GARLAND HAMLIN

A SPOIL OF OFFICE: A STORY OF THE MODERN WEST

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Содержание

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TO WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS,

THE FOREMOST HISTORIAN OF OUR COMMON LIVES AND THE MOST VITAL FIGURE IN OUR LITERATURE, I DEDICATE THIS STUDY OF THE GREAT MIDDLE WEST, ITS CONTEMPORARY LIFE AND LANDSCAPE.

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

In this story of "A Spoil of Office" it was my intention to treat life as it would present itself to a young Western man of humble condition, who should set himself to the task of winning a political success. I have therefore maintained with considerable care the point of view of Bradley Talcott. Such a design loses in variety but gains, it seems to me, in unity and continuity of movement.

It has one marked disadvantage, however: it is apt to be misunderstood by the reader who may take the characters, events, and theories, judged by the central figure, to be the author's estimate. To illustrate: Ida Wilbur is presented as she appeared to Bradley Talcott, and not as the reader would see her, and not as the author would have delineated her had she been taken as the central figure of the book. This explanatory word seemed needed; being given, I leave its working out to the reader.

The three great movements of the American farmer, herein used as background – the Grange, the Alliance, and the People's party – seem to me to be as legitimate subjects for fiction as any war or crusade. They came in impulses with mightiest enthusiasms, they died out like waves upon the beach; but the power which originated them did not die; it will return in different forms again and again, so long as the love of liberty and the hatred of injustice live in the hearts of men and women.

What the next movement will be I do not know; but when it comes, Bradley Talcott and Ida his wife will be foremost among its leaders.

Hamlin Garland.

Chicago, *May, 1897.*

I.
THE GRANGE PICNIC

Early in the cool hush of a June morning in the seventies, a curious vehicle left Farmer Councill's door, loaded with a merry group of young people. It was a huge omnibus, constructed out of a heavy farm wagon and a hay rack, and was drawn by six horses. The driver was Councill's hired man, Bradley Talcott. Councill himself held between his vast knees the staff of a mighty flag in which they all took immense pride. The girls of the grange had made it for the day.

Laughter and scraps of song and rude witticisms made the huge wagon a bouquet of smiling faces. Everybody laughed, except Bradley, who sat with intent eyes and steady lips, his sinewy brown hand holding the excited horses in place. This intentness and self-mastery lent a sort of majesty to his rough-hewn face.

"Let 'em out a little, Brad," said Councill. "We're a little late."

Behind them came teams, before them were teams, along every lane of the beautiful upland prairie, teams were rolling rapidly, all toward the south. The day was perfect summer; it made the heart of reticent Bradley Talcott ache with the beauty of it every time his thoughts went up to the blue sky. The larks, and bobolinks, and red-wings made every meadow riotous with song, and the ever-alert king-birds and flickers flew along from post to post as if to have a part in the celebration.

On every side stretched fields of wheat, green as emerald and soft as velvet. Some of it was high enough already to ripple in the soft winds. The corn fields showed their yellow-green rows of timid shoots, and cattle on the pastures luxuriated in the fullness of the June grass; the whole land was at its fairest and liberalest, and it seemed peculiarly fitting that the farmers should go on a picnic this day of all days.

At the four corners below stood scores of other wagons, loaded to the rim with men, women and children. Up and down the line rode Milton Jennings, the marshal of the day, exalted by the baton he held and the gay red sash looped across his shoulders. Everywhere rose merry shouts, and far away at the head of the procession the Burr Oak band was playing. All waited for the flag whose beautiful folds flamed afar in the bright sunlight.

Every member of the grange wore its quaint regalia, apron, sash, and pouch of white, orange, buff and red. Each grange was headed by banners, worked in silk by the patient fingers of the women. Counting the banners there were three Granges present – Liberty Grange, Meadow Grange, and Burr Oak Grange at the lead with the band. The marshal of the leading grange came charging back along the line, riding magnificently, his fiery little horse a-foam.

"Are we all ready?" he shouted like a field officer.

"Yaas!"

"All ready, Tom?"

"Ready when you are," came the fusillade of replies.

He consulted a moment with Milton, the two horses prancing with unwonted excitement that transformed them into fiery chargers of romance, in the eyes of the boys and girls, just as the sash and baton transfigured Milton into something martial.

"All ready there!" shouted the marshals with grandiloquent gestures of their be-ribboned rods, the band blared out again and the teams began to move toward the west. The men stood up to look ahead, while the boys in the back end of the wagons craned perilously over the edge of the box to see how long the line was. It seemed enormous to them, and their admiration of the marshals broke forth in shrill cries of primitive wildness.

Many of the young fellows had hired at ruinous expense the carriages in which they sat with their girls, wearing a quiet air of aristocratic reserve which did not allow them to shout sarcasms

at Milton, when his horse broke into a trot and jounced him up and down till his hat flew off. But mainly the young people were in huge bowered lumber wagons in wildly hilarious groups. The girls in their simple white dresses tied with blue ribbon at the waist, and the boys in their thick woolen suits which did all-round duty for best wear.

As they moved off across the prairie toward the dim blue belt of timber which marked the banks of Rock River, other processions joined them with banner, and bands, and choirs, all making a peaceful and significant parade, an army of reapers of grain, not reapers of men. Some came singing "John Brown," or "Hail, Columbia." Everywhere was a voiced excitement which told how tremendous the occasion seemed. In every wagon hid in cool deeps of fresh-cut grass, were unimaginable quantities of good things which the boys never for a moment forgot even in their great excitement.

On the procession moved, with gay flags and flashing banners. The dust rolled up, the cattle stared across the fences, the colts ran snorting away, tails waving like flags, and unlucky toilers in the fields stopped to wave their hats and gaze wistfully till the caravan passed. The men shouted jovial words to them, and the boys waved their hats in ready sympathy.

At ten o'clock they entered the magnificent grove of oaks, where a speaker's stand had been erected, and where enterprising salesmen from Rock River had erected soda water and candy stands, with an eye to business.

There was already a stupendous crowd, at least so it seemed to the farmers' boys. Two or three bands were whanging away somewhere in the grove; children were shouting and laughing, and boys were racing to and fro, playing ball or wrestling; babies were screaming, and the marshals were shouting directions to the entering teams, in voices that rang through the vaulted foliage with thrilling effect, and the harsh bray of the ice cream and candy sellers completed the confusion.

Bradley's skill as a horseman came out as he swung into the narrow winding road which led through threatening stumps into the heart of the wood past the speaker's stand. Councill furled his great flag and trailed it over the heads of those behind, and Flora and Ceres, and all the other deities of the grange upheld the staff with smiling good-will. And so they drew up to the grand stand, the most imposing turn-out of the day. They sprang out and mingled with the merry crowd, while Bradley drove away. After he had taken care of the team he came back towards the grand stand and wandered about alone. He was not a native of the country and knew very few of the people. He stood about with a timid expression on his face that made him seem more awkward than he really was. He was tall, and strong, and graceful when not conscious of himself as he was now. He felt a little bitter at being ignored – that is, he felt it in a vague and wordless way.

Lovers passed him in pairs, eating peanuts or hot candy which they bit off from a huge triangular mass still hot from the kettle. He had never seen any candy just like that, and wondered if he had better try a piece. The speaking on the stand attracted and held his attention, however. Oratory always had a powerful attraction for him. He moved forward and stood leaning against a tree.

Seats had been arranged in a semi-circle around the stand, on which the speakers of the day, the band, and the singers were already grouped. All around, leaning against the trees, twined in the branches of the oaks, or ranked against the railing, were the banners and mottoes of the various granges. No. 10, Liberty Grange, "Justice is our Plea." Meadow Grange, "United We Stand, Divided We Fall." Bethel Grange, "Fraternity." Other mottoes were "Through Difficulties to the Stars"; "Equal Rights to All, Special Privileges to None." A small organ sat upon the stand surrounded with the singers. Milton, resplendent in his sash and his white vest and black coat, sat beside the organist Eileen, the daughter of Osmond Deering.

The choir arose to sing, accompanied by the organ, and their voices rolled out under the vaulted aisles of foliage, with that thrilling, far-away effect of the singing voice in the midst of illimitable spaces. This was followed by prayer, and then Mr. Deering, the president, called upon everybody to join in singing the national anthem, after which he made the opening address.

He spoke of the marvellous growth of the order, how it had sprung up from the soil at the need of the farmer; it was the first great movement of the farmer in history, and it was something to be proud of. The farmer had been oppressed. He had been helpless and would continue helpless till he asked and demanded his rights. After a dignified and earnest speech he said: – "I will now introduce as the next speaker Mr. Isaac Hobkirk."

Mr. Hobkirk, a large man with a very bad voice, made a fiery speech. "Down with the middlemen," he cried, and was applauded vigorously. "They are the blood-suckers that's takin' the life out of us farmers. What we want is to deal right with the manufacturers, an' cut off these white-handed fellers in Rock River who git all we raise. Speechifyin' and picnickin' is all well an' good, but what we want is *agents*. We want agents f'r machinery, wheat buyers, agents f'r groceries, that's what we want; that's what we're here for; that's what the grange was got together for. Down with the middlemen!"

This brought out vigorous applause and showed that a very large number agreed with him. Bradley sat silently through it all. It didn't mean very much to him, and he wished they'd sing again.

The chairman again came forward. "Napoleon said 'Old men for counsel, but young men for war.' But our young men have listened patiently to us old fellows for years, and mebbe they don't think much of our counsel. I'm going to call on Milton Jennings, one of our rising young men."

Milton, a handsome young fellow with yellow hair and smiling lips, arose and came forward to the rail, feeling furtively in his coat-tail pocket to see that his handkerchief was all right. He was a student at the seminary, and was considered a fine young orator. This was his first attempt before so large an audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began after clearing his throat. "Brothers and sisters of the Order: I feel highly honored by the president by being thus called upon to address you. Old men for counsel is all right, if they counsel what we young men want, but I'm for war; I'm for a fight in the interests of the farmer. Not merely a defensive warfare but an offensive warfare.

"How? By the ballot. Mr. President, I know you don't agree with me. I know it's a rule of the Order to keep politics out of it, but I don't know of a better place to discuss the interests of the farmer. It's a mistake. We've got to unite at the ballot box; what's the use of our order if we don't? We must be represented at the State legislature, and we can't do that unless we make the grange a political factor.

