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THE MAKIN' O' JOE

LOUIS MATTHEWS SWEET

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BY

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TO

KENNETH, MARGARET, HOGARTH AND MALCOLM

STORY LOVERS, ALL

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CHAPTER I

JOE ONDERDONK BECOMES SOMEBODY

WHEN Mr. Vickers punched Jim Goodenough that time, his fist connected jest where Jim's ribs joined his breast-bone, and Jim landed backwards, after sailin' across Ed Williams's floor and passin' through the plate-glass window in front, on the platform outside. He lighted so hard that several planks of the platform that wa'n't so new as they had been twenty years before broke under him and he stuck in the hole he'd made for himself, like a cork in a jug. Only I should judge that if the mouth of the jug was smooth the cork would have been more comfortable than Jim was, for the splinters in them broken planks as well as the pieces of glass he picked up on his way through the window was anything but smooth. When we'd uncorked him and pulled the various pieces of wood and glass out of his clothes (and some

of 'em went through the cloth and had to be pulled loose from his real bein', so to speak), he was ready to call it a day's work and go home.

Jim had made the mistake of thinkin' that because Mr. Vickers was a minister he'd take a poundin' without doin' anything back—and it was a big mistake. He wa'n't that kind of a minister. He was English and mebby they do some things different there. Jim was pretty mad and kind of reckless or he'd probably had more sense, though he wa'n't exactly famous for sense.

The whole thing happened on a Saturday afternoon—the Saturday afternoon, to put it jest so, before Decoration Day, in the year 1898. None of us that was there ever forgot any of it. I didn't, anyhow. I stumbled into the fracas by accident, if there is such a thing—and it changed my whole way o' livin', though I was too old to change very easy. I was Commander of the Post that year, and had been all day at the Post room fixin' the flowers that people brought in and puttin' them in water so that they'd be fresh and ready for Monday. Long about four o'clock I finished up and went home for a little rest. My old batch quarters was so sort of lonesome, as they got sometimes for all that I was so used to 'em, that I wandered off down street. It was Saturday, as I said, and the country people was in

doin' their tradin'. The teams was hitched the whole length of the street on both sides, and men and women was goin' in and out of the stores and standin' around in bunches visitin'. I saw about all my friends and most of my enemies that day. I sort o' loafed along till I come to Ed Williams's grocery store about halfway down the street. There was a group of men I knowed out in front and as we was talkin' I noticed a sign alongside of Ed's door sayin': "Clerk Wanted." It kind of interested me because Dick Spendlove, who was a sort of cousin of mine, had been clerkin' for Ed for more'n two years, and I hadn't heard of his quittin'. I started up the steps to ask Ed what'd become of Dick, when a boy about sixteen, tall 'nd pretty well-built, 'nd better dressed and neater in his get-up than most of our country boys, passed me and went into the store. He looked kind of familiar but I couldn't jest place him and decided he must be a stranger in town. That wa'n't so unusual as it used to be, in summer time anyhow, because there was a good many campers down at the Point and they got their groceries and supplies mostly at the village. Ed always had his share of their trade. It was pretty early though for campers so it didn't seem likely that this boy was one of 'em. I followed him into the store some curious to know who he

was. When I went in I found that Ed was behind the counter waitin' on Mr. Vickers, the Rector. Jim Goodenough was alongside of him, the young Doctor was sittin' behind the stove readin' the paper, and there was some others hangin' around that I don't remember. The boy was standin' behind Mr. Vickers.

When his turn come he went up to the counter and spoke to Ed, very respectful-like but right out so's everybody could hear. "Mr. Williams, you've advertised for a clerk. I'd like the position if you're willin' to give it to me." That was altogether too sudden for Ed. It didn't do to spring things on him like that. He was the slowest talkin' man in Lake County, if not in the world. He stuttered like the mischief, or like one o' them gasoline bicycles that the summer boarders bring in. Folks said that he'd learned to stutter and 'd broke down his talkin' gear in general when he was first married, by tryin' to put in about one word to his wife's twenty. He'd foundered himself, seems like, in a race that was too fast for him. There he stood, leanin' on the counter, mouth open, jaw saggin' so that you'd see his tongue wanderin' around inside his mouth like a lost dog huntin' for his master's tracks. For a spell he couldn't say nothin' and then he managed to blurt out: "You do, hey? What's your

name?" The boy hesitated jest long 'nough to say so, then tossed his head in a way that I come to know well afterwards. He was a mighty handsome boy, with big black eyes and hair full as black and shiny that waved on his head. He said, "I'm Joe Onderdonk, Herman Onderdonk's oldest boy."

That made what the papers call "a sensation," like a bee makes when he steps on your finger. Everybody stopped stock-still in whatever he was doin'; even the Doc dropped his paper and looked up over his glasses. Nobody said a word and scarce breathed.

Am I makin' a lot out o' nothin'? Not for anybody that'd lived for any length o' time in Middleport. The Onderdonks was famous in the whole region, nobody more so in their way except the Lake-roaders, as we called 'em. The Lake-roaders was a community of about five or six families out south a few miles that had intermarried with each other until a lot of 'em was idiots and all of 'em, as Mr. Vickers says, altogether déjennerate—which, I guess, is a fancy way of sayin' "no count." Well, next to the Lake-roaders, who was human only because they wa'n't anythin' else, the Onderdonk "tribe," as we called 'em, was the prize no-counts of the whole county—includ-

in' Brenton, the county-seat, which was a real city.

Herm' Onderdonk, the father of the tribe, was an old soldier but hadn't never been admitted to the Post. His *woman*, for as far as anybody knowed she wa'n't his wife, really 'd been before the war the wife of another man. Herm' went to the war but quit before it was over—some say he deserted, but I guess that wa'n't so, anyhow he never was took up for it—and come back and stayed. When the rest of us come home a couple o' years afterwards, Herm' was livin' with this woman. What happened then none of us ever knew. The real husband, who was a particular friend of mine, never put in no claim for his wife and never said nothin' about it, even to me. Herm' and the woman went along just as before. They lived in a tumble-down house near the lake, how, nobody quite knowed, had a raft o' children, and was as much outcasts as if they lived on a desert island. Herm' fished some, his wife worked in the garden, they both stole a good deal or was s'posed to, certain the children did, and managed, in filth 'nd rags, to get along somehow. Herm' 'd been arrested more'n once on 'spicion o' small thievin', but nothin' was ever proved on him and we'd come to look on the family 's a sort o' runnin' sore in the commun'ty that couldn't be cured.

When this young fellow, clean 's a whistle,

handsome, well-set up and well-dressed, said that he was Herm' Onderdonk's boy, if my heart 'd been anyways weak, I'd a dropped dead. I knowed right off why he looked familiar 'nd why I didn't recognize him. They say—the old folks, that is, what remember earlier times—that Herm's woman 'd been a pretty girl, them was her black eyes anyhow; but nobody that I knowed of 'd ever see an Onderdonk clean or dressed half-way decent. So, 'tain't strange that Ed, never very handy in dealin' with things 'xcept when his wife was with him to tell him what to do, was clean stumped.

It was just here that Jim Goodenough took a hand in the game, with the usual results. Jim never touched nothin' that he didn't put meanness into, from a town-meetin' to a church weddin'. Jim's a big, bullet-headed kind of fellow, round-bellied and bow-legged. His eyes bugged out and his face was some mottled, so that altogether he could 've stood for the picture of the grand-daddy of all the bull-frogs—on his hind-legs.

He come of a prominent family that, late years, had sort of run to emptyin's. Like a potato vine, the best part of it was underground. And in Jim's case there wa'n't much left but wind and cussedness, but plenty o' *them*. He knows it all,

o' course, such fellows always do by right o' birth, but though he does a powerful lot o' talkin' 'nd blowin' 'round, he don't never say much of anythin'. He's married to the Widow Curtis's youngest daughter, Mame. The widow, who to tell the truth is a good deal of a fool, though a nice enough woman in some ways, was tickled to death when Mame took up with Jim, on account of the "excellent old family" that he come from, but I guess she's found out since that he come a long way from anythin' very excellent. He's a rotten customer with women and pisen mean at home besides. Mame's been married five years and is only twenty-four, but she looks all o' forty and mighty sad b'sides.

Well, 's I say, while Joe was waitin' for his answer from Ed, and Ed was fishin' around his mouth for somethin' to say, Jim broke in. "My Lord," says he, with that laugh of his that always made me want to murder him, "can I believe my ears or eyes—an Onderdonk with shoes on his feet and *stockin's*, too, lookin' for a job? You better watch the till pretty close, Ed, if you take him in, and the goods, too, or you won't have anythin' left. Where 'd you steal them fine clothes, Joe? Onderdonk and thief is the same thing, accordin' to my notion. I could pretty near live on what your old Dad's stole from me." I can

say them words all right, but I can't make you *hear* 'em. I wouldn't know how to put into any kind o' words the meanness that Jim put into what he said. I never felt so sorry for anybody in my life as I did for that boy. Every word must 've stung like a whip-lash. It was just cruel, that's what it was, if Joe 'd been the worst bein' alive. Then, sir, slap out o' the sky, come a big surprise. I ain't never had many bigger ones. Instead o' cringin' like a dog that 'd been flicked with a whip, that boy turned on Jim and looked straight at him right between the eyes, a full minute. It must 've been a minute for it seemed like an hour. His face was white, he didn't show scared but mad; and, as Mr. Vickers said afterwards, "his black eyes literally emitted fire." I know what that means—like the muzzle of a gun fired in the dark. When I saw his face I felt cold chills chase each other up and down my back, and I fairly shivered. If a man gets red when he's mad, you needn't be so much afraid—he'll blow off easy like, but when he turns white, look out, he's dangerous. He talked low, never raisin' his voice onct, but he didn't need to; what he said was enough and the way he said it made it go clean through you like them Mouser bullets you read about. And what he said sounded as if it come from a man, not from a boy.

"Jim, you're *old* enough to be a man and I'm a boy; you're a Goodenough and I'm only Joe Onderdonk, and I suppose you think that you've got a right to say anything you like to me, but I'm tellin' you now that *you* can't say any such things to me, not safely. You don't know me, but I know you, and I'm goin' to tell you to your face, in front of these men who know you too, just what you are. To begin with, you're a liar. What you say about my father may be true—I'm not sayin' that it is or isn't. He was born on a canal boat and was thrown overboard when he was a boy to swim ashore and take care of himself without school or anythin' else—he never had a chance—but what you said about me is a lie. I never stole one penny's worth from anybody and that's more than you could take oath to. I haven't forgotten that black calf that wandered on to your farm and you never give back, but hid away until it was too old to be proved, though you knew all the time whose it was. Besides, you 're the vilest whelp in this town,—I don't leave out anybody, and that's sayin' a lot. What about Mary Skuse that never dared go home to her folk or show her face in town after she'd worked for your wife and lived in your house only a month? *You* talk to *me?* Every man here knows that you can't be trusted with a dollar much less a girl

without her men-folks are around to take care of her! I could tell more if I wanted to, but that's enough. And these men know it's true." Things happened mighty fast after that. For just a breath Jim was as paralyzed as Ed, then with a roar and big round oath he lifted his fist and went after Joe. He was fairly foamin' at the mouth and would 've been glad to do what he'd said he'd do—"kill the d——d whipper-snapper right where he stood." But Mr. Vickers put out his arm and stopped him. "No, you don't, Jim. Wait a minute, or you'll do somethin' you'll be sorry for. You can't strike a boy like that, no matter what he's said." Jim turned on Mr. Vickers with a snarl like a bull-dog caught by the length of his chain a foot from the calf of your leg. "Take your arm away or you'll get hurt. I'm goin' to kill him if I have to kill all the parsons this side o' hell to get him." He was stark-mad, o' course; there was murder in his blood-shot eyes, murder in his mouth all twisted and out of shape and slobberin' like that same bull-dog's. He fairly screeched, and tugged at Mr. Vickers's arm, spittin' out cuss-words and threats that would make your blood run cold. Some things he said wa'n't any too nice, neither. Mr. Vickers never moved, but held him fast, his arm stretched out like the limb of a tree. He was as cool and quiet as the

lake on a summer mornin'. He tried to quiet Jim and get him human again, but 'twa'n't no use. He went on ravin' and tearin' and tryin' to pull loose and get at Joe. I don't doubt a bit that if he'd got free he'd a killed Joe—mighty near, anyhow. By this time a considerable crowd 'd collected, includin' some women, white in the face and scared most to death. Among 'em was Tiny Gilbert, Frank's wife. She caught hold o' me. "Can't you stop this? It's awful." I thought so, too, but I didn't know exactly what to do. I started to push up closer and several of the men, seein' me, pushed along with me, and we all tried to get a grip on Jim and pull him away.

It was then that he made his big mistake. He jerked his arm loose, lunged back and forward, and then struck at Mr. Vickers's face with all his weight. If the blow 'd got home 't would 've put Mr. Vickers, big as he was, on the sick-list for some time, but it didn't land—Mr. Vickers wa'n't there when it come. But he *was* there about one second afterwards. He drawed his arm back and under and shot it straight out. His big fist went straight to the mark and struck with a bing like a beetle on a barrel-head. There was pretty near a solid ring 'round 'em, but there was jest one openin' and Jim found that. He rocketed 'crosst the floor without hardly touchin' it, hit the front

window with a crash you could 've heard the whole length of the village, and struck the platform outside, jest as I told you a while ago.

When we'd pried Jim loose, the breath 'nd fight was all out o' him for that day, and he went off home, head hangin' down, 'nd if he'd had a tail 't would 've been between his legs, without another word.

The battle was all over. And if you'll believe me, there wa'n't a piece of that glass, except what stuck in the sash, over an eighth of an inch long. Jim must 've flew all of twelve foot. Mr. Vickers wa'n't much like lightnin' in general, he was slow spoke, and his motions was all deliberate-like. It took him longer to light his pipe than it took me to smoke mine all up. But he was mighty like lightnin' in one respect. He didn't have to hit twice in the same place. In fact, as the fellow said, the place wa'n't there any more.

I most forgot to tell you the most surprisin' thing of all. After the fracas was all over, 'nd Jim 'd went home, while the rest of us was still excited 'nd shakin', young Joe turned to Ed, as if nothin' 'd happened, and said: "Mr. Williams, do I get that job?" But Ed was 'way beyond answerin' that or anythin' else! Mr. Vickers said he'd pay for the glass.

CHAPTER II

I GET MY BIG IDEA

You see, my big idea was really born growed-up. It didn't begin small like a seed-corn and then sprout up little by little. It was higher'n my head when I first caught sight of it. I don't know how I ever come to think of it. I was always handier with my hands than with my head. I never laid claim to bein' extra smart, and smarter men than I ever thought o' bein' are always losin' good chances jest by not payin' attention. So I often wonder how I ever come to think about this. But I did, thank goodness, and made my big stroke at sixty-two years old. It come like this. I kept thinkin' about that fracas at Ed Williams's store. I couldn't get it out o' my head, somehow. Two notions kept sort o' strugglin' in my mind. One of 'em was jest plain wonder 'bout Joe. I couldn't figger him out, and the more I thought about him, the less I c'd understand him. I didn't see how, in our village where everybody knows everybody else

from the cradle to the grave, a boy like Joe could grow up and me not hear of it. I suppose that until lately there hadn't been much on the outside to show that he was different from the rest o' the boys. Until a boy gets old enough to earn money and get himself some clothes or goes away to college or business and comes home again, he don't get much chance to ketch the eye as bein' different from a dozen other lads his size. Besides, who'd look for a boy like Joe amongst Herm' Onderdonk's wild raft of young ones. You expect members o' the same family to be some alike. Anyhow, you don't expect to find a kitten in a litter o' rabbits, or hummin' birds hatched in a hen's nest. Of course, you can usually tell 'em apart, unless they're matched up like Hartley's twins—that had to wear different clothes so's their own folks could tell Ross from Archie—but there's somethin' in their looks or gait or somethin' to remind you o' the rest. All Herm's boys, and girls too, for that matter, are pritty much of a muchness, wild, ragged and uncombed—they look alike, act alike, and, more's the pity, talk alike. All but Joe, *he* w's teetotally different in everythin' that you could see and calculate from.

Mr. Vickers said that except for bein' human and havin' the usual outfit o' limbs, etc., Joe wasn't any more like the rest o' his family than

a chestnut horse is like a horse-chestnut. "Joe is a sport, Colonel," he said, "and that's all there is about it." I was mad. "What d'ye mean?" I said, "Joe is as straight as a string. *He* ain't no sport, like Jim Goodenough or Ase Long, or any of them fellows!" The Rector laughed, as he does about half the time at what I say. "No offense, Colonel; I didn't use the word in that sense. 'Sport' is a word that scientists use for an unusual appearance in nature, like a red flower from a plant that's always borne white ones. Joe doesn't belong to his own family."

The other notion that was in my head all that evenin' and more or less all night, for I woke up more times than I c'd count, and the next day besides, was a deep-down worry for Joe. I couldn't help bein' afraid that some harm would come to him from Jim. I knowed Jim from 'way back. He was a mortal hater, o' the cold, crawlin', snaky kind, and there wa'n't anythin' in the calendar too low and mean for him to do to get even. He had no more forgive or forget in him than a red Injun, and I knowed that some time Jim would hit and hit hard.

And here 's the strange thing. Though he wa'n't no kith nor kin o' mine, except through the Old Gardener, I found out that I didn't want Joe Onderdonk hurt *noway*. Ain't that queer now?

I don't suppose I c'd find four people who 'd go ten steps out o' their way to favor an Onderdonk. They was practically outlaws. Of course, they wa'n't quite so bad as Lake-roaders, who was actshal outlaws and not even put in the list with real human bein's—but next to Lake-roaders, the Onderdonk's was jest what you'd call—*nobodies*. But I was interested, I tell you, so that I couldn't let go the idea of him, more'n two minutes at a time.

I mulled the thing over, without gettin' nowheres, all day Sunday. Monday was Decoration Day, and I was too busy to think. That was always the greatest one day of the year in my calendar. It's the only celebration of a *big thing* in hist'ry that I'd had any part in *myself*. To me, it's a greater day than Fourth o' July. I wa'n't actshally in the Revolution and I'm celebratin' somethin' that other folkses done. On Decoration Day, I march 's I used to march, alongside o' the same comrades, some of 'em, that I was with when we followed Old Glory south.

Right here I'll slip in a few words 'bout myself, not enough to be cheeky, nor nothin' like that, but jest enough to let you know who I am and what I'm tryin' to do. I'm knowed in our "beautiful lake-side village" (as the *Trumpet* says, in its "Old Home" edition), as Colonel Ellison—Col-

onel for short and mostly. I ain't a Colonel, really, o' course. The rank was breveted on to me by the Post, b'cause of a real Colonel Ellison of our brigade who was killed at Chicamauger. I ain't much educated, which I don't need to tell you. The war happened the wrong time for me. In '61, when I was only a kid, less'n Joe's age when I first knowed him, I clumb onto a horse and started to chase after a wild Irishman by th' name o' Phil Sheridan, the greatest cavalry rider of all time, if you ask me, and when I unmounted from that horse four years afterwards, considerable warped in legs and disposition both, 'twas too late for me to go to school. Besides, I had to work for my bread and butter. I live in a little house b'tween the 'Piscopal Church 'nd the Rec-t'ry. It belongs to the Church 'nd goes with the position o' sexton 'nd caretaker that I've had ever since Mr. Vickers come here—which is about twenty-five years now. I take care o' the church and rectory grounds, the barn and gardens, drive the rector's mare, Hepzy, a good deal; and b'tween times, odd-job it around town, and get along pretty well.

Now, from my case, you can tell somethin' o' what the Post and Decoration Day means to some of us old soldiers. I ain't had no education to speak of, no wealth except my memories, and no

"social position," as the Widow Curtis says. That don't worry me none—you don't much miss what you never had—'nd I've got good friends, if they *be* jest ev'ryday folks.

But, all the same, the only place where I really 'mount to much is in the Post and amongst the Comrades. When I go there I c'n forget 'bout mowin' lawns, puttin' down carpets (or takin' 'em up, which is worse yit), 'nd ringin' the church bell that only ten or a dozen people ever answer —there ain't many 'Piscopals in our town, and what they are of 'em are dyin' off fast. Yes, I forget all this dull business when I put my foot on the first stair that creaks so, on my way up to the Post rooms.

And when I put on my old faded blue suit, 'nd take my old cavalry cap in my hand and set down with the Comrades, I c'n jest feel that old Phil hoss under me, that went through the whole four years o' the war and died jest in time for the declaration o' peace. I buried him myself and my eyes was so full o' tears that I couldn't hardly see where to put my spade. Many and many's the time I've slept under the stars or clouds with my head on old Phil's flank (I near got in trouble, once, callin' him 'Phil'. The old General come along jest as I yelled the name 'nd thought I meant him) and the curious thing was he'd always

lay still as long 's I was asleep, no matter what happened. Why, one time, I remember, a four-inch shell busted so near it threw dirt all over both of us, 'nd old Phil never moved. I've got a lock o' his mane fastened on to that old cap yit, 'nd you couldn't buy them few gray hairs for money.

Yes, in the Post I'm not jest a cheap old grizzled roustabout, only fit to pull tacks or push a lawn-mower—I'm *somebody.* The boys know what I done and appreciate me for what I was. I drop back thirty years and walk in a dream, all full o' red-fire, o' them great and glorious days. Well, that'll do. I'm forgettin' to tell what I started to tell—this is Joe's story, not mine.

As I say, Decoration Day come on Monday. I was Commander of the Post that year,—marched at the head o' the Procession and presided at the exercises, bow-legs and all (Mr. Vickers calls my legs, bent with horse-back ridin', "honorable scars"), sittin' between Rev. Mark Shanley, o' Riverton, the "Orator of the Day," and th' Rev. Orlando Owen, the Methodist Minister, who said the prayer.

You don't get to be Commander o' the Post very often—it passes around among the Comrades, one a year—it was my second time since the Post

was formed, and likely to be my last,—so it *was* one big day for me. I was as near perfectly happy as a man could be in this vale o' tears, 'nd ready to sing (though I ain't much of a singer) the song of that old fellow in the Bible that Mr. Vickers calls "Unk Dismiss Us," a sort o' final "Now I lay me down to sleep," I guess. First off, we all sung "America" as a sort o' openin' prayer. Then Lincoln's Gettysburg speech was read by Major Doolittle, he was an officer in the National Guard over to Brenton. He never see the Civil War, but to hear him talk you'd think he'd fought and won it all alone—though at the time he belonged to the bare-footed infantry in arms. The Major was more or less of a tin-soldier, but quite a personage in town and a ornamental figger in his uniform—so we 'most always had him do somethin'.

The record of the Post in the War was read by Lawyer Albert Simonds. This was his last year as school teacher, which he'd held on to with one hand while he studied law with the other. After that, I introduced the Rev. Orlando, to make the prayer. That prayer come pretty near bein' the death o' me. I jest escaped disgracin' the Post and myself forevermore. I ain't much of any frivolous for my age nor likely to laugh in the wrong place—but this time I had to stuff my handkerchief into my mouth and hold onto my

jaws with both hands. Rev. Orlando was an awful good fellow, I'd known him for years and always liked him first-rate. He hadn't been trained for a preacher and didn't go to preachin' till he was past forty. He was in the dry-goods business before goin' into the pulpit. Somebody put it into his head that because he was a pretty free talker he ought to preach. He started most too late—seems like you've got to ketch a fellow early and break him in while he's young to make a good preacher out of him. It's somethin' like breakin' colts for the track. Orlando was picked jest a little too late. He could talk a blue streak and use high-falutin' words, not always, accordin' to Mr. Vickers, knowin' or carin' much about the meanin' of 'em.

That prayer was a wonder. That was long before the days o' flyin', but Rev. Orlando didn't hit ground three times durin' the whole thing. If words could carry you to heaven jest by wingin' up 'nd beatin' the air, we'd 've landed sure,—in a body. It was jest after the battle of Manila Bay and Dewey'd sailed for home. Orlando told the Lord about that, includin' incidental-like the leadin' facts o' the Spanish War. From there he went by one jump to the Revolution, followed most of our military history through and ended up with us veterans, thankin' the Lord for the heroes

livin' and dead who'd fought and bled under the glorious *"Stars and Bars."*

It couldn't 've been worse unless he'd said the same thing about "Old Glory" in the presence of a Confederate Post. Ushally, of course, there ain't such a terrible difference between stripes and bars, but in this case there was a lot of it.

Of course, he didn't mean anything wrong and we never laid it up against him, but it nearly robbed the Post of its honored Commander.

The Rev. Mark didn't help me none to get re-composed, for when Orlando set down, he leaned over and whispered into my ear: "Orlando's a mighty good fellow but what's the use o' makin' a stump speech to God Almighty? Don't you suppose the Lord knows that Dewey's left Manila?" "Yes," I whispered back, "but when we confine our prayers to tellin' the Lord what He don't know, they'll be shorter'n they are now." "Shorter'n Orlando's, anyhow," said Mark. We hadn't time to say anythin' more because I had to get up and introduce him.

Mark's speech was the real thing—which, accordin' to my notion, is what you hear from a veteran and nobody else. He 'nlisted when he was only nineteen and 's he put it, went in a boy with a thick shock o' red hair, and come out in two years, an old man with a thin sprinklin' o'

faded gray hair 'round his temples. It made an old man out of his body, what wa'n't ever any too strong after that, but it didn't age his mind none, not a bit. We always thought that Rev. Mark was the funniest man that ever lived—not that he tried to be, which he didn't, but he jest was, because he was built so. There's more stories goin' the rounds about Mark than about any preacher that ever lived in this part o' the country. Maybe I'll tell you some o' them before I get through, but jest now I'm interested in somethin' else.

When he finished his speech, which was the best he ever done, fur 's I can remember, Mark set down and some school children sung some patriotic songs. While the children was singin', Mark leaned over toward me and put his arm around my shoulder. "Listen, Colonel," said he, "there's somethin' queer goin' on here. I noticed it all the time I was speakin'. Don't look quick, but in a minute get your eye on that big fat man on the right about ten rows back, notice his face and then follow where he's lookin'." As soon as 'twas safe I looked accordin' to directions. When I saw the whole picture, I liked to jump out o' my chair. The man was Jim Goodenough, and he was lookin', with his whole mean soul of a snake in his face, at Joe and Mabel Gilbert, who was sittin' side by side across the aisle from Jim and a little

further front. They was, o' course, entirely unconscious o' Jim's black looks and was havin' the best o' times with each other. The rest o' the world simply wa'n't there.

When I took in the whole thing, I felt 's if a great big hand had took holt o' my heart 'nd squeezed all the blood out of it. I felt a gone-feelin' in the pit o' my stomach, and warm as it was, I turned chilly. I guess I shivered.

Well, I had reason. There was all the makin's o' several kinds o' trouble right there in the mixin' bowl, and it wouldn't take a big lot o' stirrin' to make it bubble, neither.

To see Joe with Mabel Gilbert bothered me a lot, all by itself—and then to have Jim hangin' over him like a big black thunder-head give me all the cause for worryin' that I needed, with some to spare. But they say it's darkest jest before mornin', and I guess it's true, because my big idea come then. I turned to Rev. Mark. "Come home with me after the exercises and I'll tell you all about it. I'm worried about it, anyhow. Besides, I've got an idea and I want to talk it over with you." Mark turned and looked at me, kind o' surprised and sorrowful-like. He shook his head. "I'll stay, Colonel, as long as I'm needed. It's bad enough to be worried like that, but actually to have an idea at the same time is dangerous. I

never knew you to have that trouble before; you're gettin' old. You need a friend and I'll stand by you."

Jest then the children finished their song and we got up for the benediction, which was "pronounced" by the new North-end minister. I hadn't any answer ready for Mark, but it was my move and anythin' might happen between now and mornin'. But, as I tell you, I'd got my big idea.

CHAPTER III

I DECIDE TO TAKE HOLD

We smoked up for a while without sayin' a word. It'd been a great day for both of us but it was good to be away from the crowd and comfortable. Mark (there's no reason why I should Rev. him all the while—we'd been comrades for thirty years) took off his long preacher's coat, which, he said, fitted on him like a suit of steel armor on a Fiji Islander, pulled off his shoes, lighted his old "dudeen," put his feet on the window sill, and let out a grunt of satisfaction.

I suppose you're shocked b'cause a minister smoked a pipe along with me—a hardened old cavalry-man of the breed s'posed to have hair on their teeth. Well, you wouldn't be if you knowed Mark. He was what Mr. Vickers calls *swi jeneris*—there never was and never could be but one Mark Shanley. He come from the North of Ireland, and nothin' could change him. He used to say to me: "Colonel, I'm Irish and the taste of the dudeen is sweet to me teeth, and if it wasn't

I'm not goin' to let an association of old maids tell me what I can do and what I can't. Besides, bein' so I'm Irish, they ought to be glad I don't drink whiskey."

Mark referred in this unrespectful way to the A B C Society o' Riverton, that once sent a committee to break Mark's connection with the dudeen and found it too strong *every way*. That must 've been a pretty interestin' meetin'. One lady got pretty well het up when Mark refused to come to terms and proceeded to read the riot act to him. Before she got through she really used his wife as a club to hit him over the head with. This ain't the most tackful thing in the world to do and this good sister made considerable of a blunder. She kept tellin' Mark that the mistakes of his life 'd been many and the sins of his life 'd been more—as the hymn says—always endin' up: "But your wife, Mrs. Shanley, is a lady." Mark stood it as long as he could and then turned on the pesterin' woman, as Mr. Vickers said, like the famous "Stag at Bay." In a terrible voice he said, "Yes, Madame, Mrs. Shanley *is* a lady—and you would be one, too, if you'd lived with Mark Shanley for twenty-five years—or you'd be dead!" They say that the woman would be runnin' *yit* if she hadn't got out of breath. As I was sayin', the good sisters bothered Mark a good deal about

his pipe, but he finally got revenge and shut 'em up at the same time. It happened like this:

There was an A B C meetin' in Riverton—their big annual meetin' with all the folks on hand. The President was a kind o' potterin' old dame named Andrews, good-intentioned enough, but slow and dull as ditch-water. Well, this old girl was presidin' *at length*. First off, she delivered a long speech of her own, then she give reports from various societies, and long about bedtime she said: "I know you would never forgive me if I didn't read you a part of the annual address of our State-president." Then she hit up for another long lap. Mark was settin' in the front seat, or near it, alongside of a young Baptist minister, jest out o' school. Mark told me hisself that the women had persecuted him before and he hadn't said much of anythin', but that this meetin' was just a little too much. "I don't believe in everlastin' punishment in this life," he said.

Mark turned to the young preacher alongside o' him and, in a solemn voice full of weeps, that could be heard all over the church, made a sort o' last will 'nd testament. "My Boy, you will live to see the end of this meetin'. You are young and in the ordinary course of nature have many years before you. I am gettin' old and am not likely to

survive. Do me one last favor. When you leave the field, go by my house and tell my people that I died like a man with my face to the *foe*."

Mrs. Dan Elton told me that she was at the meetin' and that Mark broke it up then and there. Some people were scandaled by it, but most of 'em, even A B C-ers themselves, were so glad to get out that they didn't feel very hard against Mark, and after that they were all glad enough to let him alone. Which was right, too, for he was a good man and did a lot of good all the time.

I've forgot my manners. I've left you waitin' from the time we set down in my old settin' room, with our feet up, smokin' and sayin' nothin'. Excuse me, and I'll go on.

After a while, Mark took his pipe out and turned to me. "Colonel, who was the *gossoon* that the big fellow was lookin' at so lovin' like? It looked as if they'd met before somewhere." "They had," said I, and proceeded to tell him when and where, and how they'd met. "There's trouble comin' out of it, sure," said I. "Jim never forgets and never forgives, and he won't never give up until he's done somethin' to get even. When he thinks he's even he *will* be even, you c'n bet. Jim's a hard collector if he ain't very good pay some ways. He collects his grudges right on the nail, princ'pal 'nd interest."

"What do you think he'll do?" asked Mark. "I don't *think*," said I. "There's no way even o' guessin' what he'll do. It'll be mean and cruel, that I'm sure of."

"What about the colleen?" asked Mark then. "Well," said I, "you see all that I see and mebbe more, but unless I'm mistaken that means more trouble." "What do you mean?" Instead o' answerin', I asked *him* a question: "What did you notice about Joe and the colleen, as you call her?"

Mark laughed. "The main thing was that they didn't seem to know that there was anybody in the world but themselves. They weren't misbehavin', understand—and bodily they were payin' attention, but on a wager, I don't believe either one of 'em could repeat three sentences I spoke and I don't believe they'd know me now if we met face to face. Calf-love, would you say?"

"Love, perhaps," said I, "but I'm not so sure about it's bein' o' the calf kind. I don't believe it, knowin' what I do of the parties. I've never see them together before, but I've see enough now to make me mighty anxious. It spells more trouble for Joe and he's got enough 'lready."

"Why more trouble?"

"Simple enough," said I. "The girl's Mabel Gilbert, Frank's sister, and, what is more to the purpose, Mrs. Frank's sister-in-law. Mabel's the

prettiest girl in town and one of the brightest. She's also the most popular. Couple that up in the same harness with this, that Mrs. Frank is the highty-tightiest, proudest woman in this town, next to the widow Curtis, who's old and all broke up by trouble and worry. Why Tiny Gilbert is so stuck-up, nobody knows—her father wa'n't nothin' but a cobbler and none too good a one at that, and her sister married a nobody-much over to Riverton, your town—last I knowed he was in jail. It's true jest the same that Tiny's a high-stepper and thinks she's a society somethin' or other in the village or a big part of it. Now, if Joe goes and gets in love with Mabel, the fur 'll fly certain, and that fur is likely to come off o' Joe. Mark, I don't believe that you have any idea how people round here look at them Onderdonks. Nobody can understand it that don't live here, but they're just scum, that's the plain truth —scum, and nothin' else."

Mark turned on me with a flash in his eye I'd never see before. "I don't understand? Don't I though! Didn't the whole ten of us come over from Ireland steerage when I was a bit of a gossoon, cock-eye to a toad. Didn't we live in a shanty on the canal, not ten miles from Riverton where I live now? And wa'n't I and my brothers and sisters too jest Irish *scum*, until I was big

enough to put the map o' Ireland on the face of anybody 'scummin' ' me? Don't I know? I do, jest. And what's more, I know what the boy's got to fight against to make anythin' out of himself."

"That's the thing," said I, "that worries me. He's got a long, hard row to hoe. And everybody, or most everybody, 'll be against him. They'll suspicion him all the time, for one thing; and be lookin' for the bad blood in him to show out. But even that ain't the thing I'm most 'fraid of for him."

"What's that?"

"Jest what little Miss Posey is likely to do to him."

"How?" said Mark. "It looks to me as if all she's ever goin' to do she's done already."

"Not by a jug-full," said I; "he's jest driftin' along before the wind now. The trouble 'll come when he tries to make port."

"Meanin'?"

"Jest this. She ain't noways likely to marry him. The folks won't let her, for one thing. And then Joe's got too much against him. I don't see any way up or out for him. And to have a disappointment in love piled on top of all that he's got to carry seems more 'n anybody could lug."

"Oh, well," said Mark, "so far 's the love is concerned, he's young and will get over that."

"That's what I'm scairt of," said I, "that he won't, and I think he won't."

"Why," said Mark, "they mostly do—these young fellers fall in love, or think they do, half a dozen times before they get hitched up. Why won't Joe?"

"For the same reason that my dog, Fusty, won't take up with nobody else. I've give him away four or five times—once half 'crosst the county, and he broke loose and come home ev'ry time."

"How d' you account for it?" asked Mark.

"This way," said I, "and it applies to Joe jest right. One day I was settin' out on the back porch yonder. I heard a clatter on the walk south o' the house, and around the corner come this little dog, creepin' on his belly that he couldn't get low enough to suit him, and draggin' a tin-can tied to his tail. He was the raggedest, hungriest, saddest little bundle of misery you ever set eyes on. I took him in, cut the can off his tail, fed him, petted him, and give him a home. Result is, he loves me to death. I couldn't give him away and I couldn't get rid o' him without killin' him. I've see dog-love before, but never anythin' like Fusty's love for me. You see, no one, up to that

time, had ever treated him half-way decent. I was the only friend he'd ever had. And as long as he lives there 'll be nobody like me. Kind o' makes me proud, Fusty's love does. I'm afraid it 'll be somethin' like that with Joe. Up until lately, anyhow, he ain't hardly been treated human. Herm' himself is a brute, drunk half the time and ugly all the time. And Herm's boys are rather less account around here than Fusty was when he come crawlin' 'round that corner. Unless I miss my guess, jest from what I've seen to-day, the girl has opened up Paradise to Joe and he won't go out unless she puts him out. And you know to a lover what ain't Paradise is the tother thing."

Mark didn't say nothin' to this but set there smokin' and thinkin'. "By the way," said I, when the silence had pulled out pretty long and thin, "you've not asked me about my big idea?" Mark cocked his eye at me and spoke with his pipe held b'tween his teeth. "No need! If you've really got an idea you'll tell it sooner or later. What goes into the tub 'll come out in the wash. I suppose you want me to ask you what it is. Am I to judge whether it's a big idea or not? Do you want advice or have you made up your mind and want me to tell you how wise you are? Come now, be honest and say right out which it is."

"I've about made up my mind to carry my idea out. I don't want advice and I do want you to think that I am doin' a wise thing, but I can get along without it."

