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Who they were, and whence they came, none can say. The mountains where they found their home – their long home – keep silence. The stars, that they knew, look down upon their graves and make no sign. Their memory, unless in some fine and subtle way lingering in the mystery, the pervasive melancholy, the vaguely troublous forecast and retrospect which possess the mind in contemplating this sequestered spot, unhallowed save by the sense of a common humanity, has faded from the earth. None might know that they had ever lived but for a dim tradition associating them with the ancient forgotten peoples of this old hemisphere of ours that we are wont to deem so new. For this is one of the strange burial-grounds of the “pygmy dwellers” of Tennessee; prehistoric, it is held, an extinct diminutive race; only Aztec children, others surmise, of a uniform age and size, buried apart from their kindred, for some unimagined, never-to-be-explained reason; and a more prosaic opinion contends that the curious stone sepulchres contain merely infant relics of the Cherokee Indian. All I know is, here they rest, awaiting that supreme moment when this mortality shall put on immortality, and meanwhile in the solemn environment of the Great Smoky Mountains the “Leetle People” sleep well.

Quiet neighbors all these years have they been. So quiet! almost forgotten. In fact, the nearest mountaineers start, with a dazed look, at a question concerning them, then become mysterious, with that superstitious, speculative gleam in the eye as of one who knows much of uncanny lore, but is shy to recount.

“I do declar’ I never war so set back in my life ez I felt whenst that thar valley man jes’ upped an’ axed me ’bout’n them thar Leetle Stranger People buried yander on the rise,” declared Stephen Yates, one July evening, as he stood leaning on his rifle before the door of his cabin in the cove. His horse, reeking and blown, still saddled, bore a deer, newly slain, unprotected by the game-laws, and the old hounds, panting and muddy from the chase, lay around the doorstep.

A young woman of twenty, perhaps, with a pale oval face and dark hair, and serene dark gray eyes, was on the rickety porch, leaning upon a rude shelf that served also as a balustrade; she had a cedar piggin in her hand, and the cow was lowing at the bars. On the doorstep there sat a rotund and

stalwart, but preternaturally solemn young person, who now and again, with a corrugated countenance, gnashed his gums. His time and energies were expended in that trying occupation known as “cuttin’ yer teeth,” an acquisition which he would some day value more highly than now. He sought, as far as an abnormally developed craft might compass, to force, by many an infant wile, his elders to share his woes, and it was with a distinctly fallen countenance that his father hearkened to his mother’s parenthetical request to “’bide hyar an’ company leetle Moses whilst I be a-milkin’ the cow.”

Yates did not refuse, although a braver man might have quailed. It was his hard fate to regard leetle Moses as a supreme fetich, and to worship him with as unrequited an idolatry as ever was lavished on the great god Dagon. He only sought to gain time, and continued his account of the conversation:

“He ’lowed ef he hed knowed afore ez they war buried hyar, he’d hev kem a hunderd mile jes’ ter view the spot,” he said, his eye kindling with a recollection of the “valley man’s” enthusiasm.

His wife hardly entered into it at second-hand. She regarded him with a slow wonderment stealing over her face.

“War-war he ’quainted with enny of ’em in thar lifetime?” she demanded, hesitating, but seeking to solve the valley man’s reason – “them Leetle Stranger People?”

“Great Gosh! Adelaide!” Yates exclaimed, irritably, contemptuous all at once of the limitations of her standpoint. “Ye stay cooped up hyar ’sociatin’ with nobody but leetle Mose till ye hev furgot every durned thing ye ever knowed. The Leetle People hev been dead so long ago nobody ’members ’em – not even old man Peake, an’ he air a hunderd an’ ten year old – ef he ain’t lyin,’” he added, cautiously.

Her face flushed. There was fire in her serene eyes, like a flare of sunset in the placid depths of a lake. “I’m willin’ ter ’bide along o’ leetle Mose,” she retorted. “I never expect ter see no better company ’n leetle Mose ter the las’ day I live, an’ I never *did* see none!”