"You may talk about legislative corruption, Mr. President, and about county rings, to come near home. (Cheers and cries, "Now you're getting at it," "That's right," etc.) But the only way to get 'em out is to vote 'em out. ("That's a fact.") You m'say we can talk it over outside the order. Yes, but I tell you, Mr. President, the order's the place for it. If it's an educational thing, then I say it ought to educate and educate in politics, Mr. President.

"I tell you, I'm for war! Let's go in to win! When the fall's work is done, in fact, from this time on, Mr. President, the farmers of this county ought to organize for the campaign. Cut and dry our tickets, cut and dry our plans. If we begin early and work together we can strangle the anacondy that is crushing us, and the eagle of victory will perch on our banners on the third of November, and the blood-suckers trouble us no more forever."

With this remarkable peroration, spoken in a high monotonous key, after the fashion of the political orator, Milton sat down mopping his face, while his admirers cheered.

The chairman, who had been nervously twisting in his chair, hastened to explain.

"Fellow-Citizens: I'm not to be held responsible for anything anybody else speaks on this platform. I do not believe with our young brother. I think that politics will destroy the grange. To make it a debating school on political questions would bring discord and wrangling into it. I hope I shall never see the day. I now ask Brother Jennings to say a few words."

Mr. Jennings, a fat and jolly farmer, came to the front looking very hot. His collar had long since melted.

"I aint very much of a speech-maker, Mr. President, brothers and sisters. Fact is, I sent my boy down to the seminary to learn how to talk, so't I wouldn't haf to. I guess he represents my idees purty well, though, all except this political idee. I don't know about that. I aint quite made up my mind on that point. I guess I'd better leave the floor for somebody else."

"Glad you left the floor," whispered Milton to his father as he sat down by his side. Milton was a merciless joker, especially upon his father.

"We have with us to-day," said the chairman, in the tone of one who announces the coming in of the dessert, "one of the most eloquent speakers in the State, one whose name all grangers know, our State lecturer, Miss Ida Wilbur."

The assembly rose to its feet with applause as a slender young woman stepped forth, and waited, with easy dignity to begin her speech. There was something significant in her manner, which was grave and dignified, and a splendid stillness fell upon the audience as she began in a clear, penetrating contralto:

"Brothers and sisters in the Order: While I have been sitting here listening to your speakers, I have been looking at the mottoes on your banners, and I have been trying to find out by those expressions what your conception of this movement is. I wonder whether its majesty appears to you as it does to me." She paused for an instant. "We are in danger of losing sight of its larger meaning.

"Primarily, the object of the grange has been the education of the farmers. It has been a great social educator, and I am glad, my friends and neighbors, when I can look out upon such an assembly as this. I see in it the rise of the idea of union, and intelligent union; but principally I see in it the meeting together of the farmers who live too much apart from the rest of the world."

"I believe," she cried with lifted hand, "I believe this is the greatest movement of the farmer in the history of the world. It is a movement against unjust discrimination, no doubt, but it has another side to me, a poetic side, I call it. The farmer is a free citizen of a great republic, it is true; but he is a *Solitary* free citizen. He lives alone too much. He meets his fellow-men too little. His dull life, his hard work, make it almost impossible to keep his better nature uppermost. The work of the grange is a social work." She was supported by generous applause.

"It is not to antagonize town and country. The work of the grange to me is not political. Keep politics out of it, or it will destroy you. Use it to bring yourselves together. Let it furnish you with pleasant hours. Establish your agencies, if you can, but I care more for meetings like this. I care more for the poetry there is in having Flora, and Ceres, and Pomona brought into the farmer's home."

Her great brown eyes glowed as she spoke and her lifted head thrilled those who sat near enough to see the emotion that was in the lines of her face. The sun struck through the trees, that swayed in masses overhead, dappling the upturned faces with light and shade. The leaves under the tread of the wind rustled softly, and the soaring hawk looked down curiously as he drifted above the grove, like a fleck of cloud.

On Bradley, standing there alone, there fell something mysterious, like a light. Something whiter and more penetrating than the sunlight. As he listened, something stirred within him, a vast longing, a hopeless ambition, nameless as it was strange. His bronzed face paled and he breathed heavily. His eyes absorbed every detail of the girl's face and figure. There was wonder in his eyes at her girlish face, and something like awe at her powerful diction and her impersonal emotion. She stood there like an incarnation of the great dream-world that lay beyond his horizon, the world of poets and singers in the far realms of light and luxury.

"I have a dream of what is coming," she said in conclusion, and her voice had a prophetic ring. "I see a time when the farmer will not need to live in a cabin on a lonely farm. I see the farmers coming together in groups. I see them with time to read, and time to visit with their fellows. I see them enjoying lectures in beautiful halls, erected in every village. I see them gather like the Saxons of old upon the green at evening to sing and dance. I see cities rising near them with schools, and churches, and concert halls, and theatres. I see a day when the farmer will no longer be a drudge and his wife a

bond slave, but happy men and women who will go singing to their pleasant tasks upon their fruitful farms." The audience did not cheer, it sat as if in church. The girl seemed to be speaking prophecy.

"When the boys and girls will not go West nor to the city; when life will be worth living. In that day the moon will be brighter and the stars more glad, and pleasure, and poetry, and love of life come back to the man who tills the soil."

The people broke into wild applause when she finished. All were deeply stirred. Tears were streaming down many faces, and when Deering arose to announce a song by the choir his voice shook and he made no secret of his deep emotion. After the song, he said: "Neighbors, we don't want to spoil that splendid speech with another this day. The best thing we can do is to try to think that good time is here and eat our dinner with the resolution to bring that good time as soon as possible."

Bradley stood there after the others had risen. The dazzling pictures called up by the speaker's words were still moving confusedly in his brain. They faded at last and he moved with a sigh and went out to feed the horses their oats.

II.
THE DINNER UNDER THE OAKS

The dinner made a beautiful scene, the most idyllic in the farmer's life. The sun, now high noon, fell through the leaves in patches of quivering light upon the white table-cloth, spread out upon the planks, and it fell upon the fair hair of girls, and upon the hard knotted fingers of men and women grown old in toil. The rattle of dishes, the harsh-keyed, unwonted laughter of the women, and the sounding invitations to dinner given and taken filled the air. The long plank seats placed together made capital tables, and eager children squatted about wistfully watching the display of each new delicacy. The crude abundance of the Iowa farm had been brought out to make it a great dinner. The boys could hardly be restrained from clutching at each new dish.

The Councills and the Burns families took dinner together. Mrs. Burns, fretful and worn, cuffed the children back from the table while bringing out her biscuit and roast chicken. Some sat stolidly silent, but big-voiced Councill joked in his heavy way with everyone within earshot.

"Well, the Lord is on our side, neighbor Jennings, to-day, anyhow," he roared across the space of two or three tables.

"He's always on our side, brother Councill," smiled Jennings.

"Wal, I'd know about that. Sometimes I'm a leettle in doubt."

"Got something good to eat?" inquired Jennings of Mrs. Councill.

"Land sakes, no! We never have anything fit to eat since Jane's gone to havin' beaux; my cookin' aint fit for a hawg to eat."

"I aint a-goin' to eat it, then," roared Councill in vast delight at his joke on himself. "I'll go over and eat with Marm Jennings." They all laughed at this.

"Tell us so't we c'n laff," called Mrs. Smith, coming over to see what they did have.

"Where's Brad?" said Mrs. Councill, looking about her. "Aint he comin' to dinner?"

"I don't see him around anywheres. Mebbe he's out feed'n the horses," replied Councill, without concern.

"Say! that was a great speech that girl made," put in Brother Smith, coming over with a chicken leg in one hand and a buttered biscuit in the other. "But what we want is free trade" —

"What we want is a home market," said Milton, some distance away.

"Oh, go to – Texas with y'r home market!"

"Tut, tut, tut, no politics, brethren," interrupted Jennings.

Bradley, ignored by everybody, was standing over by the trunk of a large oak tree, watching from afar the young girl who had so stirred him. She was eating dinner with Deering, his wife, and daughter, and Milton, who was there, looking very bright and handsome, or at least he appeared so to Eileen Deering, a graceful little girl, his classmate at the seminary.

Miss Wilbur sat beside Deering, who was a large man with a type of face somewhat resembling Lincoln's. She was smiling brightly, but her smile had something thoughtful in it, and her eyes had unknown deeps like a leaf-bottomed woodland pool across which the sun fell. She was feeling yet the stress of emotion she had felt in speaking, and was a little conscious of the admiring glances of the people.

She saw once or twice a tall, roughly dressed young farmer, who seemed to be looking at her steadily, and there was something in his glance, a timid worshipful expression, that touched her and made her observe him more closely. He was very farmer-like, she noticed; his cheap coat fitted him badly, and his hat was old and shapeless. Yet there was something natively fine and chivalrous in his admiration. She felt that.

"You're a farmer's daughter yourself," said Deering, as if they had been speaking of somebody else who was.

"Yes, my father was a farmer. I'm a teacher. I only began a little while ago to speak in the interest of the farmer. It seems to me that everybody is looking out for himself except the farmer, and I want to help him to help himself. I expect to speak in every county in the State this winter."

Bradley crept nearer. He was eager to hear what she was saying. He grew furtive in his manner, when she observed him, and he felt as if he were doing something criminal. He saw Miss Wilbur say something to Mr. Deering, who looked up a moment later and said to Bradley, whom he did not know, "Why, certainly, come and have some dinner, plenty of it."

Bradley flushed hot with shame and indignation, and moved away deeply humiliated. They had taken him for a poor, friendless, lonely tramp, and there was just enough truth in his loneliness to make it sting.

"Say, Brad, don't you want some grub?" called Councill, catching sight of him.

"Quick, 'r'y lose it," said Burns.

He sat down and fell upon the dinner silently, but there was a hot flush still upon his face. He was not a beau. It had always been difficult for him to address a marriageable woman, and a joke on that subject threw him into dumb confusion. He had lived a dozen tender dreams of which no one knew a word. Indeed, he never acknowledged them to himself. He had admired in this way Eileen Deering whom he had seen with Milton a few times during the year. He now envied Milton his easy air of calm self-possession in the presence of two such beautiful girls. There was a bitter feeling of rebellion in his heart.

