

IN THE MAGUERRIWOCK

Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835–1921)

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Mr. Furbush was waited upon one morning by a client and requested to take charge of a case that was rather out of his usual beat, as he said. And though its being a good instance of mysterious disappearance, with almost nothing to start from, gave it an immediate interest to his inquisitive mind, yet the investigation, being located upon an almost uncivilized region of the frontier forest, made it a much less agreeable study than was the same line of cases when they could be worked up in the pleasant purlieus of the city and involved no greater hardships than attendance at the opera-houses and in the drawing-rooms of fashionable ladies.

“But,” said the client, “I think it will really be worth your while. The fee will be such—”

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Furbush, “but I am not so young as I was. I have a liking for my easy-chair. Perhaps my scent is not so keen as once—”

“On the contrary, habit has made it perfect.”

“No dog for the chase like an old one? Well, let me have the data,” said Mr. Furbush, rather pleased than otherwise—for the truth was he had been getting a little rusty—taking an enormous pinch of snuff and then filling his fingers till he seemed to be throwing dust in the eyes of the universe.

“Listen then,” said his interlocutor. “Ten years ago a pack-peddler went through the town of Boltonby—the last large town in that part of the state and the last town at all before you reach the Maguerriwock district—he stopped at the watchmaker’s there and exhibited the contents of his pack, a small pack, but full of valuables. There were watches and bracelets and gold chains in it, brooches set with pearls. There were carbuncles and amethysts and many marketable stones variously set—it was decidedly a precious pack on the whole. And though the watchmaker lightened it of sundry articles, he made it heavy again with the gold which he paid for them; the peddler preferring gold, as he was going upon the frontier and into Canada, where our own bank-bills were at a discount.

“But do you go afoot?” asked the watchmaker.”

“‘Unless some team gives me a lift,’ replied the peddler.”

“‘Dangerous business,’ the watchmaker said, ‘in such a neighborhood as the Maguerriwock. I wouldn’t be seen there alone after dark though I had left all my watches here in the shop behind me. And you to walk into the lion’s mouth with all your wealth upon you?’”

“‘Who would suspect me of wealth?’ asked the peddler. ‘Do you see the patches on my boots? Am I not out at elbow? Do I wear fine linen? Am I not on foot stubbing along too poor to take a stage? Does my pack look like anything more than a farm-laborer’s knapsack?’ And he laughed and asked which road led to the Third Plantation and which to the Maguerriwock, and went out in the direction of the Third Plantation.”

“There were one or two loungers in the store; I don’t know their names—I suppose they could easily be ascertained. It has been found that the peddler, after he had gone a couple of miles in the direction of the Third Plantation—that is, on a northwest radius—struck across the fields and made for the road that runs in the direction of a northeast radius from Boltonby Center, and that led into the Maguerriwock—on one side of him the black and white brook tumbling down with its foam; on the other, old Maguerriwock Mountain rising dark with its firs.”

"Whether he lost his way and wandered round there till he starved or died, whether the bears and wolves abounding there made an end of him, whether he was waylaid and murdered it is impossible to say. All we know is that he never reached the settlement beyond, or if he did, there is no trace of his having done so."

"Now, before the peddler went on his fatal journey, he having a few surplus funds, invested them in a Bolivian silver-mining company's stock, the sound of whose name happened to take his fancy; wisely, as it eventuated. This company made dividend after dividend—first of fifty, then of a hundred, then of five hundred percent; the stock has risen to an almost inestimable value, and the fortune of a prince lies ready for the peddler's hand, or for the hand of the next of kin. It is of the first importance to this next of kin to discover the peddler; if he is not forthcoming, it becomes of the second importance to establish the fact of his decease. And I, Mr. Furbush," said the client, drawing back the better to observe the effect of his announcement, "am the next of kin!"

"Yes," said Mr. Furbush calmly, after he had sent up a ring of smoke to the ceiling and watched it dissipate there. "Yes; I've known about that million's rusting for an owner this long time, and wondered you never came to me about it. I don't know but what I'll undertake it. Tell you tomorrow. Call again, same hour." After which the two heads were put together a moment as to terms and expenses, and the client went out. And Mr. Furbush snapped his fingers to a pleasant tune for a little while, having made his bargain all on one side. But this exultation was succeeded by a corresponding depression, for Mr. Furbush never found any pleasure in over-reaching a simpleton; he liked to measure wits with someone whose blade was as long and as keen as his own; the case, too, was as simply put together as black and white; he saw it now straight before him. And although I believe in the end he exacted the fulfillment of his client's promises, yet the whole round sum which he thus obtained, and which enabled him to withdraw presently from business, had he chosen so to do, gave him far less pleasure than the pitiful salary of a detective policeman used to do when he drew it quarterly.

