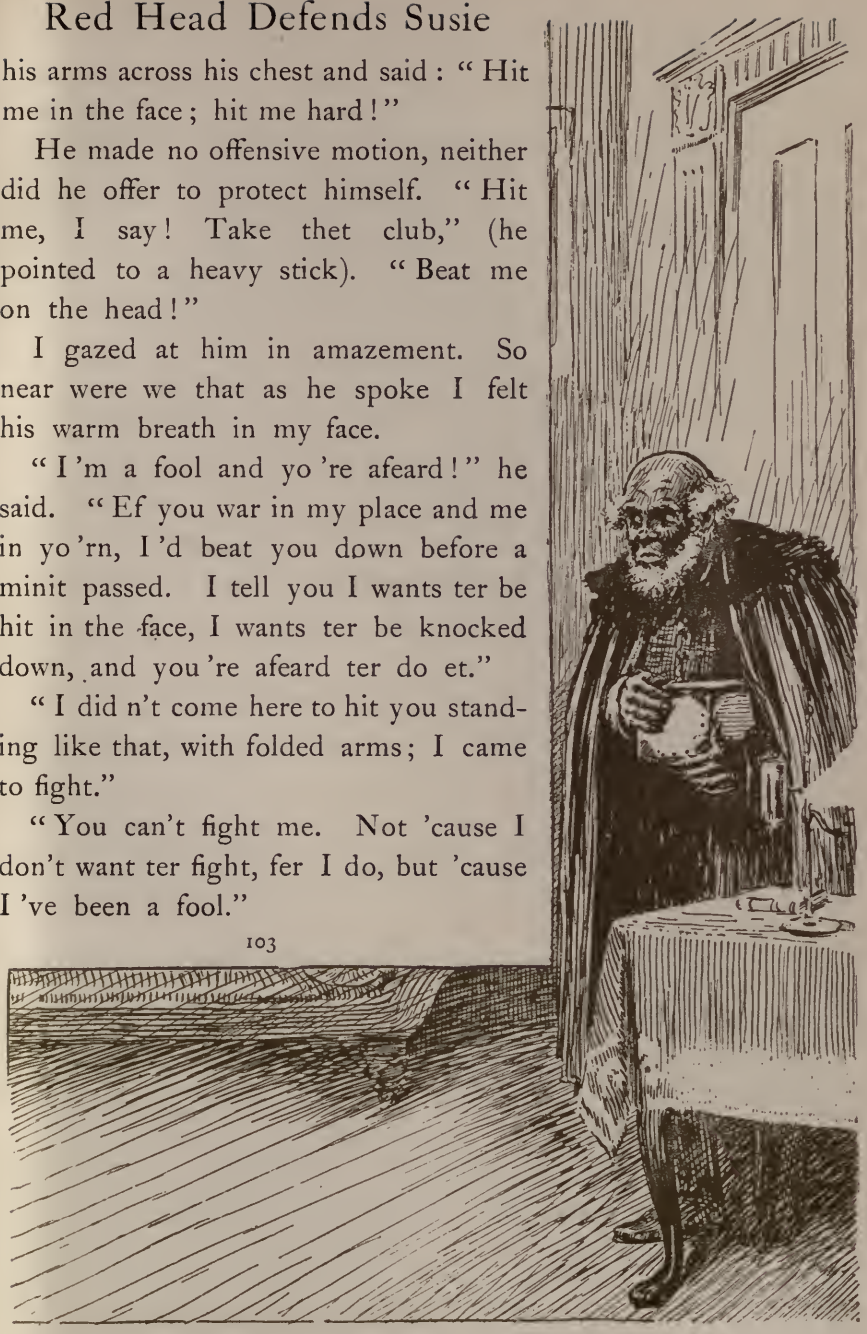
He made no offensive motion, neither did he offer to protect himself. "Hit me, I say! Take thet club," (he pointed to a heavy stick). "Beat me on the head!"

I gazed at him in amazement. So near were we that as he spoke I felt his warm breath in my face.

"I 'm a fool and yo 're afeard!" he said. "Ef you war in my place and me in yo 'rn, I 'd beat you down before a minit passed. I tell you I wants ter be hit in the face, I wants ter be knocked down, and you 're afeard ter do et."

"I did n't come here to hit you standing like that, with folded arms; I came to fight."

"You can't fight me. Not 'cause I don't want ter fight, fer I do, but 'cause I 've been a fool."



"Why?"

"I promised not ter fight you, but I did n't promise not ter show you thet I 'm not afeard of bein' hurt. I 'll not strike back, but I dare you ter beat my head with the club. I wants ter git paid fer bein' a fool. I 'll not flinch. Hit me, I say."

"I shall not do it. Who made you promise not to fight me?"

His eyes snapped. "Nobody *made* me, I don't 'low no one ter make me do nuthin'. I jest promised not ter fight you, and I 'll do what I promised."

"Whom did you promise?"

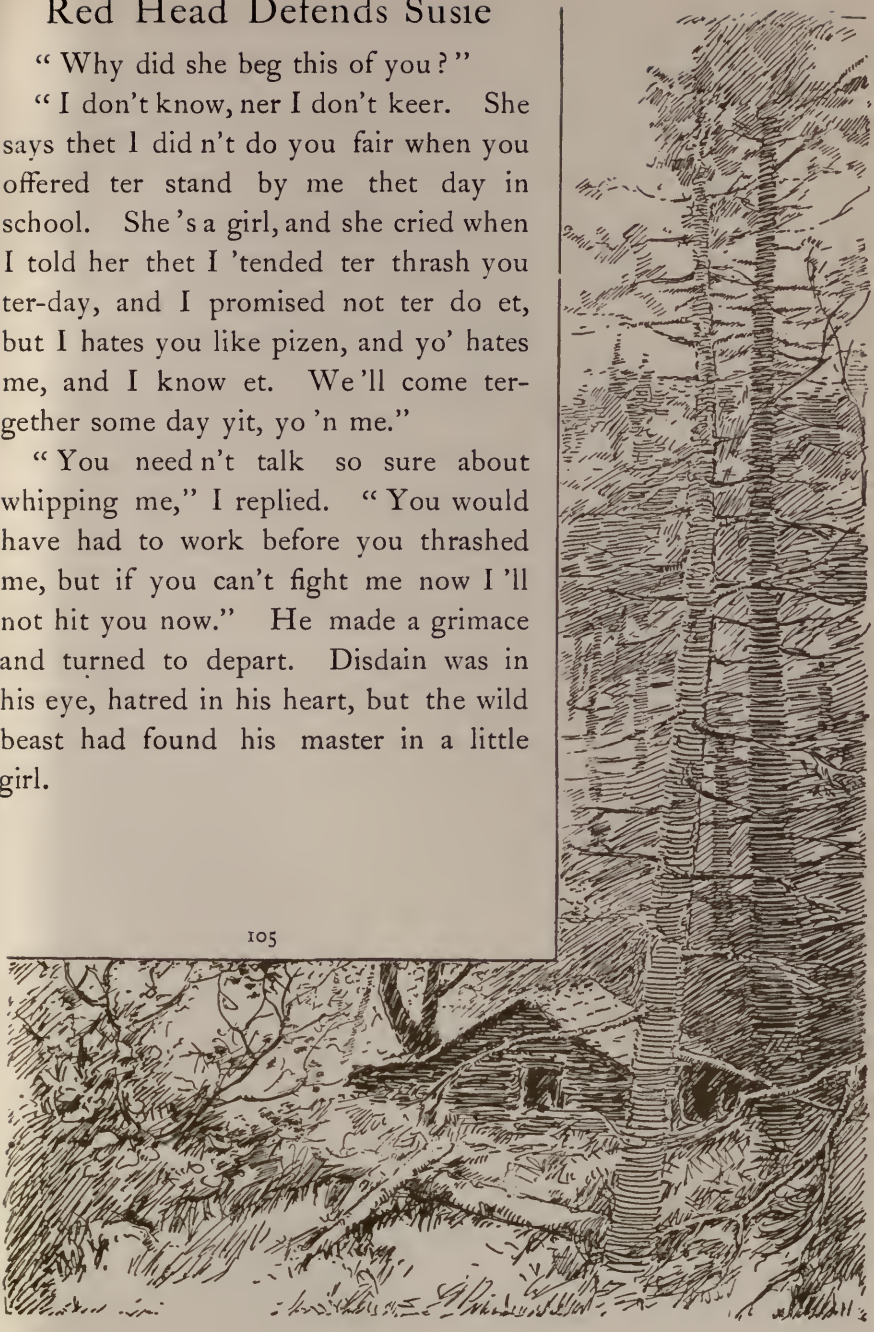
"Susie."

He stood before me with folded arms, this wild mountain-boy, my enemy. "Susie begged me not ter fight you, and I promised. She said thet you hed been kind ter her and helped her in school. I 'm a fool, but not a coward."

"Why did she beg this of you?"

"I don't know, ner I don't keer. She says thet I did n't do you fair when you offered ter stand by me thet day in school. She 's a girl, and she cried when I told her thet I 'tended ter thrash you ter-day, and I promised not ter do et, but I hates you like pizen, and yo' hates me, and I know et. We 'll come ter-gether some day yit, yo 'n me."

"You need n't talk so sure about whipping me," I replied. "You would have had to work before you thrashed me, but if you can't fight me now I 'll not hit you now." He made a grimace and turned to depart. Disdain was in his eye, hatred in his heart, but the wild beast had found his master in a little girl.



CHAPTER XI

I PRESCRIBE FOR MR. NORDMAN

TIME passed, and Red Head had grown to near manhood's height, while I was prepared to enter college.

"Sammy," said Mr. Cumback, the grocer, that last morning as I made my farewell tour through the village, thrusting into my pocket a neatly tied package, "don't forget Stringtown!" and then he squeezed my fingers until the joints ached.

Chinney Bill Smith, of long-bearded fame, sat on a barrel before Mr. Cumback's grocery. The crown of his head was now bald, but the entire chest of the

artful Kentucky minstrel was masked by heavy whiskers.

"Sammy," he said, and his rough palm covered my hand and crushed the skin on my wrist, "Sammy, yo' hev heerd me tell some whoppers 'bout Cap'n Sam Hill, but when the feller a man's talkin' ter knows thet a story es a lie, et ain't no lie. Nevah tell a lie, Sammy; cut yore tongue out fust."

Venerable Judge Elford held me long by the hand, looking me full in the face. "Child, it has been many years since my boy Charles went from our village to a college in Ohio; he was about your age when he left me. And next Willie, 'our Willie,' the boy of Silas and Sarah, left for the North." His voice trembled, and for a moment he said no more. I knew the story of both "our Willie" and his boy. There was no need for him to tell it.

Then the judge resumed. "Promise me, Sammy, that if ever you get into trouble, you will come to me."

"That I will assuredly do."

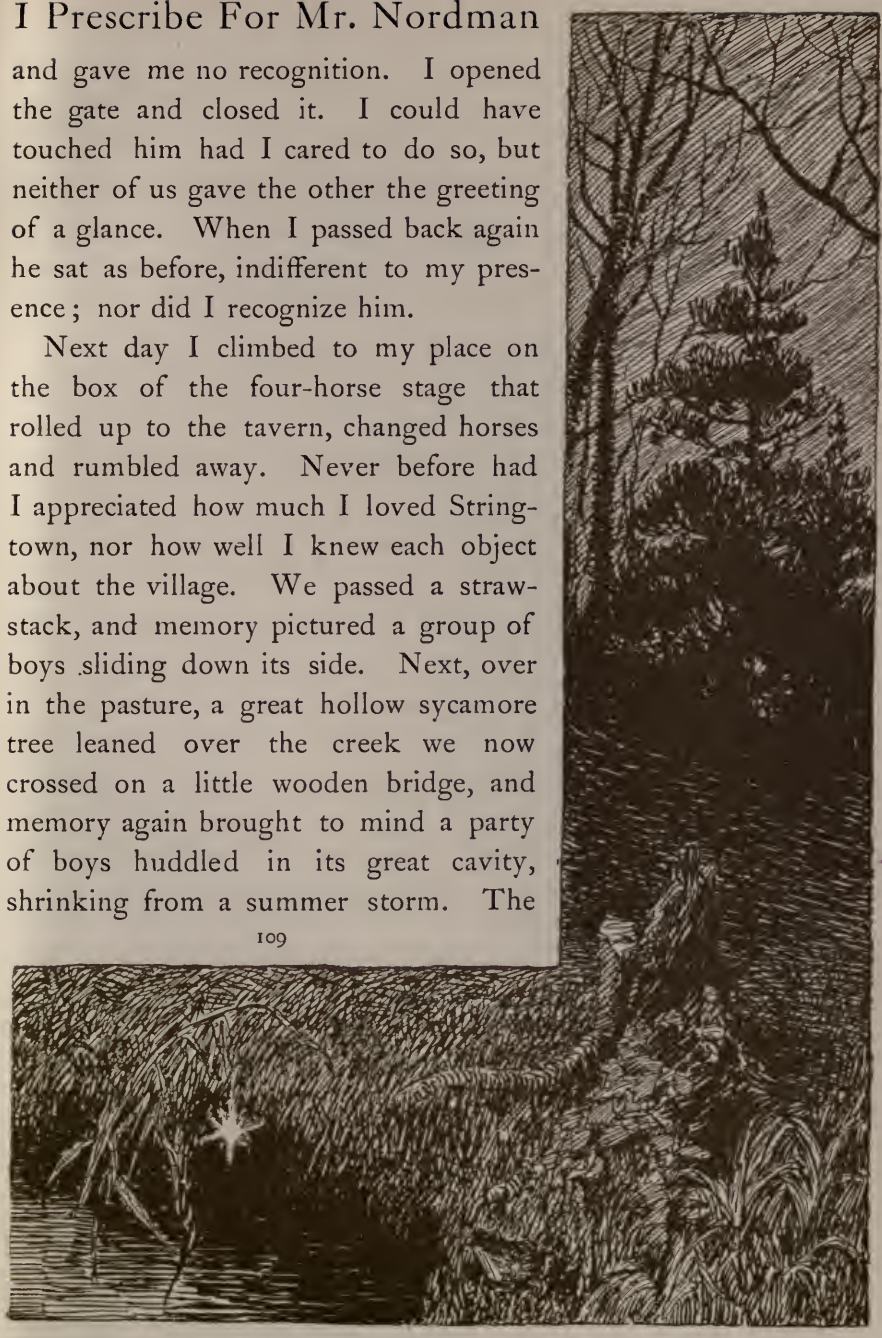
"And that in case you need help, you will follow my advice. There are dissipations in the North new to boys like you. Maintain your honor, Sammy; fight, if needs be. Maintain your honor, if to do so means to fight the whole North. Remember, Sammy, the record of my boy Charley gives me a right to this heartfelt interest in the son of an old neighbor, who has no father."

"I promise to call on you, Judge," said I, "and to follow your advice."

Nearing the home of Mr. Nordman, the old gentleman on the pike south of Stringtown, I caught sight of a lad on the fence beside the front gate. Red was his head. I drew near; he gazed intently up the pike toward the south,

and gave me no recognition. I opened the gate and closed it. I could have touched him had I cared to do so, but neither of us gave the other the greeting of a glance. When I passed back again he sat as before, indifferent to my presence; nor did I recognize him.

Next day I climbed to my place on the box of the four-horse stage that rolled up to the tavern, changed horses and rumbled away. Never before had I appreciated how much I loved Stringtown, nor how well I knew each object about the village. We passed a strawstack, and memory pictured a group of boys sliding down its side. Next, over in the pasture, a great hollow sycamore tree leaned over the creek we now crossed on a little wooden bridge, and memory again brought to mind a party of boys huddled in its great cavity, shrinking from a summer storm. The



tree held its white arms aloft, its blackened cavity was exactly as when that day we crept into its hollow. As each loved scene passed in retrospect, my heart grew heavier. I even thought kindly of Red Head and, with no bitterness in the remembrance, sought to locate the spot where, in distant Bloody Hollow, we met to fight that morning, when with uplifted hand he dared me to beat him in the face with the heavy stick.

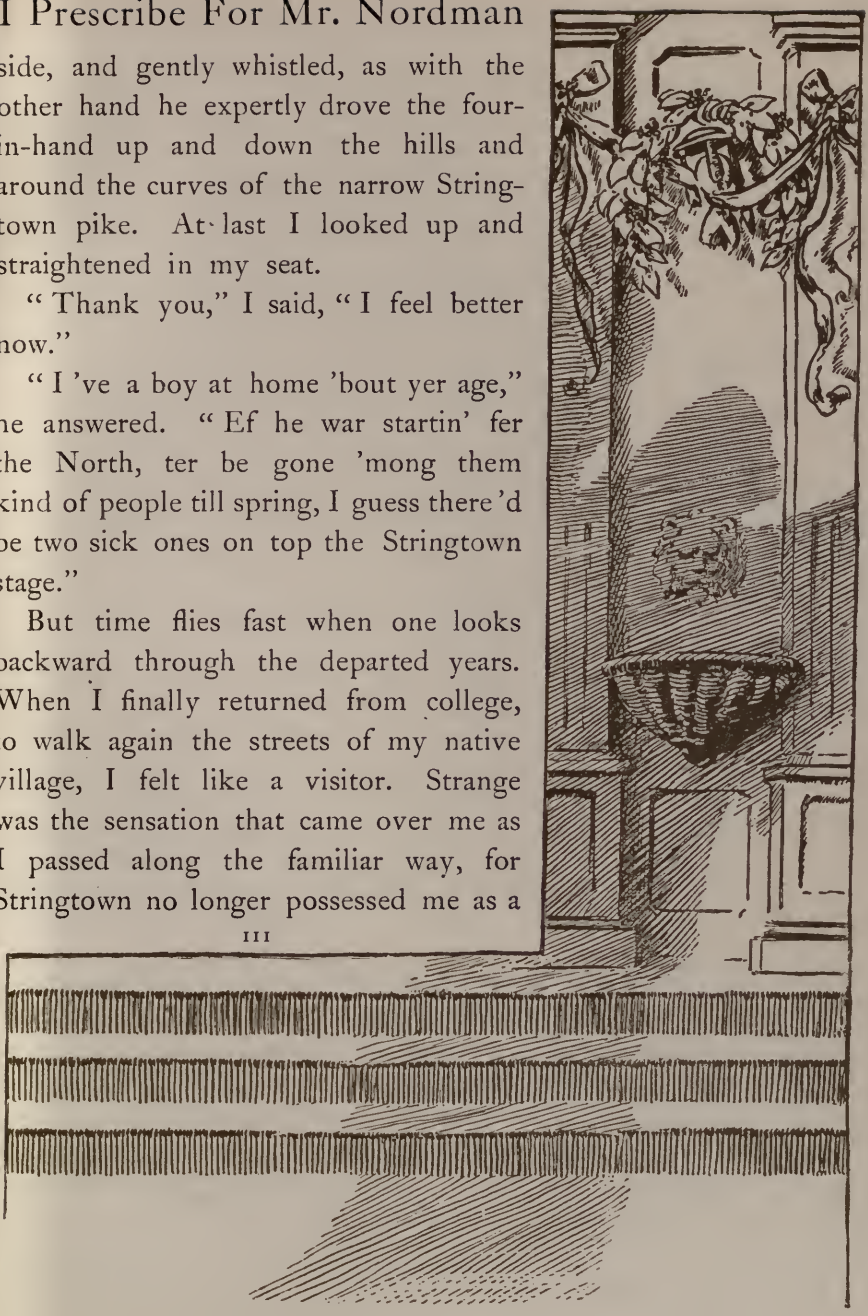
The lump in my throat grew painfully large. I endeavored to crush it down and vainly tried to hold back the tears. A gush of grief swept suddenly over me, my face was covered by my hands, and the rough stage driver, who for some reason had sat in silence, and whom I sought to deceive, — for I was ashamed to have him notice my weakness, — threw his arm about me, drew me close to his

side, and gently whistled, as with the other hand he expertly drove the four-in-hand up and down the hills and around the curves of the narrow Stringtown pike. At last I looked up and straightened in my seat.

"Thank you," I said, "I feel better now."

"I 've a boy at home 'bout yer age," he answered. "Ef he war startin' fer the North, ter be gone 'mong them kind of people till spring, I guess there 'd be two sick ones on top the Stringtown stage."

But time flies fast when one looks backward through the departed years. When I finally returned from college, to walk again the streets of my native village, I felt like a visitor. Strange was the sensation that came over me as I passed along the familiar way, for Stringtown no longer possessed me as a



part of herself. The houses were seemingly much smaller than when I had formerly known them, the pavements narrower, the flat stones of the walks were now uneven and rough. A group of little boys looked up at me; without a word of recognition they resumed their marble-playing. On that very spot but a few years before, playing marbles, I, too, knelt in the dirt, a boy of Stringtown, known to every other boy and knowing every boy. "Mr. Drew" and "Samuel" fell on my ears and grated harshly, but there were a few exceptions. The man who first used the familiar term "Sammy" was Judge Elford. "Sammy," he said, "you did not get into trouble; you did not send for me, as I feared you might, and asked you to do in case you needed me; you have my admiration. A splendid record you have made, but the end is not in sight. You may yet

require my advice, my help. Remember, Sammy, you promised to follow it if the needful time ever arrives."

I passed up the old pike to the home of Mr. Nordman, the Kentucky gentleman who introduced Red Head to our Stringtown school. Something that I cannot to-day define attracted me toward this home of my antagonist of old. A moment did I stop in the open gateway, just a moment, while through my mind ran the reflection that when last I passed that spot Red Head crowned the gate-post. I turned toward the porch where sat the familiar figure of Mr. Nordman.

Cordial was the reception extended by this friend of my childhood, who possessed the peculiar charm such men have for youthful as well as more matured minds. Many were the questions he asked, most charmingly did he interject his quaint words of pure Kentucky ac-

cent. But in it all Red Head dominated my mind, although he did not now present himself in person. At last I turned to depart but was held by a question from my host. "Sammy," he said, "you have studied in the line of chemistry and medicine and must know much of things concerning ailments such as trouble men of my age."

"I am not a physician, Mr. Nordman, but yet I understand somewhat the uses and doses of remedial agents."

"I called foah doctahs one aftah the othah, and each gave me quinine. I'll not take quinine, Sammy. It's pizen and gives me the bone misery. Can't you name some simple, an herb or bark to fit my trouble?"

Reflecting a moment and questioning further I finally replied, "Mr. Nordman, as I have said, I am a chemist, not a physician, and hesitate even to suggest

a cure. Yet an emergency remedy is sometimes necessary in the household. It is evident you often need both a gentle tonic and a mild, quieting agent. I would suggest that you put golden seal root and wild cherry bark in whiskey, and as a tonic, take a tablespoonful of the liquid each morning."

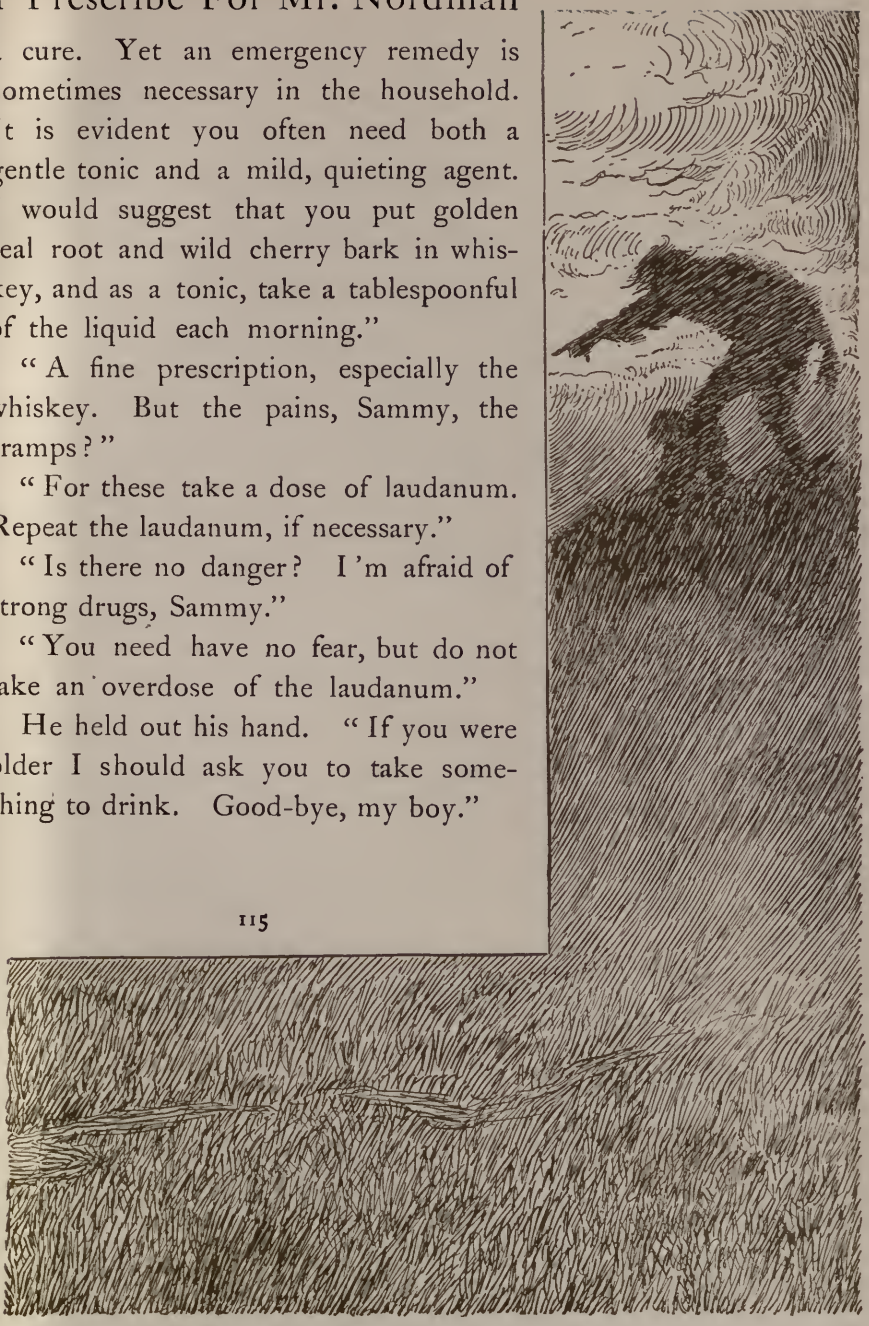
"A fine prescription, especially the whiskey. But the pains, Sammy, the cramps?"

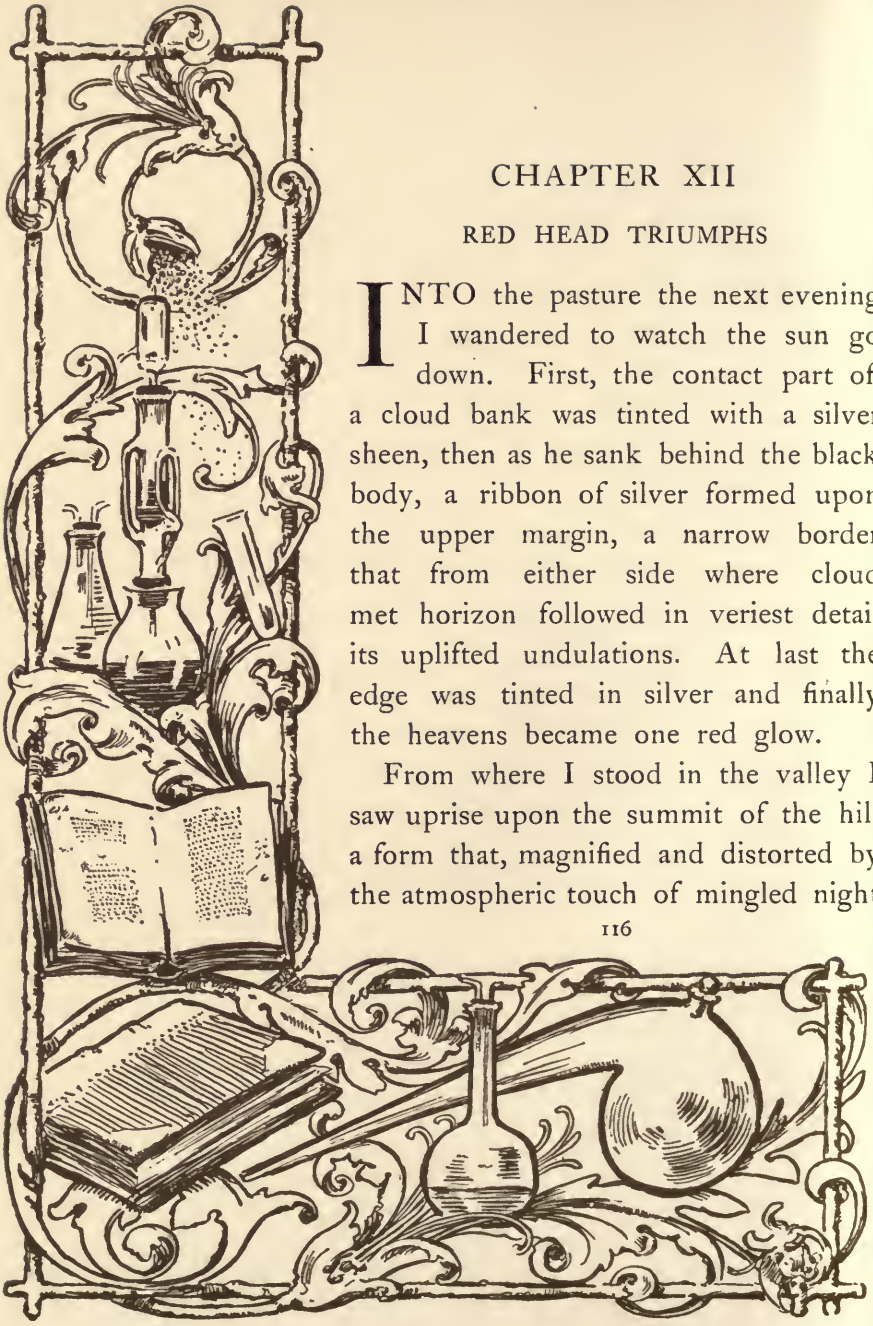
"For these take a dose of laudanum. Repeat the laudanum, if necessary."

"Is there no danger? I'm afraid of strong drugs, Sammy."

"You need have no fear, but do not take an overdose of the laudanum."

He held out his hand. "If you were older I should ask you to take something to drink. Good-bye, my boy."





