The Crime of Micah Rood

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Table of Contents

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IN the early part of the last century there lived in eastern Connecticut a man named Micah Rood. He was a solitary soul, and occupied a low, tumble−down house, in which he had seen his sisters and his brothers, his father and his mother, die. The mice used the bare floors for a play−ground; the swallows filled up the unused chimneys; in the cellar the gophers frolicked, and in the attic a hundred bats made their home. Micah Rood disturbed no living creature, unless now and then he killed a hare for his day's dinner, or cast bait for a glistening trout in the Shetucket. For the most part his food came from the garden and the orchard, which his father had planted and nurtured years before.

Into whatever disrepair the house had fallen, the garden bloomed and flourished like a western Eden. The brambles, with their luscious burden, clambered up the stone walls, sentineled by trim rows of English currants. The strawberry nestled among its wayward creepers, and on the trellises hung grapes of varied hues. In seemly rows, down the sunny expanse of the garden spot, grew every vegetable indigenous to the western world, or transplanted by colonial industry. Everything here took seed, and bore fruit with a prodigal exuberance. Beyond the garden lay the orchard, a labyrinth of flowers in the spring−time, a paradise of verdure in the summer, and in the season of fruition a miracle of plenty.

Often the master of the orchard stood by the gate in the crisp autumn mornings, with his hat filled with apples for the children as they passed to school. There was only one tree in the orchard of whose fruit he was chary. Consequently it was the bearings of this tree that the children most wanted.

"Prithee," Master Rood," they would say, "give us some of the gold apples?"

"I sell the gold apples for siller," he would say; "content ye with the red and green ones."

In all the region there grew no counterpart to this remarkable apple. Its skin was of the clearest amber, translucent and spotless, and the pulp was white as snow, mellow yet firm, and without a flaw from the glistening skin to the even brown seeds nestling like babies in their silken cradle. Its flavor was peculiar and piquant, with a suggestion of spiciness. The fame of Micah Rood's apple, as it was called, had extended far and wide, but all efforts to engraft it upon other trees failed utterly; and the envious farmers were fain to content themselves with the rare shoots.

If there dwelt any vanity in the heart of Micah Rood, it was in the possession of this apple tree, which took the prize at all the local fairs, and carried his name beyond the neighborhood where its owner lived. For the most part he was a modest man, averse to discussions of any sort, shrinking from men and their opinions. He talked more to his dog than to any human being. He fed his mind upon a few old books, and made Nature his religion. All things that made the woods their home were his friends. He possessed himself of their secrets, and insinuated himself into their confidences. But best of all he loved the children. When they told him their sorrows, the answering tears sprang to his eyes; when they told him of their delights, his laugh woke the echoes of the Shetucket as light and free as their own. He laughed frequently when with the children, throwing back his great head, while the tears of mirth ran from his merry blue eyes.

His teeth were like pearls, and constituted his chief charm. For the rest he was rugged and firmly knit. It seemed to the children, after a time, that some cloud was hanging over the serene spirit of their friend. After he had laughed he sighed, and they saw, as he walked down the green paths that led away from his place, that he would look lovingly back at the old homestead and shake his head again and again with a perplexed and melancholy air. The merchants, too, observed that he began to be closer in his bargains, and he barreled his apples so greedily that the birds and the children were quite robbed of their autumnal feast. A winter wore away and left Micah in this changed mood. He sat through the long, dull days brooding over his fire and smoking. He made his own simple meals of mush and bacon, kept his own counsels, and neither visited nor received the neighboring folk.

One day, in a heavy January rain, the boys noticed a strange man who rode rapidly through the village, and drew rein at Micah Rood's orchard gate. He passed through the leafless orchard, and up the muddy garden paths to the old dismantled house. The boys had time to learn by heart every good point of the chestnut mare fastened to the palings before the stranger emerged from the house. Micah followed him to the gate. The stranger swung himself upon the mare with a sort of jaunty flourish, while Micah stood heavily and moodily by, chewing the end of a straw.

"Well, Master Rood," the boys heard the stranger say, "thou'st till the first of next May, but not a day of grace more." He had a decisive, keen manner that took away the breath of the boys used to men of slow action and slow speech. "Mind ye," he snapped, like an angry cur, "not another day's grace." Micah said not a word, but stolidly chewed on his straw while the stranger cut his animal briskly with the whip, and mare and rider dashed away down the dreary road. The boys began to frisk about their old friend and pulled savagely at the tails of his coat, whooping and whistling to arouse him from his reverie. Micah looked up and roared:

"Off with ye! I'm in no mood for pranks."