A gay party of gentlemen was just forming for a hunting excursion down in this very Maguerriwock district and no other; and to this Mr. Furbush, happening to know about it, had no difficulty in attaching himself. Most of the gentlemen treated Mr. Furbush with distinguished urbanity, whether they had ever had occasion to deal with him in the past or feared they might have in the future. And while he never lost an eye to business, he contrived to enjoy himself until they reached Boltonby, the large town of which mention has been made, in as good wildwood fashion as did ever anyone who wore the belted green.

In Boltonby, Mr. Furbush's watch must needs get itself out of order just as the party was going into the deep woods. Of course he sought the watchmaker's without delay in order to repair the mishap.

"Take a seat, if you please," said the artisan. "I'll not detain you a half-hour, sir. Nothing but some snuff in the works," and he applied all his dexterity. "Haven't seen a repeater here before, sir," said he, presently, "since I looked into the pack of the peddler that was killed in the Maguerriwock."

"Killed!" exclaimed Mr. Furbush.

"Well, there's some suppose he got bewildered and wandered round till he grew exhausted. And there even have been discovering parties out after his pack. But it's all one now. The thing that's certain is that the last time he was seen it was in this shop," said he, sensationally.

"Indeed? They never suspected you of a hand in his disappearance, then?" asked Mr. Furbush, mischievously stealing the sensation.

"Hardly, sir," said the worthy watchmaker. "Not anyone in Boltonby, sir."

"But are you certain he was seen here then?"

"In my shop? I should think so. Let me see who saw him," said the watchmaker, reflectively. "The parson—there he sits now; Dr. Stedman, dead long ago, poor man; old Ledgefield, from over the mountain—"

"Maguerriwock?"

"The same. And one or two of the farmers that never sent, nor never received, a letter in the whole course of their lives, but who came regularly every Saturday, from far and near, to see if there were any for them, whether or no. I had the post-office here then. That was the way they kept up with the world. Let me see—the Cravens, father and son; and Billy Moore—he's a cripple—"

"You never laid the deed to old Ledgefield?"

"Bless you, no," said the watchmaker, as he blew between the wheels of the watch blasts fit to carry the vans of a bolting-mill. "Couldn't have killed a fly."

"Was the peddler such a small man that you compare him to so small an object?"

"Small? He? As much limestone in his bones as ever walked across the state of Maine. Six feet two in his stockings."

"One man alone couldn't have matched him, then, I take it?" said Mr. Furbush.

"Not unless he pinned him from behind. No, nor then either."

"It is, to my apprehension, the most probable conjecture that he is lying at the foot of the Maguerriwock rocks, and his knapsack beside him," said the parson, joining in, and warmed with the old gossip of the place.

"Yes, many's thought so. I remember the first exploring party after him. I went with them. We thought if the wolves had got him we should find parts of his clothes; and I was sure I should know an odd button I had seen in his woolen shirt. It was a wooden button, carved to represent a little Chinese god, with a head slung in his belt. He said he'd carved it himself, going along from place to place; and 'twas ugly enough for you to believe him, the button was. Dr. Stedman and a parcel of us went; made a regular spree of it. The Cravens got it up, and we slept at their farm in the settlement beyond and drank such cider there as only the apples of Eden ever could have made before."

"Not very good cider, then, if you remember the character of the apples in that locality," said Mr. Furbush, with a wink at the parson. "Good farm?"

"Well, no, not particularly so—at that time, that is. Shiftless fellows, they used to be; fond of hunting and drinking; perked up since then, been more industrious, as Walmar finished sowing his wild oats; got the fences up everywhere, land improved, barns built. Wonderful stock, too, now; best breed of horses in all the Maguerriwock; fine cattle, Alderneys and Jerseys; some merinos—"

"Rather unusual for this region, isn't it?"

"Rather. I've a few myself. I bought them of them, though. The parson bought some merinos. When we saw the fellows turning a short corner we just encouraged them that way. Tisn't good for a community to have idlers on its outskirts, you know, sir. We feel a little as if it was our work. Better ride out and see it, sir, before you leave these parts; only twenty miles across the woods—crack farm!"

