

Tioba and Other Tales

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Arthur Colton

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1903

TIOBA

FROM among the birches and pines, where we pitched our moving tent, you looked over the flat meadow-lands; and through these went a river, slow and almost noiseless, wandering in the valley as if there were no necessity of arriving anywhere at appointed times. "What is the necessity?" it said softly to any that would listen. And there was none; so that for many days the white tent stood among the trees, overlooking the haycocks in the meadows. It was enough business in hand to study the philosophy and the subtle rhetoric of Still River.

Opposite rose a strangely ruined mountain-side. There was a nobly-poised head and plenteous chest, the head three thousand feet nearer the stars-which was little enough from their point of view, no doubt, but to us it seemed a symbol of something higher than the stars, something beyond them forever waiting and watching.

From its feet upward half a mile the mountain was one raw wound. The shivered roots and tree-trunks stuck out helplessly from reddish soil, boulders were crushed and piled in angry heaps, veins of granite ripped open-the skin and flesh of the mountain tom off with a curse, and the bones made a mockery. The wall of the precipice rose far above this desolation, and, beyond, the

hazy forests went up a mile or more clear to the sky-line. The peak stood over all, not with triumph or with shame, but with the clouds and stars.

It was a cloudy day, with rifts of sunlight. An acre of light crept down the mountain: so you have seen, on the river-boats at night, the search-light feeling, fingering along the shore.

In the evening an Arcadian, an elderly man and garrulous, came up to see what it might be that glimmered among his pulp-trees. He was a surprise, and not as Arcadian as at first one might presume, for he sold milk and eggs and blueberries at a price to make one suddenly rich. His name was Fargus, and he it was whose hay-cutter clicked like a locust all day in the meadow-lands. He came and made himself amiable beside us, and confided anything we might care to know which experience had left with him.

"That's Tioba," he said. "That's the name of that mountain." And he told us the story of one whom he called "Jim Hawks," and of the fall of Tioba.

She's a skinned mountain [he said]. She got wet inside and slid. Still River used to run ten rods further in, and there was a cemetery, too, and Jim Hawks's place; and the cemetery's there yet, six rods underground, but the creek shied off and went through my plough-land scandalous.

Now, Jim Hawks was a get-there kind, with a clawed face-by a wildcat, yes, sir. Tioba got there; and Jim he was a wicked one. I've been forty years in this valley, with the Petersons and the Storrses and the Merimys at Canada Center, all good, quiet folk. And nothing happened to us, for we did nothing to blame, till Jim came, and Tioba ups and drops on him.

Now look at it, this valley! There've been landslides over beyond in Helder's valley, but there's only one in mine. Looks as if the devil gone spit on it. It's Jim Hawks's trail.

He come one day with a buckboard and a yellow horse, and he says:

"Sell me that land from here up the mountain."

"Who be you?" says I.

"Jim Hawks," says he, and that's all he appeared to know about it. And he bought the land, and put up a house close to the mountain, so you could throw a cat down his chimney if you wanted to, or two cats if you had 'em.

He was a long, swing-shouldered man, with a light-colored mustache and a kind of flat gray eye that you couldn't see into. You look into a man's eye naturally to see what his intentions are. Well, Jim Hawks's eye appeared to have nothing to say on the subject. And as to that, I told my wife it was none of our business if he didn't bring into the valley anything but his name and a bit of money sufficient.

He got his face clawed by a wildcat by being reckless with it; and he ran a deer into Helder's back yard once and shot it, and licked Helder for claiming the deer. He was the recklessesest chap! He swings his fist into Helder's face, and he says:

"Shoot, if you got a gun. If you hain't, get out!"

I told Jim that was no place to put a house, on account of Tioba dropping rocks off herself whenever it rained hard and the soil got mushy. I told him Tioba'd as soon drop a rock on his head as into his gridiron.

You can't see Canada Center from here. There's a post-office there, and three houses, the Petersons', the Storrses' and the Merimys'. Merimy's house got a peaked roof on it. I see Jeaney Merimy climb it after her kitten a-yowling on the ridge. She wasn't but six years old then, and she was gritty the day she was born. Her mother-she's old Peterson's daughter-she whooped, and I fetched Jeaney down with Peterson's ladder. Jeaney Merimy grew up, and she was a tidy little thing. The Storrs boys calculated to marry her, one of 'em, only they weren't enterprising; and Jeaney ups and goes over to Eastport one day with Jim Hawks-cuts out early in the morning, and asks nobody. Pretty goings on in this valley! Then they come back when they were ready, and Jim says:

"What you got to say about it, Merimy?"

Merimy hadn't nothing to say about it, nor his wife hadn't nothing to say, nor Peterson, nor the Storrs boys. Dog-gone it! Nobody hadn't nothing to say; that is, they didn't say it to Jim.

