

Lewis Alfred Henry

When Men Grew Tall, or The Story Of Andrew Jackson



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Содержание

CHAPTER I – SALISBURY AND THE LAW	5
CHAPTER II – THE ROWAN HOUSE SUPPER	8
CHAPTER III – THE BLOOMING RACHEL	11
CHAPTER IV – COLONEL WAIGHTSTILL AVERY OFFENDS	13
CHAPTER V – THE WINNING OF A WIFE	16
CHAPTER VI – DEAD-SHOT DICKINSON	19
CHAPTER VII – HOW THE GENERAL FOUGHT	22
CHAPTER VIII – ENGLAND AND GRIM-VISAGED WAR	25
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

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CHAPTER I – SALISBURY AND THE LAW

IN this year of our Lord's grace, 1787, the ancient town of Salisbury, seat of justice for Rowan County, and the buzzing metropolis of its region, numbers by word of a partisan citizenry eight hundred souls. Its streets are unpaved, and present an unbroken expanse of red North Carolina clay from one narrow plank sidewalk to another. In the summer, if the weather be dry, the red clay resolves itself into blinding brick-red dust. In the spring, when the rains fall, it lapses into brick-red mud, and the Salisbury streets become bottomless morasses, the despair of travelers. Just now, it being a bright October afternoon and a shower having paid the town a visit but an hour before, the streets offer no suggestion of either mud or dust, but are as clean and straight and beautiful as a good man's morals. Trees rank either side, and their branches interlock overhead. These make every street a cathedral aisle, groined and arched in leafy green.

In one of the suburbs, that is to say about pistol shot from the town's commercial center, stands a two-story mansion. It is painted white, and thereby distinguished above its neighbors, and has a heavily columned veranda all across its wide face. This edifice is the residence of Spruce McCay, a foremost member of the Rowan County bar.

In a corner of the lawn, which unfolds verdantly in front of the house, is a one-story one-room structure, the law office of Spruce McCay. Inside are two or three pine desks, much visited of knives in the past, and a half-dozen ramshackle chairs, which have seen stronger if not better days. Also there is a collection of shelves; and these latter hold scores of law books, among which "Blackstone's Commentaries," "Coke on Littleton," and "Hales's Pleas of the Crown" are given prominent place. The books show musty and dog-eared, and it is many years since the youngest among them came from the printing press.

On this October afternoon, the office has but one occupant. He is tall, being six feet and an inch, and so slim and meager that he seems six inches taller. Besides, he stands as straight as a lance, with nothing of stoop to his narrow shoulders, and this has the effect of augmenting his height.

The face is a boy's face. It is likewise of the sort called "horse"; with hollow cheeks and lantern jaws. The forehead is high and narrow. The yellow hair is long, and tied in a cue with an eelskin – for eelskins are according to the latest fashionable command sent up from Charleston. The redeeming feature to the horse face is the eyes. These are big and blue and deep, and tell of a mighty power for either love or hate. They are Scotch-Irish eyes, loyal eyes, steadfast eyes, and of that inveterate breed which if aroused can outstare, outdomineer Satan.

As adding to the horse face a look of command, which sets well with those blue eyes – so capable of tenderness and ferocity – is a high predatory nose. The mouth, thin-lipped and wide, is replete of what folk call character, but does nothing to soften a general expression which is nothing if not iron. And yet the last word is applicable only at times. The horse face never turns iron-hard unless danger presses, or perilous deeds are to be done. In easier, relaxed hours one finds no sternness there, but gayety and lightness and a love of pleasure.

In dress the horse-faced boy is rather the fop, with a bottle-green surtout of latest cut, high-collared, long-tailed, open to display a flowered waistcoat of as many hues as May, from which struggles a ruffle stiff with starch. The horsefaced boy has his predatory nose buried in a law book. This is as it should be, for he is a student of the learned Spruce McCay.

There comes a step at the door; the horsefaced boy takes his nose from between the covers of the book. Spruce McCay walks in, and throws himself carelessly into a seat. He is a square, hearty man, with nose up-tilted and eager, as though somewhere in the distance it sniffed an orchard. He is of middle years, and well arrived at that highest ground, just where the pathway of life begins to slope downward toward the final yet still distant grave.

Spruce McCay glances at a paper or two on his desk. Then, shoving all aside, he fills and lights a corn-cob pipe. Through the smoke rings he surveys the horse-faced boy; plainly he meditates a communication.

“Andy, I’ve been thinking you over.”

Andy says “Yes?” expectantly.

“You should cross the mountains.”

The blue eyes take on a bluer glint, and light up the horse face like azure lamps.

“Yes, a new country is the place for you. You are now about to be admitted to practice law; not because you know law, but for the reason that I have recommended it. As I say, you have little law knowledge; but you possess courage, brains, perseverance, honesty, prudence and divers other traits, which you take from your Carrickfergus ancestors. These should carry you farther in the wilderness than any knowledge of the books.”

The predatory nose snorts, and the horse face begins to glow resentfully.

“You think I know no law?”

“No more than does Necessity! Not enough to keep you from being laughed at in Rowan County! How should you? Your attention and your interest have both run away to other things. I’ve watched you for two years past. You are deep in the lore of cockfighting, but guiltless of the Commentaries of our worthy Master Blackstone. If I were to ask you for the Rule in Shelly’s Case, you would be posed. At the same time you could expound every rule that governs a horse race. In brief you are accomplished in many gentlemanly things, while as barren of law learning as a Hottentot. Now if you were a lad of fortune, instead of being as poor as the crows, you might easily cut a figure of elegant idleness on the North Carolina circuits. But you lack utterly of that money required to gild and make tolerable your ignorance here at home. In the woods along the Cumberland, that is to say in the Nashville and Jonesboro courts, where ignorance and poverty are the rule, your deficiencies will count for trifles. Also you will be surrounded by conditions that promote courage, honesty and quickness to a first importance. On the Cumberland the fact that you are a dead shot with rifle or pistol, and can back the most unmanageable horse that ever looked through a bridle, will place you higher in the confidence of men than would all the law that Hobart, Hales and Hawkins ever knew. Now don’t get angry. Think over what I’ve said; the longer you look at it, the more you’ll feel that I am right. I’ll see that you are given your sheepskin as a lawyer; and, when you decide to migrate, I’ll have you commissioned in that new country as attorney for the state. This last will send you headlong into the midst of a backwoods practice, where those native virtues you own should find a field for their exercise, and your talents for cockfighting and horse racing, added to your absolute genius for firearms, be sure to advance you far.”

Spruce McCay raps the ashes from his corn-cob pipe. Just then one of the house negroes taps at the door, as preliminary to intruding a respectful head. The respectful head announces that visitors have arrived at the big white mansion. Spruce McCay at this quits the office, and the horse-faced Andy finds himself alone.

For one hour he ponders the unpalatable words of his worthy master. His vanity has been hurt; his self-love ruffled. None the less he feels that a deal of truth lies tucked away in what Spruce McCay has said. Besides a plunge into the untried wilderness rather matches his taste, and a promised state’s attorneyship is not to be despised.

As the horse-faced Andy ruminates these things, laughter and much joyous clatter is heard at the door. This time it is his two fellow students, Crawford and McNairy. These young gentlemen have

been out with their guns, and now present themselves with a double backload of quails as the fruits of it. The pair begin vociferously to inform the horse-faced Andy concerning their day's adventures. He halts the conversational flow with a repressive lift of the hand.

“Gentlemen,” says he, with a vast affectation of dignity, and as though sixty were the years of each instead of twenty, “I desire your company at supper in my rooms. Come at 7 o'clock. I shall have news for you – news, and a proposition.”

