

# OUR SOUTHERN MOUNTAINEERS

REMOVAL THE REMEDY FOR THE EVILS THAT ISOLATION AND POVERTY  
HAVE BROUGHT—SOME RESULTS OF A FIRST-HAND INVESTIGATION

BY

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*[In some parts of the southern Appalachian Mountains, as in some parts of the Adirondacks and of the mountains of New England, there are districts in which the population has grown beyond the slight power of the land to support it, so that the people have become poor and, in some places, their isolation and consequent inbreeding have added ignorance and degeneracy to their poverty. From a first-hand investigation Mr. Dawley has found that such conditions do exist among the people in the least accessible parts of the Appalachian Mountains. The remedy is to induce these people to move down to better farms or to industries, as some of them are doing. Because great sums have been wasted in mistaken missionary work to improve the lives of people in these places where they ought not to stay, THE WORLD'S WORK publishes Mr. Dawley's article in order, if possible, to hasten the migration from these really uninhabitable regions.—THE EDITORS.]*

**T**HERE is a considerable section of our country where the conditions of our people (especially of the children) are so deplorable as to beggar description. It is the mountain region known as the Southern Appalachians. A great number of the inhabitants are insufficiently housed, and they do not get enough wholesome food or sufficient clothing. Their children do not go to school, either because they do not care to send them, or for the very good reason that in many localities there are no schools; and where there are schools, the average term is only four months of the year, and the teachers are worthless. There are localities where these people have intermarried, increased, and multiplied to such an extent, with no opportunity of making a living, that they are degenerating under the effects of poverty and isolation.

In saying this I do not include the entire region, for there are fine people among these mountains, who have good valley farms, and who grow an abundance to eat and clothe themselves well, even though they may not have adequate transportation facilities for the marketing of their crops. And there are mountain farmers who have transportation facilities, and who work and make money with varying degrees of success, as do people elsewhere. But poor people of the mountains,

to whom I shall refer chiefly in this article, live in localities that are too densely populated, and that are economically uninhabitable.

I am able to state these facts of my own knowledge because I spent the better part of two years investigating the conditions for the United States Government. I carried on the investigation over a large territory, making a house-to-house visit among the people, and recording upon printed blanks or schedules all the conditions under which they were found to be living, with the amount of their crops, land cultivated, food consumed, earnings, and total income and expenditures for the year.

The work was the outcome of the Beveridge amendment, a measure proposed to prohibit the employment of children in any industrial enterprise, other than agricultural, throughout the United States. I was assigned to study the conditions of the people on the farms before they went to the mills.

I believe it is due to Dr. Charles Wardell Stiles, of hookworm fame, that the special investigation which I carried on was undertaken. At that time I knew absolutely nothing about child-labor in the South, nor did I know anything about the conditions of the people either at the mills or on the farms. My particular field of investigation was the mountains of Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. With my headquarters

most of the time at Asheville, N. C., I spent the winter of 1907-1908 and the following spring, until summer, in the mountains, journeying east into the Piedmont region of North Carolina, south into South Carolina, west to the borders of Tennessee and Georgia, and north into Tennessee, and thence into the Great Smoky Mountains, both north and south.

In order to get at the people and study them in their homes, a great deal of this traveling had to be done on horseback and in mid-winter. I found families without poultry, without eggs, without milk or butter, and without sugar or molasses or sweets of any kind. And I found the little children of these families (as young as three years) chewing tobacco because it assuaged the pangs of hunger, and mothers giving tobacco to their babies because "it stopped their yelling."

I have been in cabin after cabin having only one room, in which the entire family lived, cooked, slept, and ate, without any other furniture than their rude beds, a few broken chairs, and a rickety table. I found in such cabins, six, eight, ten, and even sixteen children and grandchildren growing up in ignorance, vice, and in many instances in crime. I found families without the simplest articles of civilization, such as a looking-glass, a comb, a brush, or a wash-basin.