As a pet dog slinks away in humiliation at a blow, so the boys, hurt and indignant, skulked down the road speechless at the cruelty of their old friend.

The April sunshine was bringing the dank odors from the earth when the village beauties were thrown into a flutter of excitement. Old Geoffry Peterkin, the peddler, came with such jewelry, such stuffs, and such laces as the maidens of Shetucket had never seen the like of before.

"You are getting rich, Geoffry," the men said to him.

"No, no!" and Geoffry shook his grizzled head with a flattered smile. "Not from your women−folk. There's no such bargain−drivers between here and Boston town."

"Thou'lt be a−setting up in Boston town, Geoffry," said another. "Thou'rt getting too fine to travel pack a−back amongst us simple country folk."

"Not a bit of it," protested Geoffry. "I couldn't let the pretty dears go without their beads and their ribbons. I come and go as reg'lar as the leaves, spring, summer, and autumn."

By twilight Geoffry had made his last visit, and with his pack somewhat lightened he tramped away in the raw dusk. He went straight down the road that led to the next village, until out of sight of the windows, then turned to his right and groped his way across the commons with his eye ever fixed on a deeper blackness in the gloom. This looming blackness was the orchard of Micah Rood. He found the gate, entered, and made his way to the dismantled house. A bat swept its wing against his face as he rapped his stick upon the door.

"What witchcraft's here?" he said, and pounded harder.

There were no cracks in the heavy oaken door through which a light might filter, and old Geoffry Peterkin was blinded like any owl when the door was flung open, and Micah Rood, with a forked candle−stick in his hands, appeared, recognized him, and bade him enter. The wind drove down the hallway, blew the flame an inch from the wicks, where it burned blue a moment, and then expired, leaving the men in darkness. Geoffry stepped in, and Micah threw his weight against the door, swung the bar into place, and led Geoffry into a large bare room lit up by a blazing hickory fire. When the candles were relit, Micah said:

"Hast thou supped this night, friend Peterkin?"

"That have I, and royally too, with Rogers the smith. No more for me."

Micah Rood stirred up the fire and produced a bottle of brandy from a cupboard. He filled a small glass and offered it to his guest. It was greedily quaffed by the peddler. Micah replaced the bottle, and took no liquor himself. Pipes were then lit. Micah smoked moodily and in silence. The peddler, too, was silent. He hugged his knee, puffed vigorously at his pipe, and stared at the blazing hickory. Micah spoke first.

"Thou hast prospered since thou sold milk−pans to my mother."

"I've made a fortune with that old pack," said the peddler, pointing to the corner where it lay. "Year after year I have trudged this road, and year after year has my pack been larger and my stops longer. My stuffs, too, have changed. I carry no more milk−pans. I leave that to others. I now have jewels and cloths. Why, man! There's a fortune even now in that old pack."

He arose and unstrapped the leathern bands that bound his burden. He drew from the pack a variety of jewel−cases and handed them to Micah. "I did not show these at the village," he continued, pointing over his shoulder. "I sell those in towns."

Micah clumsily opened one or two, and looked at their contents with restless eyes. There were rubies as red as a serpent's tongue; silver, carved as daintily as hoar−frost, gleaming with icy diamonds; pearls that nestled like precious eggs in fairy golden nests; turquois gleaming from beds of enamel, and bracelets of ebony capped with topaz balls.

"These," laughed Geoffry, dangling a translucent necklace of amber, "I keep to ward off ill−luck. She will be a witch indeed that gets me to sell these. But if thou'lt marry, good Master Rood, I'll give them to thy bride."

He chuckled, gasped, and gurgled mightily; but Micah checked his exuberance by looking up fiercely.

"There'll be never a bride for me," he said. "She'd be killed here with the rats and the damp rot. It takes gold to get a woman."

"Bah!" sneered Geoffry. "It takes youth, boy, blue, good laugh, and a strong leg. Why, if a bride could be had for gold, I've got that."

He unrolled a shimmering azure satin, and took from it two bags of soft, stout leather.

"There is where I keep my yellow boys shut up!" the old fellow cried in great glee; "and when I let them out, they'll bring me anything I want, Micah Rood, except a true heart. How have things prospered with thee?" he added, as he shot a shrewd glance at Micah from beneath his eyebrows.