CHAPTER II – THE ROWAN HOUSE SUPPER

THE horse-faced Andy precedes the coming of his two friends to that supper by two hours. As he moves up the street toward the Rowan House, fair faces beam on him and fair hands wave him a salutation from certain Salisbury verandas. In return he doffs his hat with an exaggerated politeness, which becomes him as the acknowledged beau of the town. One cannot blame those beaming fair faces and those saluting hands. Slim, elegant, confident with a kind of polished cockyness that does not ill become his years, our horse-faced one possesses what the world calls “presence.” No one will look on him without being impressed; he is congenitally remarkable, and to see him once is to ever afterward expect to hear him. Besides, for all his foppishness, there is a scar on his sandy head, and a second on his hand, which were made by an English saber when he had no more than entered upon his teens. Also he has shed English blood to pay for those scars; and in a day which still heaves and tosses with the ground swells of the Revolution, such stark matters brevet one to the respect of men and the love of women.

The foppish, horse-faced Andy strides into the Rowan House. In the long-room he meets mine host Brown, who has fame as a publican, and none as a sinner, throughout North Carolina.

“Supper in my rooms, Mr. Brown,” commands our hero; “supper for three. Have it hot and ready at sharp seven. Also let us have plenty of whisky and tobacco.”

Mine host Brown says that all shall be as ordered.

The foppish Andy, with that grave manner of dignity which laughs at his boyish twenty years, explains to his landlord that he will call for his bill in the morning.

“Have my horse, Cherokee,” he says, “well groomed and saddled. To-morrow I leave Salisbury.”

“Going West?”

“West,” returns Andy.

“As to the bill,” ventures mine host Brown, “would you like to play a game of all-fours, and make it double or nothing?”

Andy the horse-faced hesitates.

“You have such vile luck,” he says, as though remonstrating with mine host Brown for a fault. “It seems shameful to play with you, since you never win.”

Mine host Brown looks sheepishly apologetic.

“For one as eager to play as I am,” he responds, “it does look as though I ought to know more about the game. However, since it’s your last night, we might as well preserve a record.”

Andy the horse-faced yields to the rabid anxiety of mine host Brown to gamble. The game shall be played presently; meanwhile, there is an errand which takes him to his rooms.

Andy goes to his rooms; mine host Brown, after preparing a table in the long-room for the promised game, saunters fatly – being rotund as a publican should be – into the kitchen, to leave directions concerning that triangular supper. There he encounters his wife, as rotund as himself, supervising the energies of a phalanx of black Amazons, who form the culinary forces of the Rowan House.

“Young Jackson leaves in the morning, mother,” observes mine host Brown to Mrs. Brown, whom he always addresses as “mother.”

“For good?” asks Mrs. Brown, who is singeing the pin feathers from a chicken of much fatness, and exceeding yellow as to leg.

“Oh, I knew he was going,” returns mine host Brown, rather irrelevantly. “Spruce Mc-Cay told me that he was about to advise him to emigrate to the western counties. Spruce says the Cumberland country is just the place for him.”

“And now I suppose,” remarks Mrs. Brown, “you’ll let him win a good-by game of cards, to square his bill.”

“Why not?” returns mine host Brown. “He’s got no money; never had any money. You yourself said, when he came here, to give him his board free, because you knew and loved his dead mother. Now the Christian thing is to let him win it. In that way his pride is saved; at the same time it gives me amusement.”

“Well, Marmaduke,” says Mrs. Brown, moving off with the yellow-legged fowl, “I’m sure I don’t care how you manage, only so you don’t take his money.”

“There never was a chance, mother. He never has any money, after his clothes are bought.”

The game of all-fours is played; and is won by Andy of the horse face, who thereby rounds off a run of card-luck that has continued unbroken for two years.

“It looks as though I’d never beat you!” exclaims mine host Brown, pretending sadness and imitating a sigh.

“You ought never to gamble,” advises the horse-faced Andy solemnly.

Mine host Brown produces his bill, wherein the charges for board, lodging, laundry, tobacco, and whisky in pints, quarts and gallons are set down on one side, to be balanced and acquitted by divers sums lost at all-fours, the same being noted opposite.

“There you are! All square!” says mine host Brown.

“But the charges for to-night’s supper?”

“Mother” – meaning Mrs. Brown – “says the supper is to be with her compliments.”

Steaming hot, the supper comes promptly at seven. It is followed, steaming hot, by unlimited whisky punch. Pipes are lighted, and, with glasses at easy hand, the three boys draw about the fire. The punch, the pipes, and the crackling log fire are very comfortable adjuncts on an October night.

“And now,” cries Crawford, who is full of life and interest, “now for the news and the proposition!”

McNairy nods owlsh assent to the words of his volatile friend. He intends one day to be a judge, and, while quite as lively as Crawford, seizes on occasions such as this to practice his features in a formidable woolsack gravity.

“First,” observes Andy, soberly sipping his punch, “let me put a question: What is my standing in Rowan County?”

“You are the recognized authority,” cries Crawford, “on dog fighting, cockfighting, and horse racing.”

McNairy nods.

“Humph!” says Andy. Then, on the heels of a pause: “And what should you say were my chief accomplishments?”

Again Crawford takes it upon himself to reply.

“You ride, shoot, run, jump, wrestle, dance and make love beyond expression.”

McNairy the judicial nods.

“Humph!” says Andy.

The trio puff and sip in silence.

“You say nothing for my knowledge of law?” This from the disgruntled Andy, with a rising inflection that is like finding fault.

“No!” cry the others in hearty concert.

“You wouldn’t believe us if we did,” adds McNairy of the future woolsack.

“Neither would the Judge,” returns Andy cynically. “The Judge” is the title by which the three designate their master, Spruce Mc-Cay. Andy goes on: “The news I promised is this. To-morrow I leave Salisbury. The Judge has recommended my admission to the bar, and I shall take the oath and get my license before I start. I shall transfer myself to the region along the Cumberland, where I am told a barrister of my singular lack of ability should find plenty of practice.”

“Why do you leave old Rowan?” asks woolsack McNairy, beginning to take an interest.

“Because I have no education, less law, and still less money. It seems that these are conditions precedent to staying in Rowan with credit.”

“Well,” cries McNairy the judicial, grasping Andy’s long bony hand, “you have as much education, as much law, and as much money as I. Under the circumstances I shall go with you.”

“And I,” breaks in the lively Crawford, “since I have none of those ignorant and poverty-eaten qualifications you name, but on the contrary am rich, wise and learned – I shall remain here. When the wilderness casts you fellows out, come back and I shall welcome you. Pending which – as Parson Hicks would say – receive my blessing.”

The evening wears on amid clouds of tobacco smoke and rivers of punch. At the close the three take hold of hands, and sing a farewell song very badly. Then, since they look on the evening as a sacred one, they wind up by breaking the pipes they have smoked and the glasses they have drunk from, to save them in the hereafter from profane and vulgar uses. At last, rather deviously, they make their various ways to bed.

The next day, young Andrew Jackson, barrister and counselor at law, with all his belongings – save the rifle he carries, and the pistols in his saddle holsters – crowded into a pair of saddlebags, rides out of Salisbury on his bay horse Cherokee. He will stop at Martinsville for a space, awaiting the judicial McNairy.

Then the pair are to set their willing, hopeful faces for the Cumberland.