"Glory be!" he shouted. "Here's an honest man! I'll approve your project without hearin' a word. When a man's that brave he can't go astray. Spit it out, as the little girl said to the dog that had her cake. I am alive for it." I didn't know whether he was laughin' at me or not and didn't care much. I was all for my idea jest then.

"First off," I said, "look around you here. What do you see?" Mark pretended to look around very careful. "Well, for one thing, I see more dust 'nd débris than Mrs. Shanley, bein' a careful housekeeper, would stand for."

Then he began to sing, in a voice that made the windows rattle:

"Bachelor's Hall, what a quare lookin' place it is!
Kape me from sich, all the days of me life.
Sure but I think what a burnin' disgrace it is,
Niver at all to be gettin' a wife.

"Pots, dishes, pans and sich grasy commodities,
Ashes and praty-skins, kiver the floor;
His cup-board a store-house of comical oddities,
Things that had niver been neighbors before.

"Late in the night, when he goes to bed shiverin',
Niver a bit is the bed made at all;
He crapes like a terrapin under the kiverin'!
Bad luck to the picture of Bachelor's Hall."

I held up my hand. "Have mercy, Mark. It ain't quite so bad as that, dusty 's it is sometimes. Tell me what else you see?"

"I see a pretty comfortable first floor—if sort o' bare and bachelor. What a fool you were not to marry, but it's no use talking now. What else do you want me to see?"

"How many rooms?" He got up, opened a door or two, and set down again. "Three down-stairs, besides the kitchen. What of it?"

"Three more upstairs—four bedrooms—one man tries to live in the whole place. It's lone-some 'nd selfish b'sides."

Mark laughed out loud. "What 've I always told you? Your house is big and lonesome for one—any house is, if there's only one room in it. But, my friend, if you're thinkin' of marryin' at *your* age, I may have to take back my endorse-ment, unsight and unseen, of your big idea."

"Don't be a fool," said I, "because you've prac-tised and know how. I'd look sweet marryin' now, wouldn't I? Try again."

"I give it up," said Mark, "and you want

to tell me, anyway. What's on your mind?"

"I'm goin' to take Joe Onderdonk in here to live with me and give him that much of a chance. You see, Herm's old shack ain't near big enough for the family and Joe has to bunk in with two of his brothers. How he can keep his clothes decent or keep hisself comf't'ble, I don't see. If he should come here, he could have a quiet room all to himself. Besides, it can't be very easy for him down there. I don't think they like his ways much and he couldn't like theirs noways, 'nd——"

Mark didn't wait for me to finish. He plumped his feet down onto the floor and padded in his stockings 'crosst the room to where I set, grabbed me by the hand, and pretty near pulled my arm out by th' roots.

"Lord love ye, man dear, but ye have a head. I'm glad I stood for ye before I knew what the idea was. It'll be good for him and it'll be simply grand for you. Only, I'm fearin' he'll think it's charity and won't come."

"Don't worry. He'll come. I'll tell him that I need him and that he's got to work for his keep. That'll bring him."

"I hope so," said Mark. "It'll go far to make a man of you—which, accordin' to my way o' thinkin', no bachelor ever is."

"All the same," said I, "I'm afraid that somethin' 'll happen to the boy."

"God forbid," said Mark.

"Amen to that," said I.

CHAPTER IV

WE ALL SETTLE DOWN

WHEN I told Mark Shanley that I was sure Joe would come to live with me, mebbe I put on more certainty than I really felt inside. But it come out all right. He come. It took considerable argyment, for Joe always could smell charity further 'n a rat could cheese, but he didn't feel the same way about it by a good deal. I had to show him that he was expected to work and that he could do 'nough to make it worth while for me. When I done that he followed along easy.

We got along first-rate from the start. Joe took right hold o' the housekeepin', kept the floors clean, so that you could sit down anywhere in your Sunday clothes without doin' 'em any damage. This was surprisin' seein' how he'd lived down at Herm's. Joe was jest natch'rally built clean. He was busy, too. He didn't get the job in Ed Williams's store. He'd prob'ly 've starved to death while Ed was tryin' to say "yes" or "no," anyhow—but Hannah come down flat-footed:

"We ain't goin' to have no Onderdonk workin' in our store and handlin' our money. 'Tain't safe. And our customers wouldn't like it, neither." Mr. Vickers said that Hannah used "we" in the editorial sense—like when Van Hunt calls himself "we" in the *Trumpet*. I could see that Jim Goodenough or some o' his friends had been at work on Hannah—Ed didn't count for shucks—and closed up one door for Joe.

But that didn't shut him in or out—the young Doctor give him a good deal better job than Ed's, more pay, too, drivin' for him and tendin' office between times. Joe was tickled to death with his work and took to that smelly old doctor's shop, skeleton and all, like a duck to water.

We was all happy that summer, and none o' the things I was afraid of happened straight-off. In fact, the summer dozed along the whole way through till fall, without nothin' of any account happenin'. That's always the way in a country village. Everythin' happens in a small village that happens anywhere, but so seldom that a man has to live half a life-time to get what's on the front page of the New York Earth every day. If old Bill Burgess was to tell you all the excitin' things he's see happen right here in this sleepy old town since he was a boy seventy-odd years ago, 'twould read like a dime novel—but who

wants to take fifty or seventy-five years to read a novel? And yet some things did happen even in that same lazy summer. For one thing, I got pretty well acquainted with the young minister. I worked for him several days, and as he worked, too, right alongside of me as common as you please, I had some talks with him. One day we cleaned house and changed some rooms around that wa'n't quite suited to the family. That meant movin' the parson's books, which was quite some job, let me tell you. That young fellow's got more books than anybody in town, even Mr. Vickers.

I asked him if he'd read them all. He said that he hadn't, that is, every one all through, but he knew about what was in them. That seemed funny to me and after I'd mulled it over a spell, I asked him: "How can you know what's in a book without readin' it all?" "Well," said he, "I kind o' browse around in it, read here and there, look at the chapter headin's, study the index and one thing and another—so I know pretty well what the book has in it." Then I went on to find out somethin' that I'd often thought about. "It ought to be pretty easy to make sermons when you've got so many books around!" That was more 'n half a question. He laughed out loud, but he answered quick 'nough. "Do you think I get

them right out of these books?" "Pretty near, now, don't you? I've always wanted to know but never had a chance before."

"I'll tell you, Colonel," said he, "just how it is. You get them out of your books and you don't. Do you get vegetables from the rectory garden directly out of your packages of seeds, so that the more seeds you have the more truck you raise?" "Not direct," said I; "you've got to plant your seed first b'fore you get any truck." He was sort of a city fellow and didn't know much about plantin' and such things.

"Exactly," said the parson. "Jest so you have to *read* books and make somethin' of your own out of 'em. You have to plant the seed before you can have any truck."

That shut me up for a while, because I had to think it over. When we started talkin' again it was about somethin' else, and that ended my preachin' lessons for that season. There was some more questions I wanted to ask but I never did get around to it. It was one of them times when the minister told me about Sally Brown's weddin'—which was the first one he had after comin' to Middleport. It was a great introduction to our village, for, as it happened, some of the funniest folks alive—I was goin' to say, in all this world—was at that weddin'.

Sal herself was somethin' of a joke, that is, she had the name o' bein' the most sot, sour, man-hatin' old maid in any seven adjoinin' counties that you could mention. She got 'ngaged by letter to a man in some God-knows-where place in the West and he come half-way 'crosst the continent to marry a vineg'ry old maid—sixty, if she was a day, if she *did* put it down as fifty in the minister's book—that no man had looked at more 'n once except by accident in the last twenty years. I pitied him, though I didn't know him and hadn't never seen him. I thought that he couldn't 've done nothin' to deserve what he was likely to get. Poor man, I wonder if he's still alive and sorry, or dead and glad of it.

When the minister got to the Widow Johnson's house, on Hill Street, where he'd been told to come "about ten o'clock"—as he supposed to marry the *widow's* daughter to somebody—it was about ten minutes of the hour. But the guests was all there, settin' in chairs tight up against the wall, in a row, lookin' and actin' as much like the graven images we're told not to bow down to in Scripture as they knowed how. The only difference was they *did* talk a little, in a queer way 's if there was a corpse in the room that might overhear them. The parson said he had to go 'long in front o' the row and shake hands with all of

'em. He noticed that they was pretty old, women and all, and s'posed the bride and groom was in some other room. When the introducin' and handshakin' (they was all so sort o' embarrassed that, as he said, his hand felt as if he'd been handlin' a barrel o' codfish, sort o' cold and clammy) he asked for the bride and groom to sign up hitchin' papers. As he said to me: "If my heart hadn't been good and sound, I'd have toppled over when this rather elderly and somewhat spare lady was presented to me as the bride." Come to find out, the groom 'd gone out to fix up somethin' about tickets 'nd baggage and hadn't got back yet. The parson set down, but not in the row backed up against the wall. "I couldn't stand that," said he; "it made me think of an old song we used to sing in college about 'ninety-nine blue-bottles hanging on the wall.' "

"Was there any men there," I asked, "at that time o' day?" "Yes," said he, "three; old Uncle Tommy Frissell, Mr. Munson, the elder ("Kusco," said I), and Mr. Benoni Treat."

"Who was the women?" "I didn't know them all, and don't remember all the names now, but there were, let's see, Miss Anne Hepworth, Mrs. Henry Bayliss——" I held up my hand—"You needn't tell me any more. I've got an earful 'lready. I'll bet more than any minister 'd ven-

ture to risk, that somethin' unushal happened at that weddin'."

He laughed right out. "There sure did, but what made you think that somethin' out of the ordinary would happen?" "The list of guests would make that certain to anybody that knows this town. Somethin' out of the ordinary always happens where 'Crazy' Anne Hepworth is, and 'Oni Treat was there, too." I couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of it.

"What's the joke?" he asked. "Why do you connect Miss Hepworth and Mr. Treat?"

"I couldn't help it if I tried," said I, "and you won't neither, after to-day. They belong together like corn-beef 'nd cabbage, or liver 'nd bacon."

"Let's hear the story anyhow, before I tell you what happened at that weddin'—I won't tell 'til you do."

"You needn't bribe me," said I. "I'm crazy to tell it. You know 'Oni is kind o' a figger o' fun, anyhow," said I. "He is for a fact. He's the tallest, *and* the thinnest, man inside the corporation o' Middleport. He's six foot some odd, and as broad's a pencil or a lightnin'-rod. If you could 've nailed slats cross-wise on his legs and braced him up somehow—for he always seemed sort o' wambly, as if he was goin' to break up into stove lengths—he'd 've made a good step-ladder.

His Adam's apple stood out, it seemed like, all by itself, and kept runnin' up and down his cordy neck like the bucket on Ase Long's new coal-hister down to the dock, only it appeared to load up and unload faster 'n any engine could work. 'Oni's a good man 'nd lives up to his lights, which ain't quite as bright 's that new-fangled gas Chet Baldwin has got into his house. The sore spot in 'Oni's life, which it ain't quite safe to mention when he's around, and *noways* safe when his wife, Elviry, is within hearin' distance, is his bustin' up a revival meetin' in the Methodist Church.

"He didn't intend to. He's a very religious man and wouldn't hold to do such a thing, but he did it as well as if he had intended it. Most of the good folks think it was the Devil that done it, but, humanly speakin', it was Anne Hepworth —'Crazy Anne.'

" 'Oni has on the back o' his long neck, about a foot and a half from his collar, a wen that sprouts, or used to, three or four pretty middlin' long hairs. It looked kind o' like a little carrot with the tops on. In this meetin', Anne set right behind 'Oni and at the most solemn point in the exercises, she had one o' them crazy spells that give her her nick-name, leaned over and give a twitch to the hairs growin' out o' 'Oni's wen. She must 've grabbed pritty hard, for 'Oni jumped

out o' his seat and let out a yell that could 've been heard pretty near to Northport.

"'Oni most died o' shame. He told me with tears in his eyes that it was so sudden and hurt so that he couldn't 've helped yellin', 'Not if the Bishop 'd been there! If somebody 'd only told me, I could 've held on and kep' still—as it is, nobody 'll ever forget it. I set in the back seat in the gallery up against the wall, now, 'nd b'sides I have Elviry trim them hairs down every week. Nobody ain't ever goin' to do that to *me* again.' What did Anne do at the weddin'?"

"Well," said the parson, "I don't suppose that it's very good taste to criticize the guests at a party where you've been, but this is 'most too good to keep. Miss Hepworth was evidently pretty nervous on account o' the bridegroom's bein' late. It worried her a good deal and she made no bones o' sayin' so. And her remarks started the others goin' until pretty nearly all the women had sung a verse to the tune of 'it's unlucky to be late at your weddin'.' The climax came when one old lady made the tactful remark: 'There ain't much luck in such a weddin' nohow. I always say that a man who has to go away from home for a wife can't be much of a man.' That would have thrown a wet blanket on 'most any weddin' party that I ever attended. Most of the people seemed

a little embarrassed—I know *I* was, more'n a little—but it didn't bother Miss Brown. She said, and I'll never forget the look on her face, sort o' twisted and puckery "I know," said I, "as if she'd bit into a lemon"): 'The bride is *so* charming that she deserves the best kind of a man!' Honest," went on the parson, "that was almost more than I could stand. I felt ashamed and mad and sorry, too. It's hard lines when a woman is so sour and bitter that she can't keep her tongue off of herself. I've heard that a wasp when it's wounded will sting itself to death. Miss Brown made me think o' that. Why do you suppose a woman with a disposition all warped and twisted like that wants to marry?"

"I don't know," said I, "unless it's because they hate to look as if nobody wanted 'em—like bad fruit that can't be sold."

"I suppose it's different with bachelors?" with a kind o' sly look at me.

"Sort of," said I, "and at that I sometimes think that a bachelor dies without ever livin'. But it ain't ushally throwed up to him that he couldn't *get* anybody. What happened next at your weddin'?"

"Well, the next was Miss Hepworth's performance. Everybody stopped talkin' after Miss Brown made her awful remark. There wasn't

much to say about that, and nobody seemed anxious to start up anythin' new. I was tryin' to figure out whether a knot-hole that I could see in the base-board o' that room was big enough to let me through, for I was thoroughly uncomfortable where I was. When I happened to glance at Miss Hepworth she was evidently uneasy. She was lookin' this way 'nd that and squirmin' around in her chair like a small boy at church when the sermon's long. Suddenly she got up and darted across the room—you know that room, don't you?—Mrs. Johnson's parlor?"

"I've been there," said I, "but I don't remember much about it. It's kind o' long, ain't it?"

"Yes," he said, "very long and narrow. I guess it runs along the whole east side o' the house. The row of guests were sittin' along the west wall o' the room. In the far corner of the room across from the guests was a little stand and on the stand was a vase filled with *withered* flowers. It was a bouquet of old-fashioned posies, but 'd been left for days, perhaps for weeks, and it was simply withered and almost fallin' apart. Miss Hepworth made for this stand, took the bunch of poor dead posies in her hand, and then proceeded to make the worst break I ever witnessed. She came dancing back and stopped in front of where Miss Brown was sittin'. Then she

said: 'I notice that the bride has no flowers. A bride oughtn't to be married without a bouquet. Allow me to present this.' " The parson stopped a minute and fairly shivered. "By George, I understood then what the Bible means when it says that some people would cry to mountains to fall on top of them. I was willin' to have anything happen to me. I'd 've been willin' to be run over by a train or fall down a well—anything to get out of that horrible place! And what do you think happened?"

"I don't know," said I; "I can imagine 'most anythin'."

"Miss Brown took the flowers, got up, made a bow, and with that same twisted, lemony look said, 'Very appropriate, I'm sure.' And she put the withered flowers alongside of her withered, yellow cheek. I don't believe I could 've stood it much longer, but just then the bridegroom came in and just in time to save my mind, if not my life, we went on with the weddin'. I hope never to attend another such."

By the end of the summer the parson was a good friend to Joe and me. He often come in to talk with us and he got int'rested in Joe, who went to his church, and helped him with his studies. And that's another thing. Joe went right on studyin' jest as if he was goin' to school.

I never heard tell of any one 'round our town doin' that. He begun, too, to read Doc's medical books. He had one bustin' big one over to the house, called "Anatomy and Surgery," the grisliest, saw-bones lookin' thing you ever see. I never opened it but once. Joe seemed to like it and was diggin' into it all the while.

Seein' him studyin' away so hard put another *idea* into my mind. I'll tell you about it later.

CHAPTER V

AUNTIE TALKS

THE summer wa'n't all gone, though, before I got warnin' that there was trouble afoot. And one o' the boss trouble-makers o' the place brought me the news of it. As well 's I can remember, it was along late in August that Auntie Evans first got active in the business of tryin' to run my affairs. It was a wonder that she'd held off so long. Havin' nothin' very much of her own to tend to —seein' that Doc, her husband, who hadn't no business at all of his own, bein' sickly and sort o' retired, did half the house-work, Auntie was usually tryin' to run somebody's affairs. Up to this time, though, she hadn't bothered me much. After she really got under headway I see that I hadn't half appreciated the blessin' of havin' her leave me alone.

Have you ever met Auntie? If you haven't, you've got one good time comin'—that is, if you like that sort o' thing. In order to break it to you kind o' easy like, I'll tell you how she looks.

She's a very trim figger indeed—in fact, she looks very much as if she'd been trimmed for a flag-pole, except for her arms, and they're so high up, so thin and sort o' knurly, that they look like branches left on by accident when the choppers got through with her. Her skin is yellow, wrinkled, and shows every bone in her face and jaw. She's had some sort o' disease that made her eyes yellow, too. She always wears, even in summer, a fluffy shawl and tippet-like thing over her shoulders. When she peers at you, as she has a way o' doin' over her specs, she looks at a little distance, for all the world like one o' them hoot-owls, nine-tenths feathers and the rest bone. But you don't get the whole charm of Auntie until you hear her voice. It is high, squeaky, and sharp-set like a rusty saw under the file. Mr. Vickers said that she's talked so much that she'd ruined her whole vocal apparatus except the G string, and that was considerable frayed.

I figgered it out pretty careful and come to a conclusion as to what makes that woman so thunderin' and impossible thin. She's et up, or burnt up, or somethin' like that, with curiosity. She's all wore out watchin' her neighbors and figgerin' out what's happenin' to 'em, and what they're doin'. No matter what happens in town, night or day, that woman's sure to know about

it, and usually the fust to tell it, except for them that's told by the ones she's told. She can't always hold 'em back so that she can cover the whole village. With her curiosity, her everlastin' peekin' and snoopin', when she takes your affairs in hand, you c'n be sure that they'll be dealt with *some*. She's got opinions on all subjects, and never hesitates to let 'em be known, and she keeps sawin' away at her neighbors' affairs with that raspin' voice o' hers; it's as soothin' to the nerves as livin' next to a saw-mill. There ain't a man in town, even old Thad Hunt, who weighs most three hundred, and never puts foot on the ground if he can help it, that wouldn't rather walk a mile than listen to her talk half an hour.

So, my heart dropped down about to the level o' my boot-tops when I saw her evidently headin' my way through the Rectory garden. I was settin' on the back-porch in my shirt-sleeves enjoyin' an after-supper pipe. Joe 'd took young Doc into the country, and except for Fusty I was alone. After passin' the time o' day, she set down alongside without an invite 'nd for about three ticks o' the clock didn't say nothin'. Of course, such a thing is dangerous,—it's unnatchral, you know, for a talkin' critter like Auntie—like holdin' your breath under water. It didn't last very long though, or I should 've sent for a Doc. But be-

fore I'd scurcely began to count, she started in full tilt: "Say, Colonel, the new North-end elder is the funniest feller I ever see." I laughed. "Henrietta, you ain't in a proper frame o' mind. It ain't respectful to the clergy to call the minister a 'feller.'"

"I guess I'm as respectful as you be," she said, kind o' snappy. She don't like to be interrupted. "Anyhow, he's funny. I've been watchin' him most all summer ("I'll bet you have," said I to myself!) and he's noways like any other preacher that ever was around here."

"How do you mean?" said I, jest to keep her goin'. I was kind o' gettin' int'rested. This was different than the ordinary run o' her talk.

"Well, fust off, he don't never come out doors to do nothin', or go down town, or make calls, before noon."

"I can explain that," I put in. "Mr. Vickers says he studies four or five hours every mornin'."

"What does he do that for, do you s'pose? He might better be down town talkin' to the men, like Elder Owen. And then," she went on quick, so's I couldn't stick in—talkin' to Auntie was like fencin' with a good fighter, you'd got to jab quick or he'd get you first—"he never wears white ties or a long coat, 'xcept on Sundays. He'd rather put on old clothes and poggle 'round the

barn. He's always buildin' chicken coops or diggin' in the garden. He's actshally goin' into the chicken-business with Prof. Jackson. They're goin' to buy one o' them hatchin'-machines and are goin' to raise three or four hundred chickens *in the winter*. He's put most of the garden into chicken yard and rented Andy Ames's coop on the other side. Says he'll have two hundred hens by next year. What do you think o' that?"

"I don't think at all," said I, "I know. He'll get stuck. He's got two poor partners—the chicken business and Prof. Jackson—there ain't an honest hair on either one of 'em. Either one alone is bad enough—the two together 'll fix him sure enough."

"That reminds me o' somethin'," Auntie went on, "funnier yet. You remember that old hot-water hatcher that Thad Hunt used to own? He built it, you know, from plans he bought from a chicken paper. Thad had the thing around for several years, but hadn't used it lately. I don't know 's it ever worked very good. Well, the young elder see it one day and jest went crazy over it, wanted to know how it worked and could *he* make one—when, lo and behold, old Thad up and give it to him!"

"And the parson didn't faint?" said I. "Well,

he ain't got heart disease, that's sure, or else he don't know Thad Hunt."

"Anyhow," said Auntie, "the Elder took the thing, had it lugged down to th' house and got it into the summer kitchen. It was half as big as a piano and heavy!—My land! They couldn't get it through the kitchen-entry so that they had to take both sashes out of the kitchen window and hist it through. You know that kitchen—the outside one, I mean. Old Thad built that himself, and he only left about eight by ten for the kitchen part, and when they got that old incubator thing, as they call it, in, there wa'n't hardly room enough for the stove. And that wa'n't the worst of it —when he come to put the hot-water in, the tank leaked so that the egg-draw swelled up and wouldn't pull.

"The Elder went to work and tore the top off to see if he couldn't fix the tank and found that it was set in plaster paris and all rusted through. There was more 'n a dozen holes in it. 'Twa'n't any good and he had to throw out the whole thing, except what he could use for kindlin' wood. I saw the old tank all busted up out behind the barn."

"I was wonderin'," says I, "what was the matter with the thing when Thad give it away—now I know. If I hadn't found out it would have

worried me. The parson's young and he'll learn."

"Um," said Auntie, "he *is* young, but he ain't any too young if he's goin' to learn all that he don't know, in one life-time, 'specially about babies—let me tell you. (Well, I was lettin' her as well as I knew how.) The other night the baby, the youngest, I mean, they's two of 'em about of a size, was cryin' for most two hours like all possessed. In the mornin' when he was out to the pump, with that funny glass pitcher they've got—it *is* a funny thing, awful clumsy and heavy and with sharp points all over it—I asked him what was the matter with the baby. You wouldn't believe it, but he said, 'She had a bad dream.' Bad dream, fiddlesticks! It was the worst colic you every heard tell of. There's another queer thing about Elder Hilton—he's regular neetums with your 'Piscopal man, Vickers. *He's* a funny man. He thinks he's smart. He's up to the Elder's two or three nights a week—and he stays talkin' and smokin' most all night. I should think the Elder's wife would have to shake out her curtains every few days or they'd smell awful and people 'ud think that her husband smoked. Last Tuesday night he stayed till after one o'clock, I heard 'em go out and looked at the clock."

"I understand that Bert Winship don't think

much of his minister hobnobbin' so thick with Vickers—he's dreffful worldly. He drinks wine and smokes, and I've heard he sometimes even says "Damn'—besides, he drives that awful fast horse —Ed. Ryerson raced her on the ice once——"

My mind kind o' wandered off here—thinkin' o' one thing 'nd another about the way Mr. Vickers done things. His ways was his own—that's sure. Then somethin' she said brought me *to* again, and I waited for a chance to hand out a notion I got to Auntie. I had to wait some time, for she was workin' faster and smoother than Van Hunt's new gas engine that runs his printin'-press. When there come a little stop for breath, I said: "I don't know why the young minister likes Mr. Vickers, but I do know why Mr. Vickers likes him."

"Why? I always wondered what there was to it."

"Well," said I, lightin' up my pipe again, which shows that Auntie 'd stayed the full length of a smoke, "for one thing the young elder ain't afraid of him and ain't shocked by him neither, and gives him as good as he sends. Mr. Vickers is always sayin' outlandish things to 'jar' folks, as he says. Some of 'em take it pretty hard. The other minister—the one that jest left—was scared out about the first time and wouldn't come near

the rector if he could help it. Mr. Hilton ain't that kind 'nd Mr. Vickers likes him for his ginger." This was all made-up talk, 's you can see. It didn't amount to nothin', it was just to stall Auntie for a while. She was pritty restless while I was prosin' along, and I knowed she hadn't said what she'd come to say. I kind o' *sensed* when she fust showed up in the garden that she had somethin' on her mind and it wa'n't the minister, neither.

I knowed I'd have to listen but I didn't intend to make it too easy for her by givin' her any extry chances to talk. I kep' on gabbin' so's to stop her. Before I finished she was like a high-lifed horse checked-in hard, champin' her bit 'nd stampin' her feet, and threatenin' to rare. And she didn't wait a second longer'n she had to. I *had* to draw breath and while I was doin' it she broke in—"Colonel, how long are you culculatin' to have that Onderdonk fellow live with you?" I froze up quick and tight, if it was August—you could 've skated anywhere within ten feet o' me. "I don't know that the question is any int'rest to th' public," said I. "Why?"

"I s'pose you know, don't you, you ain't makin' yourself very popular havin' him here? There's some don't like it."

"No, I don't," said I, "and if I did 'twouldn't

make a mite o' difference. What's my business is my business, and what's my business ain't anybody else's business. My father used to say that there was two ways o' gettin' rich: one is mindin' your own business and the other is not mindin' other people's. This town stays poor, I guess, because it don't follow neither one o' them rules. What do I care whether I'm pop'lar or not. I ain't runnin' for office."

"Mebby not," said Auntie, "but nobody can afford to get his neighbors down on him."

"Who's down on me for takin' Joe in with me? Ain't I a right to live with anybody I want to if it's respectable?"

"Yes," she said, kind o' unwillin' like. "I guess you have. But you know the Bible says some things is lawful but ain't expeditious. This is one o' *them!* Besides, some folks think it *ain't* quite respectable encouragin' such low-down trash as them Onderdonks and givin' 'em a place with other folks. We're told not to cast pearls before swine."

That made me mad, good and hot, so 's my collar sizzled. The devil quotin' Scriptcher is one thing I can't abide. "Look here, Henrietta Evans," said I, "there's two things wrong about that there quotation—I ain't handin' out no pearls and Joe Onderdonk ain't no swine.

'Twouldn't be very healthy for a *man* to call him a name like that 'round me. Joe belongs to me now, and I'm goin' to stand up for him. And as for doin' somethin' that ain't respectable! Are you so blind that you can't see that the most respectable thing I could do would be to take Joe, who wants to be everythin' that's good and is tryin' harder this minute to be straight and decent than nine-tenths of the best men in town ever thought o' doin', and give him a decent home and a chance? I'll shoot a little o' your own Scriptcher at you. Don't the Bible say somethin' about salt that's lost its saltiness or somethin' like that bein' no good? Doesn't that mean that good people ought to be strong enough to make the world better and get over some to the good side that ain't been there b'fore? If it don't mean that, I don't know what it does mean. Salt that hadn't no more saltiness to it than some goodness 'round here wouldn't keep pork overnight."

That was a long speech and for a wonder it shut Auntie up. She kind o' shook her head, doubtful-like, and said, "Mebby so," and went home. Her visit left me kind o' uneasy, because I knowed it was jest a beginner. They'd go after me harder a little later on. That was nothin' but a skirmish.

CHAPTER VI

JIM MEDDLES IN AGAIN

My idea that Auntie Evans was only a skirmishin' party sent out ahead by the main attack was proved jest two days later by the appearance of Jim Goodenough himself to tackle me on the subject o' Joe. My notion that he was Major Gen'ral o' the whole cussed campaign was right, too. It was a case o' bad luck for me. Jim seen me only because I didn't see him first. If I 'd sighted him anyways ahead I'd been in the garret or in the Rectory cellar behind the barrels. However it didn't matter much, for I couldn't 've dodged him very long if he really wanted to see me. As 'twas, he come pretty early in the mornin' 'nd was fair on top o' me before I knowed he was anywhere 'round. I was on the porch waitin' for Mr. Vickers to call me. I was to take him over to Southport for the day. Hepzy was all hitched up, standin' in the barn ready.

I guess I've made it plain that I never did like Jim Goodenough. I knowed him as boy and man,

sneakin' boy he was and he'd growed up into the same kind of a man. That's ushal enough, I guess. Mr. Vickers tells about some poet fellow that said, "the boy is father to the man," which is true if it *is* poetry, that's generally mostly lies, or thereabouts.

Jim didn't waste no time gittin' down to business. The meetin' wa'n't exactly opened with prayer, nor closed that way, neither. Jim ordered me, at the point of the bay'net, it really come to that 'nd nothin' less, to show Joe the door. I ain't goin' to tell all that was said. It ain't necessary 'nd wouldn't be what the preachers call "edifyin'." What Jim said had twice as much bluster and swear-words as sense and ideas in it, and some things I said wouldn't look so very pritty on this white page. An old soldier ushally has some such vocabulary tucked away, even if he don't use it much. I'll have to own up that I lost my temper. When the hect'rin' fool laid down what he called his "ultomatom" and pretended that he had all the decent folks in town backin' him, the trace or somethin' busted in my inside and I give him some pretty sulfery advice, the main point bein' that he could go to a place where the climate is always the middle of August, if not more so.

As I said, I got pretty hot and started in to out-

him. Don't you s'pose I've heard what you've been sayin' all over town? I know jest what you're doin' and why you're doin' it. When you get interested in makin' this place respectable, the devil 'd come to church to hear the sermon and get religion. You're thick enough some ways, but I ain't so old or short-sighted that I can't see through you. And there's another thing. If anythin' real serious happens to Joe, it won't be hard to fasten it onto you. Plenty 've heard you say what you'd do."

Perhaps it wa'n't very wise—it made Jim madder 'n ever. He struck back at me quick. He was always snake enough for that. "Didn't I tell you that you're a weak-minded old fool? And some day you're goin' to find it out. I'm not goin' to forget or let this pass. You must be out o' your dodderin' old head."

"Such as it is," said I, "my mind's my own. You haven't changed it none by your argyments or your threats, neither. By the way, why didn't you go to Doc first? Mebby he'd fire Joe and that would get me and Joe too at one shoot."

Jim ripped out a big oath, and by that I knowed he'd been to Doc 'lready and got his walkin'-papers before he come to me. I found out afterwards that Doc didn't mince matters no more than I did.

"He's as big a fool as you are, and I don't know but bigger."

I don't think Jim intended to tell me this but he was so mad and I badgered him so that he let it out before he thought.

"Aha, aha," said I, "then you've found out already that Joe has some friends. You'd better be sure he has. I warn you that there's more of 'em than you think. You'd better call off your campaign. It may get you in trouble. Did you ever hear tell o' the man that dug a hole for his neighbor and come home drunk and fell into it himself? So fur's I'm concerned, if Joe hadn't another friend on earth, I'd stand by him, thick and thin."

By this time Jim was crazy mad, the way he was at Ed Williams's store that time. A little more and he would 've lunged at me and there would have been a nice mix-up on my porch, rectory property. I was scairt, not that he'd *hit* me, but that he'd fall in a fit. It ain't safe to get so mad that the veins in your face swell up like clothes-lines and you turn the color of Concord grapes, half-ripe. Jim was mighty near the breakin'-point that time. I was mighty glad when, jest then, Mr. Vickers called over from his study window that he was ready to go. I didn't

want Jim to drop dead on my stoop 'nd mess it all up, and one time I thought he would.

When Mr. Vickers called, I left Jim without another word. When the Rector 'nd me was well out o' town and our pipes was drawin' good, I did what I'd been sort o' plannin' to do since the day before, when Auntie come at me so. I'd been wantin' to get Mr. Vickers more interested in Joe and I thought I see a chance to do it now. He wa'n't unfriendly nor nothin' like that—jest not what you'd call "int'rested." It wa'n't never very easy to get up steam in Mr. Vickers, but when you did get a good fire built he showed plenty o' power. There was a good biler but it was a big one and took a lot o' coal.

I waited a few minutes and then told him the whole thing; that is, Auntie's talk with me and Jim's campaign 'gainst Joe. I told him, too, how much Joe meant to me and how worried I was for fear somebody would do harm to him.

The Rector smoked on for quite a while, without sayin' a word. Finally, he turned to me, and jesturin' with the stem of his pipe—a way he had—he begun to talk.

"Colonel, do you know what's the matter with Middleport?"

"I know some things that's the matter with it,

but I don't know 's I've got the ones you mean. It's all-fired narrow-minded, for one thing."

"A symptom, Colonel, only a symptom. The disease is deeper down! But the fatal thing is somethin' that's goin' on here and has been for years. What happens to a pan o' milk when you let the cream rise to the top and skim it off?"

"It leaves skim-milk, o' course," said I, quick enough, but not seein' his meanin' yet. "What's that got to do with Middleport and Joe's case?"

"Everything in the world," said he. "Middleport is bein' skimmed, and what's left is mighty thin skimmed milk. What becomes of the bright, enterprisin' boys that we raise here? They go to the City, they have to—there's nothing for them here. How many boys from this village 've gone to Brenton in the last five years?"

"I don't know how many but there certin is a lot of 'em. I can name five or six right now."

"Five or six?" he said, disgusted-like. "I don't know *how* many, but Dan Elton told me the other day that fifteen had gone from his Church alone in the last year. That's one side of the shield. Now look at the other. Who are the ones that stay? The lazy, good-for-nothin's,—mostly billiard-room hangers-on, huntin' and fishin' loafers around the lake. Fools like Bead Winters and dejennerates like Jim Goodenough.

Skim-milk, this village is—and gettin' thinner every year."

"Yes," said I, "I c'n see that with one eye, but jest how does it affect Joe?"

"This way. It sets the tone o' the village even among older and better people then this riff-raff we've been talkin' about. The people, most of them, exceptin' present company—for really, Colonel, I don't mean you—lack ambition or force, and they don't like these qualities much in others. They fight almost anythin' new and dislike people who are different. These loafers, especially, don't want anybody to get beyond them. You notice, don't you, that the boys that go away and get into business, earn money, dress well and come back here once in a while, aren't popular with these stay-at-homes? Why, there's a bitter feud now between Dan Elton's boy, Bob, and Ferd Haynes that drives the bus, and I don't know what it will come to."

"I'd noticed it, but I'd never thought what caused it."

"Now," he went on, tappin' out his sentences with his pipe-stem, "that's the trouble with your boy, Joe. Aside from that collision with Goodenough, the only thing he's done wrong is to try and be somebody. Such a move isn't popular. The philosophy of the village is that Joe Onder-

donk shouldn't be anything but what we should expect Herm's son to be, a ragged ne'er-do-well and poacher. Since he decides to be a man, they're down on him. If it weren't for that, he never would 've got Jim down on him in the first place. Now, not only Jim, but people you'd be surprised to find in the business of kickin' down the ladder the boy is trying to climb by, are against him. It all comes to this, Colonel,—if Joe really means business and is in earnest in wantin' to be somebody and do somethin' worth while, he'll have to leave Middleport—there won't be room for him here."

I could see the truth of all this and it made me feel sorry. "Is it as bad as all that? Won't nobody help him?"

"Oh, yes," said the Rector, "a good many will help him—the best people anyway, and we have some good people here——will be glad to see him get on and will help all they can. But the general feelin' will be unfavorable, you can count on that. Thank God, we aren't all in the mud and so in love with it that we want to keep our neighbors there. But there are too many o' that kind, altogether too many. So far as your worries are concerned, I don't anticipate anythin' more serious than petty persecutions and village tricks—not right away, anyhow. But, all the same, Joe had

better plan to go away. The village is too small for men who want to grow. It doesn't do to plant an oak in a flower-pot. It always does one of two things. It kills the oak or smashes the pot."

There didn't seem to be much more to be said about Joe, but what Mr. Vickers had jest said put an idea into my head. It 'most scared me to say it, but I did,—somethin' sort o' made me.

"It always seemed to me," said I, "that you was too big a man for Middleport, even with the other two places added in." (He was rector of the three Ports.)

A queer look come over his face and I was scairter 'n ever that I'd make a bad break. You see, there was a kind o' mystery about him. His folks was way up on the other side. One o' his uncles was some sort of a judge. He'd often told me about the house he lived in in the old country, and I'd seen a picture of it, too—a great, big house, bigger 'n any in Brenton, covered with ivy that he said was hundreds o' years old, with big trees standin' around it, older yet. 'Twas all carved wood inside, with a picture gallery in it with paintin's of his ancestors back to Adam, or pretty near that—forty rooms and all kinds of servants wearin' uniforms. Why he come to America at all was a mystery to us town-folks,

and how he come to live in a country-town like Middleport was harder to understand yet. We couldn't make nothin' out o' the business.

