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# THE CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

By Charles Egbert Craddock

1911

He yearned for a sign from the heavens. Could one intimation be vouchsafed him, how it would confirm his faltering faith! Jubal Kennedy was of the temperament impervious to spiritual subtleties, fain to reach conclusions with the line and rule of mathematical demonstration. Thus, all unreceptive, he looked through the mountain gap, as through some stupendous gateway, on the splendors of autumn; the vast landscape glamorous in a transparent amethystine haze; the foliage of the dense primeval wilderness in the October richness of red and russet; the "hunter's moon," a full sphere of illuminated pearl, high in the blue east while yet the dull vermilion sun swung westering above the massive purple heights. He knew how the sap was sinking; that the growths of the year had now failed; presently all would be shrouded in snow, but only to rise again in the reassurance of vernal quickening, to glow anew in the fullness of bloom, to attain eventually the perfection of fruition. And still he was deaf to the reiterated analogy of death, and blind to the immanent obvious prophecy of resurrection and the life to come. His thoughts, as he stood on this jutting crag in Sunrise Gap, were with a recent "experience meeting" at which he had sought to canvass his spiritual needs. His demand of a sign from the heavens as evidence of the existence of the God of revelation, as assurance of the awakening of divine grace in the human heart, as actual proof that wistful mortality is inherently endowed with immortality, had electrified this symposium. Though it was fashionable, so to speak, in this remote cove among the Great Smoky Mountains, to be repentant in rhetorical involutions and a self-accuser in finespun interpretations of sin, doubt, or more properly an eager questioning, a desire to possess the sacred mysteries of religion, was unprecedented. Kennedy was a proud man, reticent, reserved. Although the old parson, visibly surprised and startled, had gently invited his full confidence, Kennedy had hastily swallowed his words, as best he might, perceiving that the congregation had wholly misinterpreted their true intent and that certain gossips had an unholy relish of the sensation they had caused.

Thereafter he indulged his poignant longings for the elucidation of the veiled truths only when, as now, he wandered deep in the woods with his rifle on his shoulder. He could not have said to-day that he was nearer an inspiration, a hope, a "leading," than heretofore, but as he stood on the crag it was with the effect of a dislocation that he was torn from the solemn theme by an interruption at a vital crisis.

The faint vibrations of a violin stirred the reverent hush of the landscape in the blended light of the setting sun and the "hunter's moon." Presently the musician came into view, advancing slowly through the aisles of the red autumn forest. A rapt figure it was, swaying in responsive ecstasy with the rhythmic cadence. The head, with its long, blowsy yellow hair, was bowed over the dark polished wood of the instrument; the eyes

were half closed; the right arm, despite the eccentric patches on the sleeve of the old brown-jeans coat, moved with free, elastic gestures in all the liberties of a practiced bowing. If he saw the hunter motionless on the brink of the crag, the fiddler gave no intimation. His every faculty was as if enthralled by the swinging iteration of the sweet melancholy melody, rendered with a breadth of effect, an inspiration, it might almost have seemed, incongruous with the infirmities of the crazy old fiddle. He was like a creature under the sway of a spell, and apparently drawn by this dulcet lure of the enchantment of sound was the odd procession that trailed silently after him through these deep mountain fastnesses.

A woman came first, arrayed in a ragged purple skirt and a yellow blouse open at the throat, displaying a slender white neck which upheld a face of pensive, inert beauty. She clasped in her arms a delicate infant, ethereal of aspect with its flaxen hair, transparently pallid complexion, and wide blue eyes. It was absolutely quiescent, save that now and then it turned feebly in its waxen hands a little striped red-and-yellow pomegranate. A sturdy blond toddler trudged behind, in a checked blue cotton frock, short enough to disclose cherubic pink feet and legs bare to the knee; he carried that treasure of rural juveniles, a cornstalk violin. An old hound, his tail suavely wagging, padded along the narrow path; and last of all came, with frequent pause to crop the wayside herbage, a large cow, brindled red and white.