As Andy the horse-faced rides away that October afternoon, Henry Clay is a fatherless boy of nine, living with his mother at the Virginia Slashes; Daniel Webster, a sickly child of six, is toddling about his father’s New Hampshire farm; John C. Calhoun is a baby four years old in a South Carolina farmhouse; John Quincy Adams, nineteen and just home from a polishing trip to France, is a Harvard student; Martin Van Buren, aged four, is playing about the tap room of his Dutch father’s tavern at Kinder-hook; while Aaron Burr, fortunate, foremost and full of promise, has already won high station at the New York bar. None of these has ever heard of Andy the horse-faced, nor he of them; yet one and all they are fated to grow well acquainted with one another in the years to come, and before the curtain is rung finally down on that tragedy-comedy-farce which, played to benches ever full and ever empty, men call Existence.

CHAPTER III – THE BLOOMING RACHEL

NASHVILLE is the merest scrambling huddle of log houses. The most imposing edifice is a blockhouse, built of logs squared by the broadaxe. It is the home of the widow Donelson; and, since it is all her husband left her when the Indians shot him down at the plow-stilts, and because she must live, the widow Donelson has turned the blockhouse into a boarding house.

With the widow Donelson dwells her daughter Rachel, a beautiful brunette of twenty, and the belle of the Cumberland. Rachel is vivacious and bright; and, while there is much confusion among her nouns, pronouns, verbs and adverbs in the matters of case, number, and tense, she shines forth an indomitable conversationist. With frontier freedom she laughs with everybody, jests with everybody, delights in everybody's admiration; and this does not please her husband, Lewis Robards, who is ignorant, suspicious, narrow, lazy, shiftless, jealous, and generally drunk. One time and another he has accused Rachel of a tenderness for every man in the settlement, and their quarrels have been frequent and fierce.

It is evening; the widow Donelson is preparing supper for the half dozen boarders, assisted by the blooming Rachel. The moody Robards, half soaked in corn whisky, sits by the open door, ear on the conversation, eye on the not-over-distant woods. If the worthless Robards will not work, at least he may maintain a halfbright lookout for murderous Indians; and he does.

The widow Donelson glances across from the corn bread she is mixing.

"The runner who came on ahead," she says, addressing the blooming Rachel, "reports the party as being due to-morrow. Mr. Jackson, the new State's Attorney, who will come with it, is to board and lodge with us."

The blooming Rachel looks brightly up. The drunken Robards likewise looks up; but his face is gloomy with incipient jealousy.

"A Mr. Jackson, eh?" he sneers. Then, to the blooming Rachel: "It's mighty likely you'll find in him a new lover to try your wiles on."

The blooming Rachel colors and her black eyes snap, but she holds her tongue. The widow Donelson is also silent. The mother and daughter have found wordlessness the best return to those insults, which it is the habit of the jealous drunkard to hurl at his pretty wife.

The runner made true report, and the party in which travels the horse-faced Andy makes its appearance next day. Tall, slender, elegant, self-possessed, and with a manner which marks him above the common, he is disliked by the drunken Robards on sight. When he declines to drink with that sot, the dislike crystallizes into hatred. The outrageous jealousy of Robards has found a new reason for its green-eyed existence, and he already goes drunkenly pondering the slaughter of the horse-faced Andy. Since he will never advance beyond the pondering stage, for certain reasons called "craven" among men of clean courage, his homicidal lucubrations are the less important.

Andy the horse-faced does not notice Robards. He does, however, notice with a thrill of pleasure the beautiful Rachel, and is glad to find his lines are down in such pleasant places.

He is vastly taken with the boarding house of the widow Donelson, and incautiously says as much. He praises her corn pone and fried squirrel, and vehemently avers that her hog and hominy are the best he ever ate.

Rachel the blooming does not allow her husband's jealousy to interrupt hospitality, and piles high the young State's Attorney's plate with these delicacies. She even brings out a store of wild honey and cream – dainties sparse and few and far between in these rude regions. She calls this "hospitality"; her jealous drunkard of a husband calls it "making advances." He says that in the course of a long, and he might have added misspent, life, he has observed that a coquette, with designs on a man's heart, never fails to begin by making an ally of his stomach.

"Hence," says the drunken deductionist, "that honey and cream."

That night, after Rachel the blooming and her drunken husband retire, a bitter quarrel breaks out between them. It rages with such fury that the bicker arouses one Overton, who occupies the adjoining chamber. Mr. Overton is a severe character, firm and clear as to his rights. He objects to having his rest disturbed, alleging that he has troubles of his own. Taking final offense at the language of the brute Robards, which is more emphatic than nice, he gets his pistols. Rapping on the intervening wall to invoke attention, he informs that vituperative drunkard of his intention to instantly put him (Robards) to death, should he so much as raise his voice above a whisper for the balance of the night.

Rachel seeks her mother, and the jealous drunkard quiets down. He is not unacquainted with Mr. Overton, who is reputed to possess as restless a brace of hair triggers as ever owned flint and pan. Altogether he is precisely the one whose word would carry weight with such as Robards, and, on the back of his interference in the domestic affairs of that inebriate, a great peace settles upon the blockhouse of the widow Donelson which abides throughout the night.

As for the horse-faced State's Attorney, he knows nothing of the differences between Rachel and the jealous Robards. He does not sleep in the blockhouse, having been appointed to a blanket couch in the "Bunk House," a separate dormitory structure which stands at a little distance.

During breakfast, the blooming Rachel again freights daintily deep the plate of the young State's Attorney. Thereupon the favored one beams his thanks, while behind his back as though to soothe his hate, the malevolent Rob-ards sits cleaning a rifle, casting upon him the while an occasional midnight look. Just across is the taciturn Overton, proprietor of those restless hair triggers, wondering over his bacon and eggs where this drama of love and threatened murder is to end.

CHAPTER IV – COLONEL WAIGHTSTILL AVERY OFFENDS

NOW, when the horse-faced Andy finds himself in the Cumberland country, he begins to look about him. Being a lawyer, his instinct leads him to consider those opposing ranks of commerce, the debtor and creditor classes. He finds the former composed of persons of the highest honor. Also, their honor is sensitive and easily touched, being sensitive and touchy in proportion as the bulk of their debts is increased. The debtor class, as the same finds representation about those two Cumberland forums, Nashville and Jonesboro, holds it to be the privilege of every gentleman, when dunned, to challenge and if practicable kill his creditor honorably at ten paces.

So firm indeed is the debtor class in this belief, that the creditor class, less warlike and with more to lose, seldom presents a bill. Neither does it refuse the opposition credit; for the debtor class also clings to the no less formidable theory, that to refuse credit is an insult quite as stinging as a dun direct.

In short, the horse-faced Andy discovers the region to be a very Arcadia for debtors. Their credit is without a limit and their debts are never due. He resolves to disturb these commercial Arcadians; he will break upon them as a Satan of solvency come to trouble their debt paradise.

The horse-faced Andy, as has been noted, is Scotch-Irish. Being Irish, his honor is as sensitive and his soul as warlike as are those of the most debt-eaten individual along the Cumberland. Being Scotch, he believes debts should be paid, and holds that a creditor may ask for his money without forfeiting life. He urges these views in tavern and street; and thereupon the creditors, taking heart, come to him with their claims. He accepts the trusts thus proffered; as a corollary, having now flown in the face of the militant debtor class, he is soon to prove his manhood.

The horse-faced Andy files a declaration for a client, on a mixed claim based upon bacon, molasses and rum. The defendant, a personage yclept Irad Miller, genus debtor, species keel boatman, is a very patrician among bankrupts, boasting that he owes more and pays less than any man south of the Ohio river. Also, having been already offended by the foppish frivolity of that ruffled shirt and grass-green surtout, he is outraged now, when the ruffled grass-green one brings suit against him.