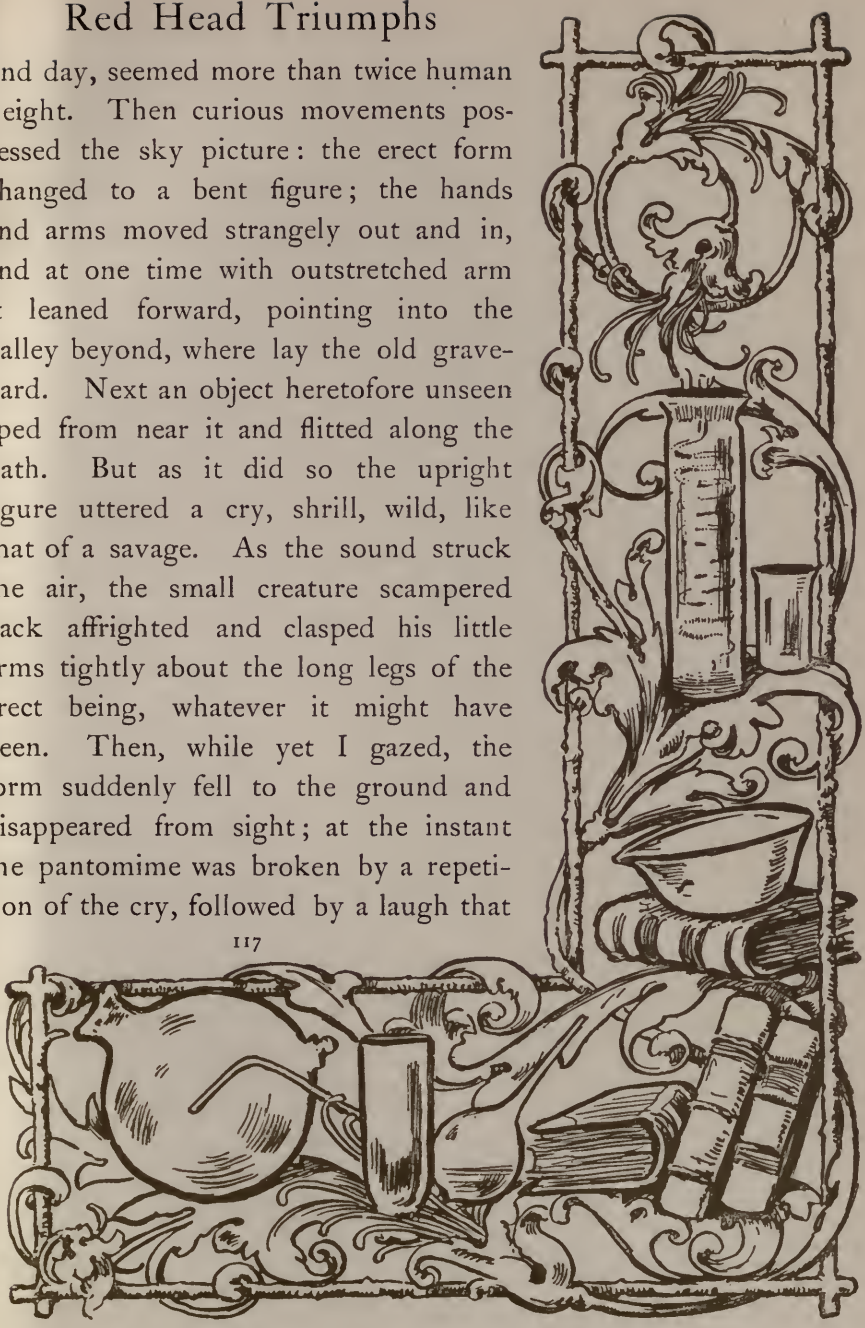
CHAPTER XII

RED HEAD TRIUMPHS

INTO the pasture the next evening I wandered to watch the sun go down. First, the contact part of a cloud bank was tinted with a silver sheen, then as he sank behind the black body, a ribbon of silver formed upon the upper margin, a narrow border that from either side where cloud met horizon followed in veriest detail its uplifted undulations. At last the edge was tinted in silver and finally the heavens became one red glow.

From where I stood in the valley I saw uprise upon the summit of the hill a form that, magnified and distorted by the atmospheric touch of mingled night

and day, seemed more than twice human height. Then curious movements possessed the sky picture: the erect form changed to a bent figure; the hands and arms moved strangely out and in, and at one time with outstretched arm it leaned forward, pointing into the valley beyond, where lay the old graveyard. Next an object heretofore unseen sped from near it and flitted along the path. But as it did so the upright figure uttered a cry, shrill, wild, like that of a savage. As the sound struck the air, the small creature scampered back affrighted and clasped his little arms tightly about the long legs of the erect being, whatever it might have been. Then, while yet I gazed, the form suddenly fell to the ground and disappeared from sight; at the instant the pantomime was broken by a repetition of the cry, followed by a laugh that



seemed unlike any other laugh my ear had ever heard. Then came silence.

I started forward, following the path in the meadow toward the summit of the hill; but when I neared the spot nothing could be seen. Too dark was it now to distinguish objects. I lingered a moment and then strode on, when my foot struck a soft obstacle. I stooped and reached down. Bare legs and feet touched my fingers, which then passed over the face of a child. Raising the little form in my arms, I moved toward a light that shone through a window in the distance. Scarce knocking at the door, I hastily entered. It was the home of Susie.

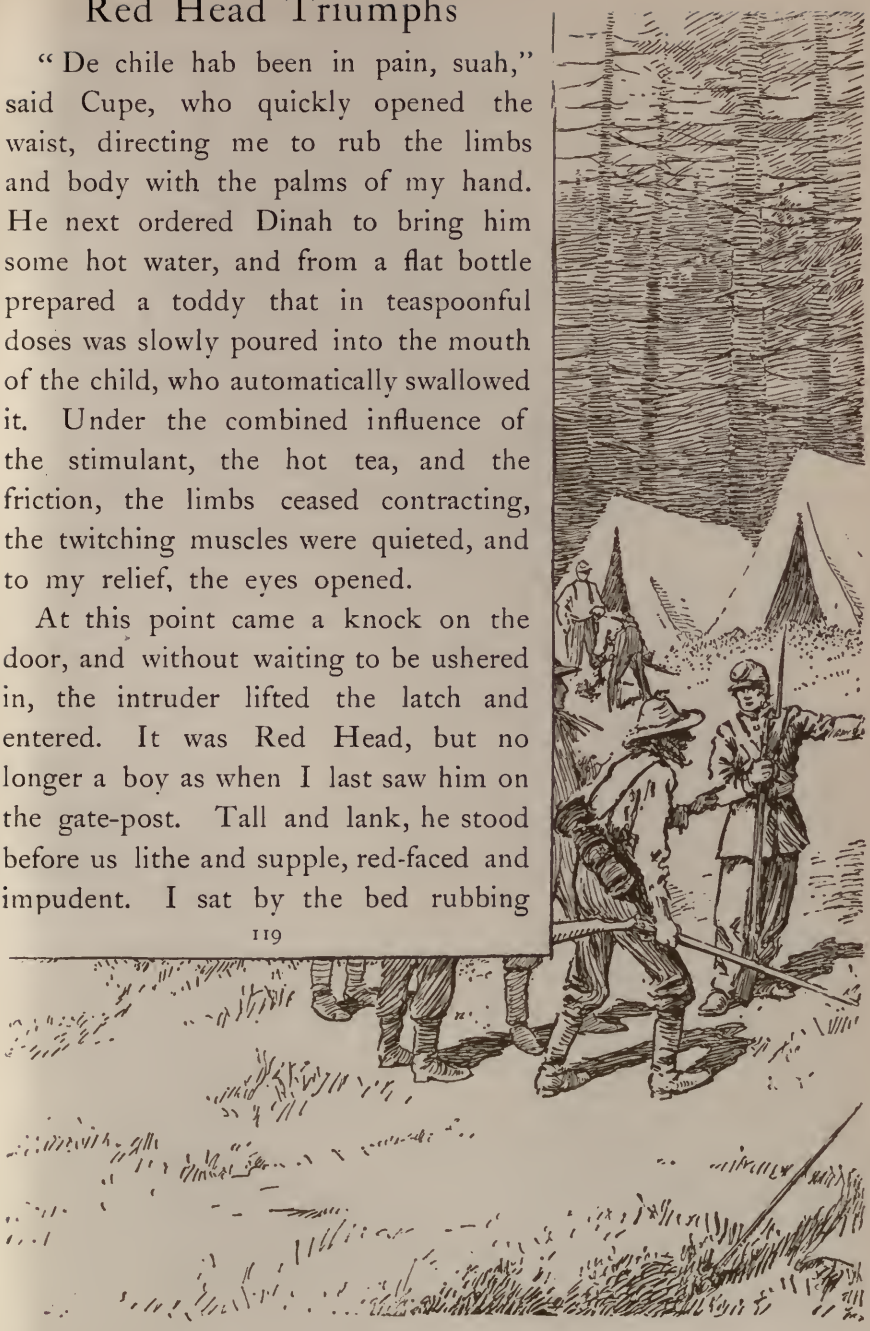
"Brung de gem'n a cheer, Dinah."

"Don't concern yourself about me, Uncle Cupe; see what can be done for this child;" and I laid the boy on the bed.

"*MAY I have the flower?*"
—Page 130

"De chile hab been in pain, suah," said Cupe, who quickly opened the waist, directing me to rub the limbs and body with the palms of my hand. He next ordered Dinah to bring him some hot water, and from a flat bottle prepared a toddy that in teaspoonful doses was slowly poured into the mouth of the child, who automatically swallowed it. Under the combined influence of the stimulant, the hot tea, and the friction, the limbs ceased contracting, the twitching muscles were quieted, and to my relief, the eyes opened.

At this point came a knock on the door, and without waiting to be ushered in, the intruder lifted the latch and entered. It was Red Head, but no longer a boy as when I last saw him on the gate-post. Tall and lank, he stood before us lithe and supple, red-faced and impudent. I sat by the bed rubbing



the forehead of the child, who as his eyes fell upon the face of the newcomer shrank as if struck by a sudden blow. With a cry of alarm he threw his arms about my neck and sobbed convulsively. Then it flashed upon me that the tall form I had seen on the hill was that of Red Head, and connecting therewith the present movements of the frightened boy, I reasoned that he had been the cause of the child's suffering. Indignation possessed me. Unclasping the arms of the little one, I thrust him upon the bed and faced the other, who stood full a head taller than myself. "And you it is," I said, "who delight in frightening helpless children! You who stoop your head when you enter a door!"

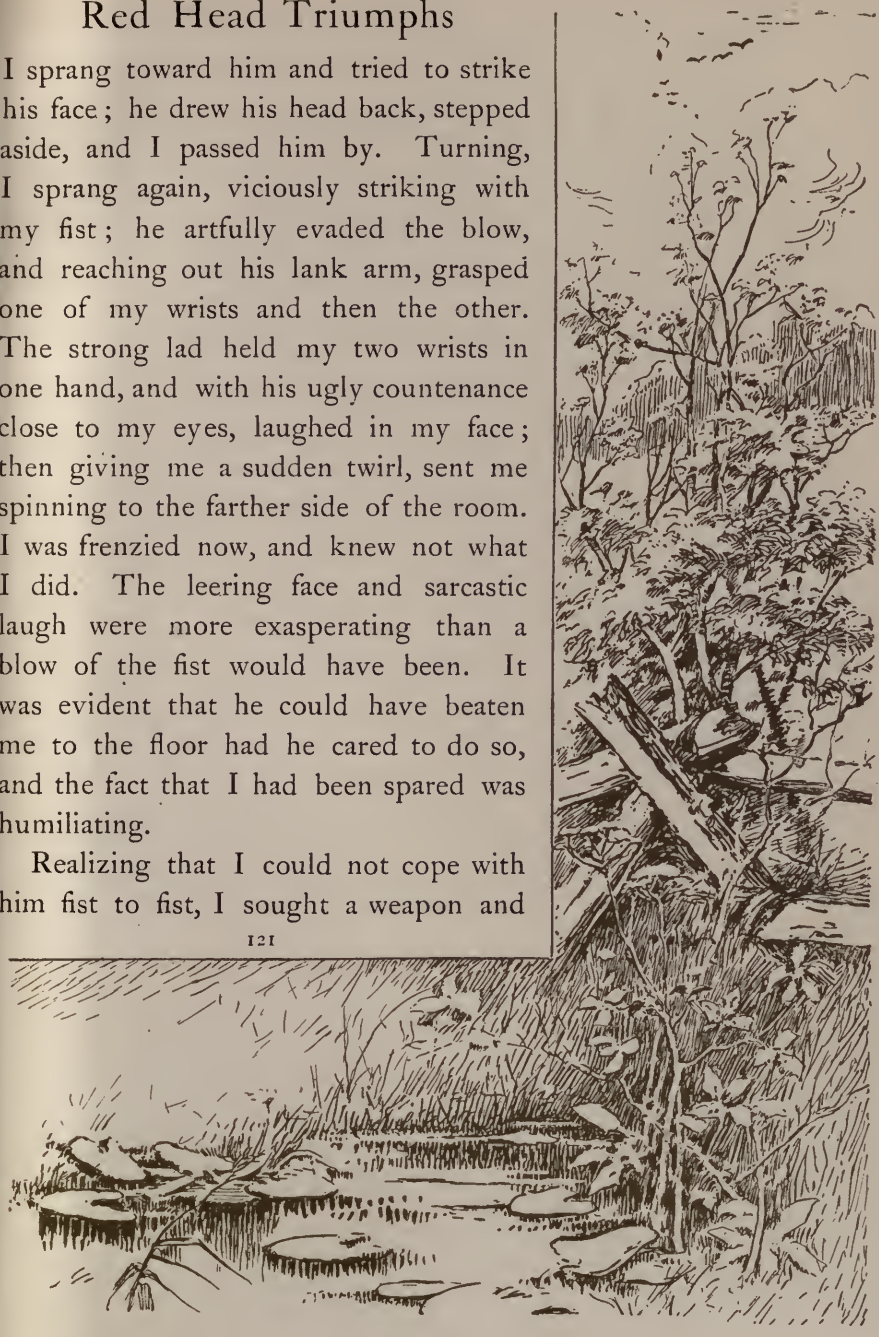
He sneered, but did not answer.

"Out of this house!" I pointed to the door, but he made no movement.

Red Head Triumphs

I sprang toward him and tried to strike his face; he drew his head back, stepped aside, and I passed him by. Turning, I sprang again, viciously striking with my fist; he artfully evaded the blow, and reaching out his lank arm, grasped one of my wrists and then the other. The strong lad held my two wrists in one hand, and with his ugly countenance close to my eyes, laughed in my face; then giving me a sudden twirl, sent me spinning to the farther side of the room. I was frenzied now, and knew not what I did. The leering face and sarcastic laugh were more exasperating than a blow of the fist would have been. It was evident that he could have beaten me to the floor had he cared to do so, and the fact that I had been spared was humiliating.

Realizing that I could not cope with him fist to fist, I sought a weapon and



found it in Cupe's double-barrelled shotgun that stood in the corner to which he had hurled me. I grasped it, and, with my back to the corner, raised and pointed it toward him, when a form burst from out the door at the back of the room. It was Susie. I shuddered as I dropped the butt of the gun to the floor, for she stood in range between Red Head and myself, and I realized how near I had come to firing as she stepped in the line of sight. Susie, with the eyes of Susie of old, but not exactly the same face, and surely not the form of the wild girl I knew four years ago. A more matured expression of countenance, a womanly figure, had replaced the face and form of the girl, yet the years had brushed away no charm or grace. She stood motionless before me in the lamplight. A wild rose had been placed in the bosom of her gown, another graced

her hair; these, when last I knew her, she would not have worn as now she wore them.

"The gun is loaded," she said. "Is it murder they teach boys in Ohio?" Ashamed, I replaced the weapon in the corner, while she turned to Cupe. "Uncle Cupe, you must answer for this. I 'll not have such things done in my house!"[1]

"'Deed, Missus, and I could n't help de boys com'n', needah could I help 'em fight'n'."

[1] To readers unfamiliar with "Stringtown on the Pike" the statement may be made that "Susie," who came into our midst as a waif, dependent on the care of the faithful negro slave, Cupe, had come into the possession of a considerable property, and had also received an education far in advance of what was then customary. To the kindly influence of Judge Elford, and to her own quick perception, must be ascribed the refined manners acquired by this otherwise neglected child. In this study of "Red Head," it is deemed unnecessary to more than refer to these incidents.

She turned to Red Head.

"And you?"

"Did n't fight. Thet feller tried ter fight, but I would n't. He 'd hev shot me, too, ef yo' hed n't come. Ask Cupe."

Then I broke in. "Red Head tells the truth. I tried to fight and could not. He is stronger than I, and he knows it. I 'm a fool for giving him a chance to show me that I am weak and that he is strong in brute strength. I have acted the dunce in trying to strike him with my fist. It must be brain against muscle hereafter, and when brain meets muscle, brain always wins."

"Thar 'll allers be two sides ter the path we meet on," said Red Head, addressing me. "You keep ter the right, and I 'll keep ter the right. Thar 's room ter look about without lookin' at each other, and thar 's room

ter whistle, ef we caint keep our mouths shet when we meets on the same path." Then he defiantly left the room.

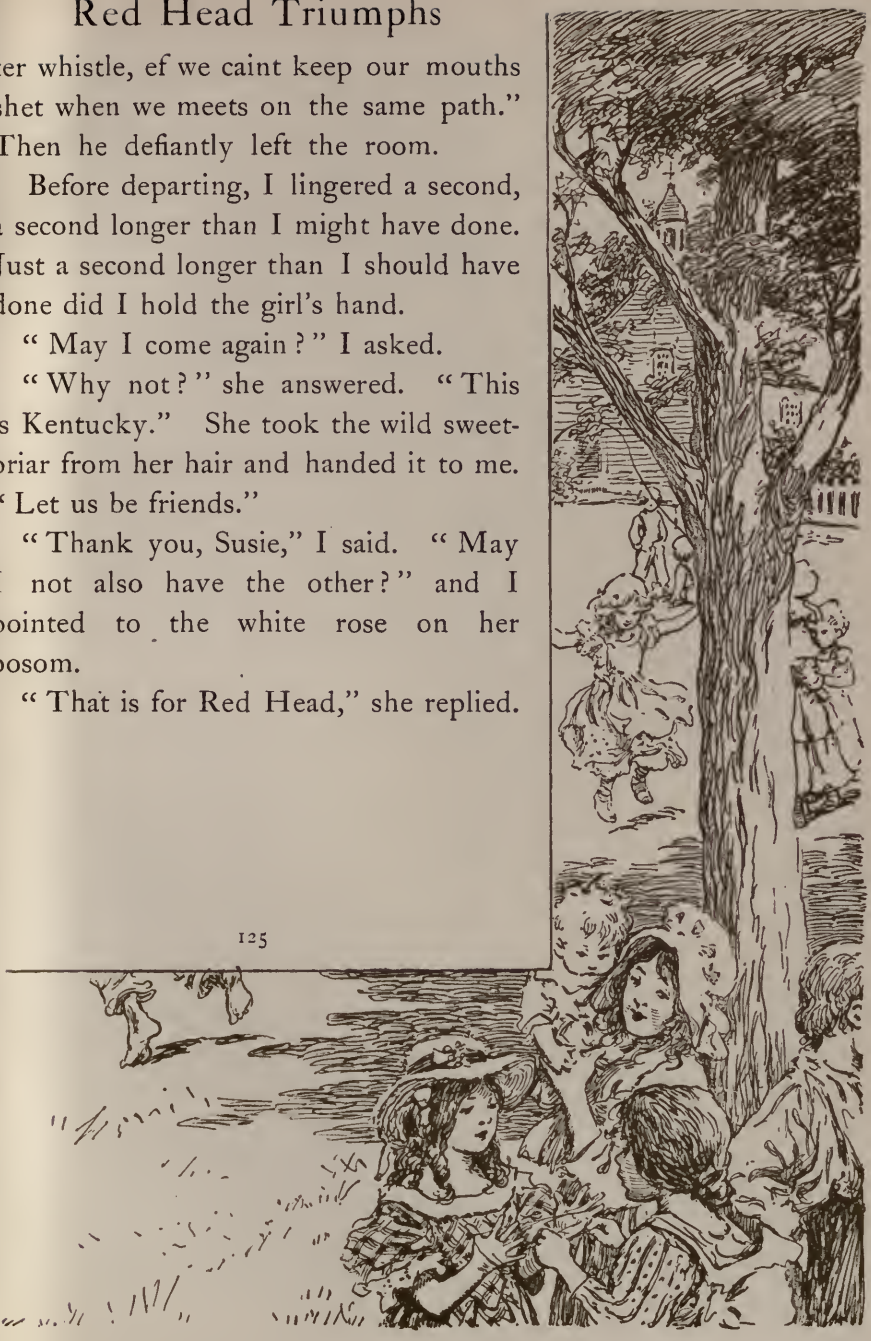
Before departing, I lingered a second, a second longer than I might have done. Just a second longer than I should have done did I hold the girl's hand.

"May I come again?" I asked.

"Why not?" she answered. "This is Kentucky." She took the wild sweet-briar from her hair and handed it to me. "Let us be friends."

"Thank you, Susie," I said. "May I not also have the other?" and I pointed to the white rose on her bosom.

"That is for Red Head," she replied.



CHAPTER XIII

SAMMY'S PROMISE

WOULD that mountain boy never cease to cross my path? From our first meeting in the old Stringtown school, our courses seemingly had been entangled. Thus I meditated as I walked home. Then my thought turned to Susie, and for the first time came the idea of Red Head as a rival. That incident of the rose lingered in my mind, nor did it lighten as the days passed. At last, I turned for a final trip over the path that led to the cabin of negro Cupe, the home of Susie. In the thicket tangle near her home, walking toward the village, I ab-

"CANNOT *you handle a Springfield rifle yet?*" — Page 131

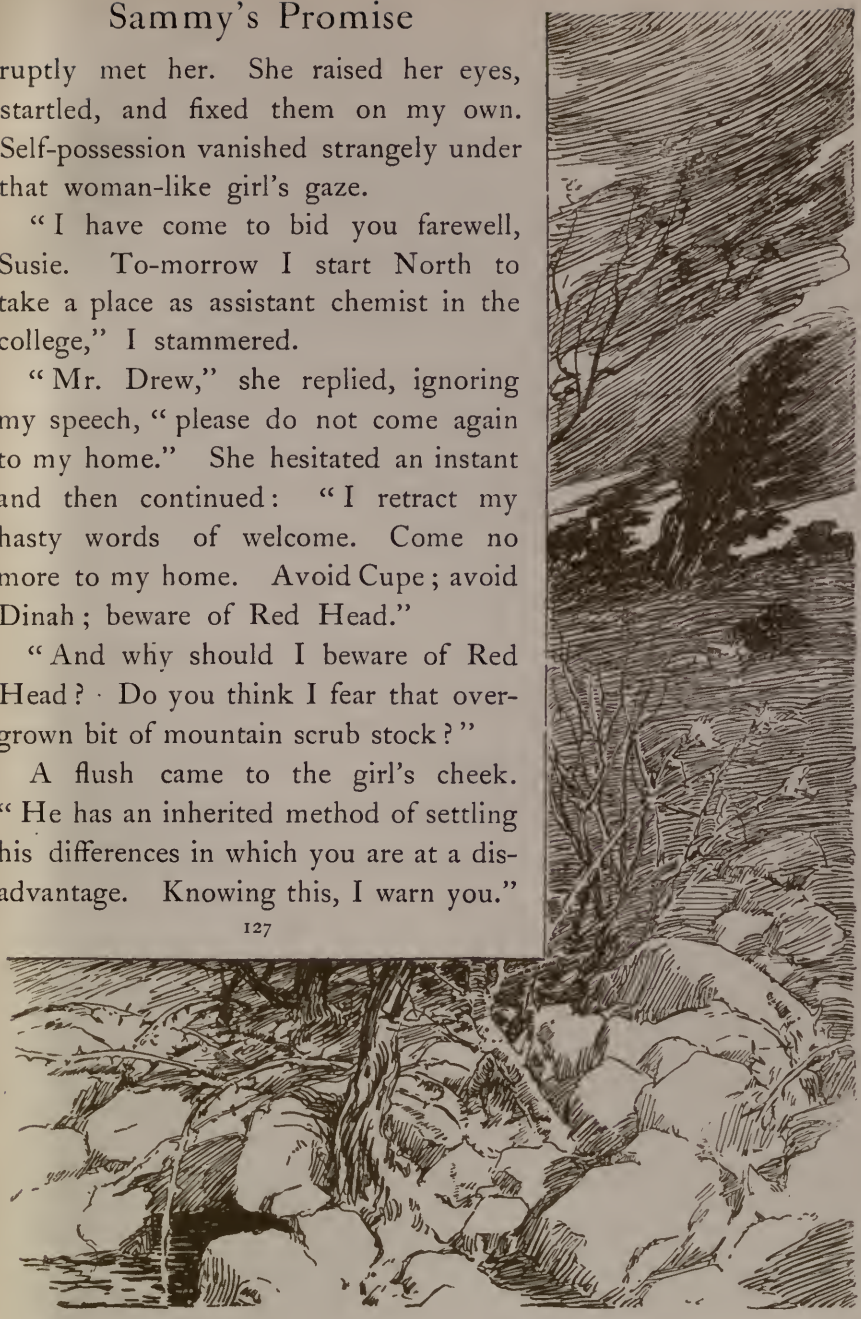
ruptly met her. She raised her eyes, startled, and fixed them on my own. Self-possession vanished strangely under that woman-like girl's gaze.

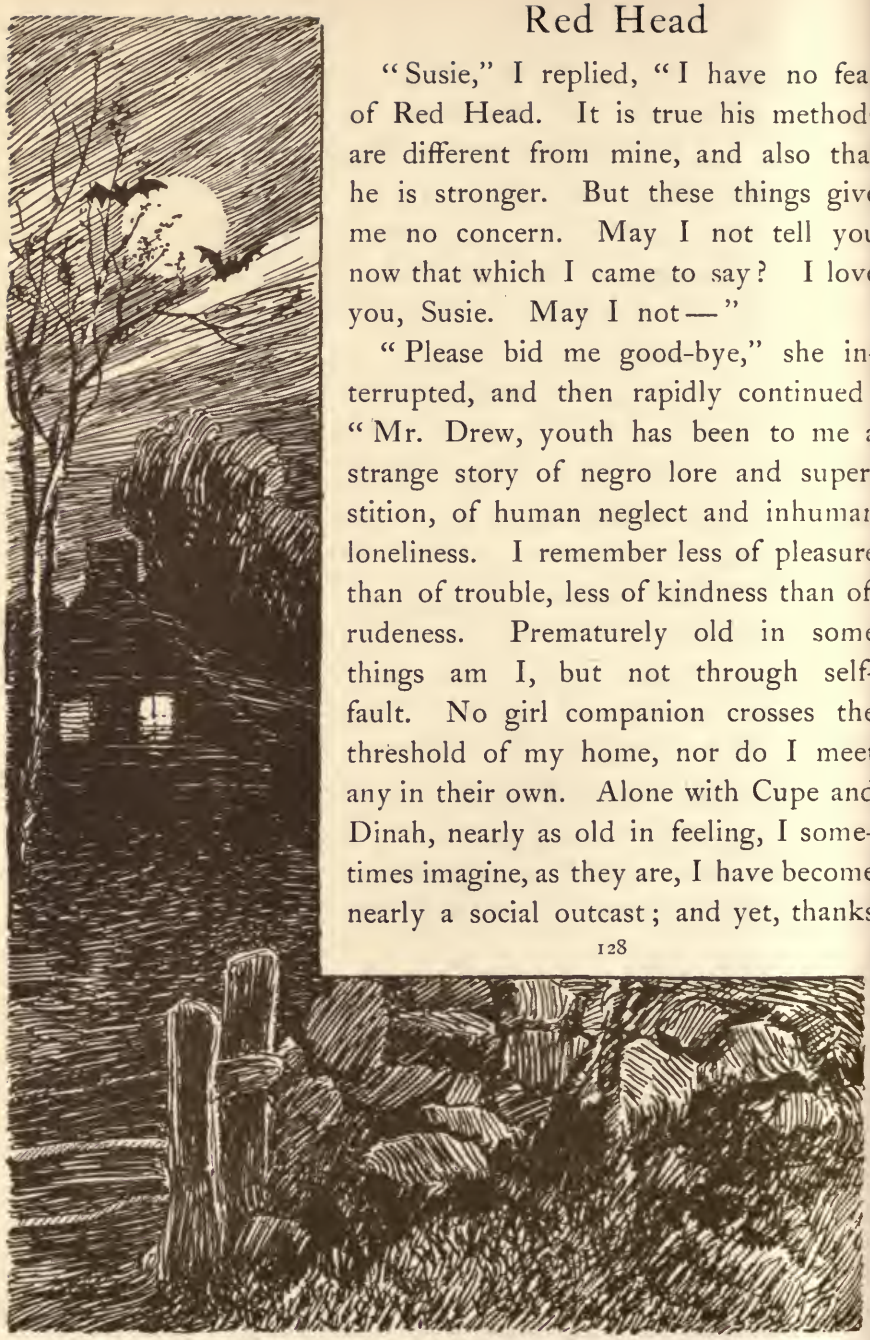
"I have come to bid you farewell, Susie. To-morrow I start North to take a place as assistant chemist in the college," I stammered.

"Mr. Drew," she replied, ignoring my speech, "please do not come again to my home." She hesitated an instant and then continued: "I retract my hasty words of welcome. Come no more to my home. Avoid Cupe; avoid Dinah; beware of Red Head."

"And why should I beware of Red Head? Do you think I fear that overgrown bit of mountain scrub stock?"

A flush came to the girl's cheek. "He has an inherited method of settling his differences in which you are at a disadvantage. Knowing this, I warn you."





"Susie," I replied, "I have no fear of Red Head. It is true his methods are different from mine, and also that he is stronger. But these things give me no concern. May I not tell you now that which I came to say? I love you, Susie. May I not — "

"Please bid me good-bye," she interrupted, and then rapidly continued: "Mr. Drew, youth has been to me a strange story of negro lore and superstition, of human neglect and inhuman loneliness. I remember less of pleasure than of trouble, less of kindness than of rudeness. Prematurely old in some things am I, but not through self-fault. No girl companion crosses the threshold of my home, nor do I meet any in their own. Alone with Cupe and Dinah, nearly as old in feeling, I sometimes imagine, as they are, I have become nearly a social outcast; and yet, thanks

to a few kind friends, I am not deficient in manner or education. You have been kind in thinking of me, yet unwise and indiscreet. Your course is sure to lead to trouble."

"You are wrong, Susie," I cried.

"Does your mother know of these visits?" she asked.

"No." I felt my face glow.

"Believe me, Mr. Drew, I know better than you these things I *reason* over, but which to you are *emotional* only." Her eyes met mine, and I saw that they were filled with tears.

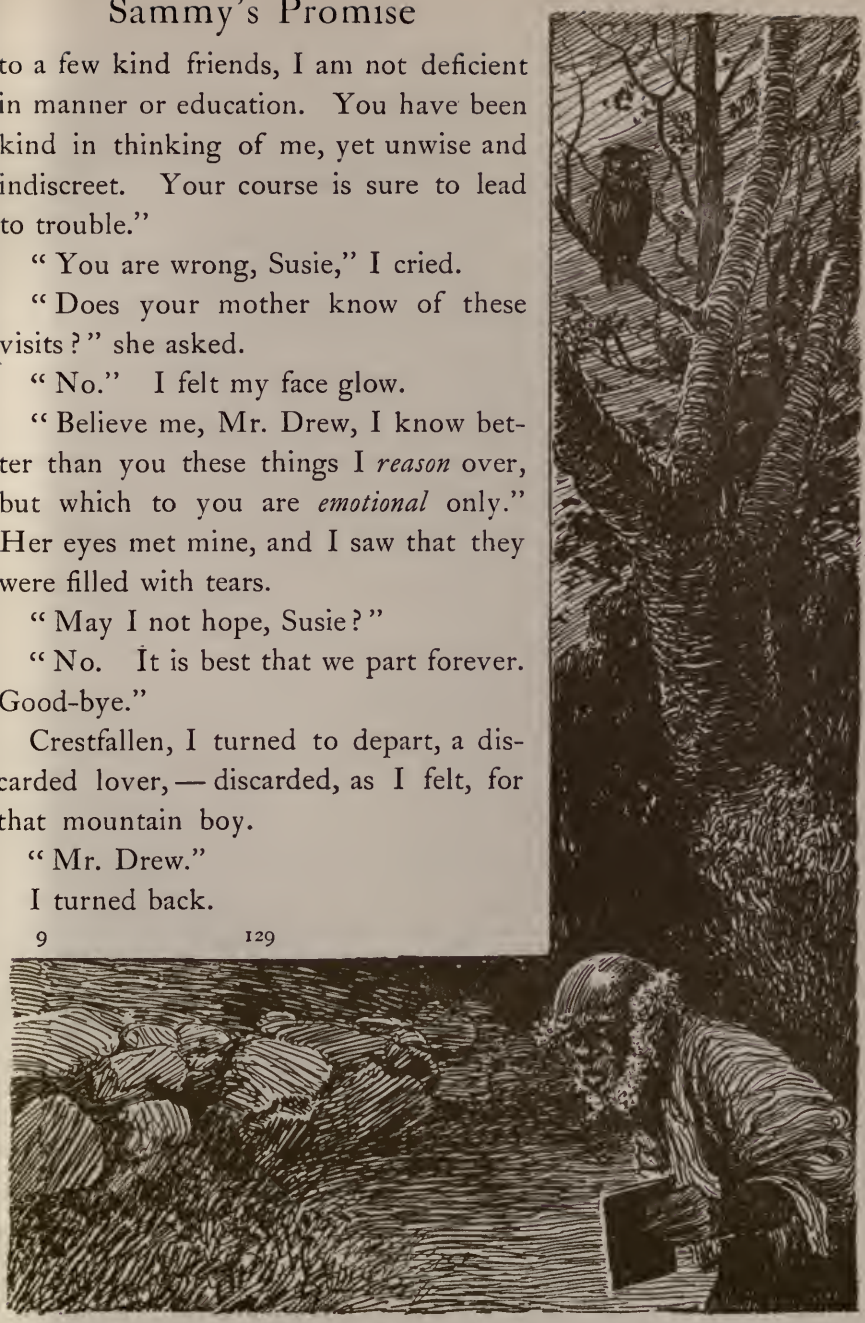
"May I not hope, Susie?"

