

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

Sundry Accounts



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	45
CHAPTER III	87
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	94

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CHAPTER I

DARKNESS

There was a house in this town where always by night lights burned. In one of its rooms many lights burned; in each of the other rooms at least one light. It stood on Clay Street, on a treeless plot among flower beds, a small dull-looking house; and when late on dark nights all the other houses on Clay Street were solid blockings lifting from the lesser blackness of their background, the lights in this house patterned its windows with squares of brilliancy so that it suggested a grid set on edge before hot flames. Once a newcomer to the town, a transient guest at Mrs. Otterbuck's boarding house, spoke about it to old Squire Jonas, who lived next door to where the lights blazed of nights, and the answer he got makes a fitting enough beginning for this account.

This stranger came along Clay Street one morning, and Squire Jonas, who was leaning over his gate contemplating the world as it passed in review, nodded to him and remarked that it was a fine morning; and the stranger was emboldened to stop and pass

the time of day, as the saying goes.

"I'm here going over the books of the Bernheimer Distilling Company," he said when they had spoken of this and that, "and, you know, when a chartered accountant gets on a job he's supposed to keep right at it until he's done. Well, my work keeps me busy till pretty late. And the last three nights, passing that place yonder adjoining yours, I've noticed she was all lit up like as if for a wedding or a christening or a party or something. But I didn't see anybody going in or coming out, or hear anybody stirring in there, and it struck me as blamed curious. Last night – or this morning, rather, I should say – it must have been close on to half-past two o'clock when I passed by, and there she was, all as quiet as the tomb and still the lights going from top to bottom. So I got to wondering to myself. Tell me, sir, is there somebody sick over there next door?"

"Yes, suh," stated the squire, "I figure you might say there is somebody sick there. He's been sick a powerful long time too. But it's not his body that's sick; it's his soul."

"I don't know as I get you, sir," said the other man in a puzzled sort of way.

"Son," stated the squire, "I reckon you've been hearin' 'em, haven't you, singin' this here new song that's goin' 'round about, 'I'm Afraid to Go Home in the Dark'? Well, probably the man who wrote that there song never was down here in these parts in his life; probably he just made the idea of it up out of his own head. But he might 'a' had the case of my neighbor in his mind

when he done so. Only his song is kind of comical and this case here is about the most uncomic one you'd be likely to run acrost. The man who lives here alongside of me is not only afraid to go home in the dark but he's actually feared to stay in the dark after he gets home. Once he killed a man and he come clear of the killin' all right enough, but seems like he ain't never got over it; and the sayin' in this town is that he's studied it out that ef ever he gets in the dark, either by himself or in company, he'll see the face of that there man he killed. So that's why, son, you've been seein' them lights a-blazin'. I've been seein' 'em myself fur goin' on twenty year or more, I reckon 'tis by now, and I've got used to 'em. But I ain't never got over wonderin' whut kind of thoughts he must have over there all alone by himself at night with everything lit up bright as day around him, when by rights things should be dark. But I ain't ever asted him, and whut's more, I never will. He ain't the kind you could go to him astin' him personal questions about his own private affairs. We-all here in town just accept him fur whut he is and sort of let him be. He's whut you might call a town character. His name is Mr. Dudley Stackpole."

In all respects save one, Squire Jonas, telling the inquiring stranger the tale, had the rights of it. There were town characters aplenty he might have described. A long-settled community with traditions behind it and a reasonable antiquity seems to breed curious types of men and women as a musty closet breeds mice and moths. This town of ours had its town mysteries and its town eccentrics – its freaks, if one wished to put the matter bluntly;

and it had its champion story-teller and its champion liar and its champion guesser of the weight of livestock on the hoof.

There was crazy Saul Vance, the butt of cruel small boys, who deported himself as any rational creature might so long as he walked a straight course; but so surely as he came to where the road forked or two streets crossed he could not decide which turning to take and for hours angled back and forth and to and fro, now taking the short cut to regain the path he just had quitted, now retracing his way over the long one, for all the world like a geometric spider spinning its web. There was old Daddy Hannah, the black root-and-yarb doctor, who could throw spells and weave charms and invoke conjures. He wore a pair of shoes which had been worn by a man who was hanged, and these shoes, as is well known, leave no tracks which a dog will nose after or a witch follow, or a ha'nt. Small boys did not gibe at Daddy Hannah, you bet you! There was Major Burnley, who lived for years and years in the same house with the wife with whom he had quarreled and never spoke a word to her or she to him. But the list is overlong for calling. With us, in that day and time, town characters abounded freely. But Mr. Dudley Stackpole was more than a town character. He was that, it is true, but he was something else besides; something which tabbed him a mortal set apart from his fellow mortals. He was the town's chief figure of tragedy.

If you had ever seen him once you could shut your eyes and see him over again. Yet about him there was nothing impressive,

nothing in his port or his manner to catch and to hold a stranger's gaze. With him, physically, it was quite the other way about. He was a short spare man, very gentle in his movements, a toneless sort of man of a palish gray cast, who always wore sad-colored clothing. He would make you think of a man molded out of a fog; almost he was like a man made of smoke. His mode of living might testify that a gnawing remorse abode ever with him, but his hair had not turned white in a single night, as the heads of those suddenly stricken by a great shock or a great grief or any greatly upsetting and disordering emotion sometimes are reputed to turn. Neither in his youth nor when age came to him was his hair white. But for so far back as any now remembered it had been a dullish gray, suggesting at a distance dead lichens.