Breathing fire and smoke, the insulted Irad lowers his horns, and starts for the horse-faced Andy. His methods at this crisis are characteristic of the Cumberland; he merely grinds the horse-faced Andy's polished boot beneath his heel, mentioning casually the while that he himself is "half hoss, half alligator," and can drink the Cumberland dry at a draught.

This is fighting talk, and the horse-faced Andy so accepts it. He surveys the truculent Irad with the cautious tail of his eye, and finds him discouragingly tall and broad and thick. The survey takes time, but the injured Irad prevents it being wasted by again grinding the polished toes.

Andy the strategic suddenly seizes a rail from the nearby fence, and charges the indebted one. The end of the rail strikes that insolvent in what is vulgarly known as the pit of the stomach, and doubles him up like a two-foot rule. At that, he who is "half hoss, half alligator," gives forth a screech of which an injured wild cat might be proud, and perceiving the rail poised for a second charge makes off. This small adventure gives the horse-faced Andy station, and an avalanche of claims pours in upon him.

Having established himself in the confidence of common men, it still remains with our horsefaced hero to conquer the esteem of the bar. The opportunity is not a day behind his collision with that violent one of equine-alligator genesis. In good sooth, it is an offshoot thereof.

The bruised Irad's case is up for trial. His counsel, Colonel Waightstill Avery, hails from a hamlet, called Morganton, on the thither side of the Blue Ridge. Colonel Waightstill is of middle

age, pompous and high, and the youth of Andy – slim, lean, eager, horse face as hairless as an egg – offends him.

“Your honor,” cries Colonel Waightstill, addressing the bench, “who, pray, is the opposing counsel?” The boyish Andy stands up. “Must I, your honor,” continues the outraged Colonel Waightstill, “must I cross forensic blades with a child? Have I journeyed all the long mountain miles from Morganton to try cases with babes and sucklings? Or perhaps, your honor” – here Colonel Waightstill waxes sarcastic – “I have mistaken the place. Possibly this is not a court, but a nursery.”

Colonel Waightstill sits down, and the horsefaced Andy, on the leaf of a law book, indites the following:

August 12, 1788.

Sir: When a man's feelings and charector are injured he ought to seek speedy redress. My charector you have injured; and further you have Insulted me in the presunce of a court and a large aujence. I therefore call upon you as a gentleman to give me satisfaction for the same; I further call upon you to give me an answer immediately without Equivocation and I hope you can do without dinner until the business is done; for it is consistent with the character of a gentleman when he injures a man to make speedy reparation; therefore I hope you will not fail in meeting me this day.

From yr Hbl st.,

Andw Jackson.

The horse-faced one spells badly; but Marlborough did, Washington does and Napoleon will spell worse. It is a notable fact that conquering militant souls have ever been better with the sword than with the spelling book.

The judge is a gentleman of quick and apprehensive eye, as frontier jurists must be.

Also, he is of finest sensibilities, and can appreciate the feelings of a man of honor. He sees the note shoved across to Colonel Waightstill by the horse-faced Andy, and at once orders a recess. The judge, with delicate tact, says the Cumberland bottoms are heavy with the seeds of fever, and that it is his practice to consume prudent rum and quinine at this hour.

While the judge goes for his rum and quinine, Colonel Waightstill and the horse-faced Andy repair to a convenient ravine at the rear of the log courthouse. A brother practitioner attends upon Colonel Waightstill, while the interests of the horse-faced Andy are conserved by Mr. Overton, who espouses his cause as a fellow boarder at the widow Donelson's. Mr. Overton has with him his invaluable hair triggers; and, since he wins the choice, presents them politely, butt first, to the second of Colonel Waightstill, who selects one for his principal. The ground is measured and pegged; the fight will be at ten paces.

As Mr. Overton gives the horse-faced Andy his weapon, he asks:

“What can you do at this distance?”

“Snuff a candle.”

“Good! Let me offer a word of advice: Don't kill; don't even wound. The *casus belli* does not justify it, and you can establish your credit without. Should your adversary require a second shot, it will then be the other way. His failure to apologize, coupled with a demand for another shot, should mean his death warrant.”

The horse-faced Andy approves this counsel. And yet, if he must not wound he may warn, and to that admonitory end sends his ounce of lead so as to all but brush the ear of Colonel Waightstill. That gentleman's bullet flies safely wild. After the exchange of shots, the seconds hold a consultation. Mr. Overton says that his principal must receive an apology, or the duel shall proceed.

Colonel Waightstill's second talks with that gentleman, and finds him much softened as to mood. The flying lead, brushing his ear like the wing of a death angel, has set him thinking. He now distrusts that simile of “babes and sucklings,” and is even ready to concede the intimation that the horse-faced Andy is a child to be far-fetched. Indeed, he has conceived a vast respect, almost an affection, for his youthful adversary, and will not only apologize, but declares that, for purposes of

litigation, he shall hereafter regard the horse-faced Andy as a being of mature years. All this says Colonel Waight-still, under the respectful spell of that flying lead; and if not in these phrases, then in words to the same effect.

The horse-faced Andy shakes hands with Colonel Waightstill, and they return to the log courthouse, where the rum-and-quinine jurist is pleasantly awaiting them. The trial is again called, and the horse-faced Andy secures a verdict. What is of more consequence, he secures the respect of bench and bar; hereafter no one will so much as dream of disputing his word, should he lay claim to the years of Methuselah. That careful grazing shot at Colonel Waightstill, ages the horse-faced Andy wondrously in Cumberland estimation.

Good fortune is not yet done with Andy of the horse face. Within hours after the meeting in that convenient ravine, he is given new opportunity to fix himself in the good regard of folk.

It is on the verge of midnight. A gentleman, unsteady with his cups, seeks temporary repose on the grassy litter which surrounds the tavern haystack. Being comfortable, and safe against a fall, he of the too many cups refreshes himself with his pipe. Pipe going, he falls into thought; and next, in the midst of his preoccupation, he sets the hay afire. It burns like tinder, and the flames, wind-flaunted, catch the thatched roof of the stable.

The settlement is threatened; the wild cry of "Fire!" is raised; from tavern and dwelling, men, women and children come trooping forth, clad in little besides looks of terror. The scene is one of confusion and misdirection; no one knows what to do. Meanwhile, the flames leap from the stable to the tavern itself.

It is Andy the horse-faced who brings order out of chaos. Born for leadership, command comes easy to him. He calls for buckets, and with military quickness forms a double line of men between the river and the flames. The full buckets chase each other along one line, while the empties are returned by the second to be refilled. When the lines are working in watery concord, he organizes the balance of the community into a wet-blanket force. By his orders, coverlets, tablecloths, blankets, anything, everything that will serve, are dipped in the river and spread on exposed roofs. In an encouragingly short space, the fire is checked and the settlement saved.

While the excitement is at its height, that pipe incendiary, who started the conflagration, breaks through the double line of water passers, and begins to give orders. He is as wild as was Nero at the burning of Rome. Finding this person disturbing the effective march of events, the horse-faced Andy – who is nothing if not executive – knocks him down with a bucket. The Cumberland Nero falls into the river, and the ducking, acting in happy conjunction with the stunning thump, brings him to the shore a changed and sobered man. That bucket promptitude, wherewith he deposed Nero, becomes one of those several immediate arguments which make mightily for the communal advancement of Andy the horse-faced.

CHAPTER V – THE WINNING OF A WIFE

ALL these energetic matters happen at aforesaid, is dancing attendance upon the court. The fame of them travels to Nashville in advance of his return, and works a respectful change toward him in the attitude of the public. Hereafter he is to be called “Andrew” by ones who know him well; while others, less acquainted, will on military occasions hail him as “Cap’n” and on civil ones as “Square.” On every hand, reference to him as “horse-faced” is to be dropped; wherefore this history, the effort of which is to follow close in the wake of the actual, will from this point profit by that polite example.