The section of our country where these conditions exist includes a mountainous region of nine states, with a population, according to the census of ten years ago, exceeding the combined population of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California. This region has thousands upon thousands of physically and mentally fit people, but there are entire localities in these mountains, and many of them, which are economically uninhabitable, containing populations that are mentally and morally and physically degenerating from lack of opportunity.

It was not always easy to find this class of people. To a traveller on the railroads and on the highways, there was always the good class of farming people in evidence; and, until I learned their ways, they always refrained from saying much about the other class. But one day in a quiet mountain village, just as the fat, well-fed proprietor of the little hotel was telling me that there were no such people in that part of the country, a family of nomads came tramping by. Two gaunt,

hungry-looking men went ahead, one of them carrying a long gun and a small child in his arms, while the other led a lean hound. Following the men was a long-legged, awkward boy, with his trousers reaching about half-way down his bare legs. He carried a baby, and behind him came an old woman, hobbling along with the aid of a staff, and behind her a younger woman with a frying-pan, a coffee-pot, and a tin cup dangling at her waist. When I asked a neighboring merchant where those people lived, he said:

"Oh, just take the first creek you come to and go up it — you can't miss them; and the farther up you go, the more you will find, and the worse they will get."

And so I went up the creeks and came in touch with the people of poverty. I found their cabins wherever there was a little patch of arable land between the precipitous rocks and hills, and even upon the mountaintops. Picture to yourself a solitary log cabin, without windows or porch, on a little patch of land capable of producing only a few bushels of corn; and picture in one of these cabins the haggard old mother and the broken-down father sitting by the fireplace, chewing tobacco all day long, with eight or ten children, long-haired and dirty, scattered about — and you have a typical picture of the "farm" and of the family of the uninhabitable places. When you see one of these "farms" for the first time, you may ask, Where is the barn? Barn! There is not a barn, not even a chicken-coop, for miles around.

To get a more precise view of exact conditions, let us start from the top of any one of the many mountain spurs in this vast region. We are on the divide. At our feet there is a tiny stream. As it increases in volume our descent begins. On our left we see a little cabin in a sloping "pocket" of land. It is surrounded by rocks and cliffs on three sides, with the mountain stream separating it from us and our trail. The cabin is a miserable structure of upright boards, with great open cracks and nothing to keep out the cold. If the sun is shining and the day fairly warm, we may see a group of children scattered about in the warm sunshine. They are bare-legged and ragged. In such a cabin as this we shall find the old crone sitting by the fireplace, spitting tobacco-juice into the fire. If you ask her how old she is, she may not know; but she thinks that she is "going on forty something:"

She looks to be a hundred. Inside are rude and filthy beds, rickety chairs and table, coffee-pot, frying-pan, and battered water-bucket; that is all. In such a cabin as this you will not find a looking-glass, a wash-basin, or a comb; and the "farmer," if he is at home, will tell you that he "made forty bushels of corn," last season, which was not enough to do him. Ask him how he made any money, and he will tell you that he went six, eight, ten — yes, I have known them to go sixty miles — to earn it. And his total earnings did not exceed ten dollars during the entire year.

As we continue our journey down the mountain we come to more of the cabins; and, as a rule, they become a little better in appearance, and the "farmer" may tell us that he "made a right smart of corn last year and enough to do him." Now we come to a cabin with a porch, where there are wooden pegs driven into the wall, and on the pegs are clothing, harness for a bull, and, perhaps, a looking-glass with a wash-basin under it. Perhaps this cabin has a crib and an out-house of some sort.

As we get near the foot of the mountain the country begins to open out before us; fields give place to the little pockets of land which we have passed, and the mule and the horse take the place of the harnessed bull. The rude cabins develop into houses, and the fields into well-cultivated farms with out-houses and stock. And it is here that we get a good meal of home products, while we talk to the good type of mountain farmer, who rears his children well, and sends them off to school to be educated. But the great number of these prosperous folk do not concern a child-labor investigator. Their children do not work at home. Neither do they or their children go to the mills to work. That was a fact soon established to a certainty. Some of their tenants go, and I could find out about them, or about the fellow up the creek with a family of eight or ten children who had gone to the mill. Occasionally I would hear of a fellow who had been to the mill and returned. He could not make a living there, and nearly starved to death, it was said; and then I would hunt him up, sometimes riding twenty miles to hear what he had to say about his experience at the cotton-mill, and he would tell me, as a rule, that he had no children old enough to work in the mill, and there was not much of anything that he could work at there.