He didn't speak for a minute and when he did his voice sounded kind o' sad to me. But he wasn't mad 'nd some way I was glad I said it.

"Perhaps so, Colonel, I've had chances to go to better places, several of 'em, but when it comes to ambition and pullin' from here and workin' hard, I'm afraid I'm what I said of others—skim-milk, after all. It may 've been a mistake, Mrs. Vickers thinks so, but I'm too old now."

I didn't say nothin' more and he changed the subject. Jest before we got to Middleport he said: "Colonel, I am inclined to think that the new minister 'll have trouble, too, with our skim-milk folks. He won't stay long, prob'bly."

"Why not?" I asked. "He seems to be a nice fellow."

"He is, but he's different, and that's a crime. He don't make enough calls, and he's too independent. They won't like him after a while, I'm afraid. He and Joe both need friends and that gives you and me a chance. We'll stand by, anyhow." We'd reached the church by this time. "If anythin' unpleasant turns up, be sure to let me know right away."

I promised 'nd was mighty glad to do it. I felt that I'd done a pretty fair day's work, and Joe had a new friend. I didn't re'lize how soon he'd need all the friends he could get.

CHAPTER VII

JOE SEES TOO MUCH

It was most a year, at that, b'fore anythin' much happened, and then things begun to pop pretty lively.

We got through one of our mean lake winters somehow, and it come most spring. That brings us to the time when Tilly Hunt's grand-mother, old Mrs. Lathrop, Benjamin Lathrop's widow, died.

To speak jest so, the story comes in when she wa'n't exactly dead, but dyin'. That she was for a matter o' four or five days and Doc and Joe was there pretty steady day and night.

I'd hate to be a doctor, leastways in the country. I'm willin' to work all day and part o' the night, but when I go to bed, I want to stay there and have my sleep out. As a matter o' fact, I couldn't do anythin' else, for when I get to sleep, I'm pretty near warranted unwakeable. In case of a fire between twelve and four o' the night, I'd

have to be carried out, if I got out at all. So no doctorin' or bein' doctor's assistant for me!

Joe's different. He took to the doctor's job like a young weasel to suckin' eggs. He c'n sleep any time or anywhere, and c'n wake up on call any time. At first Doc didn't ask him to go out much nights, but he had a way o' listenin', seems so, even in his sleep, for the sound o' Doc's bell across the street, 'nd gettin' to the barn in time to hitch up for him; so finally we rigged up a door-bell at the head o' Joe's bed so that Doc has only got to push a button and Joe wakes up like a shot. He c'n dress while you say "Jack Robinson"—'most before he strikes the floor. He's got some way o' fixin' his shirt in his coat and hangin' his pants on a chair, so that he lands into the whole riggin' at once.

All winter, and it was a long 'nd harsh one, Doc and Joe was at it, early and late. There was lots o' sickness and they didn't get much playtime. Joe grew fast that winter—mebby I thought so 'cause I wanted to, but it seemed to me that he looked healthier. He had good food, though nothin' fancy and cooked sort o' bachelor-style, and plenty of it. He was out-doors a lot 'nd in the course o' the winter he put on a couple o' inches heighth 'nd filled out to good measure. He was old for his age, anyhow, bein' knocked

around so much, so that he looked pretty much a growed man. He studied every chance he got—Doc's medical books and others he borrowed. It was wonderful the way he kep' at it. I looked over his shoulder one night and what do you think he was doin'? Drawin' a picture o' what the book called the "nervous system"! I never could understand before why it hurts so to stick a needle into you—it makes so small a hole, you'd think it wouldn't touch anythin' important, but after seein' Joe's picture, there wa'n't no mystery left—we're wired up so close that even a needle couldn't miss. It's sure fixed so that we'll ushally know what hits us.

As I started in a spell ago to say (and I'm goin' to stick to it now until I say it), Mrs. Lathrop died in April, about the middle o' the month, at four o'clock in the mornin'. Doc was at the house till midnight and then went back when the two girls, Tilly and Ellen, called him a little while before the old lady passed away. Joe drove him down and was goin' to wait for him until somebody come to help, then was goin' to drive him about a mile into the country to make an early call before breakfast. It was kind o' urgent and Doc couldn't wait no longer than to see the Hunt girls out o' their trouble.

Joe come in about six o'clock, pretty well

fagged out. I had breakfast ready and we set right down to it. I was in a hurry to get Joe off to bed for a little rest before the heft of another day come onto him, for he hadn't been quiet much of any for several days.

We was eatin' in the kitchen—as we often done in the mornin'. It jest was gettin' good and light, with sunlight streakin' through the east window. I was cookin' army flap-jacks on the stove jest behind me and tossin' 'em on to our plates as we wanted 'em. They was good, too, if I do say so.

I noticed that Joe looked tireder 'n ordinary, which wa'n't surprisin' seein' that what little sleepin' he'd done lately 'd been in his clothes on the lounge in Doc's office, and I'll gu'rantee that lounge to wake up any one o' the seven sleepers at least onct an hour. I thought that he looked kind o' troubled, too, 'nd I couldn't think of any good reason for his bein' that. I didn't say nothin'—what Joe calc'lates to tell he tells, and you don't make nothin' by tryin' to pump him. After we'd got most through eatin', and was polishin' off on dough-nuts and an extry cup o' coffee, Joe said: "Dad, I've got somethin' on my mind that I've got to tell you."

"All right," said I, "hadn't you better wait 'til you've had a nap? You look all played out."

"No," said he, "it won't wait for anythin'.

I've got to tell it now, right away quick. I couldn't sleep, anyhow."

"All right, Son," said I, "go ahead. I'm all ears."

I was, too, before he'd got very far.

"A strange thing happened this mornin', and I wish it hadn't happened. So will you, when you know. I'd been waitin' 'crosst the street, in front o' Asa Long's, for an hour, or more, I guess. I was in the buggy and we was facin' north. There was a light in the cupola room in Asa's house, the room where the old Doctor had his 'den,' as he called it. All the time I was there, off and on, between naps, I wondered what it could mean. Just about quarter to four a party o' men come down the long drive-way that goes under that overhead thing. They was very quiet but I heard the crunchin' of the gravel under their feet, and a good deal o' shufflin'. They come down to the side-walk within three feet o' where I set —old Tom stood where the drive-way goes in to the street.

"One o' the men was so drunk that two o' the others had to hold him, walkin' on each side. They'd all been drinkin', more or less, but none was anythin' like as bad off as this one that was more 'n half carried."

"How many was there o' them?" I asked.

"Nine," said Joe.

"Did you know them?"

"All but one. They was all town men but two, and one o' them was from Brenton, 'nd I knowed *him.*"

"It's a wonder they didn't try to dodge you. Did they come way down to the side-walk near you?"

"All the way. You see, the drive goes through a thick clump o' bushes a rod or so from the front walk, and winds besides, so that they was right at my elbow before they seen me. I see them first 'nd recognized 'em, and what's more they know I see and recognized 'em. I'm mighty sorry I did!"

So was I, but I didn't intend to show it, so I put the best face on it I could.

"Well," said I, "what does it amount to? You see a comp'ny o' gentlemen comin' home from the house of a friend—it is late, or early—and they are somewhat conviveral (ain't that the word?)—but that's nothin' to you and you say nothin' about it. They certainly ain't goin' to say nothin' about it, so it amounts to nothin' neither way. Ain't that all there is to it?"

"No," said Joe, "that ain't all there is to it, by a good deal. That was no ordinary company o' gentlemen been visitin' at the house of a friend,

conviveral, as you call it, or not. Didn't I tell you that one o' the men was so drunk that he had to be pretty near carried?"

"Yes," said I, "you did."

"Let me tell you who he was." He leaned over the table until he could almost whisper, as if the old house had ears to hear him and a mouth to tell what he said. "That man was Professor-Lawyer Albert Simonds—late of the Middleport High School, now of the Lake County Bar."

I felt as if a mule had kicked the breath out o' me.

"Then," said Joe, "let me tell you the names o' the two men who were holdin' him up. One of 'em was Howard Agnew, sheriff of Lake County, the other was Ransom Dusenberry, *our leadin' grocer*—as Van Hunt would say."

Joe looked at me while I gasped like a fish in the bottom of a boat.

"Let me tell you that other five that I know the names of: Ase himself, George Taylor, Jim Goodenough, Hank Tyndall, Ed Twining." Barrin' Ase, that I shall want to say some more about, these fellows didn't amount to much—"skim-milk" as Mr. Vickers had said. But, all of a sudden, the meanin' o' the whole business flashed into my mind.

"Joe," said I, 'nd I was so excited that I stood

up. "Joe, do you know what you've done? You've stumbled onto th' mysterious midnight or *all*-night poker-club. That's it, sure as you're born. They've never been caught before. Everybody has notions 'bout it—who belongs 'nd all—but you know what everybody but the gang themselves, and some o' their wives, mebby, are guessin' at. You know what no one else knows. It's the gang, the poker-gang, sure as sure."

"Yes," said Joe, very quiet, but serious-like, "I know *too much*, for my own good."

I knowed that, too, but I didn't want to say so. Then I thought o' somethin' else.

"You said, Joe, that the party knowed that you recognized 'em. How did that happen? Did they come close to you?"

"Yes," said Joe, "one of 'em, and it happened to be Jim Goodenough, too, come over to the buggy and took a good look at me. The street light was on the other side of a tree from me and was right on the path, so that I see 'em first. But, 's I say, Jim come over and see me. I guess at first they thought the buggy was empty. Afterwards Jim went back to the rest and told them who it was. They palavered quite a while, in whispers, that is, and then scattered."

"Did Jim say anythin' to you?"

"He done that," said Joe, "twice. He cussed

me out pretty strong when he first caught sight o' me, and then he come back again after he'd talked with the others and said that he'd cut my heart out if I told a soul what I'd seen."

"Did you promise not to tell?"

"Of course not," said Joe. "Aren't I tellin' you?"

"I thought mebby that didn't count—like Rip Van Winkle's last glass o' drink."

"I didn't promise, anyway, and I'm not much afraid of what Jim Goodenough will do. He's a big coward. But all the same, I'm in for trouble. Jim wa'n't alone and he wouldn't care as much about bein' exposed as some o' the rest. Everybody knows he's a tough. I'm more afraid o' Simonds and Agnew than of all the rest put together. They aren't aimin' to come before the public as bein' in such parties."

"What are you calcalatin' to do?" said I.

"Set tight alongside o' the Doctor until I'm blown off the seat, which won't be very long, I'm thinkin'."

"Why do you think that you'll get into trouble? You aren't goin' to tell, neither am I, and no one else knows it—that is, I s'pose no one else does. You didn't tell the Doctor, did you? Anyway, he wouldn't say a word."

"There are two reasons why I think I'll get into

trouble," said Joe. "One is that these fellows will hate me for knowin' what I know. They can't help it. I hold a club over 'em. Then I wouldn't promise Goodenough not to tell. He's awful mad 'nd I guess would have gone after me right then if he hadn't been afraid of makin' a row and havin' the Doctor come. They'll never believe but what I'll make use o' what I know to get them into trouble. There's another reason, somethin' else happened——"

"What!" said I, "somethin' else. You *did* have a night of it, didn't you? Tell me the rest."

"Not more than fifteen minutes after the club left the Doctor come out o' the house to tell me that Mrs. Lathrop was gone and that as soon as Andy Ames come he'd be ready to go. He told me to go to the office and get a bottle o' medicine that he'd forgot 'nd then come back and pick him up, in the course of half an hour. I drove down Main Street to the office and right in front of it, hung over the hitchin'-post, half on the sidewalk, was Professor Simonds, sound asleep. The others couldn't get him to walk any further or were too far gone themselves, and 'd left him high 'nd dry."

"High mebby," said I, "but not very dry." It was a poor joke but it helped some.

"What did you do?" I asked then.

"At first I didn't know what to do, but I made up my mind that I wouldn't leave him there for somebody to find in the mornin'. I'd do that much for the sake of his wife and the school."

"Church, too," said I, "that would hit the young minister pretty hard if he knowed it. How did you work it? It must have been a hard job to tackle."

"It was. Lucky, I had quite a little time. I loaded him into the buggy. He was dead weight, like a bag o' meal. The best I could do was to lean his head against the dash-board and push his legs under the seat. Then I led Tom up the hill. My plan was to get him up against the door of the house, lead Tom down to the corner, and hitch him, go back, ring the door-bell and cut for cover the way the boys do on Hallowe'en. The plan didn't go. I was jest haulin' my load up onto the stoop when the door opened and the Missis come out. She was as white as the dead, and there was a bad look in her eyes, like somebody who's seen somethin' she can't bear to see, but she was all grit 'nd said, 'Good-morning, Joe,' as if I'd come to breakfast, and helped me carry her husband on to the sofa in the library.

"I started for the front-door full tilt; all I wanted in the world was to get out o' there and

away from her eyes. All the while I was so 'shamed that I couldn't raise my eyes from the floor or look her in the face. And I kep' thinkin' what rotten luck it was that I, of all boys in the world, should get mixed up in this mess.

"When we got to the door she thanked me, in a low, quiet voice, tired-like, and then with a sudden snap in her voice, as if she'd waked up or somethin', she said: 'Joe, I want to ask you a question or two.' This is what I'd been dreadin' ever since I saw her face in the door. Was you ever in a place that you'd have given your hide to get out of?"

"Yes," said I, "sev'ral times, and sev'ral places where I thought I'd give my hide without gettin' out. What did she ask you?"

"Just three questions, and that was two more than I wanted, and one more than I *could* answer. The first was: 'How did *you* get into this?' I answered that one easy enough by jest tellin' her where I found her husband and how I come to be there. Then came her second question: 'Did you see Mr. Simonds before you found him in front o' the office?' That I didn't want to answer, but I could. But when she asked me where I saw him first, I couldn't answer, at least, I felt so I couldn't. I either had to lie or else tell her that I saw him first comin' out of Ase Long's

yard—which would give the whole thing away."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I looked right in her eyes, and it was the first time I'd had the nerve to, and told her the truth. I told her just as gentle as I knew how, but I told her right out that I couldn't tell her."

"What did she say?"

"Nothin' much. She was very quiet and kind about it. 'I think I understand. Of course you can't tell, but I can find out what I want to know.' Then she thanked me again and closed the door. I never was so glad to be on the outside of a closed door in all my life. I went the rest of the way mostly in a dream. Nothin' that happened through the whole business seems real. I wish it wasn't. I'd like to wake up and find that it isn't so."

"Oh, well," said I, playin' up more careless than I really felt, "it'll come out all right."

"Mebby so," said Joe, "but there'll be trouble first. Somebody'll talk, and whoever it is, I'll get the blame."

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CHAPTER VIII

TILLY HUNT TALKS

Joe was right—somebody *did* talk, though it wa'n't Mrs. Simonds, so far 's I could find out. That made little difference to us, bein' so there was somebody to start rumors to flyin'. That's all that's necessary ever in our town—start 'em and they keep themselves goin'. And they was flyin' all right, *thick*, 'nd ev'ry one of 'em was as dangerous as a bomb-shell to Joe. I was as twittery 's a new recruit under fire before he's allowed to shoot back or charge. Mr. Vickers said "my nervous *re*-actions" was all wrong.

One o' the biggest differences in livin' with Joe was jest this worryin' about him. I was worse 'n a hen with one chicken and that one out of a duck-egg. You see, before, I never seemed to have no great stake in what was goin' on. I was sort o' outside. Weddin's, births, funerals, except for the Comrades, everythin', belonged to somebody else. I was jest an outsider lookin' on. Whoever was President, I'd get along—I always

had a bite to eat, a pipe-ful to smoke, a place to lay down in at night.

Now everythin' was different. I looked at the new moon now, wonderin' if Joe looked at it first over his right shoulder so's to get good-luck from it. I hadn't gone over that old "moon light, moon bright" stuff till Joe come— Enough of this foolishness—the point is somebody was talkin' and I was scairt, as ushal, for Joe. It wa'n't long before I found out who was doin' the talkin' and when I *did* find out I didn't worry much less. You'll remember that Joe seen the Poker-Club when he was waitin' for Doc at the Hunts'. In order to get my yarn straight I'll have to tell a little about the Hunt family.

The two Hunt sisters lived with their grandmother, that is, their mother's mother—she that died the mornin' o' the poker party, Mrs. Ben Lathrop. Them three women 'd sort o' fell out with the village a little while before, and was, as Mr. Vickers said, "at Coventry," when the old lady died. Van Hunt (old Thad's youngest brother), the father of the girls, was livin' with his mother-in-law and his daughters. His wife 'd been dead about two years.

About six months or a year before the old lady died, one evenin' for supper or one mornin' for breakfast, I don't remember which, Van

turned up at the house with a bran'-new wife. He hadn't give 'em no warnin' and they hadn't never even heard o' the woman, let alone *seen* her. Van always was a fool, and he showed the whole length of his ears that time certin. Sudden marriages always hand somethin' of a jolt to a man's relations—'specially if they happen to be the mother of the very late deceased, and a couple o' growed-up daughters. What happened that first time, no one but the parties present seems to know and they ain't likely to tell, but what followed come to be sort o' public property and kicked up a good deal of dust.

The girls, aided and 'betted by the old lady, so they say, made it pretty hot for Van and his new wife, 'specially the wife, and Van had to move out and set up house-keepin' on his own account.

Mrs. Van was a pindlin' little critter, cross-eyed some and otherwise homely, and scairt-like, as if she was apologizin' for bein' on earth. It was evident enough that she didn't intend to make no trouble, for she wa'n't that sort. She was kind-hearted and generous (as much as she could be with a paymaster like Van to back her), and people liked her. Consequently they purceeded to get sore on the old lady and the girls. And, as generally happens when a village starts to hand out justice, they was pretty free-handed

with it, and the girls and their grand-ma was on the north side o' the wall, pretty complete. They had their friends, o' course, and quite a few stuck up for 'em, but for the most part, they was pretty much alone. Tilly felt it like the mischief. She was bitter enough to begin with, against her father and his bride first, and afterwards against all that she knew or suspected o' bein' against her and *for* the others. Dan Elton, who's a well-meanin' old duck, but a little mite lackin' in tackt, or whatever you call takin' a jug careful by the handle, tried to smooth Tilly out and get her to see that she was makin' a mistake and gettin' folks down on her without doin' the least mite o' good. Dan told me that she flew at him like a settin' hen and liked to pick his eyes out before he c'd get away from her. From that time on she fit everybody that wa'n't on her side—right and left. It was too bad, because it spoiled the temper of a nice girl and it kep' the female portion o' the community bilin' over most o' the time.

Well, as I say, this had been goin' on for six months or so, when the old lady took sick and after a few weeks died. Ushally folks would have forgot the feud then, or anyway, would have dropped it as long as there was crape over the door, but Tilly 'd had so many rows with so many different folks, and talked so bitter that

half the women wouldn't speak to her and a good many of the men didn't dare to, when their wives were lookin', anyhow. A lot o' the people vowed they'd never darken the door again, so when the funeral was held, nobody went scarcely. Andy Ames furnished chairs for an ordinary village funeral, a hundred or a hundred and twenty-five mebby, and they wa'n't twenty-five of 'em used. I went. I'd known them two girls from little children up, and I wa'n't goin' to turn against 'em, though I *did* think the girls 'd made a mistake. Tilly was perfectly furious, partly because o' the people that stayed away, and even more because of *one* that come. For Van, the old skeezicks, brought his rib o' trouble along. Tilly was upstairs with her mother's relatives from Brenton, and was lookin' out o' the front window when Van and his wife come up the walk. Before they got to the door she'd called Andy upstairs and told him point-blank to keep that woman downstairs, or she said: "I'll put her out o' the house with my own hands. Since she's been indecent enough to come, I'll let her sit in the dining-room, but don't you let her go into the parlor, nor see grand-mother, nor come one step up here. Remember now!"

While Andy was comin' *down* the stairs, Van come in the front door and started to go up. He

saw Andy comin' down and waited, one foot on the stair, for him to git by. Andy told me that he sweat at least a pint comin' down that staircase, and tryin' to think how to head off that town-fool from goin' upstairs. What he did was to whisper: "Wait a minute, Van. Colonel wants to speak to you," and headed straight for me, where I was settin' jest inside the dinin'-room. He ought to 've been shot for puttin' it onto me that way, but he said that he couldn't think o' nothin' else to do and he had to gain time. "I thought," said he, afterwards, "that you could hold him if anybody could. I didn't dast try it myself."

He whispered to me: "For God's sake, Colonel, keep Van and the woman down here. That young spit-cat upstairs 'll pull hair right now if *she* goes up."

I went to Van and thinkin' honesty the best policy, in fact, the only one I could figger out in the time I had, I drew him one side and blowed it straight into his left ear. "Van," said I, "don't try to go upstairs. Tilly won't stand for it—not with the Missis with you. Go into the dinin'-room and sit down quiet. Leave sleepin' dogs lay."

As I remarked before, Van Hunt was always more or less of a fool in all walks o' life,

ushally more rather than less, but I never realized either the width or the pure wool of his foolishness till that day. Instead o' settin' down alongside of his wife in the dinin'-room, like a human bein' with a heart, he took his wife to the dinin'-room, put her in a chair, whispered somethin' in her ear and took *himself* upstairs.

That poor little woman set in one corner o' the half-filled dinin'-room—all humped up like a scairt rabbit—and looked, as she felt, I s'pose, more desolate and alone, ten times over, than if she hadn't a relative in the world. I could 've killed Van by inches and enjoyed every minute of the job, and I told him so next day, too. He hemmed and whined, the way he has, that "it didn't look right for me not to be with my daughters at the funeral o' their grand-mother." And I said back, mighty-quick, "It looked a mighty sight worse for your wife to be settin' alone downstairs and you upstairs with a family that you really didn't belong to no more. Your room would 've made 'em twice as happy 's your comp'ny done. If you'd had a pinch o' sense you'd left your wife to home. You might have knowed 'twould make trouble."

"I didn't suppose that *anybody* would make trouble at a funeral."

"Then you don't know your own flesh and

blood," said I, "for I know Tilly Hunt well enough to know that the sight o' that step-mother 'd make her foam at the mouth, if it was her own funeral, 'stead of her grand-mother's."

"She's got considerable temper," whined Van.

"Yes," said I, "and nothin's happened lately to improve it much."

As I said, Tilly was furious because more people didn't come to her grandma's funeral, and she sort o' swore a feud against the whole town, and 'specially against one or two people who was friends of her father, and had criticized her so 's she'd heard it. This was foolish, o' course, but the weapon she calc'lated on was pretty powerful, at short range, and carried pritty fur, too, in course o' time. The results was serious, too, as you'll see.

One night, about eleven o'clock, pretty late for me, I was gittin' ready to go to bed, when Joe's bell rung. I went to the front window and Doc called across that I was wanted on the phone. I pulled my clothes back on and went over to the office.

"Hello!" said I, "who's this?"

The voice come back: "This is Till' Hunt, but don't tell nobody."

I laughed at that b'cause, late as 'twas, I'd heard three receivers along the line come down.

"I want you to come over to the house right away. I must see you. Hurry up."

"All right," I said, "though I feel more like goin' to bed than traipsin' down there to the other end o' the village."

I hung up the ear-piece and started for the door. Doc was writin' at his desk and looked up as I said "Good-night," and opened the door.

"Night-call, Colonel? You ought to be a doctor. Who was it?"

That was jest what I didn't want to tell, so I sort o' mumbled that somebody wanted me down to the other end o' the village, and hurried downstairs without stoppin' for any more remarks.

I was let in by Tilly and Anne—Anne excited and giggly, and Tilly grim as old Phil Sheridan before a fight.

"I want you for a witness," said Tilly.

"Witness!" said I, mouth open, "this time o' night! To what?"

"Come along and I'll show you." She picked up a lantern and started on ahead upstairs. By this time I was pretty well mixed up in my mind.

"Hey, there, what kind of an expedition is this? I'm too old to be led into trouble blindfold!"

"I don't want you blind-folded," said Tilly, "fur from it. I want your eyes wide open so that

you can see things jest as they are. Come on up here!"

There was nothin' else to do. I followed, meek as Moses. Tilly led the way to the back-hall, up one flight, to where there was a ladder reachin' up through a trap-door into a garret or sort o' little overhead store-room—it wa'n't much of a garret. The house was an old one and peculiar built—two-thirds or more o' the roof was in front, leavin' a very long stretch that way and a short steep pitch at the back. The front upstairs rooms was lighted by deep-set dormers and the garret was jest a little place under the ridge-pole. It had two little windows, narrow and curved, that looked like eyebrows over the dormers. The shingles were old and mossy, so that the front of the house looked like a broad-faced whiskery old man without much of any nose.

When we come to the foot o' that ladder, goin' up overhead, Tilly handed me the lantern.

"You go up ahead and Anne and I'll come after you."

I was stumped, and thought of burglaries and bodies hangin' from the rafters. I looked at Tilly.

"Is the thing you want me to see up there?"

"What I want you to see can be seen up there—so climb away." I clumb.

When we was all up there—in the stuffy little place, as long as the house was wide, but narrow, low, dusty and all cluttered with trunks, and broken furniture and such-like garret belongin's—Tilly went over to one o' the little windows and opened it by liftin' the three-pane sash on its hinges.

She took a kind o' double-barreled spy-glass from an old chair near by and stuck it out o' the window. I ought to 'a said that by the time I got dressed and over to the phone and down to the Hunt place, it was pretty close to midnight. After lookin' a minute, she took in the glass and handed it to me.

"Look through these directly at the light you see over there," pointin' to a light which could be seen through the trees. "I'll fix the glass about right for your eyes—turn the screw back and forth if you can't see good."

I took aim and after a minute picked up the light, and then a turn o' the screw seemed to hist the whole picture 'most within arm's length. When once I saw it I give a gasp and 'most dropped the spy-glass. I was lookin' into the inside of a lighted room—there was a kind o' blind up half the length o' the window, but I was so much higher that I could see the whole room and everythin' in it. I knowed the room, o'

course, in a minute. It was old Doctor Long's upstairs office and library that Ase 'd fitted up for a billiard and card-room. Around the card-table, on which was piled chips and a good deal o' money, was nine or ten men playin', smokin', and I judged from bottles and glasses on a side-table, drinkin' some between times. It was a tough-lookin' place. I onct went to a show over to Brenton called "Ten Nights 'n a Bar-room." This looked like one act o' that show—only them nights was all spent in the city—that's the real place for wickedness, you know. Nobody 'd think o' lookin' for such a place in *our* quiet town.

I couldn't help lookin' for a minute—it sort o' surprised me and took me off my feet. I knowed right off that this was another session o' Joe's Poker-Club—they wa'n't all the same men but enough was so that I knowed what I was seein'.

A minute more 'n I felt like a miserable sneak, and I turned on Tilly madder 'n I'd ever been with a woman in my life.

"What did you bring me here for? I am sorry I ever saw this. Ain't you ashamed o' yourself, Tilly Hunt, to be spyin' on your neighbors like this?"

"Not a bit," said Tilly, cool 's a watermelon drawed up from a well, "I've suspected this for some time but didn't really find it out for sure

until I was up so much nights with grand-mother. I brought our minister up here the other night and you to-night, so I have two good witnesses that everybody'll have to believe."

"Believe!" I snorted. "What in thunder do you want witnesses for? Me, 'specially! Do you think that I'll ever tell anybody that I clumb up into your garret and watched a game o' poker over at Ase Long's through a spy-glass?"

"Indeed I do," said she, "you'll tell the truth if you're called upon for it. I'm using this for my own purpose and I may need somebody to prove that I'm tellin' the truth. You 'nd Mr. Hilton have both seen it and you couldn't deny it. I feel safe. Come, let's go down. It's time for you to go home."

Then, all of a sudden, I pointed my finger at her. "You're the one that's started all this talk about the poker-game, ain't you?"

"Yes, I am," she said, lookin' at me as if she dared me to say it wa'n't all right. "I've told and I'm goin' to keep on tellin'. I've told only a little so far but I'll tell more after a while."

I tried to argue with her. "You aren't ushally such a gossip, Tilly, and (thinkin' o' Joe) you may get others as well 's yourself into trouble."

It wa'n't no use talkin' to her. "I'm *goin'* to do it. There's one hypocrite in that crowd

that's goin' to get exposed. I'm not lyin' about him. I'm tellin' the truth, but the truth 'll drive him out o' town, and I want him to go. He talks pious to the children and then does this. He makes me sick. Besides, that game is doin' a lot o' damage. Look at George Taylor, gamblin' there, when his boys have to go around peddlin' stuff to get shoes and things to wear to school. I'm goin' to talk that game off the earth. You ought to be glad, too."

I didn't hear much she said after this, anyway, for her namin' George Taylor made me think o' the one thing that stuck in my mind from what I see through the glass. George jumped up, slammed his cards down on the table and rushed out o' the room. I'll never forget the look on his face. It was the last time I ever seen him alive.

CHAPTER IX

GEORGE TAYLOR CUTS THE THREAD

THE meanin' of what I see through Tilly's spy-glass become only too clear next day. I'd worried about George considerable after seein' that look on his face and 'd really intended to look him up in the mornin' and see if I couldn't encourage him some way. But I had to go away early.

It was the middle o' the afternoon before I got back and then it was everlastin' too late to do anythin'. I'd been to South-port to take Mr. Vickers and to do some work on the church there, and was joggin' along home behind Hepzibah, both of us more 'n half asleep, when Ed Williams stopped me in front o' his store and managed to stutter out that George had committed suicide by shootin' himself in the head. I was so sort o' knocked out that I said 'fore I thought: "Queer place for George to shoot if he wanted to hit a vital spot."

I wouldn't o' said this for the world, though

there was some excuse for it. George wa'n't exactly a college for wisdom. His head was shaped about like a cigar-box, he had an eye like a fish and he talked in a dull, hoarse voice, 'way down in his throat. He'd tried every kind o' business, from farmin' to sellin' cream-separators and had never succeeded in anythin' except drinkin' whiskey, in which occupation he was an expert, probably because he'd stuck at it more steady than anythin' else. Lately it had taken up most of his time, that 'nd gamblin' with Ase Long's gang. This last pufformance o' his with the pistol really seemed to crown up the rest o' his doin's with a final piece o' foolishness. But nobody could be very harsh with George. He'd had hard luck all his life. His father, old Reed Taylor—everybody called him "Dad"—was a hard-cider soak. Filled his cellar with it in the Fall and drunk it up mostly before Spring come in. George was practically weaned on the cussed stuff—that makes the ugliest and wickedest drunk in the world. He told me himself, that once when he was a little boy he stole into the cellar and got tight drunk on cider. He said that when he woke up with his head crackin' open and his throat like a lime-kiln, the old man laughed fit to bust and said 'twould make a man of him.

George was jest what you'd expect—a fool and

kind o' all-round victim of himself and everybody else. Everybody liked him and felt sorry for him except some that he'd beat out o' too much money. He wa'n't really dishonest, that is, he didn't intend to be, but he was always behind and lately there had been some pretty ugly stories about his dealin's.

Besides this, things were pretty bad at home. He was married to Clara Curtis, the widow's other daughter, and she led him a merry life. She did *so*. Nothin' made me more contented with bein' an old batch than contemplatin' the matrimonial careers o' George and some others around town. O' course, Clara wa'n't any too happy herself, but she never helped George none, and that 'nd his money troubles made a bad mess all around. Come to find out, George's smash-up was due partly to himself and partly to Clara's cut-ups. He'd been playin' poker and had lost some money belongin' to the Company that he was workin' for—that would have to be answered for, and Clara had been carryin' on somethin' scand'lous with the "jag-man," as we called him —the fellow that had rented the old sanitarium for a "Keeley cure" or somethin' on that order.

Clara was that way. I never did think, and I don't say now, that she was really what you'd call a bad woman, but she was an awful high-life

critter, proud 's Lucifer, flighty, reckless, fond o' pleasure and fair crazy for excitement. It was talked of that she took some sort of a drug and I rather guess that was true. She had several shady places in her record, though nothin' so bad as this, due mostly, I thought, to this excitement craze.

The Keeley-man, whose name was Doctor Barnes (everybody called him Barnes, J.D.—"Jag-doctor"), was a new-comer to town. Nobody but Doc Mason, who run the sanitarium before, had ever seen or heard a thing of him when he turned up, rented the old barracks and started an "Institution for curing the drink-habit." Nobody thought much about the fellow until somebody noticed that he had the toughest girls in Middleport and vicinity workin' for him. There wa'n't nothin' definite seen out o' the way, but the place had a kind o' a bad color about it and the decent people in town were tryin' to find out some way o' gettin' the "Ogean" stable, as Mr. Vickers called it, cleaned out, when the whole thing blew up with a bang and considerable smell and saved 'em the trouble.

Nobody knows exactly what happened, nor ever will know, likely, but anyhow late one night Joe Onderdonk's sister, Ellen, a wild piece that gave Joe a lot o' trouble, fust and last, run out

o' the place, where she'd been workin' for a week or two, yellin' like mad and wakin' up everybody within a range of half a mile. She accused Barnes and next day he was arrested for attempted criminal assault, jailed, and the trial set. Gage Wycoff was Ellen's lawyer.

Now, in the excitement that followed this ruction, it come to the surface that Clara T. was somehow mixed up with this fellow, Barnes. How much we don't know, but it was pretty bad. She seemed to lose what little head she ushally had and come out in public fightin' for Barnes. Fust off, she went for Ellen, hammer and tongs, and what she said about the poor, foolish girl couldn't be put in print, not my print, anyway. Clara went down to the lock-up and asked right out to see the prisoner; went around to drum up a defense for him and even wrote to the young minister and asked him to work for Barnes' acquittal. She put it up to him that the liquor element was fightin' Barnes and had made a frame-up against him. I know this becus the minister showed me the letter, and asked my advice about it. I told him to sit tight and say nothin'—which advice, seein' it agreed with his own ideas, he proceeded to follow, with good results.

George took Clara's foolishness to heart, and

that, on top o' his own troubles—the Company was after him for what he'd lost and he was lookin' State's prison in the face, and he hadn't a livin' chance o' makin' the loss good—was too much for him and he went out to the barn and shot himself in the left temple.

Before doin' this, though, he did about the best thing he ever done in his life, and it showed me that there was some man in him, in spite of all his foolish ways. He wrote a letter that they found clenched in his dead fist, in which he said that he was goin' because he felt that he was worth more to his family dead than alive—that he'd always made a failure of livin' and was tired of it. Then—what I'm comin' to particularly, he told what a good wife Clara 'd always been, and that it wa'n't her fault that he'd failed.

Of course this didn't do Clara no particular good. It was a good many hours too late by the Town clock on the New Methodist Church to whiten up *her* reputation, but it did help George's memory some. People thought of him a good deal more kindly when they knowed about the letter. George's fun'ral was held the next afternoon and was the saddest one I ever went to, some ways, and that's sayin' a lot. The young minister conducted it—without sayin' anythin', like a sermon, that is, only readin' verses and makin' a

prayer. Old Dad Taylor didn't seem to feel it much—chewed tobacco all through the service and turned around to spit it out of the parlor window—the old heathen! But George had three sincere mourners—his mother and his two boys, yes, and I'll have to add, his old Sunday-School teacher, Malindy Smith. On the way over, she told me a lot about what a nice little boy George was. Ain't it funny how many nice little boys turn into men that are fools or worse? I s'pose fools have to be made out o' nice little boys, or not at all, but it seems a pity.

Clara took on like a house afire, buried herself under a mountain o' black mournin' and groaned all through the service as if George had been the best husband and she the best wife in the County, and both of 'em as happy as two doves in a box. If anythin' was needed to make anybody sick, it was this play-actin' the sorrowful widow by Clara T.

The effects of George T's "rash act," as Van Hunt called it in his paper that week, didn't die out by no means when his coffin was lowered into the grave. For one thing, it stirred up a storm about the poker-game ev'rybody knowed was goin' on in the village.

There was quite a few men at that funeral who'd lost at that game more 'n they could afford

to, and there was wives settin' right by 'em who knowed it, too. None of 'em was quite ready yet to speak out and say: "My husband was in it"—and it went off that time in talk. But there was a kind of general feelin', not belongin' altogether to outsiders, that sometime there'd be a flare-up and some reputations would get scorched bad, if nothin' worse happened. The feelin' among the church people was pretty strong. The young minister—Mr. Hilton, I mean—felt mighty bad about it, natchral enough, b'cause all the families was in his congregation—the Widow Curtis bein' one of his leadin' members. He was personally hit hard by George's disgrace b'cause he'd recommended him to the firm that the money was taken from—"bendin'" his conscience some in doin' so—was what he said to me about it, but he "did want to give the poor fellow a chance." "I guess that firm won't pay much attention to my recommends after this," said he, none too cheerful. He was pretty careful of his reputation—the Elder was.

The scandal connected with the Keeley-cure muddled up Joe's affairs pretty bad. Ellen's name was, of course, bandied around a good deal and everybody suspicioned a good deal more and worse than what they knowed.

The case against Barnes, in spite of the fact

that he was evidently none too good, looked like a scheme, especially as Gage Wycoff was in it. Joe was 'most worried to death and tried his best to get Ellen to pull out of it altogether, but she was stubborn and wouldn't do a thing. Gage had filled her full o' the idea that she'd get a lot o' money out o' the case. Joe always stood by his family through thick and thin—mostly thin, so far as gratitude and thanks went, but he didn't have much influence over 'em; instead, all of 'em had a suspicion that didn't have a word o' truth in it, that Joe was big-feelin' and thought hisself above 'em, and so they all sort o' liked to do things they knowed would plague him—Ellen, specially.