The color of his skin was a color to match in with the rest of him. It was not pale, nor was it pasty. People with a taste for comparisons were hard put to it to describe just what it was the hue of his face did remind them of, until one day a man brought in from the woods the abandoned nest of a brood of black hornets, still clinging to the pendent twig from which the insect artificers had swung it. Darkies used to collect these nests in the fall of the year when the vicious swarms had deserted them. Their shredded parchments made ideal wadding for muzzle-loading scatter-guns, and sufferers from asthma tore them down, too, and burned them slowly and stooped over the smoldering mass and inhaled the fumes and the smoke which arose, because the country wiseacres preached that no boughten stuff out of

a drug store gave such relief from asthma as this hornet's-nest treatment. But it remained for this man to find a third use for such a thing. He brought it into the office of Gafford's wagon yard, where some other men were sitting about the fire, and he held it up before them and he said:

"Who does this here hornet's nest put you fellers in mind of – this gray color all over it, and all these here fine lines runnin' back and forth and every which-a-way like wrinkles? Think, now – it's somebody you all know."

And when they had given it up as a puzzle too hard for them to guess he said:

"Why, ain't it got percisely the same color and the same look about it as Mr. Dudley Stackpole's face? Why, it's a perfect imitation of him! That's whut I said to myself all in a flash when I first seen it bouncin' on the end of this here black birch limb out yonder in the flats."

"By gum, if you ain't right!" exclaimed one of the audience. "Say, come to think about it, I wonder if spendin' all his nights with bright lights burnin' round him is whut's give that old man that gray color he's got, the same as this wasp's nest has got it, and all them puckery lines round his eyes. Pore old devil, with the hags furever ridin' him! Well, they tell me he's toler'ble well fixed in this world's goods, but poor as I am, and him well off, I wouldn't trade places with him fur any amount of money. I've got my peace of mind if I ain't got anything else to speak of. Say, you'd 'a' thought in all these years a man would get over broodin'

over havin' killed another feller, and specially havin' killed him in fair fight. Let's see, now, whut was the name of the feller he killed that time out there at Cache Creek Crossin's? I actually disremember. I've heard it a thousand times, too, I reckon, if I've heard it oncet."

For a fact, the memory of the man slain so long before only endured because the slayer walked abroad as a living reminder of the taking off of one who by all accounts had been of small value to mankind in his day and generation. Save for the daily presence of the one, the very identity even of the other might before now have been forgotten. For this very reason, seeking to enlarge the merits of the controversy which had led to the death of one Jesse Tatum at the hands of Dudley Stackpole, people sometimes referred to it as the Tatum-Stackpole feud and sought to liken it to the Faxon-Fleming feud. But that was a real feud with fence-corner ambushades and a sizable mortality list and nighttime assassinations and all; whereas this lesser thing, which now briefly is to be dealt with on its merits, had been no more than a neighborhood falling out, having but a solitary homicide for its climactic upshot. So far as that went, it really was not so much the death of the victim as the survival of his destroyer – and his fashion of living afterwards – which made warp and woof for the fabric of the tragedy.

With the passage of time the actuating causes were somewhat blurred in perspective. The main facts stood forth clear enough, but the underlying details were misty and uncertain, like some

half-obliterated scribble on a badly rubbed slate upon which a more important sum has been overlaid. One rendition had it that the firm of Stackpole Brothers sued the two Tatums – Harve and Jess – for an account long overdue, and won judgment in the courts, but won with it the murderous enmity of the defendant pair. Another account would have it that a dispute over a boundary fence marching between the Tatum homestead on Cache Creek and one of the Stackpole farm holdings ripened into a prime quarrel by reasons of Stackpole stubbornness on the one hand and Tatum malignity on the other. By yet a third account the lawsuit and the line-fence matter were confusingly twisted together to form a cause for disputation.

Never mind that part though. The incontrovertible part was that things came to a decisive pass on a July day in the late 80's when the two Tatums sent word to the two Stackpoles that at or about six o'clock of that evening they would come down the side road from their place a mile away to Stackpole Brothers' gristmill above the big riffle in Cache Creek prepared to fight it out man to man. The warning was explicit enough – the Tatums would shoot on sight. The message was meant for two, but only one brother heard it; for Jeffrey Stackpole, the senior member of the firm, was sick abed with heart disease at the Stackpole house on Clay Street in town, and Dudley, the junior, was running the business and keeping bachelor's hall, as the phrase goes, in the living room of the mill; and it was Dudley who received notice.

Now the younger Stackpole was known for a law-abiding

and a well-disposed man, which reputation stood him in stead subsequently; but also he was no coward. He might crave peace, but he would not flee from trouble moving toward him. He would not advance a step to meet it, neither would he give back a step to avoid it. If it occurred to him to hurry in to the county seat and have his enemies put under bonds to keep the peace he pushed the thought from him. This, in those days, was not the popular course for one threatened with violence by another; nor, generally speaking, was it regarded exactly as the manly one to follow. So he bided that day where he was. Moreover, it was not of record that he told anyone at all of what impended. He knew little of the use of firearms, but there was a loaded pistol in the cash drawer of the mill office. He put it in a pocket of his coat and through the afternoon he waited, outwardly quiet and composed, for the appointed hour when single-handed he would defend his honor and his brother's against the unequal odds of a brace of bullies, both of them quick on the trigger, both smart and clever in the handling of weapons.

But if Stackpole told no one, someone else told someone. Probably the messenger of the Tatums talked. He currently was reputed to have a leaky tongue to go with his jimberjaws; a born trouble maker, doubtless, else he would not have loaned his service to such employment in the first place. Up and down the road ran the report that before night there would be a clash at the Stackpole mill. Peg-Leg Foster, who ran the general store below the bridge and within sight of the big riffle, saw fit to

shut up shop early and go to town for the evening. Perhaps he did not want to be a witness, or possibly he desired to be out of the way of stray lead flying about. So the only known witness to what happened, other than the parties engaged in it, was a negro woman. She, at least, was one who had not heard the rumor which since early forenoon had been spreading through the sparsely settled neighborhood. When six o'clock came she was grubbing out a sorghum patch in front of her cabin just north of where the creek cut under the Blandsville gravel pike.