"No. It is best that we part forever. Good-bye."

Crestfallen, I turned to depart, a discarded lover, — discarded, as I felt, for that mountain boy.

"Mr. Drew."

I turned back.



"May I have the flower you are wearing?"

In silence I handed it to her and added: "Susie, even though you do drive me away, if ever you wish a friend, bring me that flower. Let it be a talisman between us. Come to me in case you wish a favor. *Whatever it may be, and wherever I may be, you have but to ask.*"

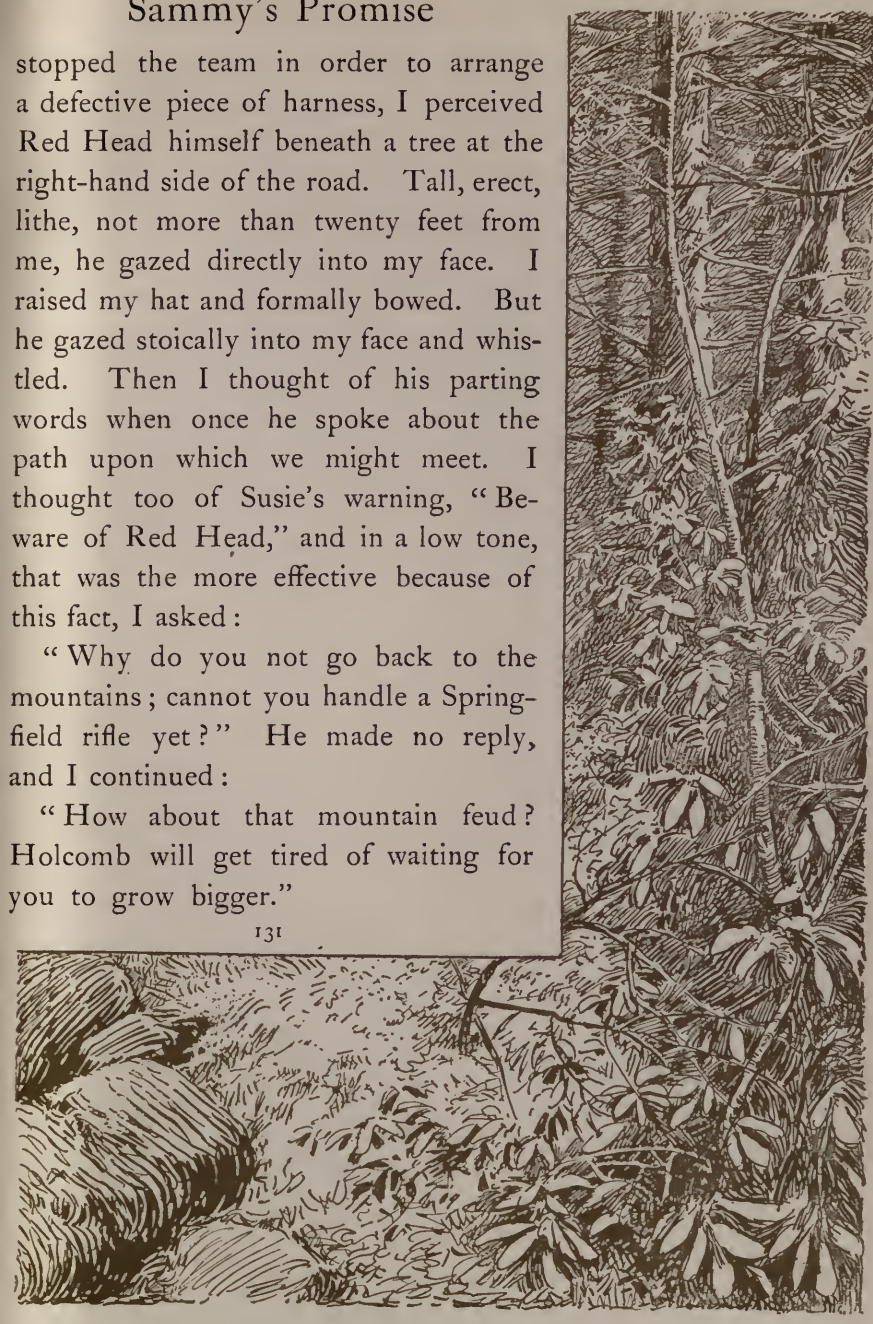
Low was the voice that murmured, "Good-bye." Then, while I stood watching, Susie turned and walked back over the path, vanishing around the clump of hazel, and I turned toward Stringtown.

As the old stage rolled down the pike the following day, I sat again beside the driver. To my mind came a pathetic plea Susie once had made for such outcasts from society as Red Head and herself; and just then, as the driver

stopped the team in order to arrange a defective piece of harness, I perceived Red Head himself beneath a tree at the right-hand side of the road. Tall, erect, lithe, not more than twenty feet from me, he gazed directly into my face. I raised my hat and formally bowed. But he gazed stoically into my face and whistled. Then I thought of his parting words when once he spoke about the path upon which we might meet. I thought too of Susie's warning, "Beware of Red Head," and in a low tone, that was the more effective because of this fact, I asked:

"Why do you not go back to the mountains; cannot you handle a Springfield rifle yet?" He made no reply, and I continued:

"How about that mountain feud? Holcomb will get tired of waiting for you to grow bigger."

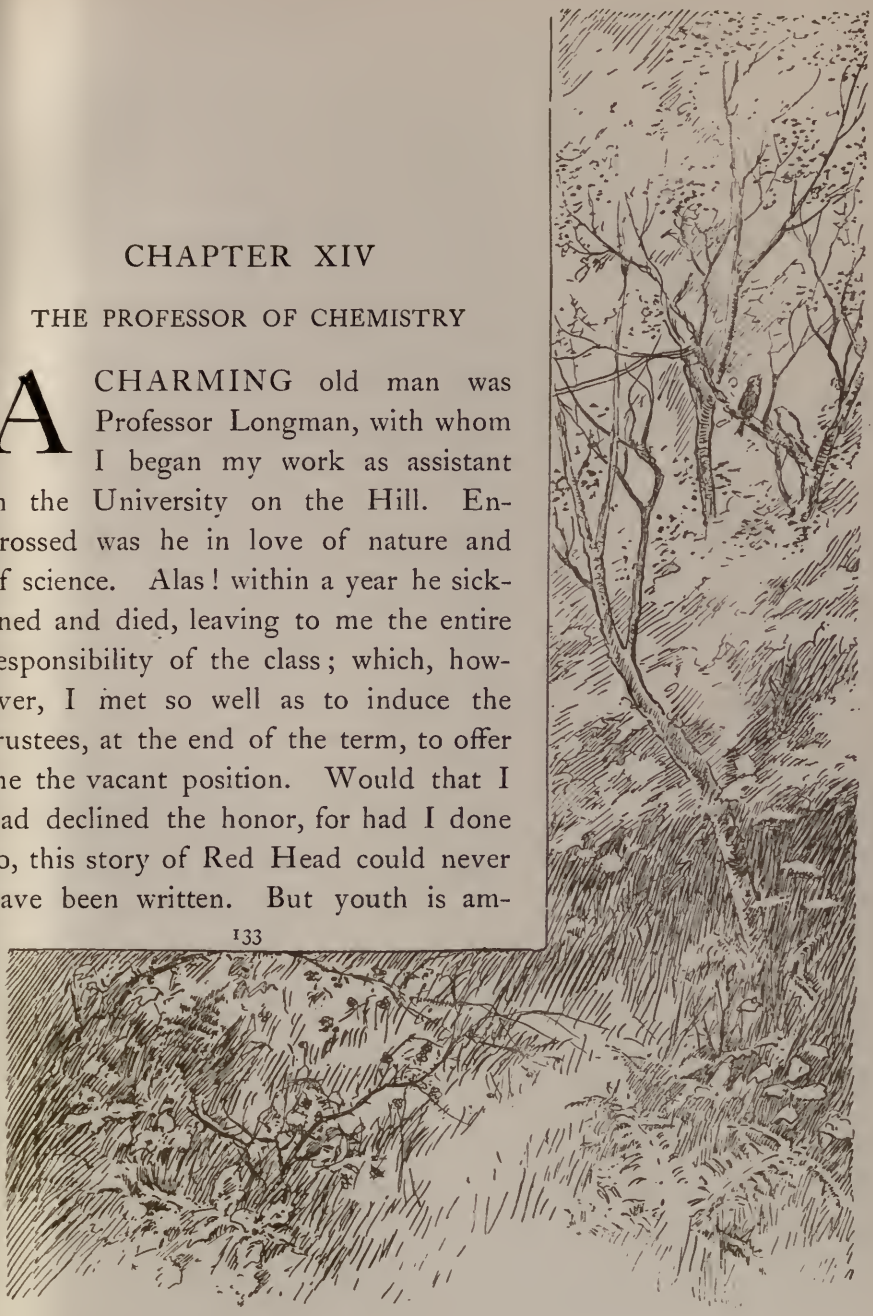


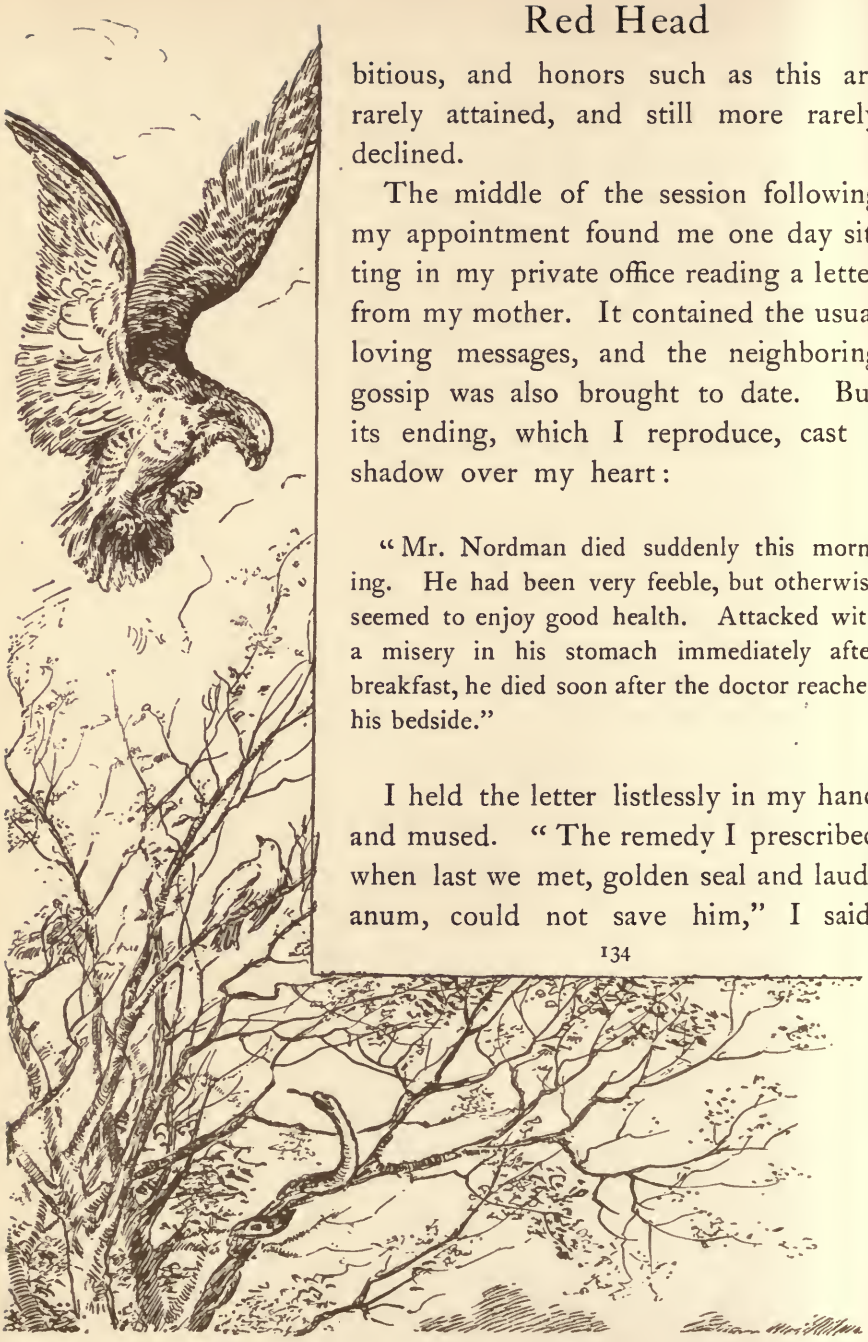
Indifferent to the taunt, he stood motionless. The coach now moved on, and as it did so I spoke again: "You 're very willing to talk fight, you who dare not go back to the mountains where lives old man Holcomb." But even this brought no reply; like a statue he remained in the shadow until the stage turned a bend in the pike, blotting " the last of the Red Heads " from view.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PROFESSOR OF CHEMISTRY

A CHARMING old man was Professor Longman, with whom I began my work as assistant in the University on the Hill. Engrossed was he in love of nature and of science. Alas! within a year he sickened and died, leaving to me the entire responsibility of the class; which, however, I met so well as to induce the trustees, at the end of the term, to offer me the vacant position. Would that I had declined the honor, for had I done so, this story of Red Head could never have been written. But youth is am-





bitious, and honors such as this are rarely attained, and still more rarely declined.

The middle of the session following my appointment found me one day sitting in my private office reading a letter from my mother. It contained the usual loving messages, and the neighboring gossip was also brought to date. But its ending, which I reproduce, cast a shadow over my heart:

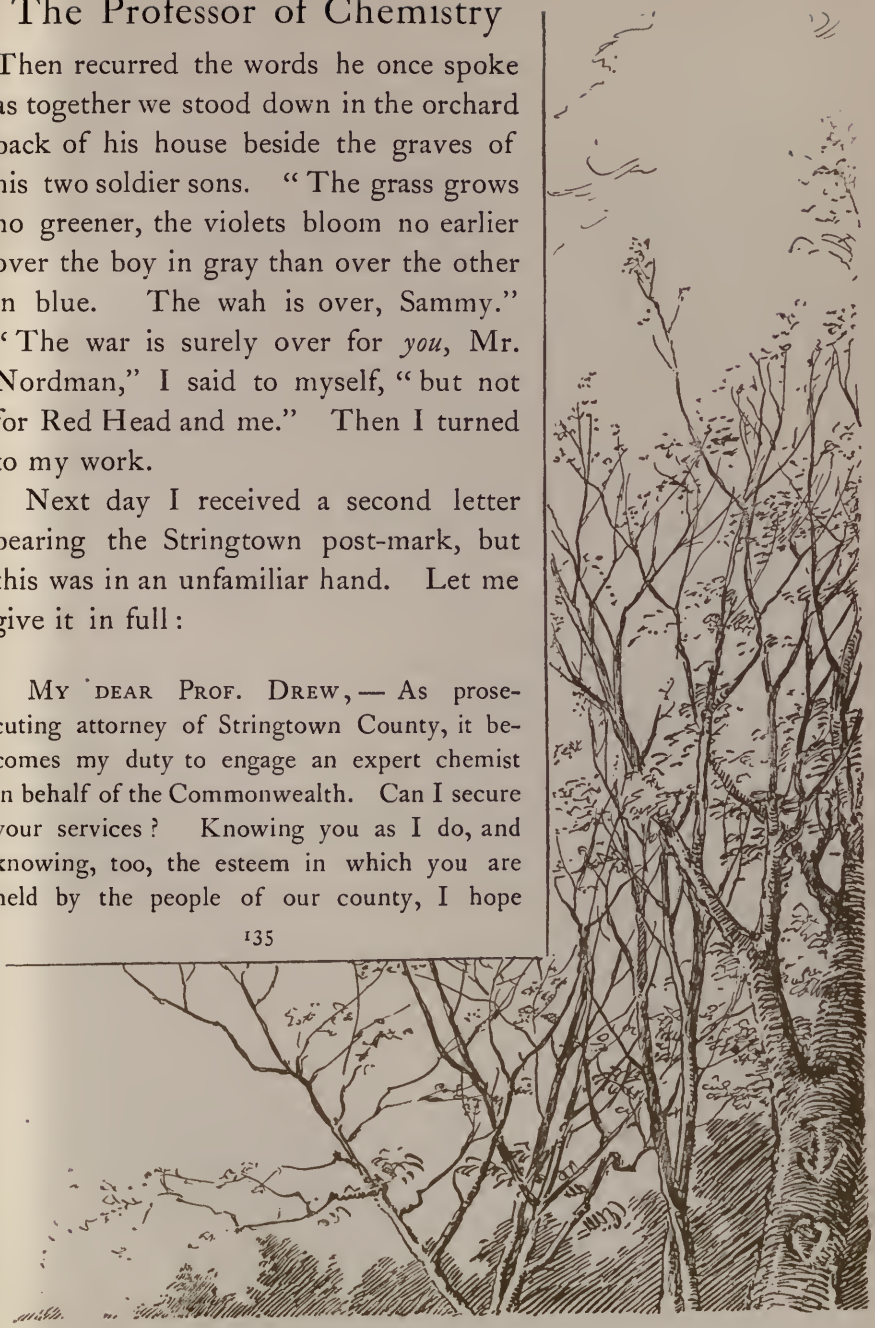
"Mr. Nordman died suddenly this morning. He had been very feeble, but otherwise seemed to enjoy good health. Attacked with a misery in his stomach immediately after breakfast, he died soon after the doctor reached his bedside."

I held the letter listlessly in my hand and mused. "The remedy I prescribed when last we met, golden seal and laudanum, could not save him," I said.

Then recurred the words he once spoke as together we stood down in the orchard back of his house beside the graves of his two soldier sons. "The grass grows no greener, the violets bloom no earlier over the boy in gray than over the other in blue. The wah is over, Sammy." "The war is surely over for *you*, Mr. Nordman," I said to myself, "but not for Red Head and me." Then I turned to my work.

Next day I received a second letter bearing the Stringtown post-mark, but this was in an unfamiliar hand. Let me give it in full:

My dear Prof. Drew, — As prosecuting attorney of Stringtown County, it becomes my duty to engage an expert chemist in behalf of the Commonwealth. Can I secure your services? Knowing you as I do, and knowing, too, the esteem in which you are held by the people of our county, I hope



that you will consent to serve us. We wish an analysis made of the contents of the stomach of Mr. Nordman, whom you probably remember. I can add that I will guarantee your fee, to be paid by the administrator of the estate. Please let me hear from you immediately.

Sincerely yours,

Z. P. Putten.

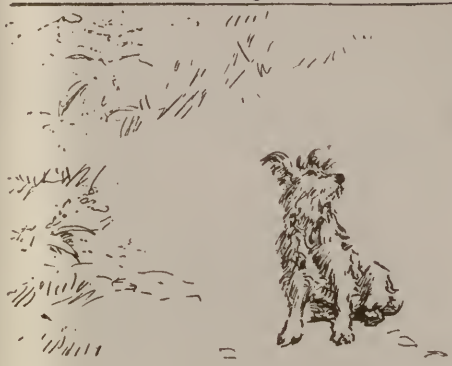
I turned to my desk and at once accepted the offer, giving explicit directions concerning the manner in which the suspected parts were to be secured, sealed in the presence of witnesses, and then expressed to my address. In a few days the package reached me. William, my assistant, opened the box and removed from it the large glass jar closely wrapped in stiff manila paper and sealed with red wax bearing the official stamp of the sheriff. I felt now a sinking of the heart, but had accepted the responsi-

bility and turned to my test tubes and reagents.

For a time the results were negative, and when the usual metallic poisons were dismissed, I turned to search for the vegetable bodies known as alkaloids, which are often so energetic in action; strychnine, morphine, atropine, being specimens of the class. As the two liquids mingled, a white cloud sprang into view. I turned to my assistant; our eyes met. Again the reaction occurred with one after another of the reagents for alkaloids. Then, as I made a careful record of the result in my note-book, I said: "The next step is to identify the alkaloid."

"I would expect strychnine," my assistant remarked, "for these precipitates seem to me much like those of strychnine."

"That point must be determined," I



replied. "It may be strychnine, or a mixture. I shall not prejudice myself concerning it." And in the end, after several days had passed, I was fairly well satisfied, although there were some points in connection with the chrome-sulphuric acid test which puzzled me.

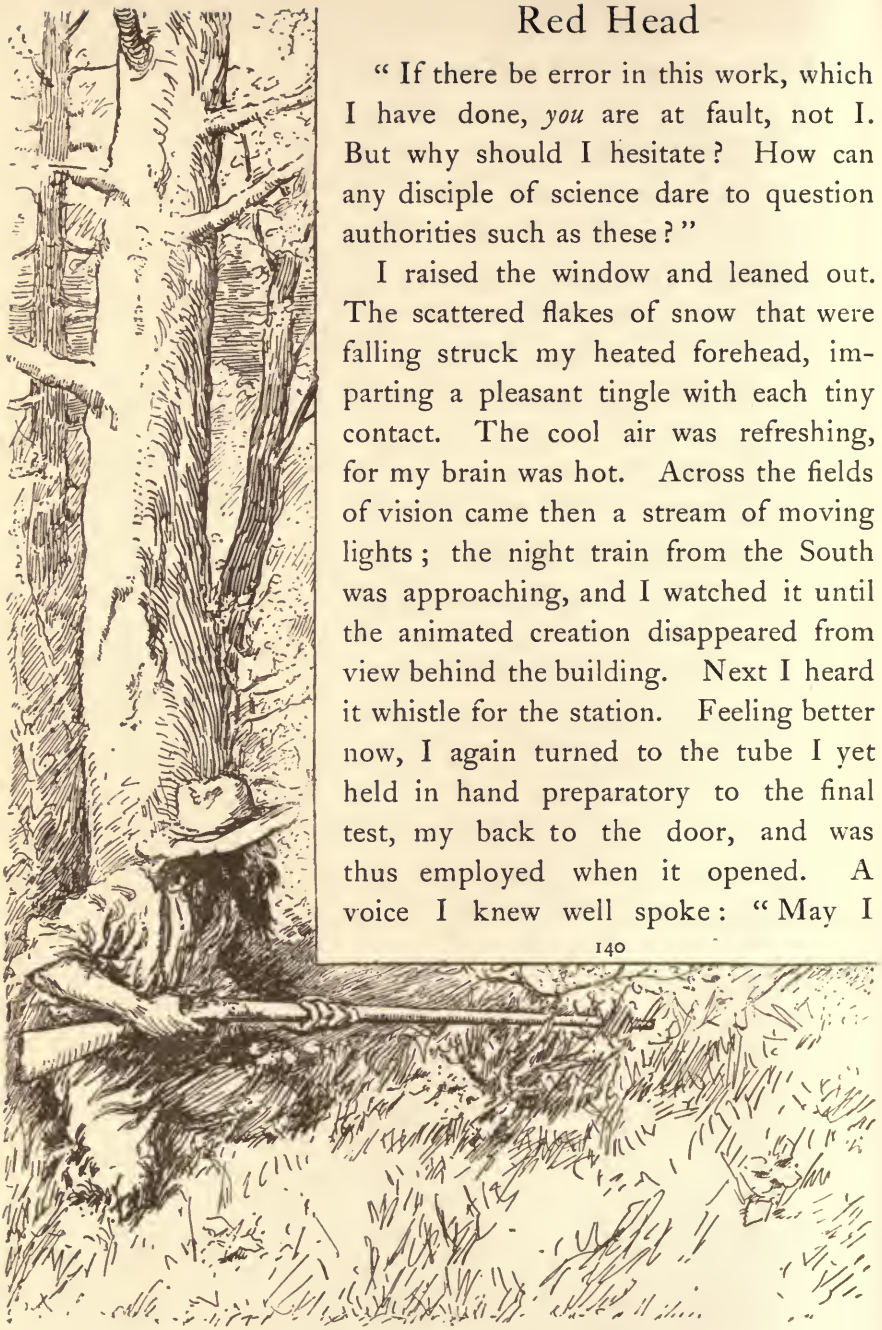
The blue-violet color surely did appear, but it was not altogether as I should have liked. But after I obtained white microscopic crystals of an alkaloid on a slide which also gave the reaction, I said:

"You were correct in your prediction, William; strychnine must be present, and such shall be my testimony before the Court of Stringtown County."

But that evening, for the first time, misgivings arose in my mind. They came during the dinner hour, when a companion made an idle query that I could not satisfactorily answer, and so turned lightly aside; but it led me to question-

ings. I sought my room and picked up a light novel, but could not interest myself in its contents. I turned to Chambers' Miscellany, and by chance opened Volume II., to the record of cases wherein many men had suffered death on circumstantial evidence that in itself seemed, with each case, to be conclusive of guilt, but which afterward was shown to be erroneous.

Closing the book, I drew on my overcoat, and in a gathering winter storm started for my laboratory. It was dark, very dark, and yet I went on in the night, for my disconcerted emotions impelled me to go then and to go there. Lighting up my room, I took out the reagents and the suspected liquid, and carefully verified the reactions. Then while I stood involved in thought, with my hand upon the pile of volumes, I spoke aloud:



" If there be error in this work, which I have done, *you* are at fault, not I. But why should I hesitate? How can any disciple of science dare to question authorities such as these?"

I raised the window and leaned out. The scattered flakes of snow that were falling struck my heated forehead, imparting a pleasant tingle with each tiny contact. The cool air was refreshing, for my brain was hot. Across the fields of vision came then a stream of moving lights; the night train from the South was approaching, and I watched it until the animated creation disappeared from view behind the building. Next I heard it whistle for the station. Feeling better now, I again turned to the tube I yet held in hand preparatory to the final test, my back to the door, and was thus employed when it opened. A voice I knew well spoke: " May I

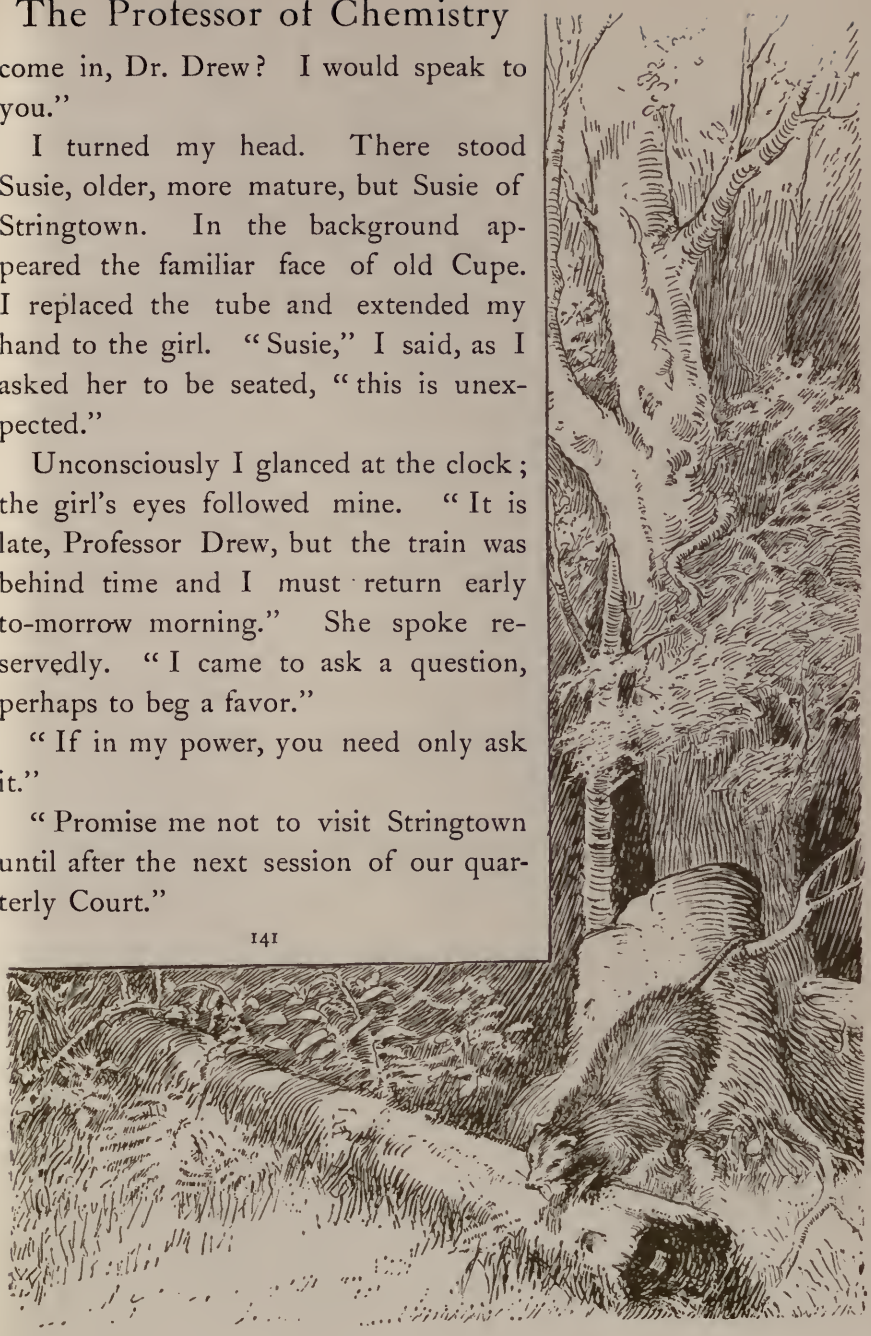
come in, Dr. Drew? I would speak to you."

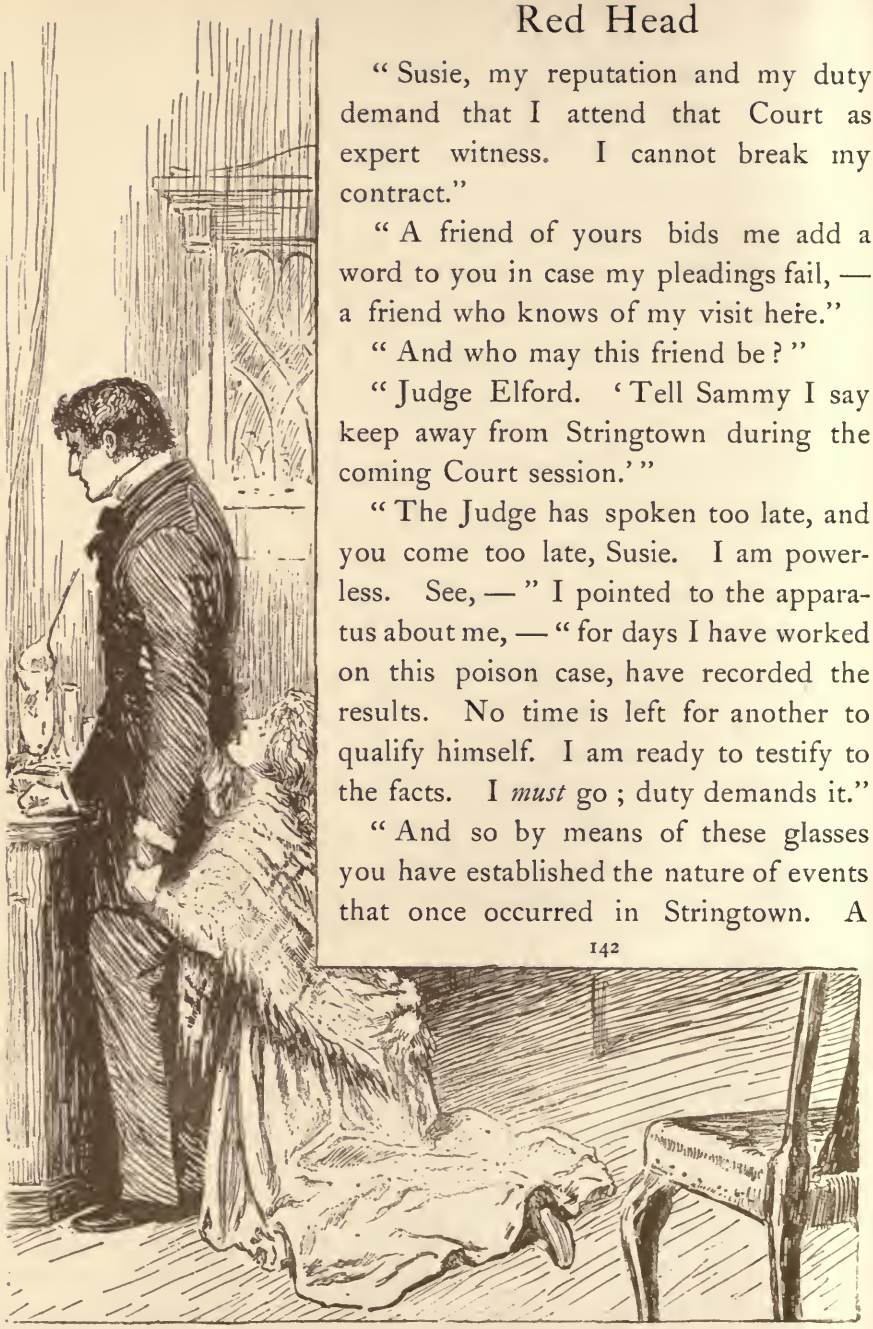
I turned my head. There stood Susie, older, more mature, but Susie of Stringtown. In the background appeared the familiar face of old Cupe. I replaced the tube and extended my hand to the girl. "Susie," I said, as I asked her to be seated, "this is unexpected."

