



***MARY NOAILLES  
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***THE MYSTERY  
OF WITCH-FACE  
MOUNTAIN, AND  
OTHER STORIES***

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# **The Mystery of Witch-Face Mountain, and Other Stories**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Titlepage](#)

[TAKING THE BLUE RIBBON AT THE COUNTY FAIR.](#)

[THE CASTING VOTE.](#)

## I.

The beetling crags that hang here and there above the gorge hold in their rugged rock sculpture no facial similitudes, no suggestions. The jagged outlines of shelving bluffs delineate no gigantic profile against the sky beyond. One might seek far and near, and scan the vast slope with alert and expectant gaze, and view naught of the semblance that from time immemorial has given the mountain its name. Yet the imagination needs but scant aid when suddenly the elusive simulacrum is revealed to the eye. In a certain slant of the diurnal light, even on bright nights at the full of the moon, sometimes in the uncanny electric flicker smitten from a storm-cloud, a gigantic peaked sinister face is limned on the bare, sandy slope, so definite, with such fixity of lineament, that one is amazed that the perception of it came no earlier, and is startled when it disappears.

Disappearing as completely as a fancy, few there are who have ever seen it who have not climbed from the herder's trail across the narrow wayside stream and up the rugged mountain slopes to the spot where it became visible. There disappointment awaits the explorer. One finds a bare and sterile space, from which the hardy chickweed can scarcely gain the sustenance for timorous sproutings; a few outcropping rocks; a series of transverse gullies here and there, washed down to deep indentations; above the whole a stretch of burnt, broken timber that goes by the name of "fire-scald," and is a relic of the fury of the fire which was

"set out" in the woods with the mission to burn only the leaves and undergrowth, and which, in its undisciplined strength, transcended its instructions, as it were, and destroyed great trees. And this is all. But once more, at a coigne of vantage on the opposite side of the gorge, and the experience can be utilized in differentiating the elements that go to make up the weird presentment of a human countenance. It is the fire-scald that suggests the great peaked brown hood; the oblong sandy stretch forms the pallid face; the ledges outline the nose and chin and brow; the eyes look out from the deep indentations where the slope is washed by the currents of the winter rains; and here and there the gullies draw heavy lines and wrinkles. And when the wind is fresh and the clouds scud before it, in the motion of their shadows the face will seem to mow at the observer, until the belief comes very readily that it is the exact counterpart of a witch's face.

Always the likeness is pointed out and insisted on by the denizens of Witch-Face Mountain, as if they had had long and intimate acquaintance with that sort of unhallowed gentry, and were especially qualified to pronounce upon the resemblance.

"Ain't it jes' like 'em, now? Ain't it the very moral of a witch?" Constant Hite demanded, one gusty day, when the shadows were a-flicker in the sun, and the face seemed animated by the malice of mockery or mirth, as he pointed it out to his companion with a sort of triumph in its splenetic contortions.

He was a big, bluff fellow, to whose pride all that befell him seemed to minister. He was proud of his length of limb,

and his hundred and eighty pounds of weight, and yet his slim appearance. "Ye wouldn't believe it now, would ye?" he was wont to say when he stepped off the scales at the store of the hamlet down in the Cove. "It's solid meat an' bone an' muscle, my boy. Keep on the friendly side of one hunderd an' eighty," with a challenging wink. He was proud of his bright brown eyes, and his dark hair and mustache, and smiling, handsome face, and his popularity among the class that he was pleased to denominate "gal critters." He piqued himself upon his several endowments as a hardy woodsman, his endurance, his sylvan craft, his pluck, and his luck and his accurate aim. The buck—all gray and antlered, for it was August—that hung across the horse, behind the saddle, gave token of this keen exactitude in the tiny wound at the base of the ear, where the rifle-ball had entered to pierce the brain; it might seem to the inexpert that death had come rather from the gaping knife-stroke across the throat, which was, however, a mere matter of butcher-craft. He was proud of the good strong bay horse that he rode, which so easily carried double, and proud of his big boots and long spurs; and he scorned flimsy town clothes, and thought that good home-woven blue jeans was the gear in which a man who was a man should clothe himself withal. He glanced more than once at the different toggery of his companion, evidently a man of cities, whom he had chanced to meet by the wayside, and with whom he had journeyed more than a mile.