That was five years ago, the spring they put up the Redman Hotel at Helder's. People's come into these parts now thicker'n bugs. They have a band that plays music at the Redman Hotel. But in my time I've seen sights. The bears used to scoop my chickens. You could hear wildcats 'most any night crying in the brush. I see a black bear come down Jumping Brook over there, slapping his toes in the water and grunting like a pig. Me, I was ploughing for buckwheat.

Jeaney Merimy went over to Eastport with her hair in a braid, and came back with it put up like a crow's nest on top of her head. She was a nice-looking girl, Jeaney, and born gritty, and it didn't do her any good.

I says to Jim: "Now, you're always looking for fighting," says I. "Now, me, I'm for peaceable doings. If you're looking for fighting any time, you start in beyond me.

"You!" says Jim. "I'd as soon scrap with a haystack."

I do know how it would be, doing with a haystack that way, but you take it from Jim's point of view, and you see it wouldn't be what he'd care for; and you take it from my point of view, and you see I didn't poke into Jim's business. That's natural good sense. Only I'm free to say he was a wicked one, 'stiling whiskey on the back side of Tioba, and filling up the Storrs boys with it, and them gone to the devil off East where the railroads are. And laying Peterson to his front door, drunk. My, he didn't know any more'n his front door! "He's my grandfather," says Jim. "That's the humor of it"-meaning he was Jeaney's grandfather. And mixing the singularest drinks, and putting 'em into an old man named Fargus, as ought to known better. My wife she said so, and she knew. I do' know what Jeaney Merimy thought, but I had my point of view on that. Jim got drunk himself on and off, and went wilder'n a wildcat, and slid over the mountains the Lord knows where. Pretty goings on in this valley!

This is a good climate if you add it all up and take the average. But sometimes it won't rain till you're gray waiting for it, and sometimes it will snow so the only way to get home is to stay inside, and sometimes it will rain like the bottom fallen out of a tub. The way of it is that when you've lived with it forty years you know how to add up and take the average.

That summer Tioba kept her head out of sight from June to September mainly. She kept it done up in cotton, as you might say, and she leaked in her joints surprising. She's a queer mountain that way. Every now and then she busts out a spring and dribbles down into Still River from a new place.

In September they were all dark days and drizzly nights, and there was often the two sounds of the

wind on Tioba that you hear on a bad night. One of 'em is a kind of steady grumble and hiss that's made with the pine-needles and maybe the tons of leaves shaking and falling. The other is the toot of the wind in the gullies on edges of rock. But if you stand in the open on a bad night and listen, you'd think Tioba was talking to you. Maybe she is.

It come along the middle of September, and it was a bad night, drizzly, and Tioba talking double. I went over to the Hawkses' place early to borrow lantern-oil, and I saw Jeaney Merimy sitting over the fire alone, and the wind singing in the chimney. "Jim hasn't come," she says, speaking quiet; and she gets me the lantern-oil. After, when I went away, she didn't seem to notice; and what with the wind in the chimney, and Jeaney sitting alone with her big black eyes staring, and Tioba talking double, and the rain drizzling, and the night falling, I felt queer enough to expect a ghost to be standing at my gate. And I came along the road, and there was one!

Yes, sir; she was a woman in a gray, wet cloak, standing at my gate, and a horse and buggy in the middle of the road.

"Mighty!" says I, and drops my oil-can smack in the mud.

"Does Mr. Hawks live here?" she says, seeing me standing like a tomfool in the mud.

"No, ma'am," says I. "That's his place across the flat half a mile. He ain't at home, but his wife is."

The wind blew her cloak around her sharp, and I could see her face, though it was more or less dark. She was some big and tall, and her face was white and wet with the rain. After a while she says:

"He's married?"

"Yes, ma'am. You'd better not-'Mighty, ma'am!" says I, "where you going?"

She swung herself into the buggy quicker'n women are apt to do, and she whops the horse around and hits him a lick, and off he goes, splashing and galloping. Me, I was beat. But I got so far as to think if she wasn't a ghost, maybe Jim Hawks would as lief she would be, and if she didn't drive more careful she'd be liable to oblige him that way. Because it stands to reason a woman don't come looking for a man on a bad night, and cut away like that, unless she has something uncommon on her mind. I heard the buggy-wheels and the splash of the horse dying away; and then there was nothing in the night but the drip of the rain and Tioba talking double-um-hiss, toot-toot.