Miss Wilbur had stirred his unexplored self. Down where ambitions are born; where aspirations rise like sun-shot mists, her words and the light of her face had gone. Already there was something sacred and ineffably sweet about her voice and face. She had come to him as the right woman comes sometimes to a man, and thereafter his whole life is changed.

He walked away from the few people he knew, and tried to interest himself in the games they were playing but he could not. He drifted back to the grand stand and sought about till he could see Miss Wilbur once more. She was so pure, so beautiful to him.

The hour or two after dinner was spent in visiting and getting acquainted, and the time seemed all too short. Each granger took this opportunity of inquiring after the health of the other grangers of the county. The young people wandered in laughing, romping groups about the grounds, buying peanuts and sugar candy, and drinking the soda water and lemonade which the venders called with strenuous enterprise.

On the shadowed side of the stand the leading men of the grange gathered, consulting about plans and measures.

"Now, it seems to me that we're going on all right now," said Deering. "We're getting our goods cheap and we're cuttin' off the middleman."

"And we're getting hold of the railways."

"Yes, but it don't amount to nothin' compared to what ought to be done. We ought 'o oust them infernal blood-suckers that's in our court-house, and we want to do it as a grange."

"No," said Jennings in his placid way, "we can do that better. I've got a plan."

"What we want," said Hobkirk, "is a party, a ticket of our own, then we can" —

"No, we can't do that. It won't be right to do that. We must stand by the party that has given us our railway legislation."

Milton and several of the younger farmers drew off one side and talked earnestly about the fall campaign.

"They'll beat us again unless we go in together," Milton said with emphatic gesticulation. Milton was a natural politician. His words found quick response in the erratic Hobkirk, who had good ideas but whose temperament made all his words jagged shot. He irritated where he meant to convince.

Bradley listened to it all without feeling that he had any part in it. It didn't seem to him that politics had anything to do with the beautiful words of the girl. On the stand the choir began to sing again and he walked toward them. They sang on and the people listened while they packed away the dishes. They sang "Auld Lang Syne," and "We'll Meet Beyond the River," with that characteristic attraction of the common people for wistful, sorrowful cadences which is a paradox not easily explained.

"All aboard!" called Councill from his wagon as Bradley drove the team up to the band stand. While the merry young people clambered in and paired off along the seats he was seeing Miss Wilbur shaking hands with the people who paused to say good-by. His heart ached for a glance of her brown eyes and a word, but he held the reins in his great hands and his face showed only his usual impassive reticence. He was only Councill's hired man.

The banners were taken up, the children loaded in, the boys looking back wistfully to the games and the candy-stands. Councill unfurled his flag to the wind, and Bradley swung the eager horses into the lane. On all sides the farmers' teams were getting out into the road; the work of the marshals was done. Each man went his own gait.

The young people behind Bradley began to sing: —

"Out on an ocean all boundless we ride,
We're homeward bound,
Homeward bound."

And so along each lane through the red sunset the farmers rolled home. Home through lanes bordered with velvet green wheat, across which the sunlight streamed in dazzling yellow floods. Home through wild prairies, where the birds nested and the gophers whistled. The dust rose up, transformed into gold by the light of the setting sun. The children fell asleep in their tired mothers' arms. The men shouted to each other from team to team, discussing the speakers and the crops.

Smiles were few as each wagon turned into its gateway and rolled up to the silent house. The sombre shadow of the farm's drudgery had fallen again on faces unused to smiling.

Only the lovers lingering on the road till the moon rose and the witchery of night came to make the girlish eyes more brilliant, softening their gayety into a wistful tenderness, only to these did the close of the day seem as sweet and momentous as the morning. While the trusty horse jogged on, impatient of the slow pace set by his driver, the lovers sat with little to say, but with hearts lit by the light that can glorify for a few moons, at least, even the life of ceaseless toil.

III.
BRADLEY RESOLVES TO GO TO SCHOOL

A farm is a good place to think in, if a man has sufficient self-sustaining force – that is, if work does not dominate him and force him to think in petty or degrading circles.

It is a lonely life. Especially lonely on a large farm in the West. The life of a hired man like Bradley Talcott is spent mainly with the horses and cattle. In the spring he works day after day with a drag or seeder, moving to and fro an animate speck across a dull brown expanse of soil. Even when he has a companion there is little talk, for there is little to say, and the extra exertion of speaking against the wind, or across distances, soon forces them both into silence.

True, there is the glory of the vast sweep of sky, the wild note of the crane, the flight of geese, the multitudinous twitter of sparrows, and the subtle exalting smell of the fresh, brown earth; but these things do not compensate for human society. Nature palls upon the normal man when he is alone with her constantly. The monotone of the wind and the monochrome of the sky oppress him. His heart remains empty.

The rustle of flashing, blade-like corn leaves, the vast clean-cut mountainous clouds of June, the shade of shimmering popple trees, the whistle of plover and the sailing hawk do not satisfy the man who follows the corn-plow with the hot sun beating down all day upon his bent head and dusty shoulders. His point of view is not that from the hammock. He is not out on a summer vacation. If he thinks, he thinks bitter things, and when he speaks his words are apt to be oaths.

Still a man has time to think and occasionally a man dominates his work and refuses to be hardened and distorted. Many farmers swear at the team or the plow and everything that bothers them. Some whistle vacantly and mechanically all day, or sing in endless succession the few gloomy songs they know. Bradley thought.

He thought all summer long. He was a powerful man physically and turned off his work with a ready knack which left him free to think. All day as he moved to and fro in the rustling corn rows, he thought, and with his thinking, his powers expanded. He had the mysterious power of self-development.

The centre of his thinking was that slender young woman and the words she had uttered. He repeated her prophetic words as nearly as he could a hundred times. He repeated them aloud as he plowed day after day, through the dreamful September mist. He began to look ahead and wonder what he should do or could do. Must he be a farmer's hired man or a renter all his life? His mind moved slowly from point to point, but it never returned to its old dumb patience. His mind, like his body, had unknown latent forces. He was one of those natures whose delicacy and strength are alike hidden.

"Brad don't know his strength," Councill was accustomed to say. "If he should ever get mad enough to fight, the other feller'd better go a-visitin'." And a person who knew his mind might have said, "If Bradley makes up his mind to do a thing he'll do it." But no one knew his mind. He did not know its resources himself.

His mind seized upon every hint, and bit by bit his resolution was formed. Milton, going by one Monday morning on his way to the seminary, stopped beside the fence where Brad was plowing and waited for him to come up. He had a real interest in Bradley.

"Hello, Brad," he called cheerily.

"Hello, Milt."

"How's business?"

"Oh, so so. Pretty cold."

The wind was blowing cold and cuttingly from the north-west. Milton, rosy with his walk, dropped down beside the hedge of weeds in the sun and Brad climbed over the fence and joined

him. It was warm and cosy there, and the crickets were cheeping feebly in the russet grass where the sunlight fell. The wind whistled through the weeds with a wild, mournful sound. Bradley did not speak for some time. He listened to Milton. At last he said abruptly —

"Say, Milt, what does it cost to go to school down there?"

"Depends on who goes. Cost me 'bout forty dollars a term. Shep an' I room it and cook our own grub."

"What's the tuition?"

"Eight dollars a term."

"Feller could go to the public school for nauthin', couldn't he?"

"Yes, and that'd be all it 'ud be worth," said Milton with fine scorn at an inferior institution.

"What does a room cost?" Brad pursued after a silence.

"Well, ours cost 'bout three dollars a month, but we have two rooms: You could get one for fifty cents a week."

He looked up at Brad with a laugh in his eyes. "Don't think of starting in right off, do you?"

"Well, I don't know but I might if I had money enough to carry me through."

"What y' think o' doin', study law?"

"No, but I'd kind o' like to be able to speak in public. Seems t' me a feller ought 'o know how to speak at a school meetin' when he's called on. I couldn't say three words to save m' soul. They teach that down there, don't they?"

"Yes, we have Friday exercises and then there are two debating clubs. They're boss for practice. That's where I put in most o' my time. I'm goin' into politics," he ended with a note of exalted purpose as if going into politics were really something fine. "Are you?"

"Well, there's no tellin' what minit a feller's liable to be called on and I'd kinder like to" – He fell off into silence again.

Milton jumped up. "Well, hold on, this won't do f'r me; I must mosey along. Good-by," he said, and set off down the road.

"When does the next term begin?" called Bradley.

"November 15th," Milton replied, looking about for an instant. "Better try it."

Bradley threw the lines over his shoulder and, bending his head, fell into deep calculation. Milton's clear tenor was heard ringing across the fields, fitfully dying away. Milton made the most of everything, and besides he was on his way to see Eileen. He could afford to be gay.

Bradley thought, even while he husked the corn, one of the bitterest of all farm tasks when the cold winds of November begin to blow. Councill had a large field of corn and every morning in the cold and frosty light Ike and Bradley were out in the field, each with a team. Beautiful mornings, if one could have looked upon it from a window in a comfortable home. There were mornings when the glittering purple and orange domes of the oaks and maples swam in the mist dreamfully, so beautiful the eyes lingered upon them wistfully. Mornings when the dim lines of the woods were a royal purple, and gray-blue shadows streamed from the trees upon the yellow-green grass.

Husking was the last of the fall work and the last day of husking found Bradley desolately undecided. They had been working desperately all the week to finish the field on Saturday. It was a bitter cold morning. As they leaped into the frost-rimmed wagon-box and caught up the reins, the half-frozen team sprang away with desperate energy, making the wagon bound over the frozen ground with a thunderous clatter.

In every field the sound of similar wagons getting out to work could be heard. It was not yet light. A leaden-gray dome of cloud had closed in over the morning sky and the feeling of snow was in the air. There was only a dull flush of red in the east to show the night had been frostily clear.

Ike raised a great shout to let his neighbors know he was in the field. Councill, with a fork over his shoulder, was on his way down the lane to help a neighbor thresh. Ike jovially shook the reins above his colts and Bradley followed close behind, and the two wagons went crashing through

the forest of corn. The race started the blood of the drivers as well as that of the teams. The cold wind cut the face like a knife and the crackling corn-stalks flew through the air as the wagons swept over them. Reaching the farther side they turned in and faced toward the house, the horses blowing white clouds of breath.