Tiny Gilbert took it up, of course. It was jest peanuts to her, and she cracked 'em so that you could hear it all over the village. She raved against Ellen worse 'n Clara T. done and she made Mabel's life miserable by discoursin' at length on the cussedness of the Onderdonks in general and Ellen in particular. And she made a lot out o' Joe's standin' by Ellen and mixin' in the mess.

I s'pose Tiny was inside her rights talkin' in her own house and to her own family about an affair that was bad enough in all conscience, but she didn't stop there, not she! Everybody was talkin' about it, of course, but if they hadn't been

you wouldn't have noticed any great lack if you'd happened to be where Tiny was. She talked everywhere and all the time, in the stores, on the street, in people's houses, not mincin' her words, neither.

She didn't defend Barnes none—she only run down Ellen. She didn't keep on the safe side of not mentionin' names or makin' charges. She come out flat-footed—I heard her myself, more 'n once—that it was a made-up case not fur from blackmail. Her argument was: "Barnes is probably plenty bad but no worse then the crowd he'd hired in with him."

One day, on the steps in front of the Post Office, she come face to face with Gage Wycoff. Gage stopped her as she tried to pass him, head up and tongue out, so to speak. He had his hat in his hand and was very polite, but she didn't get by, one step. There was a crowd of people around and most of 'em heard what he said, as I s'pose he intended they should, anyhow, he didn't lower his voice a mite.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Gilbert," said he, "I should like a word with you. I understand, from what I hear, that you know a good deal about the Onderdonk-Barnes case. From all accounts, you are a valuable witness and though you seem to be very strong for the defense, I think your testimony

ought to be taken. I shall have you subpœnaed for the prosecution and take my chances on your testimony being unfavorable to my client. Of course, being under oath, you will be careful to say nothing that you cannot prove. If you are talking without the knowledge of facts, you are assuming a very serious responsibility. I shall take pains to guard my reputation and that of my client. Good-morning!"

I happened to be standin' by when this happened and I was sorry for Tiny, mad as I was at her for the way she treated Joe. She didn't need to have any one tell her that she was in a bad fix. Gage Wycoff was the most dangerous man to get on the wrong side of in that part of the big state. The lawyers of Middleport, as a ushal thing, don't amount to much. They ain't exactly what Mr. Vickers calls "legal heavy-weights." They're just boys beginnin', or old hacks who never did amount to much, just makin' a livin' drawin' up papers and carryin' on J. P. suits. Gage was different. Why he lived in such a place as Middleport I don't know, but I've heard say by men that ought to know that there wa'n't a smarter lawyer in Lake County. He practiced all over the County and even outside. He was smart as a steel-trap and without no more heart or conscience. Mr. Vickers told me that Gage Wycoff

was the wickedest man he ever knowed. He was smooth as oil, a good talker, always preachin' about justice and righteousness, but never by any chance doin' anythin' except to make money or gain some advantage for himself. And merciless! As I say, you might 's well plead with a steel-trap not to shut down on you when you spring it, as to ask Gage to let up when he had you gripped. That Jew fellow that tried to get a pound o' flesh off'n *his* debtor was own cousin to Gage.

He'd built up his big law business on *bad cases*. When he shows up in a case you can be pretty sure that there is somethin' off color in it. Ase Long is a politician 'nd no saint, and he said that Gage Wycoff was so crooked that he was in danger o' runnin' into himself goin' the other way. I'm tellin' you this so that you can know that people are afraid o' him and usually give him more 'n half the road, especially in law matters.

Tiny was scared, there was no doubt about that. And she had good reason to be. Gage had made what amounted to a threat to sue her for libel, 'nd to be sued by Gage Wycoff for libel was no joke, in any language. Tiny turned white, hesitated a minute, looked after Gage, who walked away with that high and mighty strut o' his that's as famous as his plug-hat that he wears summer

and winter, and then half run and half flew down the street to Frank's store, lookin' like a scairt quail.

She must 've told Frank that I was standin' by, because, early in the evenin', he sauntered over and set down on the porch. As ushal, he didn't say nothin' for quite a spell, and then he took his cigar out o' his mouth long enough to ask: "What did Gage say to Tiny this morning?"

I told him all that I heard. Frank dropped again into a silence that was nearly as deep as a well, and said scurcely "Yes" or "No," until he got up to go home. I talked along as I knowed he liked to have me, without waitin' on him for answers. Jest before he left he said what he come to say, and 'twas this:

"I hope he's scared Tiny into keepin' her mouth shut. She's been talkin' too much. But he won't do no suin' or subpoenyin'—he knows me too well. I've got him where the hair's short, and he don't want it pulled."

I was surprised and said so. "I didn't know that Gage Wycoff ever cared for God, man or devil! I didn't know the' was any place on his head where the hair is short."

"There is, all the same," said Frank. "I've got him dead to rights, and he knows it. He

won't do anythin' fancy with my family. Good-night!"

He went off without givin' me a hint of what he had on Gage. That was jest like him. He had more influence than any young fellow in Middleport, jest from keepin' his tongue still in a place where most everybody else's hung on a swivel.

CHAPTER X

AUNTIE TALKS AGAIN

I WAS in the grape-arbor, on top of a ladder, when Auntie caught me again. If I could 've escaped, I would 've, but there I was perched ten foot from the ground, treed, with Auntie waitin' for me at the bottom. If the ladder 'd only been a half a mile long instead of ten foot, with a back-stairs fastened onto it, I could 've clumb down the back way and hid. As it was, there I set, with my head among the grape-vines like a ostrich 'nd wishin' I was somewhere else.

I didn't answer none too cordial when Auntie hailed me, but that didn't bother her much of any. She never cared about havin' a willin' listener—a *listener* was all she asked for. Anybody that wa'n't stone deef and couldn't get away would do for her. I ain't so sure about the hearin' part of it, even. Abe Foster said she used to stop and talk to the wooden Injun outside of his cigar-store. The paint was all wore off one ear, he claimed. There's more 'n a little truth in it, foolish as it

sounds. If you was layin' with a broken leg along side the road she'd set down all comfortable and begin to talk without ever thinkin' of callin' any one to help you up.

She begun this particular time about Doc's aches and pains, which was 'most too numerous to mention, and considerable mixed up, too, he having a complication, as they say, though Auntie being a Doctor's wife thought she knowed all about diseases and curin' 'em. I didn't pay much attention first off, because I was sure that she didn't come to talk about Doc's troubles—there was too many other things goin' on. This was jest tunin' up the orchestry, and sure enough pretty soon she started in on the concert. The first sentence woke me up, complete.

"If you've got any influence with that young Onderdonk feller you're so fond of, you'd better use it," said she.

I pulled my head out o' the grape-vines and twisted around so's to look down at her.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he's liftin' his eyes too high and is layin' up trouble for himself."

"What d' you mean by that?" I asked.

"No son of a Dutch canaler 's goin' to marry into the Gilbert family," she said.

I come nearer fallin' off that ladder than I

cared to, for my old bones are gettin' kind o' brittle. I *was* startled. That pryin' old hen evidently knew somethin' I didn't. I never 'd seen Joe with Mabel Gilbert since them Decoration Day exercises I told you about. I worried some then, but I hadn't never seen anythin' since to make me think that they was goin' together. I tried a bluff.

"What makes you think that Joe wants to marry into the Gilbert family? I ain't seen nothin' to make *me* think so."

"I don't think anythin' about it," Auntie answered, "I *know*. So does everybody else but you. You're blind 's a bat when it comes to that boy. I'm tellin' you for your own good and his."

"I don't doubt it a mite," I said. "When anybody starts out to tell you somethin' particular mean and hard to bear it's always, like a dose o' bitters, for your good. Well," I went on, "seein' you know so much, I'll ask you a question. Why shouldn't Joe marry into the Gilbert family if he wants to and Mabel—I s'pose it's Mabel you're talkin' about—wants him to?"

She looked at me over the tops of her glasses, with her mouth drawed down, her yellow eyes blinkin' like a hoot owl's. "What! that riff-raff! Why, Mabel Gilbert's got money and family!"

"What of it?" I said. "It wouldn't be the first

time that riff-raff 's married money and family in this town—besides, Joe ain't riff-raff. There ain't a brighter or straighter boy in this whole township. I tell you, he'll make his mark yet."

"I bet he will," said Auntie, "and it'll be a black one, too. The Onderdonks never make any other kind. I'm afraid there'll be a smudge on you before you're done."

"Don't you worry," I said, "I know him better 'n you do and there ain't nothin' in him to smudge anybody with. He's white clear through."

"No, he ain't neither," said she, as if that was all there was to be said. "He's an Onderdonk—a low-lived lot the whole of 'em. He's young yet and don't show what he is. Young pigs and little niggers are cunnin' enough, but they grow up like the old ones. So 'll this Joe feller o' yours. 'What's bred in the bone 'll come out in the flesh.' "

By this time I was hoppin' mad. She was a woman so I couldn't say what I wanted to, but there was some things I could say 'nd I come down off the ladder to say 'em proper. I set down on the second or third step so I could look at her and let loose. "Look here," said I, "I wish you'd say right out what you come to say. What's Joe been doin' that he hadn't ought to do, and what do you want me to do?"

"Didn't I tell you that he's makin' eyes at Mabel Gilbert and 'll get into trouble? You've took him under your wing and are sort o' fatherin' him. Learn him to keep his place and behave."

"What makes you think that he's makin' eyes at Mabel? Who told you? I ain't see none of it."

She let out a cacklin' laugh. "You'd never see anythin' wrong with that boy if it was as plain as the nose on your face. It's town talk that he's all took up with Mabel. Everybody knows it but you. And there's lots besides Tiny that don't like it."

"Town-talk in this town don't prove nothin' to me—I've lived here too long. I've got to have more proof than that. What 've you seen and who's makin' the fuss about it?"

"I don't need to tell you," said Auntie. "I'm jest warnin' you. If you don't take heed, it ain't my business."

"It ain't your business, anyway, but you've made it yours. Now, seein' you've shoved into my affairs I want to know what's what."

"Well," she said, "you're mighy perky about it. All I'm goin' to tell you is that there's talk about runnin' Joe out o' town if he don't keep his place better."

Now, the cat was out o' the bag. That was

what she'd come to say. I *was* mad now and was ready to talk, but I wanted to find out somethin' first.

"Before you go any further," I said, "I want to ask you a question or two. Besides this matter o' Mabel, that's nobody's business except his own, and so kind o' general and foggy that it don't mean nothin' anyway, has Joe been doin' anythin' he hadn't ought to? Anythin' bad, I mean, or disorderly?"

She wa'n't very fast to answer, and hemmed and hawed considerable, but I hung on and *made* her answer.

"Well," she said at last, "I don't know 's he has—*yet!*"

"Been tendin' to his own business pretty straight, ain't he? What's the common talk about that?"

It was like pullin' teeth but she had to come to.

"I don't know but what he's done pretty well, so far."

"Come now," I went on, "honest, is there a harder workin', cleaner-livin' young fellow in town than Joe? Tell the truth and shame the devil."

She hated to say it but she jest had to. "He seems to be pretty busy. He's 'most always with that young Doctor."

I had her now where I wanted her. "Jest so," I said. "And is it *because* he works hard and lives straight that some o' your friends are goin' to run him out o' town?"

"Oh, no," she said, "but because he don't know his place and tries to mix in with his betters. He's too uppish for the kind he's come from. He ain't good, anyhow, under the skin—he can't be. No one o' his tribe ever was. You can't trust 'em."

"So," I said, "you sweet, charitable people are goin' to down Joe or let somebody else do it, because of his folks! I've heard that the best way to hang a dog is to give 'im a bad name. You're doin' worse than that. You intend to hang Joe whether or no because his father 's got a bad name. That's what you call charity?"

"Charity!" sniffed Auntie, "what's charity got to do with it? Charity don't order you to call black white, and invite the pig into the parlor."

This last sayin' o' hers about the pig reminded me o' somethin' like it that I'd heard lately—then I remembered Jim Goodenough 'd said to me somethin' the same thing. I smelled a mouse—it looked like Jim had been talkin' to her. But I went on arguin' for a while.

"But," I says, "the Bible says" (I ain't much of a quoter, but I remembered this anyhow),

" 'Charity don't think no evil'—you're thinkin' evil o' Joe without any reason, whatever. You say yourself that he's behaved hisself, works hard, minds his business, and yet he must be bad and ought to be throwed out because his father was bad before him. Be you goin' to build a fence around the wicked and make 'em and their children stay inside? Can't you see you're all wrong about this? Give 'em a fair chance!"

"You're the blind one," said Auntie. "You're so all took up with that boy that you can't see what is and what ain't. He ain't fit to 'sociate with the best folks. He ain't had no bringin' up. Look how them Onderdonk young ones live in the dirt!"

"No," I said, "don't look at them—they ain't in the question. Look at Joe. Except when he's doin' dirty work I ain't never seen him with his hands dirty. When he's through a job he washes right up. Why, that boy akshally takes a bath every mornin'—there ain't ten people in town that do that!"

"The idea!" said Auntie, with another sniff, "he must think he's somebody in particular, takin' a bath every day!"

"As for his bringin' up," I said, "he's one that the Almighty Himself brought up. Mr. Vickers says Joe is a natural-born gentleman. And Mr.

Vickers' usual idea of a gentleman is the members of a few particular families—you're born a gentleman or you ain't one, mostly, and you're a gentleman because your father was. There ain't many gentlemen around here, accordin' to his tell —Joe's different. He's himself and all by himself."

Another sniff. "You're crazy, jest as I tell you, about that boy. You can't make a rose out of a skunk-cabbage. That boy's Herm' Onderdonk's brat. He ain't got no right to be except bein'— you don't think the Lord's bringin' up *that* kind, do you?"

"That ain't Joe's fault," said I, "and I don't believe the Lord 'll lay it up against him."

"Mebby not," said she, "but that don't make him fit to go with the best folks."

I was what Mr. Vickers calls "zasperated," but I held in a little longer.

"Well," said I, "you're a church-member— Joe is a member of the church. Don't you believe that *grace* could make him a good man? The preachers say it can make anybody good."

"Well, if you're sure that he's got grace. I never heard of an Onderdonk gettin' soundly converted and stayin' so. Besides, grace hasn't nothin' to do with fittin' anybody for society."

"Oh," said I, "it might make Joe fit to go to

heaven, but not to be Tiny Gilbert's brother-in-law, is that it? Well, mebby you're right, but it looks kind o' conceited to me to think the society o' Middleport better than heaven."

"Not really better," said Auntie, "but different! 'Tain't the same thing."

"You've pretty near converted me all over again. I never felt so anxious to go to heaven in my life."

Auntie eyed me in a way that wa'n't quite friendly. "Seems to me you're pretty fresh with your talk about the Almighty's bringin' up Herm' Onderdonk's young one, and *you* goin' straight to heaven!"

"Perhaps so," I said, "but I'm pretty sure it's all right, 'cause I meant it serious."

I was gettin' tired of the conversation by this time and was ready to cut threads and quit. Besides, I'd held in after Auntie 'd give herself away so, jest about as long as I could.

"Look here, Henrietta," I said, "you've had your say and delivered your warnin'—there are two or three things that I want to say to you 'nd to them that sent you—for I know that you never come of yourself. You're playin' Aaron to somebody that don't dast talk."

"The idea!" she began, mad 's a wet hen, but I choked her off.

"Don't interrupt me. I've got somethin' to say and I'm goin' to say it if I have to dam Niag'ra." (The sound o' that word did me good, anyhow!) "I don't give a continental for your society. The grandfathers, if not the fathers, o' most o' these people that hold their heads so high would duck and drop their groceries if you said 'low bridge' to 'em sudden-like. *I* think that a man's place is what he makes for himself. If Joe is the right kind of a man he's fit to marry Mabel Gilbert, or any other girl in this town or any other."

Here Auntie broke in in spite of me. "Tiny says that she'll send Mabel away if she keeps on goin' with Joe—and that she'll have Joe arrested if he don't keep away from Mabel."

"Tiny talks and acts like a fool," I said. "She don't show as much brains as the Lord ushally gives good gray geese. There's only one thing I'm afraid of 's far 's he's concerned. I don't want Joe to go much with Mabel or any other girl. He's too young and got too much of a load to carry to have a woman, if she *is* young and pretty, tied onto his neck yet awhile. But Tiny and the rest of you sillies are tryin' to make a boy and girl think serious. *I'm* afraid you'll do it! Did you ever see a picture in Pilgrim's Progress of a man tryin' to put out a fire and another around behind the wall pourin' oil on it? That's what

you folks are doin'. If Tiny keeps on she'll get Joe and Mabel married in spite of all I can do to stop it. *You* better take warnin'! That's enough about that. There's another thing. You tell them that sent you that I'm warned now and I'll be on guard from now on. Nobody ain't goin' to lynch or white-cap Joe without gettin' me first and nobody ain't goin' to get me without gettin' hurt. Vi'lence is a game all hands can play at. I've had my share and am gettin' kind o' old but I don't believe I've forgot how. That old Cavalry sabre o' mine has got a pretty good edge yet. I don't let it get rusty!"

Auntie looked scared. "How you talk! I didn't know you was such a blood-thirsty critter."

"Ordinarily I ain't," said I, "but there's some *blue blood* in this town that would be a lot better for a little spillin'. If necessary, I can do it."

Then I thought o' somethin' that might change her way o' thinkin'. "The new minister is mighty interested in Joe. He's teachin' him Latin."

"Pooh," said she, "*he* won't stay here long."

That surprised me again. I hadn't heard nothin' about it. "What d'you mean? Has he got a call to some other place?"

"No," she said, "not 's I know of, but he better have. He won't stay here long."

"Why not?" I asked; "he's only jest come. What's the trouble?"

"Well," she answered, "they say——"

"Who's *they?*" I interrupted.

"Dan Elton, for one. He says that the minister gives good sermons but somehow he don't seem to get hold o' the people. It's like I told you before. He studies too much. He don't call enough. He don't visit men in the stores enough. He's too much interested in his own family."

"That's bad," I said, "he really ought to be kicked out. He's a preacher and spends too much time studyin' what he's goin' to preach! He's a married man and thinks too much of his family! You'll be tellin' me next that he's too religious!"

"He goes out every day pushin' a baby-carriage!"

"Is that against Church-law?" I asked.

"No, but some think it ain't very dignified. He takes his wife with him when he goes callin'. And then he don't pay enough attention to the ones that pay most to the church. He treats Ed Ellis jest like he treats Malindy Smith, who don't give a quarter as much as Mr. Ellis."

"Well," said I, "he's got *some* backin' in his book o' orders even for that, I'm thinkin'."

"Then he wanted a better house to live in than the Church first give him, and," she let out that

cackle again, "he's had to pay the difference in rent himself. Jotham Arnold said that the Church agreed to give him a house but didn't say what kind of a house. He's too proud, and lives too well, anyway, to stay here long."

"Mebby so," said I, "but the real cause of all this talk is down deeper. It's a bigger fight than you've any idea of and I'm bettin' on the parson."

Then I turned on her. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll bet you anythin' you like that I'll live to hear you say you're proud o' Joe Onderdonk and that the parson can stay here as long as he likes."

But Auntie used to be a Methodist and wouldn't bet.

CHAPTER XI

AMY GOUCHER HELPS THINGS ALONG

I'VE heard Mr. Vickers say, more 'n once, that Providence could use a villain, but not a fool. I most generally believe what he says—when I understand it, which ain't always, by no means—but I've been gettin' doubtful about this particular sayin', especially since Amy Goucher's break at the Old Maids' Convention, and what come of it.

Whether what she done was Providence or not, I leave to you—I ain't no authority on the subject, but she started somethin' that started somethin' else, that started several other things, that finally brought up in somethin' that was Providence to *my* way o' thinkin', because it was what I wanted. If that ain't Providence, what is?

There wa'n't no doubt whatever about Amy's foolishness. I wouldn't want to say that she was born as big a fool as she growed into—but I can say this—that Nature give her good stuff to begin with and she made the best of it. It wa'n't that

she didn't have smartness enough in books and cookin' and the like—but jest that she hadn't no every-day common sense. She was always up to fool tricks—sayin' and doin' wild things, not so bad as Crazy Anne Hepworth, but along the same line. Here's what she done, anyway. The women of The North End Church held an Old Maids' Convention. Of course, they wa'n't old maids at all, but married women, the whole kit and bilin' of 'em, in good and regular standin'—both in matrimony and in the Church. It was gave for the benefit of the Church, though it did have the south-east corner o' play-actin' awful close. They was all dressed up, had a draw-curtain hung on a string and a stage, lighted by little floor lamps. Dan Elton squimmaged some at it, though his wife was a member of the society that run it. They was dressed like old maids *used* to be in the days when you could tell an old maid from a school-girl or the mother o' twins—in capes, poke-bonnets, flounce skirts and the rest. They was rigged up too, with long curls, hangin' down to their shoulders. They all looked about sixty—even Tiny Gilbert, who wa'n't more'n twenty-eight or thirty.

The play was pretty good. They pretended that the old maids was holdin' a convention to hit on some way to bring the men to time—'spe-

cially the ones that was comin' along in years without steppin' up to the line and gettin' married.

There was a big crowd there—pretty near everybody, includin' what Van Hunt calls the "Élites," was on hand—all except Ed Ellis. He was disgusted with the whole thing, mostly, I thought, because somebody was likely to have some fun at it. When Ed had a sour fit—like he had that week, he'd most pray for a pestilence or a famine so that he'd have company in bein' miserable. I never see such a fellow before or since. He chewed on misery like it was a cud o' the best, and at them times he didn't want no one to be happy.

Besides Ed Ellis there was only a few bachelors that stayed away for fear they might get chaffed. They'd better 've come. The Old Maids didn't forget 'em and they got it worse 'n the rest of us afterwards, b'cause everybody was layin' for 'em. Ed Twining didn't go, neither. Said that if he wanted to go to an Old Maids' Convention he c'd go any Sunday he wanted to to Church. Barrin' these few cranks and such, Middleport was out "in massy," Van said in the next week's *Trumpet*. I went, of course, though I had a hint that the performers would shy a cabbage at me. I can take a joke and I always go where

there's good fun to be had at a reasonable price—and this was only a quarter. I never heard of anybody gettin' more for his money, except one of the Lake-roaders, who bought a wife from a fellow for a quarter. He said that she was the best wife for a quarter he ever seen.

The whole thing was made up of hits at the unmarried men and older boys of courtin' age, in and around Middleport. And the way they did it wa'n't bad, neither.

The Chair*man*, or woman, of the Convention, was Celia Brett, Webb Brett's wife. She was a sight for sore eyes. She weighed so close to two hundred pounds that you wouldn't dare gamble a cent a pound on it either way. She was dressed in a rig that set off her plans and specifications to a "T." When the curtain was pulled back, the whole set of fourteen performers was set like a meetin' in front of a table, and Celia set behind it in a big chair raised a foot above the stage. On her table was a pitcher o' water, an alarm-clock, and a big wooden mallet. The alarm-clock went off when the speakers took too long. Celia herself, all puffed out with extra clothes and a big curly wig, looked like a good sized mountain. She thumped with her mallet and called the meetin' to order. Everybody was 'most dead with laughin' before the women said a word, they did

look so funny. I ain't time to describe 'em—but as antiquities they took the shine off anythin' I ever see except the family pictures Maria Tilden has in her parlor—the round ones, I mean, hung with green ropes 'most up the ceilin'.

The first thing was the roll of the Convention. That was killin', too, because every one answered to the name o' some old maid in town or else some young woman about marryin' age. Mabel was left out o' this list, 'nd I was glad—but I was glad too soon.

Then the roll o' bachelors was called for and the secretary, who was Tiny Gilbert, read 'em off. The audience was full o' laugh by this time, and fairly howled at every name, the loudest laughers usually bein' laughed *at* next time. Then one o' the old maids made a speech tellin' o' the increasin' numbers o' men that dodged the responsibilities of marriage and the correspondin' number of old maids left desolate. She wound up by askin', 'most in tears, if somethin' couldn't be done to bring the bachelors to time.

The Chairman said that the Convention had been called "to devise ways and means to bring this about." Another old maid got up and said: "We'd better go over these names again more carefully, and find out jest what's the trouble in each case."

"Roll, roll, call the roll," they all yelled. The secretary started in again, this time slow and deliberate-like, so that they could talk 'em over. Any one of the women was allowed to say somethin' about each one.

The first one was Al Twinin', Ed's brother. Al was about thirty-five and had kep' company with Ella Rulison for at least fifteen years. One of the old maids got up and said: "He's all right, but slow, oh, so slow!" It was the first hit and a good one, for Al's slowness had been town-talk for years.

It was one of the courtships that made our village famous where people begin to go together in childhood and marry in old age, jest in time to meet the hearse and go comfortably to the graveyard together.

The Chairman put a question: "What does this gentleman do for a living?"

"He drives fast horses."

"If he drives fast horses, what makes him so slow?"

"What shall be done with him?"

Another member rose and said: "I heard him talking the other day about a horse that wasn't turning out fast enough to suit him and he said: 'We'll have to build a fire under him!' "

"Very well," said the Chairman, "I'll appoint

a committee to build a fire under Mr. Twining. Next!"

It was several minutes before the show could go on. Van Hunt put in the *Trumpet* that the entertainment was punctuated with laughter and applause—it was that, full o' holes.

The next victim was old Major Doolittle, the village tin-soldier. He was a respectable enough old fellow but money-grabbin' and tight as the bark on a tree. He was pretty crusty and jokin' him in public had a spice o' danger in it so that we 'most held our breaths to hear what the women would dare say about him. The Major's name was called.

"What's his business?" asked the Chairman.

"He's a dealer in live-stock," one of the Maids answered, and the answer had plenty o' point, seein' that his main business was shavin' notes and foreclosin' mortgages. He'd got hold of most of the farms between here and North-port and made his brags that he'd own 'em all. He probably would 've if Death hadn't got in a hurry for *his* pay and foreclosed first.

"Is he able to take care of a wife?"

Everybody laughed, o' course.

"Oh, yes," was the answer, "he could afford to be a Mormon—but, Madame President, he's hopeless, for at least four or five years!"

"Why?"

"Because he's jest bought a new single-width buggy, and he'll never marry till that's worn out!"

The old buildin' fairly rocked at that.

The next on the list was Gage Wycoff, the lawyer. He was the only *professional* bachelor in town. Most bachelors is so accidental-like. They don't really intend it. Either they couldn't marry the one they wanted to, or *when* they wanted to, or wouldn't when they could, or couldn't when they would, or somethin' like that. Gage didn't marry and *said* so because he could have a better time with the girls unmarried than married. He'd gone with pretty much all the old maids and most of the married women in town, when they was younger, and now he was runnin' around with the daughters of some he'd beaued around earlier.

We looked for sparks to fly when the women handled Gage, as they had a little mite o' grudge against him. When his name was called, Tiny Gilbert got up, you c'd tell her on account o' her size for all her piled up white hair and colored specs. I was lookin' for fun, for I remembered the time not so long before when Gage sent her scuttlin' for Frank. I knowed she'd like to get back at him.

"What's his business or profession?" asked Celia.

"He practices law to pay expenses," said Tiny, in a funny voice that she'd made up like her face.

"To pay expenses!" said the Chairman, "expenses of what?"

"Keepin' young," said Tiny.

"What a delightful business," said the Chairman. "Does he succeed at it?"

"You can judge for yourself, Madame President, he's danced with two generations and can keep awake yet—if the party isn't too long."

The roar busted out again, for Gage was a great hand to go to sleep in public, and had been knowed to snore at the meetin's of a club he belonged to. He kept on goin' to young folks's parties and looked perfectly ridiculous, bandy-legged old gray-head, dancin' around.

"Well," said the President, "what is there to be done?"

Tiny shook her head. "He's hopeless, I'm afraid, entirely hopeless."

"Hopeless," said the Chairman, severe-like, "no man's hopeless till he's dead. Our motto is: 'While the lamp holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return'—to matrimony and the altar."

"I beg pardon, Madame President," another one of the women said, "the motto you've just

quoted refers to *widowers*. Get them once and they'll return all right. It's getting them the first time that is so hard."

"Very well," said the Chairman, "but we will not use the word hopeless, even in connection with bachelors. Has any lady a suggestion to make on this difficult case?"

Another woman, 'way over on the other side, got up and said: "The trouble is, Mr. Wycoff's actions promise a lot that he never carries out. I move that he be retained to sue himself for breach of promise."

The crowd nearly roared its head off at that—for Gage had the reputation, as I've told you before, of bein' willin' to take cases that no other lawyer would touch with a ten-foot pole—slander, breach o' promise, and all such truck. He was always snoopin' around to find out if somebody hadn't fell on the side-walk, or walked off into a ditch, so 's to make up a damage suit. Everybody was tickled when Gage got it. He was the only one, by the way, that got mad. Old Major Doolittle, instead o' flarin' up, was tickled with the joke on himself. But Gage was sore and even went on to talk about suin' the women for damages. We fairly laughed him off the street when he mentioned it. A dead funny-bone is an awful thing to have.

My turn come next. When they called my name, it seemed as if the whole audience turned around and grinned at me. It was *fun*, I tell you, for everybody but *one*. It made me think of what the son said to his father when the bull-pup grabbed the old man by the nose: "Hold on, Dad, it'll hurt some, but it'll be the makin' o' the pup!"

"Colonel Ellison," said the Chairman, as if she was tryin' to think of somethin' she'd 'most forgot, "seems to me I've heard o' him." She'd knowed me all her days, 'most.

"Yes," said the Secretary, "probably you have —he's a well-known public character."

"What is his occupation?"

"It would be hard to say what he does most of, he attends to so many things. In fact, he's really a university. He can do 'most anything, from making flower-beds and ringing Church-bells, to cooking pan-cakes. He's father and mother—" (everybody laughed at that), "uncle and aunt—"

"But not husband and wife," said the Chairman. "Why doesn't he marry? Since he can do so many things, he'd make a fine husband, and since he's an old soldier, he ought to have courage enough! Why doesn't he do his duty, and make some lone woman happy? Isn't he old enough?"

"Old enough!" said Tiny, with a little sniff,

"He's all o' forty!" Another roar! for I'd been out o' the war thirty years.

"Then why doesn't he do his duty? You say he does everything—why doesn't he do the right thing by us? That's his most important duty!"

There was more of it, but that's enough to give you an idea of what was done. I s'pose you think —I know Mr. Vickers did—that it was kind o' simple village fun. He called it "rural wit." Never mind, *we* had a good time and thought it was all mighty funny—I know my ribs ached for a week!

Everythin' went accordin' to program, except what Amy Goucher done. She was in it, o' course. She was sort of stage-manager, saw to the runnin' o' the curtain. She evidently sort o' had it in for Tiny in the beginnin', for the whole show so far as Tiny was concerned was spoiled—like the funeral of his wife was for the fellow who had to ride with his mother-in-law—by Amy's mischief. Without tellin' *them*, let alone anybody else, she chose Joe and Mabel as her assistants to help with the curtain, and all that—so that Joe and Mabel was together all the evenin', and in public, too. But that wa'n't the worst of it. (By the way, did I tell you that Amy Goucher was Jim Goodenough's married sister? She was, anyhow.)

After they'd roasted the bachelors a plenty and

cooked up various schemes to hunt 'em down—even pretendin' to arrange for three or four old maids to lay for every bachelor and hunt him so that he'd marry one to get rid o' the rest, they read an "honor-roll of new-married, engaged, and active courtin' men" for some years past. That was one o' the best hits o' the whole evenin', for they listed every queer marriage of old bach's, old maids, widows and widowers, and it made a gale o' fun. Lee Rulison and his wife, Annie Day, as was (she'd been a school-ma'am for years)—who was both of 'em over forty-five when they was married and a mighty happy marriage it was—set right alongside o' me when the lists was read. They blushed like a pair o' youngsters, but didn't mind a bit. Right here, at the end o' this list, Amy broke into the game. What the *devil* possessed her I couldn't find out till long after, but it's easy enough to see now!

She walked up on to the platform and spoke to Celia, who was still presidin' over the meetin', that was jest goin' to adjourn.

"Madame President, I wish to propose that this special gold medal" (she held up a big cardboard plate that she'd covered with gilt paper) "be presented to Mr. Joe Onderdonk as the youngest man now keepin' steady company in the village.

He affords an example that some of the older man ought to follow."

Everybody was paralyzed for a minute. You understand, it wa'n't down on the program at all. Amy hatched it up afterwards by herself, and even Celia, who was directin' the whole thing, didn't know what to do. In itself, it wasn't bad, it was jest like everythin' else that evenin'—a little personal and rough-like; our village fun was apt to be, but, *so far as anybody could see*, there wa'n't no malice in it—all but Tiny. She was caught, off-guard, and jumped up as if a bunch o' fire-crackers 'd went off under her chair. She started to say somethin' that didn't get out very easy b'cause she was so mad, when there come a low whistle from somewhere, the curtain was yanked together and the audience went out laughin' and talkin'. We'd had a great evenin', but the end of it troubled me considerable. And Tiny—they say that what she didn't say to Amy didn't need to be said!

CHAPTER XII

TINY EXPLODES

Amy Goucher 'd dropped her match pritty clost to the powder and the blow-up come in due time. Tiny didn't look to be dangerous but, for all that, she'd ought to carry a red flag and be marked "Explosive." The Lord seems to 've made little people that way, particularly little women. They was a show-fellow come here onct that sung a piece that went like this in the chorus, or refrain, Mr. Edwards said it was:

"For the world 'll wag to the end o' time
In the little woman's way."

My idea is that it 'd better. Anyhow, Amy touched off Tiny and the result was right on hand. Amy herself had to be patched up some the night of the Convention, and what I'm startin' to tell happened next day after. I s'pose you've been wonderin' how a growed-up woman, wife 'nd mother 'nd the rest, ever got to be tagged with the ridiculous name "Tiny." 'Twa'n't her right name, o' course, though every one, even her hus-

band, called her that right along. Her name, and I got Mr. Vickers to spell the fool thing out for me, was Antoinette, after some queen or other that lost her head, I've hearn tell. I'd be willin' to bet that she never lost her head as often 's Tiny. Her oldest sister had a sillier name yet—Gwineéver, or somethin' like that, after another woman that wa'n't none too good, accordin' to Mr. Vickers' tell. Their folks, Tiny's and Gwinny's, was kind o' silly, someways. They named one o' the boys Aljérnon—but when he growed up he changed it to Albert, the boys kidded him so that he couldn't stan' it. That long name sounded so perfect foolish in Tiny, like his high plug-hat looked on Kusco Munson with his short body and thin legs,—that ev'rybody jest natchrally changed it. We trimmed it, sort of, to fit the woman. She *was* tiny, but so's a stick o' dynamite compared to a telegraph-pole, but it's not to be fooled with promiscous for all that.

Now, you've got to understand that there's a story o' young love in this, but it's mighty hard for me to write it. That's not only b'cause I'm a hardened old seed of a bachelor cavalry-man, but b'cause I didn't know much about it. How could I? I can tell about what I see, and I can tell some things that I jest hear about like Auntie does, but I didn't *see* Joe and Mabel together, I

didn't *hear* 'em talk, and all I heard from Auntie and the rest only told me that the thing was goin' on, but it didn't give me nothin' to write about, that is, about what Joe said to Mabel, and what she said back. I didn't get six words o' that, all told. So you'll jest have to imagine what was said and done. Them that 've been lovers can do it better 'n I can, for I've never been through it. The rest can wait.

But, I *can tell* what was happenin' around the lovers, and Tiny's actions was a good big part o' this. I met her that mornin', the next one after the Old Maids' Convention, on the way down to the 9:15 train for Brenton, jest on the corner o' School Street. I wa'n't on my way to the train, but was goin' to the depot on an errand for Mr. Vickers. Tiny was comin' along Main Street from the north end o' town, and we turned the corner together.

Tiny hadn't been none too cordial to me lately. I s'pose on account o' Joe. I didn't pay no attention to that—I'd knowed her ever since she was a little girl—and treated her jest the way I always did. She wa'n't insultin', or anythin' like that, jest a leettle north o' due south in her manner. I c'd stand it all right; as to that it sort o' tickled me so I come acrost and walked down with her. I wanted like sin to jolly her on the Convention the

night b'fore, but I didn't dast. It looked to me like the dynamite flag was flyin', so I turned to what I thought was a safe subject.

"Goin' to leave us, Tiny?" said I, as a kind o' bright 'nd 'riginal way of openin' up.

"No," she said, "I'm jest goin' to see the others off."

"The others!" I said, "what others?"

"Young People's Societies goin' to Brenton for a county convention. I couldn't go, but I thought I'd go down and give 'em a send-off."

Then I remembered that Joe 'd told me at breakfast that Doc 'd give him the day to go to this convention.

Jest then we come in sight o' the station and I c'd see that the platform was pretty well covered with people—more 'n twice what was there ushally. If we ever have a crowd in town, it's down at the station train-time, or at the Post-Office when the mail 's bein' handed out. Sometimes it looks quite city-fied, up around the Post-Office nights—there's all o' seventy-five people there to onct. The place is so crowded you c'n hardly push through.

Tiny and me come on to the platform together but she went 'round in front and I went 'round the other side where the express office was, after Mr. Vickers's package. I got it and went on 'round

to the north end o' the platform—the freight end—jest as Tiny turned the opposite corner. I caught sight of her out o' the corner o' my eye, but my main attention was aimed at another part o' the scenery altogether.

