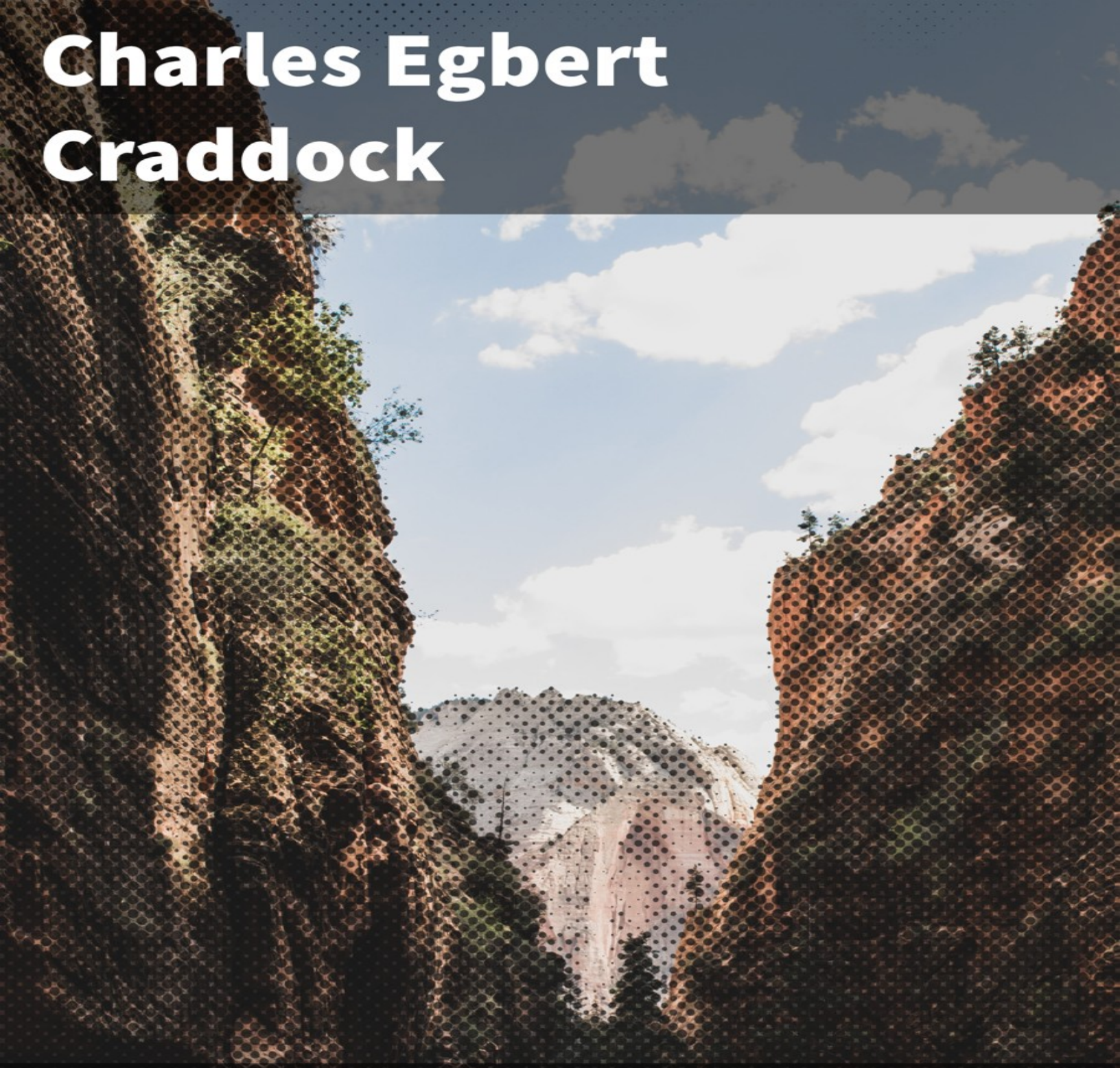
Charles Egbert Craddock



Down the Ravine

Charles Egbert Craddock

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CHAPTER I.

