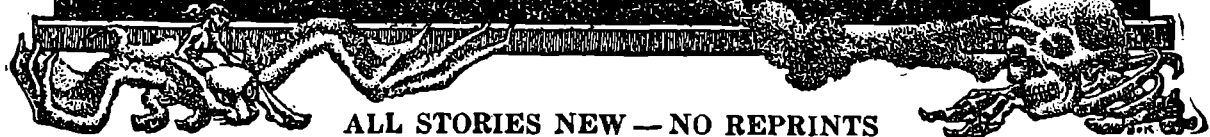


Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1951

Cover by Charles A. Kennedy

NOVELETTE

- THE HAND OF SAINT URY** Gordon MacCreagh 12
An old theory has it that a thought of hate can be a powerful enough force to persist after the death of its originator.

SHORT STORIES

- THE SIXTH GARGOYLE** David Eynon 34
For the occupant of the fifth grave the choice fell between two men—the murderer himself, or the fifth of his victims.
- THE FISHERMAN AT CRESCENT BEACH** Allan Masterson 39
The girl was gone and there was only the empty sea. And the fisherman—hunched and silent, unmoving, unnoticing—and the gulls over head.
- SOMETHING FROM OUT THERE** August Derleth 50
" . . . it was by accident that we three students stumbled on a strange chapter of occult lore that would have been much better hidden."
- PROFESSOR KATE** Margaret St. Clair 59
It wasn't the dead ones the boy feared; but Kate felt the living were guided by them.
- THE OLD GENTLEMAN WITH THE SCARLET UMBRELLA** Frank Owen 64
The old gentleman was quite merry and harmless—that is if the bite of a sand-vampire is harmless.
- THE UNWANTED** Elizabeth Counselman 68
Eleven children were to be listed for Uncle Sam in that high mountain cabin. Yet were they really there?
- SCOPE** Allison V. Harding 76
The one thing that had actually happened the scientists had never expected—that they would be unable to interpret what they saw in the great and secret lens.

THE EYRIE 6

VERSE

- FOR A SEA LOVER** Dorothy Quick 49
- MY TIMID SOUL** Page Cooper 63

Published bi-monthly by WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.50. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

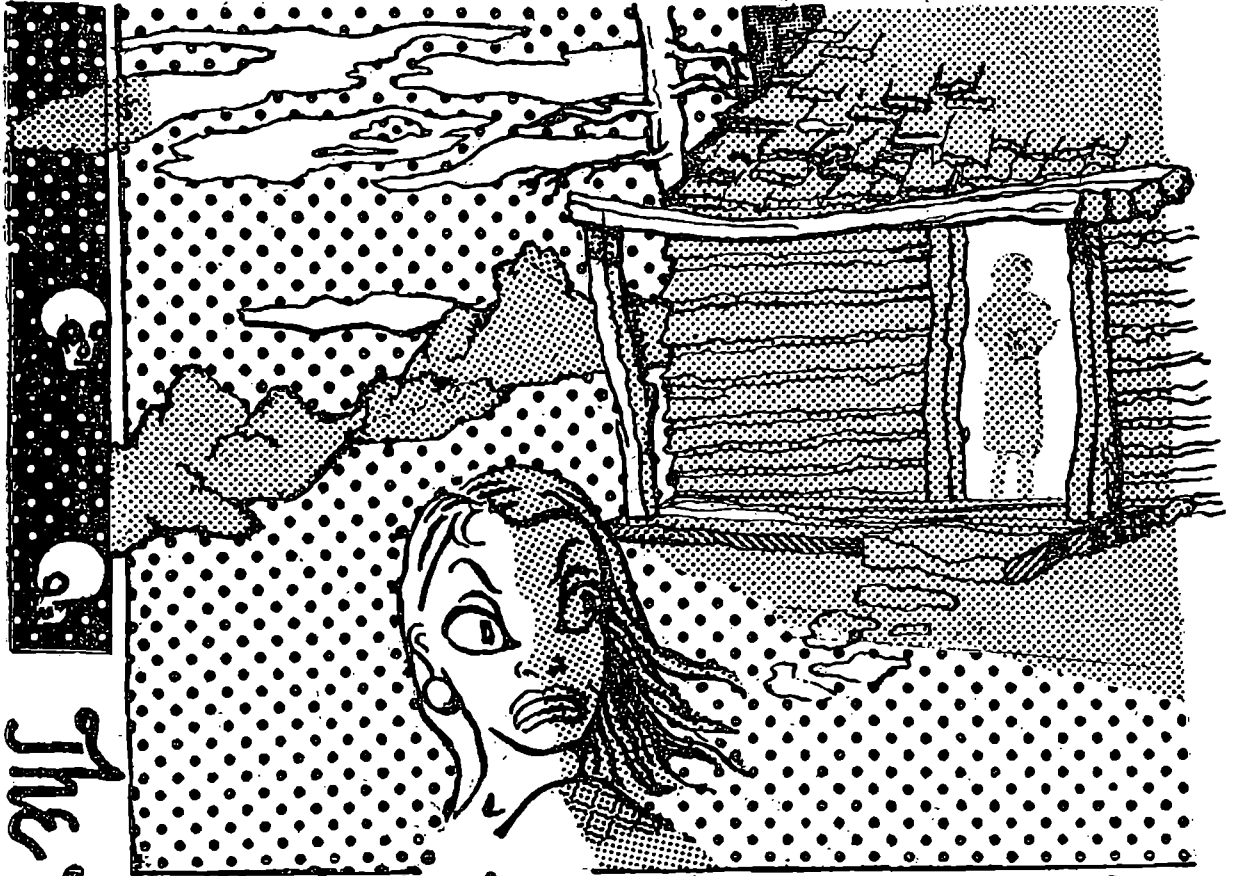
Copyright, 1950, by Weird Tales. Copyright in Great Britain.
Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

