

"Home folks and neighbor people"

Despite the low standard of living that prevails in the backwoods, the average mountain home is a happy one, as homes go. There is little worry and less fret. Nobody's nerves are on edge. Our highlander views all exigencies of life with the calm fortitude and tolerant good-humor of [Bret Harte's southwesterner](#), "to whom cyclones, famine, drought, floods, pestilence and savages were things to be accepted, and whom disaster, if it did not stimulate, certainly did not appall."

It is a patriarchal existence. The man of the house is lord. He takes no orders from anybody at home or abroad. Whether he shalt work or visit or roam the woods with dog and gun is nobody's affair but his own. About family matters he consults with his wife, but in the end his word is law. If Madame be a bit shrewish he is likely to tolerate it as natural to the weaker vessel; but if she should go too far he checks her with a curt "Shet up!" and the incident is closed.

"The woman," as every wife is called, has her kingdom within the house, and her man seldom meddles with its administration. Now and then he may grumble "A woman's allers findin' somethin' to do that a man can't see no sense in;" but, then, the Lord made women fussy over trifles -- His ways are inscrutable -- so why bother about it?

The mountain farmer's wife is not only a household drudge, but a field-hand as well. She helps to plant, hoes corn, gathers fodder, sometimes even plows or splits rails. It is the commonest of sights for a woman to be awkwardly hacking up firewood with a dull axe. When her man leaves home on a journey he is not likely to have laid in wood for the stove or hearth: so she and the children must drag from the hillsides whatever dead timber they can find.

Outside the towns no hat is lifted to maid or wife. A swain would consider it belittled his dignity. At table, if women be seated at all, the dishes are passed first to the men; but generally the wife stands by and serves. There is no conscious discourtesy in such customs; but they betoken an indifference to woman's weakness, a disregard for her finer nature, a denial of her proper rank, that are real and deep-seated in the mountaineer. To him she is little more than a sort of superior domestic animal. The chivalric regard for women that characterized our pioneers of the Far West is altogether lacking in the habits of the backwoodsman of Appalachia.

And yet it is seldom that a highland woman complains of her lot. She knows no other. From aboriginal times the men of her race have been warriors, hunters, herdsman, clearers of forests, and their women have toiled in the fields. Indeed she would scarce respect her husband if he did not lord it over her and cast upon her the menial tasks. It is "manners" for a woman to drudge and obey. All respectable wives do that. And they stay at home where they belong, never visiting or going anywhere without first asking their husband's consent.

I am satisfied that there is less bickering in mountain households than in the most advanced society of Christendom. Certainly there are fewer divorces in proportion to the marriages. This is not by grace of any uncommon regard for the [seventh commandment](#), but rather from a more tolerant attitude of mind.

Mountain women marry early, many of them at fourteen or fifteen, and nearly all before they are twenty. Large families are the rule, seven to ten children being considered normal, and fifteen is not an uncommon number; but the infant mortality is high.

The children have few toys other than rag dolls, broken bits of crockery for "play-purties," and such "ridey-hosses" and so forth as they make for themselves. They play few games, but rather frisk about like young colts without aim or method. Every mountain child has at least one dog for a playfellow, and sometimes a pet pig is equally familiar. In many districts there is not enough level land for a ballground. A prime amusement of the small boys is "rocking" (throwing stones at marks or at each other), in which rather doubtful pastime they become singularly expert.

To encourage a child to do chores about the house and stable, he may be promised a pig of his own the next time a sow litters. To know when to look for the pigs an expedient is practiced that I never heard of elsewhere: the child bores a small hole at the base of his thumbnail. I was assured by a mountain preacher that the hole "will grow out to the edge of the nail in three months and twenty-four days" -- the period, he said, of a sow's gestation (in reality the average term is about three months). Most mountaineers are indulgent, super-indulgent parents. The oft-heard threat "I'll w'ar ye out with a hick'ry!" is seldom carried out. The boys, especially, grow up with little restraint beyond their own natural sense of filial duty. Little children are allowed to eat and drink anything they want -- green fruit, adulterated candy, fresh cider, no matter what -- to the limit of repletion; and fatal consequences are not rare. I have observed the very perversity of license allowed children, similar to what Julian Ralph tells of a man on Bullskin Creek, who, explaining why his child died, said that "No one couldn't make her take no medicine; she just wouldn't take it; she was a Baker through and through, and you never could make a Baker do nothin' he didn't want to!"