Far away in the Chilhowee Mountains of Tennessee, where the sheriff advised me to fill my saddle-bags with rocks and pretend that I was a prospector looking for mines, the old moonshiner of the "cove" stood by the corner of his cabin holding the bridle of his old plough-horse in one hand, and his long-barreled rifle in the other. He told me that the revenue officers had recently come to the cove, broken up his neighbor's still, and burnt his cabin and hog-meat. He said that while he had given up making "moonshine" himself, and no longer believed in it, he did not think it was a very nice way for the "revenues" to treat his neighbor; "for God knows," said he, "he is poor enough without having everything he owns burnt up."

I asked him if any one ever went from his locality to the cotton-mills. After a pause, with his mind bent upon an answer to my inquiry, he said:

"Yes, there's Mandy Cooper and Laura Hughes down there in Tabcat. They was in pretty poor circumstances, makin' 'bout barely enough to live on, an' they went off to the cotton-mill."

"Do you think they bettered their circumstances?" I asked.

"My God!" exclaimed the old fellow, "they couldn't have worsted them."

The old moonshiner couldn't keep me overnight, for he did not have a particle of corn for my horse, so I rode on for ten miles before I could find a place to stay. On the way I stumbled upon the only industry in the locality — a moonshiner's mill in a dense thicket. It was grinding corn, probably for another run of "moonshine." The mill resembled a pig-pen more than anything else. A stream of water turned the stones, which were grinding away at the rate of about six grains of corn a minute.

At the farmhouse where I stopped that night, I asked about the two girls who had gone from Tabcat to the cotton-mills. Yes, the farmer knew them, for Mandy Cooper's mother did the washing for his wife.

"Have they improved their condition?" I asked.

"Wal, I don't know," said the farmer; "all I know that Mandy was back here a while ago, and I heard her mother ask her to stay home and help her put in a crop, and I heard Mandy say that she was through all the ploughin' she was ever goin' t' do; that it was the cotton-mill for her."

At a little town in Jackson County, North Carolina, where I learned that conditions were very bad and that a great many families had gone to the cotton-mills, I went to a Methodist minister and asked him what he knew about these people. He took me into a cove scarcely more than a mile away from the town, which possessed three or four churches and as many schoolhouses, and there we visited several families of women and children living in a most abject state of poverty and immorality.

soldier in the Confederate army, and fought all through the Civil War. Fine old fellow. Told me of his adventures in the Southern war, and I told him some of mine in the Cuban war. Asked if any one left his part of the country for the cotton-mills: he told me of Sis Dockery, who was one of his tenants. Her husband died, leaving her six or seven kids, and she could not make a living for them; so she pulled out and landed at the mills. Came home on a visit, and had money saved. Went back, and since then her father has been down to see her; he says she is living in a nicely furnished house and doing well; the kids are all



A REFORMED MOONSHINER

There are many who make whiskey because there is little opportunity to make anything else

"Now," said he, "you could build schoolhouses and churches for these people as much as you wanted to, but they would not go to them. You could preach to them, too, but what is the use? They are hungry, and want something to eat."

The following is taken from one of my notebooks of 1908:

"Tuesday, April 14th. Bald Creek, 18 miles from Flag Pond, where I spent Monday night. Stayed here last night. Mr. Hensley owns the place, and is a well-to-do farmer, owning a lot of good bottom land. He has taken several prizes at international fairs for his fine apples, was a

going to school, with the exception of the big ones, who work in the mill.

