

ELKWOOD, BASTION OF INNOVATION

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With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author

AMERICA has long served as a world leader in scientific innovation, yet despite our nationalism it is difficult to imagine any scientific endeavour without rivalry. History's greatest minds have fallen foul of each other for centuries, thriving and perishing as jousting pairs: da Vinci and Michelangelo, Darwin and Owen, Tesla and Edison, Turner and Pritchett. The final duo, though American, are not familiar to you, nor are they known to the rest of the world. When musing over the sciences, they are surely the most important names never spoken.

Turner and Pritchett's lifetime propinquity is unique amongst the rivalries of their historical companions. Both men were hand picked at the emergence of their scientific careers, Turner hailing from Boston in the North, and Pritchett from Savannah in the South. They were the first of twenty-four men assembled as part of President Andrew Jackson's concealed Innovation Initiative of 1832. Along with their families and a supporting labour force, the men were gathered in a concentrated settlement deep in the Great Smoky Mountains bordering Tennessee and North Carolina. Turner, Pritchett's senior by eighteen months, was thrust into leadership at the age of thirty-two; a position he held unchallenged until his death in 1882.

Turner's alpine community lives on. Dubbed Elkwood by its founders, the settlement lies unseen amongst the spruce-fir forests of the range's upper elevations. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, descendants of the natives who escaped President Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830, occupy the Qualla Boundary; nestled amid the valleys and rivers separating Hughes Ridge and Balsam Mountain in the eastern Smokies. Although I have scaled many of the western peaks (including Clingmans Dome, Mount Collins, and Chimney Tops*), neither white man nor native roam the wilds of the eastern slopes. They re-

main isolated, remote, and home to Elkwood's remnants.

CHEROKEE INDIANS UNLOCK GATES TO ELKWOOD

I have spent many years exploring the territories of various indigenous tribes in North America. During my expedition through the Smokies in the winter of 1928, I was able to build a friendship with the Eastern Band's Principal Chief, John A. Tahquette. He provided nine of his most experienced huntsmen to assist me in crossing the jagged range. The Cherokee know their domain like no other; of the geography and wildlife, their knowledge is faultless.

I asked the huntsmen about Mount Guyot as we mounted Chimney Tops, a double-capstone knob known to the Cherokee as "Duniskwalgunyi" or "forked antler". Jefferson, the eldest of my intrepid escort, recognised the sincerity of my questioning and decided to oblige.

The barrel-chested fifty-two-year-old told of his tribe's reluctance to venture into the thick green forest blanketing Guyot's upper slopes. He presented tales of ghosts and spirits living amongst the trees, and hunting parties ambushed by shadowy mountain warriors. Before I could dismiss his words as aboriginal imaginings, he recounted a story from his childhood about a young white woman who had made her way down the mountain and stumbled into the Qualla Indian reserve. Too sick to talk, she had been taken to a medicine man. Within hours of her arrival, the woman's face and neck began to swell. She died before the day ended. Jefferson explained that the medicine man could not cure her, for she had been cursed by the mountain ghosts for leaving her home atop Mount Guyot.

Upon revisiting the Qualla in 1930, I confronted Chief Tahquette with Jefferson's rhapsodic stories. The Cherokee appoint a Principal Chief primarily to negotiate with Europeans; Tahquette, a trustworthy fellow, is well accustomed to discussions with white men. He gave his person-



THE VIEW OF MOUNT GUYOT FROM CLINGMANS DOME

From the summit of Clingmans Dome, the clear conditions of my second ascent revealed a far-away snow peak to the east. Tahquette's men spoke of the mountain, which I later recognised as Mount Guyot, with a vaguely spiritual distaste.

al assurance that the stories were accurate, before granting me further explanation. It came to light that he has in fact made contact with a white man of Guyot many times during his term as Chief, a man the Cherokee call "the Raven of Blue Smoke".

A WATCHFUL GUARDIAN AMID SENTINEL PEAKS

On my return from an expedition through the Black Hills of South Dakota*, I arranged with the National Geographic Society to undertake the exploration of the impenetrable crowning peak of the Smokies' eastern ranges, Mount Guyot.