"The whole fambly!" muttered Kennedy. Then, aloud, "Why don't you uns kerry the baby, Basil Bedell, an' give yer wife a rest?"

At the prosaic suggestion the crystal realm of dreams was shattered. The bow, with a quavering discordant scrape upon the strings, paused. Then Bedell slowly mastered the meaning of the interruption.

"Kerry the baby! Why, Aurely won't let none but herself tech that baby." He laughed as he tossed the tousled yellow hair from his face, and looked over his shoulder to speak to the infant. "It air sech a plumb special delightsome peach, it air,—it air!"

The pale face of the child lighted up with a smile of recognition and a faint gleam of mirth.

"I jes' kem out ennyhows ter drive up the cow," Basil added.

"Big job," sneered Kennedy. "'Pears-like it takes the whole fambly to do it."

Such slothful mismanagement was calculated to affront an energetic spirit. Obviously, at this hour the woman should be at home cooking the supper.

"I follered along ter listen ter the fiddle,—ef ye hev enny call ter know." Mrs. Bedell replied to his unspoken thought, as if by divination.

But indeed such strictures were not heard for the first time. They were in some sort the penalty of the disinterested friendship which Kennedy had harbored for Basil since their childhood. He wished that his compeer might prosper in such simple wise as his own experience had proved to be amply possible. Kennedy's earlier incentive to industry had been his intention to marry, but the object of his affections had found him "too mortal solemn," and without a word of warning had married another man in a distant cove. The element of treachery in this event had gone far to reconcile the jilted lover to his future, bereft of her companionship, but the habit of industry thus formed had continued of its own momentum. It had resulted in forehanded thrift; he now possessed a comfortable holding,—cattle, house, ample land; and he had all the intolerance of the ant for the cricket. As Bedell lifted the bow once more, every wincing nerve was enlisted in arresting it in mid-air.

"Mighty long tramp fur Bobbie, thar,—why n't ye kerry him!" y

The imperturbable calm still held fast on the musician's face. "Bob," he addressed the toddler, "will you uns let daddy kerry ye like a baby!"

He swooped down as if to lift the child, the violin and bow in his left hand. The hardy youngster backed off precipitately.

"Don't ye *dare* ter do it!" he virulently admonished his parent, a resentful light in his blue eyes. Then, as Bedell sang a stave in a full rich voice, "Bye-oh, Baby!" Bob vociferated anew, "Don't you *begin* ter dare do it!" every inch a man though a little one.

"That's the kind of a fambly I hev got," Basil commented easily. "Wife an' boy an' baby all walk over me,—plumb stomp on me! Jes' enough lef of me ter play the fiddle a leetle once in a while."

"Mighty nigh all the while, I be afeared," Kennedy corrected the phrase. "How did yer corn crap turn out!" he asked, as he too fell into line and the procession moved on once more along the narrow path.

"Well enough," said Basil; "we uns hev got a sufficiency." Then, as if afraid of seeming boastful he qualified, "Ye know I hain't got but one muel ter feed, an' the cow thar. My sheep gits thar pastur' on the volunteer grass 'mongst the rocks, an' I hev jes' got a few head ennyhows."

"But *why* hain't ye got more, Basil! Why n't ye work more and quit wastin' yer time on that old fool fiddle!"

The limits of patience were reached. The musician fired up. "'Kase," he retorted, "I make enough. I hev got grace enough ter be thankful fur sech ez be vouchsafed ter me. *I ain't wantin' no meracle.*"

Kennedy flushed, following in silence while the musician annotated his triumph by a series of gay little harmonics, and young Hopeful, trudging in the rear, executed a soundless fantasia on the cornstalk fiddle with great brilliancy of technique.

"You uns air talkin' 'bout whut I said at the meetin' las' month," Kennedy observed at length.

"An' so be all the mounting," Aurelia interpolated with a sudden fierce joy of reproof.