 178
Vol. 43, No. 2

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

D. McLLWRAITH, Editor

What does the census taker do about the unwanted, the unborn?



The

Unwanted • by Mary Elizabeth Counselman

TRUDGING up the stony mountain road, with the relentless Alabama sun beating down on my head, I began to wish two things, in order of their intensity: I wished I had a big, cold, frosted-over glass of something—iced tea, lemonade, water, anything *wet*. And I wished I had never applied to my prolific Uncle Sam for this job as census-taker!

I sat down under a gnarled old tree, glaring up at the steep incline ahead of me, and decided that there are entirely too many citizens of the United States, and that they live too far apart. The district I was supposed to cover was a section of the Blue Ridge foothills, in which all the inhabitants were said to have one leg shorter than the other—from living on that sheer cliff of a

mountain! Already I had covered the few scattered farms along this winding road that seemed determined to end at the gates of Heaven. Suspicious mountain-eyes had peeked at me from every cranny of wind-worn little shacks, built of slab pine. Lean old hound dogs had run out at me, roaring annihilation, then leaping up to lick me all over the face. Small tow-headed children in flour-sack dresses scattered before me like chickens before a hawk.

But they had to be counted, every blessed one of them. Uncle Sam loved them all, and most of them were on his personal relief-list, up here on Bent Mountain where nothing but honeysuckle and dogwood could be made to grow without a maximum of effort.

Heading by Charles A. Kennedy

I sat for a minute, panting and mopping the perspiration—no, sweat! This was nothing so Emily Post! Then I shifted my big leather folder to the other aching arm and started up the mountain once more. Just ahead, over the tops of scrub pine and oak, I could see a thin curl of smoke—indicating that I had either come to another cabin, or had unfortunately stumbled on somebody's still. Pausing only to examine a blister on my heel, I climbed the hill toward that beckoning smoke-puff. If it was a farm, they would have water of sorts; if it was a still, I would take a drink of "white lightning," and nothing else would matter after that!