There was a lot o' young people on the platform, laughin' and cuttin' up, and havin' a good time gen'rally, while they was waitin' for the train. The biggest bunch of 'em was collected around a new buggy that 'd come in a few days before by freight and had jest been uncrated and put together—wheels, thills, and all—on the platform. It belonged to Chet Baldwin and was jest waitin' for his man, Medad Hovey, to sober up enough to come after it. Medad 'd been sort of under the weather for most two weeks. As I say, a crowd o' youngsters laughin' and makin' all kinds o' racket was crowded around the buggy. Mabel Gilbert was in it and Joe was b'tween the thills, facin' her and pushin' and pullin' the buggy 'round. He'd jest pushed her to the top o' the run-way to the ground, where they take the rollin' stuff off, and held her balanced on the edge. A little pull would bring her on to th' platform, and a mighty little push would start her down the slide. Joe was threatenin' to let her go, 'nd Mabel was darin' him to, 'nd the whole crowd o' youngsters was mixin' in and shoutin' back and

forth. It was jest good, innocent, boy and girl fun,—which I haven't been too blind to see sometimes covers the beginnin's o' serious things. Lovin' and laughin' are mighty close together, *I've* noticed. Here it seemed nothin' but good fun—the old folks was lookin' on and while there was some sour looks for Joe, he never run out o' them, worse luck, most ev'rybody was smilin' and good-natured. Then, all of a sudden, the whole thing was different. Tiny stepped up. It was plain enough that somethin' had broke loose inside. Amy Goucher's match 'd touched powder, you see. Well, the blast come and it was quite some blast. If it *had* been powder 'stead o' temper, that railroad station would 've been turned into matches and there wouldn't 've been nothin' left of us but sweet memories, and mebby not much of that. That little woman fairly blazed, 'nd she never stopped to think or care where the sparks 'nd splinters flew. She went for Mabel first.

"Mabel Gilbert, you shameless girl, get down from that buggy this minute! Weren't you satisfied with what was said last night when you was coupled up in ev'rybody's mind with *him?*" She pointed at Joe, 's if he'd been a dead horse or some other vile thing, not hardly fit to look at. 'Twas a wonder to see how she forgot herself, and wa'n't even conscious that she was washin' family

clothes in the publicest kind o' place, with a whole crowd, strangers among 'em, lookin' on, and listenin' with all their ears. She was too mad to know hardly what she was doin'.

"Frank and I 've done everything in the world for you, and you shame us by goin' around with this good-for-nothin', low-down, scum o' creation!"

Joe broke in jest then. I'd hardly half an eye for Tiny, or Mabel, neither, I was so busy watchin' Joe. For a minute I was worried for fear, bein' spit on like that, he might say somethin' hot and hasty, 'most anybody would, you'd think, but I needn't 've give myself no worry. He was white as paper, 'nd his lip trembled in a way that stabbed my hard old heart like a knife, but when he spoke, jest after Tiny called him worthless, he took off his hat and spoke as respectful as you would to a queen or the President's mother. Jiminy, but I was proud of him!

"Mrs. Gilbert," he said, "won't you tell me why you call me worthless? Have I done anything that ought to shut me out of good company? If I have, I didn't mean to. I try to be a man."

Anybody not stone-blind could *see* from the way he looked and from what he said, what kind of a boy he was. But Tiny *was* blind. There's nothin' in the world more unreasonable than a

woman when she's mad like that, except perhaps a man in the same shape, or a bull when he sees a red rag. They're all three in the same class. Tiny turned on Joe like the little fury she was. She couldn't say *nothin'* 'gainst Joe direct. He hadn't give anybody the least handle 'gainst him, but she tore his family all to pieces, which wa'n't hard, seein' anybody c'n tear rotten cloth. But I must say, she laid old Herm' and the rest o' the family out better 'n any undertaker could—and when she ended up by sayin': "The mud 's on you and you can't get it off," why, you almost thought it must be true!

If I live to be as old as Methusalum, I'll never forget Joe's face. It looked like a drownin' man's I see onct when I was a kid and he couldn't swim. The young folks, whose laughin' had stopped off short, was white and scared and stood 'most as if they'd been rooted to the platform.

The look on Joe's face most made me crazy and I was jest goin' to yell shame on Tiny when Mabel took a hand in the game.

Mabel was considered the prettiest girl in town. I've told you that already, 'nd I guess probably she was, though I couldn't prove it. I wa'n't interested in the prettiness of girls. I noticed that most o' the pretty ones was more or less fools—ushally more, so I didn't pay much attention.

But I did this time—I did! I couldn't describe her—I ain't got proper words, and besides I don't know *what* to describe. I could get off the ushal rigamarole about eyes and mouth and nose—but what does that all 'mount to? It was the girl that was pretty, not her nose or her mouth. It wa'n't the matter of items, but the whole thing—"toot and scramble," Mr. Vickers says, all lighted up 'nd alive.

And the thing that hit me most, above all that could be said about her red cheeks and shinin' eyes, was her pluck. You may think that I'm a sentimental old fool, but sure 's you're born, she made me think of that young girl, "Early Martyr," the picture was marked, facin' the lions, in Mr. Vickers's study. Young girls that age, the best of 'em, I mean, are about as timid as young deers, and to bring one of 'em out in public that way about a boy is pretty hard.

But Mabel didn't flinch, not a mite. She walked up to Tiny and looked her right in the eye, and spoke out so that everybody that heard Tiny's tirade could hear her.

"Listen to me, Tiny Gilbert! You've done this awful thing right out before all these people, and they can hear what I have to say, too. I don't ushally tell people how I feel, but I'm going to do it now. Joe's my friend and I'm proud of

it. He has had to make his own way and most everything has been against him, but I think all the more of him for that. You've no right to give me orders. I won't choose my friends to suit you and I won't give them up to suit you, either. I shall be Joe's friend just as long as he'll be mine. I think you're a bad, cruel woman to say such things!"

Tiny was jest bustin' out again and I know I'd 've said somethin' I'd been sorry for afterwards, but neither of us had a chance to say nothin', for jest that minute Frank Gilbert sauntered around the corner of the station, whistlin' and chewin' a straw. How long he'd been within hearin' I don't know. I expect, though, that he heard most of what 'd been said.

Frank was never knowed to be upset about nothin', not even Tiny's tantrums. He never paid much attention to her ravin's, but I've hearn tell that when he wanted to, he could stop 'em by jest raisin' his hand. He never wasted words on nobody—so that everybody called him "Silent Frank"—a queer, still sort of a fellow that had a lot of sense and a lot of influence for all that he never said much—*because* of it, perhaps.

This time Frank didn't say nothin' much—and what he did say wa'n't noways important, but he sort o' changed things by jest bein' there and the

general feelin' o' battle, murder and sudden death, as Mr. Vickers's prayer-book says—that Tiny'd put in place of the fun the young folks was havin' —Frank done away with. And, wonder o' wonders, Tiny shut up tight, then and there. And this is all he said (to Tiny): "Your sister has driven over from Brenton and is waitin' for you at the house." To Mabel: "Your train is coming in." To me: "Be home if you can about eight o'clock to-night. I want to see you."

Tiny hurried away without another word and the young folks crowded out onto the front platform for the train. I wanted a word with Joe but there wa'n't time enough, but what I seen (I guess nobody else did) comforted me a lot, though it give me somethin' more to think about. I carried it around with me for many a day.

Joe 'nd Mabel was the last to get on board. Jest before they stepped up I caught a look that passed from her to him. I'd never realized b'fore what I missed by bein' a bachelor, for no girl 'd ever looked at me that way. I didn't know it c'd be did. Her face had a flush o' pink on it, like a sunset 'crost the lake, her eyes was wet with tears that shined but didn't drop, 'nd there was a gentle kind of a look there that was like a mother's, and yet different. She put out her hand to Joe and they went up holdin' hands. I knowed that

Tiny 'd done one thing with her breakout, anyhow. She'd fixed it so that them two young folks could never think or live much apart. And Amy Goucher 'd touched off the whole magazine!

That night, Frank lounged over, with a cigar in his mouth in place of the straw, but otherwise the same as in the mornin'. He set on my porch for a full hour and said mebby ten sentences the whole time. But he got me to talkin' about Joe and I told the whole story up to date—with all I thought and hoped about Joe. I told him particular about his medical studies and for the first time let out my idea that Joe ought to be a doctor, bein' so it come natural to him.

As I say, Frank was as close-mouthed as ever, and let me do most of the talkin', but there was a good deal o' comfort in it because I was reasonable certain that he was listenin' to me, and not thinkin' up the next smart thing *he* was goin' to say.

When he went home, I felt mighty good, for he give me the impression that he somehow wa'n't so unfavorable to Joe. If he wa'n't, Joe's case wa'n't entirely hopeless, for all o' Tiny. I couldn't pick out nothin' that he said to prove it, but I jest felt so, 'nd as I looked up at the moon, that was ridin' high and full above, I somehow felt that things w'd come out all right.

Joe, after comin' back from Brenton on the six train, had gone out with Doc, so I turned in alone, in pretty good spirits.

That night was the last happy time I knowed for more weeks than I care to count now.

CHAPTER XIII

JOE FINDS THE CARDS STACKED

THE bolt dropped onto me out of a blue sky the next day and mighty little comfort did I get out of what Frank Gilbert said or didn't say.

Mr. Vickers brought me the news. I was workin' in the Rectory garden about ten o'clock in the mornin'. I remember jest what I was doin'. I was tyin' straw around some tender roses Mrs. Vickers had, for fear there might be an early frost. I never hear the name o' that kind o' rose without the whole thing comin' back to me.

Mr. Vickers come 'round the corner 'most on a run, the smoke he was puffin' out near hidin' his head. He looked like the forrard end of a locomotive. I knowed there was somethin' the matter —somethin' big, b'cause I'd never see him movin' so fast three times in my life. It took an awful lot to hurry him anyhow.

I went over to the path to meet him. He was as white as his shirt and nothin' but new-fell snow could beat that. At first he couldn't speak. Then,

after what seemed about a year he said, "Brace up, Colonel, I've got to hit you hard." "What's the matter?" said I. "The devil's to pay," said he, more to get time I guess than anything else. "He ushally is," said I, "sooner or later." I tried to play with him a little—but I was scared pretty bad—he didn't play back, not a bit. "I've got to tell you," said he, "so I might as well right out with it. Joe's jest been arrested for grand larceny and they have taken him to the lock-up. There'll be a hearing before the Justice at eleven o'clock. Come over to the Doctor's office. He wants to see you."

There was a bench jest at the edge of a flower-bed near by and I set down on it good 'nd hard. The bench was a strong one or I'd 've cracked it certin. It was a bright, sunshiny day but I'm tellin' the truth when I say that it turned dark 'nd I couldn't see more'n half-way 'crosst the lawn.

Mr. Vickers put his hand on my shoulder and looked awful sorry but didn't say a word. He knowed when to keep his mouth shut, Mr. Vickers did. In a minute or two, I got hold o' myself again. I'm too old and been through too much not to be pretty tough but that was about the worst! I looked up at Mr. Vickers and he looked down at me. "They've got him at last," said I.

"I'm afraid so," said he. I didn't think about it till afterwards but it was kind o' strange that neither of us never thought nothin' but what Joe was innocent and had been done by some o' the crowd. "I'm afraid they've put him in a tight place",—he went on, "it looks so but let's go over and see if there ain't somethin' we can do. We must get a lawyer anyway."

The thought o' doin' somethin' put a little life into me and we went 'crosst the street and up the stairs into Doc's office. There was quite a good deal of excitement up and down the street. Quite a crowd was standin' on the side-walk at the foot o' Doc's stairs and more was comin' every minute.

They made way for us and we went through a kind o' alley way. I didn't look up—but I could kind o' see out o' the corner o' my eye. I'll say this for 'em—they *mostly* looked sorry—whether for me or for Joe I couldn't tell by lookin'. Jest as I got to the top o' the stairs and was turnin' in to Doc's office, I looked back and there was Jim Goodenough lookin' up with that nasty grin on his face that I'd know him by if that was all there was left of him, like a English cat Mr. Vickers told me about. He tried to look away but he wa'n't quick enough to keep me from seein' the grin. I'd half a mind to wipe it off his face with my fist but decided not to. It was no time for small stuff.

Jim paid dear for that grin before he got through.

Doc was alone in his office when we got there, pacin' up and down with the look on his face he always had when a patient was slippin' away from him. That look always made me glad I wa'n't a doctor. He suffers too much when a patient dies and they all die some time.

When we come into the office, I turned to lock the door, thinkin' we didn't want company. "Wait," said Doc, "the young minister 'll be here in a minute. I sent for him right away. We want him here before we decide on anything." Within five minutes the four of us was behind locked doors.

"Now tell us the whole story, Doc," said I, when we'd drawed our chairs up together. "We want every word of it." "Well," said Doc, "I can tell you the story all right, though I can't understand it, the least bit in the world."

"I come down to the office half an hour earlier than ushal this morning but Joe was already through his office-work and was settin' at the table there studyin' that book." He pointed to the book. It was that big leather-covered one that I told you about, "Anatomy and Surgery." "Joe said 'good mornin'' about the same as usual," Doc went on, "though I thought he looked pretty glum but there was reason enough for that. Old

Herm' was drunk last night and tried to camp out on the 'jag-cure' steps. Joe had a thunderin' hard time tryin' to get him home. The old sot said one true thing anyhow; he said he belonged there and was going to stay. As a matter of fact, Herm's been drunk for 'most a week and Joe can't find out where he gets the stuff or the money for it. I could understand, you see, why Joe might be worried. So I didn't say nothin' more to him. It wouldn't do no good anyway. Joe's a good doctor's man. He won't say a thing that he doesn't have to say—not if you go after him with a corkscrew.

"There was very little said on either side for I was puzzlin' out a hard case and Joe was studyin', as usual, miles deep in his work. He's a concentrator—that boy! I dropped and smashed a big bottle the other day within ten feet of him and he never even winked! I guessed he was the same way then.

"After a few minutes, Al Simonds from across the hall come in and asked to borrow my screwdriver. Joe got it from the drawer under the medicine-case, handed it to Al, and went back to his studyin' without sayin' a word or comin" out of his daze. Very shortly Al come back again without the screw-driver but with a little bronze medal, about the size of a half dollar, in his hand.

This time he went up to Joe and held this medal thing out to him and said: 'Joe, is this yours?' Joe, still absorbed in his book and as far as I could tell not much interested in the medal, looked up and said: 'Yes, it is but I haven't seen it for a long time. I thought I'd lost it. Where did you find it?' 'Oh, over in my office,' Al said—as if it didn't amount to much, and went out again.

"If my mind had been half awake to what was goin' on, I proba'ly would 've see' somethin' peculiar in this—'specially Al's keepin' both the screw-driver and medal, but I didn't really pay much attention so that the next proceedin's give me the shock o' my life.

"Fred Hooper, the constable, come to the door of my office and beckoned to me. 'Come over here a minute, Doc, to the Professor's office, you and Joe. I want to talk to you.'

"Joe 'nd I both dropped our work and went 'crosst to Al's office. Al was there, of course, Jim Goodenough (whose hide, by the way, I'd like to tack to the far end of my barn), and Fred himself. As soon as we was inside the office, Fred turned the key in the door and stood with his back to it. He cleared his throat and kind of struck an attitude the way he does when he makes a political speech—Fred's a mighty important fellow, the way he looks at it and always swells up like

a bad case of flatulency whenever he makes an arrest.

" 'Doc,' said he, 'there's been a large sum o' money stole from this office since last night. It was in that roll-top yonder; hid in the back of one of them pigeon-holes. The top was locked, the office door was locked, and so was the window. The Professor had the desk and door keys on his ring where they are now. Everything was locked up tight last night and was the same this mornin' except that the desk was broke open,—it'd been prized up 'til the lock snapped. You see the door was locked—so somebody must 've come in that had a key and knowed his way around pretty well. He went straight to the right place in the desk. I've brought you in here because, to be out and out with it, circumstances point awful strong to Joe. He's the only one, besides Mr. Simonds, that has a key to this office and he was here this mornin' before any one else was 'round. There are some other things about it that look bad for Joe. That desk was prized open with your screw-driver. See?' He showed me that the dents on the under side of the lid and on the flat part of the desk 'xactly fitted my old screw-driver, that had been made out of an old file fust off and 'd been twisted besides so that it made a peculiar

mark that you couldn't mistake. The old screw-driver 'd done the job sure 'nough.

" 'And then,' Fred went on (I always did despise the fellow, he's so blown up with his own importance and I never liked him less than just then, he enjoyed bein' the center o' that ten by eight stage so), 'this medal that Joe jest owned up was his was lyin' on the top of the desk under some papers—he'd evidently rubbed it loose from his fob,—bendin' over.' This was so evidently tryin' the case b'forehand," said Doc, "that I come out o' the stupor I'd dropped into from surprise, 'nd put in then: 'Look here, Fred,' said I, 'you're mighty sure about all this but there is such a thing as not goin' ahead too fast. I want to ask a few questions.'

"I turned to Al. 'How much money was taken?' 'A thousand dollars,' said Al." At that all three of us who was listenin' to Doc pretty near jumped out of our chairs—even Mr. Vickers did it. "In the name of all that's good," said I, "how did Al Simonds come to leave a thousand in that old desk over night?"

"I asked the same question, in almost the same words," said Doc. "What did Al say?" "He said that old Thad Hunt had paid the money on a real estate deal after bankin' hours yesterday. You know Thad always pays and receives cash.

He won't have nothin' to do with banks. Al thought that since he couldn't either pay it over to his client or deposit it, the money would be safer in the desk than anywhere else. He didn't suppose anybody knowed he had the money, much less seen him put it away. He put it in an old bill-fold and tucked it away in the back of a pigeon hole and covered it over with papers."

"Fred broke in here again," said Doc, "and went up to Joe. 'Joe,' he said, 'I hate to arrest you' (that was a lie anyhow for Fred would be tickled to death to arrest his grandmother if he could lead her down Main Street in handcuffs), 'but I'll have to hold you for examination before the justice. You are under arrest!' I protested against this. I had to admit that there was circumstantial evidence, though I hated to like poison,—but there was no reason why Joe shouldn't be paroled in my charge to appear before the justice. Fred wouldn't hear to that so I demanded a warrant—he was nothing but a constable and hadn't seen any crime committed himself—and he brought one right out of his pocket. It seems that Al 'd sworn out a warrant already before Squire Gould. He must have routed the old man out of bed. That made me mad and I turned on Al Simonds and told him so with my eye and tongue. Darn him, he won't forget what I said

in a hurry! I've got my suspicions about that whole business though I can't prove nothin'—yet."

"How about Jim in all this business?" said I. "What did he say or do?" "Nothing so far," said Doc. "He looked a little meaner and more malicious than usual but didn't say much—till we went over to my office." "Your office!" said Mr. Vickers, "did you go back to your office again?" "Yes," said Doc, "just as they started away Fred said to me, 'Oh, I forgot, Doc, I want to make a search in your office—there may be some clews there.' When Fred talks about 'clews' it always makes me sick. He wouldn't know a clew if it bit him in the leg.

" 'All right,' said I, 'go ahead. I've no objections.' We crossed the hall again and Fred began to snoop around. Jim still hung around though I couldn't see that it was any particular business of his. All the time Fred was huntin' around Jim was restless and uneasy, walkin' back and forth and lookin' out of the window. Finally he said to Fred, who was nosing around like a Sherlock Holmes who'd took an overdose of his favorite drug, 'Why don't you look up there?' pointin' to my medicine closet—the top of it, you see, is about six inches under the ceilin'.

"Fred got up on a chair, looked over the mold-

in', then up on top, reached back and pulled out a flabby old bill-fold, worn gray 'nd frayed around the edges. 'Is that it?' he asked Al, holdin' it out. Al gave one look at it,—'Yes, the money was in that.' This discovery closed the vise on me for a while and I had to let 'em go. Fred didn't put handcuffs on Joe though I knowed he wanted to. I heard the bracelets rattle in his pockets and saw him look at Joe's wrists. If he had, I b'lieve I'd have laid for him some dark night. Before they left the office I took one shot at Al. I said, 'Al, do you really think that boy would be fool enough to steal out of your desk a thousand dollars that had been put in the night before, knowin' that it would be discovered the next mornin' and that he would be the first one suspicioned?' I learned a lot from that question 'cause Al didn't answer right up (in fact, it kind o' floored him), and Jim put his oar in. 'Of course, he does,' said Jim. 'There wa'n't nobody else to take it. So far 's the amount 's concerned, he proba'ly didn't know how much he had until afterwards. Besides' (and he laughed in a way that made me want to murder him), 'he's an Onderdonk—they're all thieves and can't help stealin' any more than a cat can keep away from cream. He did it all right. Don't worry!' He laughed again and they all went out."

By the time Doc 'd finished his story it was 'most 'leven o'clock and we left for the Squire's office. I've done a good many hard things, durin' the war and since, but I'll take my oath that I never done nothin' half so hard as to walk down Main Street to Squire Gould's office that sunshiny day when Joe was in the clutches of Fred Hooper, charged with bein' a thief. I pulled my hat down over my eyes and tried not to see nobody —but I've often thought since that I felt like the fellow that lived in a glass house, as if a million eyes was on me.

There ain't a great deal that I need tell about the Justice trial. I forgot, though, to say that before we left Doc's office we'd decided to get Ambrose Johnson of Brenton to be Joe's lawyer— if we could. There was a big "if" there. We wa'n't at all sure that we could get him. He didn't take every case that come along and "thank you," like most lawyers. A criminal case unless he was pretty sure the accused was innocent he wouldn't touch at all. We knew it was no use to wire him or even write him. Somebody 'd have to go and put up an argyment for Joe. We decided to have the Doctor go right over to Brenton that day—but o' course even if Johnson did decide to take the case, it wouldn't help none before the Justice. We'd have to handle that ourselves.

We had to make up our minds in a hurry so on the way over we fixed it that Doc should appear as a friend of the accused and ask to have the case adjourned until we could get counsel.

I believe we could 've carried this through except for what happened at the hearin'. Squire Gould was a very old man, not very strong, mind or body. I believe the office was give him anyhow more for the man than the lawyer. He was mighty timid about relyin' on his own judgment or doin' anythin' out of the ordinary. He ushally followed the regular rules and if the case turned out much of any important, turned it over to the higher court without decidin'. The way things turned out this worked against us. We figured out that if we could get Johnson for the justice trial we might by good luck clear the thing up and get Joe off without a county trial,—so Doc and the rest of us went in with that plan fixed up.

The Squire's office, which wa'n't none too big anyhow, was crowded to the windows and doors, 'nd the crowd overflowed into the yard and out to the street. The office was a little buildin' by itself on the corner of the Squire's lot. There was quite a number of women standin' 'round. I didn't see Mabel but I did ketch a glimpse o' Tiny.

That Mabel was somewhere around or had

somebody there to do for her, I soon found out for 's I was pushin' through the crowd at the door, somebody slipped a little paper into my hand. When I got inside I looked at it. It read: "Tell him not to be afraid. I know he didn't do it. Joshua 1:5, 6." It hadn't a name signed to it and didn't need any. Jest as I finished readin' it I looked up and caught Joe's eye. He was settin' alongside the constable, as quiet as he used to set readin' with his feet up on the rail of my old base-burner. He smiled at me as if to say: "Brace up, Colonel, it's all right." As I looked around I could see that Joe was the calmest person in sight. The old Squire was nervous and fretty as a settin' hen. Mr. Vickers was combin' his beard and pullin' out hairs at every rake. Al Simonds was bitin' his nails. And ev'rybody else was restless and upset. I know *I* was—which wa'n't strange but I could see that Joe wa'n't, which *was* strange.

I leaned over and borrowed the Justice's Bible, when he wa'n't lookin', and handed it to Joe with the note. He read the note, opened the Bible to the right place straight off, which I couldn't 've done, read it and looked at me again, this time with his face all worked up as if he had hard work to keep the tears back. Tenderness done what no harshness could do,—most broke him

down. Then I let down my bucket, full length o' the rope and hauled up a smile for him,—hard work as it was,—jest as the case was called.

The charge was read and Al made his statement, and Jim and Fred supported it. The Doctor got up and asked for an adjournment till we could get counsel—jest as we planned. There wa'n't nobody to object 'nd I thought from the look on the Squire's face that he was goin' to grant it,—when there come a big fuss around the door, a loud, kind o' thick voice shouted somethin' and old Herm' Onderdonk, drunker 'n glory, and wavin' a big wad o' bills in his hand, busted through the crowd and reeled up to the justice's table.

He flung the bills on the table, mighty near fallin' over after 'em, caught himself 'nd stood teeterin' on his unsteady legs. He kind o' peered through his bushy eyebrows, as if he couldn't see very plain, as he probably couldn't, and spoke to the justice: "This'h to get Joe off. Joe give 'm to me—I give 'm to Joe. Joe's good boy —makes lots money."

Before anybody tried to stop him or even thought o' doin', the drunken old loon turned and stumbled through the crowd 'nd out doors. Ev'rybody in that room was froze fast, the way they happened to be when the thing happened,—

"hipnetized," as they say, by that money on the table. The roll 'd opened up when Herm' dropped it, and we c'd see that the bills was big yellow-backs.

There was more money dropped out o' Herm's dirty, shakin' old fist that day than most o' the men around would see in twelve months. We jest set and stared, like a lot o' owls. It got so still that you c'd hear folks breathe—and you held your own breath b'cause it sounded so loud. Right in the middle o' this big silence Jim Goodenough laughed—that mean, sneerin' devil's laugh o' his. It sounded like the breakin' of a big glass window with a rock.

The old Squire come to with a jump and ordered Fred to arrest old Herm', but it was too late; the old sinner 'd went, no one knowed where. But he'd stayed plenty long enough to spill our beans all over the place. The Squire held Joe for county court and fixed bail at a thousand dollars. I hadn't no chance to talk with Joe—jest shook his hand and wished him luck as they took him away.

I had two visitors that night. I set in the house all evenin' wrastlin' with sorrow as I hadn't never done b'fore. Jest after dark there was a knock at my back door and when I opened it I found Mabel Gilbert standin' there. Her pretty face

was white as a tomb-stone by moonlight and she looked like an old woman. She handed me a paper, and said: "This is for Joe," and kind o' faded into the dark so quick that if I hadn't o' had the paper in my hand I'd a thought she was a ghost. I didn't read that note, o' course, 'nd I never knew what was in it—I've often wondered.

Later on Mr. Vickers come in. He give me the biggest shock yet for he told me that Joe wouldn't let him and Doc put up the bail for him. "He's determined to go to jail, rather than be bailed out." "Why?" said I, "is he crazy?" "No," said Mr. Vickers, "I think he's pretty sensible, though the way he plans it makes it pretty hard." "I can't see it," said I. "Why should he rot in that old jail when he might be free and stay here at home?"

"Well," said the Rector, "he says that if he should come out on bail it wouldn't be the same. He'd be under a cloud of suspicion all the time; people would throw it up to him. He expects to be cleared at the trial *if not before*, and he doesn't want to be around with the thing hanging over him. The last thing he said to me was: 'I'll never set my foot in Middleport again until everybody knows I'm innocent. Tell the Colonel not to worry—it will come out all right.' "

"What makes him so sure that he'll be cleared right off like that? They've tied the rope around him pretty tight, what with Herm' and all." The Rector smiled: "You'll be surprised. Joe believes that he'll be cleared because God wouldn't allow it to be otherwise!"

"Well," said I, "maybe so. Joe knows more about that than I do—but all the same I wish I knowed for certin that Ambrose Johnson would take the case."

CHAPTER XIV

A STRANGER COMES TO TOWN

Jest before Joe's trouble come, a strange man turned up in town. If I'd been writin' a real novel, as they call them paper-covered books the boys hide behind their jogafries in school, I'd call him a mysterious stranger.

It wouldn't be necessary, though, in our town b'cause every stranger's mysterious till we know his business, which we make it *our* business to find out as soon as we can. If he's a hardware man or a farm-implements man or a fertilizer man or a book-agent or an egg and poultry-buyer, we understand what he come to town for and that ends it. But a stranger in town who doesn't buy nothin' or sell nothin' or advertise nothin' sets every tongue to waggin' and every ear to quiverin' from the old foundry to the North End Church.

So it did this time. The man called himself William Scott and he stopped to Eb. Ransom's "home-hotel." Mr. Vickers said that Ransom's

place was well named. It was too much like a home to be a hotel and too much like a hotel to be a home so that the guest that went there missed it two ways. Nobody could stand Ransom very long anyway nor his wife neither, no more'n they could stand each other. They loved each other like the parrot 'nd the cat and never tried to hide it neither. I onct heard Eb tell his wife that "Hell couldn't live with her"—meanin', I s'pose, that he'd about give up.

Well, our stranger pretty soon turned up on the streets and in the stores. Wherever there was any men collected together, as there was most always somewhere, Scott come around, hands in his pockets, cigar in his mouth, listenin' to what was bein' said, joinin' in the talk if it come all right but never pushin' in. He didn't look mysterious or like a villain nor nothin' like that. He had a round red face, high square shoulders that he had a way o' hunchin' up so that the p'ints of 'em was most higher'n his head.

Here's the funny thing about him. Sooner or later he had a kind of a business talk with about every man in town but he never got down to brass tacks in buyin' or sellin' nothin', 'nd he never said "boo" about himself. Cusko Munson told me that Scott talked with him over an hour—or Cusko thought he did but when he went over it

afterwards it seemed as though he, Cusko, done most o' the talkin'. When it was all over, the stranger bought a fifteen cent collar—didn't even take two for a quarter! Cusko seemed to feel that the fellow didn't calculate to pay much for conversation at that rate. More'n that, Cusko couldn't remember what it was all about, except that Scott wanted to know if Middleport was a good business place 'nd if people spent their money free-like 'nd paid for what they got. Cusko c'd give him a good deal o' light on that subject.

Scott talked with Gage Wycoff who was s'posed never to say nothin' less'n a dollar a word but loosened up when Scott asked him about real estate, property for sale, values, taxes, who owned their own places, who had mortgages 'nd who held mortgages 'nd all that sort o' talk. He even went with Gage to look at some property but he didn't buy nothin'. He went to Jotham Arnold's bee-place and talked bees half a day 'nd actually bought a square o' honey for twelve cents. He went out to Bert Darrell's farm (Bert had ten children in the house, 'nd twenty thoroughbred Jersies in the barn, all worth lookin' at), but though he give out hints that he was interested in cattle, he didn't buy none o' Bert's young stock that he had for sale.

This sort o' thing Scott did with everybody.

He went to church on Sunday, a different one every time, and durin' the week he'd manage to talk with the leadin' members, elders, deacons 'nd class-leaders, like Dan Elton and Oni Treat about church matters. He got acquainted with everybody in town, ministers, lawyers, doctors, farmers, men, women, children. Everybody liked him except a few that was more'n ordinary nervous about strangers on account o' private reasons, like whiskey boot-leggin', but nobody understood him and the amount o' curiosity shut up in that town like gas in a tank was dangerous. I hardly dast smoke for fear I'd have the same luck that Chet Baldwin did when he smoked a cigar in a little gas-house on his lawn. When the folks got to him, what was left was hung in a crotch of an apple tree back o' the house, full forty feet from where he started. They never did find the stub o' that cigar nor the fingers that held it.

I was puzzled like all the rest though I will say I wa'n't so et up with curiosity as some was. Auntie lost two pounds while Scott was in town —though where she lost it from I couldn't even guess. I found out somethin' about the fellow by accident—it was really by three accidents hand-runnin', though one was an accident jest on my side, for Scott intended it.

He come on me, as he always did, sort o' cas-

yal like, as if he'd thought o' it the last minute or jest happened 'round. It was a rainy day and I was oilin' 'nd blackin' Mr. Vickers's best harness. I was settin' in the barn, far enough back from the door to dodge the drip o' the rain and near enough to get the light.

I heard a crunch on the gravel o' the drive-way and looked up to see Scott, with a rubber hat and coat on, loungin' up the drive-way, smokin' as usual. There was one fire that the rain hadn't put out anyhow. "Hello, Colonel," said he, as if he'd knowed me all my life. "I never could resist the smell o' neat's foot oil and harness-blackin', so I followed it like a dog after a piece o' beefsteak."

"Ust to it?" said I. "Ust to it!" said he. "I should say *so!* My father kept a livery-stable 'nd I was always under foot in the barn. I was never so happy as when it rained and all hands turned to and cleaned up the harness. Do you mind if I watch you awhile, if I don't get too far inside with my cigar?" "Make yourself to home," said I—which he proceeded to do by turnin' over a nail-keg and settin' on it. "Kind of a dull day," said I, by way o' throwin' somethin' bright and new into the talk. "Kind o' messy," said he, "but not so dull. There's always somethin' goin' on. I've jest been listenin' to George

Dixon shavin' a customer." I looked up. "*Listenin'* to him? What do you mean? He didn't do it with a pianner or melodeon, did he?"

"Not exactly," said he, "but I doubt if he could do a very good job without usin' his mouth at the same time with his hands. They say that an Italian can't talk over the phone—he drops the receiver every time tryin' to wave his hands. George's hands and his tongue seem to hang on the same wire and pull together. What I really meant was that I was interested in what he was sayin'."

"You're easily satisfied," said I, "if you can be interested in what George Dixon says. There are a dozen fools around here who can talk as good as he can."

"Maybe," said he. "George ain't a philosopher or nothin' like that, but all the same I was interested in what he had to say."

"What particular line o' foolishness was he dealin' in to-day?" said I. "As you say, he comes some short o' bein' a college professor but I'd like to know if you don't mind tellin' me just what interested you. There's a lot o' folks around here who'd like to know what you're interested in and I ain't denyin' that I'm one of 'em." Scott laughed. "I don't mind tellin' you what George was talkin' about. He was tellin' how the town

had improved since he come here five years ago. 'For instance,' he said, 'five years ago nobody but Doctor Long, Mrs. Doolittle, the Major's sister-in-law, and Mr. Vickers, the rector, had furnaces in their houses. Now there are twenty of 'em. Al Simonds, Asa Long, and a lot of others have 'em. Same way with gas-light, telephones, bathrooms, hot and cold water—and other things. This is gettin' to be quite a town.' "

"Humph," said I, "there's two sides to that. Them luxuries is all right, if you've got the money to pay for 'em and the rest o' your bills too. Some o' them fellows can afford what they've got and some of 'em can't."

"So you think that some of these fellows have been extravagant, do you? George thinks it's all to the good."

"There's some things in the world that George don't know," said I. "Now there's——" I stopped before I mentioned the name. After all, this fellow was a stranger and I'd better keep my tongue back o' my teeth. I ain't often been sorry for what I didn't say. So I went on different. "There's one fellow you mentioned that has all these modern improvements, they call 'em, from cellar to garret and from the front gate to the barn-door. He's built an addition on to his house —put in all these fixin's, and he ain't paid in-

terest on his mortgages this year or hadn't a few days ago. He's just startin' out in business you might say, 'nd doin' pretty well but he's up to his ears in debt 'nd likely to stay so. Why didn't he wait awhile, until he could 've paid up as he went along? It 'd been better for him and for the town. I don't calcalate I'm doin' much for it when I buy a tin bath-tub in Brenton and can't pay my own grocer here."

"I know who you mean," said Scott, 'nd I nearly fell off the box I was sittin' on. I looked at him close. How'd he know I was talkin' about Al Simonds? He seemed to see what was inside my head. "Don't worry but I know what's been doin' here lately, so I could pigeon-hole what you told me in the right place. Al *is* kind of hard-up, but maybe he'll pull through all right. Can't you see why I was interested in what George said? You see," he went on, "talkin' kind of confidential like, if I make investments here I want to know about business conditions and what men I can trust"—I stopped him.

"You ain't makin' no investments here, and you ain't thinkin' o' doin' so. Nobody's goin' to buy no property here that ain't somehow *fastened* here—our folks, I mean—they certainly ain't doin' it for the sake o' makin' money. They ain't takin' no chance, for one thing. Property

here ain't increasin' in value none—it's rather tother way around. We don't gain one a year in population. You ain't a fool, that's certin, and I know you ain't comin' here with money to put in when there's so many good chances that you c'd get, jest as easy as comin' here. This village ain't any nearer to other places than they are to this one." That was an awful long speech but I wa'n't goin' to be bluffed clean out o' my hide, 'nd I can see as far into a grindstone as the hole 'll let me—so I jest *called* him.

He laughed out hearty, "I throw up the sponge, Colonel. You're too keen for me 'nd I ought to 've kept away from you. Don't give me away. So far as I know, you're the only one that's suspicioned me and it wouldn't do my business any good to have anybody think that I'm not what I seem to be. Besides, a bun for your apple, I may be able to help you before I'm through (this was two or three days after Joe was arrested). My business has a sort of a bearin' on yours and I'm most through. Mum's the word. Good-by." He got up 'nd sauntered away, puffin' 'nd hummin' as careless as ever. I couldn't make nothin' out of it nor I didn't take any great stock in his bein' able to help out about Joe—which was a large mistake even for me. I'd proba'ly 've for-

gotten all about it if it hadn't been for what happened afterwards.

