

(For Baldwin's Monthly.)

**OLD CRAWFORD AND THE WILLY HOUSE.**  
(Of the White Mountains.)

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"Here they lie, eight feet beneath us. Poor souls! not one of them escaped. This road is eight feet higher now than before that slide from the mountain," was the comment of Old Crawford. Saying this, we turned mechanically in the direction of the small, unpainted cottage; rather should I say it was beautifully tinted by time and the elements. It stood upon a narrow esplanade, so green that one wondered from whence and how such a lovely oasis had been recovered from the desert that surrounded it, till following a slip of verdure it was observed to connect itself with a sort of saddle emanating from the bald and scarred surface of the mountain side. Directly above this shoulder or saddle, which was dotted red with the wild cranberry, and softened with moss also, giving place through the rocky crevices to the lovely blue harebell, was a yellow chasm plowed from the mountain top, and descending with the wreck of stunted pines and huge boulders, as if at one time it had threatened to submerge the little cottage and bury this one spot of verdure in overwhelming ruin.

"How could any one live in such a desert?" I exclaimed, seating myself upon a rock, because my husband and Old Crawford had done so.

"Aye, child," replied the latter, poising the huge crowbar upon the palm of his hand, thoughtfully; "we who live in the mountains love them. The wind screeching down the valleys is suitable thereto, and the thunder and lightning sound as if the old peaks sent up signals and messages to one another."

I thought of Byron's—

—"And Jura, from her misty shroud,  
Calls to the listening Alps, that cry to her aloud."

For mountains are the inspiration of the poet, and those nurtured amid their wild grandeur are instinctive and spontaneous utterers of their sublime melody. He continued:

"The Willy was a nice family. He, being a mountaineer, as it were, enjoyed this desert, but somehow I always thought it was too much for her; she was delicate like, and the lonesomeness, and noise of the river and mountains were a sort of dread to her."

"Indeed it must have been," I responded; for even where we sat in this mild Summer day there came to the ear the monotone of the river, and ever and anon a stone loosened from the mountain above slid downward—leaping from point to point, and burying itself in the water below. It was the slow process of nature leveling the hill and upraising the valley.

"What was the object of the family in settling themselves in this wild region?" questioned my husband.

"They did not exactly settle here," rejoined Old Crawford. "You see, after the Winter was fully set in, this road was as safe as any down in the settlements. Everything was frozen up from the river to the mountain top—froze solid as rock, and no sun could melt it, till the late Spring or Summer rains came down here like pouring water from a bucket, and then—well, it was one roar of wind, water and rocks, and a person must be bred here to enjoy it, for it is unhuman."

"There is nothing more fearful than the wind," I mused, audibly.

"You think so? Well I rather enjoy it; but men can stand up against what a woman can't. You see, the folks of the north part of Vermont and New Hampshire were a good way from any market. They are right smart people, tall and strong and good farmers, but the pesky part of it was they couldn't get money unless they could carry their pigs to market. Now, they could go down through the 'Notch,' and then it was clear sledding to Portland, where the people wanted just what they had to sell. But the difficulty was to get through the 'Notch'—it's only three miles, but I've known men to be twelve and sixteen hours getting through, and some on 'em got snowed up and would o' died, only Tom, that is my boy, and I, kept a sharp look out for 'em, and if we didn't hear their horns blow, why bless you, it was shovels and bear-skins and tough work. We never let them go without one or other of us for guide, for storms come

up here when you wouldn't expect 'em. Now, these farmers wanted a place to rest and warm themselves after getting through the 'Notch,' and so this house was built, and after a while the Willys came here to live. Good people; and they gave the farmers a hot fire, a nice supper, and a shake-down, till it was time to go on again; sometimes twenty of them came down with their 'pungs,' and put up here, and cracked jokes and sang old songs about fair Rosamond and Queen Eleanor (vile old jade she was, too,) and ate apples and doughnuts and pumpkin pies, and pleasant, harmless carouses they had of it—and now we have to give it all up. Changes are coming on us."

The speaker was silent awhile, and his fine, thoughtful face assumed a melancholy expression. He went on:

"Willy's wife, somehow, always had something nice and pretty about her; she was just your size, child," glancing with a fatherly look at me, "and that year, the last she ever saw, she and Willy took it into their heads to not break up and go away, as was usual, before the snows melted and came pouring down into the valley, as they always did, covering the place on which we sit, and up to the edge of the little spot where the house stands. Willy built a wall round the house, but 'twas no more than a bulrush against a moving mountain. I warned them to go away, as the frost came out, but she had a baby in her arms, and didn't want to move.

"I don't think there's any danger, father," she said; she always called me father," and the old man's voice trembled a little as he drew his hand over his eyes. "Well, she busied herself and the children to make this little spot look pretty, singing her hymns and teaching the children out of the Bible; and Willy went to work and walled up a camp, which she, in her pretty way, named 'The Refuge,' to which they were to fly in case of danger. You must know that these slides move slowly, the loosened rocks skipping and tumbling, at first, till the falling stones and earth plow deeper and deeper, and then they begin to move faster and faster, tearing all before them, with a sound like thunder. This being so, they thought they would have time to escape to the Refuge, in case of danger. Poor souls! they'd better have trusted to the house. You see that yellow seam in the mountain, over across the river; well, about a month before the great slide, that mountain broke away in the night-time. 'Twas an awful storm, and the slide turned the river several feet nearer the house. I begged them to come through to our place till all the snow melted from the mountain, but as there had been no slide from the mountain, which you see above the house, and they were quite a household, they wouldn't come. Well, well, child, that was a terrible night; it was one continual roar. Wind and rain, thunder and lightning, the torrents pouring down, and every hill seeming as if it had broke away, and was hurling itself into the valley.