One gets a picture of the scene: The thin and deficient shadows stretching themselves across the parched bottom lands as the sun slid down behind the trees of Eden's swamp lot; the heat waves of a blistering hot day still dancing their devil's dance down the road like wriggling circumflexes to accent a false promise of coolness off there in the distance; the ominous emptiness of the landscape; the brooding quiet, cut through only by the frogs and the dry flies tuning up for their evening concert; the bandannaed negress wrangling at the weeds with her hoe blade inside the rail fence; and, half sheltered within the lintels of the office doorway of his mill, Dudley Stackpole, a slim, still figure, watching up the crossroad for the coming of his adversaries.

But the adversaries did not come from up the road as they had advertised they would. That declaration on their part had been a trick and device, cocked up in the hope of taking the foe by surprise and from the rear. In a canvas-covered wagon – moving

wagons, we used to call them in Red Gravel County – they left their house half an hour or so before the time set by them for the meeting, and they cut through by a wood lane which met the pike south of Foster's store; and then very slowly they rode up the pike toward the mill, being minded to attack from behind, with the added advantage of unexpectedness on their side.

Chance, though, spoiled their strategy and made these terms of primitive dueling more equal. Mark how: The woman in the sorghum patch saw it happen. She saw the wagon pass her and saw it brought to a standstill just beyond where she was; saw Jess Tatum slide stealthily down from under the overhanging hood of the wagon and, sheltered behind it, draw a revolver and cock it, all the while peeping out, searching the front and the nearer side of the gristmill with his eager eyes. She saw Harve Tatum, the elder brother, set the wheel chock and wrap the lines about the sheathed whipstock, and then as he swung off the seat catch a boot heel on the rim of the wagon box and fall to the road with a jar which knocked him cold, for he was a gross and heavy man and struck squarely on his head. With popped eyes she saw Jess throw up his pistol and fire once from his ambush behind the wagon, and then – the startled team having snatched the wagon from before him – saw him advance into the open toward the mill, shooting again as he advanced.

All now in the same breath and in a jumble of shock and terror she saw Dudley Stackpole emerge into full sight, and standing clear a pace from his doorway return the fire; saw the

thudding frantic hoofs of the nigh horse spurn Harve Tatum's body aside – the kick broke his right leg, it turned out – saw Jess Tatum suddenly halt and stagger back as though jerked by an unseen hand; saw him drop his weapon and straighten again, and with both hands clutched to his throat run forward, head thrown back and feet drumming; heard him give one strange bubbling, strangled scream – it was the blood in his throat made this outcry sound thus – and saw him fall on his face, twitching and heaving, not thirty feet from where Dudley Stackpole stood, his pistol upraised and ready for more firing.

As to how many shots, all told, were fired the woman never could say with certainty. There might have been four or five or six, or even seven, she thought. After the opening shot they rang together in almost a continuous volley, she said. Three empty chambers in Tatum's gun and two in Stackpole's seemed conclusive evidence to the sheriff and the coroner that night and to the coroner's jurors next day that five shots had been fired.

On one point, though, for all her fright, the woman was positive, and to this she stuck in the face of questions and cross-questions. After Tatum stopped as though jolted to a standstill, and dropped his weapon, Stackpole flung the barrel of his revolver upward and did not again offer to fire, either as his disarmed and stricken enemy advanced upon him or after he had fallen. As she put it, he stood there like a man frozen stiff.

Having seen and heard this much, the witness, now all possible peril for her was passed, suddenly became mad with fear. She

ran into her cabin and scrouged behind the headboard of a bed. When at length she timorously withdrew from hiding and came trembling forth, already persons out of the neighborhood, drawn by the sounds of the fusillade, were hurrying up. They seemed to spring, as it were, out of the ground. Into the mill these newcomers carried the two Tatums, Jess being stone-dead and Harve still senseless, with a leg dangling where the bones were snapped below the knee, and a great cut in his scalp; and they laid the two of them side by side on the floor in the gritty dust of the meal tailings and the flour grindings. This done, some ran to harness and hitch and to go to fetch doctors and law officers, spreading the news as they went; and some stayed on to work over Harve Tatum and to give such comfort as they might to Dudley Stackpole, he sitting dumb in his little, cluttered office awaiting the coming of constable or sheriff or deputy so that he might surrender himself into custody.

While they waited and while they worked to bring Harve Tatum back to his senses, the men marveled at two amazing things. The first wonder was that Jess Tatum, finished marksman as he was, and the main instigator and central figure of sundry violent encounters in the past, should have failed to hit the mark at which he fired with his first shot or with his second or with his third; and the second, a still greater wonder, was that Dudley Stackpole, who perhaps never in his life had had for a target a living thing, should have sped a bullet so squarely into the heart of his victim at twenty yards or more. The first phenomenon

might perhaps be explained, they agreed, on the hypothesis that the mishap to his brother coming at the very moment of the fight's beginning, unnerved Jess and threw him out of stride, so to speak. But the second was not in anywise to be explained excepting on the theory of sheer chance. The fact remained that it was so, and the fact remained that it was strange.

By form of law Dudley Stackpole spent two days under arrest; but this was a form, a legal fiction only. Actually he was at liberty from the time he reached the courthouse that night, riding in the sheriff's buggy with the sheriff and carrying poised on his knees a lighted lantern. Afterwards it was to be recalled that when, alongside the sheriff, he came out of his mill technically a prisoner he carried in his hand this lantern, all trimmed of wick and burning, and that he held fast to it through the six-mile ride to town. Afterwards, too, the circumstance was to be coupled with multiplying circumstances to establish a state of facts; but at the moment, in the excited state of mind of those present, it passed unremarked and almost unnoticed. And he still held it in his hand when, having been released under nominal bond and attended by certain sympathizing friends, he walked across town from the county building to his home on Clay Street. That fact, too, was subsequently remembered and added to other details to make a finished sum of deductive reasoning.