My expedition left the Qualla December 10, 1930. My friend Chief Tahquette had once again granted me a band of skillful assistants, made up of the same hunters who had been with me for many years. In search of the Raven of Blue Smoke, we set north along the stream of Raven Fork, as far as the water would take us.

There was no path to Guyot. Jefferson led us upstream along the riverbank until the bush grew so thick that we were forced into the trickling water. We splashed further, always uphill, until the water too was displaced by bush. Tree roots were used as staircases in the sloping mud, and then ladder rungs as our course continued to steepen.

The northern, western, and eastern slopes to Guyot's upper elevations are decidedly gentle when compared to our approach from the south. My assistants assured me that only by meeting with the Raven of Blue Smoke, who kept vigil on this side of the mountain, might I safely venture

beyond the wall of spruce-fir at 5,500 feet. At 5,000 feet we dug into the mountainside. Sheltered by the northern hardwood canopy of Yellow Birch and American Beech, we lay in wait until after dark.

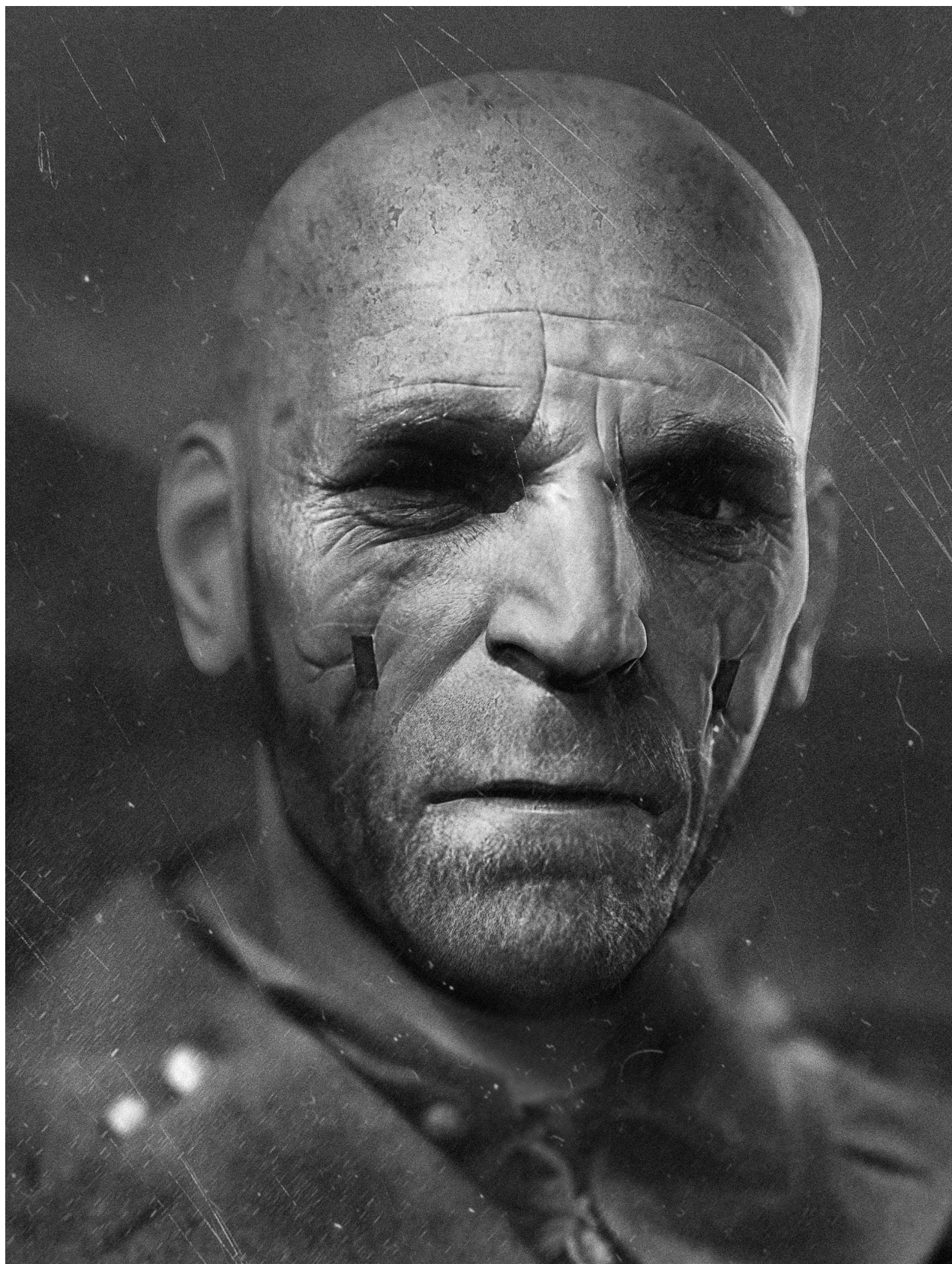
I awoke to distant murmurings. 30 feet up the slope, Jefferson stood next to a crouched figure. The white man of Guyot met my gaze with suspicious eyes. His speech was impatient, although I could not make out his words through the gusting wind. Jefferson finally signalled; my presence was required.