Yates shifted his weight uncertainly upon his other foot, and surveyed with a casual glance the wide landscape. The sense of supersedure was sharp at the moment. He had been in his day a great man in her estimation, and now “leetle Mose,” with his surly dejection, with only a tooth or two – and with these he would have gladly dispensed – with his uncertain gait and his pigeon-toes and his nearly bald head, was a greater man still. He and his

mother were a close corporation, but, for the sake of his own fealty to the domestic Dagon, Steve Yates forgave them both. He went on presently:

“The valley man hed jes’ hearn tell ez them Leetle People war buried hyarabout. I never seen a man so streck of a heap ez he war, an’ he axed me fool questions till I felt plumb cur’ous a-talkin’ ’bout them Leetle Stranger People buried thar on the rise.” Once more he turned toward the slope that embarrassed, half-laughing glance – in which, however, there was no mirth – betokening a spirit ill at ease, and secretly shrinking from some uncanny, irksome fear.

Her eyes mechanically followed his to the purple slope so still under the crimson sky. Higher up, the mountain, shielded by the shadow of its own crags from this reflection of the west, showed a dark green shade of an indescribable depth and richness of tone, never merging into dusky indefiniteness. Through a gap in the range to the east were visible the infinite blue distances of the Great Smoky peaks, their color here and there idealized by the far-away glammers of sunset to an exquisite roseate hue, or a crystalline and perfect amethyst against the amber horizon. Down the clifty gorge – its walls of solid sandstone, cloven to the bare heart of the range by the fierce momentum of the waters – the bounding river came. One mad leap presented the glittering splendors of a glassy-green cataract, and in its elastic spray an elusive rainbow lurked. Its voice was like that of one crying in the wilderness, so far might its eloquent iteration be heard. The Little People, in their day, might have given ear to its message and pondered on the untranslated tidings, but now they did not heed.

Only the dwellers in the mountaineer’s cabin hard by listened at times to the pulsing rhythm, as alive as the metre of a great poem; and, again, in duller mood, its sound was but as silence to those who cared not to hear. The dark little house seemed small and solitary and transitory here among the massive, enduring mountains, beside the majestic flow of the waters, and the rail-fence enclosed the minimum of space from the great unpeopled wilds.

“I ’lowed ter him they never walked,” Yates said, presently. “Ez fur ez I know, they hain’t been seen, nor none o’ ’em set out ter walk, sence they war put thar fust. Nobody ez I know purfesses ter hev seen enny o’ the Stranger People’s harnts.”

He repeated this with simplicity, evidently desirous of giving the pygmy dwellers their bounden due.

“I ’lowed ter him,” he continued, “ez folks hed let them be, an’ they hed

let the mounting folks be. Nobody wanted sech cur'ous harnts ez folks o' thar size ter git ter walkin' at this late day."

There was a vague chill in the air – or was it in the moral atmosphere?

"What be *he* a-vagrantin' round fur, inquirin' 'bout them as be dead an' done with the livin' long ago?" she demanded, a touch of acerbity in her tone and a restless look in her eyes.

"He 'lows ez he's jes' kem hyar along o' Leonard Rhodes ez be a'lectioneerin' fur floater fur the Legislatur'. An' him an' Rhodes air frien's, an' Rhodes hev got some lan' in this county ez hev got one o' them Injun mounds on it, an' he hev let this frien' o' his hev men ter dig an' open it ter see what they could find. I seen 'em arter it ter-day; this hyar man 'peared mighty nigh ez excited ez a Juny-bug; I noticed he never dug none, though, hisse'f."

He paused for a moment, chewing hard on his quid of tobacco; then he slowly laughed. "The folks he hed hired ter dig 'lowed he war teched in the head, but he 'peared sorter sensible ter me – never teched a spade, an' 'twar a hot day."

"What did they find?" asked his wife, breathlessly.

"Dirt," Yates said, with an iconoclastic laugh, "a plenty of it. He 'peared toler'ble disapp'inted till he hearn 'bout the Stranger People's buryin'-groun'. Adelaide" – he raised his voice suddenly – "that thar idjit o' a man, he 'lows ez them Leetle People warn't grown folks at all – jes' chil'n; I tried ter tell the fool better – jes' leetle chil'n!"