He had paused again and again to point out the "witch-face" to the stranger, who at first could not discern it at all, and then when it suddenly broke upon him could not be

wiled away from it. He dismounted, hitching his horse to a sapling, and up and down he patrolled the rocky mountain path to study the face at various angles; Constant Hite looking on the while with an important placid satisfaction, as if he had invented the illusion.

"Some folks, though, can't abide sech ez witches," he said, with a tolerant smile, as if he were able to defy their malevolence and make light of it. "Ye see that cabin on the spur over yander around the bend?" It looked very small and solitary from this height, and the rail fences about its scanty inclosures hardly reached the dignity of suggesting jackstraws. "Waal, the Hanways over thar hev a full view of the old witch enny time she will show up at all. Folks in the mountings 'low the day be onlucky when she appears on the slope thar. The old folks at Hanway's will talk 'bout it cornsider'ble ef ye set 'em goin'; they hev seen thar time, an' it rests 'em some ter tell 'bout'n the spites they hev hed that they lay ter the witch-face."

The ugly fascination of the witch-face had laid hold, too, on the stranger. Twice he had sought to photograph it, and Constant Hite had watched him with an air of lenient indulgence to folly as he potted about, now adjusting his camera, now changing his place anew.

"And I believe I have got the whole amount of nothing at all," he said at last, looking up breathlessly at the mountaineer. Albeit the wind was fresh and the altitude great, the sun was hot on the unshaded red clay path, and the nimble gyrations of the would-be artist brought plentiful drops to his brow. He took off his straw hat, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, while he stared wistfully at



the siren of his fancy, grimacing maliciously at him from the slope above. "If the confounded old woman would hold still, and not disappear so suddenly at the wrong minute, I'd have had her charming physiognomy all correct. I believe I've spoiled my plates,—that's all." And once more he mopped his bedewed forehead.

He was a man of thirty-five, perhaps, of the type that will never look old or grow perceptibly gray. His hair was red and straight, and cut close to his head. He had a long mustache of the same sanguine tint. The sun had brought the blood near the surface of his thin skin, and he looked hot and red, and thoroughly exasperated. His brown eyes were disproportionately angry, considering the slight importance of his enterprise. He was evidently a man of keen, quick temper, easily aroused and nervous. His handsome, well-groomed horse was fractious, and difficult for so impatient a rider to control. His equestrian outfit once more attracted the covert glance of Con Hite, whose experience and observation could duplicate no such attire. He was tall, somewhat heavily built, and altogether a sufficiently stalwart specimen of the genus "town man."

"I'll tell you what I'll do!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I'll sketch the whole scene!"

"Now you're shoutin'," said Con Hite capably, as if he had always advocated this method of solving the difficulty. His interlocutor could not for a moment have dreamed that he had never before seen a camera, had never heard of a photograph, had not the least idea of what the process of sketching might be which he so boldly approved; nay, the very phrase embodying his encouragement of the project

was foreign to his vocabulary,—a bit of sophisticated slang which he had adopted from his companion's conversation, and readily assimilated.

"You stay just where you are!" cried the stranger, his enthusiasm rising to the occasion; "just that pose,—that pose precisely."

He ran swiftly across the path to remove the inefficient camera from the foreground, and in a moment was seated on a log by the wayside, his quick eye scanning the scene: the close file of the ranges about the horizon, one showing above another, and one more faintly blue than another, for thus the distance was defined; then the amphitheatre of the Cove, the heavy bronze-green slopes of the mountains, all with ripple marks of clear chrome-green ruffling in the wake of the wind; in the middle distance the still depths of the valley below, with shadows all a-slumber and silent, and on the projecting spur the quiet, lonely little house, so slight a suggestion of the presence of man amidst the majestic dominance of nature; here, to the right, across the savage gorge, with its cliffs and with its currents in the deep trough, the nearest slope of the mountain, with the great gaunt bare space showing that face of ill omen, sibylline, sinister, definite indeed,—he wondered how his eyes were holden that he should not have discerned it at once; and in the immediate foreground the equestrian figure of the mountaineer, booted and spurred, the very "moral," as Hite would have called it, of an athlete, with his fine erect pose distinct against the hazy perspective, his expression of confident force, the details of his handsome features

revealed by the brim of his wide black hat turned up in front.