Kennedy winced visibly.

"The folks all 'low ez ye be no better than an onbeliever." Aurelia was bent on driving the blade home. "The idee of axin' fur a meracle at this late day,—so ez ye kin be satisfied in yer mind ez ye hev got grace! Providence, though merciful, air *obleeged*, ter know ez sech air plumb scandalous an' redic'lous."

"Why, Aurely, hesh up," exclaimed her husband, startled from his wonted leniency. "I hev never hearn ye talk in sech a key,—yer voice sounds plumb out o' tune. I be plumb sorry, Jube, ez I spoke ter you uns 'bout a meracle at all. But I frar consider'ble nettled by yer words, ye see,—'kase I know I be a powerful, lazy,

shif'less cuss——”

“Ye know a lie, then,” his helpmate interrupted promptly.

“Why, Aurely, hesh up,—ye—ye—*woman*, ye!” he concluded injuriously. Then resuming his remarks to Kennedy, “I know I *do* fool away a deal of my time with the fiddle——”

“The sound of it is like bread ter me,—

“I couldn't live without it,” interposed the unconquered Aurelia. “Sometimes it minds me o' the singin' o' runnin' water in a lonesome place. Then agin it minds me o' seein' sunshine in a dream. An' sometimes it be sweet an' high an' fur off, like a voice from the sky, tellin' what no mortal ever knowed before,—an' *then* it minds me o' the tune them angels sung ter the shepherds abidin' in the fields. I *couldn't* live without it.”

“Woman, hold yer jaw!” Basil proclaimed comprehensively. Then, renewing his explanation to Kennedy, “I kin see that I don't purvide fur my fambly ez I ought ter do, through hatin' work and lovin' to play the fiddle.”

“I ain't goin' ter hear my home an' hearth reviled.” Aurelia laid an imperative hand on her husband's arm. “Ye know ye couldn 't make more out'n sech ground,—though I ain't faultin' our land, neither. We uns hev enough an' ter spare, all we need an' more than we deserve. We don't need ter ax a meracle from the skies ter stay our souls on faith, nor a sign ter prove our grace.”

“Now, *now*, *stop*, Aurely!—I declar', Jube I dunno what made me lay my tongue ter sech a word ez that thar miser'ble benighted meracle! I be powerful sorry I hurt yer feelin's, Jube; folks seekin' salvation git mightily mis-put sometimes, an'——”

“I don't want ter hear none o' yer views on religion,” Kennedy interrupted gruffly. An apology often augments the sense of injury. In this instance it also annulled the provocation, for his own admission put Bedell hopelessly in the wrong. “Ez a friend I war argufyin' with ye agin' yer waste o' time with that old fool fiddle. Ye hev got wife an' children, an' yit not so well off in this world's gear ez me, a single man. I misdoubts ef ye hev hunted a day since the craps war laid by, or hev got a pound o' jerked venison stored up fer winter. But this air yer home,”—he pointed upward at a little clearing beginning, as they approached, to be visible amidst the forest,—“an' ef ye air satisfied with sech ez it be, that comes from laziness stiddier a contented sperit.”

With this caustic saying he suddenly left them, the procession standing silently staring after him as he took his way through the woods in the dusky red shadows of the autumnal gloaming.

Aurelia's vaunted home was indeed a poor place,—not even the rude though substantial log-cabin common to the region. It was a flimsy shanty of boards, and except for its rickety porch was more like a box than a house. It had its perch on a jutting eminence, where it seemed the familiar of the skies, so did the clouds and winds circle about it. Through the great gateway of Sunrise Gap it commanded a landscape of a scope that might typify a world, in its multitude of mountain ranges, in the intricacies of its intervening valleys, in the glittering coils of its water-courses. Basil would sometimes sink into deep silences, overpowered by the majesty of nature in this place. After a long hiatus the bow would tremble and falter on the strings as if overawed for a time; presently the theme would strengthen, expand, resound with large meaning, and then he would send forth melodies that he had never before played or heard, his own dream, the reflection of that mighty mood of nature in the limpid pool of his receptive mind.