The household at the widow Donelson’s learns of the Jonesboro valor and executive promptitude of the young State’s Attorney. The blooming Rachel rejoices, while her Jonesboro, where the horse-faced one, in the interests of the creditor class drunken spouse turns sullen. His jealousy of Andrew is multiplied, as that young gentleman’s fame increases. The fame, however, is of a sort that seriously dislikes the drunken Robards, who is at heart a hare. Wherefore, while his jealousy grows, he no longer makes it the tavern talk, as was his sottish wont.

Affairs run briskly prosperous with Andrew, and he finds himself engaged in half the litigation of the Cumberland. There is little money, but the region owns a currency of its own. Some wise man has said that the circulating medium of Europe is gold, of Africa men, of Asia women, of America land. The client’s of Andrew reward his labors with land, and many a “six-forty,” by which the slang of the Cumberland identifies a section of land, becomes his. Finally he owns such an array of wilderness square miles, polka-dotted about between the Cumberland and the Mississippi, that the aggregate acreage swells into the thousands. Those acres, however, are hardly more valuable than are the brown leaves wherewith each autumn carpets them.

While the ardent Andrew is pushing his way at the bar, and accumulating “six-forties,” he continues to board at the widow Donelson’s.

The blooming Rachel delights in his society – so polished, so splendidly different from that of the drunkard Robards! Once or twice, too, when Andrew, in his saddlebag excursions from court to court, has a powder-burning brush with Indians and saves his sandy scalp by a narrowish margin, the red cheek of Rachel is seen to whiten. That is to say, the drunkard Robards sees it whiten; the purblind Andrew never once observes that mark of tender concern. The pistol repute of the decisive Andrew serves when he is by to stifle remark on the lip of the recreant Robards. But there come hours when the latter has the blooming Rachel to himself, at which time he raves like one demon-possessed. He avers that the unconscious Andrew is the lover of the blooming Rachel, and in so doing lies like an Ananias. However, the drunken one has the excuse of jealousy; which emotion is not only green-eyed but cross-eyed, and of all things – as history shows – most apt to mislead the accurate vision of folk.

Andrew overflows of sentiment, and often in moments of loneliness turns homesick. This is the more marvelous, since never from his very cradle days has he had a home. Being homesick – one may as well call it that, for want of a better word – he goes out to the orchard fence, a lonely spot, cut off from view by intercepting bushes, and devotes himself to melancholy. This melancholy, as often happens with high-strung, vanity-bitten young gentlemen, is for the greater part nothing more than the fomentations of his egotism and conceit. But Andrew does not know this truth, and wears a fine tragic air as one beset of what poets term “a nameless grief.”

One day the blooming Rachel discovers the melancholy Andrew, dreamily mournful by the orchard fence. She watches him unperceived, and her gentle bosom yearns over him. The blooming Rachel is not wanting in that taint of romanticism to which all border folk are born; and now, to see this Hector! – this lion among men! – so bent in sadness, moves her tenderly. At that it is only a kind of maternal tenderness; for the blooming Rachel has a wealth of mother love, and no children upon whom to lavish it. She stands looking at the melancholy one, and would give worlds if she might only take his head to her sympathetic bosom and cherish it.

The blooming Rachel approaches, and cheerily greets the gloomy one. She seeks to uplift his spirits. Under the sweet spell of her, he tells how wholly alone he is. He speaks of his mother and how her very grave is lost. He relates how the Revolution swallowed up the lives of his two brothers.

“And your father?”

“He was buried the week before I was born.”

The two stay by the orchard fence a long while, and talk on many things; but never once on love.

The drunken Robards, fiend-guided, gets a green-eyed glimpse of them. With that his jealousy receives added edge, and – the better to decide upon a course – he hurries to a grog-gery to pour down rum by the cup. Either he drinks beyond his wont, or that rum is of sterner impulse than common; for he becomes pot-valorous, and with curses vows the death of Andrew.

The drunken Robards, filled with rum to the brim, issues forth to execute his threats. He finds his victim still sadly by the orchard fence; but alone, since the blooming Rachel has been called to aid in supper-getting. The pot-valorous Robards bursts into a torrent of jealous recrimination.

The melancholy Andrew cannot believe his ears! His melancholy takes flight when he does understand, and in its stead comes white-hot anger.

“What! you scoundrel!” he roars. The blue eyes blaze with such ferocity that Robards the craven starts back. In a moment the other has control of himself. “Sir!” he grits, “you shall give me satisfaction!”

Robards the drunken says nothing, being frozen of fear. The enraged Andrew stalks away in quest of the taciturn Overton who owns those hair triggers.

“Let us take a walk,” says hair-trigger Overton, running his arm inside the lean elbow of Andrew. Once in the woods, he goes on: “What do you want to do?”

“Kill him! I would put him in hell in a second!”

“Doubtless! Having killed him, what then will you do?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Let me explain: You kill Robards. His wife is a widow. Also, because you have killed Robards in a quarrel over her, she is the talk of the settlement. Therefore, I put the question: Having made Rachel the scandal of the Cumberland, what will you do?”

There is a long, embarrassed pause. Presently Andrew lifts his gaze to the cool eyes of his friend.

“I shall offer her marriage. She shall, if she accept it, have the protection of my name.”

“And then,” goes on the ice-and-iron Overton, “the scandal will be redoubled. They will say that you and Rachel, plotting together, have murdered Robards to open a wider way for your guilty loves.”

Andrew takes a deep breath. “What would you counsel?” he asks.

“One thing,” – laying his hand on Andrew’s shoulder – “under no circumstances, not even to save your own life, must you slay Robards. You might better slay Rachel; since his death by your hand spells her destruction. Good people would avoid her as though she were the plague. Never more, on the Cumberland, should she hold up her head.”

That night the fear-eaten Robards solves the situation which his crazy jealousy has created. He starts secretly for the North. He tells two or three that he will never more call the blooming Rachel wife.

For a month there is much silence, and some restraint, at the widow Donelson’s. This condition wears away; and, while no one says so, everybody feels relaxed and relieved by the absence of the drunken Robards. No one names him, and there is tacit agreement to forget the creature. The drunken Robards, however, has no notion of being forgotten. Word comes down from above that he will return and reclaim his wife. At this the black eyes of Rachel sparkle dangerously.

“That monster,” she cries, “shall never kiss my lips, nor so much as touch my hand again!”

By advice of her mother, and to avoid the drunken Robards – who promises his hateful appearance with each new day – the blooming Rachel resolves to take passage on a keel boat for Natchez. Andrew, in deep concern, declares that he shall accompany her. He says that he goes to

protect her from those Indians who make a double fringe of savage peril along the Cumberland, the Ohio, and the Mississippi. Overton, the taciturn, shrugs his shoulders; the keel-boat captain is glad to have with him the steadiest rifle along the Cumberland, and says as much; the blooming Rachel is glad, but says so only with her eyes; the Nashville good people say nothing, winking in silence sophisticated eyes.

Robards the drunken, now when they are gone, plays the ill-used husband to the hilt. He seems to revel in the rôle, and, to keep it from cooling in interest, petitions the Virginia Legislature for a divorce. In course of time the news climbs the mountains, and descends into the Cumberland, that the divorce is granted; while similar word floats down to Natchez with the keel boats.