The saddest spectacle in the mountains is the tiny burial-ground, without a headstone or headboard in it, all overgrown with weeds, and perhaps unfenced, with cattle grazing over the low mounds or sunken graves. The spot seems never to be visited between interments. I have remarked elsewhere that most mountaineers are singularly callous in the presence of serious injury or death. They show a no less remarkable lack of reverence for the dead. Nothing on earth can be more poignantly lonesome than one of these mountain burial places, nothing so mutely evident of neglect.

Funeral services are extremely simple. In the backwoods, where lumber is scarce, a coffin will be knocked together from rough planks taken from someone's loft, or out of puncheons hewn from the green trees. It is slung on poles and carried like a litter. The only exercises at the grave are singing and praying; and sometimes even those are omitted, as in case no preacher can be summoned in time.

In all back settlements that I have visited, from Kentucky southward, there is a strange custom as to the funeral sermon, that seems to have no analogue elsewhere. It is not preached until long after the interment, maybe a year or several years. In some districts the practice is to hold joint services, at the same time and place, for all in the neighborhood who died within the year. The time chosen will be after the crops are gathered so that everybody can attend. In other places a husband's funeral sermon is postponed until his wife dies, or vice versa, though the interval may be many years. These collective funeral services last two or three days, and are attended by hundreds of people, like a camp-meeting.

Strange scenes sometimes are witnessed at the graveside, prompted perhaps by weird superstitions. At one of our burials, which was attended by more than the usual retinue of kinsfolk, there were present two mothers who bore each other the deadliest hate that women know. Each had a child at her breast. When the clods fell, they silently exchanged babies long enough for each to suckle her rival's child. Was it a reconciliation cemented by the very life of their blood? Or was it a charm to keep off evil spirits? No one could (or would) explain it to me.

Weddings never are celebrated in church, but at the home of the bride, and are jolly occasions, of course. Often the young men, stimulated with more or less "moonshine," add the literally stunning compliment of a shivaree.

The mountaineers have a native fondness for music and dancing, which, with the shouting spells of their revivals, are the only outlets for those powerful emotions which otherwise they studiously conceal. The harmony of "part singing" is unknown in the back districts, where men and women both sing in a jerky treble. Most of their music is in the weird, plaintive minor key that seems spontaneous with primitive people throughout the world. Not only the tone, but the sentiment of their hymns and ballads is usually of a melancholy nature, expressing the wrath of God and the doom of sinners, or the luckless adventures of wild blades and of maidens all forlorn. A highlander might well say, with the clown in *A Winter's Tale*, "I love a ballad but even too well; if it be doleful matter, merrily set down, or a very pleasant thing indeed, and sung lamentably."

But where banjo and fiddle enter, the vapors vanish. Up strike The Fox Chase, Shady Grove, Gamblin' man, Sourwood Mountain, and knees are limbered, and merry voices rise.

Call up your dog, O call up your dog!
Call up your dog!
Call up your dog!
Let 's a-go huntin' to ketch a groundhog.
Rang tang a-whaddle linky day!

Wherever the church has not put its ban on "twistifications" the country dance is the chief amusement of young and old. I have never succeeded in memorizing [the queer "calls" at these dances](#), in proper order, and so take the liberty of quoting from Mr. Haney's Mountain People of Kentucky.

"Eight hands up and go to the left; half and back; corners turn; partners sash-i-ate. First four, forwards and back; forward again and cross over; forward and back and home you go. Gents stand and ladies swing in the center; own partners and half sash-i-ate. "Eight hands and gone again; half and back; partners by the right and opposite by the left-sash-i-ate. Right hands across and howdy do? Left and back and how are you? Opposite partners, half sash-i-ate and go to the next (and so on for each couple).