It took fourteen hours to negotiate the terms of my ascension. The Raven of Blue Smoke, or Abraham as he preferred, was a troubled man of sixty years. He never stood with us for more than ten minutes at a time and even when present he scanned the wooded terrain around us ceaselessly. Our conversation was heavily stilted with Abraham routinely slinking out into the haze, sometimes mid-sentence, only to return hours later. Although his reasoning was concealed, eventually he agreed to escort me into the upper elevations of Mount Guyot.

A RELIC OF BYGONE RESEARCHERS

We left my Cherokee assistants behind as we set off towards the summit. Abraham carried a variety of instruments including a strangely shaped but recognisably violent weapon, which he handled with an unusual delicacy.

The forested steep was strewn with rocks of all sizes, each covered with a thick layer of green moss. Abraham asked for news of the outside world; while the Cherokees



THE RAVEN OF BLUE SMOKE

had kept him up to date with occurrences throughout the Smokies, he knew nothing of happenings further afield. He asked many political questions, which showed that, although he was fifty years out of date; he had once been reasonably well informed. During my explanations, he habitually covered his mouth and nose with a piece of cloth he kept draped over his shoulder. He responded to my solicitous glances with a grave nod, acknowledging the peculiarity but neglecting to offer an explanation.

We mounted a narrow ridge sweeping southeast from Guyot's summit. This eventually gave way to a rare break in the forest, and with it, the first trace of man since quitting the Qualla.

Two long steel rails lay parallel, swooping 100 feet down the mountainside where they met a ramshackle freight rig. Overrun by thick undergrowth, the mechanical contrivance had been partially dismantled on one side, revealing a complex tangle of electrical wires. I looked to Abraham expectantly, but received little more than a shrug of indifference in return.

My curiosity was not so easily subdued. I dropped off the ridge and proceeded towards the rig, Abraham hastening after me with obvious reluctance. The hulking iron carcass, I was told, represented a timeworn transportation experiment conducted by Abraham's forefathers, a group of physicists and mechanical engineers who had settled the wilds of Guyot following a government directive in 1832.

CAUGHT BETWEEN DUTY AND VIRTUE

The cold and rainy evening found us crossing a pass to the east, barely 150 feet below the summit. Here we mounted a rocky trail, whereupon Abraham halted abruptly. He signalled towards the now silhouetted mountainside to our North. A soft red glow flickered between huge trunks of spruce. The ranger beckoned for silence, despite the shrieking wind, as he scrutinised the darkness ahead. Suddenly, he winced as a blue floodlight burst into life atop the northern slope. Stepping forth he raised a small cylindrical implement before covering his eyes. The object discharged three rapid surges of blinding white light. We were blanketed in darkness once more as the hilltop floodlight obediently withdrew.

Abraham moved purposefully towards the red glow. Our trail descended aggressively towards a great fallen log, beyond which lay an adolescent black bear, a rare sight at this altitude. Bathed in red light, the creature was sprawled on its back revealing a bloody paw, mangled by a leghold trap. Amazingly, Abraham vaulted the log to disengage the trap, a difficult task owing to the powerfully flailing animal and steep terrain. With accomplished skill he pulled snaring pins from the bear's flesh; finally extinguishing the red light. Abraham had spoken softly to the animal before it fled into the blackness.