Rounding a turn in the snake-like road, I came upon a typical mountain cabin, like any of a score of others I had stopped at this morning. Bright red peppers were hanging in strings from the rafters of a low front stoop, built onto the front of a slab-pine shack. There was the usual gourd-pole standing, gaunt and skeletal, in the yard. Martins darted in and out of the hanging gourd-bird-houses, those professional hawk-warners for the chickens that clucked and scratched about the yard. Then, bubbling up clear and sweet as the one Moses struck from a rock, I saw a mountain spring just beyond the house. A gourd-dipper hung beside it, and a large watermelon lay chilling in its depths beside two brown crocks of milk or butter. With a faint moan I headed for this oasis—

And stopped short.

A tall, spare mountaineer with a bushy red beard and a missing right arm had appeared, as though the rocky ground had sprouted him. His narrow blue eyes held an expression almost identical to the look of the rifle bore he held cradled in his left arm. It was pointed directly at my heart, which was pounding against my ribs like a trapped rabbit.

But I managed to smile. "Good morning, sir. I'm here to take the census. Are you the head of the house?"

The blue eyes narrowed a fraction. Their owner spat. I heard the click of a cocked rifle as he frowned, as though puzzled at

the word "census"; then, in a deep rusty drawl:

"You ain't takin' nothin' around here, Ma'm. *Git!* Besides," he added with simple dignity, "we ain't got nary'ne. We're pore folks. . . ."

I stifled a giggle, managing to keep my face straight with an effort—in spite of that deadly-looking weapon leveled at my chest.

"No, no. I mean. . . . The Government sent me to. . . ."

At the word, my unwilling host stiffened a bit more. His cold eyes flicked a look at my official folder, and he snorted.

"We don't want no re-lief!" he snapped. "Them as can't do for theirselves—like them shif'less Hambys down the road!—you give *them* your re-lief! Me and Marthy can keep keer of one 'nother!"

A GRIN of admiration crept over my face at sight of this one-armed, undernourished old hellion, standing here on his little piece of unfertile land and defying the whole world to help or hinder him. This, I thought, is our American heritage. Pioneers like these hill people had made our nation what it is today. But some of them, like this old farmer, were still pioneering, still fighting to carve a living out of wilderness and weather. He didn't think of himself as a "citizen," didn't trade on it, and had probably never voted or paid taxes in his life. But he was an American, all right!

"Look," I said gently. "All I'm supposed to do is take your name, and the names of all your family. For the files in Washington. They have to know how many people there are in the country. Every ten years, we. . . ."

The old codger—I couldn't decide how old he was; perhaps fifty, perhaps sixty—just looked at me.

"How-come?" he asked simply. "How-come they want to know about *us*? Me and Marthy don't bother nobody. Don't ask favors. Don't aim fer nobody to push us around. We jest want to be let alone. Was anybody down in the bed, I reckon we'd holp 'em. Rest o' the time—*leave us bel!*"

I gulped, telling myself that here, again, was a typical American. It was obvious that my "basic questions" would be roundly resented by this two-fisted individualist, and certainly not answered unless I resorted to a sneak-approach.

I shrugged, and laid my folder down on a sawed-off stump.

"All right, Mr. . . er? I didn't catch the name?"

"I don't aim to drop it," the old hellion answered dryly, but a twinkle of humor came into those rifle-eyes of his. The muzzle of his weapon lowered only a fraction. He jerked his thumb toward the spring. "You dry? Git ye a drink, if you're a mind to. Then," he added politely but firmly, "I reckon you'll be on your way? Got a tin lizzie someplace?"

"Parked down at Stoots General Store. I had to walk the rest of the way," I let my voice fall an octave, forlornly, hoping to play on his sympathy. After all, he was a citizen, and I was being paid, not to hike up and down these mountains, but to list the people living on them. "Think your . . . er, wife? . . . would mind if I sat down on that cool-looking porch for a minute and caught my breath? Folks who live in town," I added, grinning at him and trying flattery, "live from side to side. Not up and down, like you-all around these parts! I wouldn't last a week!"

That drew a chuckle from him. But the rifle was still pointed in my general direction. Then I saw him stiffen, looking past my shoulder at someone. He frowned; shook his head slightly. But I turned too quickly—in time to see a frail, quiet-looking, little woman with graying hair and soft luminous dark eyes peeking out at me from the cabin doorway. She started to duck back out of sight, in obedience to the man's headshake. Then she seemed to think better of it, and stepped out into full view. There was a kind of glow about her face, a warm happy look that drew me at once.