Around were rocks, crags, chasms,—the fields which nourished the family lay well from the verge, within the purlieu of the limited mountain plateau. He had sought to persuade himself that it was to save all the arable land for tillage that he had placed his house and door-yard here, but both he and Aurelia were secretly aware of the subterfuge; he would fain be always within the glamour of the prospect through Sunrise Gap!

Their interlocutor had truly deemed that the woman should have been earlier at home cooking the supper. Dusk had deepened to darkness long before the meal smoked upon the board. The spinning-wheel had begun to whirl for her evening stint when other hill-folks had betaken themselves to bed. Basil puffed his pipe before the fire; the flicker and flare pervaded every nook of the bright little house. Strings of red-pepper-pods flaunted in festoons from the beams; the baby slumbered under a gay quilt in his rude cradle, never far from his mother's hand, but the bluff little boy was still up and about, although his aspect, round and burly, in a scanty nightgown, gave token of recognition of the fact that bed was his appropriate place. His shrill plaintive voice rose ever and anon wakefully.

“I wanter hear a bear tale,—I wanter hear a bear tale.”

Thus Basil must needs knock the ashes from his pipe the better to devote himself to the narration,—a prince of raconteurs, to judge by the spell-bound interest of the youngster who stood at his knee and hung on his words. Even Aurelia checked the whirl of her wheel to listen smilingly. She broke out laughing in appreciative pleasure when Basil took up the violin to show how a jovial old bear, who intruded into this very house one day when all the family were away at the church in the cove, and who mistook the instrument for a banjo, addressed himself to picking out this tune, singing the while a quaint and ursine lay. Basil embellished the imitation with a masterly effect of realistic growls.

“Ef ye keep goin' at that gait, Basil,” Aurelia admonished him, “daylight will ketch us all wide awake around the fire,—no wonder the child won't go to bed.” She seemed suddenly impressed with the pervasive cheer. “What a fool that man, Jube Kennedy, must be! How *could* ennybody hev a sweeter, darlinger home than we uns hev got hyar in Sunrise Gap!”

On the languorous autumn a fierce winter ensued. The cold came early. The deciduous growths of the forests were leafless ere November waned, rifled by the riotous marauding winds. December set in with the gusty snow flying fast. Drear were the gray skies; ghastly the sheeted ranges. Drifts piled high in bleak ravines, and the grim gneissoid crags were begirt with gigantic icicles. But about the little house in Sunrise Gap that kept so warm a heart, the holly trees showed their glad green leaves and the red berries glowed with a mystic significance.

As the weeks wore on, the place was often in Kennedy's mind, although he had not seen it since that autumn afternoon when he had bestirred himself to rebuke its owner concerning the inadequacies of the domestic provision. His admonition had been kindly meant and had not deserved the retort, the flippant

ridicule of his spiritual yearnings. Though he still winced from the recollection, he was sorry that he had resisted the importunacy of Basil's apology. He realized that Aurelia had persisted to the limit of her power in the embitterment of the controversy, but even Aurelia he was disposed to forgive as time passed on. When Christmas Day dawned, the vague sentiment began to assume the definiteness of a purpose, and noontide found him on his way to Sunrise Gap.

There was now no path through the woods; the snow lay deep over all, unbroken save at long intervals when queer footprints gave token of the stirring abroad of the sylvan denizens, and he felt an idle interest in distinguishing the steps of wolf and fox, of opossum and weasel. In the intricacies of the forest aisles, amid laden boughs of pine and fir, there was a suggestion of darkness, but all the sky held not enough light to cast the shadow of a bole on the white blank spaces of the snow-covered ground. A vague blue haze clothed the air; yet as he drew near the mountain brink, all was distinct in the vast landscape, the massive ranges and alternating valleys in infinite repetition.