"Jee Whitaker!" shouted Ike, as he crouched on the leeward side of his wagon, and threshed his arms around his chest, after having finished blanketing his team to protect them against the ferocious wind. "I'm thunderin' glad this is the last day of this kind o' thing."

He looked like a grizzly bear in bad repair. He had an old fur cap on his head that concealed his ears and most of his face. He wore a ragged coat that was generally gray, but had white lines along the seams. Under this he wore another coat still more ragged, and the whole was belted at the waist with an old surcingle. Like his father, he was possessed of vast physical strength, and took pride in his powers of endurance.

"Wal, here goes," he said, stripping off his outside coat. "It's tough, but it aint no use dreadin' it."

Bradley smiled back at him in his wordless way, and caught hold of the first ear. It sent a shiver of pain through him. His fingers, worn to the quick, protruded from his stiff, ragged gloves, and the motions of clasping and stripping the ear were like the rasp of a file on a naked nerve. He shivered and swore, but his oath was like a groan.

The horses, humped and shivering, looked black and fuzzy, by reason of their erected hair. They tore at the corn-stalks hungrily. Their tails streamed sidewise with the force of the wind, which had a wild and lonesome sound, as it swept across the sear stretches of the corn. The stalks towered far above the heads of the huskers, but did little to temper the onslaught of the blast.

Occasional flocks of geese drifted by in the grasp of the inexorable gale, their necks out-thrust as if they had already caught the gleam of their warm southern lagoons. Clouds of ducks, more adventurous, were seen in irregular flight, rising and falling from the lonely fields with wild clapping of wings. Only the sparrows seemed indifferent to the cold.

There was immensity in the dome of the unbroken, seamless, gray threatening sky. There was majesty in the dim plain, across which the morning light slowly fell. The plain, with its dark blue groves, from which thin lines of smoke rose and hastened away, and majesty in the wind that came from the illimitable and desolate north. But the lonely huskers had no time to feel, much less to think, upon these things.

They bent down to their work and snatched the red and yellow ears bare of their frosty husks with marvelous dexterity. The first plunge over, Bradley found as usual that the sharpest pain was over. The wind cut his face, and an occasional driving flake of snow struck and clung to his face and stung. His coat collar chafed his chin, and the frost wet his gloves through and through. But he warmed to it and at last almost forgot it. He fell into thought again, so deep that his work became absolutely mechanical.

"Say, Brad, let's go to that dance over at Davis's," shouted Ike, after an hour of silence.

"I guess not."

"Why not?"

"Because I aint invited."

"Oh, that's all right; Ed, he told me to bring anyone I felt like."

"I aint going, all the same. I may be in Rock River by next Wednesday."

"They aint no danger o' you're going to Rock River."

Bradley fell once more into the circle of his plans and went the round again. He had saved two hundred dollars. It was enough to take him to school a year, but what then? That was the recurring question. It was the most momentous day in his life. Should he spend his money in this way? Every dollar of it represented toil, long days of lonely plowing or dragging, long days under the burning harvest sun. It was all he had, all he had to show for his life. Was it right to spend it for schooling?

"What good'll it do yeh?" Ike asked one day when Bradley was feeling out for a little helpful sympathy. "Better buy a team with it and rent a piece of land. What y' goan to do after you spent the money?"

"I don't know," Bradley had replied in his honest way.

"Wal, I'd think of it a dum long spell 'fore I'd do it," was Ike's reply, and Councill had agreed with it.

Bradley fell behind Ike, for he wanted to be alone. He had grown into the habit of accounting to *Her* for his actions, and when he wished to consult with *Her*, he wanted to be alone. There was something sacred, even in the thought of *Her*, and he shrank from having his thoughts broken in upon by any careless or jesting word.

As he pondered, his hands grew slower in their action and, at last, he stopped and leaned against the wagon-box. Something came into his heart that shook him, a feeling of unknown power, a certainty of faith in himself. He shivered with an electric thrill that made his hair stir.

He lifted his face to the sky and his eyes saw a crane sailing with stately grace, in measureless circle, a mere speck against the unbroken gray of the sky. There seemed something prophetic; something mystic in its harsh, wild cry that fell, like the scream of the eagle, a defiant note against wind and storm.

"I'll do it," he said, and his hands clinched. At the sound of his voice he shivered again, as if the wind had suddenly penetrated his clothing. His dress made him grotesque. The spaces around him made him pathetic, but in his golden-brown eyes was something that made him sublime.

The thought which he dared not utter, but which lay deep under every resolution and action he made, was the hope, undefined and unacknowledged to himself, that sometime he might meet her and have her approve his action.

IV.
BRADLEY'S TRIALS AT SCHOOL

The morning on which Bradley was to begin his term at the seminary was a clear, crisp day in later November. He had rented a room in the basement of a queer old building, known as the Park Hotel, a crazy mansard-roofed structure which held at regular intervals some rash men attempting to run it as a hotel.

Bradley had rented this cellar because it was the cheapest place he could find. He agreed to pay two dollars a month for it, and the use of the two chairs, and cooking stove, which made up its furnishing. He had purchased a skillet and two or three dishes, Mrs. Councill had lent him a bed, and he seemed reasonably secure against hunger and cold.

He looked forward to his entrance into the school with dread. All that Monday morning he stood about his door watching for Milton and seeing the merry students in procession up the walk. The girls seemed so bright and so beautiful, he wondered how the boys could walk beside them with such calm unconcern. Their laughter, their mutual greetings threw him into a profound self-pity and disgust. When he joined Milton and Shepard, and went up the walk under the bare-limbed maple trees, he shivered with fear. They all seemed perfectly at home, with the exception of himself.

Milton knowing what to expect smuggled him into the chapel in the midst of a crowd of five or six others, and thus he escaped the derisive applause with which the pupils were accustomed to greet each new-comer at the opening of a term. He gave one quick glance at the rows of faces, and shambled awkwardly along to his seat beside Milton, his eyes downcast. He found courage to look around and study his fellow-students after a little and discovered that several of them were quite as awkward, quite as ill at ease as himself.

Milton, old pupil as he was (that is to say, this was his second term), sat beside him and indicated the seniors as they came in, and among the rest pointed out Radbourn.

"He's the high mucky-muck o' this shebang," Shep whispered.

"Why so?" asked Bradley, looking carefully at the big, smooth-faced, rather gloomy-looking young fellow.

Shep hit his own head with his fist in a comically significant gesture. "Brains! What d' ye call 'em, Milt? Correscations of the serry beltum."

Shepard was a short youth with thick yellow hair, and a comically serious quality in the twist of his long upper lip.

Milton grinned. "Convolutions of the cerebrum, I s'pose you're driving at. Shep comes to school to have fun," Milton explained to Bradley.

"Chuss," said Shep, by which he meant yes; "an' I have it, too, betyerneck. I enter no plea, me lord" —

There came a burst of applause as a tall and attractive girl came in with her arms laden down with books. Her intellectual face lit up with a smile at the applause, and a pink flush came into her pale cheek. "That's Miss Graham," whispered Shepard; "she's all bent up on Radbourn."

The teachers came in, the choir rose to sing, and the exercises of the morning began. Bradley thought Miss Graham, with her heavy-lidded, velvety-brown eyes, looked like Miss Wilbur. Her eyes were darker, he decided, and she was taller and paler; in fact, the resemblance was mainly in her manner which had the same dignity and repose.

At Milton's suggestion Bradley remained in his seat after the rest of the pupils had marched out to the sound of the organ. Then Milton introduced him to the principal, who took him by the hand so cordially that his embarrassment was gone in a moment. "Come and see me at eleven," he said. After a short talk with him in his room a couple hours later, his work was assigned.

"You'll be in the preparatory department, Mr. Talcott, but if you care to do extra work we may get you into the junior class. Jennings, look after him a little, won't you?"

The principal was a kind man, but he had two hundred of these rude, awkward farmer-boys, and he could not be expected to study each one closely enough to discover their latent powers. Bradley went away down town to buy his books, with a feeling that the smile of the principal was not genuine, and he felt also that Milton was a little ashamed of him here in the town. Everything seemed to be going hard with him. But his hardest trial came when he entered the classroom at one o'clock.

He knew no one, of course, and the long, narrow room was filled with riotous boys and girls all much younger than himself. All the desks seemed to be occupied and he was obliged to run the gauntlet of the entire class in his search for a seat. As he walked down the room so close to the wall that he brushed the chalk of the blackboard off upon his shoulder, he made a really ludicrous figure. All of his fine, free, unconscious grace was gone and his strength of limb only added to his awkwardness.

The girls were of that age where they find the keenest delight in annoying a bashful fellow such as they perceived this new-comer to be. His hair had been badly barbered by Councill and his suit of cotton diagonal, originally too small and never a fit, was now yellow on the shoulders where the sun had faded the analine dye, and his trousers were so tight that they clung to the tops of his great boots, exposing his huge feet in all their enormity of shapeless housing. His large hands protruded from his sleeves and were made still more noticeable by his evident loss of their control.

"Picked too soon," said Nettie Russell, with a vacant stare into space, whereat the rest shrieked with laughter. A great hot wave of blood rushed up over Bradley, making him dizzy. He knew that joke all too well. He looked around blindly for a seat. As he stood there helpless, Nettie hit him with a piece of chalk and someone threw the eraser at his boots.

"Number twelves," said young Brown.

"When did it get loose?"

"Does your mother know you're out?"

"Put your hat over it," came from all sides.

He saw an empty chair and started to sit down, but Nettie slipped into it before him. He started for her seat and her brother Claude got there apparently by mere accident just before him. Bradley stood again indecisively, not daring to look up, burning with rage and shame. Again someone hit him with a piece of chalk, making a resounding whack, and the entire class roared again in concert.

"Why, its head is *wood!*" said Claude, in apparent astonishment at his own discovery.

Bradley raised his head for the first time. There came into his eyes a look that made Claude Russell tremble. He again approached an empty chair and was again forestalled by young Brown. With a bitter curse he swung his great open palm around and laid his tormenter flat on the floor, stunned and breathless. A silence fell on the group. It was as if a lion had awakened with a roar of wrath.

"Come on, all o' ye!" he snarled through his set teeth, facing them all. As he stood thus the absurdity of his own attitude came upon him. They were only children, after all. Reeking with the sweat of shame and anger which burst from his burning skin, he reached for a chair.