"Tuesday, 12th. Stopped at Day Book. D. F. Young, postmaster, merchant, and farmer, reports that from Mine Fork — a very bad locality, where they make moonshine, shoot, fight, and kill — seven families have gone to the mills in the last six years. Annie Laws went six years ago, with two illegitimate children. Two of the families owned their own land but lived hard. Lem Phillips was not worth \$25 when he went to Carolina six years ago with his wife and five children. He now owns two lots, one double team, and is doing well. People leave because they are hard up and can't make a living. Some leave on



A "FARM" NEAR THE TOP OF A CREST

As a rule, the higher up in the mountains the people live, the worse are the conditions



WHERE PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO LIVE WITH NO VISIBLE MEANS OF SUPPORT

account of getting into trouble, selling whiskey and finding themselves indicted; then they skip out, and the authorities are glad to get rid of them."

I spent seven months on this kind of field work, getting such results as the above extracts. At the end of this period I returned to Washington, thoroughly convinced that the salvation of these families was for them to leave the mountains and go to a place where, for the first time in their lives, they may have a chance to make a living.

I was, however, instructed to make a more

in carrying on the work in detail in twenty-one townships and forty-five districts, scattered over a large area of mountain territory.

I obtained nearly nine hundred schedules of families on the farms, each schedule containing an answer to more than one hundred inquiries, with the age, conjugal condition, occupation, earnings, physical condition, literacy, and schooling of every member of the family. As a total result, I had recorded on these schedules the living conditions of fully 5,000 individuals.



A HOME TYPICAL OF THE BETTER CLASS OF COVE-DWELLERS

scientific investigation. I submitted a plan for making a house to house canvass in certain districts and recording upon printed schedules the exact conditions under which the people lived, with their earnings, crops, food consumed, physical, moral, and social condition, and their total income and expenditure. I was instructed to put this plan into operation. I carried on my investigations in fourteen counties of three states and was preparing to carry the work into Georgia and Alabama, when I was called off the job. However, I had succeeded

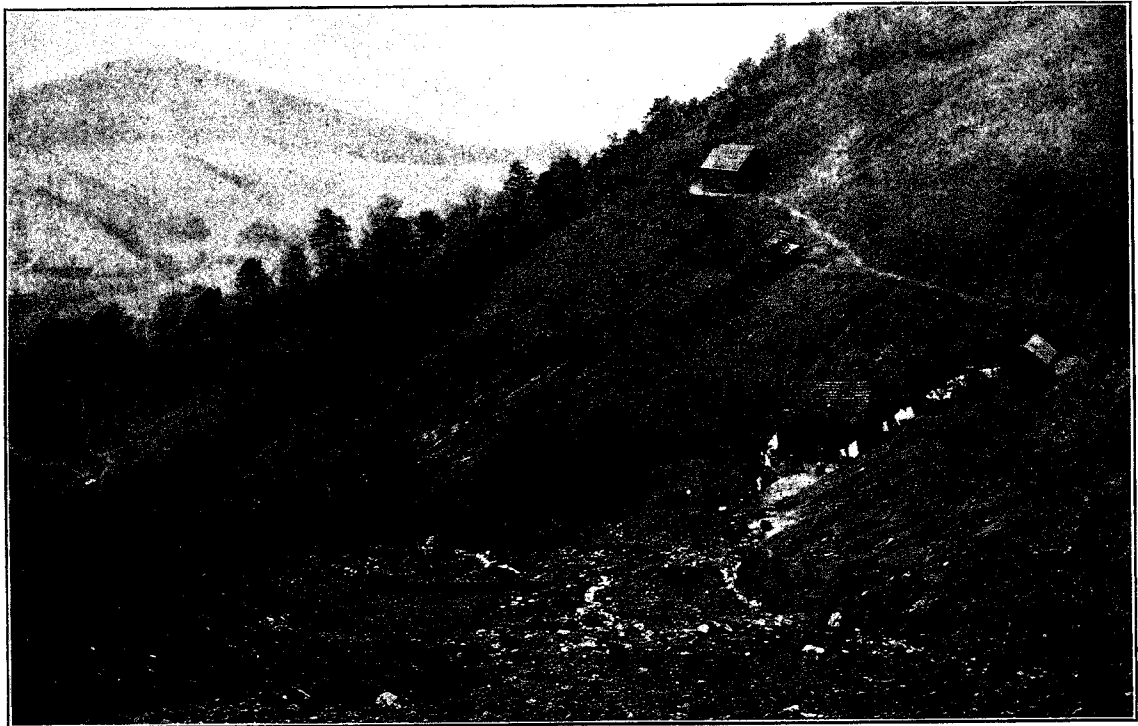
In addition to this detailed work, showing just how the families live on the so-called farms, I obtained for each district the last school report (when there was one to be had), a specific report on the educational facilities, a description of the territory or topography of the land, and a general summary showing the industrial, social, moral, and sanitary conditions of the locality, and its resources. I made a persistent search for families who had left their farms for the cotton-mills; and on another schedule blank I recorded, as far as ascertainable