Two nights in succession I'd been out late. The fust time I'd been to Southport with Mrs. Vickers and the two girls to take 'em to a concert to Lakeside College. It was one o' them Simpson concerts, all fancy kinds o' fiddles racin' for the fence 'nd no real music at all, so I hung around outside, communed with my pipe 'nd the stars as Mr. Vickers says 'til it was all over. That got me to the barn about 'leven-thirty. After puttin' up Hepzy, I come around the corner o' my house, intendin' to go in by the front door as I'd locked the back door on the inside.

As I come onto the porch I happened to look 'crosst the street 'nd noticed that there was a light in the bank. A light that time o' night in the bank wa'n't no ordinary happenin'. As I've said before, I ain't over curious but this time I was considerable worked up. Wantin' to see, I made up my mind that it was my duty to find out what was the matter. It might be a burglar 'nd my funds 'd be in danger. You can always make a duty out o' what you want to do like Auntie does with a piece o' scandal—she tells it for the good o' the community. So I snuck 'crosst the street, on tip-toe you might say, 'nd took a peek. The shade was more'n half way up—it was fastened at

the bottom 'nd rolled up by a string—'nd I couldn't 've looked over the top without climbin' a tree, but there was a tear in the edge o' the curtain about two foot up 'nd a little three-cornered piece hung down, leavin' an eye-hole jest at the right place for me. I took a squint.

The President's office was at the front o' the bank, opposite the teller's window, 'nd I could see straight into it. There, with the table between 'em, set Earle Baldwin 'nd this William Scott fellow that I'm tellin' you about. They was leanin' 'crosst the table and lookin' at papers that Scott was showin' to Baldwin. He (that is Scott) was pointin' out some hand-writin' on the papers. Everythin' wasn't type-wrote them days. I could see that the safe was open 'nd while I watched, which wa'n't very long, Earle took down a big bank-book, opened it to a certin page 'nd he 'nd Scott bent over it, lookin' at it till their heads most touched. One other thing I saw before I got back 'crosst the street.—A round silver thing was layin' on the table near Scott's elbow, alongside the papers. What that shiny thing was I didn't know then but I saw it plain as day layin' on the table. I was awake quite a spell tryin' to think what it all meant but I dropped off to sleep without bein' no wiser than when I started out.

The next night I was out again—'nd glad of

it for my old ranch was ten times as dreary now without Joe as it had been b'fore he come—'til past midnight at a lodge that I belong to. Most o' the lodge-members live at the other end o' the town or up on the hill—so I was alone when I come to the Rectory corner. I walked catty-cornered 'crosst the lawn toward my front door. That brought me under the window o' Mr. Vickers's study. 'Twas lighted up bright—which wa'n't nothin' unusual. Mr. Vickers was the worst night-hawk in town, barrin' the aforesaid poker-club, and did most o' his studyin' by lamp-light. As I was passin', by accident—b'cause I was thinkin' about Joe and not where I was—I happened to look up. I was so startled by what I seen that I stopped in my tracks so quick that I nearly took a header into the geranium bed, like a bicycle braked too quick.

There was a table in the bay-window o' the study piled up high with books, magazines 'nd papers, but there was valleys between the hills o' piled up stuff and through one o' them I caught sight o' Mr. Vickers, settin' at his desk, pullin' on a new corn-cob, 'nd, opposite to him, readin' from papers 'nd pointin' out things was this man Scott. That Mr. Vickers was interested more'n common was easy to see. He'd forgot to smoke, 'nd set there with his pipe half-way to his mouth.

"That's twice," I thought, 'nd I ain't sure but what I said it out loud. I needn't 've been afraid to yell it. Them two 'd never 've heard me.

So you see though Scott hadn't told me nothin' very definite I wa'n't able to forget about it.

CHAPTER XV

LAWYER JOHNSON CALLS A MEETIN'

LAWYER JOHNSON took Joe's case. We was mighty lucky to get him,—as I said before, he didn't take all and sundry cases. We was more lucky than we had any claim—or that I had anyhow, seein' that I'd made the remarks I did about Providence takin' a hand in it. Now that I've gone over the whole story again I can see that all that we done for Joe, includin' Johnson's law work, was only a part o' it. Mr. Vickers said that a poet he knew about said once: "There's a D'vinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will." If Mr. Vickers 'd only caught me a little younger he might 've made me a po'try reader. He brings it in mighty pat sometimes—and this was one o' the times. We only done a part o' the business.—Providence whittled off the end, like the writer said, 'nd Joe was about right after all. I've had a lot more respect for the Lord's doin's since that time.

All the same, Johnson was a good lawyer and

we was lucky to get him, 's I say. Ambrose wa'n't like any other lawyer in the whole county. He claimed to be a follow-oner of Abe Lincoln and he wouldn't take no case that he thought Lincoln wouldn't take. He was a joke one way. He was a hot prohibitionist but handicapped for that kind o' business by a big red nose. They tell the story that once he was on a train when a more or less pickled citizen was passin' round a generous bottle. He passed it to Ambrose, who not only wouldn't take none but mighty near throwed it out o' the window—tellin' the fellow what he thought about whiskey and whiskey-guzzlers in general 'nd treaters in particular. The fellow took it all right 'nd pocketed his flask—but kind o' got even with Ambrose by sayin': "Well, Uncle, it's all right—but if you don't drink you ought to take your *sign* in"—'nd he pointed to the red light that Ambrose carried around in front when he walked.

Ambrose wa'n't nothin' to laugh at as a lawyer, though,—as the folks he lawed against gen'rally found out. He claimed to follow after Lincoln in another way too. He always tried his cases b'forehand. He used to say: "I don't take every case that's offered to me but when I do take one I calculate to win if there's any win to it. If I don't it's because there's somethin' in the case

deeper than I c'n dig down to. I intend to know as much about my opponent's case as he does so that I can argue his side as well as my own. That was Lincoln's way and it's the only way to practice law." I don't know whether he was so careful in pickin' his cases or whether his way o' handlin' 'em accounts for it, but he sure did have a trick o' winnin'. He took Joe's case jest because we believed in him,—that was the only question he asked Doc when they talked about it. He went to see Joe several times in the Brenton jail 'nd come over to Middleport every once in a while to talk with us 'nd with other men around town. We didn't know what he was doin'—he's about as talkative as the bark on a tree. We was all feelin' like a driver does when the team's actin' up 'nd some one else has the lines.

Finally, about three weeks before county-court opened, Ambrose called a meetin' o' the four o' us that was standin' behind Joe 'nd hirin' him, —Mr. Vickers, Doc, the North End Minister 'nd me. I was considerable surprised when he set the meetin' for eight-thirty at my house. I wondered why he didn't have it at Doc's office or in Mr. Vickers's study—and I told him so. "How'd you happen to choose my place for that meetin'," said I; "ain't much o' a place, you know?" "Never you mind," said he. "That's where I want the

meetin' and I've got a good reason for my choice. You tell the men to come one by one and to drop in, not on the minute, but somewhere between eight and half-past. I don't want no great amount o' curiosity stirred up about this,—so be careful." I promised 'nd started right out to let the others know.

It was half-past eight, jest, when we set down to the "council-talk," as Mr. Vickers called it. We was all around the dinin'-table, like bank directors. The lawyer set at the head o' the table 'nd took charge right from the start. He opened up with a speech on how law-cases had to be worked up—most o' that I couldn't understand—but before long he hit on somethin' that I could sort o' follow. With Mr. Vickers to help me I think I got it down about the way he said it. "A case like this one, gentlemen," he said, "in which charges o' criminality are made,—cases in which the state is the plaintiff is different from civil cases in which property rights are involved, where there may be equity on both sides. In a criminal case, it's either true or false. There is a sayin', you know, that there are always two sides to every question. There can't be two sides *in fact* to an act that was done or not done by a given person. The appearance may be two-sided—the fact can't possibly be. Joe did it or he didn't. He can't

possibly be partly innocent and partly guilty. If he ain't guilty there must be a defect somewhere in the case against him. It's our business to find that defect. If it's on the surface it will be easy to expose the flaw in the state's case. If it lies imbedded below the surface it will be harder work—but easy or hard, the method is the same. I've called you together to-night to canvass the whole case and see if our united brains can penetrate deep enough to detect a flaw in the evidence against our client.

"Let's begin with this. I understand that you gentlemen all believe, in spite of appearances, that young Onderdonk did not steal this money. Am I right in this?" He was—there wa'n't no doubt about that.

"In a minute," said Ambrose, "I'm goin' to ask you why you believe what you evidently do believe so heartily,—but first, I'm goin' over the evidence that led your local justice to hold Joe for county-court." He then went over what we know already from Doc's account 'nd the justice's hearin'—that don't need to be repeated.

"Now," said he, after that, "now we're ready for business. Will each of you, in turn, kindly tell me why you do not believe in the guilt of the accused and imagine that you are on the witness stand and speak right out. Mr. Hilton," turning

to the young minister, "you're at my right, suppose you begin."

This was pretty sudden to me. I hadn't thought o' goin' at it that way 'nd was mighty glad he didn't call on me first. The young minister didn't hesitate a minute. "I don't believe Joe is guilty because of what I know of the boy's character and ambition. He has worked too long and too hard to climb out of the mud he was born into, to slip back at the first chance. And I know how anxious he was for the rest of the family to be respectable and how grieved he was when theydidn't do what he wanted them to do. I'd stake anything in the world on my belief that he simply couldn't do it. It contradicts everything I know about him."

Johnson set there for a while drummin' with his pencil, as if he was thinkin' over what the Elder 'd said. Then he shook his head. "That testimony would undoubtedly count with a jury but it wouldn't have so much weight with the court. Any judge has seen enough impossible things happen to harden him against evidence like that as actual proof of innocence. At most it is character testimony—not strong enough by itself to overcome the circumstantial evidence. The net of evidence is what we've got to break. Mr. Vickers, you're next." The Rector was foolin'

with his pipe—movin' it round in a circle and makin' marks on my good red table cloth with the stem of it. He didn't answer what you'd call sudden. He had a slow, heavy kind o' way o' speakin'—but what he said was ushally listened to because he'd thought it all out beforehand. He generally had a shell in his gun before he fired it.

"I don't know that I can make myself plain—but this is the way the case looks to me. I don't know much about the boy except as I've seen him around the place here with the Colonel. He strikes me as being an uncommonly straightforward, manly boy and a miracle of gentlemanliness considering the kind of family he came from. But I really don't know much about him and could say very little and swear to nothing at all. I'd be no good on the witness-stand. On the other hand, I *do* know Simonds and Goodenough and I wouldn't trust either one of them as far as I could throw Trinity Church by the steeple." He stopped a minute 'nd seemed to drop into thought, puffin' away at his pipe. Then he took it by the bowl, and pointed the stem at the lawyer: "Johnson, as nearly as I can make out, every bit of evidence against young Onderdonk depends on the testimony and veracity of one or the other of those two men I've named. Simonds *says* he lost the money—unverified assertion. Then he or Jim

brought out the screw-driver, the bill-fold and the button or whatever it was. Every particle of evidence and the alleged crime itself could have been framed up. Isn't that so? Well, I wouldn't hang that yellow whiffet o' the Colonel's on the word of those two fellows with their lawyer thrown in."

The lawyer nodded his head: "That's more like legal talk but it doesn't go far enough yet. The evidence is positive and circumstantial and rests on the witnesses. It can't be reached except through them. You'd have to accuse the two men of fabricating testimony and *prove it.* For instance, the bill-fold was discovered by the constable. You'd have to prove that it was placed there—planted, as they say, before you could break down the testimony and that's just what we can't do—yet. Doctor, let's hear from you."

The Doctor had been settin' hunched down in his chair so that his head wa'n't much higher 'n the table. He had his hand over his eyes 'nd looked as if he was asleep—but he wa'n't—not much. He pulled himself up on the level, looked at every man settin' around the table—as if he was kind o' readin' us before he talked to us. "I've already told most of you that I'm just as certain that Joe didn't steal that money as I am that I'm settin' here. I base this partly on the way he

acted in my office, or rather in Simonds's place across the hall the morning he was arrested; partly on the way he has behaved since, but most of all on this: a man or boy's character is all of one piece. He may be inconsistent, all right, but not with his own strongest feelings. Now I *know* Joe. His strongest impulse is his ambition to do good work. He's conscientious about everything but particularly about takin' what he hasn't earned. I could give you a dozen instances of his refusin' tips at the office because he didn't want money he didn't earn. In everything else he's the same way. He's dead in love with a girl here—who likes him mighty well, too—but her people object to him and I happen to know that he's refused to see her on the sly—at night, you know, etc., for fear it would hurt her reputation. A boy like that wouldn't steal. He's got a conscience and the highest sense of honor I ever saw in boy or man."

"We've got back to the point we started from," said Johnson. "What you've said is simply character testimony and can't be used to loosen the net of circumstances woven around Onderdonk. I tell you, again, that net has to be broken or we can't really get anywhere. You can convict a bishop with a spotless reputation on circumstantial evidence if it's strong enough."

"There's another thing I wanted to say," said the Doctor, " 'nd forgot. Circumstantial evidence seems to me a good deal like symptoms. Up to a certain point they're very confusing. The same symptoms may point to any one of a half-dozen causes. It's the same way with circumstances surrounding a case like this. They are capable of several explanations. Only one of them can be correct but all of them may *seem* to be right at the time. If we knew all the facts we'd know that Joe is innocent."

"That's exactly right," said the lawyer. "As I told you in the first place, if Joe is really innocent there must be some explanation of the facts aside from his guilt. Colonel, it's your turn. What have you to say?" There was a good deal o' this talk that I didn't understand very well but every time Lawyer Johnson told one o' the men that he'd failed to get what he wanted, my heart got a little heavier so that by the time he got to me, if I could 've swopped it for coal pound for pound I'd been all right for the winter.

"All that I can do," said I, and I hardly knowed my own voice, it sounded so wilted and discouraged, "is to tell what happened along back before this business come up—about the money, I mean. I don't know *how* them two fellows worked it, but I'm sure they did 'nd I know why they did it."

Then I told 'em what I've already put down here, about Joe 'nd Jim Goodenough, 'nd about Joe's fallin' in with the poker-party, Auntie's talk 'nd all the rest, bringin' out the fact that Simonds was mixed up in it all. I showed 'em how the crowd, 'specially Simonds, was dead afraid that Joe 'd tell what he knew. I told 'em, too, what I see the night I looked through Tilly Hunt's spy-glasses 'nd how the talk that was laid to Joe got started. When I stopped, the lawyer set there, with his eye-glasses pushed up on to his forehead, tappin' the table 'nd lookin' from one to another o' us—mostly 's if he didn't see us though.

"I haven't got what I'm lookin' for yet," said he, sort o' talkin' to himself. "What has been said proves to me that we've got a case—though I didn't need any extra convincin' on that point, —but it doesn't show me how to win it." He shook himself 'nd begun to talk to us. "You see, by using every bit of stuff you've given me I might be able—I think I should—be able to prevent conviction. I could insinuate motive and throw doubt on the evidence—and maybe I could grill one o' those fellows on the witness-stand and get something damagin' out of him but I couldn't hope for much more than a divided jury. That would leave the boy always under a shadow of

suspicion that would hurt his future almost as much as a conviction would. I want a clear-cut acquittal, and—" here he thumped the table with his fist *hard*—"by Thunder, I'm going to get it. But I need more material—more straight stuff. I don't want to hang the whole case on what you men have brought out—that'll do for side issue matter, trimmin', so to speak. But," here he looked at me, 'nd I lookin' I've no doubt like Noah did when the elephant stepped on his foot, goin' into the Ark,—"don't be discouraged and don't think you haven't helped me. You've made one thing clear to my mind that I was in doubt about before. The only way we can break up the case against Onderdonk is to prove that it's a conspiracy—what the city police call a 'frame-up'—it's that or nothin'. Now the key to the whole case is something that none of you have mentioned here to-night—that is, the incident of the elder Onderdonk and the money that he said he got from Joe.—You know, don't you," he asked, "that the bills old Herman dropped on Justice Gould's table were identified by Thaddeus Hunt as being some of those he paid Simonds?" We didn't. "They have and it forms part of the case against young Joe. If we could find out who gave that money to old Herman,

we'd have the case in our own hands." He stopped and raised his hand,—"In other words, gentlemen, we have got to find Herman Onderdonk." With that the meetin' broke up.

CHAPTER XVI

IF THE COURT PLEASE

To find old Herm was easier said than done—for all that Ambrose lifted up his hand and tried to look like Lincoln signin' the proclamation that set all the darkies free 'nd sayin' (Ambrose I mean—not Lincoln) that we'd *got* to find him.

Old Herm seemed to 've vanished into thin air—like old Nick which he was a pretty good imitation of—used to do, only leavin' no smell o' brimstone behind. In Herm's case, though, the smell would likely 've been whiskey, not brimstone—but we couldn't even smell whiskey anywhere, strong enough that is to lead to the old bummer's hidin' place. He seemed to 've crawled in somewheres 'nd pulled the lid over his head.

So we were facin' the trial half ready, as Lawyer Johnson said,—but it couldn't be helped. I was blue, I tell you, durin' the days jest before the trial. Ambrose wa'n't very encouragin' 'nd I felt all the time as if prison gates was open in

front o' *me* 'stead o' Joe. I was some jumpy, I can tell you.

The trial come off the first week in October. More folks from Middleport 'nd vicinity went to court that first day than usually goes to the county fair—and all that could do it by hook 'nd crook stayed through. The court-room was crowded to the doors 'nd windows all the time 'nd there wa'n't hardly enough men left in Middleport to tend store—which wa'n't so important seein' there wa'n't nobody left to buy nothin'. The whole o' Middleport lived in Brenton them days—'nd the ones that had relatives to stay with was lucky. Judge Poor tried the case 'nd the County 'torney was Will Day.

I'll pass over the preliminary part, the choosin' o' the jury 'nd the rest. Both sides used up all their challenges in pickin' 'nd got the twelve men 'nd no more. Neither side seemed to trust nobody that was very close either to Al or to Joe 'nd in the end not a man from our township set on the jury.

Ambrose told me that he was sparrin' for time mostly, in the hope that we would find old Herm. He had a detective from Brenton huntin' for him but there wa'n't no sign o' him yet.

As I said, I'm goin' to skip over 'til about the third day—when things begun to pop fast. I

don't hardly know how to begin or where to leave off—there's so much to tell. If I jest stick to the trial mebby I'll get through some time.

Al was the first witness for the prosecution. He was followed by the constable, Jim Goodenough 'nd old Thad Hunt. Day brought out the facts he wanted,—that a crime had been committed, etc.—'nd the reasons for suspicionin' Joe 'nd what 'd been found out,—'nd then turned Al over to Ambrose for cross-examinin'. We was all half asleep 'til then but we come awake with a perk. We thought it would be interestin' 'nd it was, *certin.*

Johnson was slow in askin' questions, partly, I guess, to keep the witness on the rack 's long as he could, partly to gain time. I could get it most all down. Along toward the end I got so excited that I missed fire some but Mr. Vickers was helpin' me take notes b'cause I wanted a record o' the whole proceedin'—'nd between us we got all that was worth while. From the beginnin' Al looked uncomf'table—but pulled himself together 'nd faced Ambrose, who was a terror to a lyin' or careless witness, nervy enough.

"Your business?"

"Practice of Law, Real Estate, Life and Fire Insurance."

"How long have you been in business in Middleport?"

"About three years,—two years while still a teacher in Middleport High School—nearly one year devoted entirely to the business."

"Are you well acquainted with the defendant?"

"Yes, that is he was in High School my last year as teacher."

"What was your general opinion of his character prior to this incident of the lost money?"

(Objection by prosecutor,—overruled by the Judge.)

"Well, he always seemed to be well-behaved and industrious, but——" Johnson broke in awful snappy and sudden-like:

"Never mind the 'but' just now. I want to ask a question right here. Why do you say '*seemed* to be well-behaved'?" There was quite a wait before Al answered.

"I don't know exactly what I did mean or that I meant anything in particular. I was just thinking out loud, I guess."

"This is a poor place," says Johnson, "to think out loud or guess, either. What were you thinking?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it *does* matter. I want to know what you

meant when you said that Onderdonk seemed to be well-behaved."

Al kind o' hung back and then said—like it come hard—"Well, if you insist, I suppose I really meant that I never felt quite sure of Joe. Outwardly he never did anything that I could put my hand on and say it was wrong but somehow I felt I didn't know him—that he was sly, secretive and tricky. In fact,"—(here he hemmed 'nd hawed a good deal 'n finally busted out with it as if he'd held it in as long as he could), "I never trusted him and always felt that his well-appearin' ways was a cover for things not so good. For example——" Here Ambrose broke in—"Good; I was looking *for examples*—the rest of what you've said is pretty general, not to say vague. Give the jury *instances*—we all need facts."

Al was evidently mad but went on: "He was interested in one of our local young ladies. Her people, natchrally enough, in view of his family, objected to the friendship. I watched the affair and was sure that he took every possible chance to strengthen his hold on the girl,—and yet he did it in such a way, as I say, that you couldn't really see anything to find fault with. I was sure that the thing was going on but I couldn't get hold of anything definite. His whole school-life

seemed to me like this. It appeared all right on the surface but I felt that it was because he was too clever to be caught."

This made me sick. Did you ever in your life hear tell of a slicker piece of character-blackin' than that? He'd managed to plaster suspicion all over Joe, made out o' nothin' at all but one little measly fact twisted all out o' shape. I wondered that Johnson let him go on. Somebody else in the court-room didn't like Al's testimony any more'n I did for jest as Simonds finished 'nd before Ambrose had a chance to say nothin' this Somebody hissed, a gentle little hiss it was, but you c'd hear it all over the court-room. Everybody looked at everybody else, wonderin' who it was; the judge near busted his table with his mallet 'nd threatened to clear the room. Al turned a yellowish-green 'nd looked the way I felt over his testimony but nobody ever found out who it was that hissed. I can tell you, though, one funny thing about it. If my eye followed right to the place where that hiss come from—'nd ushally I can come pretty close to locatin' a sound—it was the bench where Frank 'nd Tiny Gilbert set with Al Simonds's wife—o' course, none o' them done it, but it's queer all the same. Ambrose didn't try to break up Al's testimony but in about three minutes he set off an explosion that pretty near

blowed the court-house off its foundations. He started off innocent enough—like the fuse to a blast that jest sputters 'nd throws off a few sparks 'til it reaches the powder—then! This was his first question:

"Of course, with such an opinion of Onderdonk, you were not surprised when the evidence seemed to point to his guilty knowledge of your loss?" (My, but he was a smooth one, Ambrose was, when it come to words!)

"Not so much as I should have been in the case of some others. What we know about the family isn't very favorable."—

Ambrose paid no attention to that except to say kind o' dry like: "The family isn't on trial. You have no lingering doubt of the defendant's guilt?"

"None!"—There was jest a second's wait between the question 'nd the answer. Then come the blow-up.

Johnson walked over towards the witness-chair where Al set 'nd leaned his hand on the rail o' the box. He waited a minute, not more, I s'pose, though it seemed more like a year 'nd a half with two months o' March throwed in, not sayin' a word 'nd jest lookin' at Al. I don't know how he ever had the nerve to do it—only a strong man could 've. We was all holdin' our breath—Al was as white as the wall 'nd looked like he was

seein' things. When we c'd scarcely stand it another minute, Ambrose spoke out. You wouldn't 've knowed his voice. It was low, most a whisper, but it c'd be heard all over the court-room. A mouse in the wall c'd 've heard it.

"Mr. Simonds," he said, "you're under oath before God and man to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Have you told the *whole* truth concerning this money loss?"

Ambrose told me afterwards that he took an awful risk in askin' such a question. To stick in such an insinuation against a witness without somethin' definite to base it on might, he said, have brought the whole case down around his ears. "My only chance," he went on, "not of putting the question across, there never was a ghost of a chance of that, but of getting the question heard, was that Simonds had a guilty secret and would wince under the question."—*That's jest exactly what happened.* The court was in a squall immediate. Will Day was on his feet demandin' that the question be cut out—even from the stenographer's report. But, fur as I c'd see, nobody but the Judge paid any attention to him though he was tearin' around—even the eyes o' the Jury was lookin' sommers else. We was all lookin' at *Al.* He turned gray in the face 'nd mighty near fainted. You c'd see he was fightin' hard to get

hold of himself. Ambrose watched him like a cat watchin' a mouse 'nd when Will finished his long, hot argument, Ambrose said with a peculiar smile: "The witness need not answer."

The Judge didn't say nothin' but I noticed that he shook his head a little at Ambrose as if to say: "Don't try that again." Johnson bowed 'nd then straight off dropped another bomb. He kept on with that whisperin' voice that would 've drove a ghost out of a graveyard.

"Mr. Simonds, has your business been prosperous of late?"

This question blowed up the court-room again. Day demanded that this question too be cut out. Ambrose stood perfectly still while Will was talkin' 'nd then waited for the Judge's say without puttin' in a word of his own. The Judge thought a minute 'nd then said:

"Mr. Johnson, I can allow this question only on condition that you show at once the bearing of it on your case."

Johnson smiled, not showin' the least sign o' being ruffled: "Very well, Your Honor, I will proceed to do so." He turned to Al.

"Mr. Simonds, you have no collateral evidence to prove the truth of your original statement as to the theft? For example, nobody *saw* you put

the money away, look the desk and the office and discover the loss this morning?"

"No," said Al, lookin' awful sick.

"You were alone both when you put in the money and when you found it gone?"

"Yes."

"Then," said Ambrose, "the very fact that a theft has taken place rests upon your unsupported word?"

"Yes."

"Then," went on Ambrose, "it is conceivable that if you were an unscrupulous person with a motive for injuring my client, you might have fabricated the whole case. There might have been no thousand dollars or you might have hipothicated (I had a dickens of a time with that word. Mr. Vickers says it ain't right yet) the money." Day was up at this but Ambrose waved him aside. "Just a moment, please. Your Honor will observe that I am now making no insinuation against the witness. I am stating a mere possibility which my learned opponent must acknowledge to exist under the peculiar circumstances of this case. If a dishonest and malicious man had been in the complainant's position, he could have manufactured the whole case against my client. The very fact that a crime has been committed rests on his word alone. That and that alone was the

purport of my question. Therefore any item of information we can gain as to his circumstances becomes pertinent. I think the learned District Attorney will see the propriety of allowing his witness to answer my question. If not, I appeal to the Court."

"I still object," said Day.

"Objection overruled," said the Judge.

"Exception," said Day.

When the jawin'-match was over, Ambrose went on. "My question is—has your business been in a favorable condition the past six months?"

"Quite as usual," said Al.

"Collections good?"

For some reason that I couldn't get on to then, Al hesitated quite a while before he said: "Yes."

"Then you haven't experienced serious financial embarrassment during the past few months?"

Another wait and then: "No," sort o' dragged out o' him.

"Mr. Simonds, where do you do your banking?"

"At the National Bank of Middleport."

"Do you regularly conduct your financial affairs through this bank?"

"Yes."

"That is all, Mr. Simonds," said Ambrose. "Mr. District Attorney, the witness is yours. If

the Court please, I should like the privilege of recalling the witness later."

"Granted," said the judge.

The redirect examination, as they call it, didn't amount to a hill o' beans so fur's I could see. Then Ambrose took Jim Goodenough in hand. I rather thought the fur 'd fly this time, 'nd it did, sure enough. If it hadn't been all tore up I c'd 've picked up enough for a coat.

The first question Ambrose asked Jim made us prick up our ears, 'nd the way he asked it, too, sort o' mean 'nd hostile 'nd hectorin' like.

"You are very much interested in this case, I understand; is that true?" asked Ambrose.

Jim went red as fire,—"What d'ye mean, interested?"

Ambrose smiled,—a smile that was more insultin' than words. "Men have been killed for less," Mr. Vickers whispered at my elbow.

Ambrose went on: "That's what I'd like to know myself—just what your being interested in this case means. We'll drop that, though. When and how did you get into this case?"

Here was another queer thing. That question seemed like it was innocent enough but it broke Jim all up. Finally, after a good deal o' backin' 'nd fillin' he said that he happened to be in his

office next to Simonds's when the robbery was discovered.

"What time of the day was that?"

Jim hesitated again 'nd seemed to be tryin' to think. I couldn't understand then why such a simple thing should bother him so—but I did see it later. Finally he said: "About six o'clock in the mornin'."

"Isn't that pretty early for you to be down to business?"

"Yes, but I was goin' away and was down early."

"How did it happen that Mr. Simonds was also down town so early? Does he ordinarily open his office at six o'clock?"

"No, but he was worried about the money and that brought him down early too."

"How long had you been in your office when Simonds told you about his loss?"

"I hadn't been in at all—I was jest putting my key into my door when he called me in and told me about losin' the money."

Quick as a flash Ambrose asked him: "Young Onderdonk, where was he when you and Simonds got together on this loss?"

Jim looked blank 'nd turned white. "Why, I think he was in the Doctor's office—he was a little later anyhow."

"Had he already swept out the offices when you came down?"

"Yes."

"Does he usually finish his morning work before six o'clock?"

"No, I suppose not," said Jim.

"Then he was early as well as you and Simonds?"

"Yes."

"Rather curious coincidence, isn't it, that nearly everybody in that building was down an hour or so earlier than usual?"

Jim didn't say anythin' to that—only looked sullen 'nd ugly. Ambrose didn't force an answer to that question 'nd went on with another. This all may seem pretty small potatoes but there was somethin' about it at the time that made it seem different 'nd big. Somehow I seemed to *know* all o' a sudden that Jim 'd been caught. Jim seemed to know it too for he looked scairt.

"Does young Onderdonk sweep *your* office?"

"No, he doesn't," said Jim with a nasty laugh.

"Why not?"

"Because I wouldn't have him."

"Why wouldn't you have him?"

Here was the chance Jim 'd been waitin' for. Pullin' all the meanness he could squeeze out o'

his overloaded gall, he said: "Because I wouldn't have the scum around."

Ambrose didn't take that up right away as I thought he would. I was kind o' disappointed, too,—for I thought it give him a good chance to get back. Ambrose thought quite a while. Then he begun again.

"Tell me all that happened after Simonds called you into the office."

"We first looked all around for clews. We found the marks on the desk and then the medal —and then we were pretty sure who did it."

"What made you sure?"

"The medal. Simonds knew it was Onderdonk's."

"What happened next?"

"I phoned for the constable."

"What time was that?"

"About seven."

"You hunted around an hour or thereabouts, then, before sending for the constable?"

"Yes."

"What next?"

"We went to the Squire's and swore out a warrant."

"You were pretty sure then that the defendant was guilty?"

Evidently that was what Jim was waitin' for. He was only too anxious to answer.

"Yes, I was sure from the first minute I knew about it."

"Why?"

"Because he come from a low-lived, roost-robbin' family o' thieves."

"Is that why you wouldn't have him sweep out your office?"

"Yes, I didn't want him around and I wouldn't trust him or any of his tribe with a cent-piece in broad daylight even if I could watch 'em."

"Who thought of the screw-driver?"

"I did."

"What made you think of it?"

"The marks on the desk."

"You say that the marks on the desk made you think of the screw-driver?"

"Yes."

"You must have been pretty familiar with the screw-driver to think of it when you saw the marks." That wasn't a question but Jim answered.

"I'd used it several times and remembered it."

Ambrose looked at him with a curious kind o' smile.

"You ought to be a detective—Sherlock Holmes couldn't teach you very much." Jim

looked mad but didn't say nothin'. Ambrose looked down at his notes for awhile 'nd then asked another question.

"If I'm not mistaken you suggested to the constable to look on top of the medicine-case for the missing bill-fold. What made you think o' that place?"

"It looked likely to me and Hooper 'd looked pretty much everywhere else."

"In fact," said Ambrose, "you've taken a more active part in this case than any one else, including the nominal complainant. Have you any personal reason for disliking the defendant?"

Jim didn't answer right away 'nd Will Day jumped in ahead of him with an objection. Ambrose jawed back on this 'nd there was a long wrangle until the question was let in. Jim hung back so long that Ambrose shot at him: "Remember, you're under oath!"

Finally, like pullin' a tight cork out o' a bottle, Jim answered: "No."

Ambrose looked at him a long time, borin' him with his keen old eyes—then he turned to the Judge. "If the Court please, this witness has been lying right along. He hasn't told a straight story about what happened that morning and his account is a tissue of absurdities, as I shall show when the time comes, but what he has just said

is worse than all the rest. I shall call witnesses later to prove that he has committed perjury. The District Attorney may have the witness."

But, before Will c'd get on to his feet, Jim, white 'nd shaky 'nd with all the brag gone out of him, put in: "I—I made a mistake. I want to say 'Yes' instead of 'No.' "

At that the Judge leaned over the table 'nd spoke sharp 'nd stern: "You wish to change your testimony from 'No' to 'Yes'?"

Jim nodded his head—he was too scairt to say anythin' jest then. The Judge went on in that same "God-have-mercy-on-your-soul" tone: "It is allowed but I warn you to be more careful in the future. Go on, Mr. Counsel."

Johnson knowed he had him now 'nd was as gentle as that same cat when the mouse lies under his paw. "Will you kindly tell the Court and the Jury the circumstances which caused this feeling on your part against the defendant?"

Jim fairly shriveled up. "It's, it's a private matter," he stammered.

"No, it isn't," said Johnson; "it is only too public. Tell the Court what happened on Saturday, May 28th, last, in Williams's grocery store in Middleport. If you don't I will get the whole story before the Jury by witnesses who were present on that occasion. Go on."

Jim was caught 'nd showed it. As he looked around as if to find some way out, my eye caught his'n, 'nd I was paid in full with interest up to date for the grin he shot up the stairs at me the day Jim was arrested. Mean as the cuss was I was sorry for him—but not *so* sorry that I didn't enjoy seein' him squimmage.

"Well," says he, "we quarreled. Young Onderdonk insulted me and I tried to punish him but was prevented." (You were *that*, thought I. I can hear you land after bein' *prevented*, yet.)

Johnson kep' at him 'nd dragged it out of him little by little: "How did he insult you? Did *he* start the trouble?"

"Not exactly. I said something to him he didn't like and he turned and fired insults at me."

"What did he say?"

Jim's forehead sweated at that. He tried to brass it out but the brass was wearin' awful thin. "Oh, he accused me of all sorts of things—the general meanin' bein' that I was no good—even worse than the Onderdonks"—with that sneer o' his.

"Of course, Onderdonk didn't by any chance tell the truth?"

"No. It was all a lie. Town gossip."

"Are you prepared to state under oath that there was no truth in what Onderdonk said?"

Here Day interfered 'nd got that question crossed off. But the Jury heard Ambrose 'nd saw Jim, which I guess was what he wanted, anyway he didn't make any fuss.

"Did you drop the matter there?"

"I didn't do nothin' to him then or afterwards."

"But, did you drop the matter finally there?"

Jim was furious. "I told you that I didn't do nothin' about it."

"Did you say any more about it publicly or among your friends in such a way as to make it a public matter that you meditated revenge?"

"I may have said some such foolishness, first off. A man says a good deal when he's mad."

At that Johnson turned on him so fierce that we all jumped, 'nd in a terrible voice that was more like a tiger's than a cat's, he put the claws into Jim's hide 'nd ripped him all to pieces. "Look here, Witness, you've dodged this question long enough. You can't bluff me nor the Court any more. I want a straight answer. Haven't you said in public and repeatedly that you'd get even with Onderdonk if it took a life-time? Didn't you in the presence of witnesses in Williams's store on May 28th and in other places since that date?—I have a list of times and occasions right here with the names of persons who heard you

make those threats,"—and he shook a paper under Jim's nose. "Deny it if you dare!"

Jim didn't dare. There wa'n't anything in him to stand up against that 'nd he wilted like a leaf in a bonfire. Of "Windy Jim," who'd strutted around all his life with the idea that he was Somebody, there was hardly enough left to crawl out o' the stand 'nd get away. He really never held up his head again but there was worse things waitin' for him, for all that,—as you'll know in good time.

CHAPTER XVII

JOE KEEPS STILL

But for one thing, the State's case against Joe would 've gone to pieces with the break-down o' Jim under Johnson's cross-examinin' tactics. When our lawyer handed his victim over to the District Attorney he was, as I say, all in. Will tried to pull him together 'nd pick up some o' the damage but it wa'n't the least use. Jim was smashed for good 'nd all. Simonds, too, was more like twelve basket fulls o' fragments than a whole man. As the case rested 'most entirely on the evidence o' these two, it would, as I say, have broke down entirely but for Herm's doin's at the Justice trial. Mr. Vickers told me that was their trump card 'nd so it turned out. The fact that Herm had old Thad's bills 'nd had said that Joe give 'em to him was hard to get over. It didn't seem to make much difference that old Herm was drunker'n an owl—for there's a sayin' that Mr. Vickers give me in some dead language that the drunker you are the more likely you are

to tell the truth. I've noticed that myself, without no dead language to tell it in. Jest at this point when the testimony about old Herm went to the Jury, Johnson decided all of a sudden to put Joe on the stand to speak for himself. He did this partly b'cause the character o' the Onderdonks 'd been worked for all it was worth 'nd a little more 'nd he wanted the Jury to face up with Joe 'nd see what a fine boy he was. It didn't work out the way he expected,—that is, the testimony didn't but it come out all right in the end after all. I was proud o' Joe as I always was in whatever he said or did. I'd been watchin' him all through the trial 'nd I can't get over the wonder o' it yet. A good deal o' the time he didn't even listen—*he read a book.* Once I saw the Judge look at him pretty sharp—'nd he called Ambrose up to the bench 'nd asked him somethin'. I was mighty curious about that talk 'nd after the Court shut off for the day I asked him about what the Judge said to him. "If you don't mind tellin' me," said I, "I'd like to know what his Honor said to you." "I don't mind telling you the least bit in the world," said he. "He wanted to know if Joe was indifferent about going to prison or whether it was brass that kept him so cool that whenever there was a chance he went on with his reading." "What did you tell him?" I asked.