"It's a big subject, I know; I can't get it all in. I shall only suggest it. Just keep that pose, will you? Hold the horse still. 'Stand the storm, it won't be long!'" the artist said, smiling with renewed satisfaction as his pencil, not all inapt, went briskly to work on the horizontal lines of the background.

But it was longer than he had thought, so still sat the contemplative mountaineer, so alluring were the details of the landscape. The enthusiasm of the amateur is always a more urgent motive power than the restrained and utilitarian industry of the professional.

Few sworn knights of the crayon would have sat sketching so long in that temperature as he did, with the sun blazing through his straw hat and his blood mustering under his thin skin; but he stopped at a point short of sunstroke, and it was with a tumultuous sense of success that he at last arose, and, with the sketch-book still open, walked across the road and laid it on the pommel of the mountaineer's saddle.

Constant Hite took it up suspiciously and looked at it askance. It is to be doubted if ever before he had seen a picture, unless perchance in the primary reading-book of his callow days at the public school, spasmodically opened at intervals at the "church house" in the Cove. He continued to gravely gaze at the sketch, held sideways and almost reversed, for some moments.

"Bless Gawd! hyar's Whitefoot's muzzle jes' ez nat'ral—an' *Me*—waal, sir! don't / look proud!" he cried suddenly, with a note of such succulent vanity, so finely flavored a

pride, that the stranger could but laugh at the zest of his triumph.

"Do you see the witch-face?" he demanded.

"Hesh! hesh!" cried the mountaineer hilariously. "Don't 'sturb me 'bout yer witch-face. Ef thar ain't the buck,—yes, toler'ble fat,—an' with all his horns! An' look at my boot,—actially the spur on it! An' my hat turned up;" he raised his flattered hand to the brim as if to verify its position.

"You didn't know you were so good looking, hey?" suggested the amused town man.

"My Lord, naw!" declared Hite, laughing at himself, yet laughing delightedly. "I dunno *how* the gals make out to do without me at all!"

The pleased artist laughed, too. "Well, hand it over," he said, as he reached out for the book. "We must be getting out of this sun. I'm not used to it, you see."

He put his foot in the stirrup as he spoke, and as he swung himself into the saddle the mountaineer reluctantly closed and relinquished the book. "I'd like ter see it agin, some time or other," he observed.

He remembered this wish afterward, and how little he then imagined where and in what manner he was destined to see it again.

They rode on together into the dense woods, leaving the wind and the sunshine and the flying clouds fluctuating over the broad expanse of the mountains, and the witch-face silently mowing and grimacing at the world below, albeit seen by no human being except perchance some dweller at the little house on the spur, struck aghast by this unwelcome apparition evoked by the necromancy of the

breeze and the sheen and the shadow, marking this as an unlucky day.

"That's right smart o' a cur'osity, ain't it?" said Constant Hite complacently, as they jogged along. "When the last gover'mint survey fellers went through hyar, they war plumb smitten by the ole 'oman, an' spent cornsider'ble time a-stare-gazin' at her. They 'lowed they hed never seen the beat."

"What was the survey for?" asked the town man, with keen mundane interest.

Constant Hite was rarely at a loss. When other men were fain to come to a pause for the lack of information, the resources of his agile substitutions and speculations were made manifest. "They war jes' runnin' a few lines hyar an' thar," he said negligently. "They lef' some tall striped poles planted in the ground, red an' sich colors, ter mark the way; an' them mounting folks over yander in the funderest coves,—they air powerful ahint the times,—they hed never hearn o' sech ez a survey, noway, an' the poles jes' 'peared ter them sprung up thar like Jonah's gourd in a single night, ez ef they kem from seed; an' the folks, they 'lowed 't war the sign o' a new war." He laughed lazily at the uninstructed terrors of the unsophisticated denizens of the "funderest coves." "They'd gather around an' stare-gaze at the poles, an' wonder if they'd hev ter fight the Rebs agin; them folks is mos'ly Union." Then his interest in the subject quickening, "Them survey fellers, they ondertook, too, ter medjure the tallness o' some o' the mountings fur the gover'mint. Now what good is that goin' ter do the Nunited States?" he resumed grudgingly. "The mountings kin be medjured by the