"You would find it most interesting," said the parson.

"Thank you," answered Mr. Furbush. "I don't doubt it."

"There's your watch, all right. No, indeed, sir, not a penny! Trifling service—stranger, too!" And Mr. Furbush retired, having decidedly the best of this bargain, as of nearly all others in which he had a hand.

Mr. Furbush lost no time in excusing himself from his party, in seeking the society of the sheriff, in hiring a team, in driving across the woods, and arriving at nightfall on the crack farm of the Cravens, which he had been so warmly advised to visit.

On the way he confided in the sheriff so much as he thought best, made that astonished and slightly unwilling individual his confederate, and though they had no precisely prepared plan of action, they had yet that concert of attention and suggestion which might prove invaluable. The leafy shadows fell around them as they rode and plotted; the soft wind blew in their faces, full of delicious flowery smells and the sun-kisses of resinous branches; the fallen boughs crackled pleasantly under their wheels in the soft forest road. It seemed impossible that any such sweet, wild region could be the seat of dark and evil deeds. It would have seemed so, rather, to anyone else than the sheriff, whose daily business dealt with the doers of such deeds till there was nothing strange about them, or than Mr. Furbush, whose calculations, having finally determined toward one direction, not all the leafy shadows or flowery smells of creation could turn aside.

It was just as the red sunset changed to purple over all the clear country that they came out from the obscurity of the wood upon the long rich slopes of the Craven farm. In the distance other clearings were to be seen, but yet hardly deserving the name, since, so far as they could be discerned in the light of approaching evening, they seemed to be mere acres of tangle and brushwood, while the Craven fields were velvet with turf or billowy with grain, the fences were of mortared stone, the great open-doored barns were overflowing, mild-eyed cattle were standing contentedly about the fields which darkened so gently, and on the grass before the door a man was breaking a superb stallion that appeared to have all the fire of the mustang with all the grace of the Arab in his composition.

"It takes money to have such things as that horse," said Mr. Furbush. "You may 'perk up' and be as industrious as you please, but ten years are not enough to change the generations of a common cart-horse into such a creature as that. It takes money—watches, brooches set with pearls, carbuncles, amethysts, and gold coins that are preferred to our own bank-bills for currency on the Canadian frontier."

The sheriff laughed as Mr. Furbush spoke, and then hailed the horse-tamer; but not before Mr. Furbush had noted the singular contrast evident between the stone fences laid in plaster, the bountiful barns, and the low, rude house, with its hanging eaves, narrow windows, and entirely barbarous appearance, and had rummaged round among his reasons to find one that answered the question why so miserable a hovel was patched and painted and retained by men who evidently liked the display of a crack farm.

"Hallo, Walmar," cried the sheriff. "Got a night's lodging to spare?"

"Don't know," was the hospitable answer. "I'll ask the old man. Who's that with you?"

"Gentleman going across the clearing. Afraid of night air. Guess I'll get down and stretch my legs, anyway. Mr. Furbush, Mr. Walmar Craven."

Mr. Furbush took off his hat, but coughed tenderly, and pulled up the handkerchief around his throat—carefully looked over his new acquaintance the while, and decided that he probably looked better today than he did ten years ago, was no stronger today than he was ten years ago, and was an ill-looking whelp, with his under-hung jaw, ten years ago or today. Meanwhile Mr. Craven himself had come out to inspect the arrival. "Come in! Come in!" he cried, with a certain rough heartiness, under whose lion's skin Mr. Furbush thought he could detect the fox's ears. "Lodging? Of course we have," he said. "Always a bed for you, Sheriff; and any friend of yours welcome here. Never turned a man from my door since I had one. Come in, come in!"

Mr. Furbush was not a coward; but his courage needed one or two little invitations to assert its existence as he bent his head beneath the low lintel of that man's dwelling; for, as he said to himself, he had never seen a more evil countenance belie more good profession in all his life before. It was not the burly, brutal face of the prize-fighter or the lounging plug-ugly, which he already knew so well. It had a hideousness whose die must have been broken in the stamping, and eyes that crossed at a sickening angle of strabismus gave all the original face an added sinister effect, that made the one who had seen it a single time turn and look again, that he might be sure it was an actual thing which he had seen, and no vision of an impossibility.