He wondered when near the house that he had not heard the familiar barking of the old hound; then he remembered that the sound of his horse's hoofs was muffled by the snow. He was glad to be unheralded. He would like to surprise Aurelia into geniality before her vicarious rancor for Basil's sake should be roused anew. As he emerged from the thick growths of the holly, with the icy scintillations of its clustering green leaves and red berries, he drew rein so suddenly that the horse was thrown back on his haunches. The rider sat as if petrified in the presence of an awful disaster.

The house was gone! Even the site had vanished! Kennedy stared bewildered. Slowly the realization of what had chanced here began to creep through his brain. Evidently there had been a gigantic landslide. The cliff-like projection was broken sheer off,—hurled into the depths of the valley. Some action of subterranean waters, throughout ages, doubtless, had been undermining the great crags till the rocky crust of the earth had collapsed. He could see even now how the freeze had fractured outcropping ledges where the ice had gathered in the fissures. A deep abyss that he remembered as being at a considerable distance from the mountain's brink, once spanned by a foot-bridge, now showed the remnant of its jagged, shattered walls at the extreme verge of the precipice.

A cold chill of horror benumbed his senses. Basil, the wife, the children,—where were they? A terrible death, surely, to be torn from the warm securities of the hearth-stone, without a moment's warning, and hurled into the midst of this frantic turmoil of nature, down to the depths of the gap,—a thousand feet below! And at what time had this dread fate befallen his friend? He remembered that at the cross-roads' store, when he had paused on his way to warm himself that morning, some gossip was detailing the phenomenon of unseasonable thunder during the previous night, while others protested that it must have been only the clamors of "Christmas guns" firing all along the country-side. "A turrible clap, it was," the raconteur had persisted. "Sounded ez ef all creation hed split apart." Perhaps, therefore, the catastrophe might be recent. Kennedy could scarcely command his muscles as he dismounted and made his way slowly and cautiously to the verge.

Any deviation from the accustomed routine of nature has an unnerving effect, unparalleled by disaster in other sort; no individual danger or doom, the aspect of death by drowning, or gunshot, or disease, can so abash the reason and stultify normal expectation. Kennedy was scarcely conscious that he saw the vast disorder of the landslide, scattered from the precipice on the mountain's brink to the depths of the Gap—inverted roots of great pines thrust out in mid-air, foundations of crags riven asunder and hurled in monstrous fragments along the steep slant, unknown streams newly liberated from the caverns of the range and cascading from the crevices of the rocks. In effect he could not believe his own eyes. His mind realized the perception of his senses only when his heart suddenly plunged with a wild hope,—he had discerned amongst the turmoil a shape of line and rule, the little box-like hut! Caught as it was in the boughs of a cluster of pines and firs, uprooted and thrust out at an incline a little less than vertical, the inmates might have been spared such shock of the fall as would otherwise have proved fatal. Had the house been one of the substantial log-cabins of the region its timbers must have been torn one from another, the daubing and chinking scattered as mere atoms. But the more flimsy character of the little dwelling had thus far served to save it,—the interdependent "framing" of its structure held fast; the upright studding and boards, nailed stoutly on, rendered it indeed the box that it looked. It was, so to speak, built in one piece, and no part was subjected to greater strain than another. But should the earth cave anew, should the tough fibres of one of those gigantic roots tear out from the loosened friable soil, should the elastic supporting branches barely sway in some errant gust of wind, the little box would fall hundreds of feet, cracked like a nut, shattering against the rocks of the levels below.

He wondered if the inmates yet lived,—he pitied them still more if they only existed to realize their peril, to await in an anguish of fear their ultimate doom. Perhaps—he felt he was but trifling with despair—some rescue might be devised.

Such a weird cry he set up on the brink of the mountain!—full of horror, grief, and that poignant hope. The echoes of the Gap seemed reluctant to repeat the tones, dull, slow, muffled in snow. But a sturdy halloo responded from the window, uppermost now, for the house lay on its side amongst the boughs. Kennedy thought he saw the pallid simulacrum of a face.