"Why, Jared!" she scolded in a mild sweet drawl. "Didn' you ast the lady to come in and set? *Shame* on you!" She winked at me cheerfully, a woman's wink, sharing the eccentricities of menfolk as

our mutual cross. "I reckon you're jest plumb tuckered out, ain't-you, ma'm? Why, come in! I'll send one o' the childurn to the sprang to fetch ye a cold drink o' buttermilk. Don't nothin' cool me off like buttermilk, of a hot day!" she chattered on hospitably, then raised her voice. "*Tom-mee! Cleavydel!* . . . Now, where'd them young'uns git off to? Berry-pickin', I'll be bound! . . . *Raynell! Woodrow!*" she shouted again, then gave up, shaking her head and smiling.

I hesitated, glancing back at the man with the rifle and caught a peculiar look of alarm on his bearded face. He opened his mouth once as though about to protest, then sighed, and turned away to the spring.

"I'll fetch the buttermilk," he offered gruffly. "I . . . I reckon Marthy would like a mite o' company now and then, at that. Man-person don't take no stock in visitin'!"

"Well," I hesitated, as he strode out of earshot. "I'm not exactly here for a visit—" I eyed the little woman, whose bright eyes instantly took on a look of sensitive withdrawal.

"Oh—! You . . . you-ain't from County Welfare?" she faltered. "Jared, he's sot agin any kind of charity. Even the soldier kind. He lost that—'ere arm of his'n in the German war. Come back here to his pa's place and found it growed up in weeds, all his folks died off. Typhoid. I . . . I . . ." She flushed, and lowered her eyes. "I was only a girl-baby when I first seen him, a-huntin' rabbits with that one arm. Took a shine to one another first sight, and I run off from my daddy to marry him. . . ."

She stopped, as if shocked at the flood of pent-up conversation that burst from her at sight of another woman. From what the old man had said, I sensed that she did not have the pleasure of much company, up here off the beaten trail. Church-going was about the only recreation most of these mountain women had, anyway; and there was something withdrawn about this household. I had sensed it before, though there was nothing I could put my finger on and call it "unusual." This middle-aged

couple seemed a cross-section of the mountaineer families I had encountered today and yesterday, on my census-taking trek over the district assigned me. All were poor. All were suspicious, more or less, of the personal questions I had to ask. All had large families of children.

I SAT down on the porch and opened my folder, smiling. "No, no," I answered her question. "The Government makes a list of all the folks living in this country, and I'm here to ask you a few questions. About your family and your farm. . . Your name is—?" I waited, pencil poised.

The little gray woman's face cleared. "Oh!" She beamed. "I . . . I catch on now to what you. . . ! Our oldest boy told me about it, just yesterday. Said a lady was over to Baldy Gap, askin' questions for the Gover'mint. Likely 't'was you, yourself?" I nodded, beaming back at her. "Well, then!" she said eagerly. "I'll be happy and glad to answer ye. Jared," she lowered her voice apologetically, "he's a mite ill at strangers. Don't you take hurt by nothin' he says!"

I sat back in the split-bottom rocker, thankful to get the business over with so smoothly. Their name, I learned, was Forney. Jared C. The "C!" was just an initial; it didn't stand for anything. Jared's mother had simply thought it sounded well. Martha Ann was her name, aged forty-eight to her husband's sixty-seven. They had, she said brightly, eleven children. Woodrow was the oldest. The youngest, a baby in arms, was not yet named. He was simply called "the least one."

Smiling, I jotted down the names in my book, then asked Martha Forney to supply their birth dates. Rocking gently, she ticked them off with the fond memory of any mother. I stopped, frowning slightly at one apparent error in my figures.

"Oh—I'm *sorry!* I must have got the names mixed." I laughed gaily. "I have the birthday of your youngest child listed as *second!* 1934. . ."