eye,—look a-yander." He pointed with the end of his whip at a section of the horizon, visible between the fringed and low-swaying boughs of hemlock and fir as the trail swept closer to the verge of the range, on which was softly painted, as on ivory and with an enameled lustre, two or three great azure domes, with here and there the high white clouds of a clear day nestling flakelike on the summits. "They air jes' all-fired high, an' that's all. Do it make 'em seem enny taller ter say they air six thousand or seben thousand feet? Man ain't used ter medjurin' by the thousand feet. When he gits ter the ground he goes by the pole. I dunno how high nor how long a thousand feet air. The gover'mint jes' want ter spend a leetle money, I reckon. It 'pears toler'ble weak-kneed in its mind, wunst in a while. But ef it wants ter fool money away, it's mighty well able ter afford sech. It hev got a power o' ways a-comin' at money,—we all know that, we all know that."

He said this with a gloomy inflection and a downward look that might have implied a liability for taxes beyond his willingness to pay. But, barring the assessment on a small holding of mountain land, Constant Hite seemed in case to contribute naught to his country's exchequer.

"It needs all it can get, now," replied the stranger casually, but doubtless from a sophisticated knowledge, as behooved a reader of the journals of the day, of the condition of the treasury.

He could not account for the quick glance of alarm and enmity which the mountaineer cast upon him. It roused in him a certain constraint which he had not experienced earlier in their chance association. It caused him to

remember that this was a lonely way and a wild country. He was an alien to the temper and sentiment of the people. He felt suddenly that sense of distance in mind and spirit which is the true isolation of the foreigner, and which even an identity of tongue and kindred cannot annul. Looking keenly into the mountaineer's half-averted, angry, excited face, he could not for his life discern how its expression might comport with the tenor of the casual conversation which had elicited it. He did not even dimly surmise that his allusion to the finances of the government could be construed as a justification of the whiskey tax, generally esteemed in the mountains a measure of tyrannous oppression; that from his supposititious advocacy of it he had laid himself liable to the suspicion of being himself of the revenue force,—his mission here to spy out moonshiners; that his companion's mind was even now dwelling anew, and with a rueful difference, on that masterly drawing of himself in the stranger's sketch-book.

"But what do that prove, though?" Hite thought, a certain hope springing up with the joy of the very recollection of the simulacrum of the brilliant rural coxcomb adorning the page. "Jes' that me is *Me*. All he kin say 'bout me air that hyar I be goin' home from huntin' ter kerry my game. *That* ain't agin the law, surely."

The "revenueurs," he argued, too, never rode alone, as did this man, and spies and informers were generally of the vicinage. The stranger was specially well mounted, and as his puzzled cogitation over the significant silence that had supervened between them became so marked as to strike Hite's attention, the mountaineer sought to nullify it by an

allusion to the horse. "That feller puts down his feet like a kitten," he said admiringly. "I never seen nuthin' ez wears shoes so supple. Shows speed, I s'pose? Built fur it."

"Makes pretty fair time," responded the stranger without enthusiasm. The doubt, perplexity, and even suspicion which his companion's manner had evoked were not yet dissipated, and the allusion to the horse, and the glow of covetous admiration in Hite's face as his eyes dwelt upon the finely fashioned creature so deftly moving along, brought suddenly to his mind sundry exploits of a gang of horse-thieves about these coves and mountains, detailed in recent newspapers. These rumors had been esteemed by urban communities in general as merely sensational, and had attracted scant attention. Now, with their recurrence to his recollection, their verisimilitude was urged upon him. The horse he rode was a valuable animal, and moreover, here, ten or twenty miles from a habitation, would prove a shrewd loss indeed. Nevertheless, it was impossible to shake off or evade his companion; the wilderness, with its jungle of dense rhododendron undergrowth on either side of the path, was impenetrable. There was no alternative practicable. He could only go on and hope for the best.

A second glance at the mountaineer's honest face served in some sort as reassurance as to the probity of his character. Gradually a vivid interest in the environment, which had earlier amazed and amused Constant Hite, began to be renewed. The stranger looked about to identify the growths of the forest with a keen, fresh enthusiasm, as if he were meeting old friends. Once, with a sudden flush and an intent eye, he flung the reins to the man whom he had half



suspected of being a horse-thief ten minutes before, to hastily dismount and uproot a tiny wayside weed, which he breathlessly and triumphantly explained to the wondering mountaineer was a rare plant which he had never seen; he carefully bestowed it between the leaves of his sketch-book before he resumed the saddle, and Hite was moved to ask, "How d' ye know its durned comical name, ef ye never seen it afore? By Gosh! it's got a name longer 'n its tap-root!"