"I told him that my remarkable client was as far as possible from being indifferent to his position but that he had no fear of not being acquitted. The Judge asked, 'Why?' And I said, 'Because the Lord was going to see him through and bring the case out all right.' " "What did the Judge say to that?" "Just this," said Ambrose, puttin' on his hat 'nd turnin' to go, " 'I wish I had that kind of faith in the Lord. I'd sleep more and do better work.' "

Now, let me tell you that wa'n't put on, like Dan Elton's Sunday coat or 'Oni Treat's Sunday face, half again 's long as his Monday one, but was jest Joe's way o' lookin' at things—'nd a pretty good way, I guess it is.

Well, I started out to tell about Joe's testimony at the trial. Johnson drawed it out by askin' questions that Joe answered mostly without waitin' a watch-tick. They begun with the night before the robbery 'nd the first thing off the reel was that Joe wa'n't *alone* in the office-buildin' at all the night before. As you remember he was over to Brenton at the Convention until the evenin' train 'nd then went on a night trip with Doc 'nd didn't get back until after I was abed 'nd asleep. He went from the barn to the house without goin' to th' office. I near jumped out o' my shoes at that because it showed that Joe

couldn't 've knowed that Al put the money in the pigeon-hole. He wa'n't around there to see anything that went on.

The next thing was that he run slambang into Jim's testimony by sayin' that he didn't finish his work in the offices next mornin' until seven, about half an hour before the Doctor come. He was arrested some time before eight. If this was true, at the time when Jim said he 'nd Al were huntin' for clews Joe was in Al's office sweepin' 'nd *them two plotters must 've been sommers else.*

At this point Ambrose had Joe leave the stand 'nd called Doc to prove that Joe went straight home from the barn and called Al *back* to ask *him* about the time. Al looked sicker'n ever but he was in luck because he didn't remember a thing about the time. He was too excited to notice, he said.

Mr. Vickers was most tickled to death. He was an awful dignified man, Mr. Vickers, 'nd never made much fuss in public but this time he said he wanted to jump up 'nd sing: "God Save the King" or "Britannia Rules the Waves." I asked him what was the matter with "The Star Spangled Banner." He said it was all right but wa'n't his tune. This side-play shows how happy we was! Ambrose called Joe back 'nd asked him a few more questions before handin' him over to the

District Attorney. They was mostly about old Herm. You c'd see that Ambrose hated to ask them questions 'nd Joe, of course, hated to answer 'em but they had to be asked 'nd Joe was sensible enough to see that what had to be had to be, 'nd acted accordin'.

"Mr. Onderdonk, your father has disappeared, hasn't he?"

"Yes," said Joe. "He has been away more than six weeks now."

"You have no idea where he is?"

"None whatever."

"Did your father act at all peculiarly before he disappeared?"

"You mean—the day of my examination before the Justice?"

"No. Not that particularly. Along back, before that."

"Well, he had been drinkin' very hard for a long time."

"Was your father habitually a heavy drinker?"

"Only at times. He sometimes kept away from drink weeks or even months at a time—'specially when we had no license."

"Then this drinking spell was unusually long?"

"I never remember anything like it since I was a small boy. It had lasted a week before I was arrested."

"Where did your father get the liquor from?"

"I don't know. Mother said he had it hidden in the cellar but I couldn't find it."

"How do men who want liquor in your village get it when the village is dry?"

"There are various ways. It is, of course, boot-legged in by somebody."

"Have you any idea who does the boot-legging?"

"Yes. I have some idea."

"Could you mention the names of any men who, according to your idea, are doing this business?"

Day was half way to his feet when Joe answered with a smile, "I could but I don't believe I will."

"Has anything been heard from your father since he suddenly disappeared the day of your arrest?"

"Only this," said Joe, "my mother wrote me that father had been home *twice* at night." (That was a surprise to me 'nd I guess 'twould 've been a surprise to the detective we hired to find old Herm.)

"Did she give you any details about those night visits?"

"She said that he was in liquor both times and that he brought her money. She said, too, that

he was frightened and was hiding out somewheres. He wouldn't tell her where."

"Have you any idea where the money came from that he gave your mother?"

"No. You see, Mr. Johnson,"—Joe seemed to forget that he was on the stand 'nd jest talked to Johnson 's if they was alone,—"father couldn't have been working—he was lying by in the daytime and only came home at night—twice in all those weeks. But he had money and a good deal of it. Mother said she never knew him to have so much."

"Did your father often have much money?"

"Never—so far as I know."

"Did you often give your father money?"

"I never gave it to *him*. Whenever I could I gave it to mother."

"You have no idea where your father got the money from that he gave your mother?"

"How could I? You see, he must 've had a good deal for he left quite a sum in Mr. Gould's office and then had more to give mother."

"Have you any idea where he has been hiding?"

"No. I don't see how he could keep hidden so long. I don't understand how he gets food or anything about it."

"Don't you think that somebody *must* know where he is?"

"He must get food and liquor from somewhere, that's sure," said Joe.

Here Day made a fuss about this testimony bein' irreverent or sassy or somethin' like that but the Judge cut him off quick. *He* was interested, I could see that.

"Mr. Onderdonk" (it sounded funny to hear Joe called that but Ambrose said that his clients always had to be treated respectful), "how do you account for the fact that your father had plenty of money just after the robbery and that some of that money consisted of the identical bills which Mr. Thaddeus Hunt sent over to Mr. Simonds?"

"I can't account for it."

"Do you think your father committed that robbery?"

"I do not."

"Why not?"

"For several reasons—the main one being that he never was around the offices and couldn't have known or had any idea that there was any money there."

"Do you think that some one else took the money and divided the money with your father?"

"I don't see why any one should—but, of course, it's possible."

"You can see no reason why the real thief should turn over part of the money to your father?"

"No, really I can't."

"You know, don't you, that the appearance of your father at the office of the Justice, with what he said and did, is the strongest part of the case against you? I may say," with a sideways look at Day, "that it is the only part of the case that still amounts to anything much!"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Then can you see no reason why the culprit should let your father have some of his booty?"

"You mean, to throw suspicion on me?"

"I mean exactly that. Now, what do you say?"

Joe didn't say anythin' except, "It might be."

"Mr. Onderdonk, you have enemies in Middleport, have you not?"

"Well, I don't know as you would exactly call them enemies. Some people don't like me very well."

"Why not? What is the cause of this enmity?"

Joe looked worried-like as if he didn't like that line o' questionin'. I c'd see that Day didn't like

it neither for he started to get up 'nd then set down again in his chair.

Joe answered kind o' low, "Because of my name, I guess."

"Anything else than that? Anything recent, I mean?" Anybody c'd see now that Ambrose was after somethin' in particular 'nd that Joe wa'n't much minded to give it to him.

"You know," said Joe, "what Mr. Simonds and Mr. Goodenough said. Doesn't that explain it?"

"No, that isn't what I mean. I have reason to believe that there is a definite cause further back and deeper down for the enmity to you. I mean something that has actually happened *lately*. Are you willing to tell what it is?"

Joe wa'n't willin' to answer 'nd Will Day wa'n't willin' to have him—by a good deal, for he made the biggest kind o' a fuss about the question. Ambrose won out, though, 'nd the question was put to Joe again. He hung back a long while 'nd I could see that Ambrose was frettin' under the delay. I looked over the faces in the courtroom 'nd I could see more'n one that looked white 'nd scared. The Middleport people, most o' the men, anyhow, knowed well what Ambrose wanted 'nd a good many didn't want him to get it. On the other side there was some o' us jest as anx-

ious to have the whole thing dragged out into the light.

It was a mighty interestin' sight—the smartest lawyer in Lake County fightin', with his wits, against his own client who was really nothin' but a kid. Why Joe wanted to hold out I couldn't see—but anyhow there didn't seem to be much chance for him in Ambrose's hands. The lawyer 'd crumpled up Al 'nd Jim quick enough.

Well, to the question Joe waited a long time before answerin' 'nd then said: "The question isn't definite enough. I'm not sure that I understand what you mean."

"Let me put it more definitely then," said the lawyer. "Did you not in the early morning of April 14th last see a company of Middleport citizens under rather compromising circumstances?"

"Well," said Joe, "I did see some men who'd been out pretty late."

"What had they been doing?"

"I have no direct knowledge of that," said Joe.

"Couldn't you judge from their appearance and behavior what they had been doing?"

"Partly. Yes, sir," said Joe.

"Had they been drinking?"

"Some of them evidently had," said Joe.

"And the rest?"

"They were helping the others," said Joe. There was a laugh at this.

"Did you recognize the men in this group?"

"Some of them."

"How many strangers were there among them?"

"One," said Joe—'nd everybody laughed—that is, everybody but them white-faced ones I spoke of before.

"The rest were Middleport men?"

"Not all."

"How many outsiders did you know?"

"One."

"Where was he from?"

"Brenton."

"Was he well known to you?"

"Yes, sir," said Joe.

"Frequently in Middleport?"

"Yes."

"In what capacity: official or private?"

"Sometimes one, sometimes the other."

"He was an official, then?"

"Yes." Joe hated to answer—you c'd see that.

"Were the Middleport men prominent citizens?"

Here Day busted in again 'nd kicked on this whole line o' questionin' 's bein' sassy or "impertinent," as he said, in his high-falutin' way.

The Judge turned to Johnson. "Is this evidence pertinent to your case?"

"Decidedly so," said Ambrose, "as your Honor will perceive in the very next question after the one now pending."

"Proceed then," said the Judge.

Ambrose repeated his question about the prominent citizens.

Joe answered: "Some of them."

"Any public officials among them?"

"I'd rather not say," said Joe.

"You *have* said."—Johnson come back that time quick 's a flash. Everybody laughed or else shivered. Even Joe had to smile. But we was all tiptoein' for the next question.

"Do you think that the men in this group had a special reason for enmity against you?"

"No real reason," said Joe.

"Why not?"

"Because it wasn't my fault that I saw them and I never talked about what I saw."

"All the same," said Ambrose, "do you think they liked the idea of your knowing what you did?"

"Perhaps not," said Joe.

"Have you any reason to think that there was enmity against you on account of what you had seen?"

"Some slight reasons."

"What were they?"

"Nothing very definite," said Joe. "Looks mostly—and one or two things that were said."

"What, for instance?"

"Well, I was warned to keep my mouth shut or it would be worse for me."

"By whom?"

"One of the men." Here Joe hit back as quick as Ambrose did the other time. Another big laugh.

"By the way," said Ambrose, "did you think that these men just happened to come together that one night accidentally, so to speak, or was there some close connection between them?"

"So far as I know they didn't belong to any regular organization or lodge."

"More like a club?"

"Yes," said Joe, "*more* like a club than a lodge."

"Did you see them together more than once?"

"No," said Joe.

"Do you know whether any one else has seen the same men together?"

"I have heard that some of them have been seen together."

"Now," said Ambrose, "I am going to ask a very important question and I want a straight

answer.—Are any of the men that you saw in the early morning of April 14th connected with this case?"

Here Day blew up again worse'n ever, and demanded up 'nd down that this question be throwed out. Ambrose let him blow off 'nd then said, mighty quiet 'nd easy-like: "The District Attorney objected to my first questions because they weren't pertinent enough—now he objects because they are too pertinent. It seems impossible to please him.

"Your Honor, this question and the next one I shall ask are simply necessary to my case. They tie up all the others."

"Question allowed," said the Judge. We all turned to Joe.

"I decline to answer," said Joe.

Johnson blew up this time. I never saw him so mad, seem so anyhow.

"Decline to answer? Young man, what do you mean?" He turned furiously to the Judge. "I have a good mind to give up the case right here and now."

The Judge turned to Joe: "You'd better answer, my boy." He was mighty mild about it, I thought, considerin'.

Joe asked the Judge, "Must I answer?"

The Judge smiled. "No, but I think perhaps

it would be wiser. Your lawyer should know what is best for you."

"I still decline," said Joe—settin' his lips in a way I knowed well.

Ambrose still looked mighty mad, but changed his tactics a little.

"If you were sure it would help your case would you answer?"

"No," said Joe. "I don't see how I could. I don't believe it has anything to do with the case, really. I'm sorry, Mr. Johnson, but I can't answer the question."

Johnson's mad seemed to go, all in a minute. He smiled: "I have all the answer I want."—Only one other thing at the trial surprised me as much as this.

Then the lawyer went on 's if nothin' had happened. "I have one more question to ask and then the District Attorney may have the witness—Mr. Onderdonk, do you see any of the men you saw that morning here in this court-room?"

Joe looked right at the Jury and said, "No." Everybody c'd see where he was lookin' 'nd we all laughed. Johnson waved his hand 's if givin' up the whole fight 'nd set down.

Day got up 'nd said to the Judge, "I have no questions to ask. The witness may be excused."

That was what surprised me most. I leaned

over to Mr. Vickers,—"What does that mean?" said I.

Mr. Vickers was laughin'. "Day doesn't dare cross-examine for fear he'll have to bring out the answer Joe has kept back. Joe did just what Johnson wanted him to do."

"Did Ambrose *tell* Joe not to answer that question?"

"No," said Mr. Vickers, "I don't think he did but he counted on his not answering."

"What made Ambrose so mad then?"

"He wasn't. That was a part of the game. He got just what he wanted. Don't you see? Everybody knows *now* that the men Joe saw *were* in the case against him."

I couldn't see yet. "Why wouldn't Joe answer?"

"You will have to ask him. I can guess but I don't know."

I didn't ask Joe but I did ask Ambrose after Court was over—'nd there was quite an interestin' scene at the time too.

Will Day come up jest as I asked Ambrose, "Why didn't Joe answer that question? I couldn't see any harm in it." Johnson laughed, "Oh, that fantastic sense of honor he has. He thought that it wasn't fair to connect that night with his case."

Day broke in, "Nothin' o' the sort. You can't fool me. He was coached not to answer. If he had I'd 've cross-examined the hide off of him and you know it. You're mighty clever, Ambrose, but I'll win this case yet."

"You *will* not," said Ambrose. "I've got it tied up in a bundle ready to take home. Your two witnesses aren't good enough to be honest and they aren't bad enough to be good conspirators. Goodenough is a dead one already and I'll have his partner next session."

"You can't get Onderdonk free, at that," said Will, "without breaking down the evidence of old Onderdonk."

"We'll see," said Ambrose. "However, I want you to know that I didn't coach young Joe to refuse to answer that question. But I *knew* he would."

Will said "Humph" to this 'nd we all went home.

CHAPTER XVIII

SCOTT TALKS

In the next three days big things tumbled out so fast that I was dizzy. Them three days was Saturday, Sunday 'nd Monday. The examination o' Joe was ended up Friday afternoon 'nd 's there wa'n't nothin' more to do but for the lawyers to sum up, 'nd they wanted a whole day to do it in, the Court took a récess, they call it, over Sunday. That left me Saturday, I s'posed, free to work in. I sure needed the time. I hadn't done more'n a lick 'nd a promise anywhere around the place since the trial started. The barn needed cleanin', the church had to be swept 'nd dusted for Sunday, 'nd a dozen other things laid around jest yellin' to be done. It's a curious thing that Sunday, marryin', dyin' 'nd dustin' don't stop because somebody's in jail. So I went at it, hammer 'nd tongs, Saturday mornin' 'nd kept drivin' 'til most noon. Then without warnin' the curtain went up 'nd the show opened.

That "mysterious stranger-in-the-gray-coat 'nd-

blue-wig" fellow Scott, as Mr. Vickers called him, sauntered up the drive-way to the barn the way he done that other time in the rain. I was glad to see him though I didn't want to be hendered in my work. I knew him well 'nough by this time to tell him to go on talkin' while I worked. He didn't hender my work—not at all—he jest stopped it off short. He wa'n't in his usual jokin' way either—his face was tired 'nd kind o' tight-drawed, if you know what that means, 'nd his mouth was nothin' but a straight line 'crosst his face. You'd hardly of knew Scott, he was so different from ordinary. "Colonel," said he, "I want you to come at once over to Doctor Talbot's office. I know it's most dinner time but there is business that's got to be settled right off—and when you know what it is you won't care whether you have dinner or not. Come right along with me. Never mind your clothes—the others will probably be there now."

So I dropped what I was doin' 'nd went, stable-boots, overalls 'nd all. When we got to Doc's office,—the same smell was there that I smelled the mornin' Joe was arrested, *odorform* Doc said it was,—we found Doc, the young minister, Mr. Vickers, 'nd Al Simonds (lookin' 's though he'd been through a fit o' sickness). It was *some* queer combination o' folks 'nd I must 've showed I

thought so for Scott says, "Sit down, Colonel. I'll make short work of explainin' the situation." Scott was leanin' up against Doc's table where he writes recipes 'nd mixes up stuff for his patients—it all made me think o' Joe so that I felt fair homesick, the way I did the first time I ever went away from home—the rest o' us set in chairs facin' him, Al at one end o' the line, Mr. Vickers at the other.

Scott spoke to me first. "Colonel," he said, "you remember that rainy day when I come to the Rector's barn where you was workin' and talked to you?"

"Yes," said I, "I was thinkin' of it when you come up the drive-way to-day."

"You remember my sayin' that I *might* be able to help you?"

"Yes," said I, "I remember, too, that I didn't think very much o' it at the time. I didn't see how you could help any."

"Well," said he, "I am going to show you now. I am a private detective in the employ of the National Association of Insurance Companies which has been formed for protection against dishonest claimants and also delinquent agents. Mr. Simonds here is the local agent of several of these associated companies and for some time his affairs haven't been satisfactory to the companies. His

remittances have been irregular. He has made the usual excuses, that renewals haven't been made and that policy-holders have been delinquent in making premium payments, etc. The matter reached such a pass that complaints have come to the Association management, and I was sent here to look the ground over.

"My business was, first, to find out the truth about Simonds's collections, to get in touch with the policyholders, and to examine the agent's business position in general. I had authority from the State Insurance Department to audit his books and get all necessary information from the bank. As you gentlemen know, I have been here for several weeks and I venture to say that I know more about the business affairs not only of our agent but the other business men in town than any other man in it except the president of the local bank. And I presume that I know some things that he doesn't know.

"What I have discovered about Mr. Simonds's work as our agent would ordinarily concern him alone and I should have settled my business with him privately. As it is, however, my discoveries indirectly are of interest to you gentlemen and for that reason I have asked you to be present to hear my statement to Mr. Simonds. I had to speak to the head of the bank, Mr. Baldwin, and

I thought it wise to confide in Mr. Vickers because it was necessary to have one adviser who knew the whole thing. Here are the facts:

"Shortly after I came here I received word that Mr. Simonds had paid all his companies *in full* for policies renewed and renewable—the total amount of this payment being twelve hundred and fifty dollars. I was ordered at the same time to keep up the investigation in order to get a line on the man's methods and also to find out the cause of so much delay.

"You see, the amount due was divided into twenty-two premium payments, and all but a few just renewable, over-due from one to four months. It is a very unusual thing for so many men in one community and answerable to a single agent to be delinquent at the same time. In such cases we usually find that the agent has been loose if not actually crooked in his methods. Then, to add to the peculiarity of the situation, the whole amount, which was a large one for this small office, was paid smack up in one day.

"But that's not all. By the aid of Mr. Baldwin, I found out that every one of the twenty-two policy-holders had paid Simonds within the thirty day grace period. We could trace the amounts in some instances from their accounts to his, and in other cases the coincidence in dates and deposits

showed clearly enough where cash had been conveyed. I got close enough to some of the men to get a sight of their receipts.

"So far the case was clear. Simonds 'd got the money for the premiums. But here a peculiar thing showed up. Simonds's bank account for that whole period balanced to a cent without a single payment to any of the companies, up to and including the time when the companies were paid in full. There was just one cash withdrawal of two hundred and fifty dollars (on the very day when the companies were paid) which might have gone into that amount. Otherwise every dollar is accounted for. You can see at once what this means. Simonds's big transaction with his companies does not appear in the books of the bank at all. He paid the companies out of funds which for some reason he did not deposit in his bank nor pay through the bank.

"When I discovered this, I wired the Association in cipher and found out through them that the accounts severally were paid by New York drafts signed by the Cashier of the First National Bank of Brenton.

"There is another curious fact here. This amount of money was paid three days after the alleged theft from Mr. Simonds of one thousand dollars. I make no charges," he went on, turnin'

to Simonds, "for it may be that Mr. Simonds can account for the whole peculiar transaction. But it is evident that he has got some tall explaining to do. Here is the situation in a nutshell: Simonds makes his collections about as usual but by hook and crook, and it takes a good deal of both to stand off insurance companies that long, he keeps back in the neighborhood of a thousand dollars. Then coincidently with a theft of a thousand from him, of other people's money, he pays that sum in a lump, outside his bank and in cash."

He turned to Al. "Mr. Simonds, am I not right in saying that you have some explaining to do?"

Up to this time not a soul in that room made a move or said a word except Scott. We all set there paralyzed. But when he stopped I couldn't hold in a second. I jumped up.—"I can explain it,—this thievin' rascal stole that money himself 'nd tried to lay it onto Joe. That's the explanation." All that I suffered durin' them eternal weeks while Joe was shut up in that darned jail jest come to the top 'nd I was mad enough to kill. They tried to hold me back but I couldn't *be* held. I went over to Al, shook my fist under his nose 'nd yelled in a voice (so *they* say) that could be heard the length o' Main Street, "Al Simonds, that's the truth, that's what you done,

ain't it? Tell me, before I choke it out o' you."

Al looked up at me 'nd seein' red as I was I come to a full stop at the look in his face. He was payin', right then, full price without no rebate. There was shame 'nd misery 'nd busted pride, 'nd God knows what-not in that look. There may or may not be a hell sommers else—Mr. Vickers is kind o' dubious on that subject,—but that there's one right here on top o' the good round earth, I learned then. I was answered without words, stumbled back to my chair 'nd hid my face in my hands. My cheeks felt scorched.

Al turned to the others. "It's all up with me, Gentlemen. There is no sense in denyin' what must come out. And I'm not sure that I want to deny it any longer. I've stood it about as long as I can anyway. I was tryin' to figure out some way to save Joe. I stole the money and used it to tide over a desperate situation with the Insurance Companies, tryin' to stave off ruin and get a chance to turn around. I knew that I couldn't keep that money for any length of time but I expected some in any day."

After he started in he run on, talkin' fast 'nd sort o' feverish. Some things he said didn't seem to make sense. "I don't want you to think that I would have let Joe go to prison for my crime. In fact, to tell you the whole truth, I never in-

tended to accuse Joe at all,—that was forced on me." He stopped a minute, lookin' from one to another o' us. "I didn't intend to say that—it just came out of itself, for weak and wicked as I've been I do hate to have you think that I deliberately plotted to ruin that boy's life."

Mr. Vickers spoke up here. "Simonds, why not make a clear breast of it? It will be better for all of us if you do. What do you mean, for instance, by being *forced* into this scheme against Onderdonk?"

"Well, it is quite a complicated story. You all know what an extravagant fool I've been, with my new house, my gas-light, my bath-room, telephone, and all the rest of it. I've done a lot of foolish things,—among them I've borrowed money from several men, one in particular."

"Jim Goodenough?" said I.

"I'd rather not mention names—not yet anyway. Besides all this, I've lost money gambling."

"At Ase Long's?" said I.

"I'd rather not say. Well, anyhow, I lost it and owed this same man a big gambling debt. Altogether I owed him far more than I could pay for some time.

"On the day we all remember so well—along about three o'clock in the afternoon—this man,

I suppose I may as well say the name now as later, Jim Goodenough, came into my office and demanded payment in full for what I owed him. I told him that I couldn't pay so much. That statement made no impression on him. You know Jim's blustering and bullying way. He insisted that I must go the bank and borrow enough to pay him. I told him that Baldwin wouldn't lend me anything like the amount *necessary.* Then Jim got abusive ("as usual," said I) and threatened to sue at once if I didn't get that money. Finally he said, 'I don't care what you do,—sell something, sell that fast horse of yours, sell your life-insurance, sell your soul, sell anything you please but you've got to pay me within forty-eight hours—or I'll sue.'

"Then," went on Al, "in an unlucky minute to get a little pity from him ("blood from a turnip and milk from a grind-stone," said I) I told him how matters were with the Companies. That made him ten times worse because he was sure then that I was going to ruin and he wanted to get *his* money before the crash came. While we were talking Thad Hunt came in with that unlucky thousand dollars. After I'd taken the money from Thad and receipted for it, the old man left. I put the money in my desk without

making up my mind just what to do with it. The bank was already closed for the day.

"Jim sat for a while without saying a word. Then he said to me, 'Al, when have you *got* to pay that money of old Thad's over?' 'In two or three days,' said I. Jim got up and began to walk up and down the office,—'Wait a minute. I want to think.' Then he sat down again, drew his chair close up to mine and put up this proposition: 'Al, you're in a bad way with your debt to the companies which has got to be paid soon and your debt to me that's got to be paid right off. There's only one thing you can do—and that's, pretend to *lose old Thad's money!*'

" 'Pretend to lose it?' said I. 'How am I going to do that—and who'll believe me if I do?' 'Let a burglar get it,' said he. 'Burglar?' said I, 'there aren't any burglars here. There hasn't been a burglary in this town since the station was broken into and that was three years ago.' 'That doesn't make any difference. It might happen any time. If you lose the money'—all of a sudden he stopped—thought a minute,—'I've got it. We'll fix the robbery onto that Onderdonk rat. He's in and out of these offices all the time and it will be easy to get him. This is the chance I've been looking for ever since he bully-ragged me in Ed Williams's store. We've got him now.' I

made all sorts of objections of course, but he fairly bullied and threatened me into it.

"He said that if I didn't do it, he'd write to the Insurance Companies and tell them all about what a pinch I was in and he'd see that my policy holders knew that I'd held money back on them and reported them as delinquents. On the other hand he agreed, if I'd do it, to let my debt to him go indefinitely until I got straightened around. Well, I guess I'm a weak sister anyway—and it seemed as if the pressure was more than I could stand. Anyhow I gave in and the scheme was put through. We fixed up the evidence that night—it took us until nearly morning; in fact I didn't go to bed at all. It was all pretty carefully worked out except the *time* but we were so careless about that one thing that we practically lost the case. I don't care, anyhow. I've been in hell day and night and nothing that can happen now can be as bad as what I've been through already. This is the whole story. The question is now: What are you going to do with me?"

Here Scott spoke up,—"Let me speak first for the Association. It is our general policy to make recovery in cases like this but not to publish the agent. I am authorized by the Association to say that since Mr. Simonds has made up his delinquency it will be satisfied with the cancellation of

his agencies. We do not intend to prosecute. With regard to the other matter, of course I have nothing to say."

Mr. Vickers spoke next,—"Simonds, what will you do about Thaddeus Hunt's money?"

"I have already made arrangements to turn all my property over to meet my various obligations. There's enough and more. My wife is going home to her people at once——"

I broke in here: "What is to be done about Joe?"

Al took a paper out o' his pocket. "I have a signed statement here equivalent to what I have told you. That will clear Joe and obtain his release. As I said before, the only question is: 'What are you gentlemen going to do with me?' If you bring action against me I shall probably go to prison for a long term."

"As Joe would 've," said I, "if this scheme 'd succeeded."

"It couldn't succeed," said Al. "I've known that ever since it really got started—and told Jim so. Your lawyer smashed up our testimony and I knew last Friday that the summing up would leave nothing of the case against Joe. The District Attorney knew that too for he told me so and he told me at the same time about what he thought of me and Jim, too. We haven't much

chance with the Court either—for in addition to all the rest there will be a charge of false swearing against both of us."

Mr. Vickers looked at me with a kind o' question in his eyes 'nd I nodded. "Simonds," said he, "I don't know what the Judge will say but so far as we are concerned, since the proceedings have stopped at this stage and as you are likely to be pretty severely punished, we are inclined to let you go and give you another chance. Is that your idea, Colonel?" he said to me.

"Yes," said I.

"And yours, Mr. Hilton?"

"Yes."

"And yours, Doctor?"

"Yes."

"One other thing," said I. "Al, have you any notion where Herm' Onderdonk is?"

"None whatever," said Al. "I had nothing to do with that. Jim took some of old Thad's money. We knew, of course, that the old man could identify it for he always knew the number of every note he took in—and he gave me other bills in the place of them but I never knew where Herm was kept. You'll have to make Jim tell you that."

That seemed to be the only way for it—but as it turned out it wa'n't necessary. We talked some other things over 'nd then I went back to my work.

CHAPTER XIX

WE FIND HERM ONDERDONK

All this happened Saturday along in the middle o' the day. That same night after supper I strolled up to the young Minister's for a few minutes' talk about the happenin's o' the day. I know enough, ushally, not to call on a preacher, 'specially a young one, Saturday night, but this wa'n't anything ordinary 'nd I jest *had* to see him.

Mebby I ain't told you that he was livin' with his little family in Thad Hunt's green house on Highland Street. The green part o' this was a good deal more than ordinary. The house was one o' the sights o' Middleport for it was the greenest green, 'nd the meanest green, I ever set eyes on. Old Thad used the paint because he got it cheap. It went bad somehow on Dan Elton's hands 'nd he couldn't sell it in ordinary trade. Old Thad made him an offer one day for the whole lot, six or eight kegs. Dan took him up, though he wa'n't much used to sellin' anythin' under price.

Old Thad had enough o' that green paint to cover house, barn, 'nd all the rest o' the buildin's. It was what Amy Goucher calls "gorgeous." As I say, it wa'n't no ordinary green. It was the color o' biled spinach, when it's cut fine. The Minister said he didn't care much, he didn't have to look at it any oftener 'n anybody else. But once in a while it woke one o' the babies up with a bad dream. "It ain't so bad," he said, "to live *in* a house like this as to live opposite to it, or next door. The saddest thing about it is that there should be any one on earth who would choose such paint."

"Thad didn't choose the color," I said, when he told me that; "he chose the price of it. The color was an accident like."

"Pretty near a fatal accident," said he; "some people have painter's colic when they see that house."

I got to the Green Manse, as Mrs. Hilton called it, jest after the family 'd had breakfast. They was all out in the back-yard feedin' the chickens. The family, besides the parson himself 'nd his wife, a bright-eyed, brown-haired girl who, they say, can do anythin' from writin' essays on art to makin' first-class flap-jacks, 'nd two children, a boy goin' on three 'nd a baby girl, was all there.

When I come 'round the corner o' the house,

two folks spied me. One was Auntie, out on her back-porch with Doc, washin' up the breakfast dishes. She was peerin' at me, hoot-owl style, over her glasses, 'nd lookin' as if she wondered why as I was there. The other was the parson's boy, toddlin' 'round on his sturdy little legs as if he owned the place. When he caught sight o' me, he yelled out, "Tum on, Turnel, see the chickabids. All plyma flocks."

The little girl was in her carriage, sort o' rockin' up 'nd down. She let out another yell at sight o' me, 'nd from that on I was right in it. I knowed 'em both well 'nd they always acted tickled to death to see me. The first time the boy ever went out to a meal was at Mr. Vickers's. The Rector told me that when the boy's high chair was drawed up to the tables he see some olives on a plate in the middle o' the table 'nd dove for 'em, yellin', "See the green balls!" After supper they put the boy on the dinin'-room floor to play with Snap, the fox-terrier. I was passin' the window jest then, bound for the furnace, 'nd Mr. Vickers called me in to see the show. I nearly died laughin'. "The two pups," as Mr. Vickers called 'em, was mighty interested in each other, but about as much afraid, so that they both always went the same way. The boy was jest creepin' then (it was about a year before this)

'nd could go like a streak, settin' down. He'd take after the dog, 'nd the dog would run yellin' like mad. Then he'd git some extra courage 'nd take after the baby. Then the baby 'd skedaddle for the corner or where his mother was, then out again after the pup. My, but it was funny! He was full o' ginger 'nd up to somethin' all the time. While I was there 'nd he was showin' me the chickabids, he reached over into the pen after one. The Minister had to hold him back, 'nd he made considerable fuss. "He actually loves 'em to death!" said the parson. "He gets hold of them and hugs them in his little hand or up to his breast, and when he gets through with them they're gone—squeezed to death. We hate to keep him away from them, he does love them so, but we can't bear to have them hurt. We can't afford to lose them, either."

"Put a wire over the top o' the run," I said; "it'll keep the cats away 'nd the baby can see 'em without gettin' his hands on 'em."

"Good head, Colonel; I never thought of that. It'll work beautifully."

After talkin' a few minutes with the Missus 'nd playin' with the children, the minister 'nd I adjourned to the house to talk. We set on the west porch, on the side next to the apple trees. It was October but mild 'nd very comfortable to

set out. The parson was easy in his mind 'nd said he'd got his work all done for the next day, in spite o' the trial 'nd all the excitement, so we talked along quite a spell.

In the course, mebby, of half or three-quarters o' an hour we'd made Joe into a big city doctor, when there come a fast beatin' o' horse's feet that I knowed was Hepzy's—I'd tell her step 's far 's I c'd hear it—up the street. They stopped out in front with a scrape that showed she was pulled up sudden 'nd then come that loud whistle, made with thumb 'nd fust finger that Mr. Vickers always used to call me from my house over to his when he wanted me. We run down to the street 'nd there was Mr. Vickers in his two wheeler with Hepzy in the shafts, highty-tightyin' the way she always did when she was excited, knowin' she was goin' for a fast drive.

"Hilton," said the Rector, who was dressed in his big sheep-skin coat 'nd puffin' out smoke like a steam-engine, "get in quick and come with me. Old Herm Onderdonk has been found. He's dying at the old Goucher mill on the Elmwood road and has asked to see you. Colonel, you go to Andy Ames and get him to drive out there with his ambulance wagon. He'll have to bring the body back here for burial."

With that he jest laid his whip on Hepzy's

back 'nd she fairly kicked the road out from under her 'nd they was lost in the dark. I went after Ames 'nd we drove out together.

When we got to the old mill, Andy was needed sure enough for old Herm'd passed out. When we come into the buildin', that hadn't been used for a mill for years 'nd was bare 'nd empty of machinery, all but the old mill-wheel 'nd its connections with a single set o' grindstones, we found a spooky place for certin.

It was sort o' half lighted with lanterns that always throw such big 'nd funny shaped shadows. There was only two men there besides the ministers but it seemed like there was six or eight, big black fellows in the corners 'nd on the walls. One o' the men I didn't know but found out he was the Coroner 'nd the other was an under-sheriff that I'd seen at the court-house durin' the trial.

Off in the corner I saw a shape under a horse-blanket 'nd I knowed for certin it was all that was left o' poor old Herm.

The young minister, white 's ashes 'nd with a kind o' teary look in his eyes, come over to meet me. "What happened?" said I. "The old man," said he, "has been in hiding here ever since he disappeared. Jim Goodenough brought him here and kept him. He carried food to Herm who, you see, was practically a prisoner and

afraid to show himself, two or three times a week and plied him with liquor right along. Herm didn't dare show a light at night and in moving around upstairs, where he stayed so that he couldn't be seen by anybody looking in, he stepped on a rotten plank and fell through to the lower floor. He was all smashed up and only lived a half-hour after we got here."

"How did he happen to be found?" said I. "This is a lonely place 'nd he might have died without anybody knowin' it."

"Some country boys were coon-hunting and the hunt brought them alongside the mill. One of them thought he heard a groan. They had torches with them so they lighted one and found the old man where he'd fallen. They phoned to Mr. Vickers, as Herm' asked them to, and he got the rest of us here. We must go and help Mr. Ames now. I'll tell you the whole story on the way home. The Under-Sheriff is going after Jim Goodenough. He'll ride with Mr. Vickers and I will go with you in the Undertaker's wagon."

Old Herm's story was soon told. He'd been drinkin' pretty hard for a week before the day the money-case come up 'nd was pritty badly muddled. As near 's he could remember Jim brought him a roll o' money about half-past ten the mornin' Joe was bein' tried 'nd told him it 'd

come from Joe 'nd that he c'd help by takin' it to the Justice's office 'nd hand it over for Joe.

It was a pritty chancey kind o' a scheme b'cause it's awful hard to tell beforehand what a drunken fellow will do or guarantee that he'll do what you want him to do any time. But, old Herm, *when he was drunk*, was always fond o' Joe so that the thing went through without a hitch. Jim got hold o' the old man again afterwards 'nd scairt him most to death by tellin' him that Joe was in trouble 'nd that he'd he in trouble too if he didn't clear out. He got him home 'nd at night sneaked him out to the old mill, kept him from soberin' up 'nd quieted him by tellin' what would happen to him if he didn't keep under cover. You wouldn't think that such a plan could 've been thought of 'nd carried out in our village but Jim was ingenyus in deviltry, everybody'll own that up, 'nd it all happened jest as I tell you—only when Herm fell through the floor it sobered him up complete 'nd he told the whole thing. We had Jim dead to rights 'nd the under-sheriff was goin' for him behind Hepzy.