Unconsciously I glanced at the clock; the girl's eyes followed mine. "It is late, Professor Drew, but the train was behind time and I must return early to-morrow morning." She spoke reservedly. "I came to ask a question, perhaps to beg a favor."

"If in my power, you need only ask it."

"Promise me not to visit Stringtown until after the next session of our quarterly Court."





"Susie, my reputation and my duty demand that I attend that Court as expert witness. I cannot break my contract."

"A friend of yours bids me add a word to you in case my pleadings fail, — a friend who knows of my visit here."

"And who may this friend be?"

"Judge Elford. 'Tell Sammy I say keep away from Stringtown during the coming Court session.'"

"The Judge has spoken too late, and you come too late, Susie. I am powerless. See, —" I pointed to the apparatus about me, —"for days I have worked on this poison case, have recorded the results. No time is left for another to qualify himself. I am ready to testify to the facts. I *must* go; duty demands it."

"And so by means of these glasses you have established the nature of events that once occurred in Stringtown. A

man you have not seen for years has died, and you propose to give evidence concerning the cause of his death?"

"Yes."

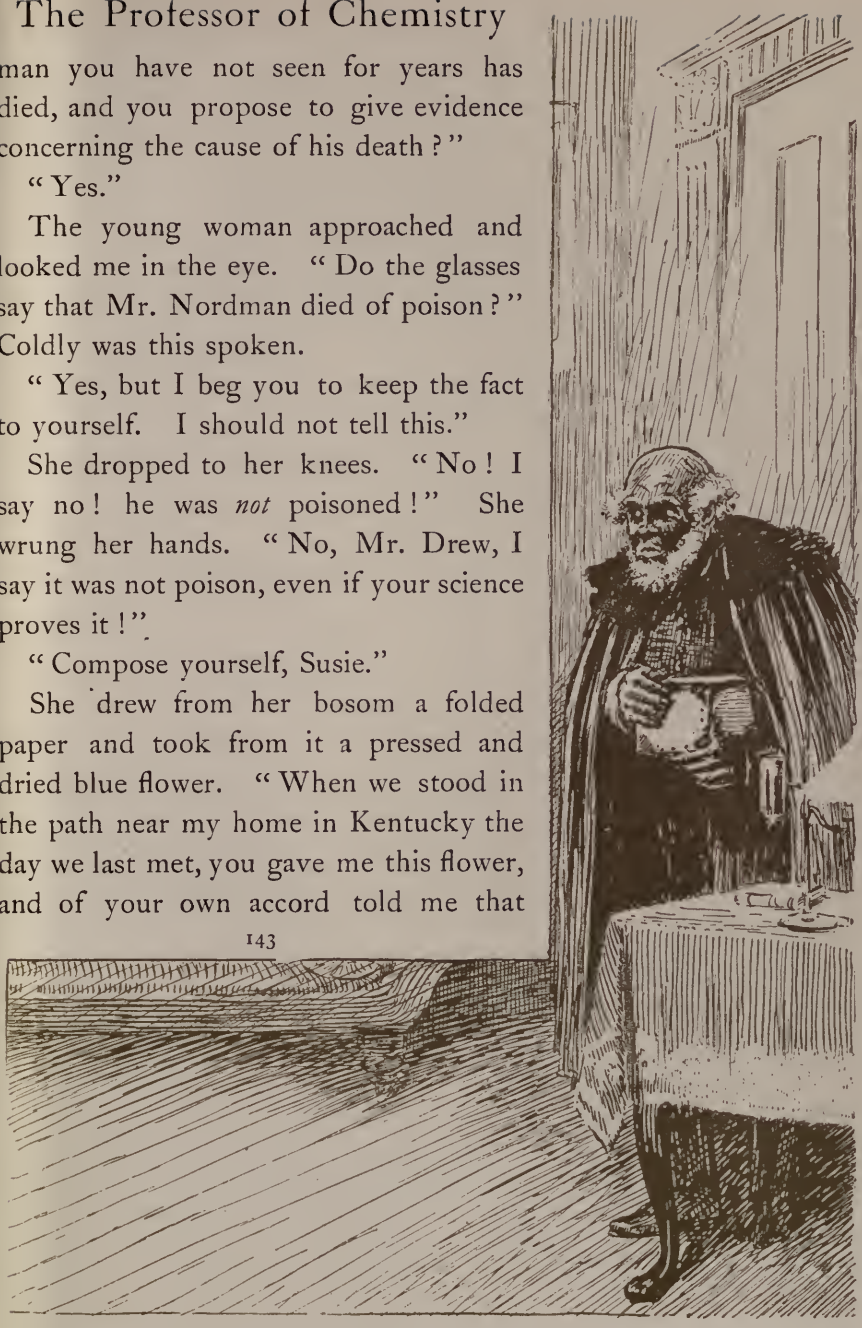
The young woman approached and looked me in the eye. "Do the glasses say that Mr. Nordman died of poison?" Coldly was this spoken.

"Yes, but I beg you to keep the fact to yourself. I should not tell this."

She dropped to her knees. "No! I say no! he was *not* poisoned!" She wrung her hands. "No, Mr. Drew, I say it was not poison, even if your science proves it!"

"Compose yourself, Susie."

She drew from her bosom a folded paper and took from it a pressed and dried blue flower. "When we stood in the path near my home in Kentucky the day we last met, you gave me this flower, and of your own accord told me that



if ever I wished a favor and presented this flower, the favor would be granted. '*Whatever it may be and wherever I shall be,*' you said, '*you have but to ask.*' I bring you now the flower and on my knees I beg you to fulfil the promise made long before you contracted with Mr. Putten. Is not the word given to me in the years that have passed more sacred than the legal contract you made but a few days ago? I ask you to drop this case, come not to Stringtown during the next term of court. Believe in me, Mr. Drew; accept my pleadings, believe that I am right, whatever proof to the contrary you think you find in these tubes and vessels."

"I cannot. Ask anything else but this."

Dropping the withered flower on the floor, she arose and placed her foot upon it. "And this you call *duty*, this break-

ing of a sacred promise given to one who treasured your words! I call it murder, for your testimony will hang an innocent man!"

"Of whom do you speak, Susie? Whom am I to hang on my evidence?"

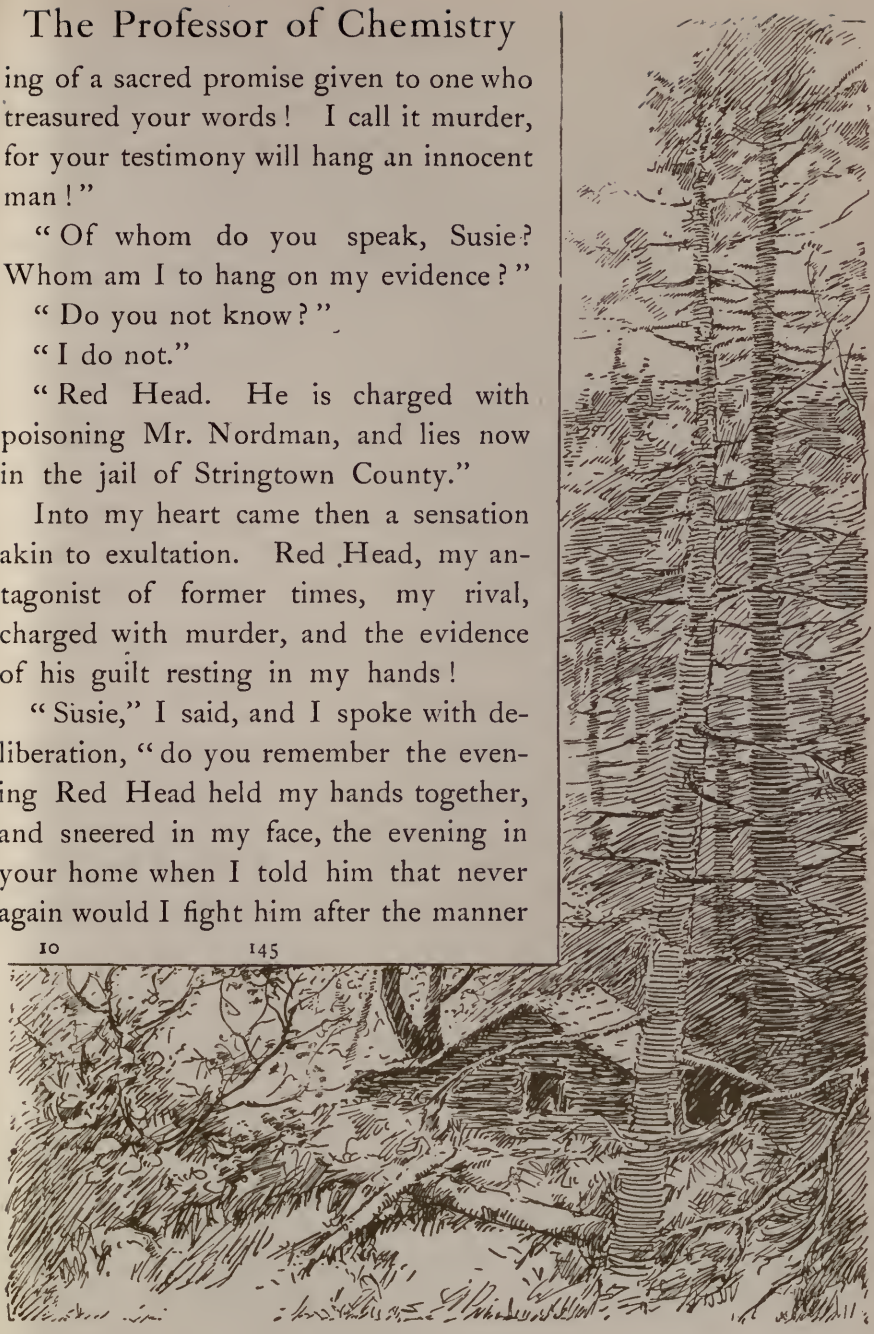
"Do you not know?"

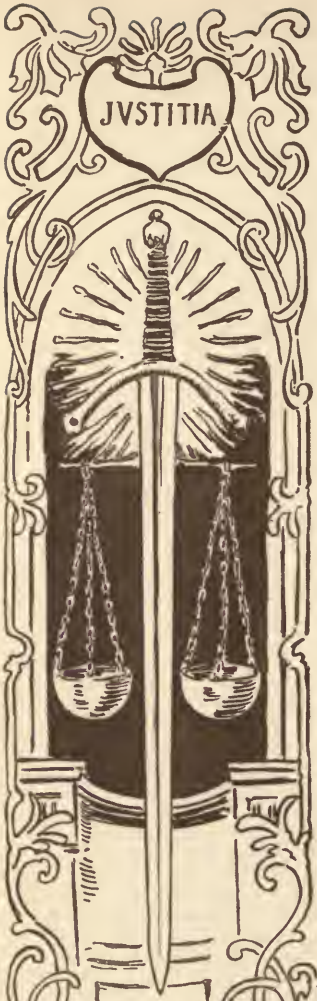
"I do not."

"Red Head. He is charged with poisoning Mr. Nordman, and lies now in the jail of Stringtown County."

Into my heart came then a sensation akin to exultation. Red Head, my antagonist of former times, my rival, charged with murder, and the evidence of his guilt resting in my hands!

"Susie," I said, and I spoke with deliberation, "do you remember the evening Red Head held my hands together, and sneered in my face, the evening in your home when I told him that never again would I fight him after the manner





brutes fight? Do you recollect that I said the time would come when I could use my brain instead of my fists, and predicted that brain would win? Do you recollect that?"

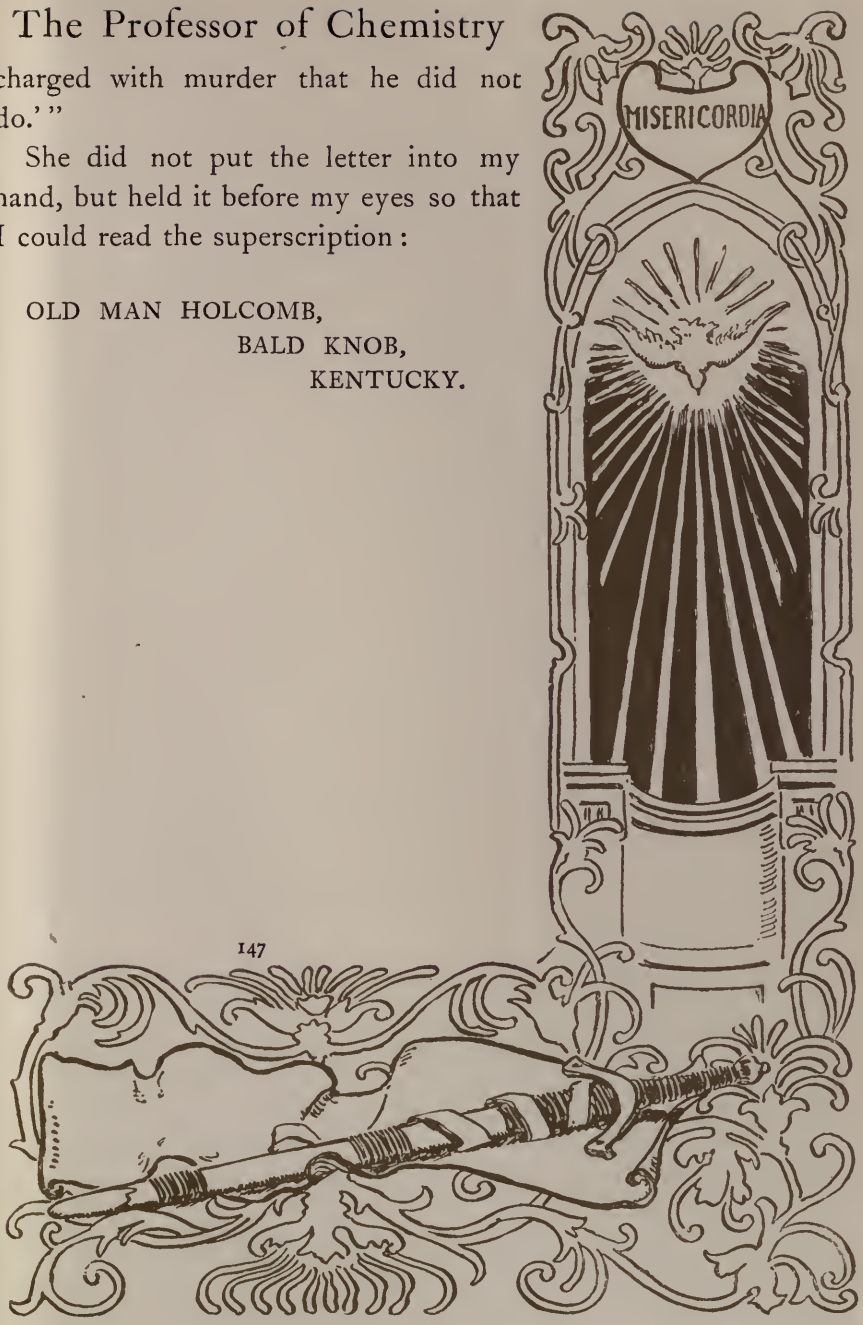
The girl no longer shrank from me, she no longer stood in supplication, but with erect head and flashing eyes, answered:

"He is *not* guilty, and he must not hang. Now I shall seek the man who will listen to the appeal of justice, who can stand between this uncultured country boy and the scaffold. I came to you of my own free will, not by the counsel or consent of Red Head. He defies both you and your art; he said to me: 'Go to the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, take this letter' (she drew a letter from her pocket), 'find the man addressed, and say to him that Red Head lies in the jail of Stringtown County,

charged with murder that he did not do.' "

She did not put the letter into my hand, but held it before my eyes so that I could read the superscription:

OLD MAN HOLCOMB,
BALD KNOB,
KENTUCKY.



CHAPTER XV

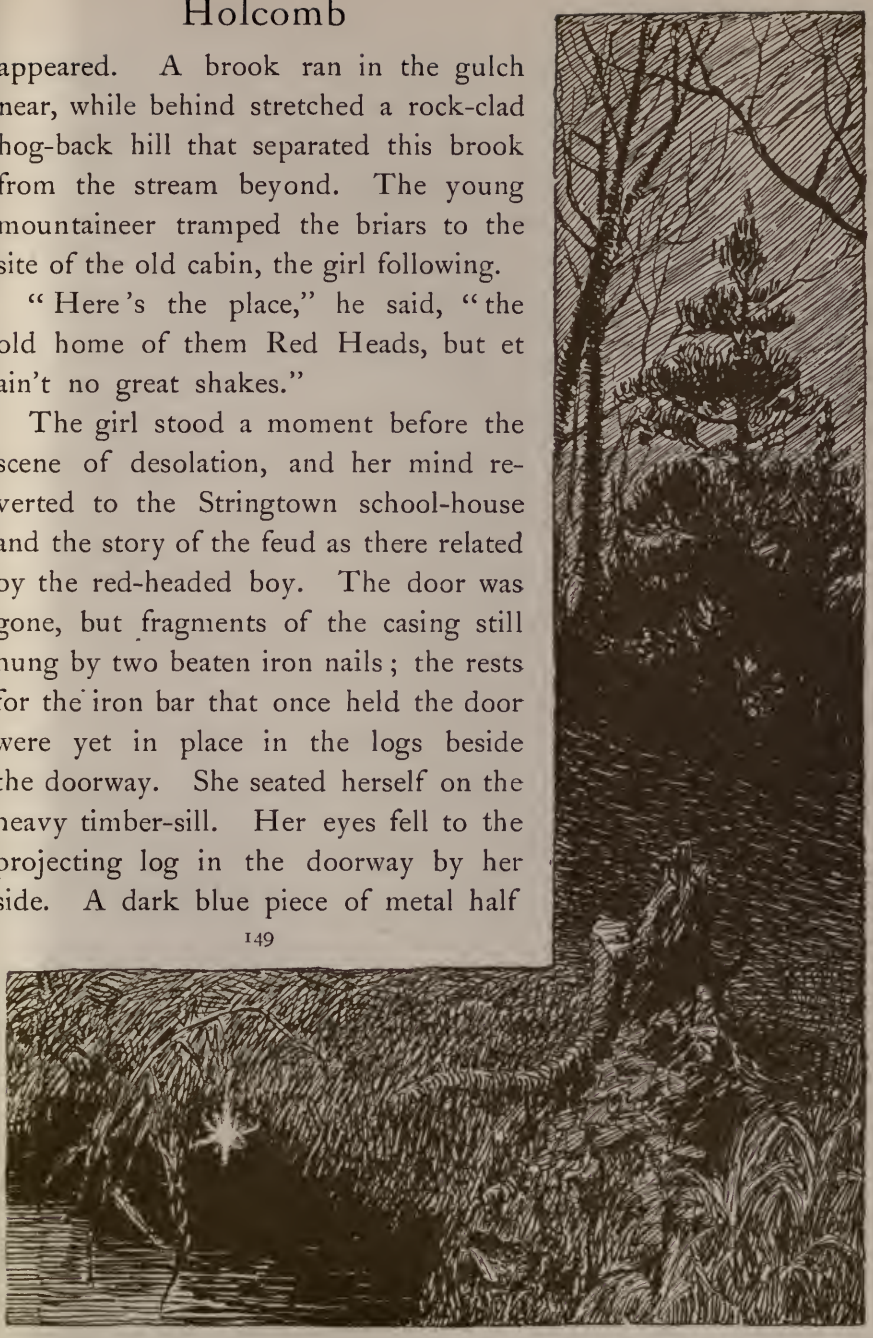
HOLCOMB

THE girl who so recently pleaded for the life of Red Head, preceded by a guide, was now traversing the Eastern Kentucky mountain wilds on the back of a mule. For some days they had been beyond the track of even mountain wagon-wheels. The bluffs were always present either overhanging above or precipitous below. The streams were often bank-full, so that long circuits were necessary. At last they neared a deserted cabin, windowless and roofless. The chimney had fallen in, the logs were decayed, and the mud chinking between them had dis-

appeared. A brook ran in the gulch near, while behind stretched a rock-clad hog-back hill that separated this brook from the stream beyond. The young mountaineer tramped the briars to the site of the old cabin, the girl following.

"Here's the place," he said, "the old home of them Red Heads, but et ain't no great shakes."

The girl stood a moment before the scene of desolation, and her mind reverted to the Stringtown school-house and the story of the feud as there related by the red-headed boy. The door was gone, but fragments of the casing still hung by two beaten iron nails; the rests for the iron bar that once held the door were yet in place in the logs beside the doorway. She seated herself on the heavy timber-sill. Her eyes fell to the projecting log in the doorway by her side. A dark blue piece of metal half



covered with a white crust — from about which the wood had partly rotted away — was imbedded in the end. With her fingers she scraped the soft wood-mould away, and then raised from its resting-place the flattened, weather-corroded minnie bullet, upon which were still to be seen the creases that once held the cartridge-shell in place. A shudder came over her; she dropped the fragment into her pocket and raised her eyes; there in the trail below them, the muzzle of a long gun in his hand, stood a tall, grizzled old man. At this instant the guide caught sight of the intruder.

"Thet 's him."

"Who?"

"Ol' Holcomb."

The girl arose and started along the path back toward the man. His form was lank and uncouth, his hair thin and white, his face covered with a crop of

beard that had been roughly trimmed with the scissors. He did not speak, nor did the girl until she stood close beside him.

"Are you Mr. Holcomb?"

"I'm Ol' Holcomb."

"I came to bring you a message."

"Who from?"

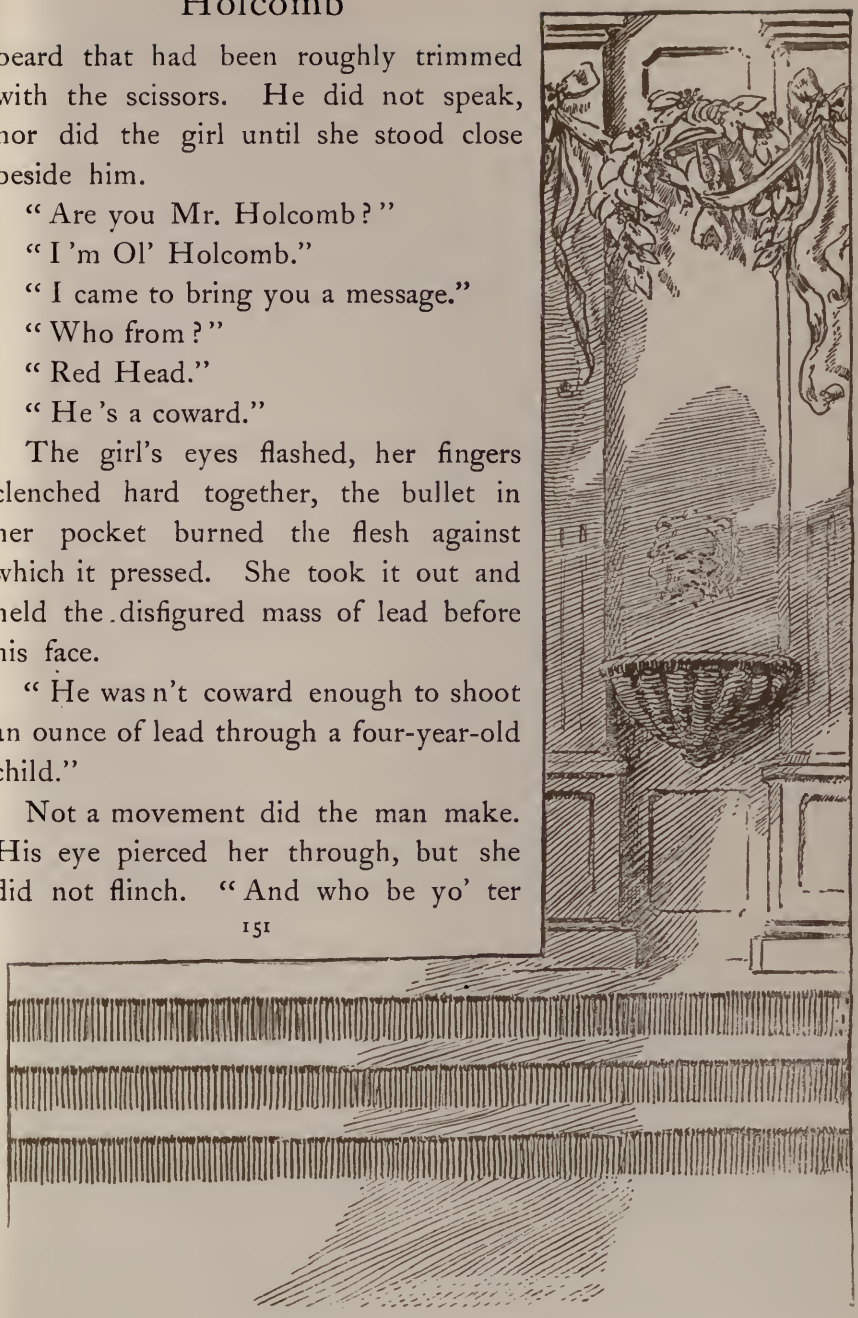
"Red Head."

"He's a coward."

The girl's eyes flashed, her fingers clenched hard together, the bullet in her pocket burned the flesh against which it pressed. She took it out and held the disfigured mass of lead before his face.

"He was n't coward enough to shoot an ounce of lead through a four-year-old child."

Not a movement did the man make. His eye pierced her through, but she did not flinch. "And who be yo' ter



tell Holcomb this? D' y' wanter wedge inter the feud?"

"Never mind who I am. I know who you are and what you did. But I do not seek you to talk over these things. I came to deliver a message." She took from her pocket the letter she had already shown to Professor Drew, and held it out.

Without opening it, the man asked: "And hev yo' come fur?"

"From Stringtown."

"Yo' can't git back ter Hawley's claim ternight, and thet's the nearest stoppin' place. Yore shoes air thin and yo' air shiverin' like a young lamb in sleety weather. Yo' wants ter be warmed up 'n' fed, and yo 'd better go crost the divide ter my cabin, and we 'll settle the other matter thar. You 'll hev ter stay all night ha'ar'bouts."

These words were spoken in a kindly

tone, and the girl realized that he told the truth, but she knew, too, that excitement, not cold, was responsible for her shivering.

In the common room of that cabin, while she sat close to the fire, Holcomb held the letter long in his hands, turning it about, eying it curiously. "Guess yo 'll hev ter read et ter me," he said; then tore it open and handed it to the girl, who complied, reading as follows:

HOLCOMB: I'm Red Head. I did n't come back ter the moun'ns ter finish the feud 'cause I promised Susie not ter fight lessen she married Drew. Then I 'tended ter whip Drew first and shoot you next. But I can't do neithèr, fer I 'm in jail. Drew 's got the pull, too, and lessen I git help he 'll hang me fer killin' a man I did n't kill. I 'm not a pizoner and you knows thet too. I 'm not a coward and you knows et. What I wants es fer you ter come ter Stringtown and keep me from bein' hung. You ain't much of a friend,

but you 've got grit and sense and kin shoot, and thet 's the kind of a friend I needs now. You know et 'ud disgrace the fam'ly you fought fer and the fam'ly you fought, fer me ter be hung and I mus' n't be hung. Ef you 'll come, tell Susie and she 'll tell me. Come ter the Stringtown County Court and stop the hangin' and end the feud.

RED HEAD.

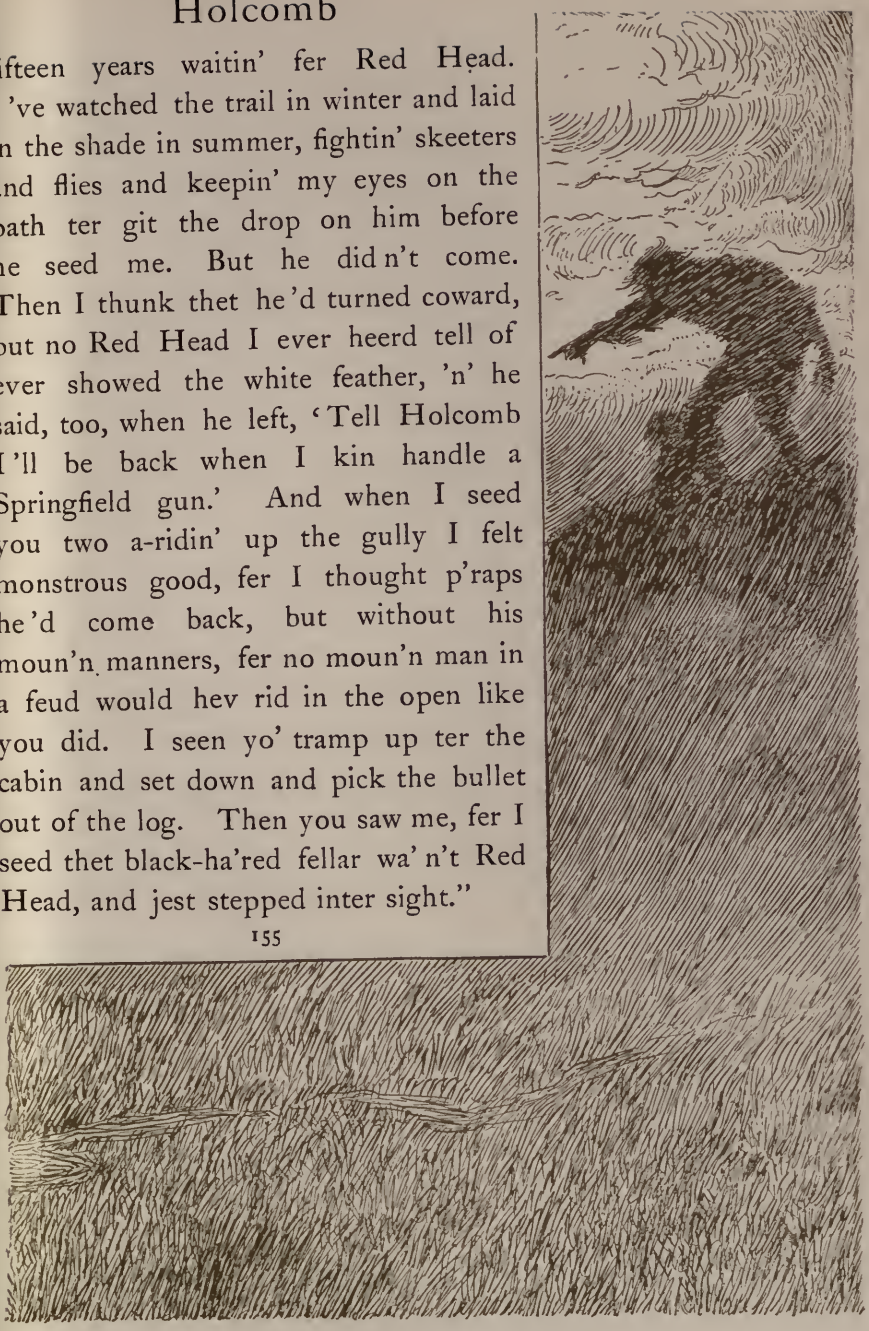
When the girl ceased reading, Holcomb again scrutinized the letter. Evidently his thoughts were not altogether in the present, for after a period of silence he musingly remarked:

"Ef he 's like his kin, et 's the truth he told when he said thet he 's not a coward. Them war a brave fam'ly and grit, else thar 'd been more 'n one Holcomb livin'. I 'm the last of the Holcombs, child."