Nettie, like the little dare-devil that she was, pulled the chair from under him, and he saved himself from falling only by wildly clutching the desk before him. As it was, he fell almost into her lap and everybody shrieked with uncontrollable laughter. In the midst of it, Miss Clayson, the teacher, came hurrying in to silence the tumult, and Bradley rushed from the room like a bull from the arena, maddened with the spears of the toreador. He snatched his hat and coat from the rack and hardly looked up till he reached the haven of his little cellar.

He threw his cap on the floor and for a half hour raged up and down the floor, his mortification and shame and rage finding vent in a fit of cursing such as he had never had in his life before. All awkwardness was gone now. His great limbs, supple and swift, clenched, doubled, and thrust out against the air in unconscious lightning-swift gestures that showed how terrible he could be when roused.

At last he grew calm enough to sit down, and then his mood changed to the deepest dejection. He sank into a measureless despair. A terrible ache came into his throat.

They were right, he was a great hulking fool. He never could be anything but a clod-hopper, anyway. He looked down at his great hand, at his short trousers, and the indecent ugliness of his horrible boots, and studied himself without mercy to himself. He acknowledged that they were hideous, but he couldn't help it.

Then his mind took another turn and he went over the history of that suit. He didn't want it when he bought it, but he found himself like wax, moulded by the soft, white, confidential hands of the Jew salesman, who offered it to him as a special favor below cost. In common with other young men of his sort he always felt under obligation to buy if he went into a store, even if there were nothing there that suited him. He knew when he bought the suit and paid eleven dollars for it that he would always be sorry, and its cheapness now appalled him.

He always swore at himself for this weakness before the salesman, and yet, year by year he had been cheated in the same way. For the first time, however, he saw his clothing in all its hideousness. Those cruel girls and grinning boys had shown him that clothes made the man, even in a western school. The worst part of it was that he had been humiliated by a girl and there was no redress. His strength of limb was useless here.

He sat there till darkness came into his room. He did not replenish the coal in the stove that leered at him from the two broken doors in front, and seemed to face him with a crazy, drunken reel on its mis-matched legs. He was hungry, but he sat there enjoying in a morbid way the pang of hunger. It helped him someway to bear the sting of his defeat.

It was the darkest hour of his life. He swore never to go back again to that room. He couldn't face that crowd of grinning faces. He turned hot and cold by turns as he thought of his folly. He was a cursed fool for ever thinking of trying to do anything but just dig away on a farm. He might have known how it would be; he'd got behind and had to be classed in with the children; there was no help for it; he'd never go back.

The thought of *Her* came in again and again, but the thought couldn't help him. *Her* face drove the last of his curses from his lips, but it threw him into a fathomless despair, where he no longer defined his thoughts into words. *Her* face shone like a star, but it stood over a bottomless rift in the earth and showed how impassable its yawning barrier was.

There came a whoop outside and a scramble at the door and somebody tumbled into the room.

"Anybody here?"

"Hello, where are you, Brad?"

He recognized Milton's voice. "Yes, I'm here; but wait a minute."

"Cæsar, I *guess* we'll wait! Break our necks if we don't," said the other shadow whom he now recognized as Shep Watson. "Always live in the dark?"

They waited while he lighted the dim little kerosene lamp on the table. "O conspiracy, shamest thou to show thy dangerous brow by night," quoted Shep in the interim.

"Been 'sleep?" asked Milton.

"No. Se' down, anywheres," he added on second thought, as he realized that chairs were limited.

"Say, Brad, come on; let's go over t' the society."

"I guess not," said Brad sullenly.

"Why not?" asked Milton, recognizing something bitter in his voice.

"Because, I aint got any right to go. I aint goin' t' school ag'in. I'm goin' west."

"Why, what's up?"

"I aint a-goin', that's all. I can't never ketch up with the rest of you fellers." His voice broke a little, "an' it aint much fun havin' to go in with a whole raft o' little boys and girls."

"Oh, say now, Brad, I wouldn't mind 'em if I was you," said Milton, after a pause. He had the delicacy not to say he had heard the details of Bradley's experience. "We all have to go through 'bout the same row o' stumps, don't we, Shep? The way to do with 'em is to jest pay no 'tention to 'em."

But the good-will and sympathy of the boys could not prevail upon Bradley to go with them. He persisted in his determination to leave school. And the boys finally went out leaving him alone. Their influence had been good, however; he was distinctly less bitter after they left him and his thoughts went back to Miss Wilbur. What would she think of him if he gave up all his plans the first day, simply because some mischievous girls and boys had made him absurd? When he thought of her he felt strong enough to go back, but when he thought of his tormentors and what he would be obliged to endure from them, he shivered and shrank back into despondency.

He was still fighting his battle, when a slow step came down the stairs ending in a sharp rap upon the door. He said, "Come in," and Radbourn, the most powerful and most popular senior, entered the room. He was a good deal of an autocrat in the town and in the school, and took pleasure in exercising his power on behalf of some poor devil like Bradley Talcott.

"Jennings tells me you're going to give it up," he said, without preliminary conversation.

Bradley nodded sullenly. "What's the use, anyhow? I might as well. I'm too old, anyhow."

Radbourn looked at him a moment in silence. "Put on your hat and let's go outside," he said at length, and there was something in his voice that Bradley obeyed.

Once on the outside Radbourn took his arm and they walked on up the street in silence for some distance. It was still, and clear, and frosty, and the stars burned overhead with many-colored brilliancy.

"Now I know all about it, Talcott, and I know just about how you feel. But all the same you must go back there to-morrow morning."

"It aint no use talkin', I can't do it."

"Yes, you can. You think you can't, but you can. A man can do anything if he only thinks he can and tries hard. You can't afford to let a little thing like that upset your plans. I understand your position exactly. You're at a disadvantage," he changed his pace suddenly, stopping Bradley. "Now, Talcott, you're at a disadvantage with that suit. It makes you look like a gawk, when you're not. You're a stalwart fellow, and if you'll invest in a new suit of clothes as Jennings did, it'll make all the difference in the world."

"I can't afford it."

"No, that's a mistake, you can't afford *not* to have it. A good suit of clothes will do more to put you on an equality with the boys than anything else you can do for yourself. Now let's drop in here to see my friend, who keeps what you need, and to-morrow I'll call for you and take you into the class and introduce you to Miss Clayson, and you'll be all right. You didn't start right."

When he walked in with Radbourn the next morning and was introduced to the teacher, Nettie Russell stared in breathless astonishmemt. He was barbered and wore a suit which showed his splendid length and strength of limb.

"Well said! Aint we a big sunflower! My sakes! aint we a-coming out!" "No moon last night." "Must 'a ben a fire." "He got them with a basket and a club," were some of the remarks he heard.

Bradley felt the difference in the atmosphere, and he walked to his seat with a self-possession that astonished himself. And from that time he was master of the situation. The girls pelted him with chalk and marked figures on his back, but he kept at his work. He had a firm grip on the plow-handles now, and he didn't look back. They grew to respect him, at length, and some of the girls distinctly showed their admiration. Brown came over to get help on a sum and so did Nettie, and when he sat down beside her she winked in triumph at the other girls while Bradley patiently tried to explain the problem in algebra which was his own terror.

He certainly was a handsome fellow in a rough-angled way, and when the boys found he could jump eleven feet and eight inches at a standing jump, they no longer drew any distinctions between

his attainments in algebra and their own. Neither did his poverty count against him with them. He sawed wood in every spare hour with desperate energy to make up for the sinful extravagance of his new fifteen dollar suit of clothes.

He was sawing wood in an alley one Saturday morning where he could hear a girl singing in a bird-like way that was very charming. He was tremendously hungry, for he had been at work since the first faint gray light, and the smell of breakfast that came to his senses was tantalizing.

He heard the girl's rapid feet moving about in the kitchen and her voice rising and falling, pausing and beginning again as if she were working rapidly. Then she fell silent, and he knew she was at breakfast.

At last she opened the door and came out along the walk with a tablecloth. She shook her cloth, and then her singing ceased and Bradley went on with his work.

"Hello, Brad!" called a sudden voice.

He looked up and saw Nettie Russell's roguish face peering over the board fence.

"Hello," he replied, and stood an instant in wordless surprise. "I didn't know you lived there."

"Well, I do. Aint tickled to death to find it out, I s'pose? Say, you aint so very mad at me, are yeh?" she added insinuatingly.

He didn't know what to say, so he kept silent. He noticed for the first time how childishly round her face was!

She took a new turn. "Say, aint you hungry?"

Bradley admitted that he had eaten an early breakfast. He did not say it was composed of fried pork and potatoes and baker's bread, without tea, coffee, or milk.

The girl seemed delighted to think he was hungry.

"You wait a minute," she commanded, and her smiling face disappeared from the top of the fence. Brad went to work to keep from catching cold, wondering what she was going to do. She reappeared soon with a fat home-made sausage and a couple of warm biscuits which she insisted upon his taking.

"They're all buttered and – they've got sugar on 'em," she whispered significantly.

"Say, you eat now, while I saw," she commanded, coming around through the gate.

She had put on her fascinator hood, but her hands and wrists were bare. She struggled away on a log, putting her knee on it in a comically resolute style.

"The saw always goes crooked," she said in despair. Bradley laughed at her heartily.

"Say, do you do this for fun?" she asked, stopping to puff, her cheeks a beautiful pink.

"No, I don't. I do it because I'm obliged to."

She threw down the saw. "Well, that beats me; I can't saw, but I can cook. I made them biscuits." She challenged his opinion, as he well knew.

"They're first rate," he admitted, and they were friends. She watched him eat with apparent satisfaction.

"Say, I can't stay here, I'll freeze. Are yeh going to be here till noon?"

"Yes."

"Well, when I whistle you come in and get some grub, will yeh?" Bradley smiled back at her laughing face.

"This ain't your folks' wood pile."

"What's the difference?" she replied. "You jest come in, will yeh?"

"Yes, I'll come."

"Like fun you will! Honest?" she persisted.

"Hope to die," he said solemnly.

"That's the checker," she said, and disappeared with a click of the tongue.

Bradley worked away in a glow of cheerfulness. It was astonishing how much this little victory over a roguish girl meant to him. He had changed one person's ridicule to friendship, and it seemed to be prophetic of other victories.