Then I went into the house, and didn't tell my wife about it, she disliking Jim on account of his singular drinks, which had a tidy taste, but affecting a man sudden and surprising. My wife she went off to bed, and I sat by the fire, feeling like there was more wrong in the world than common. And I kept thinking of Jeaney Merimy sitting by herself off there beyond the rain, with the wind singing in the chimney, and Tioba groaning and tooting over her. Then there was the extra woman looking for Jim; and it seemed to me if I was looking for Jim on a dark night, I'd want to let him know beforehand it was all peaceable, so there wouldn't be a mistake, Jim being a sudden man and not particular. I had the extra woman on my mind, so that after some while it seemed to me she had come back and was driving splish-splash around my house, though it was only the wind. I was that foolish I kept counting how many times she went round the house, and it was more than forty; and sometimes she came so close to the front door I thought she'd come through it-bang!

Then somebody rapped sudden at the door, and I jumped, and my chair went slap under the table,

and I says, "Come in," though I'd rather it would have stayed out, and in walks Jim Hawks. "Mighty!" says I. "I thought you was a horse and buggy."

He picked up my chair and sat in it himself, rather cool, and began to dry off.

"Horse and buggy?" says he. "Looking for me?"

I just nodded, seeing he appeared to know all about it.

"Saw 'em in Eastport," says he. "I suppose she's over there"-meaning his place. "Gone down the road! You don't say! Now, I might have known she wouldn't do what you might call a rational thing. Never could bet on that woman. If there was one of two things she'd be likely to do, she wouldn't do either of 'em."

"Well," says I, "speaking generally, what might she want of you?"

Jim looks at me kind of absent minded, rubbing his hair the wrong way.

"Now, look at it, Fargus," he says. "It ain't reasonable. Now, she and me, we got married about five years ago. And she had a brother named Tom Cheever, and Tom and I didn't agree, and naturally he got hurt; not but that he got well again-that is, partly. And she appeared to have different ideas from me, and she appeared to think she'd had enough of me, and I took that to be reasonable. Now, here she wants me to come back and behave myself, cool as you please. And me inquiring why, she acts like the country was too small for us both. I don't see it that way myself." And he shook his head, stretching his hands out over the fire.

"I don't see either end of it," says I. "You're a bad one, Jim, a downright bad one."

"That's so. It's Jeaney you mean," he says, looking kind of interested. "It'll be hell for Jeaney, won't it?"

The wind and rain was whooping round the house so we could hardly hear each other. It was like a wild thing trying to get in, which didn't know how to do it, and wouldn't give up; and then you'd hear like something whimpering, and little fingers tapping at the window-glass.

My opinion of Jim Hawks was that I didn't seem to get on to him, and that's my opinion up to now; and it appeared to me then that Jim might be the proper explanation himself of anything the extra woman did which seemed unreasonable; but I didn't tell him that, because I didn't see rightly what it would mean if I said it.

Jim got up and stretched his legs. "Now, I tell you, Fargus," says he, "I'm going to put the thing to Jeaney, being a clipper little woman, not to say sharp. If it comes to the worst, I daresay Canada Center will give us a burying; or if she wants to slide over the mountains with me, there's no trouble about it; or if she'd rather go her own way, and me mine, that's reasonable; or if she says to do nothing but hold the fort, why, that's all right, too, only Canada Center would be likely to take a hand, and then there'd surely be trouble, on account of me getting mad. Now, I have to say to you, Fargus, that you've been as friendly as a man could be, as things are; and maybe you've seen the last of me, and maybe you wouldn't mind if you had."

"Speaking generally," says I, "you're about right, Jim."

With that he laughed, and went out, pulling the door to hard against the storm.

Next day the rain came streaming down, and my cellar was flooded, and the valley was full of the noise of the flood brooks. I kept looking toward the Hawkses' place, having a kind of notion something would blow up there. It appeared to me there was too much gunpowder in that family for the house to stay quiet. Besides, I saw Tioba had been dropping rocks in the night, and there were new boulders around. One had ploughed through Jim's yard, and the road was cut up frightful. The boulder in Jim's yard looked as if it might be eight feet high. I told my wife the Hawkses ought to get out of there, and she said she didn't care, she being down on Jim on account of his mixed drinks, which had a way of getting under a man, I'm free to say, and heaving him up.

About four o'clock in the afternoon it come off misty, and I started over to tell Jim he'd better get out; and sudden I stops and looks, for there was a crowd coming from Canada Center-the Storrses and the Petersons and the Merimys, and the extra woman in a buggy with Henry Hall, who was county sheriff then. "Well, 'Mighty!'" says I.

They pulled up in front of Jim's place, and I took it they were going to walk in and settle things prompt. But you see, when I got there, it was Jim a-standing by his door with his rifle, and the sheriff and Canada Center was squeezing themselves through the gate and Jim shooting off sideways at the pickets on his fence. And the sheriff ups and yelled:

"Here, you Jim Hawks! That ain't any way to do."