"This be Jube Kennedy," he cried, reassuringly. "I be goin' ter fetch help,—men, ropes, and a windlass."

"Make haste then,—we uns be nigh friz."

"Ye air in no danger of fire, then?" asked the practical man.

"We hev hed none,—before we war flunged off'n the bluff we hed squinched the fire ter pledjure Bob, ez he war afeard Santy Claus would scorch his feet comm' down the chimbley,—powerful lucky fur we uns; the fire would hev burnt the house bodaciously."

Kennedy hardly stayed to hear. He was off in a moment, galloping at frantic speed along the snowy trail scarcely traceable in the sad light of the gray day; taking short cuts through the densities of the laurel; torn by jagged rocks and tangles of thorny growths and broken branches of great trees; plunging now and again into deep drifts above concealed icy chasms, and rescuing with inexpressible difficulty the floundering,

struggling horse; reaching again the open sheeted roadway, bruised, bleeding, exhausted, yet furiously plunging forward, rousing the sparsely settled country-side with imperative insistence for help in this matter of life or death!

Death, indeed, only,—for the enterprise was pronounced impossible by those more experienced than Kennedy. Among the men now on the bluff were several who had been employed in the silver mines of this region, and they demonstrated conclusively that a rope could not be worked clear of the obstructions of the face of the rugged and shattered cliffs; that a human being, drawn from the cabin, strapped in a chair, must needs be torn from it and flung into the abyss below, or beaten to a frightful death against the jagged rocks in the transit.

“But not ef the chair war ter be steadied by a guy-rope from—say—from that thar old pine tree over thar,” Kennedy insisted, indicating the long bole of a partially uprooted and inverted tree on the steeps. “The chair would swing cl'ar of the bluff then.”

“But, Jube, it is onpossible ter git a guy-rope over ter that tree,—more than a man's life is wuth ter try it.”

A moment ensued of absolute silence,—space, however, for a hard-fought battle.

The aspect of that mad world below, with every condition of creation reversed; a mistake in the adjustment of the winch and gear by the excited, reluctant, disapproving men; an overstrain on the fibres of the long-used rope; a slip on the treacherous ice; the dizzy whirl of the senses that even a glance downward at those drear depths set astir in the brain,—all were canvassed within his mental processes, all were duly realized in their entirety ere he said with a spare dull voice and dry lips,—

“Fix ter let me down ter that thar leanin' pine, boys,—I'll kerry a guy-rope over thar.”

At one side the crag beetled, and although it was impossible thence to reach the cabin with a rope it would swing clear of obstructions here, and might bring the rescuer within touch of the pine, where could be fastened the guy-rope; the other end would be affixed to the chair which could be lowered to the cabin only from the rugged face of the cliff. Kennedy harbored no self-deception; he more than doubted the outcome of the enterprise. He quaked and turned pale with dread as with the great rope knotted about his arm-pits and around his waist he was swung over the brink at the point where the crag jutted forth,—lower and lower still; now nearing the slanting inverted pine, caught amidst the débris of earth and rock; now failing to reach its boughs; once more swinging back to a great distance, so did the length of the rope increase the scope of the pendulum; now nearing the pine again, and at last fairly lodged on the icy bole, knotting and coiling about it the end of the guy-rope, on which he had come and on which he must needs return.

It seemed, through the inexpert handling of the little group, a long time before the stout arm-chair was secured to the cables, slowly lowered, and landed at last on the outside of the hut. Many an anxious glance was cast at the slate-gray sky. An inopportune flurry of snow, a flaw of wind:—and even now all would be lost. Dusk too impended, and as the rope began to coil on the windlass at the signal to hoist every eye was strained to discern the identity of the first voyagers in this aerial journey,—the two children, securely lashed to the chair. This was well,—all felt that both parents might best wait, might risk the added delay. The chair came swinging easily, swiftly, along the gradations of the rise, the guy-rope holding it well from the chances of contact with the jagged projections of the face of the cliff, and the first shout of triumph rang sonorously from the summit.