He glanced quickly at her, as if prepared for the shock of surprise which must be elicited by this onslaught upon the faith of a whole community. Somehow, as she again fastened her eyes on the sombre declivity, her face wore the look of one whose secret thought is revealed in words. In the few years that she had lived here, a stranger herself, in some sort – not accustomed, as was her husband, to a lifelong vicinage to the pygmy burial-ground – she had developed no receptivity to that uncanny idea of a race of dwarfs. Always as children she had thought of the Little People; she had made no effort to reconcile this theory with the strange fact that no similar sarcophagi, enclosing larger frames, were known of far or near; she found no incongruity in the idea that infants should have been thus segregated in death from all their kindred; it seemed a meet resting-place for youth and innocence, thus apart from all others. They were children – only children; all asleep; asleep and resting! With the strange fascination that the spot and its unique tradition exerted upon her, she would glance thither from time to time throughout the day, pausing at her task to follow the shadow of

the clouds sweeping over the purple slope, and to listen to the whir of bees in the still noon amongst the sweet fern and to the call of the glad birds. When she sang in fitful fragments a crooning lullaby to her own child, who had made all childhood doubly dear and doubly sacred to her heart, she was wont to watch pensively the tender glow of evening reddening there, so soft, so brilliant, so promissory of the splendid days to come that it needs must suggest that supernal dawn when the Little People should all rise to greet the rising sun that they had seen set for the last time so long ago. In bright, slanting rows, as swift, as ethereal, as dazzling as the morning mist transfigured by the sun's rays – with her prophetic eyes she could behold them, rank after rank, coming down the slope in this radiant guise; meanwhile they slept as securely as her child slept in her arms, their waking as certain.

The picture recurred to her thoughts at the moment. “They will all rise before we-uns at the jedgmint-day,” she said, her far-seeing gray eyes clear and crystalline upon the unmarked place.

“Laws-a-massy, Adelaide!” cried her husband, in a tone of expostulation and alarm, with a quick glance over his shoulder, “what ails ye ter say sech ez that – ez ef it war gospel sure?”

Her eyes came back reluctantly to him; the question had jarred upon her reverie. “Ye air ’bleeged ter know that,” she retorted, with a slighting manner. “The sun strikes through the gap an’ teches the Leetle People’s buryin’-groun’ a full haffen hour an’ better afore it reaches the graveyard o’ the mounting folks down thar in the shadder o’ the range.”

He listened ponderingly to this logic, his chin resting upon the muzzle of his rifle; then, with a noiseless shifting of his posture, he looked again with a cautious gesture over his shoulder. He was a hardy hunter, of a vigorous physique and but scantily acquainted with fear, but this eerie idea of a thousand or so adult pygmy Tennesseans astir on the last day, forestalling the familiar mountain neighbors, robbed immortality for the moment of its wonted prestige.

The oppressive influence even laid hold on his strong frame, and he extended one powerful arm at full length, with a futile effort to yawn.

“G’long, Adelaide! G’long an’ milk the cow!” he exclaimed, with the irritation that was always apparent in his manner when perplexity seized upon his brain – a good organ of its kind, but working best in the clear air of out-of-door contemplation. He was a man of sound common-sense, but with no endowment for furtive speculation, and purblind gropings, and

tenuous deductions from flimsy premises. He heaved a great sigh of relief to remember the cow – the good, homely cow – at the bars.

Adelaide had slowly taken up the piggin. “Ye hain’t told me why that thar valley man sets so much store by the Leetle People. I’ll go arter I hear that word.”

“Waal, I ain’t a-goin’ ter speak it,” retorted her husband, with a threatening conjugal frown. “I ain’t a-goin’ ter let leetle Mose be kep’ up hyar till midnight a-waitin’ for you-uns ter milk the cow. It’s cleverly dark now.”

“Leetle Mose” was a name to conjure with; even the wife denied herself the luxury of the last word, so lost was she in the mother. She put the piggin hastily upon her head, and went, with the erect, graceful pose that the prosaic weight fosters, down the winding path beyond the spring to the bars where the red cow stood lowing.

