

# **THE DESCENDANT**

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The descendant by Ellen Glasgow

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**ELLEN GLASGOW**

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*Ellen Glasgow*



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By Ellen Glasgow

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## THE DESCENDANT

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### CHAPTER I

THE child sat upon the roadside. A stiff wind was rising westward, blowing over stretches of meadow-land that had long since run to waste, a scarlet tangle of sumac and sassafras. In the remote West, from whose heart the wind had risen, the death-bed of the Sun showed bloody after the carnage, and nearer at hand naked branches of poplar and sycamore were silhouetted against the shattered horizon, like skeletons of human arms that had withered in the wrath of God.

Over the meadows the amber light of the afterglow fell like rain. It warmed the spectres of dead carrot flowers, and they awoke to reflect its glory; it dabbled in the blood of sumac and pokeberry; and it set its fiery torch to the goldenrod till it ignited and burst into bloom, flashing a subtle flame from field to field, a glorious bonfire from the hand of Nature.

The open road wound lazily along, crossing transversely the level meadow-land and leading from the small town of Plaguesville to somewhere. Nobody—at least nobody thereabouts—knew exactly where, for it was seldom that a native left Plaguesville, and when he did it was only to go to Arlington, a few miles farther on, where the road dropped him, stretching southward.

The child sat restlessly upon the rotten rails that were

once a fence. He was lithe and sinewy, with a sharp brown face and eyes that were narrow and shrewd—a small, wild animal of the wood come out from the underbrush to bask in the shifting sunshine.

Occasionally a laborer passed along the road from his field work, his scythe upon his shoulder, the pail in which his dinner was brought swinging at his side. Once a troop of boys had gone by with a dog, and then a beggar hobbling on his crutch. They were following in the wake of the circus, which was moving to Plaguesville from a neighboring town. The child had seen the caravan go by. He had seen the mustang ponies and the cowboys who rode them; he had seen the picture of the fat lady painted upon the outside of her tent, and he had even seen the elephant as it passed in its casings.

Presently the child rose, stooping to pick the blackberry briars from his bare legs. He wore nankeen trousers somewhat worn in the seat and a nankeen shirt somewhat worn at the elbows. His hand was rough and brier-pricked, his feet stained with the red clay of the cornfield. Then, as he turned to move onward, there was a sound of footsteps, and a man's figure appeared suddenly around a bend in the road, breaking upon the glorified landscape like an ill-omened shadow.

It was the minister from the church near the town. He was a small man with a threadbare coat, a large nose, and no chin to speak of. Indeed, the one attribute of saintliness in which he was found lacking was a chin. An inch the more of chin, and he might have been held as a saint; an inch the less, and he passed as a simpleton. Such is the triumph of Matter over Mind.

"Who is it?" asked the minister. He always inquired for a passport, not that he had any curiosity upon the subject, but that he believed it to be his duty. As yet he had only attained that middle state of sanctity where duty and pleasure are clearly defined. The next stage is the one in which, from excessive cultivation of the senses or atrophy