the previous conditions of these families and their condition at the mills. Of these families I obtained records of three hundred, representing, approximately, a thousand children, who were working or had worked in the mills, and in many cases I was able to show just what had happened to them.

Where the Blue Ridge Mountains swing down into South Carolina, there is a locality known as the Dark Corner. It is the Dark Corner because its deeds of evil and lawlessness have been known throughout the state for generations. It is in the upper edge of the

naturally a country unto itself. Ever since man can remember, it has been the domain of the moonshiner and outlaw, and many are the blood-curdling tales told in both states of its illicit distilling, raids by revenue officers, battles fought, robbery, bloodshed, and wanton murder.

Into this Dark Corner I went to study the conditions there. In the little hollows, up the creeks, and over the mountain ridges are the little cabins, abandoned now, which once held the whiskey-makers and the whiskey-drinkers, with their families of besotted children. Upon



TWO "COVE" HOMES

Where people live in ignorance, poverty, and immorality because they have no opportunity to make a decent living

state, bordering North Carolina, not very far from the Georgia line, just under and partially in the Saluda Mountains, the name given to that part of the Blue Ridge. Two immense mountain-spurs of almost solid rock, known respectively as the Hogback and the Hog's Head, shut the country in on the north and east; and on the south, high, precipitous rocks descend from a small, irregular plateau, which forms the principal cove of the Dark Corner. On the west the irregular folds of the Glassy Mountain roll upward and crumple with the mother range, so that the Dark Corner is

inquiring what had become of the tenants of these cabins, I received for reply:

"They have gone to the cotton mills."

"We hated to see them go," said a farmer to me, "we foresaw the depopulation of our mountains and a scarcity of labor on our farms, but our country is better off, and the labor we have left is better, too."

Upon leaving the Dark Corner I rode around mountains and down by the winding trail, through gullies and past high cliffs with mountain torrents roaring in my ears, as darkness closed in upon me. In the bottom of a deep



A "MOONSHINE" CORN MILL  
 "The only manufacturing plant in its locality"

gorge, at last, I could discern the dim light, bright in the intense darkness, of a cabin in which I might stop for the night.



THE LAST OF THE HOWARDS  
 A famous feudist family. In a country of industries and intercourse with the world, such types do not continue

The light was so far below me that it seemed as though I could toss a stone down upon it, but by winding back and forth along the mountain-side I soon reached the bottom of the gorge and rode up to it. I could see the white whiskers of a man by the blazing fire in the fireplace, and hear him as he talked in a deep voice. Leaning over my saddle I called out the customary salute of "Howdy!"

The old man jumped up from his seat by the fireplace and shouted back as he came toward the door:

"Light, stranger; 'light!"



A DESERTED MOUNTAIN "FARM"  
 The owner at last went to the lowlands where he could make a living

As he came out, I asked him if he could put me up for the night, and his answer was:

"If you can put up with our fare."