Turning to the girl, he said abruptly: "I 've sot in this old cabin nigh on ter

SHE seated herself on the heavy timber-sill. — Page 149

fifteen years waitin' fer Red Head. I 've watched the trail in winter and laid in the shade in summer, fightin' skeeters and flies and keepin' my eyes on the path ter git the drop on him before he seed me. But he did n't come. Then I thunk thet he 'd turned coward, but no Red Head I ever heerd tell of ever showed the white feather, 'n' he said, too, when he left, 'Tell Holcomb I 'll be back when I kin handle a Springfield gun.' And when I seed you two a-ridin' up the gully I felt monstrous good, fer I thought p'raps he 'd come back, but without his moun'n manners, fer no moun'n man in a feud would hev rid in the open like you did. I seen yo' tramp up ter the cabin and set down and pick the bullet out of the log. Then you saw me, fer I seed thet black-ha'red fellar wa' n't Red Head, and jest stepped inter sight."



The girl shuddered, and Holcomb said: "Set closer ter the fire, little one. I 'm pow'ful sorry fer sech squeemish buds es you be." Then he asked: "Red Head 's in jail, the writin' says?"

"Yes."

"Fer killin' a man?"

"Yes."

"War et on the squar'?"

"He did n't kill him. Mr. Nordman died suddenly, and Red Head is charged with giving him poison."

Holcomb sat in silence a time, and then spoke in reverie: "And he axes help from Holcomb, me who wanted ter shoot him before I died, me who killed his father and his mother and his little sister, me who hev lived alone in this cabin fer 'bout fifteen years 'cause his gun and the guns of his kin hed killed every other Holcomb but me. Et's a shame thet sech a fam'ly es

his 'n and sech a fam'ly es our 'n should be disgraced by the puttin' of one of 'em in jail fer pizonin'. I wants ter shoot Red Head 'cause of the feud, and I wants ter shoot him pow'ful much, fer them are fine people, them Red Heads, but ef he gits hung we can't fight et out, fer he 's the last of his faction." Turning to the girl again, he asked: "Air yo' sure thet he did n't pizon the man?"

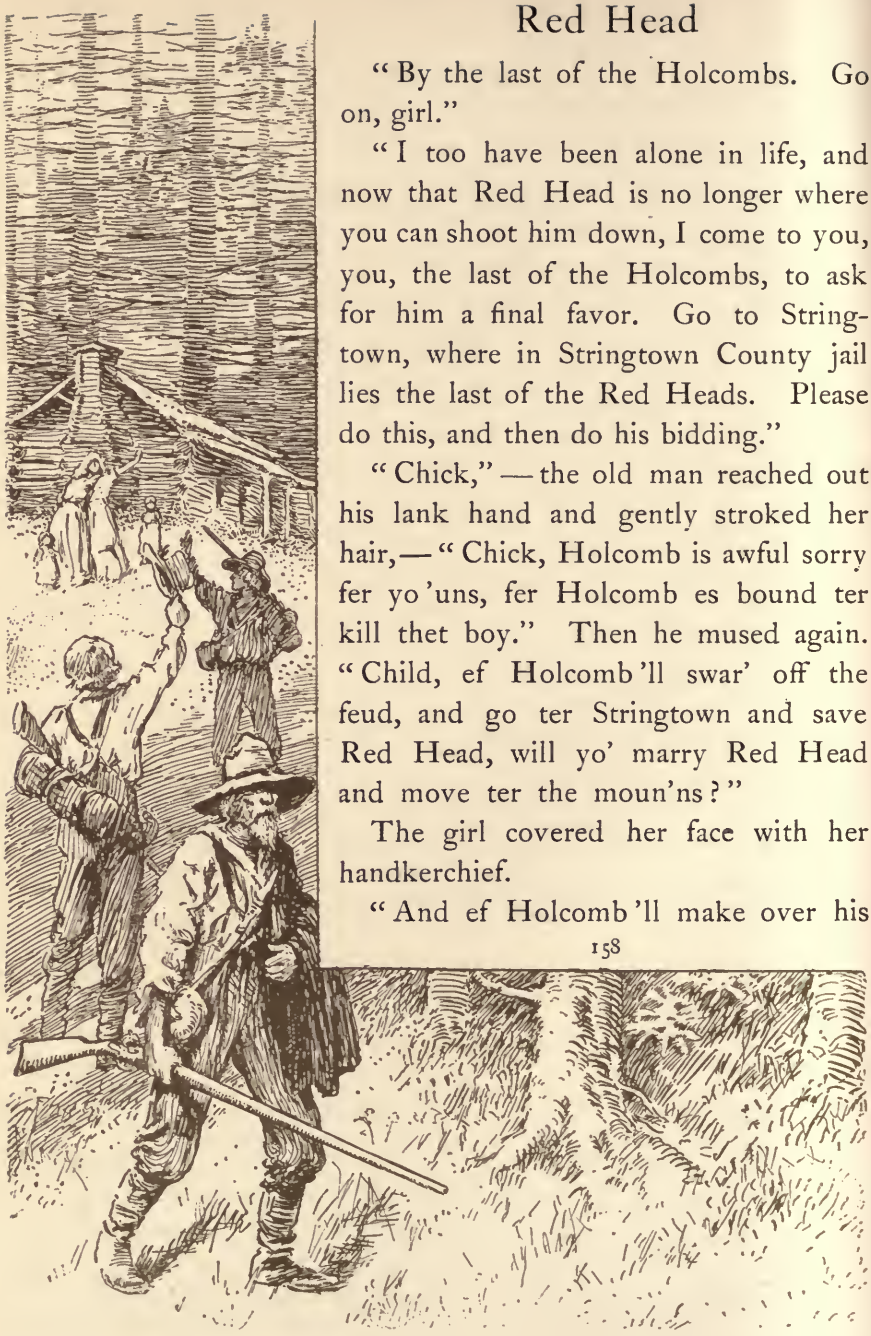
"I know he did not. He swore to me on his bended knees that he did not, and — he loves me."

"And yo' loves him?"

"I am his friend."

"Only his *friend?*" Close fixed upon her face were the eyes of Holcomb.

Earnestly did the girl reply: "Alone in the world is Red Head, hunted his life through was he, by whom, I ask?" Now her eyes held Holcomb.



"By the last of the Holcombs. Go on, girl."

"I too have been alone in life, and now that Red Head is no longer where you can shoot him down, I come to you, you, the last of the Holcombs, to ask for him a final favor. Go to Stringtown, where in Stringtown County jail lies the last of the Red Heads. Please do this, and then do his bidding."

"Chick," — the old man reached out his lank hand and gently stroked her hair, — "Chick, Holcomb is awful sorry fer yo 'uns, fer Holcomb es bound ter kill thet boy." Then he mused again. "Child, ef Holcomb 'll swar' off the feud, and go ter Stringtown and save Red Head, will yo' marry Red Head and move ter the moun'ns?"

The girl covered her face with her handkerchief.

"And ef Holcomb 'll make over his

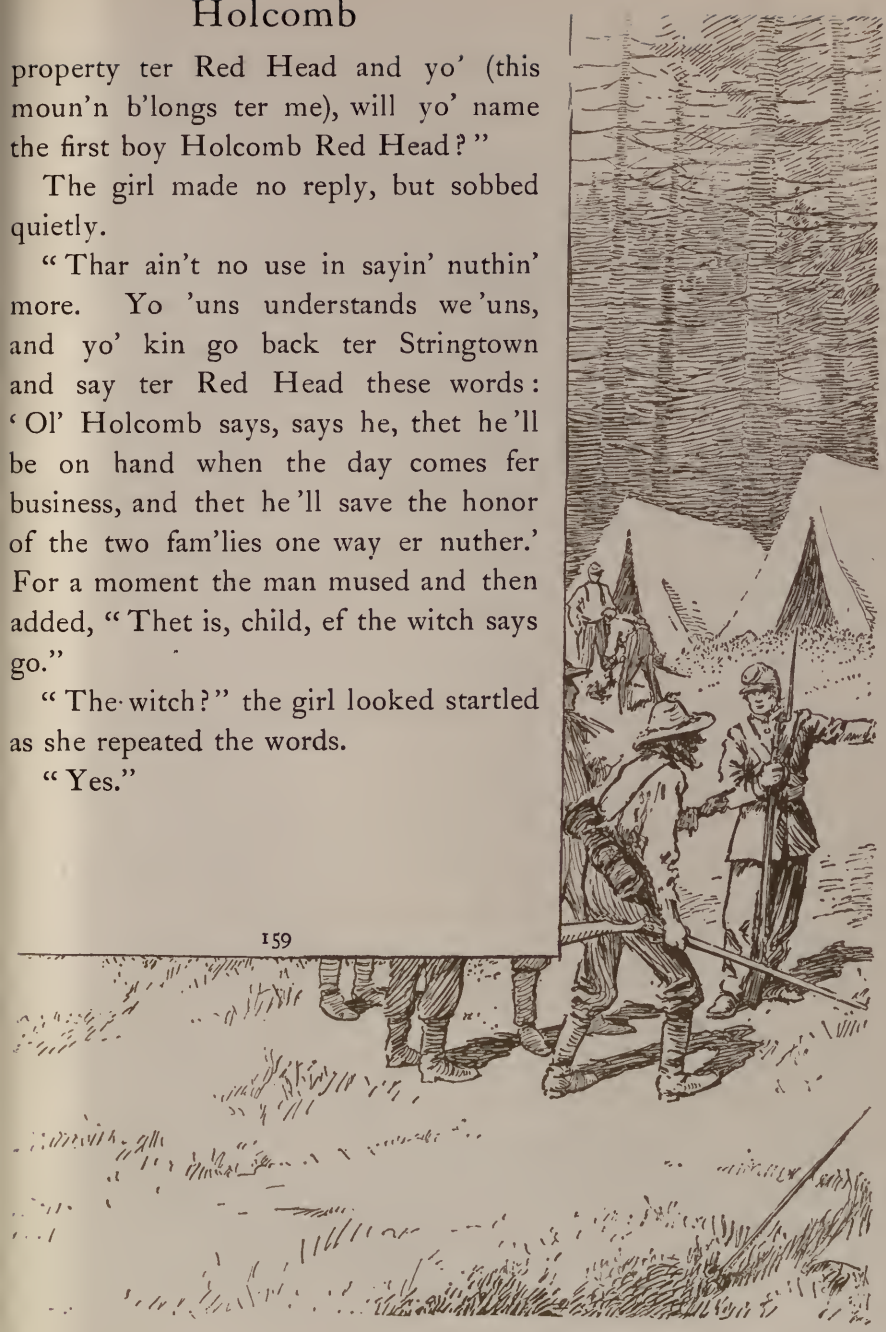
property ter Red Head and yo' (this moun'n b'longs ter me), will yo' name the first boy Holcomb Red Head?"

The girl made no reply, but sobbed quietly.

"Thar ain't no use in sayin' nuthin' more. Yo 'uns understands we 'uns, and yo' kin go back ter Stringtown and say ter Red Head these words: 'Ol' Holcomb says, says he, thet he 'll be on hand when the day comes fer business, and thet he 'll save the honor of the two fam'lies one way er nuther.' For a moment the man mused and then added, "Thet is, child, ef the witch says go."

"The witch?" the girl looked startled as she repeated the words.

"Yes."



CHAPTER XVI

THE SECOND JOURNEY TO WITCH MERRIE'S CAVE

HOLCOMB rested his head on his hand. Thus he sat in meditation; then, rising, he spoke.

"She 's got ter hev her say. Dare yo' go and see her?"

"Who?"

"Witch Merrie."

The girl shuddered. "She it was who stirred the feud between your families."

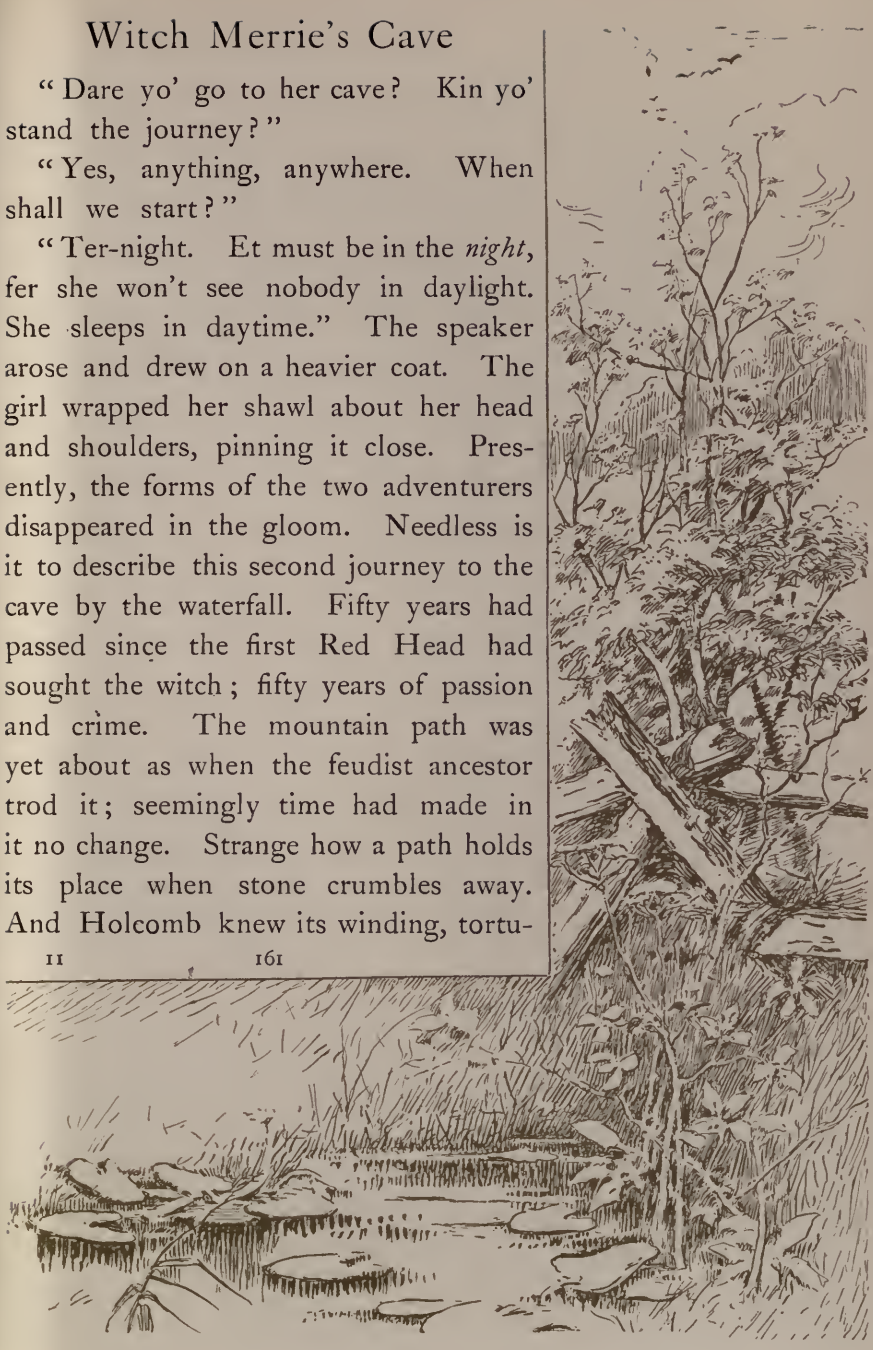
"The witch seen et comin', child."

"She made it. This I catch from Red Head's story."

"Dare yo' go to her cave? Kin yo' stand the journey?"

"Yes, anything, anywhere. When shall we start?"

"Ter-night. Et must be in the *night*, fer she won't see nobody in daylight. She sleeps in daytime." The speaker arose and drew on a heavier coat. The girl wrapped her shawl about her head and shoulders, pinning it close. Presently, the forms of the two adventurers disappeared in the gloom. Needless is it to describe this second journey to the cave by the waterfall. Fifty years had passed since the first Red Head had sought the witch; fifty years of passion and crime. The mountain path was yet about as when the feudist ancestor trod it; seemingly time had made in it no change. Strange how a path holds its place when stone crumbles away. And Holcomb knew its winding, tortu-



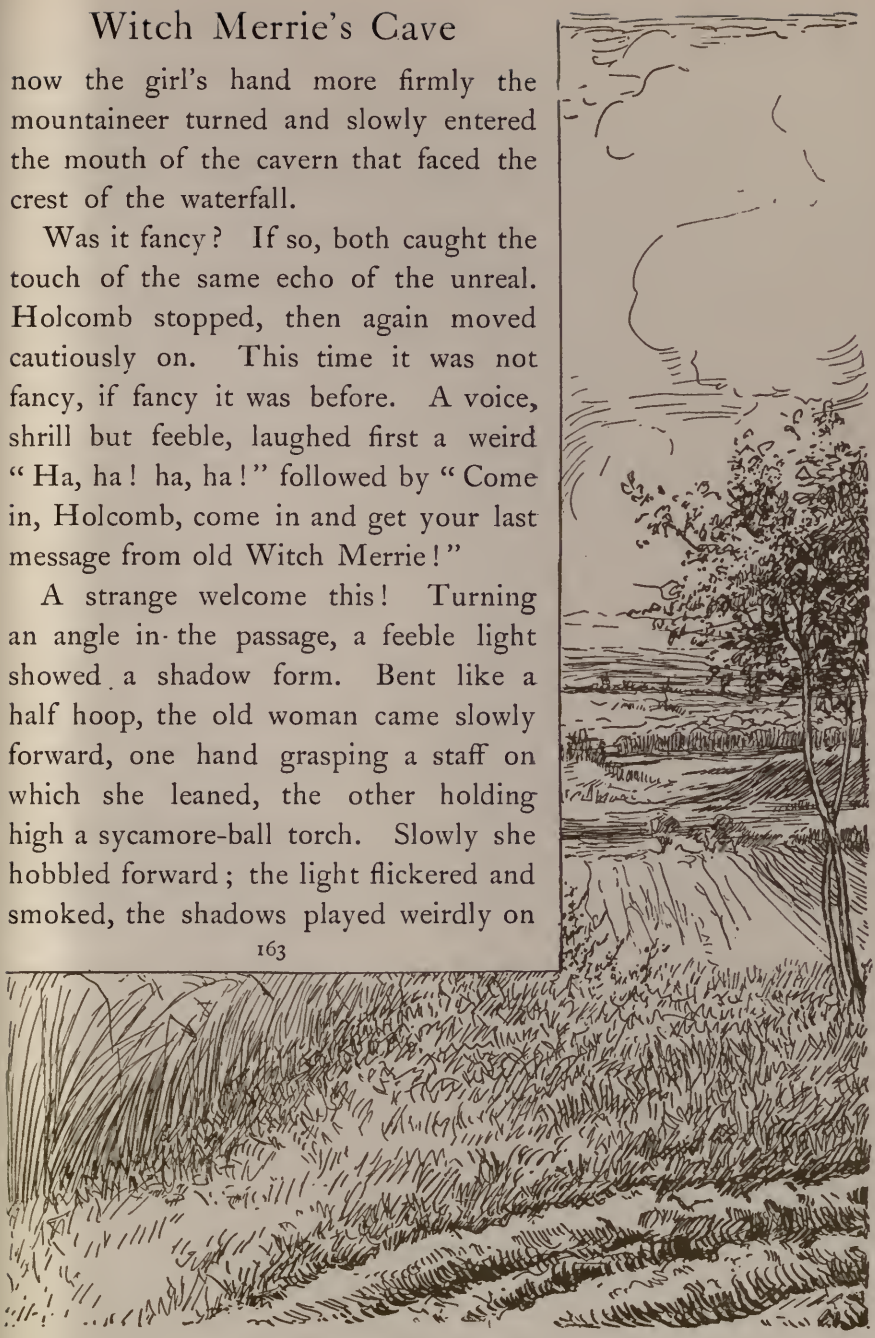
ous way as did his father's enemy of old.

At last the murmur of the waterfall was heard in the distance, the adjacent bluffs were next slowly climbed, the girl being assisted, almost carried by the hardy mountaineer. The sound of falling water increased as the night travellers neared the cataract, to stand at last on the table rock before the entrance to the cavern of the witch. The full moon cast its rays directly into the hole in the rock, but the outer light seemed only to make the cavern's mouth blacker. Holcomb stopped. Evidently he did not fancy meeting the occupant of that home. He hesitated, undecided as to what should be his next move. Strange that men such as he, fearing neither the here nor the hereafter, thus shrink from a poor creature about whom superstition uplifts the touch of magic. Holding

now the girl's hand more firmly the mountaineer turned and slowly entered the mouth of the cavern that faced the crest of the waterfall.

Was it fancy? If so, both caught the touch of the same echo of the unreal. Holcomb stopped, then again moved cautiously on. This time it was not fancy, if fancy it was before. A voice, shrill but feeble, laughed first a weird "Ha, ha! ha, ha!" followed by "Come in, Holcomb, come in and get your last message from old Witch Merrie!"

A strange welcome this! Turning an angle in the passage, a feeble light showed a shadow form. Bent like a half hoop, the old woman came slowly forward, one hand grasping a staff on which she leaned, the other holding high a sycamore-ball torch. Slowly she hobbled forward; the light flickered and smoked, the shadows played weirdly on



the cavern's side. Close she drew and peered, first into the face of the girl, next into that of her companion. Old and wrinkled and ugly was she. The girl shuddered and drew back. "Ha, ha!" chuckled the witch; "and so you, Holcomb, the last of the red roses, seek the witch of the waterfall."

"We 've come ter ax ef I kin go down ter the lowlands and help Red Head out of jail."

The witch chuckled. "As you have helped others of his family, yes. As he has helped others of your family, yes. You need each other's help."

"What do you mean, mother?" the girl spoke.

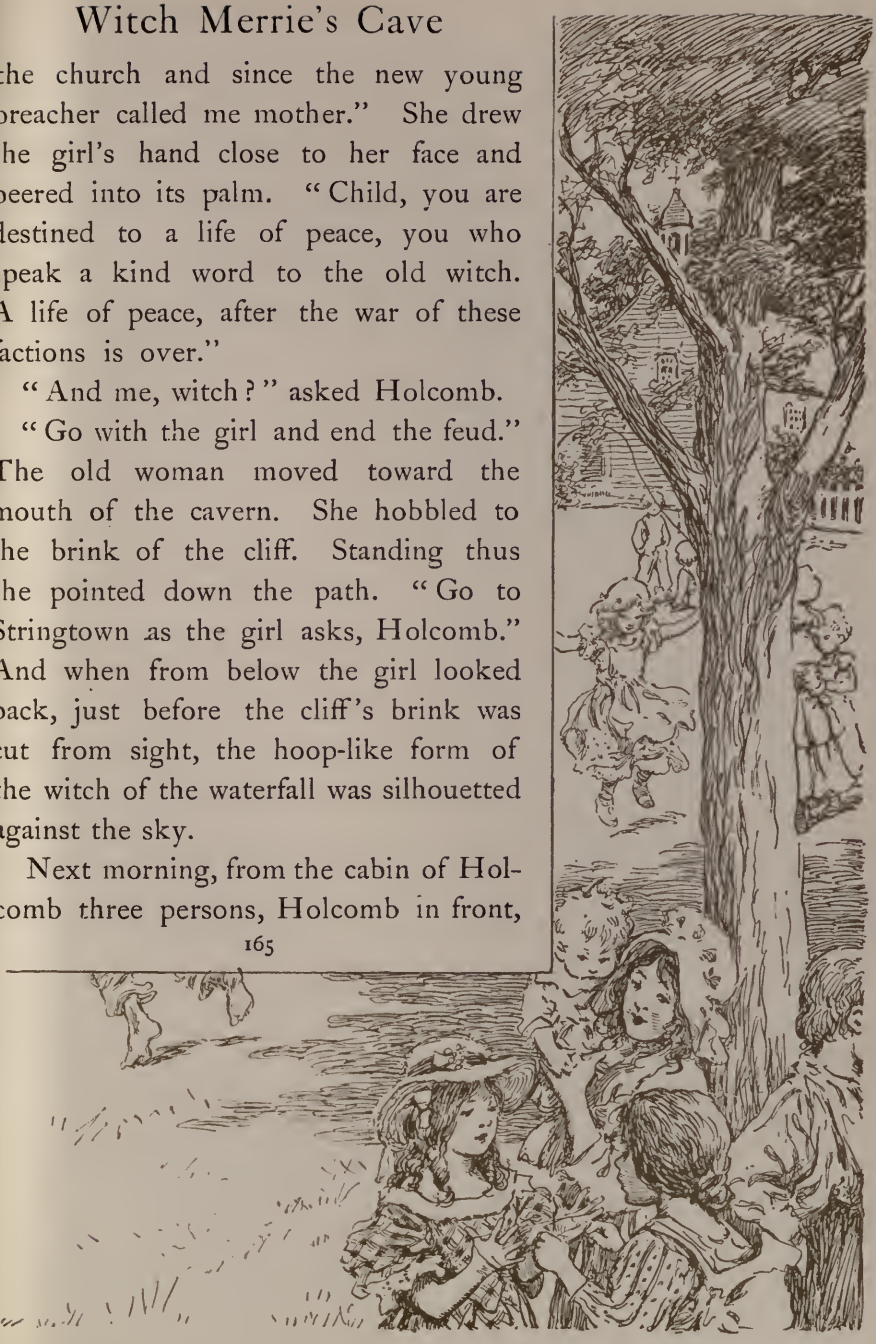
Holding the torch so that its light fell into the face of the girl, the witch gazed a moment into her eyes. Her face softened. "Child, it has been years and years since I stood in the door of

the church and since the new young preacher called me mother." She drew the girl's hand close to her face and peered into its palm. "Child, you are destined to a life of peace, you who speak a kind word to the old witch. A life of peace, after the war of these factions is over."

"And me, witch?" asked Holcomb.

"Go with the girl and end the feud." The old woman moved toward the mouth of the cavern. She hobbled to the brink of the cliff. Standing thus she pointed down the path. "Go to Stringtown as the girl asks, Holcomb." And when from below the girl looked back, just before the cliff's brink was cut from sight, the hoop-like form of the witch of the waterfall was silhouetted against the sky.

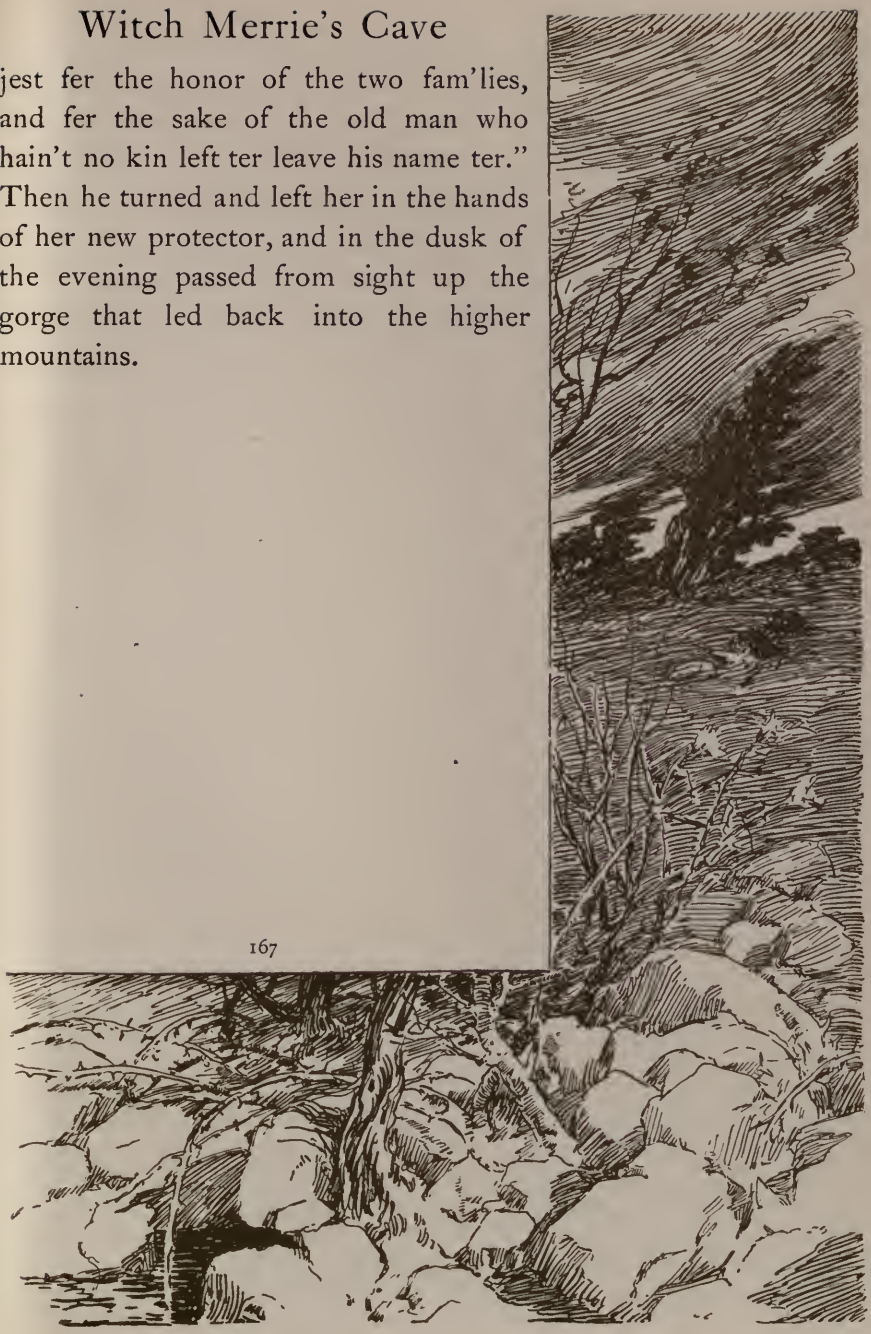
Next morning, from the cabin of Holcomb three persons, Holcomb in front,

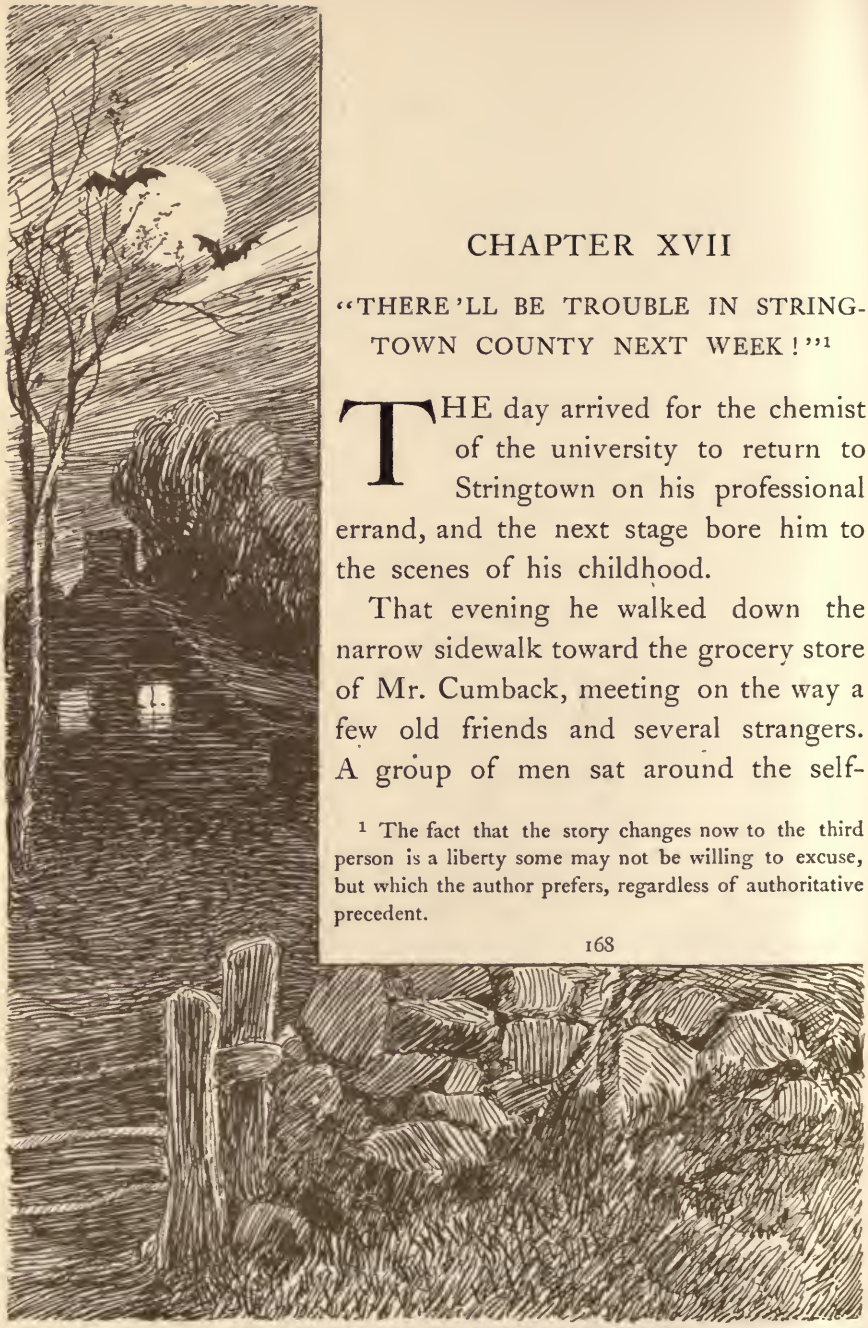


returned along the mountain trail. All day long, with his heavy rifle over his shoulder, the old man continued in the advance; finally, near sundown, he relinquished his charge to another, who stood before a double cabin near the road, and who in some manner had been advised of their approach and was expecting them. "Yo 'll stop fer the night hy'ar, and in the mornin' he 'll see yo' ter the next stop. Thar ain't no danger ter yo 'uns in these moun'ns now, fer Holcomb hev passed the word 'long thet yo 're his friend and air ter be showed ter the stage line. Et's sure death ter the feller what troubles yo'."