When next the chair rested on the cabin beside the window, a thrill of anxiety and anger went through Kennedy's heart to note, from his perch on the leaning pine, a struggle between husband and wife as to who should go first. Each was eager to take the many risks incident to the long wait in this precarious lodgment. The man was the stronger. Aurelia was forced into the chair, tied fast, pushed off, waving' her hand to her husband, shedding floods of tears, looking at him for the last time, as she fancied, and calling out dismally, “Far'well, Basil, far'-well.”

Even this lugubrious demonstration could not damp the spirits of the men working like mad at the windlass. They were jovial enough for bursts of laughter when it became apparent that Basil had utilized the ensuing interval to tie together, in preparation for the ascent with himself, the two objects which he next most treasured, his violin and his old hound. The trusty chair bore all aloft, and Basil was received with welcoming acclamations.

Before the rope was wound anew and for the last time, the aspect of the group on the cliff had changed. It had grown eerie, indistinct. The pines and firs showed no longer their sempervirent green, but were black amid the white tufted lines on their branches, that still served to accentuate their symmetry. The vale had disappeared in a sinister abyss of gloom, though Kennedy would not look down at its menace, but upward, always upward. Thus he saw, like some radiant and splendid star, the first torch whitely aglow on the brink of the precipice. It opened long avenues of light adown the snowy landscape,—soft blue shadows trailed after it, like half-descried draperies of elusive hovering beings. Soon the torch was duplicated; another and then another began to glow. Now several drew together, and like a constellation glimmered crownlike on the brow of the night, as he felt the rope stir with the signal to hoist.

Upward, always upward, his eyes on that radiant stellar coronal, as it shone white and splendid in the snowy night. And now it had lost its mystic glamour,—disintegrated by gradual approach he could see the long handles of the pine-knots; the red verges of the flame; the blue and yellow tones of the focus; the trailing wreaths of dun-tinted smoke that rose from them. Then became visible the faces of the men who held them, all crowding eagerly to the verge. But it was in a solemn silence that he was received; a drear cold darkness, every torch being stuick downward into the snow; a frantic haste in unharnessing him from the ropes, for he was almost frozen. He was hardly apt enough to interpret this as an emotion too deep for words, but now and again, as he was disentangled, he felt about his shoulders a furtive hug, and more than one pair of the ministering hands must needs pause to wring his own hands hard. They practically carried him to a fire that had been built in a sheltered place in one of those grottoes of the region, locally called “Rock-houses.” Its cavernous portal gave upon a dark interior, and not until they had turned a corner in a tunnel-like passage was revealed an arched space in a rayonnant suffusion of light, the fire itself obscured by the figures about it. His eyes were caught first by the aspect of a youthful mother with a golden-haired babe on her breast; close

by showed the head and horns of a cow; the mule was mercifully sheltered too, and stood near, munching his fodder; a cluster of sheep pressed after the steps of half a dozen men, that somehow in the clare-obscure reminded him of the shepherds of old summoned by good tidings of great joy.

A sudden figure started up with streaming white hair and patriarchal beard.

“Will ye deny ez ye hev hed a sign from the heavens, Jubal Kennedy?” the old circuit-rider straitly demanded. “How could ye hev strengthened yer heart fur sech a deed onless the grace o' God prevailed mightily within ye? Inasmuch as ye hev done it unto one o' the least o' these my brethern, ye hev done it unto me.”

“That ain't the *kind* o' sign, parson,” Kennedy faltered. “I be lookin' fur a meracle in the yearth or in the air, that I kin view or hear.”

“The kingdom o' Christ is a spiritual kingdom,” said the parson solemnly. “The kingdom o' Christ is a *spiritual* kingdom, an' great are the wonders that are wrought therein.”

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CHRISTMAS MIRACLE \*\*\*

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