"Bad," confessed Micah, "very bad. Everything has been against me of late."

"I say, boy," cried the peddler, suddenly, "I haven't been over this old house for years. Take the light and show us around."

"No," said Micah, shaking his head doggedly. "It is in bad shape and I would feel that I was showing a friend who was in rags."

"Nonsense!" cried the peddler, bursting into a hearty laugh. "Thou need'st not fear, I'll ne'er cut thy old friend."

He had replaced his stuffs, and now seized the branched candle−stick and waved his hand toward the door.

"Lead the way," he cried. "I want to see how things look," and Micah Rood sullenly obeyed.

From room to room they went in the miserable cold and the gloom. The candle threw a faint gleam through the unkept apartments, noxious with dust and decay. Not a flaw escaped the eye of the peddler. He ran his fingers into the cracks of the doors, he counted the panes of broken glass, he remarked the gaps in the plastering.

"The dry rot has got into the wainscoting," he said jauntily.

Micah Rood was burning with impotent anger. He tried to lead the peddler past one door, but the old man's keen eyes were too quick for him, and he kicked the door open with his foot.

"What have we here?" he cried.

It was the room where Micah and his brothers had slept when they were children. The little dismantled beds stood side by side. A work−bench with some miniature tools was by the curtainless window. Everything that met his gaze brought with it a flood of early recollections.

"Here's a rare lot of old truck," Geoffry cried. "The first thing I should do would be to pitch this out of doors."

Micah caught him by the arm and pushed him from the room.

"It happens that it is not thine to pitch," he said.

Geoffry Peterkin began to laugh a low, irritating chuckle. He laughed all the way back to the room where the fire was. He laughed still as Micah showed him his room −− the room where he was to pass the night; chuckled and guffawed, and clapped Micah on the back as they finally bade each other good−night. The master of the house went back and stood before the dying fire alone.

"What can he mean, in God's name?" he asked himself. "Does he know of the mortgage?"

Micah knew that the peddler, who was well off, frequently negotiated and dealt in the commercial paper of farmers. Pride and anger tore at his heart like wild beasts. What would the neighbors say when they saw his father's son driven from the house that had belonged to the family for generations? How could he endure their surprise and contempt? What would the children say when they found a stranger in possession of the famous apple−tree? "I've got no more to pay it with," he cried in helpless anguish, "than I had the day the cursed lawyer came here with his threats."

He determined to find out what Peterkin knew of the matter. He spread a bear's skin before the fire and threw himself upon it and fell into a feverish sleep, which ended long before the purple dawn broke.

He cooked a breakfast of bacon and corn cake, made a cup of coffee, and aroused his guest. The peddler, clean, keen, and alert, noted slyly the sullen heaviness of Micah. The meal was eaten in silence, and when it was finished, Geoffry put on his cloak, adjusted his pack, and prepared to leave. Micah put on his hat, took a pruning−knife from a shelf, remarking as he did so:

"I go early about my work in the orchard," and followed the peddler to the door. The trees in the orchard had begun to shimmer with young green. The perfume, so familiar to Micah, so suggestive of the place that he held dearer than all the rest of the world beside, wrought upon him till his curiosity got the better of his discretion.

"It is hard work for one man to keep up a place like this and make it pay," he remarked.

Geoffry smiled slyly, but said nothing.

"Bad luck has got the start of me of late," the master continued with an attempt at real candor.

The peddler knocked the tops off some gaunt, dead weeds that stood by the path.

"So I have heard," he said.

"What else didst thou hear?" cried Micah, quickly, his face burning, and shame and anger flashing from his blue eyes.

"Well," said the peddler, with a great show of caution, "I heard the mortgage was a good investment for any one who wanted to buy."

"Perhaps thou know'st more about it than that," sneered Micah.

Peterkin blew on his hands and rubbed them with a knowing air.

"Well," he said, "I know what I know."

"D −− −you," cried Micah, clinching his fist, "out with it!"

The peddler was getting heated. He thrust his hand into his breast and drew out a paper.

"When May comes about, Master Rood, I'll ask thee to look at the face of this document."

"Thou art a sneak!" foamed Micah. "A white−livered, cowardly sneak!"

"Rough words to call a man on his own property," said the peddler, with a malicious grin.