The slow story of the blooming Rachel's release reaches our two in Natchez. Thereupon Andrew leads Rachel the blooming before a priest; and the priest blesses them, and names them man and wife. That autumn they are again at the widow Donelson's; but the blooming Rachel, once Mrs. Robards, is now Mrs. Jackson.

Slander is never the vice of a region that goes armed to the teeth. Thus it befalls that now, when the two are back on the Cumberland, those sophisticated ones forget to wink. There comes not so much as the arching of a brow; for no one is so careless of life as all that. The whole settlement can see that the dangerous Andrew is watching with those steel-blue eyes.

At the first suggestion that his Rachel has been guilty of wrong, he will be at the throat of her maligner like a panther.

Time flows on, and a horrible thing occurs. There comes a new word that no divorce was granted by that Legislature; and this new word is indisputable. There *is* a divorce, one granted by a court; but, as an act of separation between Rachel the blooming and the drunken Robards, that decree of divorce is long months younger than the empowering act of the Richmond Legislature, which mistaken folk regarded as a divorce. The good priest's words, when he named our troubled two as man and wife, were ignorantly spoken. During months upon months thereafter, through all of which she was hailed as "Mrs. Jackson," the blooming Rachel was still the wife of the drunken Robards.

The blow strikes Andrew gray; but he says never a word. He blames himself for this shipwreck; where his Rachel was involved, he should have made all sure and invited no chances.

The injury is done, however; he must now go about its repair. There is a second marriage, at which the silent Overton and the widow Donelson are the only witnesses, and for the second time a priest congratulates our storm-tossed ones as man and wife. This time there is no mistake.

The young husband sends to Charleston; and presently there come to him over the Blue Ridge, the finest pair of dueling pistols which the Cumberland has ever beheld. They are Galway saw-handles, rifle-barreled; a breath discharges them, and they are sighted to the splitting of a hair.

"What are they for?" asks Overton the taciturn, balancing one in each experienced hand.

In the eyes of Andrew gathers that steel-blue look of doom. "They are to kill the first villain who speaks ill of my wife," says he.

CHAPTER VI – DEAD-SHOT DICKINSON

THE sandy-haired Andrew now devotes himself to the practice of law and the domestic virtues. In exercising the latter, he has the aid of the blooming Rachel, toward whom he carries himself with a tender chivalry that would have graced a Bayard. Having little of books, he is earnest for the education of others, and becomes a trustee of the Nashville Academy.

About this time the good people of the Cumberland, and of the regions round about, believing they number more than seventy thousand souls, are seized of a hunger for statehood. They call a constitutional convention at Knoxville, and Andrew attends as a delegate from his county of Davidson. Woolsack McNairy, his fellow student in the office of Spruce Mc-Cay, is also a delegate. The woolsack one has-realized that dream of old Salisbury, and is now a judge.

Andrew and woolsack McNairy are members of the committee which draws a constitution for the would-be commonwealth. The constitution, when framed, is brought by its authors into open convention, and wranglingly adopted. Also, “Tennessee” is settled upon for a name, albeit the ardent Andrew, who is nothing if not tribal, urges that of “Cumberland.”

The constitution goes, with the proposition of statehood, before Congress in Philadelphia; and, following a sharp fight, in which such fossilized ones as Rufus King oppose and such quick spirits as Aaron Burr sustain, the admission of “Tennessee,” the new State is created.

Its hunting-shirt citizenry, well pleased with their successful step in nation building, elect Andrew to the House of Representatives. A little later, he is taken from the House and sent to the Senate. There he meets with Mr. Jefferson, who is the Senate’s presiding officer, being vice-president of the nation, and that accurate parliamentarian and polished fine gentleman writes of him:

“He never speaks on account of the rashness of his feelings. I have seen him attempt it repeatedly, but as often choke with rage.” There also he encounters Aaron Burr; and is so far socially sagacious as to model his deportment upon that of the American Chesterfield, ironing out its backwoods wrinkles and savage creases, until it fits a *salon* as smoothly well as does the deportment of Burr himself. Our hero finds but one other man about Congress for whom he conceives a friendship equal to that which he feels for Aaron Burr, and he is Edward Livingston.

Andrew the energetic discovers the life of a senator to be one of dawdling uselessness, overlong drawn out; and says so. He anticipates the acrid Randolph of Roanoke, and declares that he never winds his watch while in Congress, holding all time spent there as wasted and thrown away.

Idleness rusts him; and, being of a temper even with that of best Toledo steel, he refuses to rust patiently. Preyed upon and carked of an exasperating leisure, which misfits both his years and his fierce temperament, he seeks refuge in what amusements are rife in Philadelphia. He goes to Mr. McElwee’s Looking-glass Store, 70 South Fourth Street, and pays four bits for a ticket to the readings of Mr. Fennell, who gives him Goldsmith, Thompson and Young. The readings pall upon him, and athirst for something more violent, he clinks down a Mexican dollar, witnesses the horsemanship at Mr. Rickett’s amphitheater, and finds it more to his horse-loving taste. When all else fails, he buys a seat in a box at the Old Theater in Cedar Street, and is entertained by the sleight of hand of wizard Signor Falconi. On the back of it all he grows heartily sick of the Senate, and of civilization, as the latter finds exposition in Philadelphia, and resigns his place and goes home.

When he arrives in Nashville, the Legislature – which still holds that he should be engaged upon some public work – elects him to the supreme bench...

{There are missing paragraphs which are not found in any online edition of this ebook}

...objectionable Mr. Bean with those Galway saw-handles; and that violent person surrenders unconditionally. In elucidating his sudden tameness and its causes, Mr. Bean subsequently explains to a disgusted admirer:

“I looks at the Jedge, an’ I sees shoot in his eye; an’ thar warn’t shoot in nary ‘nother eye in the crowd. So I says to myse’f, says I, ‘Old Hoss, it’s about time to sing small!’ An’ I does.”

Notwithstanding those leaden exchanges with the Governor, and the conquest of the discreet Mr. Bean, our jurist finds the bench inexpressibly tedious. At last he resigns from it, as he did from the Senate, and again retreats to private life.

Here his forethoughtful Scotch blood begins to assert itself, and he goes seriously to the making of money. With his one hundred and fifty slaves, he tills his plantation as no plantation on the Cumberland was ever tilled before; and the cotton crops he “makes” are at once the local boast and wonder. He starts an inland shipyard, and builds keel and flat boats for the river commerce with New Orleans. He opens a store, sells everything from gunpowder to quinine, broadcloth by the bolt to salt by the barrel, and takes his pay in the heterogeneous currency of the region, whereof ‘coon skins are a smallest subsidiary coin. Also, it is now that he is made Major General of Militia, an honor for which he has privily panted, even as the worn hart panteth for the water brook.

When he is a general, the blooming Rachel cuts and bastes and stitches a gorgeous uniform for her Bayard, in which labor of love she exhausts the Nashville supply of gold braid. Once the new General dons that effulgent uniform, which he does upon the instant it is completed, he offers a spectacle of such brilliancy that the bedazzled public talks facetiously of smoked glass. The new General in no wise resents this jest, being blandly tolerant of a backwoods sense of humor which suggests it. Besides, while the public has its joke, he has the uniform and his commission; and these, he opines, give him vastly the better of the situation.

Many friends, many foes, says the Arab, and now the popular young General finds his path grown up of enemies. There be reasons for the sprouting of these malevolent gentry. The General is the idol of the people. He can call them about him as the huntsman calls his hounds. At word or sign from him, they follow and pull down whatsoever man or measure he points to as his quarry of politics. This does not match with the ambitions of many a pushing gentleman, who is quite as eager for popular preference, and – he thinks – quite as much entitled to it, as is the General.

