

*At The Foot of The Fair*



Mary Roberts Rinehart

## **\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* At the Foot of the Hill

*Date of first publication:* 1906

*Author:* Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876-1958)

*Date first posted:* Sep. 29, 2020

*Date last updated:* Sep. 29, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200977

This eBook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries.

## At the Foot of the Hill

GRANDFATHER HUXLEY was a relic in the family. He had been handed down for many years, from father to son, along with the brass andirons and the mahogany settle. Unfortunately, although the last two pieces of family property were more and more appreciated the older they grew, almost the reverse was true with the old man.

When his daughter had died, in late middle life, she willed the family homestead—and her father, who had built it—to her son. The old man was seventy-five then, and his wife had been dead a dozen years. The grandson was kindly enough; to his mother's father he gave a comfortable room and a half contemptuous kindness which showed itself in a total disregard of the old man's politics and an evident idea that at threescore and fifteen one should lose all interest in this world and prepare for the next.

If Grandfather Huxley rebelled, he said nothing. He began to take the evening paper upstairs after the family had finished with it, and to spend a great deal of time polishing the sword he had carried in the Mexican War.

Old people as a rule have few possessions. One by one they dispose of unnecessary things. The belle of fifty years ago, who took a dozen trunks and boxes with her to make a month's visit, at seventy-five generally has an old-fashioned bureau full of necessities, and, locked away in a little trunk, a handful of letters and sentimental trifles. And so with Grandfather Huxley: the possessions of a lifetime had dwindled to a huge upholstered chair, with which he defiantly refused to part, and his old sword.

The sword hung in its scabbard just across from the old man's bed, where, in the sleepless hours that come to age, he could lie and dream about it. From much tramping and dragging the scabbard was worn away at one corner; it was that corner which gave Grandfather Huxley his dreams of long-ago marches through cactus plains and desert, his nightmares of long-ago thirst and heat.

Below the sword was his wife's picture. There was another portrait of her in the room; a photograph taken when her cheeks were furrowed and her thin, white hair parted and crimped; but oddly enough, he never looked at that one. He was very, very old, and he lived in his youth. Everything between was hazy and dim. The picture at which he looked was that of a girl, a little old water-color of a girl with thoughtful eyes and frivolous hair.

After his ninetieth birthday Grandfather Huxley became abnormally sensitive. Sometimes he could hear scraps of conversation about him.

“And how is the old man to-day? It’s almost uncanny, isn’t it?”

“Oh, he’s always just the same. But in the nature of things he won’t be with us very long.”

One day some army officers dined at the house. Grandfather Huxley polished his sword until it glittered, and fixed his white neckcloth with trembling fingers. At the table the conversation turned to things military, and the old man, filled with fire, told of that wonderful campaign of ’47. The officers listened respectfully—they were gallant fellows; but when Grandfather Huxley dropped back in his chair, he heard the apologetic voice of his great-granddaughter Ellen across the table.

“He’s a dear old soul,” she said, “but getting childish now; go on with what you were saying.”

After dinner the old man went upstairs. He took the shining sword from his bed and fingered it lovingly.

“I guess you and I have lived past our time,” he said huskily, and then he reached for his handkerchief and polished away carefully a spot of moisture that might have been a tear.

That night an idea seized him. He was of no use in the world; no one depended on him, no one needed him. He had lived twenty-three years past his allotted time; perhaps the good Lord had forgotten him. There could be no harm in taking a life that was nothing but a burden. And so, the next day, he began his pitifully few preparations. He sorted out his letters, and, finding none that he cared to have profaned by alien eyes, he burned them all. He went over his wardrobe, and decided that Mike, the gardener, should have his winter coat.

When it came to his most cherished possession—the sword—doubts assailed him; so few were worthy of the honor. Finally, however, he decided to give it to Ellen’s husband. After all, they had been kind to him; it was not their fault that they lived in a future in which he could have no share, and that he lived in a past which they had never known. So he wrote a little card, “To my granddaughter Ellen’s husband,” and tied it to the scabbard.

His preparations were made now. The sleeping-mixture stood on his bedroom table—an overdose; and when Ellen came back from the theater that night he would be asleep, as he should have been long ago.

He put on a clean neckerchief, and, sitting down in his big chair with the sword on his knees, listened for the slamming of the hall door below. The little wooden clock on the mantel, with the queer pink roses on the face,

marked eight, five minutes past, ten minutes past; and still the family had not gone out. The old man sat and thought—thought of the day he was married; of long-ago Christmases and rows of little stockings; of children that had never lived to grow up; and then, with the sword before him, of Buena Vista and Monterey.

After a time, he began to feel hungry. He remembered that there had been cream cakes for dinner, and that he had refused them. They were very nice, those little cream cakes—but then, after all, what did it matter? If they would only go out——

Grandfather Huxley sat looking at the picture hanging under the unfaded spot on the wall-paper which marked the sword's resting-place. After a little, the picture faded and grew misty in outline. The old man's head dropped on his chest, and he was asleep. The fire burned to a dull red, bursting now and again into a smoking jet of flame, shining on the sword across the old man's knees, on the bottle beside the bed, and the narrow, dropping chin of the sleeper.

He wakened finally, with a start. The crust over the smoldering coals had fallen in, and the room was bright. From somewhere below was audible a faint, creaking cry, a wail that beat against the ear insistently, that paused for a second, to go on with fresh vigor.

Grandfather Huxley looked at the clock. It was ten thirty, so Ellen was not at home. He listened for Nora's step. Hearing no one, he got up heavily and went to the head of the stairs. The cries kept on, longer now, with fewer intervals for breath, and with an occasional hoarse note of infantile rage.

The old man lost his look of indecision; he turned back into the room, and fumbled for his slippers. Then, with an agility that no one in the house suspected, he went down-stairs to the nursery.

The wicker structure of the baby's bed was vibrant with its occupant's rage. From among the dotted Swiss rufflings and blue ribbons Grandfather Huxley extracted his great-grandchild, and gathered him into his empty old arms. The baby quieted at once; his wrinkled face relaxed, and he settled comfortably, seeming to recognize the practised touch of hands that had handled, on occasion, three generations of babies.

It was an hour later when Ellen came home. She tiptoed upstairs ahead of her husband; then she paused, and with her finger on her lips cautioned him to silence. The oldest and the youngest member of the family sat before

the fire, in dreamy, open-eyed content. When she saw they were awake, Ellen went over, and, stooping down, kissed first the baby, then the old man.

“He wakened, and Nora must have been asleep,” said Grandfather Huxley apologetically.

Ellen slipped her hand into his with a grateful little pressure.

“What should we do without you?” she said impulsively. “This family without you would be a ship without a keel, wouldn’t it?”

Grandfather Huxley smiled, the first time for a week. Ellen got up and went toward the door.

“I’m going to bring you something to eat. You ate no dinner at all, and there are some of those little cream cakes left. Perhaps, if you eat something, you won’t need the sleeping medicine.”

Grandfather Huxley choked.

“I’m going to throw that stuff away, every drop of it,” he said firmly.

Left alone, he gathered the youngster closer in his arms.

“So the old man’s of some use after all,” he mused. “A ship without a keel, eh?”

A little later, Ellen and her husband, in the butler’s pantry below, stopped to listen. Grandfather Huxley was singing to the baby, and down the stairs came the stirring words of “The Sword of Bunker Hill,” sung in a thin, tremulous old voice.

*Mary Roberts Rinehart*

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *At the Foot of the Hill* by Mary Roberts Rinehart]