The insult was the deepest he could have offered to the man before him. A flood of ungovernable emotions rushed over Micah. The impulse latent in all angry animals to strike, to crush, to kill, came over him. He rushed forward madly, then the passion ebbed, and he saw the peddler on the ground. The pruning−knife in his own hand was red with blood. He gazed in cold horror, then tried in a weak, trembling way to heap leaves upon the body to hide it from his sight. He could gather only small hand− Page 387 fuls, and they fluttered away in the wind.

The light was getting brighter. People would soon be passing down the road. He walked up and down aimlessly for a time, and then ran to the garden. He returned with a spade and began digging furiously. He made a trench between the dead man and the tree under which he had fallen; and when it was finished he pushed the body in with his foot, not daring to touch it with his hands.

Of the peddler's death there was no doubt. The rigid face and the blood−drenched garments over the heart attested the fact. So copiously had the blood gushed forth that all the soil, and the dead leaves about the body, and the exposed roots of the tree were stained with it. Involuntarily Micah looked up at the tree. He uttered an exclamation of dismay. It was the tree of the gold apples.

After a moment's silence he recommenced his work and tossed back the earth in mad haste. He smoothed the earth so carefully that when he had finished not even a mound appeared. He scattered dead leaves over the freshly turned earth, and then walked slowly back to the house.

For the first time the shadow that hung over it, the gloom deep as despair that looked from its vacant windows, struck him. The gloss of familiarity had hidden from his eyes what had long been patent to others −− the decay, the ruin, the solitude. It swept over him as an icy breaker sweeps over a drowning man. The rats ran from him as he entered the hall. He held the arm on which the blood was rapidly drying far from him, as if he feared to let it touch his body with its confession of crime. The sleeve had stiffened to the arm, and inspired him with a nervous horror, as if a reptile was twined about it. He flung off his coat, and finally, trembling and sick, divested himself of a flannel undergarment, and still from fingertip to elbow there were blotches and smears on his arm. He realized at once the necessity of destroying the garments; and, naked to the waist, he stirred up the dying embers of the fire and threw the garments on. The heavy flannel of the coat refused to burn, and he threw it deeper and deeper in with a poker till he saw with dismay that he had quenched the fire.

"It is fate!" he cried. "I can not destroy them."

He lit a fire three times, but his haste and his confused horror made him throw on the heavy garments every time and strangle the infant blaze. At last he took them to the garret and locked them in an old chest. Starting at the shadows among the rafters, and the creaking of the boards, he crept back through the biting chill of the vacant rooms to the one that he occupied, and washed his arm again and again, until the deep glow on it seemed like another blood−stain.

After that for weeks he worked in his garden by day, and at night slept on the floor with the candles burning, and his hand on his flint−lock.

Meanwhile in the orchard the leaves budded and spread, and the perfumed blossoms came. The branches of the tree of the gold apples grew pink with swelling buds. Near that spot Micah never went. He felt as if his feet would be grasped by spectral hands.

One night a swelling wind arose, strong, steady, warm, seeming palpable to the touch like a fabric. In the morning the orchard had flung all its banners to the air. It dazzled Micah's eyes as he looked upon the tossing clouds of pink and white fragrance. But as his eye roamed about the waving splendor he caught sight of a thing that riveted him to the spot with awe.

The tree of the gold apples had blossomed blood−red.

That day he did no work. He sat from early morning till the light waned in the west, gazing at the tree flaunting its blossoms red as blood against the shifting sky. Few neighbors came that way; and as the tree stood in the heart of the orchard, fewer yet noticed its accursed beauty. To those that did Micah stammeringly gave a hint of some ingenious ingrafting, the secret of which was to make his fortune. But though the rest of the world wondered and wagged its head and doubted not that it was some witchcraft, the children were enraptured. They stole into the orchard and pilfered handfuls of the roseate flowers, and bore them away to school; the girls fastened them in their braids or wore them above their innocent hearts, and the boys trimmed their hat−bands and danced away in glee like youthful Corydons.

Spring−time passed and its promises of plenty were fulfilled. In the garden there grew a luxury of greenness; in the orchard the boughs lagged low. Micah Rood toiled day and night. He visited no house, he sought no company. If a neighbor saw him in the field and came for a chat, before he had reached the spot Micah had hidden himself.

"He used to be as ready for the news as the rest of us," said they to themselves, "and he had a laugh like a horse. His sweetheart has jilted him, most like."