The town man only laughed a trifle at this commentary upon the botanical Latin nomenclature, and once more he was leaning from his saddle, peering down the aisles of the forest with a smiling, expectant interest, as if they held for him some enchantment of which duller mortals have no ken. A brown geode, picked up in the channel of a summer-dried stream, showed an interior of sparkling quartz crystal, when a blow had shattered it, which Hite had never suspected, often as he had seen the rugged spherical stones lying along the banks. All the rocks had a thought for the stranger, close to his heart and quick on his tongue, and as Hite, half skeptical, half beguiled, listened, his suspicion of the man as a "revenuer" began to fade.

"The revenuers ain't up ter no sech l'arnin' ez this," he said to himself, with a vicarious pride. "The man, though he never war in the mountings afore, knows ez much about 'em ez ef he hed bodaciously built 'em. Fairly smelt that thar cave over t' other side the ridge jes' now, I reckon; else how'd he know 't war thar?"

A certain hollow reverberation beneath the horse's hoofs had caught his companion's quick ear. "Have you ever been in this cave hereabout?" he had asked, to Hite's delighted

amazement at this brilliant feat of mental jugglery, as it seemed to him.

Even the ground, when the repetitious woods held no new revelation of tree or flower, or hazy, flickering insect dandering through the yellow sunshine and the olive-tinted shadow and the vivid green foliage, the very ground had a word for him.

"This formation here," he said, leaning from his saddle to watch the path slipping along beneath his horse's hoofs, like the unwinding of coils of brown ribbon, "is like that witch-face slope that we saw awhile ago. It seems to occur at long intervals in patches. You see down that declivity how little grows, how barren."

The break in the density of the woods served to show the mountains, blue and purple and bronze, against the horizon; an argosy of white clouds under full sail; the Cove, shadowy, slumberous, so deep down below; and the oak leaves above their heads, all dark and sharply dentated against the blue.

Hite had suddenly drawn in his horse. An eager light was in his eye, a new idea in his mind. He felt himself on the verge of imminent discovery.

"Now," said he, lowering his voice mysteriously, and laying his hand on the bridle of the other's horse,—and so far had the allurements of science outstripped merely mundane considerations that the stranger's recent doubts and anxieties touching his animal were altogether forgotten, and he was conscious only of a responsive expectant interest,—"air thar ennything in that thar 'formation,' ez ye calls it ez could gin out fire?"

"No, certainly not," said the man of science, surprised, and marking the eager, insistent look in Hite's eyes. Both horses were at a standstill now. A jay-bird clanged out its wild woodsy cry from the dense shadows of a fern-brake far in the woods on the right, and they heard the muffled trickling of water, falling on mossy stones hard by, from a spring so slight as to be only a silver thread. The trees far below waved in the wind, and a faint dryadic sibilant singing sounded a measure or so, and grew fainter in the lulling of the breeze, and sunk to silence.

"Ennyhow," persisted Hite, "won't sech yearth gin out light somehows,—in some conditions sech ez ye talk 'bout?" he added vaguely.

"Spontaneously? Certainly not," the stranger replied, preserving his erect pose of inquiring and expectant attention.

"Why, then the mounting's 'witched sure enough,—that's all," said Hite desperately. He cast off his hold on the stranger's horse, caught up his reins anew, and made ready to fare onward forthwith.

"Does fire ever show there?" demanded his companion wonderingly.

"It's a plumb meracle, it's a plumb mystery," declared Constant Hite, as they went abreast into the dense shadow of the closing woods. "I asked ye this 'kase ez ye 'peared ter sense so much in rocks, an' weeds, an' birds, an' sile, what ain't revealed ter the mortal eye in gineral, ye mought be able ter gin some nateral reason fur that thar sile up thar round the old witch-face ter show fire or sech. But it's beyond yer knowin' or the knowin' o' enny mortal, I reckon."

"How does the fire show?" persisted the man of science, with keen and attentive interest. "And who has seen it?"