Martha Forney turned toward me, her great luminous eyes glowing with matter-

of-fact pride at having mothered this large brood.

"May 10th . . . 1934?" she corroborated the figures I had set down, then nodded happily. "Yes, that's right. That's when the least'ne come to us. Woodrow, he was the first. I reckon on account of Jared's arm and us needing a half-growed boy to help us around the place. But then," she burst out shyly, "I . . . I got to honin' for a *little* 'ne. One I could hold in my arms. . . . And the next mornin', why, there he was! Nestled down in the bed on my side, a-kickin' the covers and cooin' like a turtle-dove. . . !"

My jaws dropped. I blinked, peering at my cheery-voiced hostess with a look of shock. Then, I jumped. Jared Forney was looming over me, with a crock of buttermilk held in the crook of his one arm. His bearded face was like a thundercloud of anger, with flashes of lethal lightning darting from those cold blue eyes.

With an ominous thump he set down the crock and towered above me, single fist clenched as though he seriously debated smashing it into my startled face.

"Marthy!" he snapped. "Git on into the house! . . . And you," he glared at me. "You jest *git!* You got no call to come sneakin' around our place, a-progin' into things that don't consarn you . . . and a-pokin' fun at them that's afflicted!"

Afflicted? I glanced at that stump of an arm, wondering if that was what he referred to. But the gentle, protective look he threw after his wife's meekly retreating figure made me wonder. Then suddenly I remembered those weirdly garbled figures on my census sheet, and thought I understood.

"Oh, I . . . I'm terribly sorry," I murmured. "I . . . just didn't understand. She . . . she was telling me about the children, their names, and when they were born. . . ."

"We got no young'nes," the old man cut me off, very quietly. "You mustn't mind Marthy. She's . . . not right in her head. And you oughtn't to been pesterin' her, upsettin' her with all them questions. . . !" he fired at me fiercely. "Ma'ma

if there's anything important you want to ask, ask me! And then, I'll thank ye to git off'n my property and back where you belong!"

"Yes. Yes, of course," I nodded humbly, and managed to stammer out the last few questions about crops, acreage, and the rest, which the old fellow answered in a flat gruff voice. I scribbled down the information hurriedly, and was about to get to hell out of there, when I happened to glance back at the cabin door.

THE little gray-haired woman was standing just inside, half in shadow, half in clear mountain sunlight that slanted through the pines overhead. Her arms cuddled a wad of clothing close to her breast, and as she bent over it, crooning, I thought I saw a baby's small chubby hand wave from the folds of the cloth, playfully patting at her cheek.

I whirled to face the old man, frowning. "I thought you had no children," I called his hand rather coolly; then decided that their offspring must be illegitimate, to account for his queer attitude. My face softened. "Everybody," I said kindly, "is entitled to his status as a citizen of this country, Mr. Forney. Your baby is, too. He's entitled to free education, the right to vote when he's twenty-one, the right to apply to certain benefits. . . ."

My words broke off, like glass. Jared Forney was staring at me as if I had taken leave of my senses. His blue eyes darted toward his wife, then back to me with a shocked, amazed expression I shall never forget.

"You . . . you see it?" he whispered sharply. "You see ary *baby* . . .?"

I gaped at him, then glanced back at the woman, at the cooing child in her arms. A soft rounded little cheek peeped out from the folds of the old dress, which she held lightly in her embrace, rocking it. I saw a tendril of curly blond hair, a flash of big innocent baby-eyes. I turned back to Jared Forney, deciding that he, and not his quiet gentle little wife, was the mental case. Anyone could mix the birth dates of eleven children, especially a vague,

unlettered mountain woman like Mrs. Forney.

"See it?" I echoed, puzzled. "See what, the baby? Of course I do! You weren't trying to hide it? Surely," I said softly, "you are not ashamed of a sweet little cherub like that? . . . And I've got to take his name and birth date," I added firmly. "That's the law, Mr. Forney. You could be fined and put in jail for withholding information from a census-taker."

The mild threat went right over his head. Jared Forney continued to stare at me, then back at his wife. He shook his head, muttering, then sat down weakly in a chair, mopping his forehead with a great red bandana, pulled from his overall pocket.