What really happened wa'n't anythin' like what we expected, as you'll see in a minit. Our return trip with old Herm's battered body was a grisley kind o' a journey, taken all in all. It was at night 'nd mostly out in the country 'nd

among the woods, which kind o' ridin' I never did like nohow. Then, ridin' in the undertaker's wagon, with a corpse back o' you, a preacher 'nd an undertaker on the seat with you, the lantern weavin' back 'nd forth under the wagon makin' the horse's legs look as if they reached the sky 'nd, besides, throwin' them big, waverin' shadows in every direction, wa'n't exactly what I'd call a cheerful trip.

We reached the edge o' the village pretty close to midnight. As we passed the North-End Church the Parson said: "I guess I shall have to read my sermon to-morrow, or to-day (for the town clock struck jest then), which I never do except on extraordinary occasions. I won't be much good after this fracas."

A minit after we come to Ames' undertakin' place. As we turned into the driveway, we see a man standin' by a maple-tree that was jest at the corner o' Andy's yard. He come up to us 'nd Andy stopped. In the light o' the lantern we c'd see that it was Jim Goodenough. It wa'n't the Jim that we was used to, big, brash 'nd blusterin'—but a white, tremblin' critter, cringin' away from his own shadow. Them next few minutes will always be like a bad dream to me. If I c'd 've seen ahead I probably wouldn't 've done

as I done—'nd yet, perhaps it wouldn't 've made any diff'rence.

We waited for him to speak, not knowin' ourselves jest what to say. I tell you, it was like a piece out o' a show. In the wagon was the dead body of a man 'nd alongside the wagon was the man that was the cause o' the dead man's bein' killed!

Jim spoke to me first. "Ellison," said he, "what's happened to-night? I've heard all sorts of stories but I can't rightly tell what it's all about. Mr. Vickers drove in awhile back with an under-sheriff from Brenton. I was with some men down near the lodge-rooms and heard him ask for me. I didn't like the look of it so I slipped away and have been hidin' in the dark here ever since, hopin' that I'd see somebody. What's happened?"

"Strange things," said I, 'nd I didn't know my own voice. "Stranger things than have ever happened in this old town in my day. What did you hear?"

"I heard that somebody was killed out at the old mill—but," here his voice sort o' went to pieces 'nd he seemed to shiver all over like he had a chill, "I didn't know anybody was ever in that old mill. It's deserted."

"Didn't you?" said I. "That's strange, for

unless I'm mistaken, Jim, you knew all about his bein' there."

"Who was it? And why do you say that I had anything to do with his being there?"

"It was Herman Onderdonk who was killed out at the old mill by fallin' through the floor in the dark when he was half drunk."

"But what makes you say that I was knowin' to his bein' there? Why do you say that?" Jim's eyes was wild 'nd we c'd see by the light o' the lantern that his face was twitchin' but we c'dn't stop nothin' then.

The Minister broke in. He spoke gentle-like but it was awful, what he said, jest the same. "Because, before he died," said he, "Herman told me that you brought him there and kept him there."

Then Jim broke loose, in his regular half-crazy way. He cussed 'nd swore 'nd said it was all a plot to ruin him. He said he didn't believe old Herm was dead at all, that it was some tramp that wandered in there 'nd fell through the floor. He turned on me in particular. He said or rather yelled, for he was screechin' like Mrs. Tripp in one o' her crazy spells, "Ellison, you've done this. You've always hated me and now you're trying to get even with me for testifying against that young hellion of a Joe Onderdonk. You've got

to prove all that you say against me. I'll law you on it."

He raved so about everythin' havin' to be proved that Ames lost patience. "I can't prove to you what Herm Onderdonk *said*—that was taken down by the Coroner from the dying man's own lips, but there's a part of it I *can* prove. Jim Goodenough, look at your handi-work!" With that he took the lantern from its hook at the front o' the wagon, turned around in the seat, uncovered old Herm 'nd held the lantern so that it showed his cold dead face.

Jim gave one look, sort o' gurgled in his throat 'nd dropped where he stood like an ox hit with a pole-ax. Of course, we was sorry that we hadn't handled it diff'rent, specially Andy who sprung the day o' judgment part of it, but it was too late then. We c'd only carry him inside Andy's place, lay him on a lounge 'nd send for the doctor.

It's enough to say that Jim had a stroke that he never got entirely over 'nd from that time he was broke-down 'nd not able to do much. The case against him never come off because there wa'n't enough left of him to prosecute. As I said Jim was done for.

Let's see! That brings us to Sunday. Another busy day for me. Mr. Vickers walked to North-port in the mornin' 'nd to South-port in the after-

noon so 's I c'd take Hepzy 'nd go over to Brenton to tell Joe about what 'd happened. I talked with the Warden 'nd found out that we c'dn't get the papers for Joe's release until Monday. I spent the mornin' with Joe 'nd we had a good talk, 'nd a lot to talk about. He was glad to know that his case was finished 'nd that there wouldn't be a scratch against his name from then on—but he was sorry about Al 'nd Joe 'nd most heartbroke over old Herm's death.

I couldn't understand that, much. Old Herm 'd scurcely ever give him a good word. He'd been a shame 'nd disgrace to Joe all his life 'nd worse'n a millstone tied to his neck but for all that Joe mourned him, deep 'nd real.

In the course o' that mornin's talk Joe told me a good deal about Herm that made me think that for all his "bad black record" as Mr. Vickers called it, there was or might 've been quite a man in him—Joe stuck by him anyhow 'nd old Herm had a mourner that really mourned for him. Joe 'nd me arranged to have the body of old Herm sent over to Congress, where he used to live. He had a small burial plot there 'nd always intended to be buried in it. Sunday afternoon I went down to Herm's place 'nd helped the family get ready to go to Congress next day. It interested me a lot to see how the family turned to Joe in their

trouble, even Ellen, hateful as she'd been to him, said she c'd scurcely wait to see him. And the whole lot o' 'em was so glad that Joe was goin' to be free that they most forgot about their father, though I don't know 's that's sayin' a great deal —for Herm wa'n't no particular delight in the "home-circle," as Van Hunt used to say in the *Trumpet*. But they did turn to Joe.

That Sunday afternoon learned me one good lesson. I don't believe that nothin' good you do is *all* wasted. Joe's way o' livin'—from his clean hands to his clean tongue—didn't seem to affect the rest o' the family much. They lived about like the pigs in the sty, 'nd seemed to like it. Besides, they used to get huffy at Joe for wantin' to be diff'rent. He used to get awful discouraged 'nd down in the mouth about it. He c'dn't seem to get hold o' 'em. But I guess they come to find out when he was arrested 'nd all how much they'd bank, most without knowin' it, mebby, on his bein' honest 'nd respected 'nd when they found out that he was to go clear they'd o' hurrahed out loud if their father hadn't jest been killed. I c'd see that what Joe done while he'd been strugglin' up 'nd tryin' to be somebody had lifted the rest o' 'em the first little mite,—that Mr. Vickers says is the hardest, 'nd I c'd see that somethin' c'd be done with that family now, for certin.

CHAPTER XX

THE LONG LANE TAKES A TURN

I HAVEN'T got nothin'· more that's disagreeable to write, thanks be! Of course, Al 'nd Jim were in pritty bad 'nd poor old Herm was dead but they're out o' the story now. All the rest of it is as merry 's a Spring breeze on the lake.

The trial come to an end awful sudden, as you know. Al's leavin' town 'nd Jim's break-up 'nd Joe's bein' found innocent made a big change in the village. The poker-club was broke up complete, which was like the goin' out of ice in Spring. It sort o' changed the whole climate o' the place. The air was diff'rent.

Next to Joe, most the first one to feel this was the young North-End Minister. I found out that what Auntie 'd said about the young Minister's havin' rather rough goin' was more'n jest talk. I'll say this much for Auntie, anyhow—she was an awful gossip but there was ushally *some* truth in what she said. So there was this time. But his troubles was mostly all 'cause o' Joe 'nd the

poker-club—'nd stopped when these things was straightened out.

It wa'n't jest that his men went to church better 'nd the women was happier but the feelin's o' the village warmed up to him. It was sort o' vague 'nd general, fust off, but after a while things begun to happen to show that he was gettin' a grip on our folks. Dan Elton said to me, "He can stay here always, if he likes." "He won't like," said I.

Anyhow I was glad o' it, f'r I liked him 'nd I was what Mr. Vickers calls "jubulent" about Joe. He was free 'nd there wa'n't the scratch o' a pen against him, no shape nor manner. And, besides that, he'd acted so out 'nd out man-like through the trial that the whole village was proud of him. His stayin' in jail 'nd not bein' bailed out helped along, too—but, most of all, his refusin' to tell about the poker-club even though it w'd help him made him solid with the whole community. Joe jest owned Middleport! Everybody, *even Auntie*, who owned up she'd lost the bet she didn't make with me, wanted to know when he was comin' home. He didn't come for two days 'cause he went over to Congress, the place I told you about, ten miles east o' Brenton—to bury poor old Herm.

The mornin' o' the day that Joe was comin'

home on the noon train, Mr. Vickers come out into the garden early. He walked up 'nd down, blowin' out clouds o' smoke, 'nd spoutin' a piece that had this in it—"Now is this winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son o' York." It wa'n't summer by no means, bein' October 'nd I didn't know who the son o' York was, unless it was Scott—he come from that way, but anyway it sounded good 'nd fitted into my feelin's. The Rector laughed when I told him that October wa'n't a summer month 'nd said that it was jest a matter o' feelin' 'nd hadn't nothin' to do with the time o' year.

I knowed that he had somethin' on his mind—he always had when he smoked so fast, 'nd finally it come out. "Colonel, why don't you take Mrs. Thorne's surrey with the old gray horse and meet Joe at the noon train. He's bringing his mother and the children home with him, isn't he?"

"Yes," said I, "they're all comin' together." I'd thought o' that scheme myself but I didn't like to ask for the rig. It was mighty kind o' Mr. Vickers 'nd I said so. "I'll be glad to do it, if you think Mrs. Thorne won't mind." You see, Mrs. Thorne 'nd her daughter was Mr. Vickers' chief parish'ners 'nd the closest friends o' his family—besides, I worked for her a good deal o' the time, so it was sort o' in the family.

So it happened that when the noon train pulled in along the platform that was crowded to the edges, I was there in the surrey, big as life 'nd feelin' twice as big, waitin' for Joe 'nd his folks. Mr. Vickers was there, too, 'nd when Joe, lookin' two years instead o' a few weeks older than when he went away, got off the train leadin' his five year old brother by the hand, Mr. Vickers was there to shake his hand 'nd to help Mrs. Onderdonk down—somethin' that hadn't happened to her, I'll bet you, since she was big enough to get around alone.

Our country folks is kind of impulsive (so Mr. Vickers says) 'nd sometimes they do mighty pritty things—'specially if they're tryin' to make up for not treatin' somebody jest right. As Joe 'nd the family come across the platform, without plannin' it at all, they lined up on both sides 'nd made an alley that they walked through. The men took off their hats like they was at a funeral. A minute more the folks was in the surrey 'nd I started the old gray horse. As we drove away I looked back. Jest that minute Mr. Vickers waved his hat 'nd the men all followed him while a good many o' the women waved their hankchiefs. I got Joe 'nd the others to turn around so 's to see it. It must 've rained about then, though the sun was shinin' 'nd the sky was blue overhead,

for I see the whole thing, station, lake 'nd people through a fog.

Jest as soon 's I c'd say anythin' at all I turned to Joe, who was settin' with me on the front seat with the youngest boy between us. I wanted some big thing fittin' to the minute but all I c'd git out was,—"Well, Joe, you're home again."

"Yes," said Joe, in a low voice you c'd hardly hear, "I guess I *am*, *really home*." That was every word we said on the way to Lake Street.

When we got to the Onderdonk place, we found some things that surprised *me* as well as Joe's folks. It seems that the men 'nd women o' Joe's church (started by the women, I'll bet) had gone to work, cleaned up the yard, mended the fence 'nd fixed up the house. It didn't look like the same place, inside or out. They'd got some good furniture, not new but good, 'nd some carpets too—give by Mr. Vickers, I found out afterwards. The whole place was spick-'nd-span. There was even bunches o' posies around.

When we went into the front room, Mrs. Onderdonk threw back her veil, looked around a minute, 'nd then busted into tears. She throwed her arms around Joe 'nd said between sobs, "I'll keep it like this. I want to live like other people."

The kids didn't know what to make o' their mother's cryin', which to be sure they hadn't see

often—so they clutched hold o' Joe 'nd joined in—'nd, seein' that fog o' mine come back thicker 'n ever, we all enjoyed a very heart-breakin' time—as I heard a minister say once. Joe fathered 'nd comforted up the whole lot o' us so that bye 'nd bye we all found out that in spite o' everythin' we was pritty happy 'nd things looked bright. I can say right here 'nd now that this was the turnin' point in the life o' the Onderdonks; there was a whole pew-ful o' 'em in the North-End Church come Sunday 'nd nobody called 'em riff-raff no more. It wouldn't 've been safe, not in Middleport anyway.

Big as Joe's comin' home was, even bigger things happened about a month or so later. Everything went along about as usual. Joe went back to his work for the Doctor—'nd spent his spare time, days 'nd nights, too, diggin' into them medical books. He was older 'nd soberer'n ever, and it 'most tore my old heart loose from its fastenin's to see how that jail 'd bleached him white. He ought 've been jest a boy, kickin' up his heels free 'nd happy, like a colt in a pasture—but actshally he was a growed man with a pack on his shoulders a good sight heavier'n most o' the men twice his age carried.

As I say, everythin' *seemed*, on the outside, to go along jest as it did before—but really, nothin'

was the same, nothin' that is, except Tiny Gilbert. People jest fell over each other to be kind to Joe 'nd to show how much they thought o' him. So far 's I c'd see, about everybody o' any account in town except Tiny went out o' their way to speak to Joe 'nd say a friendly word to him.

Tiny wouldn't come to time 'nd she didn't invite Joe to the house. Besides she kept on talkin'. I hearn she said that while Joe hadn't been proved guilty, she, for one, didn't believe all they said about Al Simonds or Jim Goodenough neither. Even if Joe *didn't* steal, the family was disgraced forever by the doin's 'nd the death of old Herm. In general, she acted as obstinate 'nd cranky as only a good woman can when she gits to goin' wrong. I was thinkin' o' havin' it out with her, once for all, 'nd takin' up some o' the things that she said but Joe wouldn't let me; besides, I was kind o' waitin' to see what Frank would do. He hadn't give out no real sign yet, but he come pritty often to visit in his still way with Joe 'nd me.

Joe didn't see much o' Mabel them days. She was kind o' held in by Tiny. The gossips—Auntie among 'em, 'nd she's a pritty good weather prophet,—said that the sister-in-laws didn't git along very good 'nd prophesied that there'd be a break soon. But so far Tiny held on tight 'nd Joe seemed more timid about mixin' in with folks

than he'd been before, though they was so much more ready to have him.

Take it altogether, this was the queerest love story I ever hearn tell of. Of course, I don't know nothin' about love myself, by experience, that is. But accordin' to what I've see 'nd hearn, it takes a good deal o' stirrin' up to keep the fire goin',—goin' out rowin', settin' up nights, takin' moon-light walks 'nd sech like. But in Joe's case there wa'n't much of anythin' to fan the flames, as they say. All the same, I was sure it hadn't died out. It was like some fires I've knowed where there wa'n't no flame that you c'd see—you couldn't even smell smoke but it was burnin' all the time in the wall or behind the wainscote—'nd when it does bust out it's burnt everythin' hollow already. So in this case—but I'm ahead o' my story.

The point I've been headin' for is this: Jest after dinner one day a little while before Christmas, I was settin' in my dinin' room readin' a paper for a few minutes before goin' to work. I was all alone. Joe 'd went back to the office right after eatin'. There come a tap on the back door that opened seemin' of itself 'nd Mr. Vickers walked in. I got right up, thinkin' he wanted me to do somethin' for him—but he waved me back to my chair.

"Set down, Colonel, I just want to smoke a pipe with you." So I set down 'nd waited awhile for him to talk—which he didn't do. So I started in to make talk. I never had worse luck. The Rector puffed away but didn't seem to have more'n three or four words with him 'nd they wa'n't more'n four letters long. I tried him on the weather, on Hepzy's hoofs that I'd jest been soakin' in clay, Joe's doctorin' work, the sickness in the village 'nd country, the church furnace up at South-port that smoked—nothin' worked any better'n that chimney. It was like poundin' a feather-bed. We never *did* get started on that talk for another knock at the door 'nd the North-End minister come in. We spruced up the speakin' then 'nd had a slow three-handed round for about five minutes when the young minister turned mum like Mr. Vickers. After that the talk was like a bug tryin' to get out of a bottle. It would start buzzin' up the side until it got to the place where the glass turns in toward the neck 'nd fall down again to the bottom. We'd get to goin' on somethin' 'nd then stop. Then one o' us w'd think that wa'n't quite polite 'nd start again, 'nd then drop to the bottom o' the bottle again. It was as lively 'nd entertainin' 's an Undertakers' Convention studyin' on how to lengthen life. Then there come another knock at that old door 'nd the

Doctor come in. This was a little too much for the deef 'nd dumb 'sylum, so we started to talk all at once.

Now, I've heard a lot o' women all talk together without sayin' much o' anythin' 'nd it kept up all right 'nd was really interestin'—but with men that's always a dead failure. We clacked for a while like a loose windmill 'nd then dropped mum again. I felt kind o' foolish. I hadn't invited nobody 'nd hadn't thought o' givin' a party but they was in my house 'nd I felt as if I ought to entertain 'em.

I was thinkin' o' doin' somethin' desperate when Mr. Vickers begun to laugh. I looked at him, severe-like: "I'm glad you think it's funny! What's the joke?"

He kept on laughin'. Then he sobered up a minute. "I'll tell you what's the matter. I came here with something on my mind that I wanted to tell the Colonel or talk over with him but when I got here I found I hadn't thought it all through myself so I've been tryin' to converse with my mind somewhere else."

"You needn't make no affidavy to that," said I. "I'll take your word for it."

"All right," said the Rector, "that's settled. But now for the thing that's on my mind. I was going to tell it to the Colonel first but since you

men 've happened in just at this time I may as well tell *you* too. I am sure you will be interested. I'm thinking of young Onderdonk's future and I've been making some plans."

"You have?" said the Doctor—settin' up in his chair with a jump. "That very idea brought me here to-day when I ought to be about my own business."

"And me, too," said the young minister—'nd at that we all laughed 'nd was easy again. It was like the old times when we was consultin' about Joe, but the feelin' was mighty diff'rent.

"It's magic," said the Rector, "or Providence. We all are here on the same errand without consultin' together. Let me tell you how it lies in my mind and then you can state your opinions in turn. The Doctor tells me that this boy has a genuine talent for medicine. It seems a shame that he should not have the chance to develop and use it. So I have written to the University in New York and find that Onderdonk can combine medicine with a sort of preliminary college course and get through in four years—provided he does the work."

"He'll do the work all right enough," said the Doctor. "He knows more about anatomy now than some doctors that I know of."

Here I spoke up. I hated to pour cold water on

such a scheme as this but I couldn't see any way out of it. "But," said I, "how about the expense? Joe hasn't got no money 'nd I haven't enough to help him scurcely any. He can't work his way 'nd do that heavy studyin'. He'll break down. Besides, there's his mother 'nd the children."

The Doctor spoke up then,—"I'll pay his wages over to his mother and do his work myself."

"He'll never let you," said I. "It's mighty kind but you can't give Joe much o' anythin'. I think I know where——"

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Vickers; "I've worked this part out carefully." He took some papers 'nd a little book out o' his pocket 'nd laid 'em down on the table. "Here," he said, pointin' to 'em one by one, "is a certificate of deposit of the First National Bank of Brenton in the name of Joe Onderdonk for a thousand dollars. Here is a check-book for the same account. Here is a note for a thousand dollars made out to me and payable in six years, and here is an application for a life-insurance policy on Joe's life for a thousand dollars. That policy will name me as beneficiary. You see," went on the Rector, 'nd we didn't interrupt 'cause we was too stunned to move, let alone say anythin', "this is a cold business proposition. I don't lend Joe the money but borrow it for him on my endorsement. If he lives

I know he'll pay it back—if he doesn't I am safe. I hate to be so cold-blooded and methodical about it but Joe wouldn't accept it any other way. He can't refuse now. A thousand dollars isn't enough to see him through by a good deal but it will be enough with what he can earn, and having it in a lump sum will save him from having to worry about the next meal. He can earn enough in vacation to make his way smooth."

Well, several times durin' this story I've run out o' words to express my feelin's 'nd jest now I'm due for what Mr. Vickers calls a "failure of vocabolary." I was most too happy to live 'nd let out one old-fashioned cavalry yell.

"How about Mrs. Onderdonk and the children?" asked Doc.

"That'll be all right, I think," said I. "They won't be worse off th'n when old Herm was alive. He jest about kept himself, 'nd the rest o' 'em had to live on Mrs. Onderdonk's earnin's. If we are a little careful about seein' that she gets plenty o' work, 'nd give some jobs to the children, they'll get along all right. You can be sure Joe'll help 'em the way he always has. He'll go hungry b'fore they do." So we adjourned.

That night, after supper, I took out the papers 'nd the little check-book 'nd told Joe. At first

he wasn't goin' to listen at all. But I explained the whole thing, how he'd got to work 'nd pay back the whole thing. Then he broke down 'nd cried with his head on his arms on the table. Then —well, you wouldn't believe it if any one but I or one o' the ministers 'd told you about it. He growed into a boy, all in a minute. I was always sore 'cause Joe 'd never been a boy like other boys. The only time I ever see him frolic was with Mabel in the buggy on the station-platform 'nd Tiny froze that out o' him pritty quick. But this time he jest turned inside out from happiness like a popped kernel o' corn 'nd all that showed was the clean white heart of a boy.

He took hold o' the two arms o' my old armchair, threw his feet up 'nd stood on his head in my lap, yellin' 'nd laughin' like the minister's boy when his father tossed him over the couch 'nd he kept askin' "jest once moey." Then Joe tumbled down again, ketched me by the hands, pulled me out o' the chair, danced me 'round the room 'til my old head was all a-whirligig. Then he stopped all of a sudden, looked into my eyes with that smile that used to get me so, 'nd said, "Colonel, you dear old boy, will you do somethin' for me?"

"Certin," said I, without askin' what, " 'twould be hard to say 'No' to you to-night."

I was like a gambler that would risk anythin' on the turnin' up o' a card layin' face down on the table—for, to tell the truth, I was 's crazy happy 's he was.

He laughed again 'nd bored his black head into my chest. "Go straight down to Frank's and tell Mabel—then come back and tell me what she says."

I whistled. "Do you want me skun alive? What do you think Tiny'll say?"

"I don't care what Tiny says. I want to know what Mabel will say. Anyhow, Tiny won't hurt you. *Frank won't let her!*" With that he grabbed my cap, squashed it down on my head 'nd pushed me out the door. "Go ahead now, and don't ask any questions. I'm going over to see Mr. Vickers but I'll be here when you get back."

CHAPTER XXI

TINY SURRENDERS

So I started off, hippety-hop, on my errand o' love. I had to chuckle to myself when I thought of the little pink fellow with a pinker ribbon around his plump little middle, and a bow-arrow in his hand that ushally carried such messages. "A sweet Cupid you are," said I to myself, "over sixty years old, too bow-legged to stop a pig in an alley, with a tough old gray mústash so long that the two ends look like cow's horns!" Then I thought o' somethin' else. "Well, if you ain't shaped up jest right for the job, you're dressed more decent than the bow-arrow kid ushally is, accordin' to the pictures."

I had to laugh again thinkin' o' what Prissy Payne the milliner, Kusco Munson, Dan Elton 'nd the other merchants along Main street would say if they caught sight of the little pink chap runnin' along the street. There'd been buzz 'nough if they knowed what *I* was hurryin' for. Altogether I had considerable fun with myself, on

the way to Frank Gilbert's store. All the same underneath I wa'n't so dead easy as I made believe. Goin' to Tiny's with a message from Joe wa'n't no joke. I kept goin' over Joe's words "Frank won't let her" but I couldn't make nothin' out of 'em.

I'd made up my mind to one thing in particular. I'd go to Frank 'nd tell him straight out what was in the wind. I wouldn't sneak around 'nd pass notes behind the hedge. I had a hope, that I couldn't rightly back up with argyment, that Frank was on our side. Anyhow, whether or no, I wa'n't goin' to Mabel over his head without givin' him a chance first. So I braced up, give my cap a pull, 'nd forged ahead, but I felt about as I did when we went into a charge. When I went into the store I was glad to find that Frank was alone. He was settin' at his desk, workin' at some books, figgerin' it looked like. "Hello, Frank," said I, "figgerin' up profits?" Frank looked up from his book, keepin' his finger on the line; "Hello, Colonel," said he, 'nd went back to his work without sayin' another word. I knowed from experience that if there was any more talk then I'd have to start it. So I did. I plunged right in, though I'll own up that the water was pritty cold. I've found out that if you're goin' in at all, it's jest as easy to go in head-first, all

over. It don't help none to shiver in, one toe at a time. So in I went kersplash. "Frank," said I, "I s'pose likely I ought to 've come provided with a cod-fish or a sofy-pillow, but as I didn't I'll have to take my chances without no armor plate."

"What's the matter?" asked Frank, as I stopped a minute, "have you been stealin' apples or did you run away from school?" "Neither one," said I, "but I'm as bad scairt as if I'd done both 'nd you was the schoolmaster. The fact is, Frank, I've got a message from Joe for Mabel 'nd I've come straight to you with it."

Frank grinned as I'd never seen him do before. "That's good of you, Colonel, but it wasn't necessary. It's none of my business. Why don't you go to Mabel?" That pretty near floored me. "Why, why, what d'you mean?" I stuttered, "none of your business? Ain't anything that has to do with Mabel your business? Ain't you her brother and guardeen? I ain't takin' messages 'nd sneakin' in to other folks's families—specially anybody as decent as you are, Frank Gilbert!" Frank laughed again. "You're a white man, all right, Colonel, but you're wrong about one thing." "What's that?" said I. "About my being Mabel's guardian. I'm her brother but not her guardian." "How do you

make that out?" said I. "Everybody thinks you're her guardeen."

"Well, everybody was right, up 'til to-day. My guardianship ends, for Mabel comes of age to-day, the eighteenth of December. Look at the heading of that paper." Sure enough, the paper he handed over was a report of his action as guardeen. "You see," said Frank, "when my father died Mabel was a little girl about the age of my girl now and father made me her guardian until her eighteenth birthday, which is to-day, as I told you. She is her own boss now, and your business is with her." But I wa'n't satisfied yet. "Accordin' to law," said I, "that may be all right, but knowin' how Tiny feels about Joe 'nd not knowin' how *you* feel, I kind o' hesitate,—anyhow, I'm goin' to tell you the message first." "Can you rightly do that?" said he, grinnin' again. "I'm not Mabel, you know." "Oh, I can tell you the message, all right. It's nothin' secret 'nd he'd be glad to have you know. I was jest to tell Mabel the news about Joe 'nd tell *him* what she says. I can tell you first, jest as well, and would 've anyway."

"All right," said he; "sit down there 'nd tell me before anybody comes in."

I plumped it right out. "Joe's goin' to college!" In all the years I've knowed Frank Gilbert that was the first time I ever see him excited.

He jumped out of his chair 'nd grabbed me by the arm: "What's that? Joe going to college? How'd that come about—tell me the whole story. If folks get to coming much, I'll lock up and pull down the curtains rather than not hear this through."

I told him the whole story of the afternoon, the meetin' of the four, Mr. Vickers's plan, everything.

When I got through Frank 'd fell back into his old silent way 'nd didn't say a word for quite a while. Finally he said: "Joe's message, then, was just to tell Mabel that he was going to college—and then tell him what Mabel says?" "Yes," said I, "that's the whole program as Joe put it to me."

"Well," said he, "I don't believe she'll say very much—to *you*—you'd better let her tell Joe what she thinks, for herself." For the second time that evenin' I was against the ropes 'nd breathin' hard. "But, Frank," said I, "what about Tiny? She'll mighty near take my head off if she gets wind o' my bein' around here in this messenger business. And I certin don't dare bring Joe here." Frank thought for quite a spell, went 'nd waited on a customer, the only one that 'd been in durin' our talk, 'nd set down again.

"Colonel," said he, after another long wait, "I'm not much of a hand to talk about family

matters" ("nor nothin' else," said I to myself) "but the time 's come for me to talk straight out to you and I'm going to do it right now. I've watched Joe Onderdonk since he first started out to be somebody and I want to say that he's the finest and brightest boy this town has produced in my day. And, of course, I think all the more of him because of the family. He's made a chance for himself and them too. So far as Mabel is concerned, there is no one I know or ever knew that I'd rather give her to. Now, in all this uproar, I've watched, listened and said nothing at all. I've said nothing to Mabel, nothing to Tiny except to quiet her once in a while, nothing to Joe except a friendly word now and then. I've acted that way because it's my nature; I'm no gabber but there's another reason. Most people seem to think that the world's run by tongue power—I don't believe it. Things work themselves out. They aren't pushed by the power of anybody's jaw.

"Now take this case. I didn't agree with Tiny and I was sure that all the while she was making a big mistake. But I knew I couldn't talk her out of it. Nobody could in a thousand years. The only way to deal with people that are on a wrong track is to let them go to the end of the road 'nd find out that they're wrong. Tiny's

come to the end of the wrong road and all I've got to do now is to show her where she is. I've saved about two years of talk." He got up 'nd stretched himself. "That's the longest speech I ever made or ever will make probably. Here comes my clerk." He lowered his voice. "I'm going to tell Tiny where she's *at*. If you'll come out into the summer-house, I'll send Mabel to you. It isn't exactly summer but you won't need to stay there long. Mabel will tell you what to do."

So Mabel came to me in the summer-house. I tell you, I felt quite romantic, but if I'd stayed there very long I'd 've had to spell it different. My limbs ain't what they was. Frank's place was L shaped, frontin' on two streets, the house at one end, the store at the other. The whole space, pretty much, from the back o' the house to the back o' the store was one big garden, fruit trees, trellises, flower beds 'nd shrubs everywhere. The summer-house was jest at the angle where the walk from the store to the house turns.

I waited a few minutes, with the moonlight pourin' all around me like quick-silver out of a big basin, when the back door of Frank's house opened and Mabel, head bare, but with a cloak drawed over her shoulders, come dancin' like a fairy—though a pretty big 'nd healthy lookin' one

I'll have to own, down the white-bordered walk. She come right up to me 'nd give me both her hands. "Frank says that you have a message for me, Colonel. What is it?" "Only this, Mabel," said I, lookin' at her face, which was sweeter'n any posy that ever blossomed in that garden and wonderin' in my unexperienced old heart how she'd look to Joe's eyes, in the moonlight. "Joe's goin' away to college. Some friends are helpin' him to do it so he can study to be a real doctor 'nd he wanted me to tell you about it." "Was that all?" said she, smilin' up into my face. "All," said I, "except that he wanted me to tell him what you said about it. What 're you goin' to say, Posie?" She looked at me 'nd there was somethin' in her eyes that no bachelor of my years 'nd misunderstandin' of women could ever spell out. "Just this, Colonel, so far as Joe is concerned. You say to him from me: 'Why don't you speak for yourself, John?' " She didn't wait for me to say a word as I wanted to 'cause I couldn't see why I should call 'Joe' 'John', 'nd I couldn't see no sense in it anyway, but she went right on. "To Joe's friend and more than father, who has made this great future possible for him, I have much to say that I can never put in words. But perhaps I can show you how I feel." With that she bent down 'nd, before I could stop her, kissed my hard

old hand, then turned and run like a scairt fawn up the walk to the house, but she called back over her shoulder, "Don't go home just yet. Frank will be back in a few minutes." I walked along the garden-path 'nd into the store, feelin' kind o' stunned like but I held the *kissed* hand with the other, so that my first kiss, that felt 's if a butter fly 'd lit there, wouldn't get away.

Frank come in a very few minutes. He was smilin' easy 'nd chewin' a straw, as ushal, 'nd didn't show the least sign o' havin' been through a fracas with Tiny. I wouldn't 've looked like that, I can tell you, if I'd had to face her with the message that Frank had for her when he went into the house—but then, I ain't Frank. *I'd* never 've dared to make up to her in the first place. We're gaited different in this world, that's sure! The place was full o' folks when Frank come in, so there wa'n't no chance for detailed instructions. He jest said: "It's all right. Go get Joe and bring him down here." So I started back on another errand, 'nd this time I was in Cupid's shoes for certin—or whatever he wore on his pink feet.

As I stepped out on to the side-walk somebody called me, jest above a whisper from the dark o' the little alley that leads from the street to Frank's cellar-way that's at the side of his store.

I went a little past the corner into the shadow, 'nd by the street lamp over across, that hit kind o' slantin' into the alley, I c'd see that it was Tiny with a shawl wrapped 'round her head 'nd shoulders. She'd evidently been cryin' but her eyes were shinin' 'nd she didn't look unhappy, not a bit. Jest as soon as I was out o' sight from the street she grabbed my arm with both hands 'nd shot words at me as if she hadn't more'n four minutes to live 'nd had a whole speech to make in that time. I can't give you the whole of it. There was too many words 'nd they was too much stuck together, but what Mr. Vickers calls the *jist* o' the whole business was: Could I forgive her 'nd did I think Joe w'd forgive her? "Forgive," said I, all balled up as I always am when folks, 'specially women, let their feelin's bust out like that—"what do you mean?" "I mean that I have been dreadful to you and to Joe. I knew all along that I was acting up foolish and wicked but I couldn't give up. Something *made* me. I don't know what it is. I'm just that way sometimes. When Frank told me to-night that Joe was going to college and have a chance in the world, I acted just as I did before, turned up my nose and was starting to be just as nasty as I had been before. Then he went after me as nobody in this world but Frank Gilbert can do and when he got through

I felt the way the road must when the scraper's been on it." She reached up and whispered: "Do you know what I did. I cried like mad at first and then something broke down inside and I didn't feel mean any more, and—then I *hugged* him, I was so glad. I guess I'm nothing but a big baby with a bad disposition—but I'm not always bad and I want *you* to forgive me and I want Joe to forgive me. Tell him before you bring him down."

Whew, my pen's out o' breath tryin' to keep up with this. Of course, I forgive her. I didn't have no strength left to do nothin' else. And then, some fuddled 'nd dizzy with what I'd went through, I started up the street for home.

Joe was settin' in the dinin' room when I come into the house but bobbed up like a jumpin'-jack when I opened the door. "Well, what did she say?" I shook my head. "Nothin' that I could make any sense out of. Joe," said I, settin' down in the chair, "I'm 'most ready to agree with the fellow over to the State 'Sylum at Wilson Landin' who said that he was in there because everybody else was crazy 'nd was afraid of the only sane man around. I've seen at least two crazy people to-night 'nd mebby more." "Never mind the crazy man and all that stuff," said Joe, "or you'll have *me* crazy. What did *Mabel* say?"

"'Tain't a question of what she said, Joe, and whether she knowed what she was sayin', but what she *meant*. We'll have to work it out together. Why should she tell me to say to you, name bein' Joe, 'Why don't you speak for yourself, *John?*'" By jolly, for the third time that night I was grabbed by a lunatic. "Did she say that?" said Joe, haulin' me around the room and dancin' up 'nd down. Then he dumped me into the chair 'nd grabbed his hat, "I'm goin' down there right now." "Are you?" says I. "What about Tiny?" That wilted him so quick that I hadn't the heart not to tell him. "It's all right, Boy; Frank's been your friend all along 'nd he's brought Tiny around. And, woman-like, in swingin' she's swung 'way around from north-west to south-east, 'nd she's for you now to the death. To make a long story short both of 'em want you to come down. It's safe enough for you to speak for yourself, 'Joe-John,' whatever that means, but they told *me* to bring you along. I guess they're afraid to let you loose all by yourself."

"All right," said he. "Come along if you must but let's go now!" It wa'n't much of an invite but I went.

I didn't see the meetin' between Joe 'nd Mabel. Neither did any one else but the Lord that made 'em for each other. Frank, Tiny 'nd I set in their

livin' room eatin' cake 'nd talkin' what Mr. Vickers calls "light nothin's" while the children was out in that summer-house—where Mabel 'nd I'd met a little while before.

After a while they come in, hand in hand, Joe walkin' on air 'nd Mabel flushed 'nd dewy like a rose in a June mornin'. We was all a little embarrassed, I guess, until I cracked the ice in the pitcher by sayin': "Well, Joe, did you speak for yourself, John?" Then everybody laughed 'nd the new family party all mixed in, as homelike 's you please, to talk over Joe's plans for the big future that was callin' him up 'nd out. And, d'you know, I really believe that Tiny was pretty near the happiest o' the lot of us!

It was full midnight when I walked 'crosst the lawn 'nd tapped on Mr. Vickers's study window. He was there workin' on some paper he was writin' 'nd let me in. I told him what 'd happened 'nd at the end I said: "Now you wouldn't 've expected any o' the things that's happened in this string. You wouldn't expect Herm' Onderdonk's boy to be what Joe is. You wouldn't think that he'd come all through his troubles and get the chance you're givin' him. You wouldn't think that a girl like Mabel w'd stand by him so, through thick 'nd thin. And particular, you wouldn't expect Tiny Gilbert to give in so quick

'nd complete. Now, would you?" Mr. Vickers stood leanin' his elbow on his white mantel-piece 'nd looked down at me. Takin' a big puff 'nd blowin' it out, he said, "Colonel, to all that there's just one answer."

"What is it?" said I.

"You never can tell," said Mr. Vickers.

THE END