Already it was a foregone conclusion that the finding at the coroner's inquest, to be held the next day, would absolve him; foregone, also, that no prosecutor would press for his

arraignment on charges and that no grand jury would indict. So, soon all the evidence in hand was conclusively on his side. He had been forced into a fight not of his own choosing; an effort, which had failed, had been made to take him unfairly from behind; he had fired in self-defense after having first been fired upon; save for a quirk of fate operating in his favor, he should have faced odds of two deadly antagonists instead of facing one. What else then than his prompt and honorable discharge? And to top all, the popular verdict was that the killing off of Jess Tatum was so much good riddance of so much sorry rubbish; a pity, though, Harve had escaped his just deserts.

Helpless for the time being, and in the estimation of his fellows even more thoroughly discredited than he had been before, Harve Tatum here vanishes out of our recital. So, too, does Jeffrey Stackpole, heretofore mentioned once by name, for within a week he was dead of the same heart attack which had kept him out of the fight at Cache Creek. The rest of the narrative largely appertains to the one conspicuous survivor, this Dudley Stackpole already described.

Tradition ever afterwards had it that on the night of the killing he slept – if he slept at all – in the full-lighted room of a house which was all aglare with lights from cellar to roof line. From its every opening the house blazed as for a celebration. At the first, so the tale of it ran, people were of two different minds to account for this. This one rather thought Stackpole feared punitive reprisals under cover of night by vengeful kinsmen of

the Tatums, they being, root and branch, sprout and limb, a belligerent and an ill-conditioned breed. That one suggested that maybe he took this method of letting all and sundry know he felt no regret for having gunned the life out of a dangerous brawler; that perhaps thereby he sought to advertise his satisfaction at the outcome of that day's affair. But this latter theory was not to be credited. For so sensitive and so well-disposed a man as Dudley Stackpole to joy in his own deadly act, however justifiable in the sight of law and man that act might have been – why, the bare notion of it was preposterous! The repute and the prior conduct of the man robbed the suggestion of all plausibility. And then soon, when night after night the lights still flared in his house, and when on top of this evidence accumulated to confirm a belief already crystallizing in the public mind, the town came to sense the truth, which was that Mr. Dudley Stackpole now feared the dark as a timid child might fear it. It was not authentically chronicled that he confessed his fears to any living creature. But his fellow townsmen knew the state of his mind as though he had shouted of it from the housetops. They had heard, most of them, of such cases before. They agreed among themselves that he shunned darkness because he feared that out of that darkness might return the vision of his deed, bloodied and shocking and hideous. And they were right. He did so fear, and he feared mightily, constantly and unendingly.

That fear, along with the behavior which became from that night thenceforward part and parcel of him, made Dudley

Stackpole as one set over and put apart from his fellows. Neither by daytime nor by nighttime was he thereafter to know darkness. Never again was he to see the twilight fall or face the blackness which comes before the dawning or take his rest in the cloaking, kindly void and nothingness of the midnight. Before the dusk of evening came, in midafternoon sometimes, of stormy and briefened winter days, or in the full radiance of the sun's sinking in the summertime, he was within doors lighting the lights which would keep the darkness beyond his portals and hold at bay a gathering gloom into which from window or door he would not look and dared not look.

There were trees about his house, cottonwoods and sycamores and one noble elm branching like a lyre. He chopped them all down and had the roots grubbed out. The vines which covered his porch were shorn away. To these things many were witnesses. What transformations he worked within the walls were largely known by hearsay through the medium of Aunt Kassie, the old negress who served him as cook and chambermaid and was his only house servant. To half-fearsome, half-fascinated audiences of her own color, whose members in time communicated what she told to their white employers, she related how with his own hands, bringing a crude carpentry into play, her master ripped out certain dark closets and abolished a secluded and gloomy recess beneath a hall staircase, and how privily he called in men who strung his ceilings with electric lights, although already the building was piped for gas; and how, for final touches, he

placed in various parts of his bedroom tallow dips and oil lamps to be lit before twilight and to burn all night, so that though the gas sometime should fail and the electric bulbs blink out, there still would be abundant lighting about him. His became the house which harbored no single shadow save only the shadow of morbid dread which lived within its owner's bosom. An orthodox haunted house should by rights be deserted and dark. This house, haunted if ever one was, differed from the orthodox conception. It was tenanted and it shone with lights.

The man's abiding obsession – if we may call his besetment thus – changed in practically all essential regards the manners and the practices of his daily life. After the shooting he never returned to his mill. He could not bring himself to endure the ordeal of revisiting the scene of the killing. So the mill stood empty and silent, just as he left it that night when he rode to town with the sheriff, until after his brother's death; and then with all possible dispatch he sold it, its fixtures, contents and goodwill, for what the property would fetch at quick sale, and he gave up business. He had sufficient to stay him in his needs. The Stackpoles had the name of being a canny and a provident family, living quietly and saving of their substance. The homestead where he lived, which his father before him had built, was free of debt. He had funds in the bank and money out at interest. He had not been one to make close friends. Now those who had counted themselves his friends became rather his distant acquaintances, among whom he neither received nor bestowed confidences.

