

Adapted from  
**"The Ambitious Guest"**  
*by Nathaniel Hawthorne*

One September night a family had gathered round their hearth, and piled it high with the driftwood of mountain streams, the dry cones of the pine, and the splintered ruins of great trees that had come crashing down the nearby cliff. Up the chimney roared the fire, and brightened the room with its broad blaze. The faces of the father and mother had a sober gladness. The children laughed. The eldest daughter was the image of Happiness at seventeen, and the aged grandmother, who sat knitting in the warmest place, was the image of Happiness grown old. They had found peace in the bleakest spot of New England. This family were situated in the Notch of the White Hills. The wind was sharp throughout the year, and pitilessly cold in the winter, giving their cottage no mercy before it descended on the valley of the Saco. They dwelt in a cold spot and a dangerous one. A mountain towered above their heads, so steep, that the stones would often rumble down its sides and startle them at midnight.

The daughter had just spoken when the wind came through and seemed to pause before their cottage—rattling the door, with a sound of wailing, before it passed into the valley. For a moment it saddened them, though there was nothing unusual in the tones. But the family were glad again when they saw that the latch was lifted by some traveler.

Though they dwelt in such isolation, these people had daily contact with the world. The Notch is a great pathway, through which internal commerce moved between Maine, on one side, and the Green Mountains and the shores of the St. Lawrence, on the other. The stagecoach always drew up before the door of the cottage. A traveler, with no companion, would pause here to exchange a word to gain the strength to travel the remaining lonely stretch. And here a driver, on his way to Portland market, would put up for the night. It was one of those simple taverns where the traveller pays only for food and lodging, but meets with a homely kindness beyond all price.

When the footsteps were heard, therefore, the whole family rose up, as if to welcome some one who belonged to them.

The door was opened by a young man. His face at first wore the gloomy expression of one who travels a wild and bleak road, at nightfall and alone. But he soon brightened up when he saw the kindly warmth of his reception. He felt his heart spring forward to meet them all, from the old woman, who wiped a chair with her apron, to the little child that held out its arms to him. One glance and smile placed the stranger on a footing of innocent familiarity with the eldest daughter.

"Ah, this fire is the right thing!" cried he, "especially when there is such a pleasant circle round it. I am quite numb with cold."

"You are going towards Vermont?" said the master of the house, as he helped to take a light knapsack off the young man's shoulders.

"Yes, to Burlington, and far enough beyond," replied he. "I meant to have been at Ethan Crawford's tonight, but traveling takes much longer on such a road as this. It is no matter; for, when I saw this good fire, and all your cheerful faces, I

felt as if you had kindled it on purpose for me, and were waiting my arrival. So I shall sit down among you, and make myself at home."

The frank-hearted stranger had just drawn his chair to the fire when something like a heavy footstep was heard without, rushing down the steep side of the mountain, as with long and rapid strides. The family held their breath, because they knew the sound, and their guest held his by instinct.

"The old mountain has thrown a stone at us, for fear we should forget him," said the landlord, recovering himself. "He sometimes nods his head and threatens to come down. But we are old neighbors, and agree together pretty well upon the whole. Besides we have a sure place of refuge nearby if he should come in full strength."

After eating a supper of bear's meat and speaking with the family cheerfully, it was almost as if he belonged to their mountain brood. He was of a proud, yet gentle spirit—haughty and reserved among the rich and great; but ever ready to stoop his head to the lowly cottage door, and be like a brother or a son at the poor man's fireside. In the household he found warmth and simplicity of feeling and intelligence. He had travelled far and alone and kept himself apart from those who might otherwise have been his companions. This evening a prophetic sympathy drove the refined and educated youth to pour out his heart before the simple mountaineers. They answered him with the same free confidence. And thus it should have been. Is not the kindred of a common fate a closer tie than that of birth?

The secret of the young man's character was a high and abstracted ambition. He could have borne to live an undistinguished life, but not to be forgotten in the grave.

"As yet," cried the stranger—his cheek glowing and his eye flashing with enthusiasm—"as yet, I have done nothing. Were I to vanish from the earth tomorrow, none would know so much of me as you: that a nameless youth came up at nightfall from the valley of the Saco, and opened his heart to you in the evening, and passed through the Notch by sunrise, and was seen no more. Not a soul would ask, 'Who was he? Where did the wanderer go?' But I cannot die till I have achieved my destiny. Then, let Death come! I shall have built my monument!"

There was a continual flow of feelings, gushing forth which enabled the family to understand this young man's thoughts, though so foreign from their own.

"You laugh at me," said he, taking the eldest daughter's hand, and laughing himself. "You think my ambition as nonsensical as if I were to freeze myself to death on the top of Mount Washington, only that people might spy at me from the country round about. And, truly, that would be a noble pedestal for a man's statue!"

"It is better to sit here by this fire," answered the girl, blushing, "and be comfortable and contented, though nobody thinks about us."

"I suppose," said her father, after a fit of musing, "there is something natural in what the young man says. If my mind had been turned that way, I might have felt just the same. A slate gravestone would suit me as well as a marble one—with just my name and age, and a verse of a hymn, and something to let people know that I lived an honest man and died a Christian."

"There now!" exclaimed the stranger. "It is our nature to desire a monument, be it slate or marble, or a pillar of granite, or a glorious memory in the universal heart of man."

"We're in a strange way, tonight," said the wife. "They say it's a sign of something, when folks' minds go a wandering so. Listen to the children!"