The Ranger's efforts to save the bear, however valiant, were in vain, for not an hour later we encountered another display of luminescent streaks and flashes. A sharp crack pierced the blustering wind and the creature he had saved was suddenly obliterated. We sat, hidden amid a dense

grouping of Fraser fir, while Abraham stared dispassionately into the darkness. I asked him why the bear had been killed so drastically. He responded simply: "Disease is disease, regardless of who carries it." I met his eyes once more as he reached for the cloth draped over his shoulder.

SEEKING SHELTER IN A SLAUGHTERHOUSE

Our overnight encampment provided a grand vista overlooking Elkwood, and I was successful in obtaining some fine photographs whilst Abraham pointed out the fortified territory.

Charged with protecting his mountainside community from disease-bearing outsiders, the ranger was a veteran and a respected loner amongst his people. He patrolled a large region of Elkwood's border, 900 acres of wooded mountainside to the south, alone. Despite his age and the vastness of this territory, the Cherokees had assured me of his infallibility as a ranger; an assertion confirmed by the clinical efficiency with which he handled the black bear.

We had little time to waste as daylight rapidly exposed the valley. Being then in haste to find shelter within the settlement, I accompanied Abraham to a tapered shed-like structure protruding from Elkwood's southwestern fortifications. The building housed animals considered disease-free by the rangers who caught them. While squawking birds constituted the majority, a great elk bull also hung from the rafters, restrained by thick leather straps and steel wires. Although a thick black hood blinded the beast, it had thrashed about as we latched the door behind us, alerting the building's occupants to our presence through an inexplicable surge of red light. An imposing figure appeared at the door ahead of us. Abraham met what appeared to be his daughter.

THE FIRST OUTSIDER TO VISIT ELKWOOD

Since no foreigner had visited this strange valley, much less dared entry to the settlement, my presence was met with considerable anxiety. Despite my assertions of a clean bill of health, the woman regarded me with a look somewhere between terror and disgust. Abraham left me in the company of the squirming creatures and ushered her out of earshot.

To my right a door led into a tiny wooden hallway, wherein stood three queer-looking children. In their mother's absence, her sons had come to inspect this strange spectacle.

The eldest of these slaughterhouse imps engaged me in an extraordinary conversation. The boy, no older than nine years, and vexatiously inquisitive, conducted an impudent inquiry whilst his brothers stalked about the filth. He asked if I came from a land conquered by great men astride mechanical horses, powered by nothing more than the engine of human life. When I said that such impossible technologies do not exist, he smiled in self-congratulation.

"Oh, yes, they do," he said. "Our journals tell of such things." The conviction with which he presented these delusions was astounding.



THE LIGHT OF MORNING SHONE TO EXPOSE THE DISQUIETING SETTLEMENT OF ELKWOOD

CITIZENS OF ELKWOOD ENJOY GLORIOUS TECHNOLOGIES

Inside the slaughterhouse, hanging from vicious hooks, were an assortment of animal remains – raw meat, organs, skin – even a dog's carcass. There was nothing appetizing, however, only waste and wicked smells. The butcheress was dressed in overalls stiff with the congealed remains of her occupation. She hacked watchfully at some unidentifiable biological structure, perhaps in frustration at my unwelcome presence or simply in contemplation of breakfast. Among the filth shone an astonishing carving apparatus. Ordering her son away from my immediate presence, the woman began working with strange device, simultaneously gripping and chopping at the hoary flesh, before searing the bloody pieces dry in a fizz of smoke.

Between carcasses she mopped the instrument with a filthy rag, which hung from her girdle and trawled through stagnant pools of blood when she walked. With her muck-stained hands she packeted the cuts of meat and passed them to one of her children, who then stacked them on a counter in the corner of the room. While she worked, I noticed that Abraham cleared a space for us on the central worktop, a heavy wooden slab, which served as a gutting bench and a breakfast table. He beckoned for me to join him, and then instructed the boy to fetch food.

A small stove coil was set before us. The boy brought out two packets of meat wrapped in sodden paper, and a discoloured lump of butter, which even Abraham looked upon with suspicion. The butter began to sputter and burn as the coil became hot; Abraham unwrapped his meat and wiped it across the surface before devouring it. Although I recoiled from such an offering, I did not wish to offend

him so, cautiously I consumed a tiny mouthful. Thankfully, the room at that moment fell into a soundless darkness as the bulbs dimmed and the carving apparatus wound to a halt.

