

# The Children's Friend.

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SKETCHES OF NORTH CAROLINA.

*A brief Biography of Professor Mitchell. His Birth, Education and Professional Duties.*

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As a continuation of the notice of the University, a short sketch of one of its noblest and most useful Professors, and his melancholy death, will not be improper or unacceptable.

Elisha Mitchell, D. D., Professor of Chemistry, Mineralogy and Geology in the University, was born in Washington, Connecticut, in 1793. He graduated at Yale College in 1813, in the same class with George E. Badger, Thomas P. Devereaux, and other distinguished Southern men. In January, 1818, through the influence of Judge Gaston, he was appointed to a professorship in the University along with Dr. Olonstead, another classmate at Yale. For nearly forty years he served the institution with a zeal, fidelity and ability scarcely surpassed in the history of literary men. His love for the natural sciences soon broke through the books and the walls of his lecture room, and early led him to study the geology and natural history of the State. His vacations were spent in extensive surveys in every direction. Scarcely a stream, valley, mountain, coal bed, gold field, or mineral deposit in the State, but was visited and inspected by him. So early as 1835 he clambered the great mountain heights of the Appalachians, measured their tall peaks, and classified the rich Canadian flora of their slopes. It was he who first determined by barometric measurement what had often been conjectured, that the peaks of the Black Mountain were higher than those of the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and his name was affixed to the loftiest summit.

In 1856 a controversy arose between Dr. Mitchell and Hon. T. L. Clingman in regard to this highest peak. The latter claimed that he had first made known its true height, and that Dr. Mitchell had not been upon this particular peak. After considerable sparring in the newspapers, Dr. M. embraced the first opportunity presented by the summer vacation of 1857 to visit that mountain again for the purpose of verifying his former visit and measurements. His son, Mr. Charles Mitchell, and a daughter, accompanied him; and inasmuch as it was desirable in the interest of science to determine the accuracy of the barometer as an instrument for the measurement of elevation, he decided to run a line of levels to the summit based upon the surveys of a railroad which passed near by in the valley. Ascending by the

HEAD WATERS OF THE SWANNAHOA, he labored on the survey with his son about two weeks, and had progressed about three-fourths of the distance by Saturday noon of the 27th June. At this point about six hundred yards above a rude inn built of fir logs known as the Mountain House, he ceased work, dismissed his son, who

was his only assistant, to the farm house in the valley, requesting him to return on Monday morning to resume the survey. He then left, saying he intended to cross the great range and descend into the opposite valley of Caney river by the route which he had traversed in 1844, and if possible, see the guides who had then accompanied him. He was never again seen alive. On Monday morning the son clambered up to the appointed place, but the father was not there. The day passed without his appearance. The next morning's sun found the anxious son waiting on the crags beside the deserted tripod, and waiting in vain. The sun rode slowly and tediously through the south and west, and the gates of evening into his glorious couch behind the mountain peaks, and still the father came not. Wednesday the dismal story was repeated, and by sunset of that day, all allowances for accidental delays having been exhausted and serious alarm taken their place, swift-footed runners were started across to the other valley a distance of full twenty miles. On Friday morning they too returned without intelligence of the good Doctor—he had not reached the point for which he had started. Now indeed the worst was sure. Only one faint hope was left—and what a thought it was—that he might possibly be lying at the base of some tall precipice mangled, bleeding and perishing with hunger, but yet alive! Far and fast spread the alarm throughout that sparsely peopled region and upward poured the men of the mountains. Old men, young men and boys, farmers fresh from their fields, merchants, students, teachers, ministers, veteran hunters with their famous rifles and shot pouches swept up the mountain paths with the elastic tread of youth, leading and advising the anxious multitude from the Swannanoa valley; whilst similar multitudes were ascending from Caney river. To appreciate the difficulties of such a search which these gallant and humane men undertook, a glance at the region of the disaster is necessary.

Dwellers in the Atlantic States will scarcely comprehend that there is such a wilderness and inaccessible tract on this side of the great Western Sierras.