These disgruntled ones, baffled in their political advancement by the General, take darkling counsel among themselves. The decision they arrive at is one gloomy enough. They cannot shake the General’s hold upon the people. Nothing short of his death promises a least ray of relief. He is the sun; while he lives he alone will occupy the popular heavens. His destruction would mean the going down of that sun. In the night which followed, those lesser plotting luminaries might win for themselves some twinkling visibility.

It is the springtime of the malevolent ones’ conspiracy, and the plot they make begins to blossom for the bearing of its lethal fruit. There is in Nashville one Charles Dickinson. By profession he is a lawyer, albeit of practice intermittent and scant. In figure he is tall, handsome, graceful with a feline grace. If there be aught in the old Greek’s theory touching the transmigration of souls, then this Dickinson was aforetime and in another life a tiger. He is sinuous, powerful, vain, narrowly cruel, with a sleek purring gloss of manner over all. Also, he is of “good family” – that defense and final refuge of folk who would else sink from respectable sight in the mire of their own well-earned disrepute.

Mr. Dickinson has one accomplishment, a physical one. So nicely does his eye match his hand, that he may boast himself the quickest, surest shot in all the world. Knowing his vanity, and the deadly certainty of his pistols, the conspirators work upon him. They point out that to kill the General under circumstances which men approve, will be an easy instant step to greatness. Urged by his vanity, permitted by his cruelty, dead-shot Dickinson rises to the glittering lure.

Give a man station and fortune, and while his courage is not sapped his prudence is promoted. The poor, obscure man will risk himself more readily than will the eminent rich one, not that he is braver, but he has less to lose. The General – who has been in both Houses of Congress, and was a judge on the bench besides – will not be hurried to the field, as readily as when he was merely

Andrew the horse-faced. However, those malignant secret ones are ingenious. They know a name that cannot fail to set him ablaze for blood. They whisper that name to dead-shot Dickinson.

It is a banner day at the Clover Bottom track. The General's Truxton is to run – that meteor among race horses, the mighty Truxton! The blooming Rachel, seated in her carriage, is where she can view the finish. The General – one of the Clover Bottom stewards – is in the judge's stand. Dead-shot Dickinson, as the bell rings on the race, takes his stand at the blooming Rachel's carriage wheel. He is not there to see a race, but to plant an insult.

“Go!” cries the starter.

Away rushes the field, the flying Truxton in the lead! Around they whirl, the little jockeys plying hand and heel! They sweep by the three-quarters post! The great Truxton, eye afire, nostrils wide, comes down the stretch with the swiftness of the thrown lance! Behind, ten generous lengths, trail the beaten ruck! The red mounts to the cheek of the blooming Rachel; her black eyes shine with excitement! She applauds the invincible Truxton with her little hands.

“He is running away with them!” she cries.

Dead-shot Dickinson turns to the friend who is conveniently by his side. The chance he waited for has come.

“Running away with them!” he sneers, repeating the phrase of the blooming Rachel. “To be sure! He takes after his master, who ran away with another man's wife.”

CHAPTER VII – HOW THE GENERAL FOUGHT

THE General seeks the taciturn Over-ton – that wordless one of the uneasy hair triggers.

“It is a plot,” says the General. “And yet this man shall die.”

Hair-trigger Overton bears a challenge to dead-shot Dickinson, and is referred to that marksman’s second, Hanson Catlet. Hair-trigger Overton and Mr. Catlet agree on Harrison’s Mills, a long Day’s ride away in Kentucky. There are laws against dueling in Tennessee; wherefore her citizens, when bent on blood, repair to Kentucky. To make all equal, and owning similar laws, the Kentuckians, when blood hungry, take one another to Tennessee. The arrangement is both perfect and polite, not to say urbane, and does much to induce friendly relations between these sister commonwealths.

Place selected, Mr. Catlet insists upon putting off the fight for a week. His principal is nothing if not artistic. He must send across the Blue Ridge Mountains for a famous brace of pistols. His duel with the General will have its page in history. He insists, therefore, upon making every nice arrangement to attract the admiration of posterity. He will kill the General, of course; and, by way of emphasizing his gallantry, offers wagers to that effect. He bets three thousand dollars that he will kill the General the first fire.

The General makes no wagers, but holds long pow-wows with hair-trigger Overton over their glasses and pipes. The fight is to be at twelve paces, each man toeing a peg. The word agreed on is: “Fire – one – two – three – stop!” Both are free to kill after the word “Fire,” and before the word “Stop.”

Hair-trigger Overton and the General give themselves up to a heartfelt study of what advantages and disadvantages are presented by the situation. They decide to let the gifted Dickinson shoot first. He is so quick that the General cannot hope to forestall his fire. Also, any undue haste on the General’s part might spoil his aim. By the pros and cons of it, as weighed between them, it is plain that the General must receive the fire of dead-shot Dickinson. He will be hit; doubtless the wound will bring death. He must, however, bend every iron energy to the task of standing on his feet long enough to kill his adversary.

“Fear not! I’ll last the time!” says the General. “He shall go with me; for I’ve set my heart on his blood.”

Those wonderful pistols come over the Blue Ridge, and dead-shot Dickinson with his friends set out for that far-away Kentucky fighting ground. They make gala of the business, and laugh and joke as they ride along. By way of keeping his hand in, and to give the confidence of his admirers a wire edge, dead-shot Dickinson unbends in sinister exhibitions of his pistol skill. At a farmer’s house a gourd is hanging by a string from the bough of a tree. Deadshot Dickinson, at twenty paces, cuts the string; the gourd falls to the ground.

“Some gentlemen will be along presently,” he says. “Show them that string, and tell them how it was cut.”

At a wayside inn he puts four bullets into a mark the size of a silver dollar.

“When General Jackson arrives,” he observes, tossing a gold piece to the innkeeper, “say that those shots were fired at twenty-four paces.”

And so with song and shout and jest and pistol firing, the Dickinson party troop forward. They arrive in the early evening and put up at Harrison’s tavern. The fight is for seven o’clock in the morning.

Behind this gay cavalcade are journeying the General and hair-trigger Overton. The farmer repeats the story of the gourd and its bullet-broken string. A bit farther, and the innkeeper calls attention to that quartette of shots, which took effect within the little circumference of a dollar piece. The stern pair behold these marvels unmoved; hair-trigger Overton merely shrugs his shoulders, while the General’s lip curls contemptuously. Dead-shot Dickinson has thrown away his lead and powder if he hoped to shake these men of granite. Upon coming to the battle ground, the General and hair-

trigger Overton avoid the Harrison tavern, which shelters the jovial Dickinson *coterie*, and put up at the inn of David Miller. That evening, they hold their final conference in a cloud of tobacco smoke, like a couple of Indians. Finally, the General goes to bed, and sleeps like a tree.

With the first blue streaks of morning our two war parties are up and moving. They meet in a convenient grove of poplars. The ground is stepped off and pegged; after which hair-trigger Overton and Mr. Catlet pitch a coin. The impartial coin awards the choice of positions to Mr. Catlet, and gives the word to hair-trigger Overton. There is a third toss which settles that the weapons are to be those Galway saw-handles. At this good fortune a steel-blue point of fire shows in the satisfied eye of the General. He recalls how he procured those weapons to kill the first man who spoke evil of the blooming Rachel, and is pleased to think a benignant destiny will not permit them to be robbed of that original right.