In the broader hours of daylight his ways were such as any man of reserved and diffident ways, having no fixed employment, might follow in a smallish community. He sat upon his porch and read in books. He worked in his flower beds. With flowers he had a cunning touch, almost like a woman's. He loved them, and they responded to his love and bloomed and bore for him. He walked downtown to the business district, always alone, a shy and unimpressive figure, and sat brooding and aloof in one of the tilted-back cane chairs under the portico of the old Richland House, facing the river. He took long solitary walks on side streets and byways; but it was noted that, reaching the farther outskirts, he invariably turned back. In all those dragging years it is doubtful if once he set foot past the corporate limits into the open country. Dun hued, unobtrusive, withdrawn, he aged slowly, almost imperceptibly. Men and women of his own generation used to say that save for the wrinkles ever multiplying in close cross-hatchings about his puckered eyes, and save for the enhancing of that dead gray pallor – the wasp's-nest overcasting of his skin – he still looked to them exactly as he had looked when he was a much younger man.

It was not so much the appearance or the customary demeanor of the recluse that made strangers turn about to stare at him as he passed, and that made them remember how he looked when he was gone from their sight. The one was commonplace enough – I mean his appearance – and his conduct, unless one knew the underlying motives, was merely that of an unobtrusive,

rather melancholy seeming gentleman of quiet tastes and habits. It was the feeling and the sense of a dismal exhalation from him, an unhealthy and unnatural mental effluvium that served so indelibly to fix the bodily image of him in the brainpans of casual and uninformed passers-by. The brand of Cain was not on his brow. By every local standard of human morality it did not belong there. But built up of morbid elements within his own conscience, it looked out from his eyes and breathed out from his person.

So year by year, until the tally of the years rolled up to more than thirty, he went his lone unhappy way. He was in the life of the town, to an extent, but not of it. Always, though, it was the daylit life of the town which knew him. Excepting once only. Of this exceptional instance a story was so often repeated that in time it became permanently embalmed in the unwritten history of the place.

On a summer's afternoon, sultry and close, the heavens suddenly went all black, and quick gusts smote the earth with threats of a great windstorm. The sun vanished magically; a close thick gloaming fell out of the clouds. It was as though nightfall had descended hours before its ordained time. At the city power house the city electrician turned on the street lights. As the first great fat drops of rain fell, splashing in the dust like veritable clots, citizens scurrying indoors and citizens seeing to flapping awnings and slamming window blinds halted where they were to peer through the murk at the sight of Mr. Dudley

Stackpole fleeing to the shelter of home like a man hunted by a terrible pursuer. But with all his desperate need for haste he ran no straightaway course. The manner of his flight was what gave added strangeness to the spectacle of him. He would dart headlong, on a sharp oblique from the right-hand corner of a street intersection to a point midway of the block – or square, to give it its local name – then go slanting back again to the right-hand corner of the next street crossing, so that his path was in the pattern of one acutely slanted zigzag after another. He was keeping, as well as he could, within the circles of radiance thrown out by the municipal arc lights as he made for his house, there in his bedchamber to fortify himself about, like one beset and besieged, with the ample and protecting rays of all the methods of artificial illumination at his command – with incandescent bulbs thrown on by switches, with the flare of lighted gas jets, with the tallow dip's slim digit of flame, and with the kerosene's wick three-finger breadth of greasy brilliance. As he fumbled, in a very panic and spasm of fear, with the latchets of his front gate Squire Jonas' wife heard him screaming to Aunt Kassie, his servant, to turn on the lights – all of them.

That once was all, though – the only time he found the dark taking him unawares and threatening to envelop him in thirty years and more than thirty. Then a time came when in a hospital in Oklahoma an elderly man named A. Hamilton Bledsoe lay on his deathbed and on the day before he died told the physician who attended him and the clergyman who had called to pray for

him that he had a confession to make. He desired that it be taken down by a stenographer just as he uttered it, and transcribed; then he would sign it as his solemn dying declaration, and when he had died they were to send the signed copy back to the town from whence he had in the year 1889 moved West, and there it was to be published broadcast. All of which, in due course of time and in accordance with the signatory's wishes, was done.

With the beginning of the statement as it appeared in the *Daily Evening News*, as with Editor Tompkins' introductory paragraphs preceding it, we need have no interest. That which really matters began two-thirds of the way down the first column and ran as follows:

"How I came to know there was likely to be trouble that evening at the big-riffle crossing was this way" – it is the dying Bledsoe, of course, who is being quoted. "The man they sent to the mill with the message did a lot of loose talking on his way back after he gave in the message, and in this roundabout way the word got to me at my house on the Eden's Swamp road soon after dinnertime. Now I had always got along fine with both of the Stackpoles, and had only friendly feelings toward them; but maybe there's some people still alive back there in that county who can remember what the reason was why I should naturally hate and despise both the Tatums, and especially this Jess Tatum, him being if anything the more low-down one of the two, although the youngest. At this late day I don't aim to drag the name of anyone else into this, especially a woman's name,

and her now dead and gone and in her grave; but I will just say that if ever a man had a just cause for craving to see Jess Tatum stretched out in his blood it was me. At the same time I will state that it was not good judgment for a man who expected to go on living to start out after one of the Tatums without he kept on till he had cleaned up the both of them, and maybe some of their cousins as well. I will not admit that I acted cowardly, but I will state that I used my best judgment.

"Therefore and accordingly, no sooner did I hear the news about the dare which the Tatums had sent to the Stackpoles than I said to myself that it looked like here was my fitting chance to even up my grudge with Jess Tatum and yet at the same time not run the prospect of being known to be mixed up in the matter and maybe getting arrested, or waylaid afterwards by members of the Tatum family or things of such a nature. Likewise I figured that with a general amount of shooting going on, as seemed likely to be the case, one shot more or less would not be noticed, especially as I aimed to keep out of sight at all times and do my work from under safe cover, which it all of it turned out practically exactly as I had expected. So I took a rifle which I owned and which I was a good shot with and I privately went down through the bottoms and came out on the creek bank in the deep cut right behind Stackpole Brothers' gristmill. I should say offhand this was then about three o'clock in the evening. I was ahead of time, but I wished to be there and get everything fixed up the way I had mapped it out in my mind, without being hurried or rushed.