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The new moon, a gleaming scimitar, cleft the gauzy mists above a rugged spur of the Cumberland Mountains. The sky, still crimson and amber, stretched vast and lonely above the vast and lonely landscape. A fox was barking in the laurel.

This was an imprudent proceeding on the part of the fox, considering the value of his head-gear. A young mountaineer down the ravine was reminded, by the sharp, abrupt sound, of a premium offered by the State of Tennessee for the scalp and ears of the pestiferous red fox.

All unconscious of the legislation of extermination, the animal sped nimbly along the ledge of a cliff, becoming visible from the ravine below, a tawny streak against the gray rock. Swift though he was, a jet of red light flashing out in the dusk was yet swifter. The echoing crags clamored with the report of a rifle. The tawny streak was suddenly still. Three boys appeared in the depths of the ravine and looked up.

"Thar now! Ye can't git him off'n that thar ledge, Birt," said Tim Griggs. "The contrairy beastis couldn't hev fund a more ill-convenient spot ter die of he hed sarched the mounting."

"I ain't goin' ter leave him thar, though," stoutly declared the boy who still held the rifle. "That thar fox's scalp an' his two ears air wuth one whole dollar."

Tim remonstrated. "Look-a-hyar, Birt; ef ye try ter climb up this hyar bluff, ye'll git yer neck bruk, sure."

Birt Dicey looked up critically. It was a rugged ascent of forty feet or more to the narrow ledge where the red fox lay. Although the face of the cliff was jagged, the rock greatly splintered and fissured, with many ledges, and here and there a tuft of weeds or a stunted bush growing in a niche, it was very steep, and would afford precarious foothold. The sunset was fading. The uncertain light would multiply the dangers of the attempt. But to leave a dollar lying there on the fox's head, that the wolf and the buzzard might dine expensively to-morrow!

"An' me so tried for money!" he exclaimed, thinking aloud.

Nate Griggs, who had not before spoken, gave a sudden laugh,—a dry, jeering laugh.

"Ef all the foxes on the mounting war ter hold a pertracted meet'n, jes' ter pleasure you-uns, thar wouldn't be enough scalps an' ears 'mongst 'em ter make up the money ye hanker fur ter buy a horse."

To buy a horse was the height of Birt's ambition. His mother was a widow; and as an instance of the fact that misfortunes seldom come singly, the horse on which the family depended to till their scanty acres died shortly after his owner. And so, whenever the spring opened and the ploughs all over the countryside were starting, their one chance to cultivate a crop was to hire a mule from their nearest neighbor, the tanner. Birt was the eldest son, and his mother had only his work to offer in payment. The proposition always took the tanner in what he called a "jubious time." Spring is the season for stripping the trees of their bark, which is richer in tannin when the sap flows most

freely, and the mule was needed to haul up the piles of bark from out the depths of the woods to the tanyard. Then, too, Jubal Perkins had his own crops to put in. As he often remarked in the course of the negotiation, "I don't eat tan bark—nor yit raw hides." Although the mule was a multifarious animal, and ploughed and worked in the bark-mill, and hauled from the woods, and went long journeys in the wagon or under the saddle, he was not ubiquitous, and it was impossible for him to be in the several places in which he was urgently needed at the same time. Therefore, to hire him out on these terms seemed hardly an advantage to his master. Nevertheless, this bargain was annually struck. The poverty-stricken widow always congratulated herself upon its conclusion, and it never occurred to her that the amount of work that Birt did in the tanyard was a disproportionately large return for the few days that the tanner's mule ploughed their little fields.

Birt, however, was beginning to see that a boy to drive that mule around the bark-mill was as essential as the mule himself. As Providence had failed to furnish the tanner with a son for this purpose - his family consisting of several small daughters—Birt supplied a long-felt want.

The boy appreciated that his simple mother was over-reached, yet he could not see that she could do otherwise. He sighed for independence, for a larger opportunity. As he drove the mule round the limited circuit, his mind was far away. He anxiously canvassed the future. He cherished fiery, ambitious schemes,—often scorched, poor fellow, by their futility. With his time thus mortgaged, he thought his help to his mother was far less than it might be. But until he

could have a horse of his own, there was no hope—no progress. And for this he planned, and dreamed, and saved.