The men are led to their respective pegs by Mr. Catlet and hair-trigger Overton. The General, through the experienced strategy of hair-trigger Overton, wears a black coat – high of collar, long of skirt. It buttons close to the chin; not a least glimpse of bullet-guiding white, whether of shirt collar or cravat, is allowed to show. The black coat is purposely voluminous; and the whereabouts of the General's lean frame, tucked away in its folds, is a question not readily replied to. The only mark on the whole sable expanse of that coat is a row of steel-bright buttons. These are not in the middle, but peculiarly to one side. Those steel-bright buttons will draw the fire of dead-shot Dickinson like a magnet. Which is precisely what hair-trigger Overton had in mind.

As the two stand at the pegs, dead-shot Dickinson calls loudly to a friend:

“Watch that third button! It's over the heart! I shall hit him there!”

The grim General says nothing; but the look on his gaunt face reads like a page torn from some book of doom. As he stands waiting the word, he is observed by the watchful Overton to slip something into his mouth. Then his jaws set themselves like flint.

“Gentlemen, are you ready?”

They are ready, dead-shot Dickinson cruelly eager, the somber General adamant. There is a soundless moment, still as death:

“Fire!”

Instantly, like a flash of lightning, the pistol of dead-shot Dickinson explodes. That objective third button disappears, driven in by the vengeful lead! The General rocks a little on his feet with the awful shock of it; then he plants himself as moveless as an oak. Through the curling smoke dead-shot Dickinson makes out the stark, upstanding form. For a moment it is as though he were planet-struck. He shrinks shudderingly from his peg.

“God!” he whispers; “have I missed him?”

Hair-trigger Overton cocks the pistol he holds in his hand and covers the horror-smitten Dickinson.

“Back to your mark, sir!” he roars.

Dead-shot Dickinson steps up to his peg, his cheek the hue of ashes. He reads his sentence in those implacable steel-blue eyes, and the death nearness touches his heart like ice.

“One!” says hair-trigger Overton.

At the word, there is a sharp “click!” The General has pulled the trigger, but the hammer catches at half cock. The General's inveterate steel-blue glance never for one moment leaves his man. He recocks the weapon with a resounding “kluck!”

“Two!” says hair-trigger Overton.

“Bang!”

There comes the flash and roar, and dead-shot Dickinson is seen to stagger. He totters, stumbles slowly forward, and falls all along on his face. The bullet has bored through his body.

The General stays by his peg – cold and hard and stern. Hair-trigger Overton approaches the wounded Dickinson. One glance is enough. He crosses to the General and takes his arm.

“Come!” he says. “There is nothing more to do!”

Hair-trigger Overton leads the General back to their inn. As the pair journey through the poplar wood, he asks:

“What was that you put in your mouth?”

“It was a bullet,” returns the General; “I placed it between my teeth. By setting my jaws firmly upon it I make my hand as steady as a church.”

As the General says this, he gives that steadying pellet of lead to hair-trigger Overton, who looks it over curiously. It has been crushed between the clenched teeth of the General until now it is as flat and thin as a two-bit piece. As the two approach the tavern they come upon a negress churning butter, and the General pauses to drink a quart of milk.

Once in his room, hair-trigger Overton pulls off the General’s boot, which is full of blood.

“Not there!” says the General. “His bullet found me here”; and he throws open the black coat.

Dead-shot Dickinson’s aim was better than his surmise. He struck that indicated third button; but, thanks to the strategy of hair-trigger Overton which prompted the voluminous coat, the button did not cover the General’s heart. The deceived bullet has only broken two ribs and grazed the breastbone.

The surgeon is called; the wound is dressed and bandaged. He describes it as serious, and shakes his head.

“Still,” he observes, “you are more fortunate than Mr. Dickinson. He cannot live an hour.” As the man of probe and forceps is about to retire the General detains him.

“You are not to speak of my wound until we are back in Nashville.”

He of the probe and forceps bows assent. When he has left the room hair-trigger Overton asks:

“What was that for?”

The brow of the General grows cloudy with a reminiscent war frown.

“Have you forgotten those four shots inside the circle of a dollar, and that bullet-severed string? I want the braggart to die thinking he has missed a man at twelve paces.”

The two light pipes and hair-trigger Overton sends for his whisky. Once it has come he gives the General a stiff four fingers, and under the fiery spell of the liquor the color struggles into the pale hollow of his cheek.

He of the probe and forceps comes to the door.

“Gentlemen,” he says, palms outward with a sort of deprecatory gesture – “gentlemen, Mr. Dickinson is dead.”

The General knocks the ashes from his pipe. Then he crosses to the open window and looks out into the May sunshine. From over near the poplar wood drifts up the liquid whistle of a quail. Presently he returns to his seat and begins refilling his pipe.

“It speaks worlds for your will power, that you should have kept your feet after being hit so hard. Not one in ten thousand could have held himself together while he made that shot!” This is a marvelous burst of loquacity for hair-trigger Overton, who deals out words as some men deal out ducats.

“I was thinking on *her*, whom his slanderous tongue had hurt. I should have stood there till I killed him, though he had shot me through the heart!”

CHAPTER VIII – ENGLAND AND GRIM-VISAGED WAR

THE saw-handles are cleaned and oiled and laid away to that repose which they have won. No more will they be summoned to defend the blooming Rachel. No one now speaks evil of her; for that tragedy which reddened a May Kentucky morning has sealed the lips of slander. The General does not speak of that battle at twelve paces in the poplar wood; and yet the blooming Rachel knows. She, like her lover-husband, never refers to it; but her worship of him finds multiplication, while he, towards her, grows more and more the Bayard. Much are they revered and looked up to along the Cumberland, he for his gentle loyalty, she for her love; and the common tongue is tireless in reciting the story of their perfect happiness.

The currents of time roll on and the General is busy with his planting, his storekeeping, and his boat building. He is fortunate; and the three-sided profits pile themselves into moderate riches. In the midst of his prosperity he is visited by Aaron Burr. The late vice-president has killed Alexander Hamilton – a name despised along the Cumberland. Also he was aforetime the champion of Tennessee, when she asked the boon of statehood.

For these sundry matters, as well as for what good unconscious lessons in deportment were taught him by the courtly Colonel Burr, the General fails not to take that polished exile to his heart and to his hearth. Colonel Burr is in and out of Nashville many times. He comes and goes and comes and goes and comes again; and writes his daughter Theodosia:

“I am housed with General Jackson, who is one of those prompt, frank, loyal souls whom I like.”

Colonel Burr has been in France, and tells the General of Napoleon. He draws a battle map of Quebec, shows where Montgomery fell, and relates how he, Colonel Burr, bore that dead chieftain from the field. In the end, he gives a dim outline of his dreams for the conquest of that Spanish America, lying on the thither side of the Mississippi; and to these latter tales of empire the General lends eager ear.

By the General’s suggestion a dinner is given at the Nashville Inn in honor of Colonel Burr. The General presides, and, with a heart full of anger against Barbary pirates, offers among others the toast:

“Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!”

Colonel Burr, being dined, confides to the General how he is not without an ally in the Southwest, and says that Commander Wilkinson, in control for the Government at New Orleans, stands ready to advance his anti-Spanish projects. At the name of “Wilkinson” the General shakes his prudent head. He declares that Commander Wilkinson is a faithless, caitiff creature, with a brandified nose, a coward heart, and a weakness for breaking his word. The crafty Burr, confident to vanity of his own genius for intrigue, insists that he can trust Commander Wilkinson. Then he arranges with the General for the building of a flotilla of flat-boats at the latter’s yards, and goes his scheming way. Later, when Colonel Burr is on trial for treason in Richmond, the General will ride over the Blue Ridge to give him aid and comfort, and make street-corner speeches defending him, wherein he will say things more explicit than flattering concerning President Jefferson, who is urging the prosecution of Colonel Burr.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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