"All hands up and go to the left. Hit the floor. Corners turn and sash-i-ate. First couple cage the bird with three arms around. Bird hop out and hoot-owl in; three arms around and hootin' agin. Swing and circle four, ladies change and gents the same; right and left; the shoofly swing (and so on for each couple)."

In homes where dancing is not permitted, and often in others, "play-parties" are held, at which social games are practiced with childlike abandon: Roll the Platter, Weavilly Wheat, Needle's Eye, We Fish Who Bite, Grin an' Go 'Foot, Swing the Cymblin, Skip t' m' Lou (pronounced "Skip-tum a-loo") and many others of a rollicking, half-dancing nature.

Round the house; skip t' m' Lou, my darlin'.
Steal my partner and I'll steal again; skip (etc.).
Take her and go with her -- I don't care; skip (etc.).
I can get another as pretty as you; skip (etc.).
Pretty as a red-bird, and prettier too; skip (etc.).

A substitute for the church fair is the "pokesupper," at which dainty pokes (bags) of cake and other home-made delicacies are auctioned off to the highest bidder. Whoever bids-in a poke is entitled to eat with the girl who prepared it, and escort her home. The rivalry exended among the mountain swains by such artful lures may be judged from the fact that, in a neighborhood where a man's work brings only a dollar a day, a pretty girl's poke may be bid up, to ten, twenty, or even fifty dollars.

As a rule, the only holidays observed in the mountains, outside the towns, are Christmas and New Year's. Christmas is

celebrated after the southern fashion, which seems bizarre indeed to one witnessing it for the first time. The boys and men, having no firecrackers (which they would disdain, anyway), go about shooting revolvers and drinking to the limit of capacity or supply. Blank cartridges are never used in this uproarious jollification, and the courses of the bullets are left to chance, so that discreet people keep their noses indoors. Christmas is a day of license, of general indulgence, it being tacitly assumed that punishment is remitted for any ordinary sins of the flesh that may be committed on that day. There is no church festivity, nor are Christmas trees ever set up. Few mountain children hang up their stockings, and many have never heard of Santa Claus.

New Year's Day is celebrated with whatever effervescence remains from Christmas, and in the same manner; but generally it is a feeble reminder, as the liquid stimulus has run short and there are many sore heads in the neighborhood.

Most of the mountain preachers nowadays denounce dances and "play-parties" as sinful diversions, though their real objection seems to be that such gatherings are counter-attractions that thin out the religious ones. Be that as it may, they certainly have put a damper on frolics, so that in very many mountain settlements "goin' to meetin'" is recognized primarily as a social function and affords almost the only chance for recreation in which family can join family without restraint.

Meetings are held in the log schoolhouse. The congregation ranges itself, men on one side, women on the other, on rude benches that sometimes have no backs. Everybody goes. If one judged from attendance he would rate our highlanders as the most religious people in America. This impression is strengthened, in a stranger, by the grave and astoundingly patient attention that is given an illiterate or nearly illiterate minister while he holds forth for two or three mortal hours on the beauties of predestination, free-will, foreordination, immersion, footwashing, or on the delinquencies of "them acorn-fed critters that has gone New Light over in Copes Cove."

After an alfresco lunch, everybody doggedly returns to hear another circuit-rider expound and denounce at the top of his voice until late afternoon-as long as "the spirit lasts" and he has "good wind." When he warms up, he throws in a gasping ah or uh at short intervals, which constitutes the "holy tone." Doctor MacClintock gives this example: "Oh, brethren, repent ye, and repent ye of your sins, ah; fer if ye don't ah, the Lord, ah, he will grab yer by the seat of yer pants, ah, and held yer over hell fire till ye holler like a coon!"

During these services there is a good deal of running in and out by the men and boys, most of whom gradually congregate on the outside to whittle, gossip, drive bargains, and debate among themselves some point of dogma that is too good to keep still about.