Partly these considerations, partly the love of adventure, and partly the jeer in Nate's laugh determined him not to relinquish the price set upon the fox's head. He took off his coat and flung it on the ground beside his rifle. Then he began to clamber up the cliff.

The two brothers, their hands in the pockets of their brown jeans trousers, stood watching his ascent. Nate had sandy hair, small gray eyes, set much too close together, and a sharp, pale, freckled face. Tim seemed only a mild repetition of him, as if Nature had tried to illustrate what Nate would be with a better temper and less sly intelligence.

Birt was climbing slowly. It was a difficult matter. Here was a crevice that would hardly admit his eager fingers, and again a projection so narrow that it seemed to grudge him foothold. Some of the ledges, however, were wider, and occasionally a dwarfed huckleberry bush, nourished in a fissure, lifted him up like a helping hand. He quaked as he heard the roots strain and creak, for he was a pretty heavy fellow for sixteen years of age. They did not give way, however, and up and up he went, every moment increasing the depth below him and the danger. His breath was short; his strength flagged, he slipped more than once, giving himself a great fright; and when he reached the ledge where the dead fox lay, he thought, "The varmint don't wuth it."

Nevertheless he whooped out his triumph to Nate and Tim in a stentorian halloo, for they had already started homeward, and presently their voices died in the distance.

Birt faced about and sat down on the ledge to rest, his feet dangling over the depths beneath.

It was a lonely spot, walled in by the mountains, and frequented only by the deer that were wont to come to lick salt from the briny margin of a great salt spring far down the ravine. Their hoofs had worn a deep excavation around it in the countless years and generations that they had herded here. The "lick," as such places are called in Tennessee, was nearly two acres in extent, and in the centre of the depression the brackish water stood to the depth of six feet or more. Birt looked down at it, thinking of the old times when, according to tradition, it was the stamping ground of buffalo as well as deer. The dusk deepened. The shadows were skulking in and out of the wild ravine as the wind rose and fell. They took to his fancy the form of herds of the banished bison, revisiting in this impalpable guise the sylvan shades where they are but a memory now.

Presently he began the rugged descent, considerably hampered by the fox, which he carried by the tail. He stopped to rest whenever he found a ledge that would serve as a seat. Looking up, high above the jagged summit of the cliff that sharply serrated the zenith, he saw the earliest star, glorious in the crimson and amber sky. Below, a point of silver light quivered, reflected in the crimson and amber waters of the "lick." The fire-flies were flickering among the ferns; he saw about him their errant gleam. The shadowy herds trooped down the mountain side.

Now and then his weight uprooted a bush in his hands, and the clods fell. He missed his footing as he neared the base, and came down with a thump. It was a gravelly spot

where he had fallen, and he saw in a moment that it was the summer-dried channel of a mountain rill. As he pulled himself up on one elbow, he suddenly paused with dilated eyes. The evening light fell upon a burnished glimmer;—a bit of stone—was it stone?—shining with a metallic lustre.

He looked at it for a moment, his eyes glowing in the contemplation of a splendid possibility.

What were those old stories that his father used to tell of the gold excitement in Tennessee in 1831, when the rich earth flung largess from its hidden wealth along the romantic banks of Coca Creek! Gold had been found in Tennessee—why not here? And once—why not again?

The idea so possessed him that while he was skinning the fox his sharp knife almost sacrificed one of the *two* ears imperatively required by the statute, in order that the wily hunter may not be tempted to present one ear at a time, thus multiplying red foxes and premiums therefor like Falstaff's "rogues in buckram."