The time seemed very short that forenoon. Once or twice Nettie came out to bring some news about the cooking.

"Say, I'm making an apple pie. I'm a dandy on pies and cakes."

"I guess they would be 'pizen' cakes."

She threw an imaginary club at him.

"Well, if that ain't the sickest old joke! You'll go without any pie if you get off such a thing again."

But as dinner-time drew on he felt more and more unwilling to go into the kitchen.

He heard her whistle, but he remained at the saw-horse. It would do in the country, but not here. He had no right to go in there and eat.

There was a note of impatience in her voice when she looked over the fence and said, "Why don't you come?"

"I dassant!"

"Oh, bother! What y' 'fraid of?"

"What business have I got to eat your dinner? This aint your wood-pile."

"Say, if you don't come in I'll – I dunno what!"

"Bring it out here, it's warm."

"I won't do it; you've got to come in; the old man's gone up town and mother won't throw you out. There isn't anybody in the kitchen. Come on now," she pleaded.

Bradley followed her into the house, feeling a good deal like a very large dog, very hungry, who had followed a child's invitation into the parlor, and felt out of place.

He sat down by the fire, and silently ate what she placed before him, while she chattered away in high glee. When Mrs. Russell came in, Nettie did not take the trouble to introduce him to her mother, who moved about the room in a wordless way, smiling a little about the eyes. She was entirely subject to her daughter. She heard them discussing lessons and concluded they were classmates.

Bradley went back to his wood-sawing and soon finished the job. As he shouldered his saw and saw-buck, Nettie came out and peered over the fence again.

"Say, goin' to attend the social Monday?"

"Guess not. I ain't much on such things."

"It's lots o' fun; we spin the platter and all kinds o' things. I'm goin'," she looked archly inviting.

Bradley colored. He was not astute, but hints like this were not far from kicks. He looked down at his saw as he said, "I guess I won't go, I've got to study."

"Well, good-by," she said without mortification. She was so much of a child yet that she could be jilted without keen pain. "See y' Monday," she said as she ran into the house.

Someway Bradley's life was lightened by that day's experience. He went home to his bleak little room in a resolute mood. He sat down at his table upon which lay his algebra, determined to prepare Monday's lessons, but the pencil fell from his hand, his head sank down and lay upon the open page before him. Wood sawing had worn him down and algebra had made him sleep.

V.
BRADLEY RISES TO ADDRESS THE CARTHAGINIANS

He was now facing another terror, the Friday afternoon recitals, in which alternate sections of the pupils were obliged to appear before the public in the chapel to recite or read an essay. It was an ordeal that tried the souls of the bravest of them all.

Unquestionably it kept many pupils away. Nothing could be more terrible to a shrinking awkward boy or girl from a farm than this requirement, to stand upon a raised platform with nothing to break the effect of sheer crucifixion. It was appalling. It was a pillory, a stake, a burning, and yet there was a fearful fascination about it, and it was doubtful if a majority of the students would have voted for its abolition. The preps and juniors saw the seniors winning electrical applause from the audience and fancied the same prize was within their reach. There was no surer or more instant success to be won than that which followed a splendid oratorical effort on the platform. It was worth the cost.

Each new-comer dreaded it for weeks and talked about it constantly. Bradley, like all the rest before him, could not eat a thing on the morning preceding his trial, and in fact had suffered a distinct loss of appetite from the middle of the week.

Mary Barber, a tall, awkward, badly-dressed girl, met him as he was going up the steps after the first bell.

"Say, how you feelin'! I've shook all the mornin'. I don't know what I'm goin' to do. I'm just sick."

"Why don't you say so an' get off?" Bradley suggested.

"Because that's what I did last time, and it won't work any more." The poor girl's teeth were chattering with her fright. She laughed at herself in an hysterical way, and wrung her hands, as if with cold, and dropped back into the broadest kind of dialect. "Oh, I feel 'sif my stomach was all gone."

Nettie Russell regarded it all as merely another disagreeable duty to be shirked. Nothing troubled her very much. "You just wait and see how I get out of it," she said, as she passed by. At two o'clock the principal came in, and removed even the small pulpit, so that nothing should stand between the shrinking young orators and the keen derisive eyes below.

The chapel was a very imposing structure to Bradley. It was square and papered in grey-white with fluted columns of the Corinthian order of architecture, and that touch of history and romance did not fail of its effect on the country boys fresh from the barn-yard and the corn-rows. It added to their fear and self-abasement, as they rolled their slow eyes around and upward. The audience consisted mainly of the pupils arranged according to classes, the girls on the left and the boys on the right. In addition, some of the towns-people, who loved oratory, or were specially interested in the speakers of the day, were often present to add to the terror of the occasion.

Radbourn came in with Lily Graham, talking earnestly. He was in the same section with Bradley, a fact which did not cheer Bradley at all. Jack Carver came in with a jaunty air. His cuffs and collar were linen, and his trousers were tailor-made, which was distinction enough for him. He had no scruples, therefore, in shirking the speaking with the same indifference Nettie Russell showed.

Milton, who came in the first section, was joking the rest upon their nervousness.

"Say, when did you eat y'r last meal?" he whispered to Bradley.

"Yesterday morning," Bradley replied, unable to smile.

All the week the members of the last section had been prancing up and down the various rooms in boarding-houses, to the deep disgust of their fellow students, who mixed harsh comments throughout their practice, as they shouted in thunder tones:

"I came not here to talk. ('Then why don't you shut up?') You know too well the story of our thraldom. ('You bet we do, we've heard it all the week.') The beams of the setting sun fall upon a slave. ('Would a beam of some sort would fall on you.') O Rome! Rome!" – ('Oh, go roam the wild wood.')"

All the week the boarding-house mistresses had pounded on the stove-pipe to bring the appeal of "Spartacus to the Romans" down to a key that would not also include all the people in the block. All to no purpose. Spartacus was aroused, and nothing but a glaive or a battle-axe could bring him to silence and submission. The first section now sat smiling grimly. Their revenge was coming.

After the choir had sung, the principal of oratory, note-book in hand, came down among the pupils, and began the fateful roll-call.

The first name called was Alice Masters, an ambitious, but terribly plain and awkward girl. She had not eaten anything since the middle of the week, and was weak and nervous with fright. She sprang out of her seat, white as a dead person, and rushed up the aisle. As she stepped upon the platform she struck her toe and nearly fell. The rest laughed, some hysterically, the most of them in thoughtless derision. The blood rushed into her face and when she turned, she seemed to be masked in scarlet. She began, stammeringly, her fingers playing nervously with the seams of her dress.

"Beside his block the sculptor —

"Beside his block —

"Beside, the sculptor stood beside" —

She could not think of another word, not one, and she fell into a horrible silence, wringing her hands piteously. It was impossible for her to go on, and impossible for her to leave the floor till the word of release came.

"That will do," said the principal in calm unconcern, and she rushed from the room, and the next name was called. At length Nettie Russell faced the audience, a saucy smile on her lips, and a defiant tilt to her nose. She spoke a verse of "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," to the vast delight of the preps, who had dared her to do it. The principal scowled darkly, and put a very emphatic black mark opposite her name.

As name after name was called, Bradley's chill deepened, and the cold sweat broke out upon his body. There was a terrible weakness and nausea at his stomach, and he drew long, shivering inspirations like a man facing an icy river, into which he must plunge. His hands shook till he was forced to grasp the desk to hide his tremor.

He was saved from utter flight by Radbourn, who came before him. Whatever nervousness the big senior had ever felt, he was well over now, for he walked calmly up the aisle, and took his place with easy dignity. He scorned to address the Romans, or the men of England. He was always contemporaneous. He usually gave orations on political topics, or astounded his teachers by giving a revolutionary opinion of some classic. No matter what subject he dealt with, he interested and held his audience. His earnest face and deep-set eyes had something compelling in them, and his dignity and self-possession in themselves fascinated the poor fellows, who sat there in deathly sickness, shaking with terror.

Bradley felt again the fascination of an orator, and again his heart glowed with a secret feeling that he, too, could be an orator like that. He felt strong, and cool, and hopeful, while Radbourn was speaking, but afterward that horrible, weakening fear came back upon him.

He couldn't look at poor Harry Stillman, who came on a few names further. Harry had pounded away all the week on Webster's reply to Hayne, and he now stood forth in piteous contrast to his ponderous theme. His thin, shaking legs toed-in like an Indian's, and his trousers were tight, and short, and checked, which seemed to increase the tightness and shortness. He had narrow shoulders and thin, long arms, which he used like a jumping jack, each gesture being curiously unrelated to his facial expression, which was mainly appealing and apprehensive. As Shep Watson said, "He looked as if he expected a barn to fall on him."

At last Bradley's name was spoken, and he rose in a mist. The windows had disappeared. They were mere blurs of light. As he walked up the aisle the floor fell away from the soles of his feet. He no longer walked, he was a brain floating in space. He made his way to the stage without accident, for he had rehearsed it all so many times in his mind that unconscious cerebration attended to the necessary motions. When he faced the assembly, he seemed facing a boundless sea of faces. They in their turn were awed by something they saw in his eyes. His face was white and his eyes burned with a singular light. A mysterious power emanated from him as from the born orator.

Like all the rest he had taken a theme that was far beyond his apparent powers, and the apparent comprehension of his audience; but they had been fed so long upon William Tell, Rienzi, Marc Antony and Spartacus, that every line was familiar. Nothing was too ponderous, too lofty, too peak-addressing for them.

He mispronounced the words, his gestures were awkward and spasmodic, but lofty emotion exalted him and vibrated in his voice. He thrilled every heart. He had opened somewhere, somehow, a vast reservoir of power. A great calm fell upon him. A wild joy of new-found strength that awed and thrilled his own heart. It seemed as if a new spirit had taken his flesh. As he went on he grew more dignified and graceful. His great arms seemed to be gigantic, as he thundered against the Carthaginians. Everybody forgot his dress, his freckled face, and when he closed, the applause was instant and generous.

As he walked back to his seat, the exultant light went out of his eyes, his limbs relaxed, the windows and the sunlight cleared to vulgar day, and his face flushed with timidity. He sat down with a feeling of melancholy in his heart, as if something divine had faded out of his life.