The house which the three now entered presented even a poorer appearance internally than it did without, for trees tossing their boughs overhead and wild rose-bushes growing under the windows decorated it in some degree outside, while inside it was bare. Carpets on the floors, prints upon the walls, soft-cushioned and luxurious seats, these are the caprices of womankind, and they were absent here. The Cravens had silver spoons for their supper-table, they wore gold watches and bright-jeweled breast-pins, they liked to dazzle beholders at the county fairs and to take the prizes on their cattle there; but they chose for their chairs those that they could tilt back upon, for a table one that they could rest their heels upon, a floor that was not too good to ornament with elaborate designs in tobacco juice. So plain pine boards, furniture of deal, and walls once white-washed and now arabesqued with smoke stains, the marks of popping beer bottles, and the dust of years made up the cheer of the reception room. One woman sat in the chimney-corner of this room, her hair combed straight away from her thin face and knotted up with a great silver comb, a dirt-colored gown apparently thrown upon her person and a shawl pinned at her throat. She was a wretched-looking being, and she neither glanced up nor spoke when the three entered, but went on poking the fire with the walking-stick in her hands.

"My wife," said Mr. Craven, with a hideous leer. "You mustn't mind her, gentlemen—she's weak," and he tapped his own head to signify the particular direction in which his wife's weakness lay. "Lost her mind," he said, briefly.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Furbush; "that is very sad. A recent thing?"

"Oh no, no," said the other, carelessly. "Some years since, when this child was born"—as the door opened and a child shambled into the apartment—an undersized changling of a thing, with long, tow-colored elf-locks hanging round a face as white as leprosy. She sidled forward and stood looking into Mr. Furbush's eyes.

"I'm a fool," said she.

"Dear me, dear me!" exclaimed the sheriff, who felt more familiar with knaves than fools. "I never knew you had such a child, Craven! How old is she?"

"Old as her tongue, and a little older than her teeth; ain't you, Samantha?"

"No," answered Samantha, stoutly. "I'm ten year old next April-Fool Day. Wal said so!" And with that she shuffled hurriedly round inside her mother's chair, as if afraid of a hand that might come after her, and commenced talking to herself in an unintelligible rattle that seemed to be her natural language.

"That's the way with them," said Mr. Craven, "from morning till night. The old woman, she seldom speaks at all; Samantha, she gabbles all the time. They're no good to themselves nor anybody else. But there," said the benevolent being, with one of his most effective grimaces, as he opened a high cupboard-door, "you can't put them out of the way. We contrive to get along. Something to take, gentlemen? Nothing clearer this side the Saint John. None of your fire and smoke, but real mountain-dew. If the sheriff wasn't here should say I smuggled it myself. Don't suppose he'll object to a drop, all the same?"

Meantime Mr. Walmar Craven the horse-tamer, a man now of some thirty-odd years, had entered and hung a kettle on the crane, had produced some slices of bacon and a frying pan, into which he broke several eggs, and had set out on the bare deal an apparently recent purchase of table-service, whose stout material, brilliantly flowered and butterflied, seemed to attract poor little Samantha's attention irresistibly as she crept forward and stealthily seized one of the plates, which she commenced spinning like a top, and was immediately assisted from the room by one arm and the toe of the brotherly boot therefor.

Mrs. Craven started up at the scuffle and the screams, looked around her vacantly, as if she could not make out the disturbance, smoothed her hair, and sat down again with her scared face. "Three men went down cellar," said she, "and only two came up," and would have again commenced poking the fire had not her tender husband snatched the stick away with a gesture that promised more than it performed.

“Mountain-dew is all very well, Mr. Craven,” said Mr. Furbush, “for any one that has never heard of your cider. But as for me, there never was any Champagne bottled in France, if that’s where they bottle it, equal to the sparkle of the real pippin cider of any new apple-orchard.”

“Well, now,” said Mr. Craven. “I’m your man for that. You’d never think, to look at a little pink and white apple-blossom, that it had such a tingle in it, would you? I’ve kept my barrel of cider every fall for a dozen years back. Some’s so hard you have to use washing soda with it, and some’s the pure juice of last September. Walmar, give me a dip. My cellar’s full of it. What shall I bring you, gentlemen?”

“Twould take more mind than I’ve got to make up,” said the sheriff.

“Suppose,” said Mr. Furbush, jocosely and in good-fellowship, “suppose, since there’s such a stock below, we go down and taste all round!”