Nearly all of our highlanders, from youth upward, show an amazing fondness for theological dispute. This consists mainly in capping texts, instead of reasoning, with the single minded purpose of confusing or downing an opponent. Into this battle of memories rather than of wits the most worthless scapegrace will enter with keen gusto and perfect seriousness. I have known two or three hundred mountain lumber-jacks, hard-swearing and hard-drinking tough-as-they-make-'ems, to be whetted to a fighting edge over the rocky problem "Was Saul damned?" (Can a suicide enter the kingdom of heaven?)

The mountaineers are intensely, universally, Protestant. You will seldom find a backwoodsman who knows what a Roman Catholic is. As John Fox says, "He is the only man in the world whom the Catholic Church has made little or no effort to proselyte. Dislike of [Episcopalianism](#) is still strong among people who do not know, or pretend not to know, what the word means. 'Any Episcopalians around here?' asked a clergyman at a mountain cabin. 'I don't know,' said the old woman. 'Jim's got the skins of a lot o' varmints up in the loft. Mebbe you can find one up thar'."

The first settlers of Appalachia mainly were [Presbyterians](#), as became Scotch-Irishmen, but they fell away from that faith, partly because the wilderness was too poor to support a regular ministry, and partly because it was too democratic for Calvinism with its supreme authority of the clergy. This much of seventeenth century Calvinism the mountaineer retains: a passion for hair-splitting argument over points of doctrine, and the cocksure intolerance of [John Knox](#); but the ancestral creed itself has been forgotten.

The circuit-rider, whether [Methodist](#) or [Baptist](#), found here a field ripe for his harvest. Being himself self-supporting and unassuming, he won easily the confidence of the people. He preached a highly emotional religion that worked his audience into the ecstasy that all primitive people love. And he introduced a mighty agent of evangelization among outdoor folk when he started the camp-meeting.

The season for camp-meetings is from mid August to October. The festival may last a week in one place. It is a jubilee-week to the work-worn and home-chained women, their only diversion from a year of unspeakably monotonous toil. And for the young folks, it is their theater, their circus, their county fair. (I say this with no disrespect: "big-meetin' time" is a gala week, if there be any such thing at all in the mountains-its attractiveness is full as much secular as spiritual to the great body of the people.)

It is a camp by day only, or up to closing time. No mountaineer owns a tent. Preachers and exhorters are housed nearby, and visitors from all the country scatter about with their friends, or sleep in the open, cooking their meals by the wayside.

In these backwoods revival meetings we can witness to-day the weird phenomena of ungovernable shouting, ecstasy, bodily contortions, trance, catalepsy, and other results of hypnotic suggestion and the contagious one-mindedness of an overwrought crowd. This is called "taking a big through," and is regarded as the madness of supernatural joy. It is a mild form of that extraordinary frenzy which swept the Kentucky settlements in 1800, when thousands of men and women at the camp-meetings fell victims to "the jerks," "barking exercises," erotic vagaries, physical wreckage, or insanity, to which

the frenzy led.

Many mountaineers are easily carried away by new doctrines extravagantly presented. Religious mania is taken for inspiration by the superstitious who are looking for "signs and wonders." At one time [Mormon](#) prophets lured women from the backwoods of western Carolina and eastern Tennessee. Later there was a similar exodus of people to the [Mormon](#) Castellites, a sect of whom it was commonly remarked that "everybody who joins the Castellites goes crazy." In our day the same may be said of the [Holy Rollers](#) and [Holiness People](#).

In a feud town of eastern Kentucky, not long ago, I saw two Holiness exhorters prancing before a solemnly attentive crowd in the courthouse square, one of them shouting and exhibiting the "holy laugh," while the other pointed to the Cumberland River and cried, "I don't say if I had the faith, I say I have the faith, to walk over that river dry-shod!" I scanned the crowd, and saw nothing but belief, or willingness to believe, on any countenance. Of course, most mountaineers are more intelligent than that; but few of them are free from superstitions of one kind or other. There are to-day many believers in witchcraft among them (though none own it to any but their intimates) and nearly everybody in the hills has faith in portents.

The mountain clergy, as a general rule, are hostile to "book larnin'," for "there ain't no Holy Ghost in it." One of them who had spent three months at a theological school told President Frost, "Yes, the seminary is a good place ter go and git rested up, but 'tain't worth while fer me ter go thar no more 's long as I've got good wind."