## THE BLACK MOUNTAIN

proper is about twenty miles long, shaped like a fish hook with the shank lying parallel to the Blue Ridge and close beside it. The inside of the curve is toward the north, and contains the waters of Caney river. Its shank juts boldly into the valley of South Tow, whose waters rise between it and the Blue Ridge. Standing in the centre of this system there is a radius of ten miles without a single inhabited house or road, or even an axe mark, in any direction. The region contains perhaps 100,000 acres of as absolute wilderness as may be found in the United States, and as rugged as it is wild. It is densely clad in forests. At certain lines of elevation the deciduous trees cease, and the most luxurious forests of firs prevail which are perhaps to be found in the world. The rich,

damp soil throws them up with such vigor that their tall, straight stems stand close together, and their interlocking branches shut out the light of day and fill all the pavilion beneath with a funereal gloom.

Shrubs and smaller woods perish in this sun-excluded atmosphere, but the face of the earth is richly carpeted with their elastic mosses, which hide rocks, fallen trees, and everything. The foot-fall makes no noise and leaves no print. Often the rank, luxuriant covering conceals dangerous caverns and pitfalls, into which the incautious traveler may disappear. Clumps of tall, graceful ferns dot this mantle of wondrous beauty, and struggle for the patches of light which now and then flicker through the opening made by some storm conquered fir which has fallen from the ranks. Adown the slopes and throughout the gorges and ravines run streams of purest, coldest water, at first gurgling unseen beneath the mosses and ferns, then bursting forth into rushing torrents, then swelling into foaming cascades, and pouring at last in thundering cataracts over steep mountain walls. Along these wild water-ways flourish impenetrable wildernesses of laurel, ivy, and the glowing rhododendron, so rich, rank, and wild that the mind is bewildered in its contemplation. Such was the region in which

## THE LOST PROFESSOR

was to be sought. At least five hundred men were engaged in the search. Well and faithfully did they labor. From Friday morning until Tuesday their efforts were fruitless. No trace whatever could be found, and at every moment the task grew more and more hopeless. The faint expectation of finding him alive and suffering, gradually went out of all men's minds, and then came the more sober desire to find his lifeless body. At last on Tuesday came a melancholy confirmation of his disputed assertion that he had been on the very highest peak in 1844. An old hunter and experienced mountaineer by the name of Wilson, was present from Yancey county, who had guided the Professor on his former visit. He said he believed he could retrace the very route by which they had ascended thirteen years before, and expressed the opinion that the Professor had himself undertaken to descend into the valley of Caney river by that way. The result proved this opinion to be correct. A careful and minute search in the edge of a beautiful little prairie near the highest summit discovered the trail of human footsteps. So faint was it that an unpracticed eye could not have distinguished it from the mark left by some wild animal; but these mountain Nimrods, with their wonderful sagacity which is the result of close observation and almost instinctive reason recognized it at a glance. An incredulous town-man present desired to know how they could tell it to be the impress of a man's foot. 'Come here,' said a hunter, pointing to a spot on a fallen tree trunk, where the rank moss had been disturbed, 'kneel down and look at that

closely. What do you see?' 'Nothing,' was the reply. 'Look closer yet, and carefully. Now, what do you see?' 'Marks of the tracks of a shoe heel,' said the astonished and enlightened town-man! The effect of this discovery was almost electric. With rapid steps and eyes as keen and true as the scent of well trained sleuth hounds, off bounded the hunters upon the trail, and soon were lost in the rugged and fearful wilds below. A large number, feeling that they could be of no assistance in following that delicate trace, remained upon the heights, whilst the others swept downward upon the search. As the ground became rougher and the way more difficult, the traces left by the wanderer became more plain and unmistakable. Soon the trail left the sharp crest of the ridge down which it had started, and came to the edge of a plashing stream. Adown this they followed it without difficulty for about four miles when they came to a cataract with a sheer fall of forty feet.