Mr. Craven was blowing at a coal, which just then he dropped. He picked it up, and said nothing till his wick caught the flame—whether he was considering the proposition, or whether he had no breath to spare. If he was considering it, it is to be supposed that he reasoned that if these men had any design in going into his cellar they would get in one way or another, fair means or foul, and there was nothing like innocent unsuspectingness to disarm suspicion.

“Won’t give the gentlemen such trouble, father,” said his thoughtful son, starting forward with a pitcher in either hand. “Sullars ain’t such nice places for visitors.”

“Don’t speak of trouble!” cried Mr. Furbush. “And as for nice places, I never saw a nicer than a cider-vault. Remember when I was a boy,” continued Mr. Furbush, who was making the Cravens feel very much at home with him, “going round with a straw and trying all the bung-holes. No such sport in life, except it is blowing bubbles with a clay pipe. Pity we can’t stay boys! Come along, Mr. Sheriff! Got your pitcher, Craven? And the straws? Let me take your light. Stairs steep?”

There was no resisting such cheerful volubility. But with a curious expression of dogged sullenness, as Mr. Furbush thought, flashing out and smothering again on their pleasant countenances, the Cravens led the way together; and as they opened the door the woman in the chimney-corner half rose from her seat and looked after them with her frightened face. “Three men went down cellar,” said she, “and only two came up. Three men went down cellar, and only two came up,” and she commenced wringing her hands and moaning till she forgot about it.

Mr. Furbush’s heart—for I suppose he had one—gave a bound; but his hand held the candle just as steadily and his face looked as innocently eager after cider as if no such words as those the infirm woman uttered had ever clenched his certainty. He knew very well that when Walmar set down his pitchers and ran back he was shaking the poor thing by the shoulders till the teeth rattled in her head, and jouncing her down in her chair afterward. But not being yet prepared to interfere he called cheerily for his straw, as if that was what the gay and festive young man had run back for.

Although Mr. Furbush had given it as his opinion that there were no such nice places as cider-cellars, the present one might have changed such opinion and confirmed that of Mr. Walmar after all. The walls were a too-substantial foundation to so rickety a superstructure as the cottage, and had probably been built in long after the cottage had been reared over a mere hole in the ground; but with such solid walls and arches the place would have been a nice one if it had only been a clean one. The sides were of thick stone, the floor was of brick laid in gravel, a close and compact floor, as good as the hearths of half the country roundabout.

Mr. Furbush swung the candle over his head, narrowly missing setting fire to the sheets of cobwebs that fringed the low beams above, and noting with his hurried glance that there was not one place newer than another or of fresher stone in all the masonry, and that the cellar exactly corresponded, in its appearance of size, to the two rooms which he had seen overhead.

"By George! A prime place!" said he. "It only wants a broom. If your cider is half as good, in its way, as your cellar, Mr. Craven, there's nothing more to ask!"

"Taste it and see," said Mr. Craven, handing him the straw and taking the candle, while Walmar went forward with his hatchet and started the bungs of the barrels that lay on their sides all round the cellar, as much, Mr. Furbush could not help thinking, like the pictures which he had seen in the illustrated newspapers of royal sarcophagi in their tombs as anything else. There was something desperately suggestive, too, in the figure of the strong-armed Walmar hurling his hatchet over his head, half-lighted and wholly devilish in the strange chiaroscuro of the place.

"That, now," said Mr. Furbush, giving place to the sheriff, "is a lady's tippie. I confess I like it a trifle older."

"Try this, then," said Mr. Craven. "And if it doesn't suit, there's yet another and another and another. I'm particular about my cider too. I like it hard as the hardest. I'm a hard-shell myself, I am. Anybody that picks me up will find they've got a hard nut to crack."

"More like the thing—but still—" said Mr. Furbush, smacking his lips doubtfully.

"Aha—I see. Nothing for you but the genuine identical—meller as a Juneating, and the tang of a russet in April. Good for a headache in the morning. That's the talk, and here's the thing!"

Mr. Furbush's eyes had now become accustomed to the half-light. Over each straw that he had bent he had looked as a little child looks over the edge of its drinking-cup, on almost as close an inspection as a sunbeam makes when a camera commands. This was to be the last, and he prepared himself for an exhaustive survey while he took just one gurgling sip through his straw, to feel sure that the man was not making game of him.