Taking the hand of the girl in one rough palm, the old man again stroked her hair with the other, as he had done in the cabin, gently, tenderly. In a low tone, very low, he said: "And yo 'll name the first baby boy Holcomb, won't you,

jest fer the honor of the two fam'lies, and fer the sake of the old man who hain't no kin left ter leave his name ter." Then he turned and left her in the hands of her new protector, and in the dusk of the evening passed from sight up the gorge that led back into the higher mountains.





CHAPTER XVII

"THERE'LL BE TROUBLE IN STRINGTOWN COUNTY NEXT WEEK!"[1]

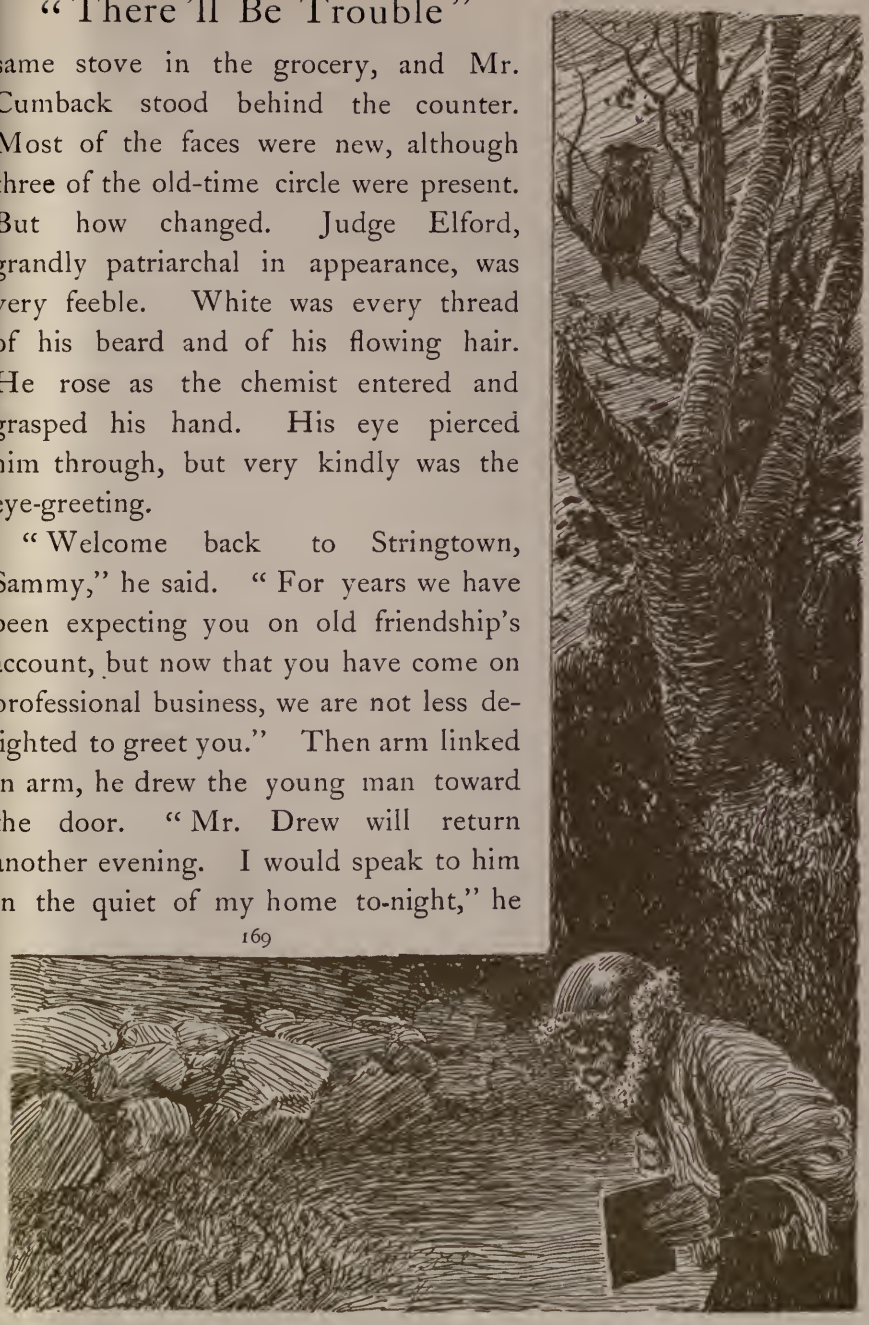
THE day arrived for the chemist of the university to return to Stringtown on his professional errand, and the next stage bore him to the scenes of his childhood.

That evening he walked down the narrow sidewalk toward the grocery store of Mr. Cumback, meeting on the way a few old friends and several strangers. A group of men sat around the self-

[1] The fact that the story changes now to the third person is a liberty some may not be willing to excuse, but which the author prefers, regardless of authoritative precedent.

same stove in the grocery, and Mr. Cumback stood behind the counter. Most of the faces were new, although three of the old-time circle were present. But how changed. Judge Elford, grandly patriarchal in appearance, was very feeble. White was every thread of his beard and of his flowing hair. He rose as the chemist entered and grasped his hand. His eye pierced him through, but very kindly was the eye-greeting.

"Welcome back to Stringtown, Sammy," he said. "For years we have been expecting you on old friendship's account, but now that you have come on professional business, we are not less delighted to greet you." Then arm linked in arm, he drew the young man toward the door. "Mr. Drew will return another evening. I would speak to him in the quiet of my home to-night," he



remarked. Something in his tone led the hearer to know that the Judge wished to talk seriously, and as if to impress the fact more emphatically, he walked in silence to his door. This is the substance of the interview, as given by Mr. Drew in his note-book :

"Did you notice the tall, white-haired man who left the room before we did?"

"Yes."

"That man has been in Stringtown for a week. He stops at the tavern, but has no business here, unless it be in connection with this case in which you are concerned. He has been asking questions of all kinds regarding Red Head and yourself, and has inquired into every detail of the poisoning affair. He has concerned himself much in Red Head's record since he came among us as a boy. That he is not alone is shown by the fact that many uncouth men call to

see him, but they soon depart. It is rumored that he is a friend of Red Head, from the mountains."

"And how am I concerned, Judge?"

"That I shall now tell you, Sammy. Would that you had kept out of this case! Were you not asked to remain away from Stringtown until after Court week?" His eyes were upon me.

"Yes."

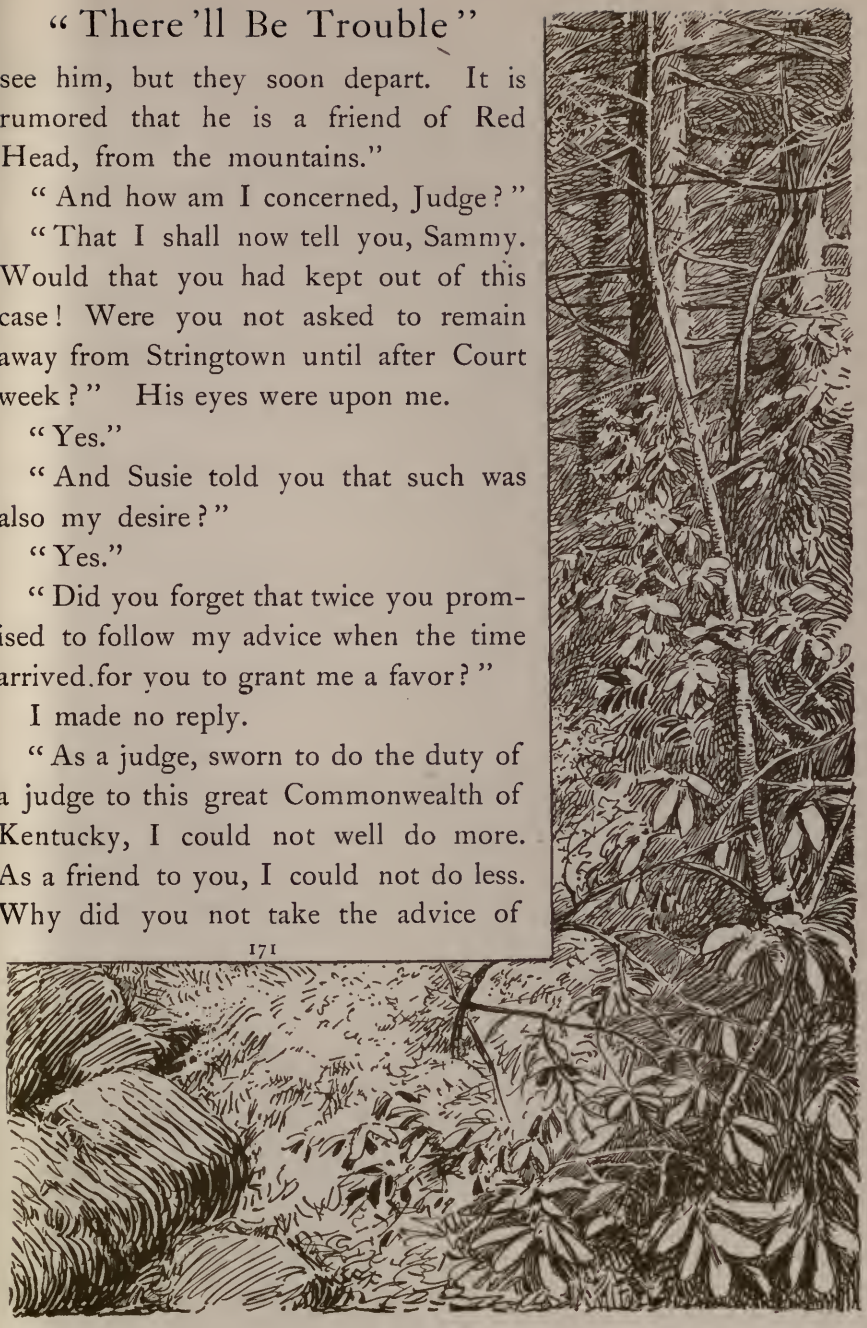
"And Susie told you that such was also my desire?"

"Yes."

"Did you forget that twice you promised to follow my advice when the time arrived for you to grant me a favor?"

I made no reply.

"As a judge, sworn to do the duty of a judge to this great Commonwealth of Kentucky, I could not well do more. As a friend to you, I could not do less. Why did you not take the advice of



your two friends, him who asked the favor and her who bore the message?" Before I could answer, he continued: "Ugly things are being said in Stringtown. The people of the county, too, are disturbed over this case. There are factions among us, and some viciousness begins to creep out; not that Red Head has made many friends, but that this thing of sending outside the State for an expert to testify against one of our citizens, is an innovation."

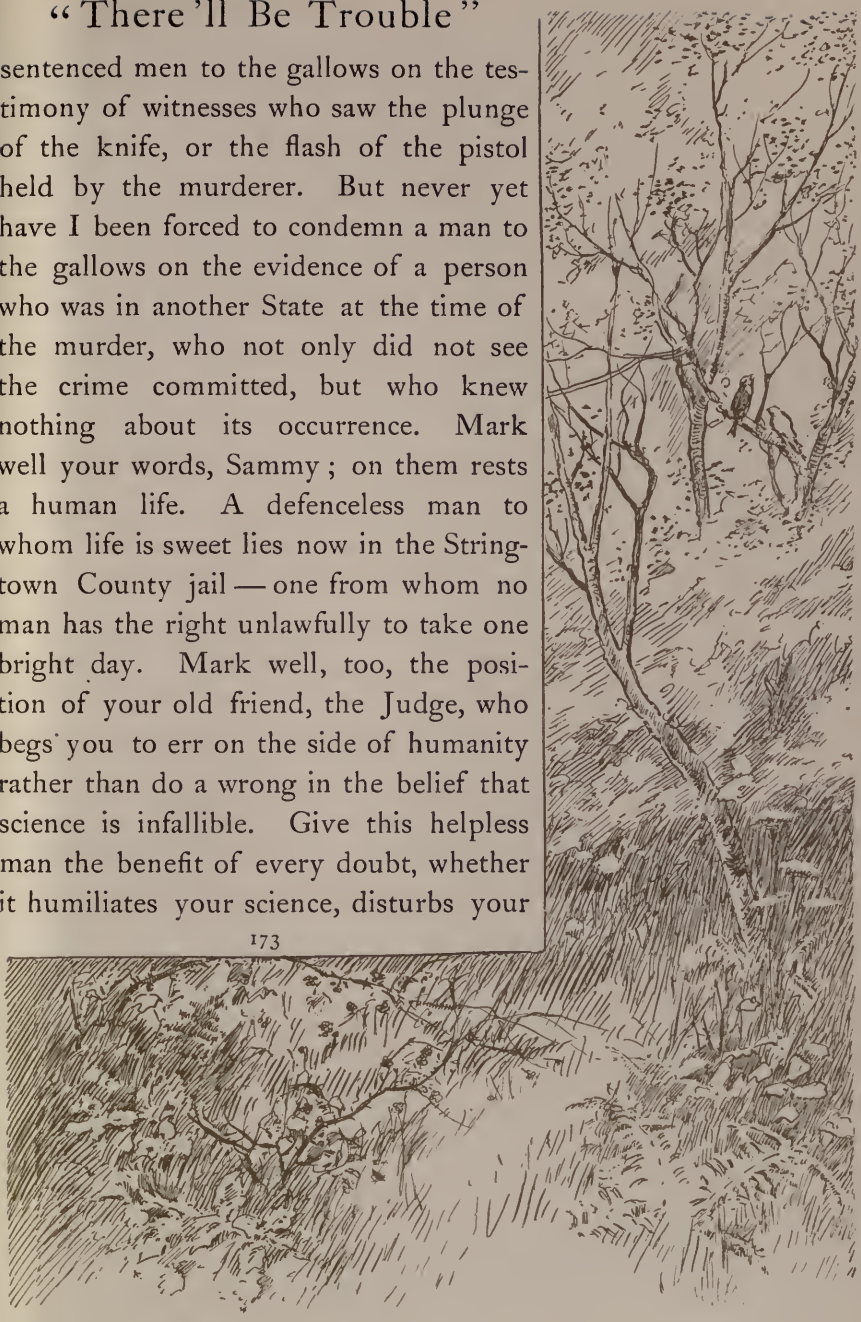
"You have my thanks for your interest," I replied with reserve.

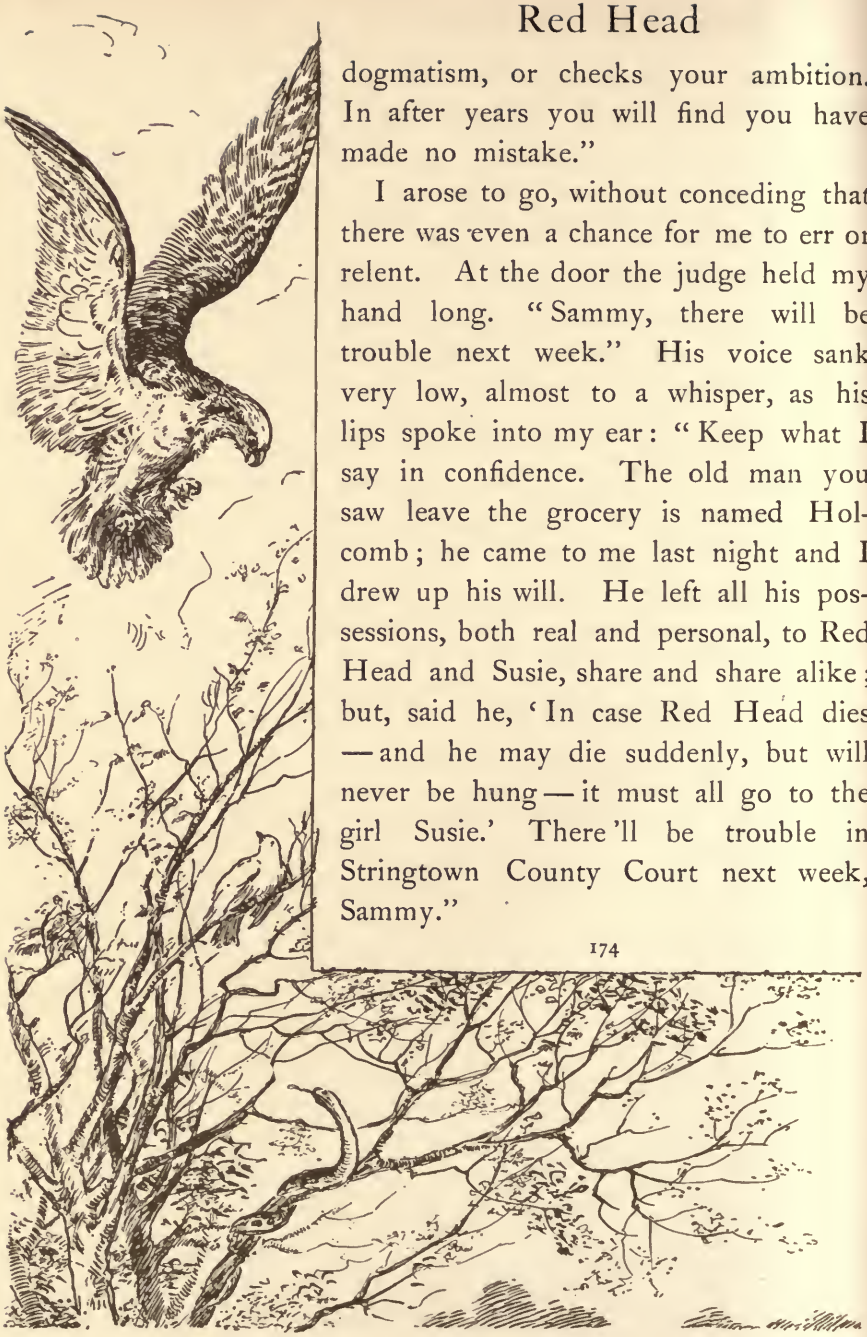
"Had I not believed that you would listen to *her* pleadings, I might have made my message stronger, but it is now too late. Sammy," he continued, "are you satisfied concerning the chemical provings you have made?"

"Yes."

"I am an old man, my child, and have

sentenced men to the gallows on the testimony of witnesses who saw the plunge of the knife, or the flash of the pistol held by the murderer. But never yet have I been forced to condemn a man to the gallows on the evidence of a person who was in another State at the time of the murder, who not only did not see the crime committed, but who knew nothing about its occurrence. Mark well your words, Sammy; on them rests a human life. A defenceless man to whom life is sweet lies now in the Stringtown County jail — one from whom no man has the right unlawfully to take one bright day. Mark well, too, the position of your old friend, the Judge, who begs you to err on the side of humanity rather than do a wrong in the belief that science is infallible. Give this helpless man the benefit of every doubt, whether it humiliates your science, disturbs your





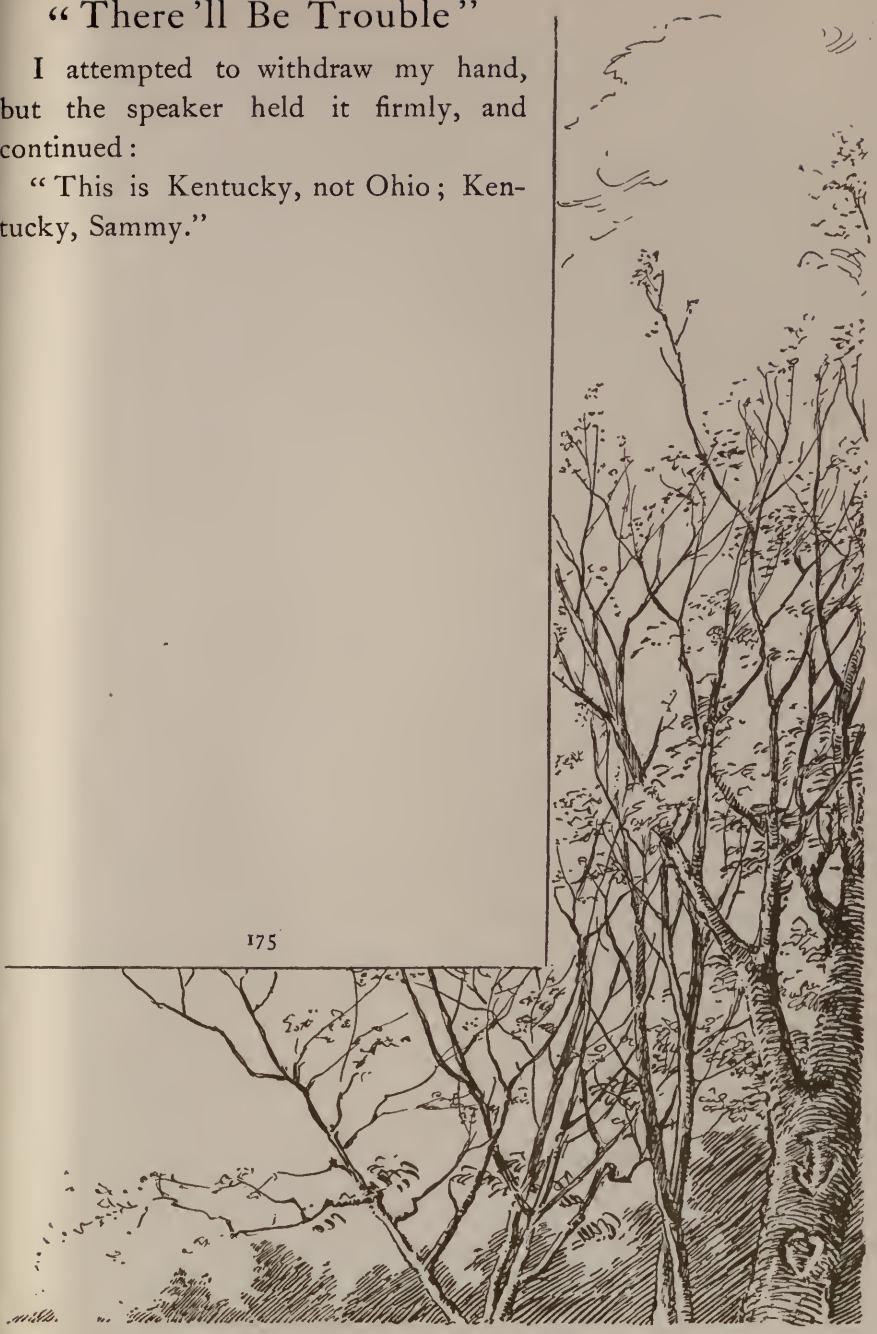
dogmatism, or checks your ambition. In after years you will find you have made no mistake."

I arose to go, without conceding that there was even a chance for me to err or relent. At the door the judge held my hand long. "Sammy, there will be trouble next week." His voice sank very low, almost to a whisper, as his lips spoke into my ear: "Keep what I say in confidence. The old man you saw leave the grocery is named Holcomb; he came to me last night and I drew up his will. He left all his possessions, both real and personal, to Red Head and Susie, share and share alike; but, said he, 'In case Red Head dies — and he may die suddenly, but will never be hung — it must all go to the girl Susie.' There 'll be trouble in Stringtown County Court next week, Sammy."

"There'll Be Trouble"

I attempted to withdraw my hand, but the speaker held it firmly, and continued:

"This is Kentucky, not Ohio; Kentucky, Sammy."



CHAPTER XVIII

STRINGTOWN COUNTY COURT

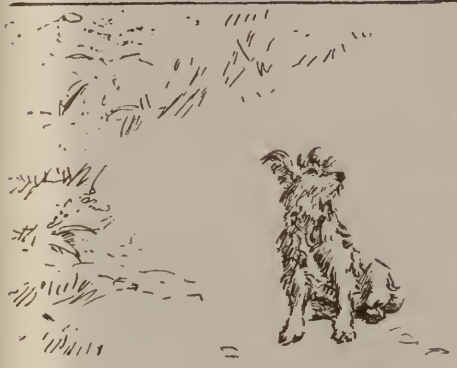
THE morning of the trial dawned and Professor Drew entered the bus that had been engaged to take the two attorneys, the judge, a few close friends of these gentlemen — a few jurymen among them — and himself to court.

They rode in silence as concerned the chemist, who spoke no word, nor did he listen to his companions, who passed their pleasantries back and forth as Kentucky men will, whether they journey to a picnic, a wedding, or a hanging.

The judge took his place exactly as he had done for more than a generation. Time had enfeebled him physically, but that fine intellectual face and placid brow

were surely the more impressive by reason of the lines that age had deepened, and the touch of brighter silver the years left upon his snow-white beard and hair.

The jury was in its place, while before each man stood that ever-present box of sawdust, and from the movement of their jaws, or the pouched cheek, it could be seen that none needed to be instructed concerning the object of these utensils. Drew seated himself by the side of the prosecuting attorney and then raised his eyes to the chair where sat the man charged with murder. His hair was red as of yore, sorrel red, like no other hair; his eyes were fixed on the chemist's face, those same little yellow eyes; his ears were red, and that florid face covered with freckles; lanker and longer than before was that crimson neck. The chemist looked him squarely in the face, then his glance, not Red Head's, fell to the floor.



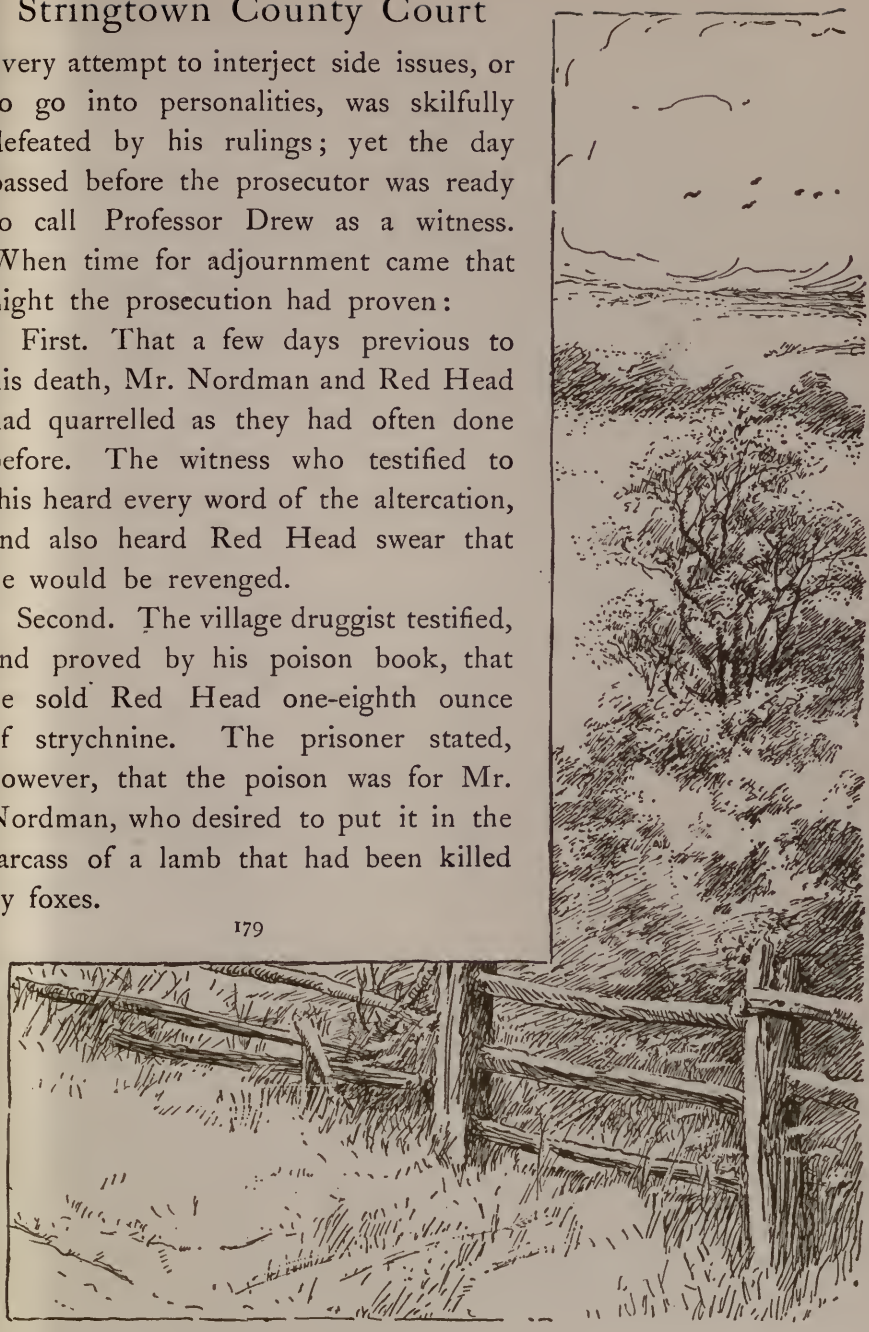
When the next witness raised his eyes they caught the form of the sheriff, who with a brace of pistols in his leather belt stood close to the prisoner, and then they turned to the audience. The room was filled with men, and no one need be told that they came from both near and far. Many Stringtown men were there, too, and there sat the tall man from the mountains of Kentucky. In full view of the prisoner was he, yet neither seemed to notice the other. He was flanked on either side by a line of men dressed in the same manner as himself; indeed, he formed the central figure in a group distinct from Stringtown folks, but each seemed indifferent to the presence of the other.

The case opened in the usual way. As the trial progressed it could be seen that the judge proposed to confine both parties to a strict statement of fact, for

every attempt to interject side issues, or to go into personalities, was skilfully defeated by his rulings; yet the day passed before the prosecutor was ready to call Professor Drew as a witness. When time for adjournment came that night the prosecution had proven:

First. That a few days previous to his death, Mr. Nordman and Red Head had quarrelled as they had often done before. The witness who testified to this heard every word of the altercation, and also heard Red Head swear that he would be revenged.