They listened accordingly. The younger children had been put to bed in another room, but with an open door between, so that they could be heard talking busily among themselves. One and all seemed to have caught the infection from the fireside circle, and were outvying each other in wild wishes, and childish projects of what they would do when they came to be men and women. At length a little boy, instead of addressing his brothers and sisters, called out to his mother.

"I'll tell you what I wish, mother," cried he. "I want you and father and grandma'm, and all of us, and the stranger too, to start right away, and go and take a drink out of the basin of the Flume!"

Nobody could help laughing at the child's notion of leaving a warm bed, and dragging them from a cheerful fire, to visit the basin of the Flume,—a brook, which tumbles over the cliff, deep within the Notch. The boy had hardly spoken when a wagon rattled along the road, and stopped a moment before the door. It appeared to contain two or three men, who were cheering their hearts with the rough chorus of a song. But the travelers moved on, still singing and laughing.

"There, mother!" cried the boy, again. "They'd have given us a ride to the Flume."

Again they laughed at the child. But a light cloud passed over the daughter's spirit. She looked gravely into the fire, and drew a breath that was almost a sigh. It forced its way, in spite of a little struggle to repress it. The stranger asked what she had been thinking of.

"Nothing," answered she, with a downcast smile. "Only I felt lonesome just then."

There was a wail along the road, as if a funeral were passing. To chase away the gloom, the family threw pine branches on their fire, till the dry leaves crackled and the flame arose, discovering once again a scene of peace and humble happiness. The light hovered about them fondly, and caressed them all. The aged woman looked up from her task, and, with fingers ever busy, was the next to speak.

"Old folks have their notions," said she, "as well as young ones. Now what should an old woman wish for, when she can go but a step or two before she comes to her grave? Children, it will haunt me night and day till I tell you."

"What is it, mother?" cried the husband and wife at once.

Then the old woman, with an air of mystery which drew the circle closer round the fire, informed them that she had provided her graveclothes some years before,—a nice linen shroud, a cap with a muslin ruff, and everything of a finer sort than she had worn since her wedding day. But this evening she had remembered an old superstition. It used to be said that if anything were amiss with a corpse, if the ruff were not smooth, or the cap did not set right, the corpse in the coffin and beneath the clods would try to put up its cold hands and arrange it. The bare thought made her nervous.

"Don't talk so, grandmother!" said the girl, shuddering.

"Old and young, we dream of graves and monuments," murmured the stranger youth. "I wonder how sailors feel when the ship is sinking, and they, unknown and undistinguished, are to be buried together in the ocean?"

For a moment, the old woman's idea so engrossed the minds of her hearers that a sound rising like the roar of a blast, had grown broad, deep, and terrible, before the fated group were aware of it. The house and all within it trembled. The foundations of the earth seemed to be shaken, as if this awful sound were the peal of the last trump. Young and old exchanged one wild glance, and remained an instant, pale, frightened, without utterance, or power to move. Then the same shriek burst from all their lips.

"The Slide! The Slide!"

The simplest words can only hint, but not portray, the unutterable horror of the catastrophe. The victims rushed from their cottage, and sought refuge in what they thought a safer spot. Alas! They had left their security and fled right into the pathway of destruction. Down came the whole side of the mountain, in a cataract of ruin. Just before it reached the house, the stream broke into two branches—touching not a window there, but destroying everything in its dreadful course. Before long, the thunder of the great Slide had ceased to roar, the mortal agony had been endured, and the victims were at peace. Their bodies were never found.

The next morning, the light smoke was seen coming from the cottage chimney. Within, the fire was yet smoldering on the hearth, and the chairs in a circle round it, as if the inhabitants had but gone forth to view the devastation of the Slide, and would shortly return, to thank Heaven for their miraculous escape. All had left separate tokens, by which those who had known the family wept for each. Who has not heard their name? The story has been told far and wide, and will forever be a legend of these mountains. Poets have sung their fate.

Some thought that a stranger had been received into the cottage on this awful night, and had shared the catastrophe of all its inmates. Others denied that there was evidence to show it. Woe for the high-souled youth, with his dream of Earthly Immortality! His name and person utterly unknown; his history, his way of life, his plans, a mystery never to be solved, his death and his existence equally a doubt! Whose was the agony of that death moment?

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License online at <http://www.gutenberg.org>.

## The Willey Tragedy

On August 28, 1826, torrential rains in the White Mountains caused a mudslide on Mount Willey in New Hampshire. The Willey couple, with their five children, lived in a small house in the notch between Mounts Willey and Webster. They evacuated their home with the help of two hired men to escape the landslide, but all seven Willeys and the two hired men died in the avalanche. The Willey home was left standing. Rescuers later found an open Bible on a table in the home, indicating that the family retreated in haste.



*Crawford Notch (1872), painted by Thomas Hill*

The news of the Willey tragedy quickly spread across the nation. During the ensuing years, it would become the subject of literature, drawings, local histories, scientific journals, and paintings. One such example is the painting by Thomas Hill (1829–1908) titled *Crawford Notch*, the site of the Willey tragedy before the slide. The Willey disaster started a new awareness of the American landscape and the raw wilderness of the White Mountains. This allure — tragedy and untamed nature — was a powerful draw for the early artists who painted in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Thomas Cole (1801–1848) in his diary entry of October 6, 1828, wrote, "The site of the Willey House, with its little patch of green in the gloomy desolation, very naturally recalled to mind the horrors of the night when the whole family perished beneath an avalanche of rocks and earth."

The incident provided the basis for an 1835 story by Nathaniel Hawthorne titled "The Ambitious Guest."