"Well, I swannee!" he whispered in a shaken voice. "Well, the Lord help my time! Well . . . I . . . swannee!"

I frowned at him impatiently, pencil raised. "Please, Mr. Forney," I pursued the advantage I seemed to have gained, for some reason I could not fathom. "If you have other children, you must tell me their names—or let your wife tell me. It doesn't matter . . . er . . . whether they are legally yours. . . ." I began.

He jerked up his head, glaring at me. "Don't you say nothin' like that about Marthy!" he cut me short. "There ain't a finer, better woman in these hills than my old 'oman! Even if . . . even if she is a mite. . . ." He gulped, casting another wary glance at the quiet figure with that baby in her arms. Then, swallowing twice, he called uncertainly: "W-woodrow? where are ye at, son? Cleavydel? Tom? Raynell. . . .?"

INSTANTLY, at his call, a group of children appeared from the shadowy pine coppice at our left. Sunlight, slanting golden through the quill-like leaves, made my eyes burn and smart, so that I could not see their faces clearly. But as they moved forward, in a smiling group, I made out the features of two young girls in their teens, a small boy of perhaps eleven, and a tall youth in his early twenties. They were all strong, healthy-looking children,

in spite of a pronounced pallor that was unusual among these sun-tanned mountaineers. They were dressed in neat flour-sack shifts, or cut-down overalls, obviously having belonged to their father. All four were bare-footed, and swinging lard-cans brimful of blackberries. I remember thinking it odd at the time that none of their faces and hands were stained with the dark purple juice . . . but perhaps they had removed these berry stains at the spring on their way to the cabin. What struck me as especially odd was their coloring.

The two girls were completely unlike, and would never have been taken for sisters. One was sturdy and dark, the other slim and blonde. The boys were as unlike each other as they were unlike the girls. One, the younger, had a pronounced Eurasian cast to his features, with small black slanted eyes in a mongoloid face. The older was a redhead, lanky, freckled, and grinning. All of them seemed in high spirits, with a glow of such pure happiness in each face that I could not help glowing back at them.

"What a fine bunch of kids!" I commented to Mrs. Forney, with a faint look of reproach for her dour spouse.

Jared Forney gaped at me again, his face paling. He followed my gaze, squinting and shading his eyes against the sun, then shook his head.

"I *swannee!*" he gulped. "I . . . I Ain't nobody but her ever really seen. . . ."

He broke off again, mopping his forehead once more and glancing sheepishly back at his wife.

"Well," I said briskly, "I'm sorry, but I've got to be getting along." I turned back to Mrs. Forney again, to ask pleasantly, "Do you have the children's birthdays listed in your family Bible? If you could get it for me, let me copy them. . . ."

Martha Forney glanced past me at her husband, a mild look of accusation.

"I . . . did have 'em wrote down," she said gently. "Hit was a peddler come by here, and I ast him if he'd write 'em for me. I never learned to read or write. . . ." She confessed timidly. "But I had all the dates in my head, and he wrote down what

I told him. Then Jared," again she glanced at the hunched muttering figure, "he seen 'em and tore out the page. Said hit was a sin and a 'bomination to the Lord to write a lie in His Book. . . . But it was Him sent 'em! Every one! I . . . I know I never *birthed* ary one of 'em my own self, not like other women have kids. But . . . I . . ." She floundered, a vague bewildered look coming into her face as though she puzzled over an old familiar problem, still unsolved to her satisfaction. "I'm their maw. . . ."

Then, suddenly, she turned to me. Those luminous dark eyes, alight with an innocent happiness and devotion, seemed to blot out the poverty and squalor of that small mountain farm, bathing it in a soft golden glow like the sunlight sifting through the trees overhead.

"Ma'm," she said abruptly, in a quiet voice like the murmur of a mountain brook, "Ma'm . . . You love kids, too, don't ye? You got ary young'nes of your own?"