"Stranger," said Hite, lowering his voice, "I hev viewed it, myself. But fust it war viewed by the Hanways,—them ez lives in that house on the spur what prongs out o' the range nigh opposite the slope o' the Witch-Face. One dark night,—thar war no moon, but thar warn't no storm, jes' a dull clouded black sky, ez late August weather will show whenst it be heavy an' sultry,—all of a suddenty, ez the Hanway fambly war settin' on the porch toler'ble late in the night, the air bein' close in the house, the darter, Narcissa by name, she calls out, 'Look! look! I see the witch-face!' An' they all start up an' stare over acrost the deep black gorge. An' thar, ez true ez life, war the witch-face glimmerin' in the midst o' the black night, and agrinnin' at 'em an' a-mockin' at 'em, an' lighted up ez ef by fire."

"And did no one discover the origin of the fire?" asked the stranger.

"Thar war no fire!" Constant Hite paused impressively. Then he went on impulsively, full of his subject: "Ben Hanway kem over ter the still-house arter me, an' tergether we went ter examine. But the bresh is powerful thick, an' the way is long, an' though we seen a flicker wunst or twict ez we-uns pushed through the deep woods, 't war daybreak 'fore we got thar, an' nare sign nor smell o' fire in all the woods could we find; nare scorch nor singe on the ground, not even a burnt stick or chunk ter tell the tale; everythin' ez airish an' cool an' jewy an' sweet ter the scent ez a summer mornin' is apt ter be."

"How often has this phenomenon occurred?" said the stranger coolly, but with a downcast, thoughtful eye and a pursed-up lip, as if he were less surprised than cogitating.

"Twict only, fur we hev kep' an eye on the old witch, Ben an' me. Ben wants a road opened out up hyar, stiddier jes' this herder's trail through the woods. Ben dunno how it mought strike folks ef they war ter know ez the witch-face hed been gin over ter sech cur'ous ways all of a suddenty. They mought take it fur a sign agin the road, sech ez b'lieves in the witch-face givin' bad luck." After a pause, "Then / viewed it wunst,—wunst in the dead o' the night. I war goin' home from the still, an' I happened ter look up, an' I seen the witch-face,—the light jes' dyin' out, jes' fadin' out. She didn't hev time ter make more 'n two or three faces at me, an' then she war gone in the night. It's a turr'ble-lookin' thing at night, stranger. So ye can't tell what makes it,—the sile, or what?"

He turned himself quite sideways as he spoke, one hand on the carcass of the deer behind the saddle, the other on his horse's neck, the better to face his interlocutor and absorb his scientific speculations. And in that moment an odd idea occurred to him,—nay, a conviction. He perceived that his companion knew and understood the origin of the illumination; and more,—that he would not divulge it.

"The soil? Assuredly not the soil," the stranger said mechanically. He was looking down, absorbed in thought, secret, mysterious, yet not devoid of a certain inexplicable suggestion of triumph; for a subtle cloaked elation, not unlike a half-smile, was on his face, although its intent,

persistent expression intimated the following out of a careful train of ideas.

"Then what is it?" demanded Hite arrogantly, as if he claimed the right to know.

"I really couldn't undertake to say," the stranger responded, his definite manner so conclusive an embargo on further inquiries that Hite felt rising anew all his former doubts of the man, and his fears and suspicions as to the errand that had brought him hither.

Could it be possible, he argued within himself, that to the agency of "revenueurs" was due that mysterious glow, more brilliant than any ordinary fire, steady, suffusive, continuous, rising in the dark wilderness, in the deep midnight, to reveal that ominous face overlooking all the countryside, with subtle flickers of laughter running athwart its wonted contortions, more weird and sinister in this ghastly glare than by day? And what significance might attend these strange machinations? Revolving the idea, he presently shook his head in conclusive negation as he rode along. The approach of raiders was silent and noiseless and secret. Whatever the mystery might portend it was not thus that they would advertise their presence, promoting the escape of the objects of their search. Hite's open and candid mind could compass no adequate motive for concealment in all the ways of the world but the desire to evade the revenue law, or to practice the shifts and quirks necessary to the capture of the wary and elusive moonshiner. Nevertheless, it was impossible, on either of these obvious bases, to account for the fact of something withheld in the stranger's manner, some secret exultant knowledge of the