"The back door of the mill was not locked, and I got in without being seen, and I went upstairs to the loft over the mill and I went to a window just above the front door, which was where they hoisted up grain when brought in wagons, and I propped the wooden shutter of the window open a little ways. But I only propped it open about two or three inches; just enough for me to see out of it up the road good. And I made me a kind of pallet out of meal sacks and I laid down there and I waited. I knew the mill had shut down for the week, and I didn't figure on any of the hands being round the mill or anybody finding out I was up there. So I waited, not hearing anybody stirring about downstairs at all, until just about three minutes past six, when all of a sudden came the first shot.

"What threw me off was expecting the Tatums to come afoot from up the road, but when they did come it was in a wagon from down the main Blandsville pike clear round in the other direction. So at this first shot I swung and peeped out and I seen Harve Tatum down in the dust seemingly right under the wheels of his wagon, and I seen Jess Tatum jump out from behind the wagon and shoot, and I seen Dudley Stackpole come out of the mill door right directly under me and start shooting back at him. There was no sign of his brother Jeffrey. I did not know then that Jeffrey was home sick in bed.

"Being thrown off the way I had been, it took me maybe one or two seconds to draw myself around and get the barrel of my rifle swung round to where I wanted it, and while I was doing

this the shooting was going on. All in a flash it had come to me that it would be fairer than ever for me to take part in this thing, because in the first place the Tatums would be two against one if Harve should get back upon his feet and get into the fight; and in the second place Dudley Stackpole didn't know the first thing about shooting a pistol. Why, all in that same second, while I was righting myself and getting the bead onto Jess Tatum's breast, I seen his first shot – Stackpole's, I mean – kick up the dust not twenty feet in front of him and less than halfway to where Tatum was. I was as cool as I am now, and I seen this quite plain.

"So with that, just as Stackpole fired wild again, I let Jess Tatum have it right through the chest, and as I did so I knew from the way he acted that he was done and through. He let loose of his pistol and acted like he was going to fall, and then he sort of rallied up and did a strange thing. He ran straight on ahead toward the mill, with his neck craned back and him running on tiptoe; and he ran this way quite a little ways before he dropped flat, face down. Somebody else, seeing him do that, might have thought he had the idea to tear into Dudley Stackpole with his bare hands, but I had done enough shooting at wild game in my time to know that he was acting like a partridge sometimes does, or a wild duck when it is shot through the heart or in the head; only in such a case a bird flies straight up in the air. Towering is what you call it when done by a partridge. I do not know what you would call it when done by a man.

"So then I closed the window shutter and I waited for quite

a little while to make sure everything was all right for me, and then I hid my rifle under the meal sacks, where it stayed until I got it privately two days later; and then I slipped downstairs and went out by the back door and came round in front, running and breathing hard as though I had just heard the shooting whilst up in the swamp. By that time there were several others had arrived, and there was also a negro woman crying round and carrying on and saying she seen Jess Tatum fire the first shot and seen Dudley Stackpole shoot back and seen Tatum fall. But she could not say for sure how many shots there were fired in all. So I saw that everything was all right so far as I was concerned, and that nobody, not even Stackpole, suspicioned but that he himself had killed Jess Tatum; and as I knew he would have no trouble with the law to amount to anything on account of it, I felt that there was no need for me to worry, and I did not – not worry then nor later. But for some time past I had been figuring on moving out here on account of this new country opening up. So I hurried up things, and inside of a week I had sold out my place and had shipped my household plunder on ahead; and I moved out here with my family, which they have all died off since, leaving only me. And now I am about to die, and so I wish to make this statement before I do so.

"But if they had thought to cut into Jess Tatum's body after he was dead, or to probe for the bullet in him, they would have known that it was not Dudley Stackpole who really shot him, but somebody else; and then I suppose suspicion might have fell upon

me, although I doubt it. Because they would have found that the bullet which killed him was fired out of a forty-five-seventy shell, and Dudley Stackpole had done all of the shooting he done with a thirty-eight caliber pistol, which would throw a different-sized bullet. But they never thought to do so."

Question by the physician, Doctor Davis: "You mean to say that no autopsy was performed upon the body of the deceased?"

Answer by Bledsoe: "If you mean by performing an autopsy that they probed into him or cut in to find the bullet I will answer no, sir, they did not. They did not seem to think to do so, because it seemed to everybody such a plain open-and-shut case that Dudley Stackpole had killed him."

Question by the Reverend Mr. Hewlitt: "I take it that you are making this confession of your own free will and in order to clear the name of an innocent party from blame and to purge your own soul?"

Answer: "In reply to that I will say yes and no. If Dudley Stackpole is still alive, which I doubt, he is by now getting to be an old man; but if alive yet I would like for him to know that he did not fire the shot which killed Jess Tatum on that occasion. He was not a bloodthirsty man, and doubtless the matter may have preyed upon his mind. So on the bare chance of him being still alive is why I make this dying statement to you gentlemen in the presence of witnesses. But I am not ashamed, and never was, at having done what I did do. I killed Jess Tatum with my own hands, and I have never regretted it. I would not regard killing

him as a crime any more than you gentlemen here would regard it as a crime killing a rattlesnake or a moccasin snake. Only, until now, I did not think it advisable for me to admit it; which, on Dudley Stackpole's account solely, is the only reason why I am now making this statement."