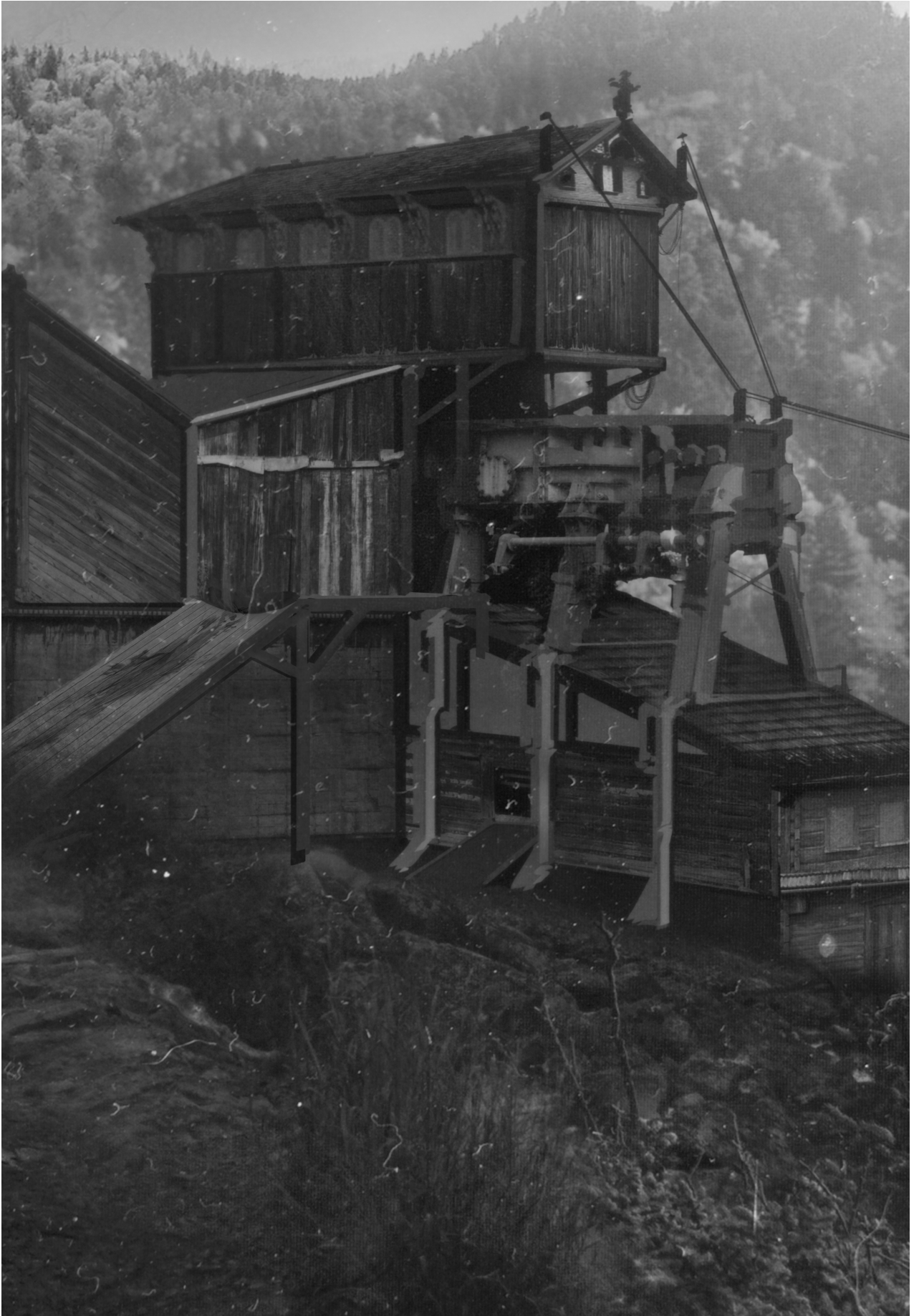
Looking up, the butcheress commanded her children to examine the suspended elk bull in the rear of the shed. Dutifully, they complied.