The floor, with here a heap of straw and there some carelessly thrown vegetables, was everywhere dry and dusty—everywhere dry and dusty except in one place. Was it Mr. Furbush's vivid imagination that gave the bricks there, ever so slightly, a brighter, damper tint than the others? As Mr. Craven moved and stood just beyond it now, holding his candle low, his shadow fell there long and outstretched as any grave. If Mr. Furbush believed in anything, it was in coincidences. A line of irregularly growing fungi that had sprouted up here and there along its length between the bricks, just gave his eye one glimpse of themselves, common toad-stools, but of various tints—white, pale pink, and tawny orange—perhaps a half-dozen or less. Mr. Furbush could have laughed aloud as he raised his head. "Never tasted anything so pungent in my life!" said he.

"Pungent—that's the word," said Mr. Craven.

"It's a drink fit for the gods," said Mr. Furbush, wiping his mouth vigorously, for if there was one thing on earth he detested more than another it was cider.

"Why do you have such things as that growing in your cellar, though? Should think 'twould corrupt the cider; they only ought to grow on graves," said Mr. Furbush, stooping to pluck one of the unsightly stems from its nook between two bricks. It gave out a damp, deathly odor, he fancied, that made him sick. He threw it down again, but not before the candle had fallen from Mr. Craven's hand and left them all in darkness.

Mr. Furbush stood stone-still and grasped the trigger of a little bosom-friend he had, expecting to feel two hands on his throat in the next moment. But Mr. Craven only swore an oath about his own deuced clumsiness, strode past him, and in a moment called to them from the head of the stairs and flared another light down by which they might see to find their way up into the room above.

Mr. Furbush understood now, just as well as if he had the whole horrid scene of one night ten years ago before him, why the feeble woman in the corner of the chimney-place who, mechanically, with a remnant of her old housewifely instinct, turned, as she was wont to do when the savor attracted her, the bacon with the fork that had been left in the pan—why she moaned ever to herself without lifting her head the refrain that had cost her

her reason and made her unborn child an idiot: "Three men went down cellar, and only two came up." But he lit the hospitable pipe after supper and placidly smoked away without a thought of the pipe of peace; and retired to the room he was to share with the sheriff, when they had partaken of a jorum of apple-toddy, without experiencing a single qualm of sensibility at the idea of fitting a halter to these men's throats after having eaten their salt. However, Mr. Furbush felt possibly acquitted of all indebtedness because the sheriff was to pay for the salt.

"Well," said the sheriff, as soon as they were alone, "what do you think of 'em?"

"Two as damned rascals," said Mr. Furbush, drawing off his boots, "as ever trod shoe-leather."

"And what do you decide to do?"

"To go back to Boltonby," whispered Mr. Furbush, "for a posse to help us bring to light again the body of the murdered pack-peddler, or what there is left of it, from underneath those toad-stools."

"By the great horn-spoon!" swore the sheriff, in an intensity of admiration that could find no further words. And they said very little more as they relieved each other from watch to watch between then and sunrise.

If old Craven's face had been disgustingly vicious on the night before, daylight did not lend any feebleness to its purport, but rather searched out and brought its evil things to naked shame. It was not fitting to call it merely brutal; for no dumb brute had ever such intelligence, such cunning, and such cruelty written in one scroll together on its face. I am afraid that Mr. Furbush's smile borrowed a reflection from it as he thought how very soon he should be able to put an end to that sickening leer of the man's. They bade one another good-morning like the best of friends; the sheriff paid the reckoning; Craven begged them to come some day and take another taste of his cider; they promised to do so, and rolled rapidly away across the clearing, taking a circular direction by an old cart-path, and thus re-tracing their way and coming out in the woods on the Boltonby side, and driving with might and main toward Boltonby.

The sheriff's horse was unrivaled in all the Maguerriwock. Walmar Craven's stallion was not well enough broken to follow and discover the true direction of their path, had it occurred to his master to do so. But, without being definitely disconcerted, the Cravens must have seen the slight and casual incidents of the evening before in the light of warnings for precaution; since that there was some very busy work going on subsequently that day, inside their doors, there is no reason to doubt.

"It's rather too bad," said the sheriff, after two hours' silence, in which neither he nor Mr. Furbush had referred to the theme of their errand; "but it's an old story now—ten years ago—and the men are doing so well—seem to have reformed, as you may say—have introduced such breeds of cattle—done so much to improve the country—"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Furbush, who was more familiar with sin and crime, penalty and punishment, than the sheriff was, and who knew very well that the sheriff had never yet been called upon to perform the last offices for any culprit. "I couldn't look at his vile throat without seeing the neck-tie that it needed!"