I SAID I had a little boy, aged six, whom I loved dearly . . . and added, politely, that I should be getting back to him before supptime. Martha Forney nodded, beaming. She shot a look of triumph at the old man, who was still muttering under his breath.

"There, Jared!" she said happily. "You see? That's all there is to it. There's some as don't want young'nes," she added sadly. "For one reason or another, they don't *want* to bring a baby into the world. There's some as destroy. . . . But once

they've started, once they've come just so far towards bein' borned, they *can't* go back—poor mites! All they ever want is . . . just to be wanted and loved, and

mebbe needed, like Woodrow. Why, there must be thousands," she said softly, "a-pushin' and crowdin' *outside* some place, in hopes somebody'll let 'em come on ahead and be somebody's young'ne. Now, Woodrow, I reckon he waited for years out there, wherever it is they have to wait. He was a real big boy when I . . . I wanted a son. And," she sighed, happily, "that very evening, I heard somebody choppin' firewood out back o' the cabin. Thought it was Jared

. . . but he was off a-huntin' possum! When he come back and found all that stovewood, he thought *I* done it—or some neighbor who was wantin' to shame him for leavin' me alone, without ary man-person to do for me. But . . . it was Woodrow! Jared, he ain't never been able to *see* his boy a-holpin' him around the place—just sees what he *does*. He's learned," the little old woman chuckled, "to tell him and then go off some place. When he gits back, the chores is done. Woodrow," she spoke proudly with a note of deep fondness, "he's a right handy boy around a farm. Ain't hardly nothin' he can't turn his hand to!

and," her eyes saddened, "why there was somebody onct that didn't want a son like *him*, I jest can't understand!"

I had sat in wordless amazement, listening to all this. Now it was my turn to gape at Jared Forney, wracking my brain to figure out which of these two old mountain people was the insane one . . . or whether *I* was! Out of sheer desire to get my feet on solid earth again, I scribbled some figures on my census sheet, cleared my throat, and asked little Mrs. Forney point-blank:

"And . . . the baby's birthday? He's about . . . eight months old, isn't he? Some . . . er . . . some neighbor left them on your doorstep? They're foster-children, is that it?"

"No ma'm," Martha Forney said clearly. "They're *mine*! I . . . I caused 'em to git borned, jest by wishin' . . . and lovin'. Like an old hen settin' on another hen's eggs!" she chuckled with a matter-of-fact humor that made my scalp stir. "Of course they ain't . . . ain't *regular* young'nes. Jared, now, he ain't never seen 'em . . . exceptin' once when he was lickered up," she said in a tone of mild reproof for past sins. "Fell in a ditch full o' rain water, and liked to drowned! Hit was Cleavydel holped him out . . . and he was that ashamed before his own daughter, he never has drunk another jugful! Oh! mebbe a nip now and then," she added with a tender tolerant grimace at her errant spouse. "But not, you know, *drinkin'*. Them kids has been the makin' of Jared," she said complacent-

ly. "Time was he'd beat me and go off to town for a week or more," she confided. "But now he knows the young'nes is lookin' up to him . . . even if *he* can't see *them*! . . . and he's as good a man as you'd find in these hills!"

I almost snickered, noting the sheepish, subdued, and even proud look on the old man's face. Here, indeed, was a fine and loving father. . . . But I still could not understand the origin of that smiling group of children before me, and of the baby in the woman's arms—the baby she said was born before those other three half-grown children!

"Er. . ." I tried again, helplessly. "Mrs. Forney. . . . You mean they're adopted? I mean, not legally adopted, but. . . . You say they were given to you by somebody who 'didn't want them,' as you call it? I . . . I'm afraid I don't quite. . . ."

"They wasn't give to me," Martha Forney interrupted stoutly, with a fond smile from the baby to the group near the pine coppice. "I *taken* 'em! They was supposed to be born to some other woman, every last one of 'em! Some woman who didn't want 'em to be born. . . . But *I* did! You can do anything, if you're a mind to . . . and the Lord thinks it's right. So," she finished matter-of-factly, "Jared and me have got eleven young'nes. Nary one of 'em looks like us, except Woodrow's a redhead like Jared. But that's accidental, o'course. They look like their *real* ma and pa. . . . *John Henry!*" she raised her voice abruptly. "Where are you, son? John Henry," she explained to me in a half-whisper, "he's kind of timid. *Ressie May!*" she called again, then sighed: "Folks can think up more reasons for not wantin' young'nes, seems like!"