That was all there was to it. One of the boys took my horse, and I was given a seat by the fire while the old man's wife insisted upon preparing me some supper. I watched her as she, with a clay-pipe in her mouth, sliced off the fat pork held against her breast, and her daughter swabbed out the frying-pan with a greasy rag. Biscuits were made and baked in the same frying-pan in which the pork was fried and the table was swabbed



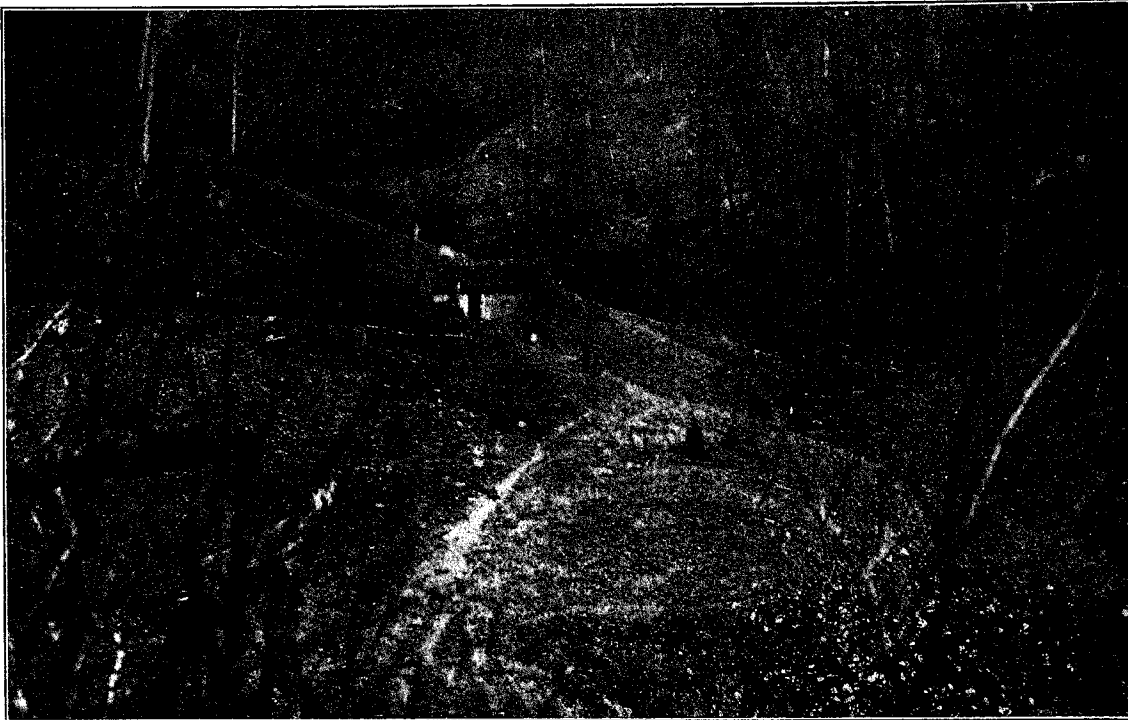


THE "FIRST CITIZEN" OF HIS LOCALITY, AND HIS FAMILY



HIS FARM OF FOUR HUNDRED ACRES

On which he raised 1,000 bushels of corn. Yet he lived in a log-house without the comforts which less capable men in the more accessible places enjoy, and without the ordinary opportunities for his children