It used to amuse me to explain how I knew that the earth was a sphere; but one day, when I was busy, a tiresome old preacher put the everlasting question to me: "Do you believe the yearth is round?" An impish perversity seized me and I answered, "No -- all blamed humbug!" "Amen!" cried my delighted catechist, "I knowed in reason you had more sense."

In general the religion of the mountaineers has little influence on every-day behavior, little to do with the moral law. Salvation is by faith alone, and not by works. Sometimes a man is "churched" for breaking the Sabbath, "cussin'" "tale-bearin'"; but sins of the flesh are rarely punished, being regarded as amiable frailties of mankind. It should be understood that the mountaineer's morals are "all tailfirst," like those of [Alan Breck in Stevenson's Kidnapped](#).

One of our old-timers nonchalantly admitted in court that he and a preacher had marked false [corner-tree](#) which figured in an important land suit. On cross-examination he was asked:

"You admit that you and Preacher X -- forged that corner-tree? Didn't you give Preacher X a good character, in your testimony? Do you consider it consistent with his profession as a minister of the Gospel to forge corner-trees?"

"Aw," replied the witness, " religion ain't got nothin' to do with corner-trees!"

John Fox relates that, "A feud leader who had about exterminated the opposing faction, and had made a good fortune for a mountaineer while doing it, for he kept his men busy getting out timber when they weren't fighting, said to me in all seriousness:

"'I have triumphed agin my enemies time and time agin. The Lord's on my side, and I gits a better and better Christian ever' year.'

"A preacher, riding down a ravine, came upon an old mountaineer hiding in the bushes with his rifle.

"'What are you doing there, my friend?"

"' Ride on, stranger,' was the easy answer. 'I'm awaitin' fer Jim Johnson, and with the help of the Lawd I'm goin' to blow his damn head off.' "

But let us never lose sight of the fact that these people, intellectually, are not living in our age. To judge them fairly we must go back and get a medieval point of view, which, by the way, persisted in Europe and America until well into the [Georgian period](#). If history be too dry, read Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, and especially its sequel *David Balfour*, to learn what that viewpoint was. The parallel is so close -- eighteenth century Britain and twentieth century Appalachia -- that here we walk the same paths with [Alan and David, the Edinboro' lawsharks, Katriona and Lady Allardyce](#). The only difference of moment is that we have no aristocracy.

As for the morals of our highlanders, they are precisely what any well-read person would expect after taking their belatedness into consideration. In speech and conduct, when at ease among themselves, they are frank, old-fashioned Englishmen and Scots, such as [Fielding](#) and [Smollet](#) and [Pepys](#) and [Burns](#) have shown us to the life. Their manners are boorish, of course, judged by a feminized modern standard, and their home conversation is as coarse as the mixed-company speeches in Shakespeare's comedies or the offhand pleasantries of [Good Queen Bess](#).

But what is refinement? What is morality?

"I don't mind," said the [Beloved Vagabond](#), "I don't mind the frank dungheap outside a German peasant's kitchen window; but what I loathe and abominate is the dungheap hidden beneath Hedwige's draper papa's parlor floor." And we do well to consider that fine remark by [Sir Oliver Lodge](#): "Vice is reversion to a lower type after perception of a higher."

I have seen the worst as well as the best of Appalachia. There are "places on Sand Mountain "scores of them -- where

unspeakable orgies prevail at times. But I know that between these two extremes the great mass of the mountain people are very like persons of similar station elsewhere, just human, with human frailties, only a little more honest, I think, in owning them. And even in the tenebra of far-back coves, where conditions exist as gross as anything to be found in the wynds and closes of our great cities, there is this blessed difference: that these half-wild creatures have not been hopelessly submerged, have not been driven into desperate war against society. The worst of them still have good traits, strong characters, something responsive to decent treatment. They are kind-hearted, loyal to their friends, quick to help anyone in distress. They know nothing of civilization. They are simply the unstarted -- and their thews are sound.

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