One of them returned shortly saying it had 'run out'. Slavering at the mouth, the beast hung, lifelessly, from the rafters. With accustomed precision the other children extracted electric cables from its flanks and disconnected the hoist, causing the carcass to thunder to the ground in a broken heap.

The butcheress pulled a collection of wires from beneath the table, carefully selected three, and, incredibly, inserted these into a line of electrical sockets protruding from her forearm. A single bulb flickered into life, and she wandered over to the fallen beast and began hacking at its carcass with her buzzing machine.

PROTESTATIONS OF GOOD HEALTH DO LITTLE TO SWAY THE PREJUDICED WOMAN

Elkwood's drinking water is collected from the head of Big Creek, which bisects the lower extremity of the settlement. This sounds idyllic, yet this was no pristine mountain spring. Elkwoodite water provided a gastric test no timid soul could survive. Abraham, who had sat beneath a window staring up the hillside for the remainder of the morning, brought out a thin hose that spurted super-heated water into filthy cups. A secondary nozzle shot a measure of foul-tasting disinfectant into each drink.



THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

I had swallowed the concoction after waiting for it to cool; choking on the chemical pungency, I coughed. The butcheress howled. Gathering her children, she wrapped her sopping rag across their frightened faces. With a voice now quivering with distress, she ordered my removal.

"I told you he'd be carrying it!" She growled at her father. I humbly assured her that the National Geographic Society, prior to the commencement of my expedition, had assessed my health and I was in perfect form. But my assurance did nothing to allay what appeared to be the woman's increasing panic. As she shuffled her children further away from my presence, Abraham agreed that we would take our leave immediately and make for the upper levels of Elkwood.

WORKERS OCCUPY THE SHADOWY STREETS

In the afternoon light, the inner streets were frightful to encounter. Various creatures hung from tall wooden structures, throwing sinister shadows across our path. An idle mind might have looked upon these suffering animals as ornamental, a savage warning to intruders, but they would ignore the marvelous functionality at work; cables draped heavily from flesh to machine, transferring electric power from the organic to the mechanical. Were it not for the cruelty of it all, it may well have earned my admiration.

The miserable ground upon which we stood was settled almost 100 years before. This was a miraculous feat; according to Abraham, the development of the Innovation Initiative in these wild mountains was plagued with problems. The task force faced extreme isolation, forgone government supply deliveries, and the scarcity of basic resources like food and water. Without the supple minds of their leading thinkers, the community would have died in its first winter.

There were 24 large buildings rooted in the hillside above the butchery. These, Abraham explained, contained research facilities and served as homes for the settlement's upper class families. These families were the direct descendants of Turner and Pritchett. Dozens of smaller structures housed the settlement's lesser denizens: labourers, tailors, water-carriers and butchers. With their heavily boarded walls, supported with Bostonian brickwork, the houses appeared strikingly permanent.



A DUTIFUL WORKER CLIMBS ATOP A GRIM STRUCTURE

Abraham gradually led me up the mountainside towards Elkwood's largest building. It stood five storeys tall, and featured a large clock face, the hands of which stood curiously still. Our approach wound through narrow paths between buildings. The rags Abraham insisted I wear across my face disguised me, so we avoided any undue attention on an increasingly busy thoroughfare. Around me navvies, builders, and riggers were preoccupied, hoisting themselves atop the great wooden pillars, connecting selected homes and workshops to the struggling animals.

Intent on finding a spot where these curious men could be photographed to advantage, I stepped off the path for a moment prompting my elderly escort to growl in warning. To leave his sight, he warned, would be to take my life into my own hands. Compliantly, I returned to our path, but not before capturing an astounding picture.



THE CHILD IS WIRED TO HIS KEEPER

A TALK WITH THE LEADER OF ELKWOOD

When we eventually reached the settlement's main building, the filth and abomination of the lower town were replaced with order and polish. When we eventually entered the upper floor of the grand tower the afternoon light was settling. Glancing through elaborate windows it traced a plethora of elaborate maps, drawings and blueprints, artfully arranged about the room. Abraham respectfully asked me to remain in the corner. Walking to the centre of the chamber he approached a bed surrounded by murmuring machines. Watching from the shadows, inconspicuous and attentive, I saw him gently wake a deformed man.

It quickly became apparent that, despite their disparate

lifestyles, the men were intimately acquainted. However, one would be wrong to describe it as a collegial relationship, for it was not. Pleasantries were omitted in favour of formal address.