A "FARM" ON POSSUM TROT, TYPICAL OF THOSE HIGH UP IN THE MOUNTAINS



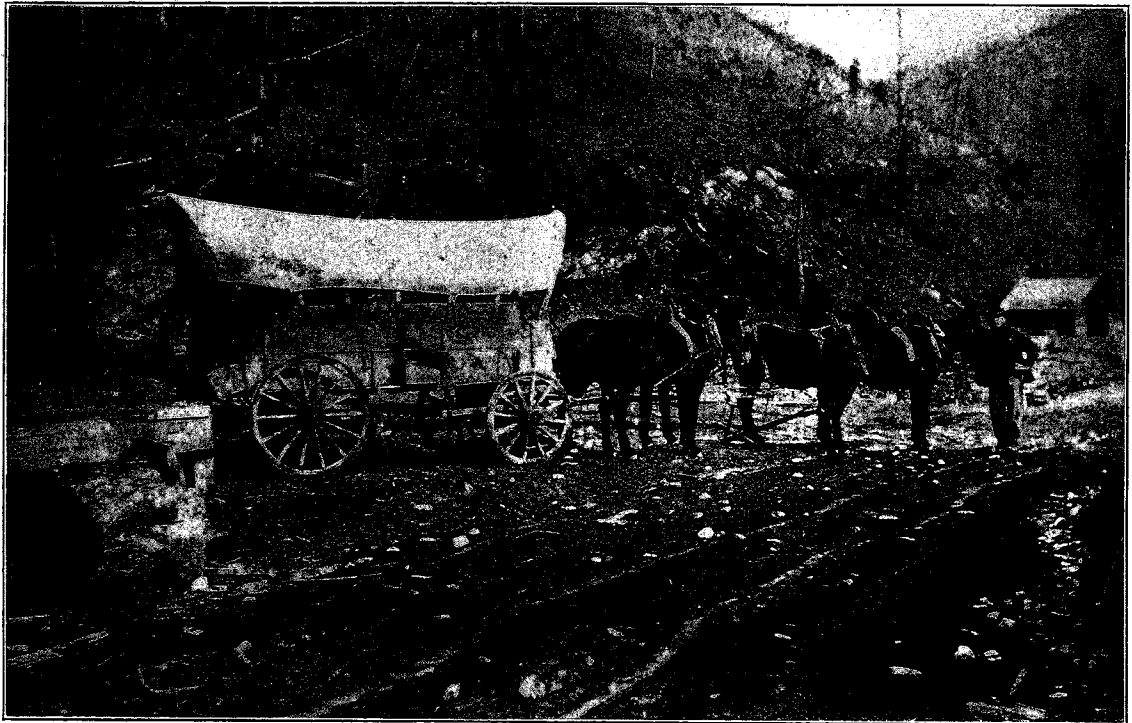
A HOUSE IN THE "DARK CORNER" OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
A region that has been noted for its lawless deeds for several generations

off with the same greasy rag that had been used for the frying-pan; I ate the biscuit and pork by the light of a kerosene lamp which smoked all over the place because it had no chimney. Yet I ascertained that this man owned four hundred acres of land and made a thousand bushels of corn, the average crop of my North Carolina cove-dwellers being only forty or fifty bushels. This man had plenty of money besides, and several tenants on his land.

He gave me his bed to sleep in while he and his wife and daughter slept in the "lean-to," his two sons occupying the other bed in the cabin.

tion and its attending poverty and vice is a crime against child-life and against civilization, and that the assumption that these people are living in prosperity is false. I know, moreover, that thousands and thousands of dollars are wasted by missionaries in trying to uplift people who need good food and a chance to work. The people of the uninhabitable places can go to the industries, unless industries can come to them; or, failing these remedies, the awful conditions continue.

The industries are not going to the mountain-coves. The people must go to the industries



STARTING A 32-MILE HAUL TO MARKET

The distance from market makes much of the mountain country unprofitable for agriculture

Our breakfast consisted of sodden biscuits, fat pork, boiled rice, and coffee.

I merely mention these living conditions to show what isolation does in some cases where the mountaineer has ample land, is eminently respectable, works hard, and makes enough to support himself and family.

In conclusion, I wish to say that the people who go from the mountain-coves even to the mills are benefited by the change—as they would be if they entered any other industry where they could make a living. I do know that any law which keeps these people in isola-

—to places where they can earn a living. Their salvation depends upon moving out of the uninhabitable places. It is not with any desire to criticize the poor people of the mountains that I write. My criticism of conditions does not apply to those localities where there are good farms and lands capable of development, and where there is a sturdy farming class of citizens, as true and worthy a people as are to be found anywhere. But the cove-dwellers must move or be moved from a really uninhabitable country. To try to keep them there by schools and churches is useless.