"I don't know," said the sheriff, nervously; "I couldn't say of myself that he abused anybody but his wife. And a judge in Illinois decided lately that that was nothing—the wife must adopt more conciliating conduct."

"Mrs. Craven isn't very conciliating, is she?" said Mr. Furbush. "I should be exasperated myself if she kept on informing me for ten years, since the day I made her and her child idiots with horror, that three men went down cellar, and only two came up!" And Mr. Furbush shivered, and grew hot afterward with a dull, indignant feeling that did not often mingle in the chess-playing work of his investigations. "He never wore a neck-tie that became him half so well as yours will!" he exclaimed. "There's nothing like a knot under the left ear for a finish."

"I don't know," said the sheriff; "the more I think of it, the more sorry I am I didn't just tip him a wink—"

"Then I should have been obliged to hold you as accessory."

"I've half the mind, I swear, to resign my commission and go to the Legislature and abolish capital punishment!"

"Ah, that's sensible. It takes the relish off of neat work, often, to think there's blood at the end of it," said Mr. Furbush. "Not here, though, I can assure you. But it's a stupid case, on the whole. If it wasn't for the fortune behind it, I think I'd have thrown up a thing that looked so plain on its face!"

It is a fact not very fair to the optimist's view that so many men are able to take pleasure, not only in the misfortunes of others, but in spite of them. The party that rode out of Boltonby that evening, to go on to the Craven's crack farm in the morning, did not make too solemn a night of it. But, gay as they had been when buoyed up by the consciousness of the service they were about to render justice, there was hardly one of them but wished he was somewhere else when they came out of the shadow of the woods in the early sunlight, and saw the figure of the elder Craven leaning against the door-post and smoking negligently, while Walmar exercised and trained his horse on the green, and all the upland and interval, with their tossing grain and meadow grass, lay in such perfect morning peace.

"Mr. Walmar," said the sheriff, "sorry to trouble you, but we shall have to request your company. No such thing as refusing the sheriff's requisition."

There was plainly doubt on Walmar's face as to whether this was an arrest, or merely a summons to serve on the posse with the others; but it grew into an odd, uneasy air of guilt, only half-brazened over by defiance. If he had no other virtue, take him and his situation together, he had a consummate self-possession. Mr. Furbush looked at him and felt that great talents were lost to the world in the early decease of Walmar Craven. But before he could speak, his father had cried out, "Morning, gentlemen! Come back to taste that cider?" A sudden fiery imp darted up in his smile and his eye as he spoke.

"Well, Mr. Craven," answered the sheriff, "no objections if you haven't."

"Here, Wal," called the father; "go and fetch up a jug."

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Craven," said the sheriff, "I think we had better go ourselves."

"Oh, just as you please, gentlemen. If the cellar's big enough to hold you. You've all been there, I believe, at one time or another; but never all together. This way." And before they could admire his audacity, or wonder at their own, the party were below stairs, with father and son beside them, and had opened their bull's-eye lanterns, ready lighted long ago, and displayed their picks and shovels.

"Going to dig for treasure in my cellar?" cried Mr. Craven facetiously, and presently holding his sides with laughter. "Well, now, I object to that, unless we go snacks!"

"You will have all you want of any treasure we find here, my good man," said Mr. Furbush, letting loose his metropolitan manner. And at the word, while his posse waited for their orders, the sheriff served the warrant upon the two men for the murder of the peddler ten years since.

"When I headed the fellows that for three days scoured the woods for him!" exclaimed Walmar, and was then made dumb by amazement.

"Go on, my friends," said his father, folding his arms then. "Go on." And Mr. Furbush's lynx eye discerned the light of such cool conquest in his leer that for a moment he half-feared there was something in the case after all.

Mr. Furbush's eye had other things to entertain it after a few seconds. He stepped forward to the place under which, on the night before, he had made sure that the murdered man lay. "This is the spot," said he. "Proceed with your work." But scarcely had they displaced a brick ere he saw that it was too late—the bricks had been displaced already, and freshly planted again in his absence. He caught Mr. Craven's eye. "I removed the crop of

toad-stools, as you advised,” said that personage, and with such a subtle but triumphal sneer that it was plain they had been outwitted, and the work was going to be in vain.