Then Jim walks down the road with his rifle over his arm, and Jeaney Merimy comes to the door. She looked some mad and some crying, a little of both.

"Hall," says he, "you turn your horse and go back where you come from. Maybe I'll see you by and by. The rest of you go back to Canada Center, and if Jeaney wants anything of you she'll come and say so. You go, now!"

And they went. The extra woman drove off with the sheriff, hanging her head, and the sheriff saying, "You'll have to come to time, Jim Hawks, soon or late." Jeaney Merimy sat in the door with her head hung down, too; and the only one as ought to have been ashamed, he was walking around uppish, like he meant to call down Tioba for throwing rocks into his yard. Then Jeaney sees me, and she says:

"You're all down on Jim. There's no one but me to stand up for Jim."

She began to cry, while Jim cocked his head and looked at her curious. And she kept saying, "There's no one but me to stand up for Jim."

That was a queer way for her to look at it.

Now, that night set in, like the one before, with a drizzling rain. It was the longest wet weather I ever knew. I kept going to the window to look at the light over at the Hawkses' and wonder what would come of it, till it made my wife nervous, and she's apt to be sharp when she's nervous, so I quit. And the way Tioba talked double that night was terrible-um-hiss, toot-toot, hour after hour; and no sleep for me and my wife, being nervous.

I do' know what time it was, or what we heard. All I know is, my wife jumps up with a yell, and I jumps up too, and I know we were terrible afraid and stood listening maybe a minute. It seemed like there was almost dead silence in the night, only the um-m went on, but no hissing and no tooting, and if there was any sound of the rain or wind I don't recollect it. And then, "Um!" says Tioba, louder and louder and louder! till there was no top nor bottom to it, and the whole infernal

world went to pieces, and pitched me and my wife flat on the floor.

The first I knew, there was dead silence again; or maybe my hearing was upset, for soon after I began to hear the rain buzzing away quietly. Then I got up and took a lantern, and my wife grabs me.

"You ain't going a step!" says she, and the upshot was we both went, two old folks that was badly scared and bound to find out why. We went along the road, looking about us cautious; and of a sudden, where the road ought to be, we ran into a bank of mud that went up out of seeing in the night. Then my wife sat down square in the road and began a-crying, and I knew Tioba had fallen down.

Now, there's Tioba, and that's how she looked next morning, only worse-more mushy and generally clawed up, with the rain still falling dismal, and running little gullies in the mud like a million snakes.

According to my guess, Jim and Jeaney and the cemetery were about ten rods in, or maybe not more than eight. Anyway, I says to Peterson, and he agreed with me, that there wasn't any use for a funeral. I says: "God A'mighty buried 'em to suit himself." It looked like he didn't think much of the way Canada Center did its burying, seeing the cemetery was took in and buried over again. Peterson and me thought the same on that point. And we put up the white stone, sort of on top of things, that maybe you've noticed, and lumped the folk in the cemetery together, and put their names on it, and a general epitaph; but not being strong on the dates, we left them out mostly. We put Jeaney Merimy with her family, but Canada Center was singularly united against letting Jim in.

"You puts his name on no stone with me or mine," says Merimy, and I'm not saying but what he was right. Yes, sir; Merimy had feelings, naturally. But it seemed to me when a man was a hundred and fifty feet underground, more or less, there ought to be some charity; and maybe I had a weakness for Jim, though my wife wouldn't hear of him, on account of his drinks, which were slippery things. Anyway, I takes a chisel and a mallet, and I picks out a boulder on the slide a decent ways from Canada Center's monument, and I cuts in it, "Jim Hawks"; and then I cuts in it an epitaph that I made myself, and it's there yet:

HERE LIES JIM HAWKS, KILLED BY ROCKS

HE DIDN'T ACT THE WAY HE OUGHT.

THAT'S ALL I'LL SAY OF JIM.

HERE HE LIES, WHAT'S LEFT OF HIM.

And I thought that stated the facts, though the second line didn't rhyme really even. Speaking generally, Tioba appeared to have dropped on things about the right time, and that being so, why not let it pass, granting Merimy had a right to his feelings?

Now, neither Sheriff Hall nor the extra woman showed up in the valley any more, so it seemed likely they had heard of Tioba falling, and agreed Jim wouldn't be any good, if they could find him. It was two weeks more before I saw the sheriff, him driving through, going over to Helder's. I saw him get out of his buggy to see the monument, and I went up after, and led him over to show Jim's epitaph, which I took to be a good epitaph, except the second line. *

Tioba and Other Tales
Arthur Colton, (1868-1943)

This ebook presents 'Tioba and Other Tales', from Arthur Colton. A dynamic table of contents enables to jump directly to the chapter selected.

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