But Radbourn reached out his hand in the face of the whole school and said, "First rate!" The pupils had the western love for oratory, and several of them crowded about to congratulate him on his speech.

Bradley did not feel at all sure of his success. He had been something alien to himself in that speech, and he could not remember what he had said or done. He was not at all sure that he had done the right thing or the best thing. He was suspicious of his power because he no longer felt it. He was like a man who had dreamed of flying and woke to find himself paralyzed. After his triumph he was the same great, awkward, country hired-man.

"Say, look here, Talcott," said Radbourn, as they met at the door of the chapel going out, "I'm going to propose you as a member of the Delta; come up Monday, and I'll put you through."

"Oh, they don't want me."

"Don't be so modest. They're in need of just such men. You'll be in demand now, no fear about that."

There was a struggle now to get him into the societies, which were, as usual, bitter rivals. He was secretly anxious to be one of the debaters. In fact he had counted more on that than upon all the rest of the advantages of the school. He thought it would please *Her* better.

He joined the Delta, over which Radbourn presided, and wore the society pin with genuine pride. He sat for several meetings silently in his seat, awed by the excessive formality of proceedings, and the strictness of the parliamentary rules. It was a curious thing to see the meeting come to order out of a chaos of wrestling, shouting, singing members whose excess of life filled the room like a crowd of prize-fighters.

Rap! Rap! And the sound of the gavel stilled the noise as if each man had received a blow on his head.

They took their seats while the stern president remained standing. One final rap, and the room was perfectly quiet, and every member an inexorable parliamentarian, ready to question decisions, or rise to points of order at the slightest infraction of Cushing's manual. Radbourn ruled with a gavel of iron, but they all enjoyed it the more. Half the fun and probably half the benefit of the society would have been lost with the loss of order.

This strenuous dignity awed Bradley for a time. His fellows seemed transformed into something quite other than their usual selves, into grave law-makers. This strangeness wore away after a time and he grew more at ease. He began to study Cushing along with the rest. It laid the foundation for a thorough knowledge of the methods of conducting a meeting, which was afterward of so much value to him.

His first attempt at debating was upon the question, "Should farmers be free traders?" a question which was introduced by Milton, who was always attempting to introduce questions which would strike fire. Nothing pleased his fun-loving nature more than to take part in a "live debate."

As real free traders were scarce, Mason, a brilliant young Democrat, requested Radbourn to take the side of free trade, and he consented. Milton formed the third part of the free trade cohort. He liked the fun of trying to debate on the opposite side, a thing which would have been impossible to Bradley's more intense and simple-hearted nature. What he believed he fought for.

Mason led off with a discussion of the theory of free exchange and made a passionate plea, florid and declamatory, which gave Fergusson, a cool, pointed, scholarly Norwegian, an excellent chance to raise a laugh. He called the attention of the house to the "copperhead Democracy," which the gentleman of the opposition was preaching. He asked what the practical application would mean. Plainly it meant cheap goods.

"That's what we want," interrupted Mason, and was silenced savagely by the chairman.

"England would flood us with cheap goods."

"Let 'em flood," said somebody unknown, and the chairman was helpless.

Fergusson worked away steadily and was called down at last.

He was distinguished as one of the few men who always talked out his ten minutes.

Radbourn astonished them all by saying with absolute sincerity: "Free trade as a theory is right. Considered as a question of ethics, as a question of the trend of things, it's right. The right to trade is as much my right, as my right to produce. The one question is whether it ought to be put into operation at once. There is no reason why the farmer should uphold protection."

From this on his remarks had a mysterious quality. "I'm a free trader, but I'm not a Democrat. Tariff tinkering is not free trade, and I don't believe the Democrats would do any more than the Republicans, but that aint the question. The question is whether the farmers should be free traders."

After the discussion along familiar lines had taken place, Radbourn resumed the chair and called on any one in the room to volunteer a word on either side. "We would like to hear from Talcott," he said.

"Talcott, Talcott," called the rest.

Bradley rose, as if impelled by some irresistible power within himself. He began stammeringly. He had but one line of thought at his command, and that was the line of thought indicated by Miss Wilbur in her speech at the picnic, the Home Market idea, upon which he had spent a great deal of thought. "Mr. Chairman, I don't believe in free trade. I believe if we had free trade it would make us all farmers for England. It aint what we ought t' do. We've got gold in our hills, an' coal an' timber to manufacture. What we want t' do is to build up our industries; make a home market."

As he went on with these stock phrases, he seemed to get hold of things which before had seemed out of his reach, scraps of speeches, newspaper comments, an astonishing flood of arguments, or at least what he took for arguments, came rushing into his mind. He reached out his hands and grasped and used phrases not his own as if they were bludgeons. He assaulted the opposition blindly, but with immense power.

He sat down amid loud applause, and young Mason arose to close the affirmative. He was sarcastic to the point of offence.

"He has said 'em all," he began, alluding to Bradley, "all the regulation arguments of Republican newspapers. And as for the leader of the opposition, he has got off the usual sneer at copperhead Democracy. This debate wouldn't have been complete without that remark from my esteemed leader

of the opposition. Where argument fails, misrepresentations and sneers may do service with the injudicious. I trust the judges will remember that the argument has been on our side, and the innuendoes on the side of the opposition."

The verdict of the judges was in favor of the free traders, but the decision of the judges had less effect on Bradley than the surprising revelation of Radbourn's thought. There were phrases whose reach and significance he did not realize to the full, but their effect was not lost. He never forgot such things.

He was thinking how diametrically opposite Miss Wilbur's ideas were, when Radbourn came up, and said with a significant smile:

"Well, Talcott, you *did* get hold of all the regulation stock material. The Home Market idea is a great field for you. You think a city is of itself a good thing? You think a city means civilization. Well, I want to tell you, and maybe you won't believe me, cities mean vice, and crime, and poverty, and vast wealth for the few, and as for the Home Market idea, how would it do to let the farmer buy in the same market in which he sells? He sells in the world's market, but you'd force him to buy in a protected market."

Radbourn went off with a peculiar smile, which left Bradley uncertain whether he was laughing at him or not. He began from that moment to overhaul his stock of phrases, to see if they were really shopworn and worthless. He was growing marvellously, his whole nature was now awake. He thought, as he sawed wood in the back alleys of the town, and at night he toiled at his books. Those were great days. New powers were swiftly burgeoning.

Radbourn spoke to several of the politicians of the town about Bradley.

"There is a good deal in that man Talcott. Of course he's just beginning, but you'll hear from him on the stump. He is an orator that reaches people. He has the advantage of most of us; he's in dead earnest when he's advocating Republicanism."

Radbourn had times of saying things like this when his hearers didn't know what to make of him.

"It's just his way," some one usually said, and the rest sat in silence. They didn't enjoy it, but as Radbourn was not running for any office and was known to be a powerful thinker, they thought it best not to antagonize him.

"I wonder if he intends the law?" asked Judge Brown.

"I see what the Judge is driving at," Radbourn said quickly, "he thinks he can make a Democrat of him."

The group laughed. Democrats were in a hopeless minority, but the judge and Colonel Peavey never lost their proselyting zeal.

"The Judge is always on hand like a sore thumb," said Amos.

"The Judge'll be on the right side of the tariff one of these fine days, and have the laugh on the lot of yeh."

"What y' idee about that, Rad?"

"Good heavens! You don't expect to have protection always, do yeh?" was his only reply.

A day or two later he said to Bradley —

"Talcott, Brown wants to see you. He wants to make you a 'lawyer's hack'! Now I'd say to most men, don't do it, but if he offers to give you a place take it. It won't be worse than sawing wood thirty hours a week."

Following Radbourn's direction he passed up a narrow, incredibly grimy stairway, and knocked at a door at the end of a hall, whose only light came through the letter-slit in the door.

"Come in!" yelled a snarling voice.

Bradley entered timidly, for the voice was not at all cordial. The Judge, in his own den, was a different man from the Judge at Robie's grocery, and this day he was in bad humor. He sat with his heels on a revolving book-case, a law-book spread out on his legs, a long pipe in his hand.

If he uttered any words of greeting they were lost in the crescendo growl of a fat bull-dog lying in supple shining length at his feet.

"Down with yeh!" he snarled at the dog, who ceased his growling, but ran lightly and with ferocious suggestiveness toward Bradley and clung sniffing about his heels.

"Si' down!" the Judge said, indicating a chair with his pipe, which he held by the bowl. He made no other motion.

Bradley sat down. This greeting drove him back into his usual stubborn silence. He waited for developments, his eyes on the dog.

"Well, young man, what can I do for you?" asked the lawyer after a long silence, during which he laid down one book, and read a page in another.

"Nothin', I guess."

"Well, what the devil did yeh come in here for?" he inquired, with a glare of astonishment. "Want 'o buy a dog?"

Bradley was mad. "I came because Radbourn sent me. I c'n git out agin, mighty quick."

The Judge took down his heels. "Oh, you're that young orator. Why didn't yeh say so, you damned young Indian?" He now rose and walked over to the spittoon before going on. Bradley knew that this rough tone was entirely different from the first. It was a sort of affectionate blackguardism. "I heard you speak last Friday. All you need, young man, is a chance to swing y'r elbows. You want room according to y'r strength, but you never'd find it in the Republican party. It's struck with the palsy."

The judge had been talking this for two presidential campaigns and didn't take himself at all seriously.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, yet."

"Do you want 'o study law?"

"I don't know, sir. Do you think I can be a lawyer?"

"If you're not too damned honest. If you want 'o try it, I'll make an arrangement with you, that will be better than sawing wood anyhow, this winter, and you can keep right on with your studies. We'll see what can be done next year."

The old man had taken a liking to Bradley on account of his oratory, and the possibilities of making him a Democratic leader had really taken possession of him. He had no son of his own, and he took a deep interest in young men of the stamp of Milton and Bradley.

After he reached home that night, Bradley extended his ambitions. He dared to hope that he might be a lawyer, and an orator, which meant also a successful politician to him. Politics to him, as to most western men, was the greatest concern of life, and the city of Washington the Mecca whose shining dome lured from afar. To go to Washington was equivalent to being born again. "A man can do anything if he thinks so and tries hard," he thought, following Radbourn's words.