"Early in the morning, before the sun was up, my boys and I made our way here. The river was a lake—it took us hours to climb over the stones and trees to reach this valley." Here the old man rose to his feet, and held the crowbar aloft, pointing his way; his voice was husky, and his keen eye dim with manly grief.

"When we came through the narrow pass, yonder, Tom, who was ahead, cried out, 'All right!' and surely there was the house, untouched. Ruin was on every side, but the sun shone pleasantly upon its sloping roof. The low windows glittered cheerily, and the door was open to invite us to enter; but there was a strange stillness there. There was no morning hymn, nor rising smoke, to tell of the family. Upon entering all was hushed. There was the Bible upon the table; a little basket, with a thimble beside it; a child's shoe by the rocking chair. We hurried forward to the Refuge. Not a vestige of it remained. The rocks were piled many feet above its place. Following the course of the slide, returning to the house, we saw a portion of a shawl emerging from the ground, and that told the whole sad story."

Following our guide, we ascended with him up to the saddle-like projection of the mountain side, of which I have before spoken.

"Here," he continued, "you see that slide began quite at the top of this peak, which rises directly above

the house. At the top the hill was, as it were, sliced off, leaving a flat or hollow space filled with water, which descended on the east side in a pretty stream, when the snows were melting. On that fatal June night, they must have been appalled at finding the mountain coming down upon their heads, with a crash and roar more dreadful than you, child, can conceive; earth and stones, tall trees and oceans of water rushing upon them, and ready to sweep away their dwelling, and they, naturally, started for the Refuge."

"And yet they perished, while the house escaped," I exclaimed.

"You wonder how that can be. Observe how the slide has plowed itself into the mountain, a great gorge, which, once in motion, could not be stayed; now, you see," pointing with the iron crowbar, "it comes down a straight line till it reaches this shoulder above the house; here it divides, straddles this saddle, and goes on in two streams or branches, one upon each side of the house, and meeting below, it swept them all away."

We stood awhile in silence, contemplating the scene, while the wind sighed through the crevices of the rocks, and the chirp of the cricket and grasshopper enhanced, rather than diminished, the sense of solitude.

"Their bodies were never recovered?" inquired my husband.

"I've will never rise till the great resurrection of all; but, digging where the shawl implied they might be—digging through masses of stone, we found three—the poor mother clinging still to her child. A sad sight it was."

So saying, we descended, and reverently entered the lowly dwelling. The bedrooms deserted, the closets empty and the doors ajar, suggested melancholy thoughts. I wiped the tears from my eyes, at which Old Crawford patted my shoulder paternally, and said: "You will write your names on the walls?" and he swept his hand around the stained plaster of the room in which we stood, with an expression of scorn upon his manly face.

"Never! it would be desecration," we exclaimed. His eyes glowed with a smile of approval. We now saw that the walls of the house so tragically bereft of inmates, were covered with the names of visitors, who thus betrayed the unwillingness of human beings to be forgotten, and they seek a brief notoriety even in this foolish way, profaning that which ought to be held sacred.

The days passed amid the mountains were days, if not exactly marked in white, marked by pictures never to be obliterated, and thoughts that extend themselves to undying emotions.

Wandering amid these hills and valleys Tom Crawford was our guide, and he pointed out many a spot where some bold enterprise had been achieved. Here a bear had been tracked home to his den and killed, while the half-grown cubs became pets in the household. There the mighty moose had called to his fellows, and again the timid deer had hither come to drink, and the catamount leaped from tree to tree. Bands of Indians, hideous in war paint, had sometimes come through the "Notch," in years ago, to hold council with the Mohawks, or perchance on their way to fight the Pequods.

Ascending a lofty cliff to hail the rising of the sun through this land of mist and vapory cloud, we found a valley of some considerable space high up among the hills. Here was a low growth of pine and juniper, and the beautiful cranberry vine embedded in mosses. The ground was marshy, indeed, it was more like a shallow lake, out of which emerged several crystal streams with tiny cascades, that Titania might have used to turn her mill-stones in which to grind the pollen of the rose and the lily brought on the thighs of the honey-bee.

"Here," said young Crawford, placing a pebble in my hand, "toss that into that little stream yonder." I did so, and he added: "You have tossed a pebble into the head-waters of the Saco River, which winds its way, gathering tribute all along the route, and pours itself into Casco Bay in Maine."

Of course, I laughed with delight. Giving me another pebble we turned our backs upon the vagrant Saco, and he directed me to toss it into a little stream that tumbled and hurried down the acclivity, scarce more than a thread of mist. I obeyed and he continued: "You have now tossed a pebble into the source of the Connecticut River, which hurries along, touching Vermont and New Hampshire, through Massachusetts and Connecticut, and pours itself into Long Island Sound."

"Verily!" I exclaimed, "this is the day of small things; who can calculate the future?"