Second. The village druggist testified, and proved by his poison book, that he sold Red Head one-eighth ounce of strychnine. The prisoner stated, however, that the poison was for Mr. Nordman, who desired to put it in the carcass of a lamb that had been killed by foxes.



Third. The servants testified that Mr. Nordman arose in good health the morning of his death, took a dram of bitters, ate a light breakfast as was his habit, and that Red Head alone breakfasted with him. Very soon thereafter he was stricken with a severe pain in the stomach and then, by his direction, they gave him a dose of laudanum, which was twice repeated.

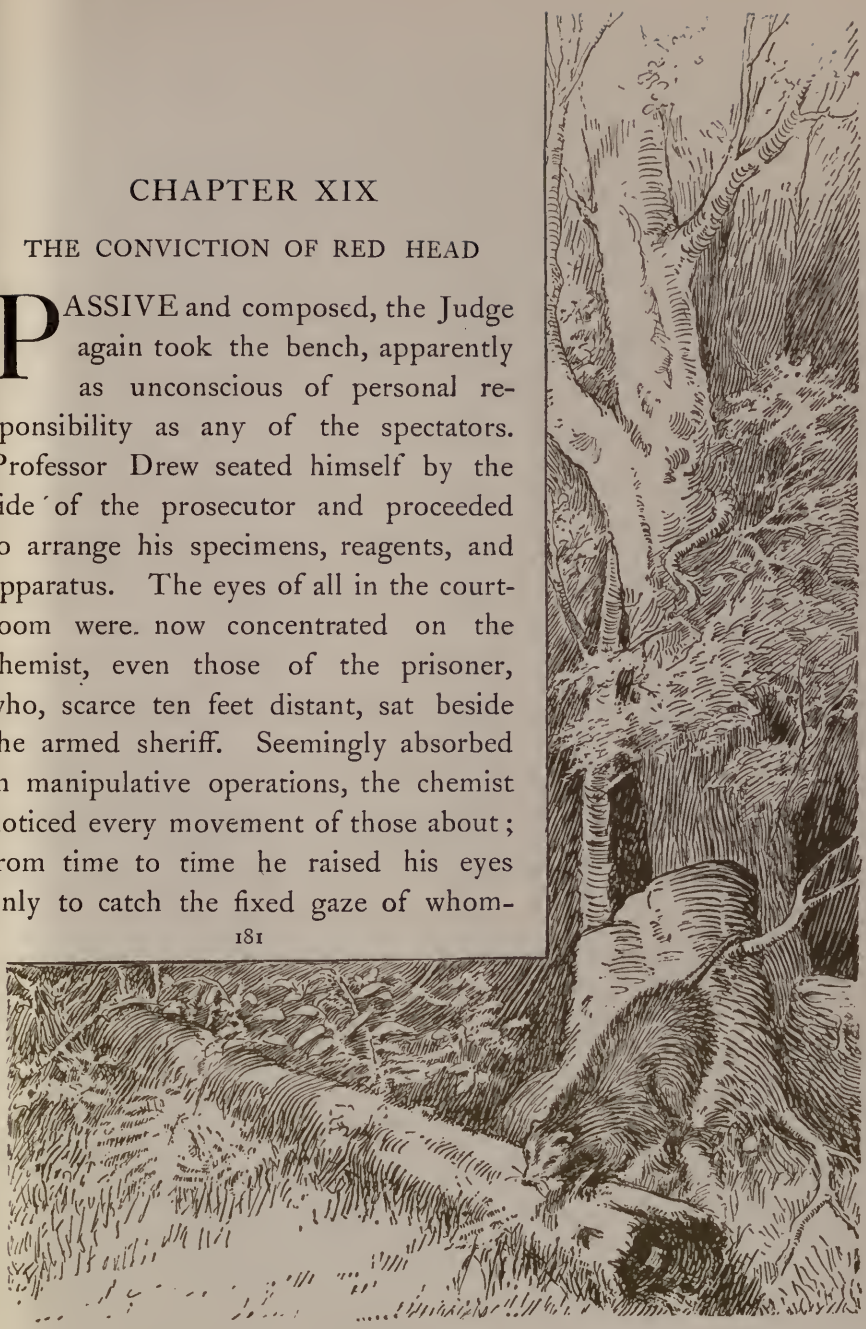
Fourth. The physician testified that he found that Mr. Nordman had been in great pain, which, however, had been quieted by laudanum before his visit. He administered an emetic, to which the patient did not respond.

This closed the evidence of the day, and the chemist was informed by the prosecution that his testimony would be taken immediately after court convened the next morning.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CONVICTION OF RED HEAD

PASSIVE and composed, the Judge again took the bench, apparently as unconscious of personal responsibility as any of the spectators. Professor Drew seated himself by the side of the prosecutor and proceeded to arrange his specimens, reagents, and apparatus. The eyes of all in the court-room were now concentrated on the chemist, even those of the prisoner, who, scarce ten feet distant, sat beside the armed sheriff. Seemingly absorbed in manipulative operations, the chemist noticed every movement of those about; from time to time he raised his eyes only to catch the fixed gaze of whom-



soever they rested on, wheresoever they turned, — jurymen, sheriff, attorneys for the prosecution and for the defence, Holcomb from the mountains, Red Head and Susie, all, — all but one, Judge Elford. He seemed unconcerned.

Again we turn to the note-book of Professor Drew for a record of those events.

That Judge Elford waited my convenience I knew, and that this famous case had drawn itself down and focussed itself on me I also knew. Amid intense stillness, friend and foe, faction, feudist, judge, prisoner, and jury were awaiting my voice. I turned my eyes to the jury. Not a mouth was in motion; firmly set each pair of jaws; never before had such a thing been known in Stringtown county-seat.

The last touch was given the vessels before me, and then I whispered to the

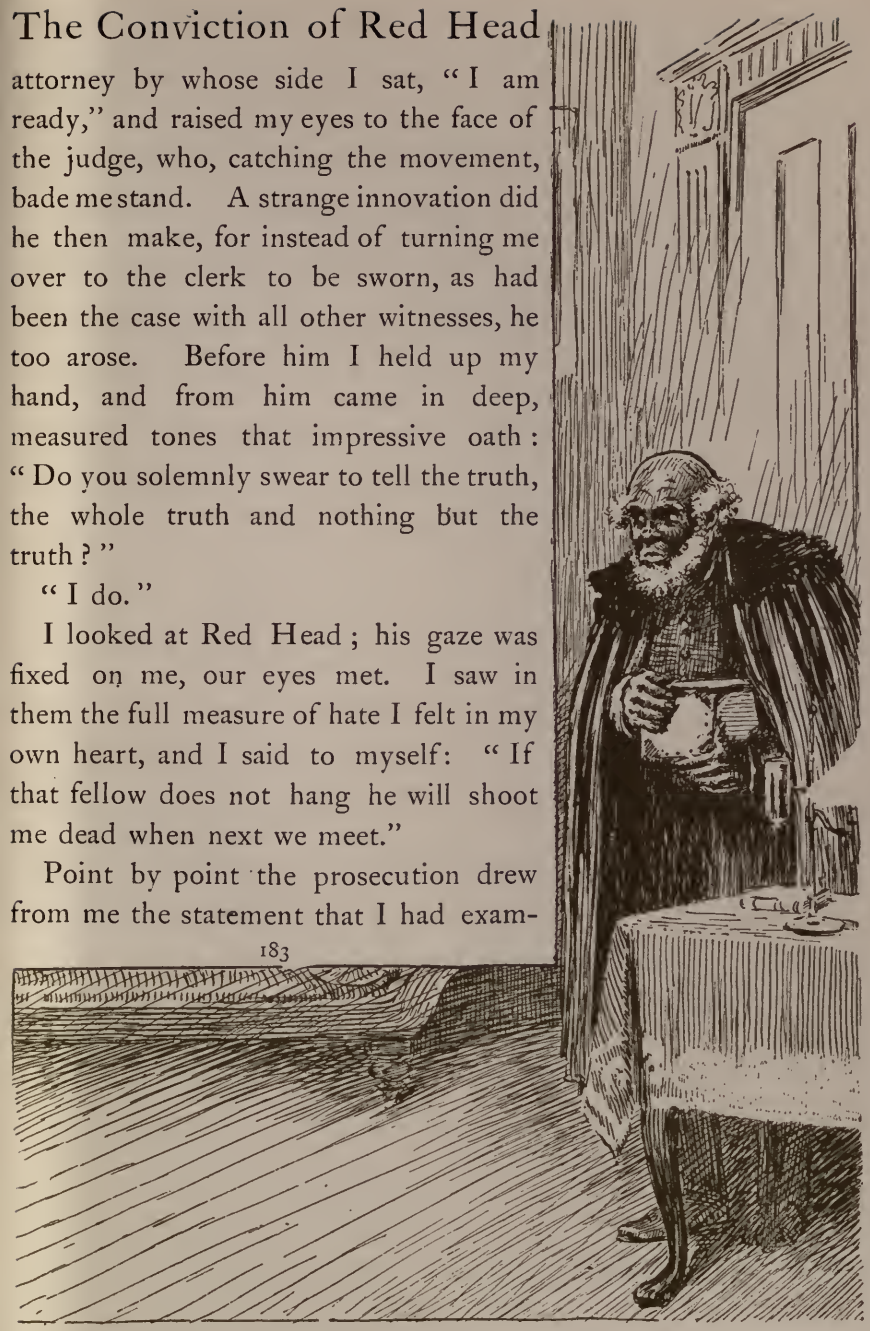
"*Go to Stringtown as the girl asks, Holcomb.*"—Page 165

attorney by whose side I sat, "I am ready," and raised my eyes to the face of the judge, who, catching the movement, bade me stand. A strange innovation did he then make, for instead of turning me over to the clerk to be sworn, as had been the case with all other witnesses, he too arose. Before him I held up my hand, and from him came in deep, measured tones that impressive oath: "Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"I do."

I looked at Red Head; his gaze was fixed on me, our eyes met. I saw in them the full measure of hate I felt in my own heart, and I said to myself: "If that fellow does not hang he will shoot me dead when next we meet."

Point by point the prosecution drew from me the statement that I had exam-



ined the suspected liquid for all known poisons, both inorganic and organic. Then I was led to the reactions of strychnine and to its location among the poisons. These I gave in detail, the particulars of which need not be repeated. Finally I was asked:

"Did you get those reactions from the substance tested?"

"I did."

"Have you specimens of the substance?"

"I have."

"Can you show the jury and the court the group test for alkaloids, and also the color reactions of strychnine?"

"I can."

"I ask, then, that Professor Drew be allowed to corroborate his testimony by experiments that will substantiate his word;" and on this point, after a legal battle with the attorneys for the defence,

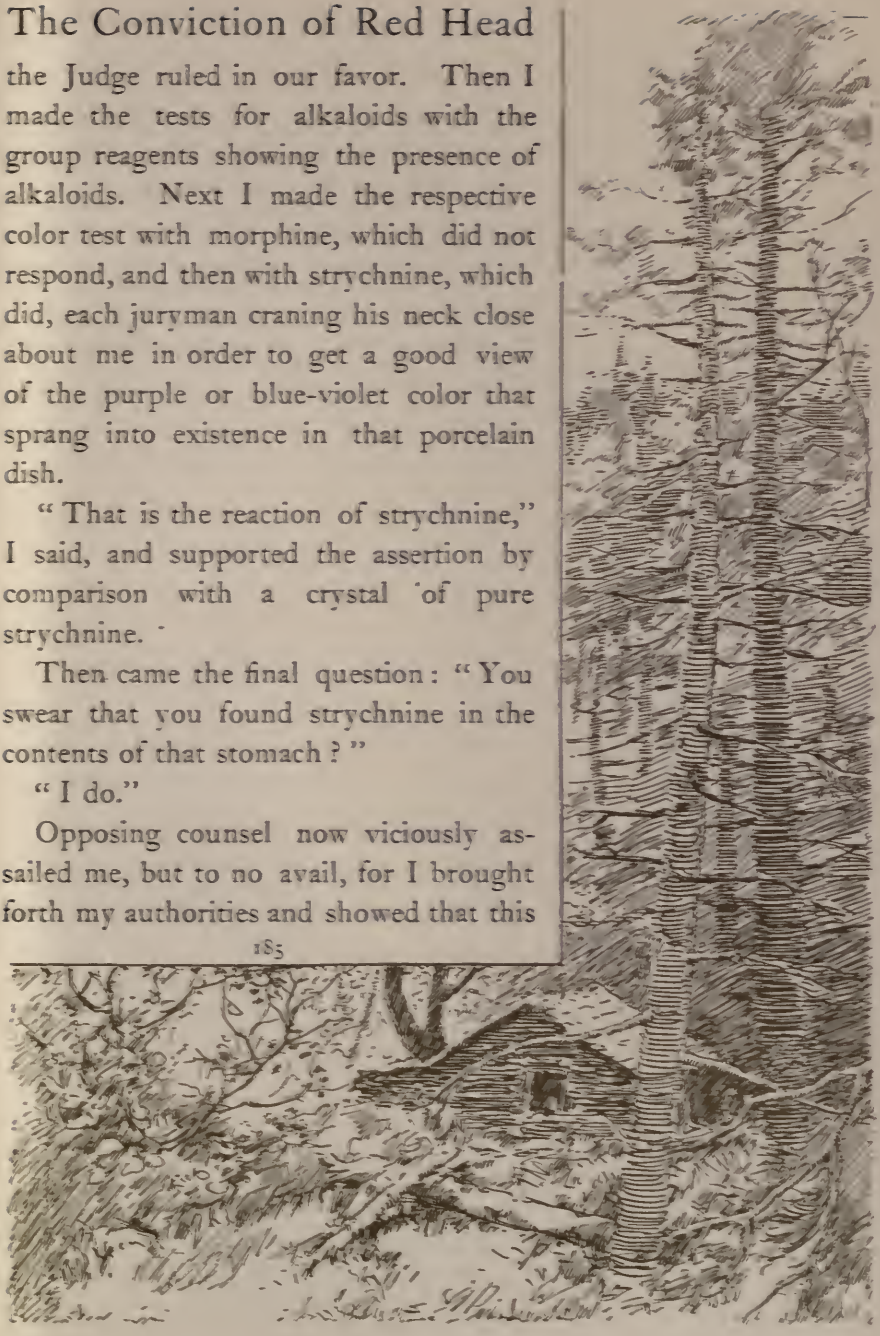
the Judge ruled in our favor. Then I made the tests for alkaloids with the group reagents showing the presence of alkaloids. Next I made the respective color test with morphine, which did not respond, and then with strychnine, which did, each juryman craning his neck close about me in order to get a good view of the purple or blue-violet color that sprang into existence in that porcelain dish.

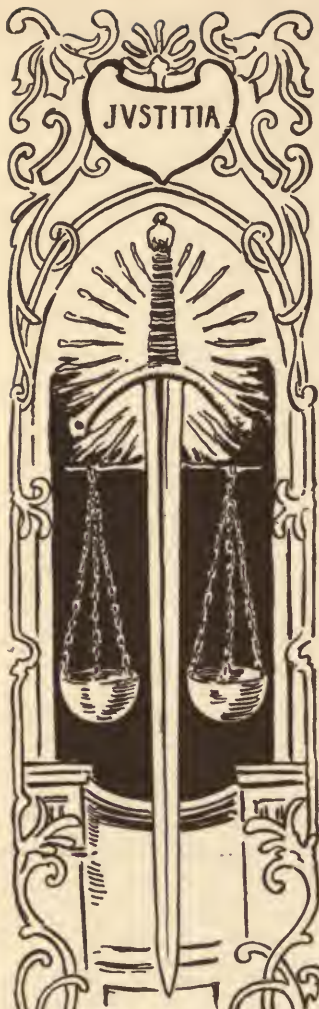
"That is the reaction of strychnine," I said, and supported the assertion by comparison with a crystal of pure strychnine.

Then came the final question: "You swear that you found strychnine in the contents of that stomach?"

"I do."

Opposing counsel now viciously assailed me, but to no avail, for I brought forth my authorities and showed that this





test was accepted by chemists of the world, and that all considered it conclusive; and at last, triumphant, I was dismissed.

Judge Elford now came down from his chair. No longer the personal friend of the widow's boy Samuel Drew, but a man intent on doing justice to one and all. Gone were his words of personal advice; justice held him bound to his trust. "Repeat the tests that I may see them close," he said. He stood over me, and side by side, both with strychnine and the suspected substance, I gave the test for alkaloids and also the color test for strychnine. Again I fancied that with one the color remained more permanent than with the other, but surely the violet-blue color came with both.

"Will no other substance produce that reaction?"

"None."

"This is a great world, there are many

countries in it. Do none of the thousands of forms of vegetation in these various lands act as does this substance?" He spoke into my very ear.

"Not to my knowledge. Science says 'No.'"

"Might not some mixture you have not tried turn purple and fade away, something free from strychnine?"

"No."

"The servants administered a dose of laudanum, and laudanum contains morphine. Is not morphine an alkaloid?"

"Yes, I have testified to the fact that I also obtained the color reaction of morphine, but that alkaloid will not give this reaction. Morphine is present here, so is strychnine."

"Could not morphine be associated with some unknown body in the stomach and then react in this way?"

"Impossible."

Red Head

"Have you tried this test with every plant, shrub, tree, leaf, root, bark, fruit, that grows?"

"No, sir!"

"Have you tried it with all that grow in Stringtown County?"

"No, sir!"

"Have you applied this test to every form of herb, fruit, vegetable, grass, leaf, that grows on the farm of the late Mr. Nordman?"

"No, sir!"

"Or in his dooryard?"

"No, sir!"

"Can you then, in the face of the fact that you have not tested these myriads of other substances, swear that this must be strychnine?"

"On the strength of these authorities"—I pointed to my books—"and on the fact that no other known bodies produce the same reactions, I can."

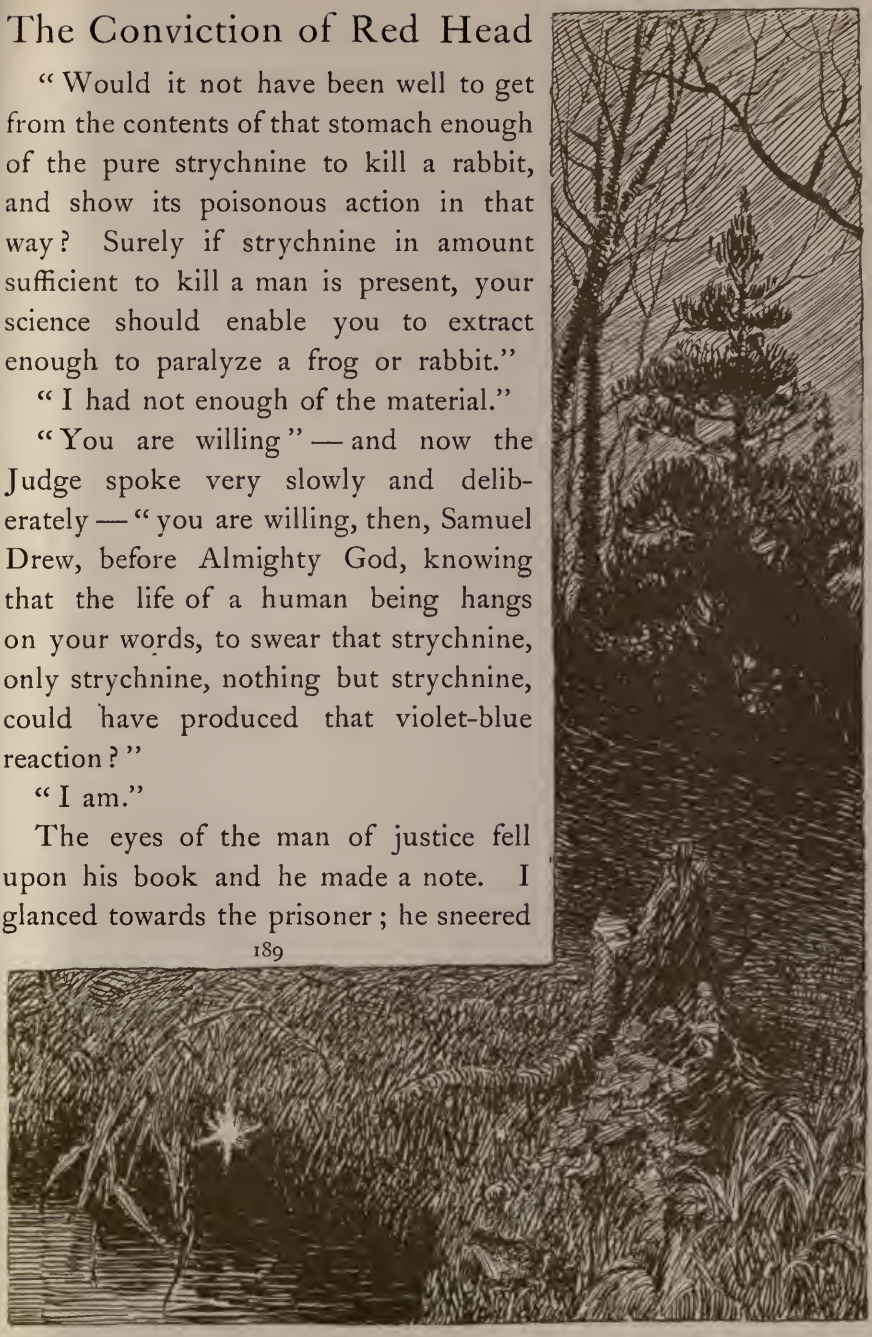
"Would it not have been well to get from the contents of that stomach enough of the pure strychnine to kill a rabbit, and show its poisonous action in that way? Surely if strychnine in amount sufficient to kill a man is present, your science should enable you to extract enough to paralyze a frog or rabbit."

"I had not enough of the material."

"You are willing" — and now the Judge spoke very slowly and deliberately — "you are willing, then, Samuel Drew, before Almighty God, knowing that the life of a human being hangs on your words, to swear that strychnine, only strychnine, nothing but strychnine, could have produced that violet-blue reaction?"

"I am."

The eyes of the man of justice fell upon his book and he made a note. I glanced towards the prisoner; he sneered



in return. Was it merely my fancy that, as if defying me to the last, he slowly raised his ears, a boyish trick with which he had been wont to drive me to a frenzy, in those long-gone-by school days? Then the Judge, very slowly, asked: "You prescribed laudanum and golden seal for the dead man. *You*." He emphasized the *you*. "Could not constituents of that prescription give a purple reaction?"

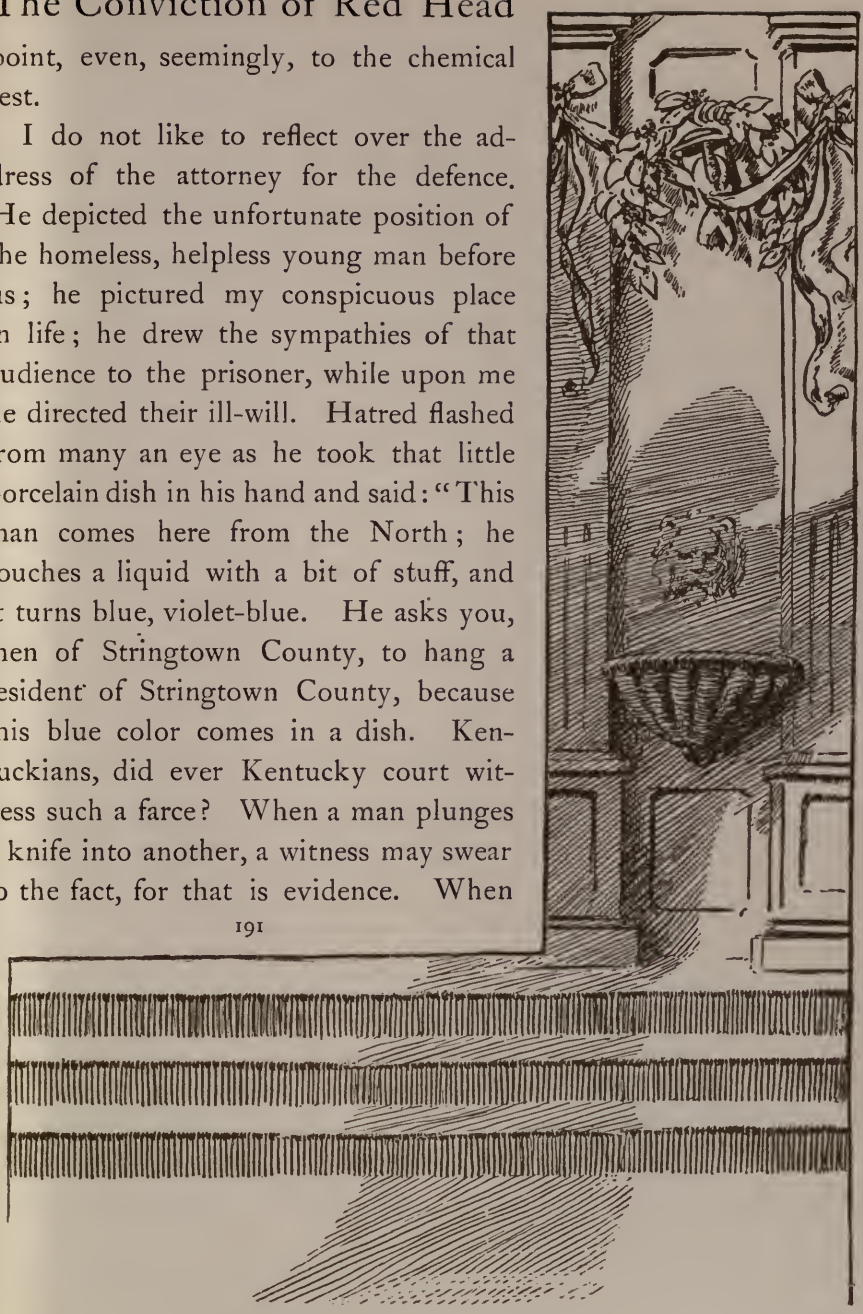
"No."

The Judge looked me in the eye.

"The witness may be excused," he said; then I let my gaze fall upon the floor. After the cross-examination, which did not in any way break the force of the evidence, the case was ready for the defence. The Commonwealth, waiving rebuttal, presented no expert evidence, and thus it went to the jury, the prosecution having proved every

point, even, seemingly, to the chemical test.

I do not like to reflect over the address of the attorney for the defence. He depicted the unfortunate position of the homeless, helpless young man before us; he pictured my conspicuous place in life; he drew the sympathies of that audience to the prisoner, while upon me he directed their ill-will. Hatred flashed from many an eye as he took that little porcelain dish in his hand and said: "This man comes here from the North; he touches a liquid with a bit of stuff, and it turns blue, violet-blue. He asks you, men of Stringtown County, to hang a resident of Stringtown County, because this blue color comes in a dish. Kentuckians, did ever Kentucky court witness such a farce? When a man plunges a knife into another, a witness may swear to the fact, for that is evidence. When

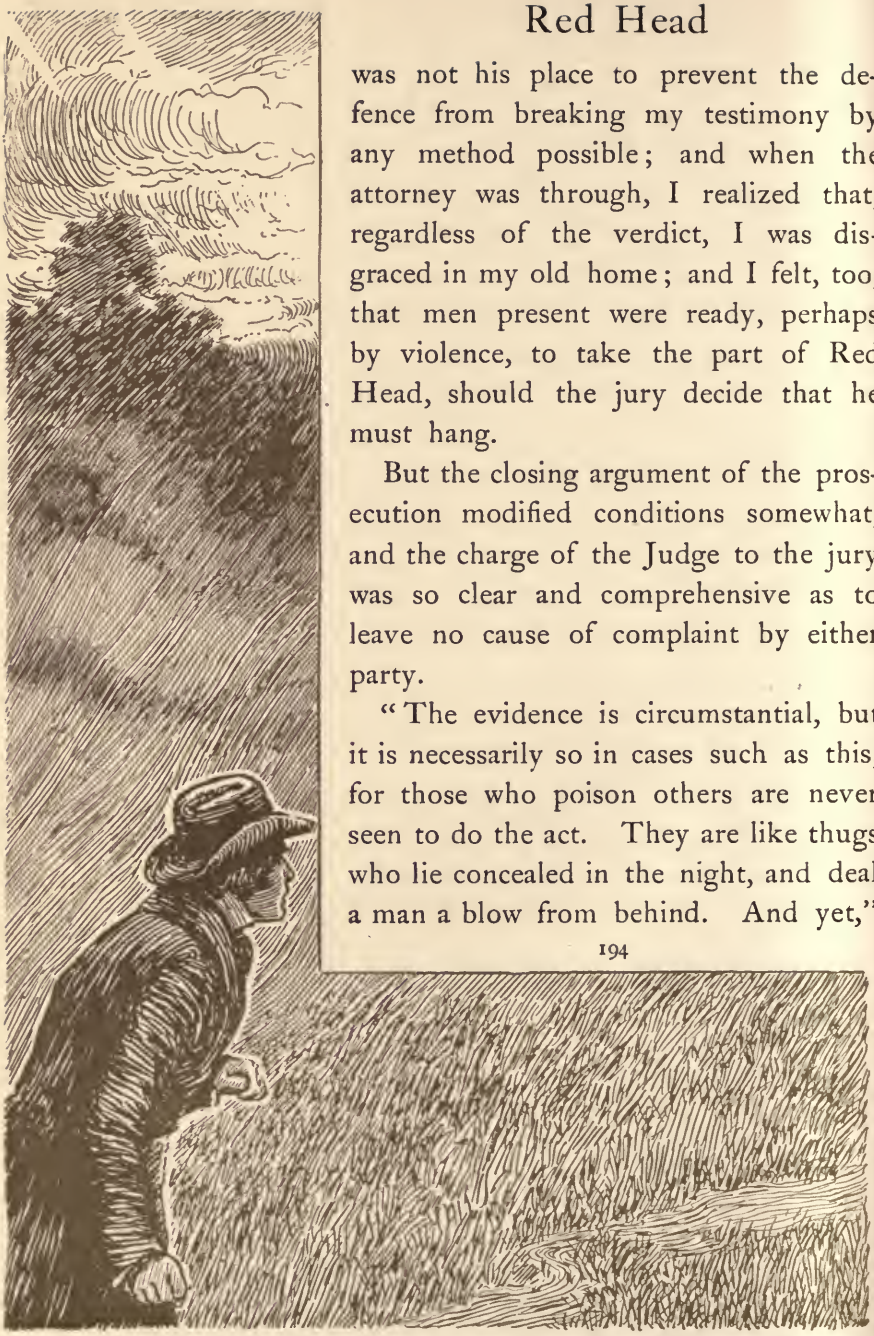


a witness swears that he saw the flash of the gun or pistol, and saw the victim fall, that is competent testimony; but when a man comes from afar and touches a dish with a glass rod and asks you to hang a Kentuckian because a spot of porcelain turns purple, that is audacious presumption, and is neither evidence nor testimony. Kentuckians, I swear by all that is holy that, if you become a party to this monstrous crime, a few dollars hereafter will hire a horde of hungry chemists from the North to show a color in a dish to whoever cares wrongly to gain an inheritance or wishes to hang an enemy. There will scarcely be time to keep the gallows oiled, so rapid will be the hangings in Kentucky. No rich man will rest in his grave with a whole stomach, for these ghouls will find chemists to swear that all who die in bed are poisoned."

Turning to me, he shook his finger in my face. "There sits a man who once lived in Stringtown, who should love his village and his State, but who comes back to us to give evidence to hang the companion of his youth. He and the prisoner were boys together; they sat in the same schoolhouse, played in the same schoolyard, lived in the same village. One is a *man*, the other a *chemist!* but I say in all earnestness that I would rather be the innocent Kentuckian who hangs — the *man*, my friends — than the renegade who returns from the North to give testimony such as this against one of our fellow-citizens!"

The attack was vicious, and I realized that his words could move men to violence had no violence been previously contemplated.

Why did Judge Elford allow this personal attack? some may ask. It



was not his place to prevent the defence from breaking my testimony by any method possible; and when the attorney was through, I realized that, regardless of the verdict, I was disgraced in my old home; and I felt, too, that men present were ready, perhaps by violence, to take the part of Red Head, should the jury decide that he must hang.