"Turner," pronounced Abraham with a nod of recognition.

"Pritchett," came the man's reply, followed by a haze of sputum, then a prolonged silence.

Abraham, a thoughtful man in spite of his menial occupation, had begun a tirade of criticism. He spoke passionately of the need for support in the nether districts, criticising the lofty researchers and accusing them of the single-handed annihilation of ethics and culture in the community. When, finally, he began lamenting the killing



THE LEADER OF ELKWOOD LIES, SICK, IN BED

of the black bear (which for Abraham, I suspect, was the true purpose of the meeting), the man cut him short.

“How often must I explain to you this necessity?” Turner wheezed. Abraham’s look hardened.

“This land is sacred, not for God or sentimentality, but for innovation. And you would have us relinquish our discoveries, and sacrifice our people’s health for the sake of a few mangy creatures – your grandfather would turn in his grave if he were to hear what you have been doing. Untreated animals carry disease. We have no resistance, no immunity.”

Feeling for Abraham’s humanity, I stepped forward. The dying man’s rhetoric was contemptible. His settlement was a travesty.

“And you would imprison these same people, indoctrinating them against outsiders who pose no threat?” I said. My protestation had the desired affect. The old man lay in stunned silence as he looked upon the first foreigner ever to venture into this wretched land.

Elkwood’s dying leader watched fearfully as I approached his bedside. He broke the silence with a hushed declaration; Abraham had doomed the settlement by facilitating my entrance.

A MURKY HISTORY OF TRIUMPHANT DISOBEDIANCE

I carefully began to explain my intentions. I told him I was an ethnographer of the National Geographic Society. When he realised that here stood the potential for his legacy to live on in the illustrious pages of such a publication, his attitude changed. He introduced himself as the grandson of one of the greatest engineers, inventors, and physicists the world had ever known: an ancestor whose name was never spoken beyond this sanctified valley. He told me the outside world had never known of the staggeringly important scientific discovery he made in the winter of 1882, or the ensuing downfall of arguably the most in-

tellectually gifted settlement on the planet.

Although wired to a tragic array of apparatus, the dying man found a sudden surge of energy. With an opportunity to record and preserve the story of his settlement, he became increasingly lucid and insistent. The 1830s, he said, saw Andrew Jackson at the helm of an ascendant America, assembling a task force of twenty-four promising mechanical engineers and physicists to investigate improvements in transportation and mechanized harvesting. Headed by the gifted mind of physicist Archibald Turner; Elkwood was born. The group was settled in this remote community, shielded from the attentions of the outside world.

Despite making some compelling discoveries in the early months of their confinement, they lacked the resources needed to effectively design and test their inventions. While operating as a private enterprise under Jackson’s presidency, the lack of investment restricted them to theoretical work, leaving the project to rumble along in uneventful isolation until the 1860s, when the Civil War disrupted the inertia.

The battle was looking ugly for the North. But when Lincoln caught wind of the long forgotten project he saw the potential reinvigoration of the northern force. Throwing extensive resources at the project, decades of designs were quickly realized and implemented in the struggle for control over the country. The need for advanced weaponry and troop transport provided a new focus for the task force who, liberated by the ability to actually build and test their designs, delivered weaponry capable of incredible violence.

Each wartime success compounded the pressure to deliver increasingly ruinous technologies. Ethical guidelines crumbled under the urgency, making way for unbridled experimentation and, ultimately, human testing. At the height of the war, General Grant was said to have credited the weaponry with shattering the Confederate lines at Fredericksburg and pushing Lee’s army back to Rich-

mond. It was Grant's admiration of the task force that secured the continued supply of resources beyond the Civil War and throughout his ensuing presidency.

Empowered by a liberated research culture, the experts saw new horizons beyond the constraints of ethics. Experiments followed that beggared rhetoric.

However, when Lincoln was assassinated, presidential commissions declined and the experts were left to investigate their own areas of interest. Chasing leads in mechanical aviation, atmospheric electricity, directed-energy weaponry, and biological engineering, their progress continued to develop.