He bustled about cheerily, cooking his fried potatoes and scraps of meat, and boiling his tea. The dim light made his large face softer and more thoughtful than it had appeared before, and his cheerfulness over his lonely meal typed forth the sublime audacity, profound ignorance, and pathetic faith with which such a man faces the world's millions and dares to hope for success.

VI.
BRADLEY ATTENDS A CONVENTION

On a dreamful September day of the following year, Bradley was helping Milton Jennings to dig potatoes. It was nearly time for his return to school and to Judge Brown's office, and the two young men were full of plans. Milton was intending to go back for another year, and Bradley intended to keep up with his studies if possible, and retain his place with Brown also.

"Say," broke out Milton suddenly, "we ought to attend this convention."

"What convention?"

"Why, the nominating convention at Rock. Father's going this afternoon. I never've been. Let's go with him."

"That won't dig taters," smiled Bradley in his slow way.

"Darn the taters. If we're goin' into politics we want 'o know all about things."

"That's so. I would like to go if your father'll let us off on the taters."

Mr. Jennings made no objection. "It'll be a farce, though, the whole thing."

"Why so?"

"I'll tell you on the way down. Git the team ready and we'll take neighbor Councill in."

Bradley listened to Mr. Jennings' explanation with an interest born of his expanding ambition. His marvellously retentive mind absorbed every detail and the situation cleared in his mind.

For sixteen years the affairs of the country had been managed by a group of persuasive, well-dressed citizens of Rock River, who played into each other's hands and juggled with the county's money with such adroitness and address that their reign seemed hopelessly permanent to the discontented and suspicious farmers of the county. Year after year they saw these gentlemen building new houses, opening banks, and buying in farm mortgages "all out of the county," many grangers asserted.

Year after year the convention assembled, and year after year the delegates from the rural townships came down to find their duties purely perfunctory, simply to fill up the seats. They always found the slate made up and fine speakers ready to put it through with a rush of ready applause, before which the slower-spoken, disorganized farmers were well-nigh helpless. It was a case of perfect organization against disorganization and mutual distrust. Banded officialism fighting to keep its place against the demands of a disorganized righteous mob of citizens. Office is always a trained command. The intrenched minority is capable of a sort of rock-like resistance.

Rock River and its neighboring village of Cedarville, by pooling together could tie the convention, and in addition to these towns they always controlled several of the outlying townships by judicious flattery of their self-constituted managers, who were given small favors, put on the central committee, and otherwise made to feel that they were leading men in the township; and it was beginning to be stated that the county treasurer had regularly bribed other influential whippers-in, by an amiable remission of taxes.

"Why don't you fight 'em?" asked Milton, after Mr. Jennings had covered the whole ground thoroughly.

Councill laughed. "We've been a-fightin' um; suppose you try."

"Give us a chance, and we'll do our part. Won't we, Brad?"

Bradley nodded, and so committed himself to the fight. He was fated to begin his political career as an Independent Republican.

On the street they met other leading grangers of the county, and it became evident that there was a deep feeling of resentment present. They gathered in knots on the sidewalks which led up under the splendid maples that lined the sidewalks leading toward the court-house.

The court-house was of the usual pseudo-classic style of architecture, that is to say, it was a brick building with an ambitious facade of four wooden fluted columns. Its halls echoed to the voices and footsteps of the crowd that passed up its broad, worn and grimy steps into the court-room itself, which was grimier and more hopelessly filthy than the staircase with its stratified accumulations of cigar stubs and foul sawdust. Its seats were benches hacked and carved like the desks of a country schoolhouse. Nothing could be more barren, more desolate. It had nothing to relieve it save the beautiful stains of color that seemed thrown upon the windows by the crimson and orange maples which stood in the yard.

They found the room full of delegates, among whom there was going on a great deal of excited conversation. From a side room near the Judge's bench there issued, from time to time, messengers who came out among the general mob, and invited certain flattered and useful delegates to come in and meet with the central committee. There was plainly a division in the house.

"The rusty cusses are on their ears to-day," said Milton, "and there's going to be fun." His blue eyes were beaming with laughter, and his quick wit kept those who were within hearing on the broad grin.

"Goin' to down 'em t' day?" he asked of Councill.

"We're goin' t' try."

In one dishonest way or another the ring had kept its hold upon the county, notwithstanding all criticism, and now came to the struggle with smiling confidence. They secured the chairman by the ready-made quick vote, by acclamation for re-election. The president then appointed the committee upon credentials and upon nominations, and the work of the convention was opened.

The committee on nominations, in due course presented its slate as usual, but here the real battle began. Bradley suddenly found himself tense with interest. His ancestry must have been a race of orators and politicians, for the atmosphere of the convention roused him till it transformed him.

Here was the real thing. No mere debate, but a fight. There was battle in the air, now blue with smoke and rank with the reek of tobacco. There was fight in the poise of the grizzled heads and rusty, yellow shoulders of the farmers who had now fallen into perfect silence. In looking over them one might have been reminded of a field of yellow-gray boulders.

Colonel Russell moved the election of the entire slate, as presented by the nominating committee, in whom, he said, the convention had the utmost confidence. Four or five farmers sprang to their feet instantly and Osmond Deering got the floor. When he began speaking the loafers in the gallery stopped their chewing in excess of interest. He was one of the most influential men in the county.

"Mr. President," he began in his mild way, "I don't want to seem captious about this matter, but I want to remind this convention that this is the eighth year that almost the same identical slate has been presented to the farmers of Rock County and passed against our wishes. It isn't right that it should pass again. It sha'n't pass without my protest." Applause. "This convention has been robbed of its right to nominate every year, and every year we've gone home feeling we've been made cat's paws of, for the benefit of a few citizens of Rock River. I protest against the slate. I claim the right to nominate my man. I don't intend to have a committee empowered to take away my rights to" —

The opposition raised a clamor, "Question! Question!" attempting to force a vote, but the old man, carried out of himself by his excitement, shook his broad flat hand in the air, and cried: "I have the floor, gentlemen, and I propose to keep it." The farmers applauded. "I say to this convention, vote down this motion and set down on the old-fashioned slate-making committee business. It aint just, it aint right, and I protest against it."

He sat down to wild excitement, his supporters trying to speak, the opposition crying, "Question, Question." Several fiery speeches were made by leading grangers, but they were met by a cool, smooth persuasive speech from the chairman of the nominating committee, who argued that it was not to be supposed that this committee chosen by this convention would bring in a slate

which would not be a credit and honor to the country. True, they were mainly from Rock River and Cedarville; but it must be remembered that the population of the county was mainly in these towns, and that no ticket could succeed which did not give a proper proportion of representation to these towns. These men could not be surpassed in business ability. They were old in their office, it was true, but the affairs of the county were passing through a critical period in their history, and it was an old and well-tried saying: "Never swap horses in the midst of a stream," anyhow, he was content to leave the matter to the vote of this convention.

The vote carried the slate through by a small majority, leaving the farmers again stunned and helpless, and the further business of the convention was to restore peace and good-will, as far as possible among the members. It was amazing to Bradley to find how easily he could be swayed by the plausible speeches of the gentlemanly chairman of the nominating committee. It was a great lesson to him in the power of oratory. The slate was put through simply by the address of the chairman of the committee.

On the way out they met Councill and Jennings walking out with Chairman Russell, who had his hand on a shoulder of each, and was saying, with beautiful candor and joviality: "Well, we beat you again. It's all fair in politics, you know."

"Yes, but it's the last time," said Jennings, who refused to smile. "We can't give this the go-by."

"Oh, well, now, neighbor Jennings, you mustn't take it too hard; you know these men are good capable men."

"They are capable enough," put in Deering, "but we want a change."

"Then make it," laughed Russell, good-naturedly defiant.

"We will make it, bet y'r boots," said Amos Ridings.

"Let's see yeh," was Russell's parting word, delivered with a jaunty wave of his hand.

The farmers rode home full of smoldering wrath. They were in fighting humor, and only needed an organizer to become a dangerous force.

VII.
THE FARMERS OUST THE RING

The following Saturday Bradley, who was still at work with Milton, saw Amos Ridings gallop up and dismount at the gate, and call Jennings out, and during the next two hours, every time he looked up he saw them in deep discussion out by the pig pen. Part of the time Jennings faced Amos, who leaned against the fence and whittled a stick, and part of the time he talked to Jennings who leaned back against the fence on his elbows, and studied Amos whittling the rail. Mrs. Jennings at last called them all to dinner, and still the question remained apparently unsolved, though they changed the conversation to crops and the price of wheat.

"Brad, set down here and make a lot o' copies of this call. Milt, you help him."

The call read:

"A New Deal. Reform in County Politics."

> "A mass convention of the citizens of Rock County will be held at Rock Creek Grove on September 28th, for the purpose of nominating a people's ticket. All who favor reform in politics and rebel against the ring-rule of our county officers are invited to be present.
> *"Per order,*
> *"Amos Ridings,*
> *John Jennings,*
> *William Councill,*
> *"People's Committee."*

"What's all this?" asked Milton of his father.

"We're going to have a convention of our own."

"We're on the war path," said Amos grimly. "We'll make them fellers think hell's t' pay and no pitch hot."

After dinner Amos took a roll of the copies of the call and rode away to the north, and Jennings hitched up his team and drove away to the south. Milton and Bradley went back to their corn-husking, feeling that they were "small petaters."

"They don't intend to let us into it, that's dead sure," said Milton. "All the same, I know the scheme. They're going to bolt the convention, and there'll be fun in the air."

The county woke up the next morning to find its schoolhouse doors proclaiming a revolt of the farmers, and the new deal was the talk of the county. It was the grange that had made this revolt possible. This general intelligence and self-cognizance was the direct result of the work of the grange. It had brought the farmers together, and had made them acquainted with their own men, their own leaders, and when they came together a few days later, under the open sky, like the Saxon thanes of old, there was a spirit of rebellion in the air that made every man look his neighbor in the face with exultation.

It was a perfectly Democratic meeting. They came together that beautiful September day, under the great oaks, a witenagemote of serious, liberty-loving men, ready to follow wherever their leaders pointed.

Amos Ridings was the chairman, tall, grim-lipped and earnest-eyed. His curt speech carried the convention with him. His platform was a wagon box, and he stood there with his hat off, the

sun falling upon his shock of close-clipped stiff hair, making a powerful and resolute figure with a touch of poetry in his face.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.