I RUBBED my eyes, staring at the group of children beside the cabin, waiting in a silent, good-humored group for whatever fond command their parents might issue next. As I looked, two more dim figures—for they all seemed dim, all at once, like figures in an old snapshot, faded by time—joined the others. One, a thin sad-eyed boy of seven, with a markedly

Jewish cast to his features, smiled at me and ducked his head shyly, playing with a flower in his hand—a mountain daisy that, oddly enough, looked clumsy and solid in the misty fingers that held it. The second new figure—I started—was a little Negro girl. She giggled silently as my gaze fell on her, digging one bare black toe into the dust. On her face, too, was that blissful glow of complete happiness and security from all hurt.

"Ressie May's colored," Mrs. Forney whispered. "But she don't know it! To me, she's jest like all the rest o' my young'nes. . . ."

Suddenly Jared Forney leaped to his feet, glowering down at me.

"I ain't gonna have no more of this!" he thundered nervously. "They . . . they ain't there, and you both know it! You don't see nary young'ne, and neither does Marthy! I tell her over and over, it's all in her mind—from wantin' a passel o' kids we never could have! She's . . . sickly, Marthy is. She

Her paw alluz allowed she was a wood's-colt, her ownself, and he tuck it out in beatin' her till she run off from him! All that's mixed up in her head, and now

well, she's a mite teched, as folks around here know. Her with her make-like young'nes named Woodrow, and Cleavydel, and . . . and some of 'em not even of our faith or color! I . . . I don't know where she gits all them berries she says the children pick, or how she does all them chores behindst my back—that she makes out like Woodrow done! But . . . if it made her any happier," he lowered his voice, speaking fiercely for my ears only, "I'd pretend the Devil was takin' the night with us!"

MY EYES misted, and I was about to nod in complete sympathy. But he wasn't having any. To this hard-bitten old rascal, I was against him, like the rest of the world, just another menace to his wife's peace of mind.

"And now," he snarled, "you *git!* You got no call to set there, makin' a mock of them as cain't help theirselves. And laugh-

in', makin' out like you see them young'nes same as she. . . !"

"But . . . but I *do* see. . . !"

I broke off hastily. Jared Forney's rifle had appeared again as if by magic, cradled in that good arm of his . . . and pointed unwaveringly at my forehead. His left eye sighted along the barrel, drawing a bead on a spot just between my startled eyes . . . and I didn't stop to protest any longer. There was cold-blooded murder in that squinting blue eye, and a fierce proud protectiveness for that vague little wife of his that brooked no argument.

I turned and ran, hugging my census-folder under my arm and not stopping to pick up a pencil that bounced from behind my ear. I ran, praying. Then I heard the click of a cocked rifle and just ran.

Only once did I so much as glance back over my shoulder at the humble little mountain cabin. When I did . . . well, it was only a bundle of old clothes that crooning woman was cuddling in her empty arms. There were four lard-buckets brimful of blackberries *someone* had picked and set down just beyond the pine coppice. But the group of smiling, ill-assorted children had disappeared.

For me, that is, they had disappeared—perhaps because . . . I don't know. Because I didn't care enough, and it took that to make them live and to keep them alive. Perhaps it was only my devotion to my own little boy that made me see them at all, as Jared Forney's childless wife saw them. Rather sadly, I took out my census sheet, a few yards down the road, and scratched out the names of eleven children that no one—no one but Martha Forney—had wanted to live. Uncle Sam, I realized with a wry smile, might take a dim view of statistics such as those. Dream-children. Wish-children, born only of will and need . . . and love. The unwanted. The unborn. . .

But for little old Mrs. Forney, their "mother" with the heart as big as all outdoors, I am quite certain that they are very much alive. And the Bureau of Vital Statistics could be wrong!