But the closing argument of the prosecution modified conditions somewhat, and the charge of the Judge to the jury was so clear and comprehensive as to leave no cause of complaint by either party.

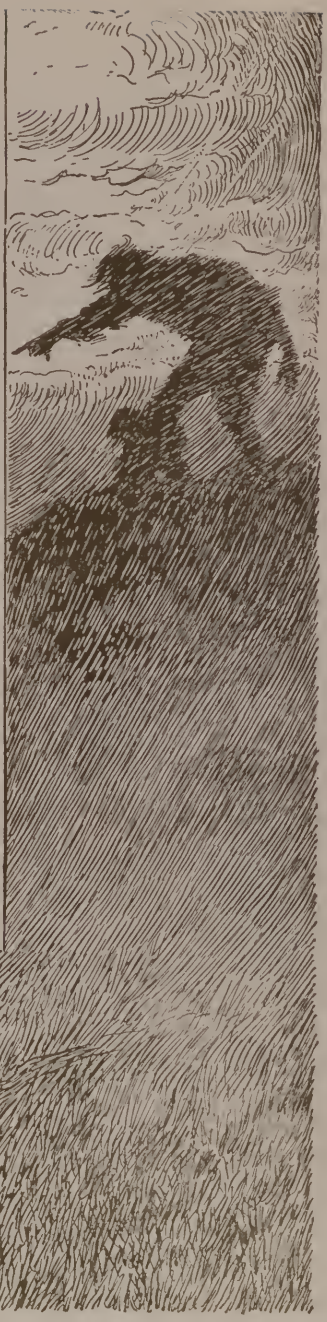
"The evidence is circumstantial, but it is necessarily so in cases such as this, for those who poison others are never seen to do the act. They are like thugs who lie concealed in the night, and deal a man a blow from behind. And yet,"

he added, "not only must the jury be convinced beyond a doubt that the prisoner bought the strychnine, but that strychnine was in the stomach, and that the prisoner administered it. If such has been proved by the testimony offered, the prisoner is as much subject to the severest penalty of the law as though he had fired a bullet into the victim."

Much more did this learned man say to those who held the life of the prisoner in their hands. Coolly, impartially, clearly, was the charge given. After the Judge concluded, the jury retired, and then we sat awaiting their return — sat until the evening's shadows were nearly on us.

. . . . . .

No longer an object of attention, I changed my place to one less conspicuous. I drew my chair back into a

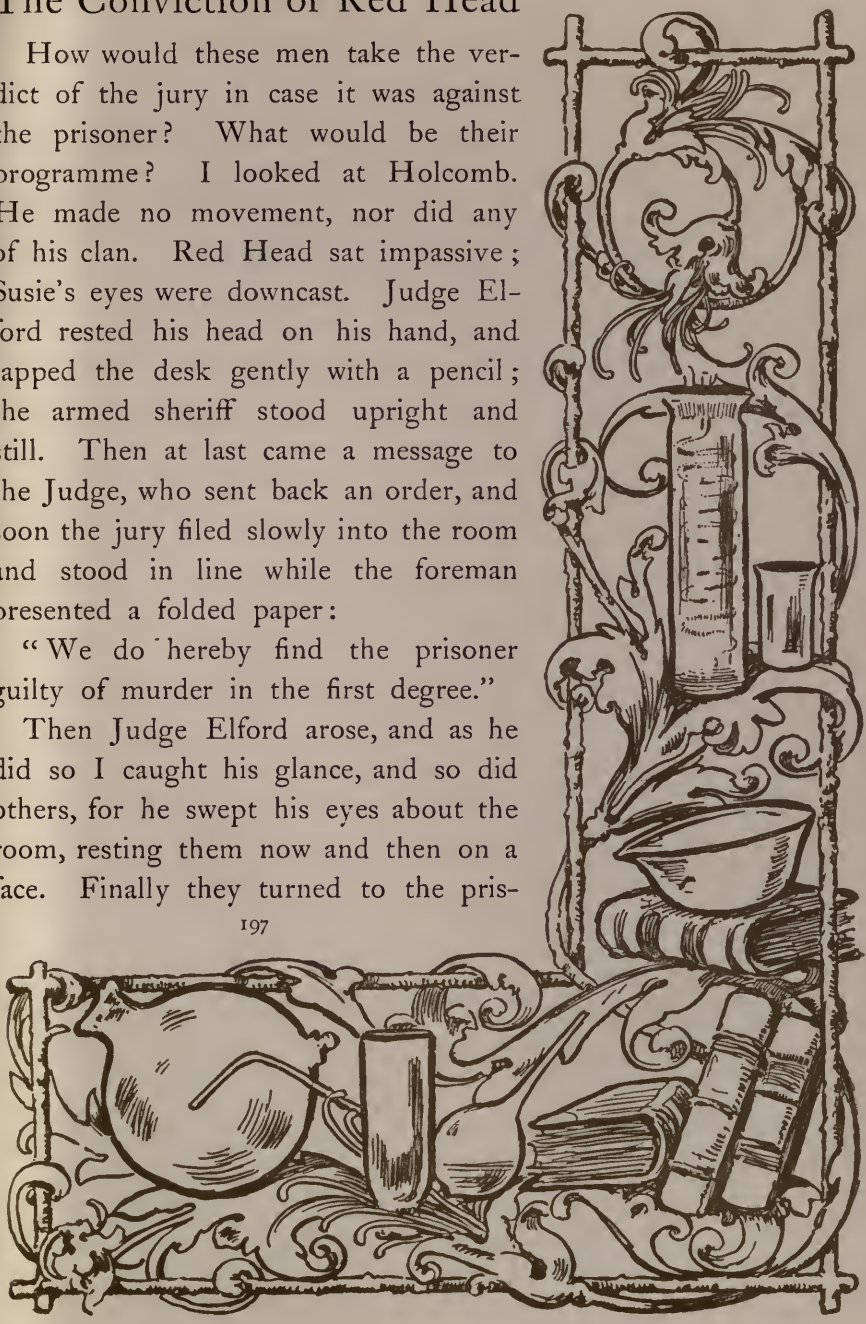


corner made by the witness-box and the prisoner's raised platform, and from that position found that I could observe the entire room. To my left sat the Judge, to my right, in the second row of spectators, sat Susie, and directly in front of me the prisoner. By his side stood the sheriff, with exposed pistols ready for a touch, and beyond these two, nearly in line with them, sat old man Holcomb amid his men from the mountains. When I looked at Red Head, I could also see the sheriff and Holcomb, for they were all in a line and covered by the same field of vision. Buzzing voices broke now upon the ear, for during the recess the tongues of the men of Stringtown and of Stringtown County were loosed. I fancied, too, that many coats that had been buttoned previously were now open, but that may have been my fancy.

How would these men take the verdict of the jury in case it was against the prisoner? What would be their programme? I looked at Holcomb. He made no movement, nor did any of his clan. Red Head sat impassive; Susie's eyes were downcast. Judge Elford rested his head on his hand, and tapped the desk gently with a pencil; the armed sheriff stood upright and still. Then at last came a message to the Judge, who sent back an order, and soon the jury filed slowly into the room and stood in line while the foreman presented a folded paper:

"We do hereby find the prisoner guilty of murder in the first degree."

Then Judge Elford arose, and as he did so I caught his glance, and so did others, for he swept his eyes about the room, resting them now and then on a face. Finally they turned to the pris-



oner. "Stand up, prisoner!" and Red Head arose.

Slowly, distinctly, the Judge pronounced the sentence of death. Had I been the murderer the message could not have affected or shocked me more. Not a muscle did Red Head move, not a tremor in his frame, no evidence of fear or shame did he exhibit. And when the words were spoken, "I do hereby sentence you to be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your soul!" he gave no show of emotion. But I saw him glance now toward old Holcomb, who then awkwardly arose, a picturesque figure. Amid intense silence he addressed the Judge.

CHAPTER XX

THE VISION OF RED HEAD

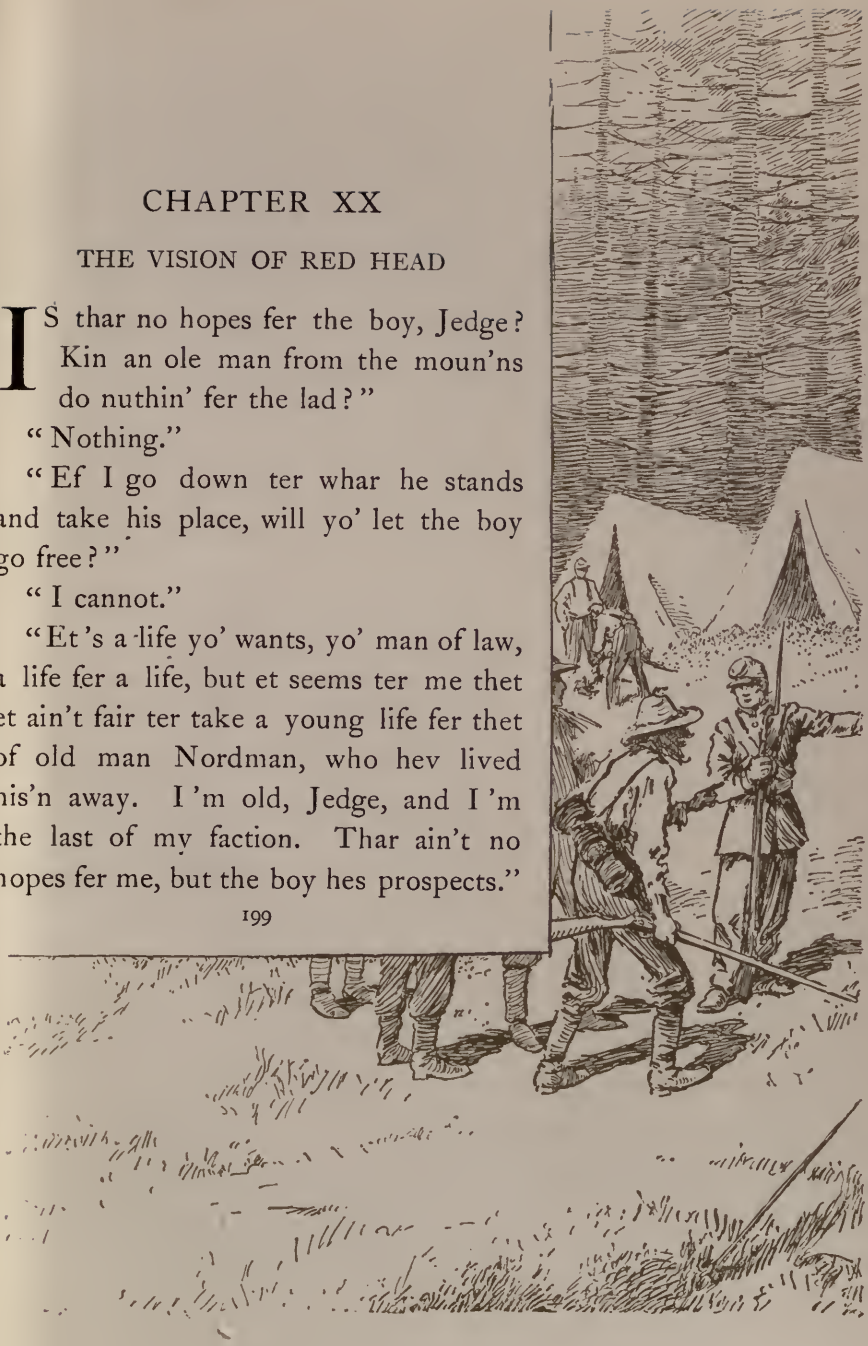
"IS thar no hopes fer the boy, Jedge? Kin an ole man from the moun'ns do nuthin' fer the lad?"

"Nothing."

"Ef I go down ter whar he stands and take his place, will yo' let the boy go free?"

"I cannot."

"Et 's a life yo' wants, yo' man of law, a life fer a life, but et seems ter me thet et ain't fair ter take a young life fer thet of old man Nordman, who hev lived his'n away. I 'm old, Jedge, and I 'm the last of my faction. Thar ain't no hopes fer me, but the boy hes prospects."



The Judge shook his head.

At this point Red Head held up his hand. "Jedge, kin I ask Holcomb a question?"

"Certainly."

Turning his gaze on the mountaineer, Red Head said: "Et's been a mighty long time sence I saw the old cabin, Holcomb, but the reason wa'n't 'cause I war afeard of no one."

"The cabin's nigh about rotted down, Red."

"How's thet rose-bush befo' the door?"

"Et's thar yit. I waited fer yo' ter come and stand up fer the white, but yo' did n't come."

"Hev you been over ter the buryin' ground of late?"

"Yes. The day befo' I started fer Stringtown I went out ter say good-bye ter all the folks livin' and dead. Thet's

a mighty long row of Red Heads lyin' next the No'th line."

"Thar 's jest es long a row of Holcombs next the South line," was Red Head's reply. Then in a lower voice, he asked: "How 'bout the old witch?"

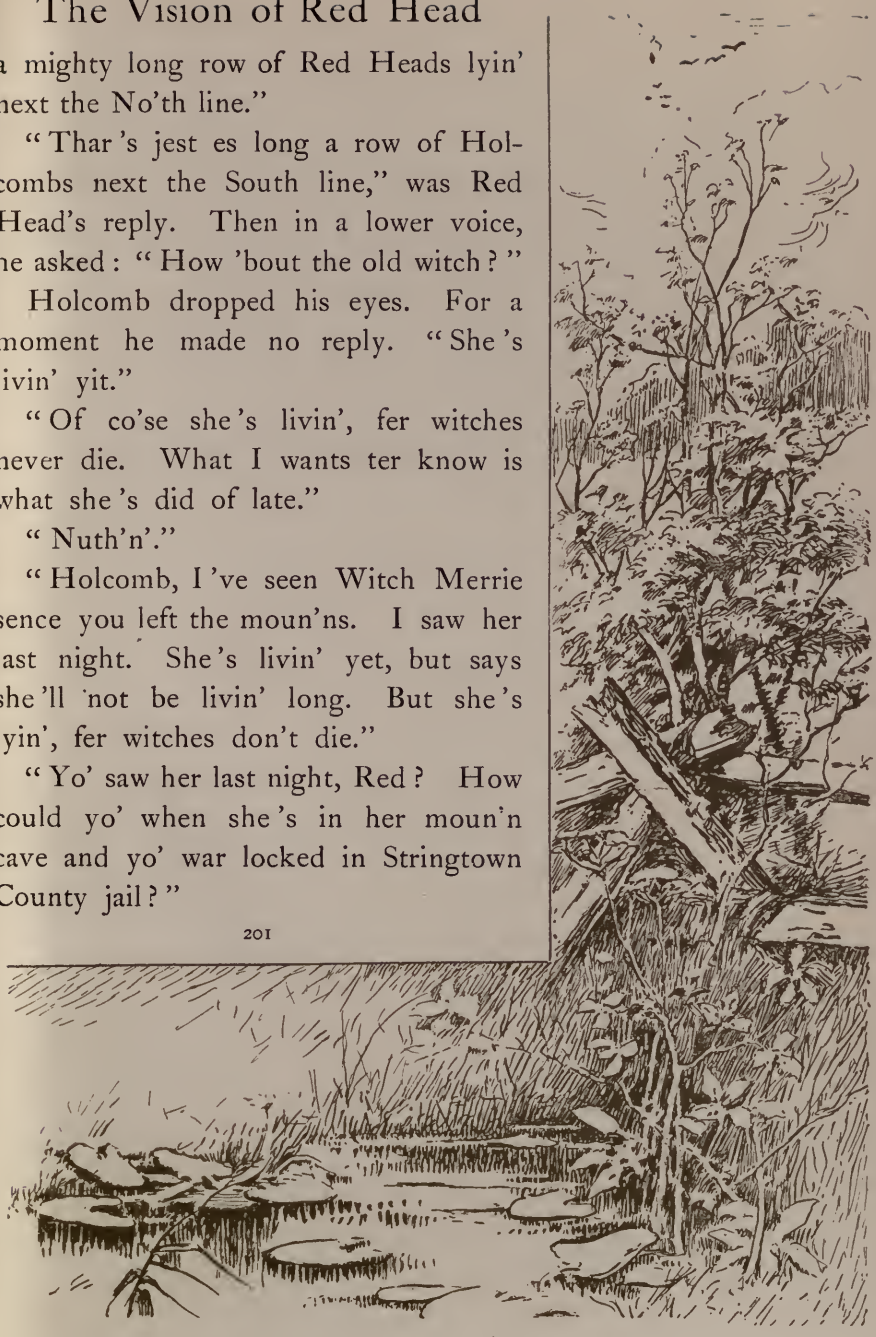
Holcomb dropped his eyes. For a moment he made no reply. "She 's livin' yit."

"Of co'se she 's livin', fer witches never die. What I wants ter know is what she 's did of late."

"Nuth'n'."

"Holcomb, I 've seen Witch Merrie sence you left the moun'ns. I saw her last night. She 's livin' yet, but says she 'll not be livin' long. But she 's lyin', fer witches don't die."

"Yo' saw her last night, Red? How could yo' when she 's in her moun'n cave and yo' war locked in Stringtown County jail?"



"Witches kin go past doahs what's locked, er through brick walls, Holcomb. Yo' knows es much. I don't know how she got in, but when I op'ned my eyes long 'bout midnight, thar she stood. Lord, Holcomb, but she war wrinkled and bent. Pow'ful slow she moved ter whar I lay and put her face close ter mine. It war dark, but I saw her like es ef et war day. 'Ha, ha!' she laughed; 'and so the red and white roses are ter thorn each other ter the last! ha, ha!' Et made me shiver, Holcomb."

"What did she mean, Red?"

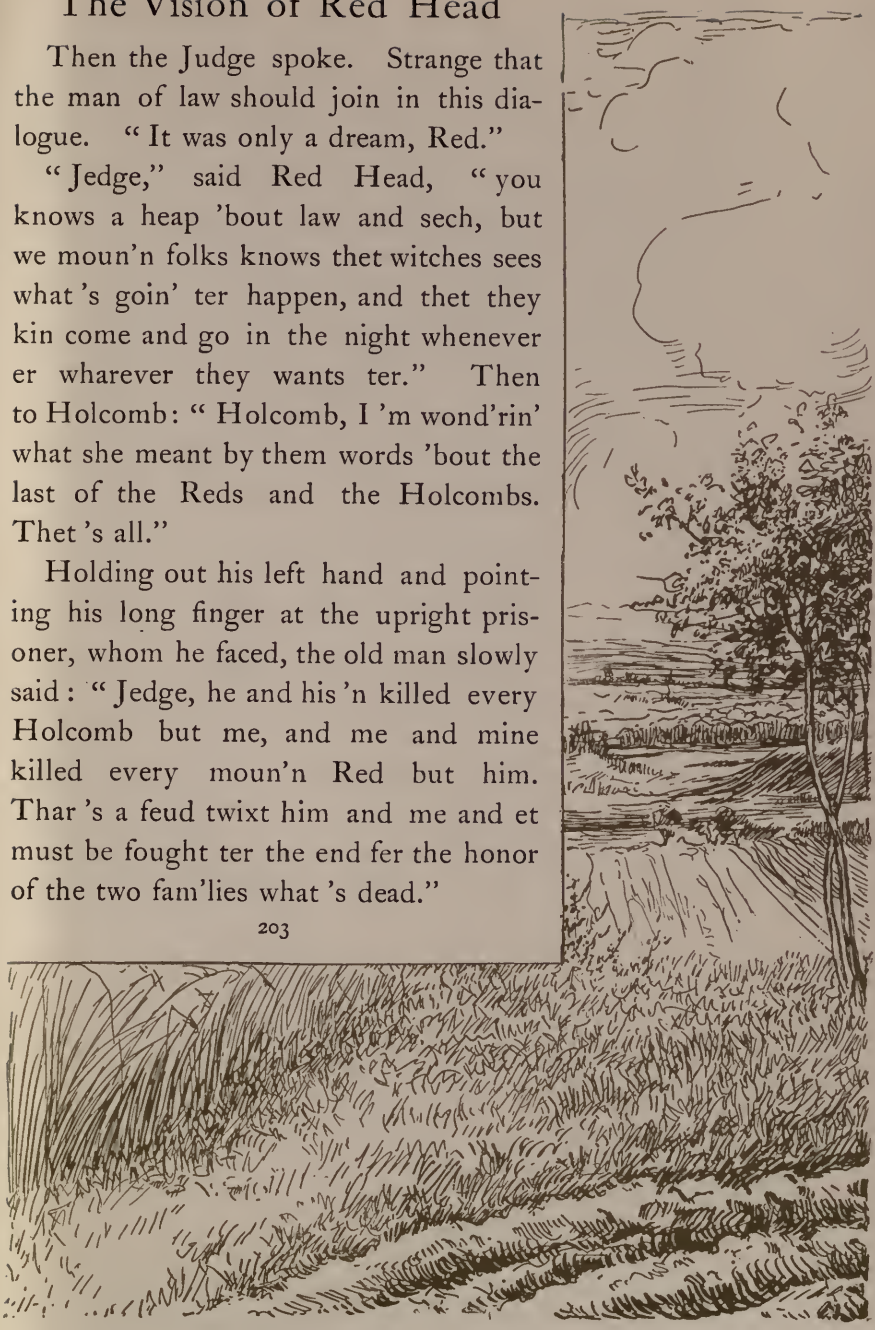
"I don't know. 'Go back, old Witch Merrie,' I said, 'back ter yer cave.' 'Ha, ha!' she laughed; 'to-morrow 'll see th' last of the Reds and the Holcombs.' Et made me shiver, Holcomb, and I shet my eyes. When I op'ned 'em she war gone."

THE right hand of the old man suddenly drew a pistol. — Page 204

Then the Judge spoke. Strange that the man of law should join in this dialogue. "It was only a dream, Red."

"Jedge," said Red Head, "you knows a heap 'bout law and sech, but we moun'n folks knows thet witches sees what 's goin' ter happen, and thet they kin come and go in the night whenever er wharever they wants ter." Then to Holcomb: "Holcomb, I 'm wond'rin' what she meant by them words 'bout the last of the Reds and the Holcombs. Thet 's all."

Holding out his left hand and pointing his long finger at the upright prisoner, whom he faced, the old man slowly said: "Jedge, he and his 'n killed every Holcomb but me, and me and mine killed every moun'n Red but him. Thar 's a feud twixt him and me and et must be fought ter the end fer the honor of the two fam'lies what 's dead."

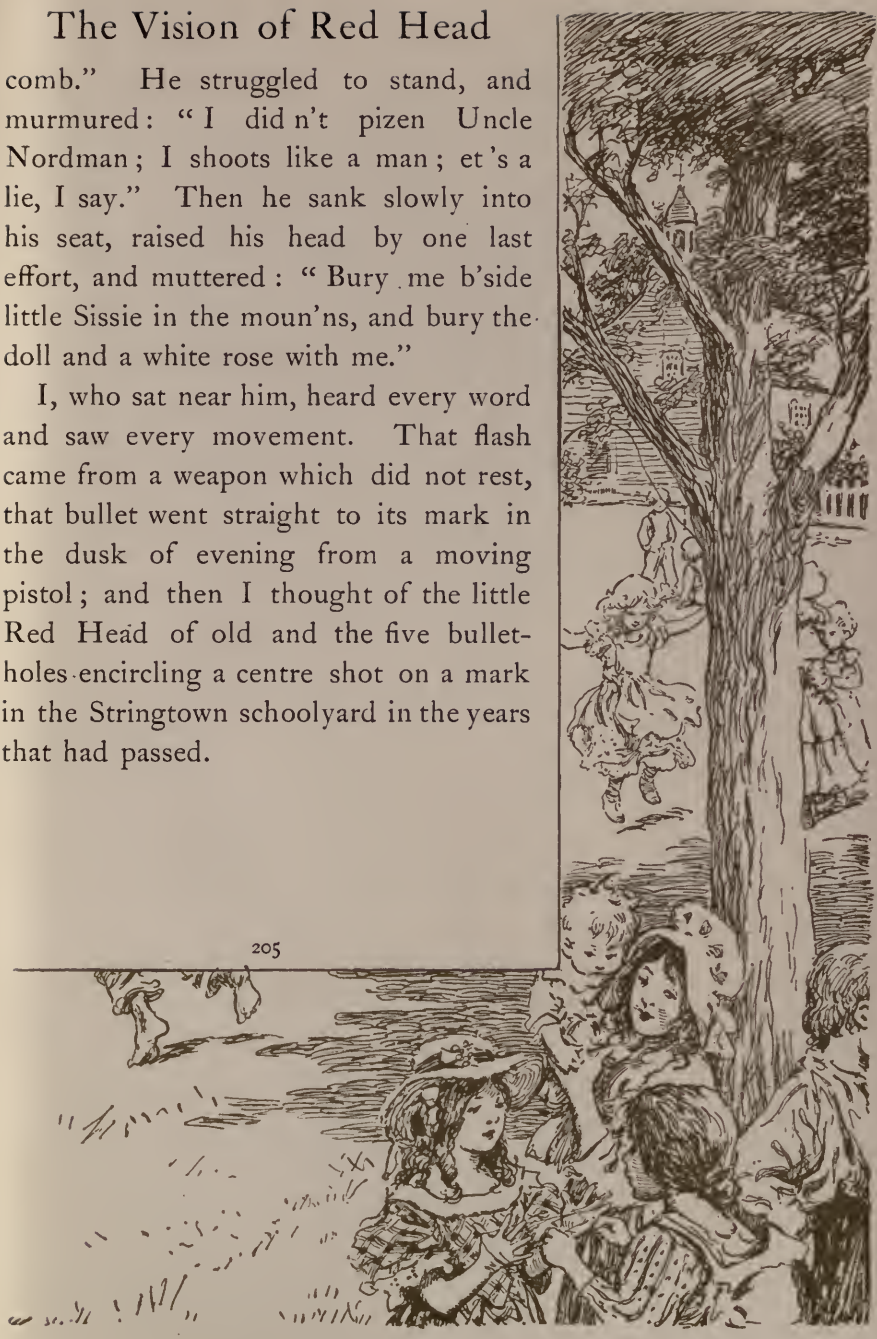


Then came a movement so quick that I, who had both Holcomb and the prisoner in line, hardly caught its import before the deed was done. The right hand of the old man suddenly drew a pistol from some unseen pocket, and with one sweep of the arm discharged it full into the chest of Red Head, who, with eye close fixed on the speaker, as that movement was begun, caught one of the weapons from out the belt of the sheriff. Younger, quicker, and more expert, his hand was not less sure; the two flashes lighted the room as if but one, the two reports were simultaneous.

A drop of blood sprang into view, just in the centre of the forehead of the old man, who fell lifeless into the arms of his companions. The prisoner stood upright; his face for once turned white, his lips moved slowly, and as by a mighty effort, he said: "The feud is over, Hol-

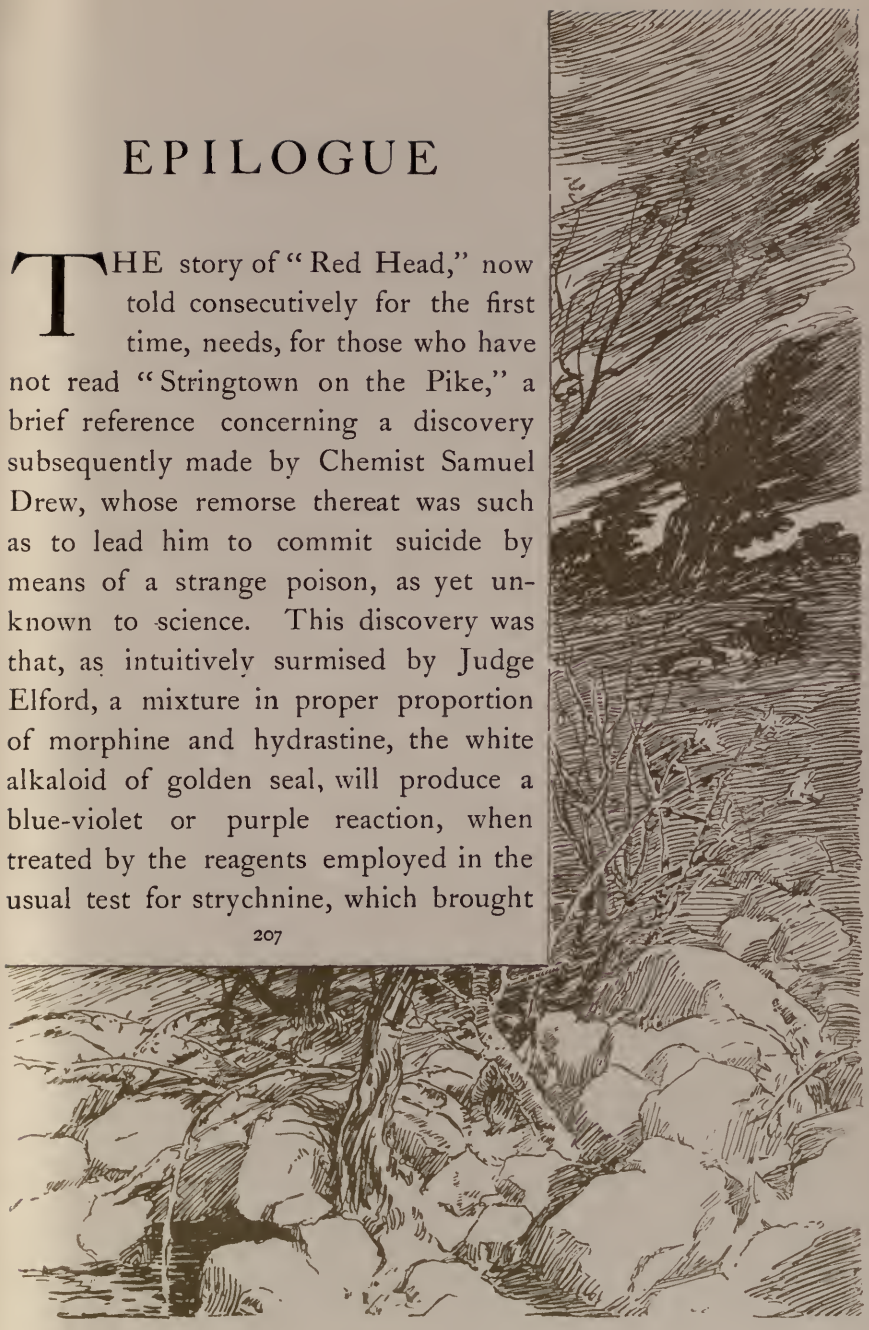
comb." He struggled to stand, and murmured: "I did n't pizen Uncle Nordman; I shoots like a man; et 's a lie, I say." Then he sank slowly into his seat, raised his head by one last effort, and muttered: "Bury me b'side little Sissie in the moun'ns, and bury the doll and a white rose with me."

I, who sat near him, heard every word and saw every movement. That flash came from a weapon which did not rest, that bullet went straight to its mark in the dusk of evening from a moving pistol; and then I thought of the little Red Head of old and the five bullet-holes encircling a centre shot on a mark in the Stringtown schoolyard in the years that had passed.



EPILOGUE

THE story of "Red Head," now told consecutively for the first time, needs, for those who have not read "Stringtown on the Pike," a brief reference concerning a discovery subsequently made by Chemist Samuel Drew, whose remorse thereat was such as to lead him to commit suicide by means of a strange poison, as yet unknown to science. This discovery was that, as intuitively surmised by Judge Elford, a mixture in proper proportion of morphine and hydrastine, the white alkaloid of golden seal, will produce a blue-violet or purple reaction, when treated by the reagents employed in the usual test for strychnine, which brought



about the conviction of Red Head. This in itself might not have been sufficient to lead him to this fatal step, had it not been for the fact that his own prescription given Mr. Nordman, as related in these pages, had supplied these two substances. Thus, not only had Professor Drew, by reason of faulty testimony, been instrumental in convicting an innocent man, but he had also served the lamentable part of supplying the compromising compound on which his expert testimony rested. Brooding over this wrong, which might have been evaded had the faction of far-seeing Judge Elford been taken, finally led Professor Drew to seek an early death by the art of the profession in which he was an expert.