He took his way homeward through the darkening woods, carrying the pelt in his hand. It was not long before he could hear the dogs barking, and as he came suddenly upon a little clearing in the midst of the dense, encompassing wilderness, he saw them all trooping down from the unenclosed passage between the two log-rooms which constituted the house. An old hound had half climbed the fence, but as he laid his fore-paw on the topmost rail, his deep-mouthed bay was hushed,—he was recognizing the approaching step of his master. The yellow curs were still insisting upon a marauder theory. One of them barked defiance as he thrust his head between the rails of the

fence. There was another head thrust through too, about on a level with Towser's, but it was not a dog's head. As Birt caught a glimpse of it, he called out hastily, "Stand back thar, Tennessee!" And then it was lost to view, for at the sound of his voice all the dogs came huddling over the bars, shrilly yelping a tumultuous welcome.

When Birt had vaulted over the fence, the little object withdrew its head from between the rails and came trotting along beside him, holding up its hand to clasp his.

His mother, standing in the passage, her tall, thin figure distinct in the firelight that came flickering out through the open door, soliloquized querulously: -

"Ef that thar child don't quit that fool way o' stickin' her head a-twixt the rails ter watch fur her brother, she'll git cotched thar some day like a peeg in a pen, an' git her neck bruk."

Birt overheard her. "Tennessee air too peart ter git herself hurt," he said, a trifle ashamed of his ready championship of his little sister, as a big rough boy is apt to be of gentler emotions.

If ever infancy can be deemed uncouth, she was an uncouth little atom of humanity. Her blue checked homespun dress, graced with big horn buttons, descended almost to her feet. Her straight, awkwardly cropped hair was of a nondescript shade pleasantly called "tow." As she came into the light of the fire, she lifted wide black eyes deprecatingly to her mother.

"She ain't pretty, I know, but she air powerful peart," Birt used to say so often that the phrase became a formula with him.

If she were "powerful peart," it was a fact readily apparent only to him, for she was a silent child, with the single marked characteristic of great affection for her eldest brother and a singular pertinacity in following him about.

"I dunno 'bout Tennie's peartness," his mother sarcastically rejoined. "'Pears ter me like the chile hain't never hed good sense; afore she could walk she'd crawl along the floor arter ye, an' holler like a squeech-ow*el* ef ye went off an' lef' her. An' ye air plumb teched in the head too, Birt, ter set sech store by Tennie. I look ter see her killed, or stunted, some day, in them travels o' hern."

For when Birt Dicey went "yerrands" on the mule through the woods to the Settlement, Tennessee often rode on the pommel of his saddle. She followed in the furrow when he ploughed. She was as familiar an object at the tanyard as the bark-mill itself. When he wielded the axe, she perched on one end of the woodpile. But so far, she had passed safely through her varied adventures, and gratifying evidences of her growth were registered on the door. "Stand back thar, Tennessee!" in a loud, boyish halloo, was a command when danger was ahead, which she obeyed with the readiness of a veteran.

Sometimes, however, this incongruous companionship became irksome to him. Her trusting, insistent affection made her a clog upon him, and he grew impatient of it.

Ah, little Sister! he learned its value one day.

The great wood fire was all aflare in the deep chimney-place. Savory odors came from the gridiron and the skillet and the hoe, on the live coals drawn out on the broad hearth. The tow-headed children grew noisy as they

assembled around the bare pine table, and began to clash their knives and forks.

Birt, unmindful, crouched by the hearth, silently turning his precious specimens about, that he might examine them by the firelight. Tennessee, her chuffy hand on his shoulder, for she could reach it as he knelt, held her head close to his, and looked at them too with wide black eyes. His mother placed the supper on the table, and twice she called to him to come, but he did not hear. She turned and looked down at him, then broke out sharply in indignant surprise.

"Air ye bereft o' reason, Birt Dicey! Ye set thar nosin' a handful o' rocks ez ef they war fitten ter eat! An' now look at the boy—a stuffin' 'em in his pockets ter sag 'em down and tear 'em out fur me ter sew in ag'in. Waal, waal! Sol'mon say ef ye spare the rod ye spile the child—mos' ennybody could hev fund that out from thar own 'sperience; but the wisest man that ever lived lef' no receipt how ter keep a boy's pockets whole in his breeches."