In the notably cold winter of 1882, Archibald Turner made an astounding discovery. Elkwood's leading researcher had derived electrical power from the vital force of a wood frog. Development began simply, with frogs lighting incandescent bulbs and bringing flasks of water to the boil. But Turner quickly applied the science to other animal species, finding there was little customization required to draw greater results from such larger animals as salamanders, dogs, and elk. It was barely days before he turned the discovery on himself. It worked, perfectly, for a time.

The community-wide implementation of Archibald Turner's discovery, however, had been a disastrous miscalculation. The old man could not see it; He refused to see it. But to fresh eyes it was undeniable. It took four short months for the complication to surface; the human body rejected Turner's vital force converters, already deeply implanted within almost every member of the community. The rejection was fatal for many. Children, Abraham's generation, were administered with a series of painful injections in a final attempt to disrupt the immune system's response. It was successful. They would survive, but each with a permanently compromised immune system, leaving them extremely vulnerable to viruses and disease.

In their final weeks, the remaining members of the Innovation Initiative developed plans for the ongoing sterilization of the area and its inhabitants. Abraham's generation grew up under the care of those lucky enough to escape implantation. Allowing visitors in risked contagion. Leaving risked contagion. Outsiders represented death, and so Elkwood waged war against them.

I was shocked. Here was the result of a dream unhinged. An idea that triumphed then turned in on itself. I looked around the room, trying to gather a careful response. But I was interrupted.

THE ZEALOUS SUCCESSOR

Through an alcove leading into the chamber a man appeared. He wore an unusual white jacket and the arrogant countenance of youth. But something about him was disconcertingly wrong. Upon seeing me he stopped short and glanced rapidly at Abraham and Turner. Then, in a panic, he scrambled for something to cover his face.

The ranger's efforts to calm the boy were ineffective, for he was neither rational nor subservient. His shrieks of outrage quickly summoned several other men to the room.

The boy had come to service the mechanical pumps

that surrounded the old man. These devices drew their power from Turner's 'vital force', and were of the boy's design. While young, it became instantly clear that here was the settlement's new leader. Both Abraham and I were forcibly apprehended and escorted to a workroom on the second floor. My first impression upon entering the chamber was a curious rankness; a scent one could not identify, sanguine, disinfected, unsettling.

Here, I was told, Elkwood treated its criminals. Although the youth and the guards kept attentive cloths to their faces, and held Abraham separate, I was pushed into a corner and briskly instructed as to the purpose of the room. Here, the youth said, modifications were applied to thieves and absconders. Claiming imprisonment as wasteful, he explained that justice required restitution. "Life represents electric potential. Although no use as social forms, criminals can still contribute."

With that, the men in white unceremoniously pulled Abraham from the room.

I realised in retrospect that sound did not travel through these chambers. Within an hour, through a small window in the side of the workroom I saw what they did to the man who had been so instrumental to my inquiries. Outside Abraham had been strung atop a tall wooden post. Heavy cables hung from his limp body and were connected to the building's mechanical clock face. The hour tolled. The sound echoed across the valley.

It is with great remorse that I set down these distressing facts; I wish only to show the consequences of such dystopian ideals.

A MIRACULOUS DEPARTURE

By morning a crowd had gathered about Abraham, some to mourn his suffering, but most to gawk and whisper. The children from the slaughterhouse stood among the horde. As 10 o'clock failed to chime, I rose in acceptance of my inescapable fate. The door clicked open, and I stepped into the hallway. To my surprise I was met not by the men in white coats, but by the butcheress.

The woman secreted me first from the building, and thence to the safety of her butchery. Amidst a fit of tearful coughs, she insisted upon my immediate departure.

The hours of my furtive escape I remember only as a blur of fragmented images. Disease spreads quickly where there is no immunity. The common cold, so innocuous to an outsider, barely evident as my own unnoticed snuffle, wreaked havoc. Doors had been rapidly sealed up, but there were bodies already placed on the pavements. Like the bubonic plague or a replaying of the trials of Egypt, Elkwood was in the throes of a retributive demise.

I remained for some time alone atop that western ridge, looking to the rising smoke above the forsaken settlement. I watched what I feared and hoped to be the final hours of that land of once great promise. What had been built upon the ideals of supreme intellect was spoilt and sickened by the hubris of a few. Although I had not intended it, I had become the vessel for its reckoning.