The household idol, sitting upon the step with a grave, inscrutable countenance, silently watched her departure, then suddenly set up a loud and bitter wail of desertion. It was in vain that she paused and called back promises of return, albeit he understood well the language which so far he refused to speak; in vain that his father came and sat beside him on the step, and patted him with a large hand upon his limited back. It was a good opportunity for the lamentation in which “leetle Mose” was prone to indulge. He had a reputation that extended far beyond his ken – for the fence bounded his world – not, however, that he would have cared. He was known throughout many a cove, and even in the settlement, as the “wust chile ever seen, an’ a jedgmint, ef the truth war known, on Stephen an’ Adelaide Yates fur hevin’ been so fly-away an’ head-strong in thar single days – both of ’em wild ez deer, an’ gin over ter dancin’ an’ foolishness.” It was with a certain grim satisfaction that the settlement hearkened to the fact that they were “mighty tame now.” Thus Dagon’s filial exploits lacked no plaudits. His mental capacities, too, received due recognition. “He be powerful smart, though; he won’t let ’em hev no mo’ comp’ny ’n he can help. I reckon he knows they wouldn’t ’tend ter him ef they hed ennything else they *could* ’tend ter. Sometimes that chile be a-settin’ on the front porch sorter peaceable, restin’ hisse’f from hollerin’,” his maternal great-aunt Jerushy chronicled to a coterie of pleased gossips, “an’ ef he see a wagon a-stoppin’ at the gate, or a visitor a-walkin’ up the path, he’ll mos’ lif’ the roof off with his screeches. An’ screech he will till they leaves; he hev mos’ made *me* deaf fur life. I useter spend consider’ble o’ my time with that young couple” – and there was an ousted suggestion in Aunt Jerushy’s

manner. "It makes his dad an' mam 'shamed fur true, his kerryin's on; they air bowed down ter the yearth!"

The widespread strictures on their idol were very bitter to the parental worshippers. Often, with a troubled aspect, they took counsel together, and repeated in helpless dudgeon the criticism of his kindred and neighbors. It was powerless to shake their loyalty. Even his father, whom he chose to regard with a lowering and suspicious mien, unless it were in the dead hours of the night, when he developed a morbid craving to be trotted back and forth and up and down the puncheon floor, was flattered with the smallest tokens of his confidence.

He had an admirable perseverance. He sat still weeping in the midst of his pink fat with so much distortion of countenance and display of gums, and such loud vocal exercises, when Adelaide returned, that she cast upon her husband a look of deep reproach, and he divined that she suspected him of having gone to the extreme length of smiting Dagon in her absence, and despite his clear conscience he could but look guilty.

"Oh, Mose!" he said, outdone, as he rose, "ye air so mean – ye air so durned mean!"

But the callow wrath of the "leetle Mose" was more formidable than the displeasure of the big man, and his heart burned at the short reply of his wife, a sarcastic "I reckon so!" when he protested that he had done nothing to Mose to which any fair-minded infant could have taken exceptions. The vocalizations of Dagon were of such unusual power this evening that his strength failed shortly after supper, and he was asleep earlier than his ordinary hour, for he was something of a late bird. Belying all his traits, he looked angelic as he lay in his little rude box cradle. When the moonlight came creeping through the door it found him there, with a smile on his rose-leaf lips, and both his pink hands unclasped on the coverlet. Adelaide, despite the silence and studious air of preoccupation she had maintained toward her husband, could but beg Yates to observe the child's beauty as she sank down, dead beat, on the doorstep to rest, but still keeping one hand on the rocker of the cradle, for motion was pleasing to "leetle Mose," and by this requisition he doubtless understood that he could absorb and occupy his elders, even when he was unconscious.

"He's purty enough, the Lord knows," the dejected father assented, as he sat smoking his pipe at a little distance on the step of the porch. "I dun'no', though, what ails him ter take sech a spite at me. I do all I kin ter pleasure him."

Adelaide experienced a vicarious qualm of conscience. "He ain't got no

spite at you-uns,” she said, reassuringly, in the hope that her words could speak louder than Dagon’s actions. “It’s jes’ his teeth harry him so.”