## ON THE DIZZLE EDGE

of this they found a broken laurel branch overhead, and torn moss underfoot. Cautiously descending they found below the dead body of him they sought. The spot was most romantic and peculiar. Pouring over the precipice, this mountain torrent had originally stuck upon solid rock below, but the attrition of its waters for untold centuries had worn out a smooth, circular basin, about fourteen feet deep and as many in diameter. This was filled with cold, pure, and perfectly limpid water, in which lay the body calmly and perfectly preserved. In the very midst of that nature which he had loved so well, and whose mysteries he had studied so diligently, the great devotee had lain him down to die. Her utmost charms were lavished upon his obsequies. The pure waters enveloped him in their winding sheet of crystal; the leaping cataract sang his requiem in that wondrous and eternal song, of which old ocean furnishes the grand all comprehensive key. Cream and golden and white flowers flaked the billow thickets of dark green laurel, and tall, conical firs and delicately tapering spruces interlocked their weeping branches from shore to shore. No trace of man save the broken laurel branch and the upturned moss on the rock above, was to be seen. To all seeming that virgin spot had seen no human face before the noble one which now looked upward from its undefiled bed upon the unspeakable beauties of the glen.

Enveloping the body in a sheet and suspending it to a stout pole, they bore it up those rugged steps where an unnumbered man could scarcely stand upright, four miles to the top. Here it was desired that he should be buried, but the members of his family who could be consulted not consenting, he was placed in a rude coffin and borne by painful and tedious stages to Asheville, where he was interred by the side of another noble classmate, the Rev. John Dickson, D. D., of Charleston, S. C., and attended to the

grave by a vast concourse of people. But he was not permitted long to sleep in that pleasant mountain churchyard. So great was the respect and esteem in which his character was held by all classes of our people, and so profoundly was the public mind impressed by the circumstances of his death and the causes which led to it, that his family yielded to the almost universal wish that his body should

## REST ON MOUNT MITCHELL.

Accordingly, in the following summer his remains were taken up and once more carried to that high peak and reinterred with imposing ceremonies in the presence of a great multitude of people. It was a scene to be long remembered. The Right Rev. James H. Otey, Bishop of Tennessee, delivered the funeral oration; ex-Governor Swain made an elegant address; the former a member of the first class which the deceased had instructed at Chapel Hill, and the latter a co-laborer in the University for near a third of a century. Strangers from distant states were present, whilst all the surrounding counties were largely represented, not only by their stalwart men, but by great numbers of their wives, daughters, and children, some of whom had walked and climbed perhaps twenty miles to witness the interesting scene. The day was calm and bright. The level spot on the summit, not larger than a good sized room, was thickly filled with spectators and far down its conical sides. Here in the face of all inexpressible glories which spread out in every direction, high over the Atlantic world, and far removed as all such scenes should ever be, from the strife and tumult of the lower and distant lands, and where Nature exerted her grandest charms to lift the souls of men to the contemplation of Him from whose hand they came, they laid the Christian hero's dust to rest. His monument and his tomb are one, and a grander bath no man had in this world. It looks eastward toward his New England birthplace, and behind him is the great land of the South-west filled with so many whom he loved and taught. 'There,' says Professor Phillips, once a beloved pupil and long a fellow teacher in the University, 'he shall rest till the Judgment Day, in a mausoleum such as no other man has ever had. Reared by the hands of Omnipotence, it was assigned to him by those to whom it was given thus to express their esteem, and it was consecrated by the lips of eloquence warmed by affection amidst the rites of our holy religion. Before him lies the North Carolina he loved so well and served so faithfully. From his lofty couch its hills and valleys melt into its plains as they stretch away to the shores of the eastern ocean, whence the dawn of the last day stealing quietly westward, as it lights the mountain tops first, shall awake him earliest to hear the greeting of "WELL DONE GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT."'

Z. B. V.

'If wisdom's ways you'd rightly seek  
Five things observe with care;  
Of whom you speak, to whom you speak,  
And what, and when and where.'