And so on and so forth for the better part of a second column, with a brief summary in Editor Tompkins' best style – which was a very dramatic and moving style indeed – of the circumstances, as recalled by old residents, of the ancient tragedy, and a short sketch of the deceased Bledsoe, the facts regarding him being drawn from the same veracious sources; and at the end of the article was a somewhat guarded but altogether sympathetic reference to the distressful recollections borne for so long and so patiently by an esteemed townsman, with a concluding paragraph to the effect that though the gentleman in question had declined to make a public statement touching on the remarkable disclosures now added thus strangely as a final chapter to the annals of an event long since occurred, the writer felt no hesitancy in saying that appreciating, as they must, the motives which prompted him to silence, his fellow citizens would one and all join the editor of the *Daily Evening News* in congratulating him upon the lifting of this cloud from his life.

"I only wish I had the language to express the way that old man looked when I showed him the galley proofs of Bledsoe's confession," said Editor Tompkins to a little interested group gathered in his sanctum after the paper was on the streets that

evening. "If I had such a power I'd have this Frenchman Balzac backed clear off the boards when it came to describing things. Gentlemen, let me tell you – I've been in this business all my life, and I've seen lots of things, but I never saw anything that was the beat of this thing.

"Just as soon as this statement came to me in the mails this morning from that place out in Oklahoma I rushed it into type, and I had a set of galley proofs pulled and I stuck 'em in my pocket and I put out for the Stackpole place out on Clay Street. I didn't want to trust either of the reporters with this job. They're both good, smart, likely boys; but, at that, they're only boys, and I didn't know how they'd go at this thing; and, anyway, it looked like it was my job.

"He was sitting on his porch reading, just a little old gray shell of a man, all hunched up, and I walked up to him and I says: 'You'll pardon me, Mr. Stackpole, but I've come to ask you a question and then to show you something. Did you,' I says, 'ever know a man named A. Hamilton Bledsoe?'

"He sort of winced. He got up and made as if to go into the house without answering me. I suppose it'd been so long since he had anybody calling on him he hardly knew how to act. And then that question coming out of a clear sky, as you might say, and rousing up bitter memories – not probably that his bitter memories needed any rousing, being always with him, anyway – may have jolted him pretty hard. But if he aimed to go inside he changed his mind when he got to the door. He turned round

and came back.

"'Yes,' he says, as though the words were being dragged out of him against his will, 'I did once know a man of that name. He was commonly called Ham Bledsoe. He lived near where' – he checked himself up, here – 'he lived,' he says, 'in this county at one time. I knew him then.'

"'That being so,' I says, 'I judge the proper thing to do is to ask you to read these galley proofs,' and I handed them over and he read them through without a word. Without a word, mind you, and yet if he'd spoken a volume he couldn't have told me any clearer what was passing through his mind when he came to the main facts than the way he did tell me just by the look that came into his face. Gentlemen, when you sit and watch a man sixty-odd years old being born again; when you see hope and life come back to him all in a minute; when you see his soul being remade in a flash, you'll find you can't describe it afterwards, but you're never going to forget it. And another thing you'll find is that there is nothing for you to say to him, nothing that you can say, nor nothing that you want to say.

"I did manage, when he was through, to ask him whether or not he wished to make a statement. That was all from me, mind you, and yet I'd gone out there with the idea in my head of getting material for a long newsy piece out of him – what we call in this business heart-interest stuff. All he said, though, as he handed me back the slips was, 'No, sir; but I thank you – from the bottom of my heart I thank you.' And then he shook hands with me – shook

hands with me like a man who'd forgotten almost how 'twas done – and he walked in his house and shut the door behind him, and I came on away feeling exactly as though I had seen a funeral turned into a resurrection."

Editor Tompkins thought he had that day written the final chapter, but he hadn't. The final chapter he was to write the next day, following hard upon a dénouement which to Mr. Tompkins, he with his own eyes having seen what he had seen, was so profound a puzzle that ever thereafter he mentally catalogued it under one of his favorite headlining phrases: "Deplorable Affair Shrouded in Mystery."

Let us go back a few hours. For a fact, Mr. Tompkins had been witness to a spirit's resurrection. It was as he had borne testimony – a life had been reborn before his eyes. Even so, he, the sole spectator to and chronicler of the glory of it, could not know the depth and the sweep and the swing of the great heartening swell of joyous relief which uplifted Dudley Stackpole at the reading of the dead Bledsoe's words. None save Dudley Stackpole himself was ever to have a true appreciation of the utter sweetness of that cleansing flood, nor he for long.

As he closed his door upon the editor, plans, aspirations, ambitions already were flowing to his brain, borne there upon that ground swell of sudden happiness. Into the back spaces of his mind long-buried desires went riding like chips upon a torrent. The substance of his patiently endured self-martyrdom was lifted all in a second, and with it the shadow of it. He would be

thenceforth as other men, living as they lived, taking, as they did, an active share and hand in communal life. He was getting old. The good news had come late, but not too late. That day would mark the total disappearance of the morbid lonely recluse and the rejuvenation of the normal-thinking, normal-habited citizen. That very day he would make a beginning of the new order of things.

And that very day he did; at least he tried. He put on his hat and he took his cane in his hand and as he started down the street he sought to put smartness and springiness into his gait. If the attempt was a sorry failure he, for one, did not appreciate the completeness of the failure. He meant, anyhow, that his step no longer should be purposeless and mechanical; that his walk should hereafter have intent in it. And as he came down the porch steps he looked about him, not dully, with sick and uninforming eyes, but with a livened interest in all familiar homely things.