“An’ ye didn’t useter be so easy sot agin me.” Yates preferred this complaint after a meditative puff of the pipe. There is a melancholy pleasure in the rôle of domestic martyr. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

“I ain’t sot agin ye, but *somebody* hev got ter take up an’ gin up fur leetle Mose. Men-folks hain’t got no patience with leetle chil’n.”

“I never knowed what ’twar ter gin up afore,” he protested. “I ain’t done nuthin’ else sense Mose war born. Don’t go nowar, don’t see nuthin’ nor nobody.”

He smoked languidly for a few moments, then, with decision: “Thar ain’t no use in it; we-uns mought jes’ ez well hev gone ter the infair over yander in the cove at Pettingill’s ez not ter-night, an’ got Aunt Jerushy ter bide with Moses till we kem back.”

“Moses would hev hollered hissself inter a fit; he jes’ stiffens at the sight o’ Aunt Jerushy.”

“Waal, then, we-uns mought hev tuk Moses along; I hev seen plenty o’ babies sleepin’ at a dance an’ camp-meetin’s, an’ even fune’ls. I’ll bet thar’s a right smart chance of ’em over at Pettingill’s now.”

“Mought cotch measles from some of ’em, too, or whoopin’-cough,” said his wife, conclusively.

There was no help for it. Seclusion with their Dagon was evidently their fate until “leetle Mose” should be grown to man’s estate.

There was a long pause, in which the mercurial and socially disposed Yates dimly beheld the lengthening perspective of this prospect. He had been a dancer of famous activities and a joyous blade at all the mountain merry-makings, and he had married the liveliest girl of his acquaintance – with no little trouble, too, for she had been a mountain belle and something of a coquette. He sometimes could hardly identify with these recollections the watchful-eyed and pensive little mother and the home-staying wife.

“I wouldn’t mind it ef Moses didn’t treat me so mean,” he resumed, all his sensibilities sorely wounded. “I do declar’ I be kep’ hid out so in the woods that I war plumb flustered when I seen them valley men this evenin’ down thar at the mound. I wouldn’t hev been s’prised none ef I hed jes’ sot out an’ run from ’em an’ hid a-hint a tree like old folks ’low the Injuns useter do whenst they seen a white man.”

“Ye never ’lowed ez what set that valley man ter talkin’ ’bout the Leetle People,” she said, seeking to divert his mind from his unfilial son, and to open a more congenial topic. Her eyes, full of the moonlight, turned

toward the slope where the sheen, richly metallic and deeply yellow, rested; the rising disk itself was visible through the gap in the mountains; much of the world seemed in some sort unaware of its advent, and lay in the shadow, dark and stolid, in a dull invisibility, as though without form and void. The moon had not yet scaled the heights of the great range; only that long clifty gorge cleaving its mighty heart was radiant with the forecast of the splendors of the night, and through this vista, upon the mystic burial-ground, fell the pensive light like a benison.

Yates, too, glanced toward it with a kindling eye and an alert interest.

“He ’pears ter be a powerful cur’us man. Somebody ’lowed he war a-diggin’ fur jugs an’ sech ez the Injuns hed – leastwise them ez built the mounds; he ’lows ’twarn’t no Injuns; and Pete Dinks tole it ez how the jugs mus’ be like that’n ez Felix Guthrie ’lowed war in the grave o’ one o’ the Leetle People.”

He paused. She turned her white, startled face toward him, her eyes distended. Her voice was bated with horror – a mere whisper.

“What grave? How do Fee ondertake ter know sech ez air in the Stranger People’s graves?”

In his instant irritation because of the problem of her mental attitude he lifted his voice, and it sounded strident above the droning *susurrus* of the cicada, which filled the summer night with a drowsy monotone, and the insistent iteration of the falls.