When the purple on the grapes began to grow through the amber, and the mellowed apples dropped from their stems, the children began to flock about the orchard gate like buzzards about a battle−field. But they found the gate padlocked and the board fence prickling with pointed sticks. Micah they saw but seldom, and his face, once so sunny, was as terrible to them as the angel's with the flaming sword that kept guard over the gates of Eden. So the sinless little Adams and Eves had no choice but to turn away with empty pockets.

However, one morning, accident took Micah to the bolted gate just as the children came trooping home in the early autumn sunset; for in those days they kept students of any age at work as many hours of the day as possible. A little fay, with curls as sunny as the tendrils of the grape, caught sight of him first. Her hat was wreathed with scarlet maple leaves; her dress was as ruddy as the cheeks of the apples. She seemed the sprite of autumn. She ran toward him, with arms outstretched, crying:

"Oh, Master Rood! Do come and play. Where hast thou been so long? We have wanted some apples, and the plaguy old gate was locked."

For the first time for months the pall of remembrance that hung over Micah's dead happiness was lifted, and the spirit of that time came back to him. He caught the little one in his brawny arms and threw her high, while she shrieked with terror and delight. After this the children gave no quarter. The breach begun, they sallied in and stormed the fortress. Like a dream of water to a man who is perishing of thirst, who knows while he yet dreams that he must wake and find his bliss an agony, this hour of innocence was to Micah. He ran, and leaped, and frolicked with the children in the shade of the trees till the orchard rang with their shouts, while the sky changed from daffodil to crimson, from crimson to gray, and sank into a deep autumn twilight. Micah stuffed their little pockets with fruit, and bade them run home. But they lingered dissatisfied.

"I wish he would give us of the golden apples," they whispered among themselves. At last one plucked up courage.

"Good Master Rood, give us of the gold apples, if thou please."

Micah shook his head sternly. They entreated him with eyes and tongues. They saw a chance for a frolic. They clung to him, climbed his back, and danced about him, shouting:

"The gold apples! The gold apples!"

A sudden change came over him; he marched to the tree with a look men wear when they go to battle.

"There is blood in them!" he cried hoarsely. "They are accursed −− accursed!"

The children shrieked with delight at what they thought a jest.

"Blood in the apples! Ha! ha! ha!" and they rolled over one another on the grass, fighting for the windfalls.

"I tell ye 'tis so!" Micah continued. He took one of the apples and broke it into halves.

"Look," he cried, and in his eyes there came a look in which the light of reason was waning. The children pressed about him, peeping over each other at the apple. On the broken side of both halves, from the rind to the core, was a blood−red streak the width of a child's little finger. An amazed silence fell on the little group.

"Home with ye now!" he cried huskily. "Home with ye, and tell what ye have seen! Run, ye brats."

"Then let us take some of the apples with us," they persisted.

"Ha!" he cried, "ye tale−bearers! I know the trick ye'd play! Here then −− "

He shook the tree like a giant. The apples rolled to the ground so fast that they looked like strands of amber beads. The children, laughing and shouting, gathered them as they fell. They began to compare the red spots. In some the drop of blood was found just under the skin, and a thin streak of carmine that penetrated to the core and colored the silvery pulp; in others it was an isolated clot, the size of a whortleberry, and on a few a narrow crescent of crimson reached half−way around the outside of the shining rind.

Suddenly a noise, not loud but agonizing, startled the little ones. They looked up at their friend. He had become horrible. His face was contorted until it was unrecognizable; his eyes were fixed on the ground as if he beheld a specter there. Shrieking, they ran from the orchard, nor cast one fearful glance behind.

The next day the smith, filled with curiosity by the tales of the children, found an odd hour in which to visit Micah Rood's house. He invited the tailor, a man thin with hunger for gossip, to go with him. The gate of the orchard stood open, flapping on its hinges as the children had left it. The visitors sauntered through, thinking to find Micah in the house, for it was the noon hour. They tasted of this fruit and that, tried a pear, now an apricot, now a pippin.

"The tree of the gold apples is right in the center," said the smith.

He pointed. The tailor looked; then his legs doubled under him as naturally as they ever did on the bench. The smith looked; his arm dropped by his side. After a time the two men went on, clinging to each other like children in the dark.

Micah Rood, with his sunny hair tangled in the branches, his tongue black and protruding, his face purple, and his clinched hands stained with dirt, hung from the tree of the golden apples. Beneath him, in a trench, from which the ground had been clawed by human hands, lay a shapeless, discolored bundle of clothes. A skull lay at one end of the trench, and beneath it a moldy pack was found with precious stones amid the decaying contents.