“What we are looking for,” said Mr. Furbush, with ineffable but well-concealed vexation, “has been removed. Nevertheless, it is as well to follow out the plan;” and he bent forward eagerly with his lantern to watch each stroke of their shovels.

Yes, it was perfectly apparent now that the earth had all lately been turned over down to a certain point—soft rich loam, dark, and emitting a sort of faint miasma, differing from the air of the cellar. Was there an impression of any shape on the soil beneath? Mr. Furbush bent down to see. Not the least. Nothing but the dark earth. And one great black beetle, nauseous object, scrambling away as fast as its countless legs would carry it.

For an instant Mr. Furbush, whose profession kept his mind active, was in danger of believing in the old fairy stories and fancying that the murdered man, enchanted into that foul black beetle, was being made away with before his face and eyes. But while the fancy was passing through his mind his glance had rested on a second object—was it another beetle? He stretched out his hand and caught it up, wiped it as clean as might be, and examined it—a button of carved wood, an ugly little Chinese god, carrying a head slung in his belt by a tiny rope. He turned about and held it up. “You should not have left this behind, Mr. Craven,” said he.

The sheriff drew near to see what had so suddenly changed the note in Mr. Furbush’s voice. “If that is all the evidence, Mr. Furbush,” said he, somewhat irately, “I think I shall release Mr. Craven from arrest.”

“It is out of your power,” said Mr. Furbush, quietly.

“At any rate, we can go up from this vile place and think it over,” said the sheriff.

“Better take something, gentlemen, before you go,” said Mr. Craven, and surely Satan prompted him.

“Don’t care if I do, Craven,” replied the sheriff. “It’s a mighty unpleasant business, anyway—don’t know why we should make it bitter.”

Mr. Furbush said nothing, standing with a serene aspect, nowise crest-fallen, as perfectly convinced as he had been in the beginning, and sure that if his sight was only sharp enough he should presently see this man convict himself.

“No need of my cracking up the Craven cider, neighbors all,” said Mr. Craven, with his very wickedest look; “though maybe when strangers come among us brewing trouble—. However, there’s the pressing of nigh upon a dozen years before you—there’s the juice of the harvest just gone, and there’s the juice of that one gone a half-score seasons since. That’s Mr. Furbush’s particular figure. He took such a pull at it night before last that I don’t think it’s got out of his head yet. Clear as the daylight of a winter’s morning, that cider is—when you can see it, which you can’t here—and sour as the sheriff’s face. Here, Walmar, start the spile, will you?”

But Walmar, totally destitute of that diabolism of humor which was one of his father’s characteristics, and not relishing the present proceeding in the least, declined to lift a hand.

“Do it myself, then,” said Mr. Craven, in great glee, “if you’re such a churl you can’t throw a bone to a bear. I don’t know how to hold a grudge, for my part; I always wipe out the score and cry quits. There’s a glass on the shelf there. Thank you, Mr. Sheriff; your turn next—quality first!” and he drew the glass full and offered it to Mr. Furbush. If he had been ardemon just up from the bottomless pit he could have shown no more hellish a grin than that with which, suddenly and unconsciously, he unmasked his face beneath Mr. Furbush’s eye. “Pungent!” said Mr. Craven. “That’s the word. A drink fit for the gods!”

“Stay a minute,” said Mr. Furbush, gently pushing back the proffered nectar. “Sheriff, I should be sorry to spill good spirit, but there’s some that’s better out than in. Break up that barrel.”

As the words left his lips Walmar sprung forward with a stifled howl.

“Not while I live,” said Craven, in a metamorphosis such as if a black ember had become a fire-brand, “do you spill my cider in my cellar. Hands off!” and he was seated on the barrel.

“Do as I say,” repeated Mr. Furbush, firmly. And there was only one hesitating moment before Mr. Craven was whirled away and held by as strong hands as those that were holding his raging and writhing son; the hoops had been knocked off the barrel, the staves had fallen apart from side to side with the fury of the outpouring liquor—and there lay the ghastly skull, the arms, the half-bleached skeleton of the murdered man they sought.

They stood around the dreadful and disgusting sight in a horrified silence. The two men saw that there was no escape. “Well,” said the elder, in the wolfish audacity of his confession, “I suppose you know what that sound upstairs means now?” And listening they could hear the words of the woman on the dismal hearth above, as she rocked herself feebly to and fro, and made her moan: “Three men went down cellar, and only two came up!”

Harriet Prescott Spofford “In the Maguerriwock” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 37 (August 1868):348–355.