“Gloryful gracious, Adelaide, surely ye mus’ hev hearn ez how one o’ them big rocks in the water-fall thar fell from the top wunst, an’ crashed down inter the ruver. An’ it kerried cornsider’ble o’ the yearth along the ruver-bank with it, an’ tuk off the top slab o’ the stone coffin o’ one o’ these hyar Leetle People. They hain’t buried more’n two feet deep. An’ Fee – ’twar on his lan’ – he had ter move his fence back-’ards, an’ whilst he war about it he got that slab an’ put it whar it b’longed, an’ kivered the grave agin. An’ so he seen the jug in thar with the bones. The jug hed shells in it, Fee say, an’ the skeleton hed beads round its neck. That all happened, now ez I kem ter study on it, afore ye an’ me war married.”

His acerbity had evaporated in the interest of the narration, and in the evolution of an excellent reason for her ignorance of these things that had happened previous to her advent into the neighborhood. He did not notice that she took no advantage of the excuse to upbraid him with his readiness to find fault, and that she made no rejoinder as she sat, her head depressed, her whole attitude crouching, her dilated eyes fixed with a horror-stricken fascination upon the pygmy burial-ground, in that broad, lucent expanse

of the yellow moonlight which was still streaming through the illuminated gorge of the mountains into an otherwise dusky world. The events of the afternoon were reasserting themselves in his mind. He laughed a little as he reviewed them.

“Fee hed been huntin’ with me ter-day, an’ this valley man – I b’lieve they ’lowed his name war Shattuck, an’ he air a lawyer whar he kem from; he don’t dig fur a living – whenst he hearn ’bout that, he say, quick ez lightning: ‘Would ye know the spot agin? What made ye leave the jar thar? What made ye put the slab back?’ An’ Fee – ye know how crusty an’ sour an’ cantankerous he be – he say, ‘Them Leetle People air *folks*, an’ I hev no call ter go grave-robbin’ ez I knows on!’ That thar Shattuck turned fire-red in a minit. He air a mighty nice, sa-aft-spoken, perlite man, though spindlin’. An’ he talked mos’ly ter me arter that – Fee stood by an’ listened – an’ I liked Shattuck middlin’ well. He ’lowed ez ’twar important ter know fur the history of the kentry – an’ he did sound sorter like he war vagrantin’ in his mind – ter know ef them Leetle People war grown folks or jes’ chil’n. He b’lieves they war jes’ chil’n, but ef he could see jes’ one skull he could tell.”

Adelaide gasped; she reached out her hand mechanically and laid it upon the feet of the baby curled up in his soft, warm nest. Her husband’s glance absently followed her movement, but he went on unheeding:

“An’ Fee, standin’ stare-gazin’ him, ez sullen ez a bar with a sore head, axed, ‘How kin he tell?’ ez much ez ter say, ‘Ye lie!’ But Shattuck was perlite ez ever. ‘Many ways; by their teeth, for instance – their wisdom teeth.’ Then he went a-maunderin’ on ’bout a man he knowed ez could jes’ take a bone o’ a animal ez he never seen, ez lived hyar afore the flood, an’ tell how tall ’twar an’ what it eat – I do declar’ he did sound like he war crazy, though he *looked* sensible ter the las’ – an’ this l’arned man could actially medjure an’ make a pictur’ of sech a animal out’n a few bones. An’ Fee, he jes’ stood listenin’ long enough ter say, ‘Them Leetle People never done me no harm, an’ I ain’t goin’ ter do them none jes’ ’kase they air leetle an’ dead, an’ can’t holp tharse’fs. They may hev hed a use fur thar teeth in thar lifetime; I hain’t got no use fur ’em now.’ An’ he whurled around an’ put his foot inter his stirrup an’ war a’goin’ ter ride off, whenst the valley man cotch his bridle an’ say, ‘Ye hev got no objections ter my excavatin’ on yer land, though?’”

Yates laughed lazily. “I do declar’ ’twar too durned funny. Fee didn’t know what the long-tongued sinner meant by ‘excavatin’,” an’ I didn’t nuther till arterward. But Fee, he jes’ wanted ter be contrary, no matter what, so he jes’ say, powerful glum, ‘I dun’no’ ’bout that,’ and rid off down the road. An’ this Shattuck, he jes’ stood lookin’ after Fee with his chin cocked up