Coming to his gate he saw, near at hand, Squire Jonas, now a gnarled but still sprightly octogenarian, leaning upon a fence post surveying the universe at large, as was the squire's daily custom. He called out a good morning and waved his stick in greeting toward the squire with a gesture which he endeavored to make natural. His aging muscles, staled by thirty-odd years of lack of practice at such tricks, merely made it jerky and forced. Still, the friendly design was there, plainly to be divined; and the neighborly tone of his voice. But the squire, ordinarily the most courteous of persons, and certainly one of the most talkative, did

not return the salutation. Astonishment congealed his faculties, tied his tongue and paralyzed his biceps. He stared dumbly a moment, and then, having regained coherent powers, he jammed his brown-varnished straw hat firmly upon his ancient poll and went scrambling up his gravel walk as fast as two rheumatic underpinnings would take him, and on into his house like a man bearing incredible and unbelievable tidings.

Mr. Stackpole opened his gate and passed out and started down the sidewalk. Midway of the next square he overtook a man he knew – an elderly watchmaker, a Swiss by birth, who worked at Nagel's jewelry store. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of times he had passed this man upon the street. Always before he had passed him with averted eyes and a stiff nod of recognition. Now, coming up behind the other, Mr. Stackpole bade him a cheerful good day. At the sound of the words the Swiss spun on his heel, then gulped audibly and backed away, flinching almost as though a blow had been aimed at him. He muttered some meaningless something, confusedly: he stared at Mr. Stackpole with widened eyes like one who beholds an apparition in the broad of the day; he stepped on his own feet and got in his own way as he shrank to the outer edge of the narrow pavement. Mr. Stackpole was minded to fall into step alongside the Swiss, but the latter would not have it so. He stumbled along for a few yards, mute and plainly terribly embarrassed at finding himself in this unexpected company, and then with a muttered sound which might be interpreted as an apology or an explanation, or

as a token of profound surprise on his part, or as combination of them all, he turned abruptly off into a grassed side lane which ran up into the old Enders orchard and ended nowhere at all in particular. Once his back was turned to Mr. Stackpole, he blessed himself fervently. On his face was the look of one who would fend off what is evil and supernatural.

Mr. Stackpole continued on his way. On a vacant lot at Franklin and Clay Streets four small boys were playing one-eyed-cat. Switching his cane at the weed tops with strokes which he strove to make casual, he stopped to watch them, a half smile of approbation on his face. Pose and expression showed that he desired their approval for his approval of their skill. They stopped, too, when they saw him – stopped short. With one accord they ceased their play, staring at him. Nervously the batsman withdrew to the farther side of the common, dragging his bat behind him. The three others followed, casting furtive looks backward over their shoulders. Under a tree at the back of the lot they conferred together, all the while shooting quick diffident glances toward where he stood. It was plain something had put a blight upon their spirits; also, even at this distance, they radiated a sort of inarticulate suspicion – a suspicion of which plainly he was the object.

For long years Mr. Stackpole's faculties for observation of the motives and actions of his fellows had been sheathed. Still, disuse had not altogether dulled them. Constant introspection had not destroyed his gift for speculation. It was rusted, but

still workable. He had read aright Squire Jonas' stupefaction, the watchmaker's ludicrous alarm. He now read aright the chill which the very sight of his altered mien – cheerful and sprightly where they had expected grim aloofness – had thrown upon the spirits of the ball players. Well, he could understand it all. The alteration in him, coming without prior warning, had startled them, frightened them, really. Well, that might have been expected. The way had not been paved properly for the transformation. It would be different when the *Daily Evening News* came out. He would go back home – he would wait. When they had read what was in the paper people would not avoid him or flee from him. They would be coming into his house to wish him well, to reestablish old relations with him. Why, it would be almost like holding a reception. He would be to those of his own age as a friend of their youth, returning after a long absence to his people, with the dour stranger who had lived in his house while he was away now driven out and gone forever.

He turned about and he went back home and he waited. But for a while nothing happened, except that in the middle of the afternoon Aunt Kassie unaccountably disappeared. She was gone when he left his seat on the front porch and went back to the kitchen to give her some instruction touching on supper. At dinnertime, entering his dining room, he had, without conscious intent whistled the bars of an old air, and at that she had dropped a plate of hot egg bread and vanished into the pantry, leaving the split fragments upon the floor. Nor had she returned. He had

made his meal unattended. Now, while he looked for her, she was hurrying down the alley, bound for the home of her preacher. She felt the need of his holy counsels and the reading of scriptural passages. She was used to queerness in her master, but if he were going crazy all of a sudden, why that would be a different matter altogether. So, presently, she was confiding to her spiritual adviser.

Mr. Stackpole returned to the porch and sat down again and waited for what was to be. Through the heat of the waning afternoon Clay Street was almost deserted; but toward sunset the thickening tides of pedestrian travel began flowing by his house as men returned homeward from work. He had a bowing acquaintance with most of those who passed.

Two or three elderly men and women among them he had known fairly well in years past. But no single one of those who came along turned in at his gate to offer him the congratulation he so eagerly desired; no single one, at sight of him, all poised and expectant, paused to call out kindly words across the palings of his fence. Yet they must have heard the news. He knew that they had heard it – all of them – knew it by the stares they cast toward the house front as they went by. There was more, though, in the staring than a quickened interest or a sharpened curiosity.

Was he wrong, or was there also a sort of subtle resentment in it? Was there a sense vaguely conveyed that even these old acquaintances of his felt almost personally aggrieved that a town character should have ceased thus abruptly to be a town character

– that they somehow felt a subtle injustice had been done to public opinion, an affront offered to civic tradition, through this unexpected sloughing off by him of the rôle he for so long had worn?

He was not wrong. There was an essence of a floating, formless resentment there. Over the invisible tendons of mental telepathy it came to him, registering emphatically.

As he shrank back in his chair he summoned his philosophy to give him balm and consolation for his disappointment. It would take time, of course, for people to grow accustomed to the change in him – that was only natural. In a few days, now, when the shock of the sensation had worn off, things would be different. They would forgive him for breaking a sort of unuttered communal law, but one hallowed, as it were, by rote and custom. He vaguely comprehended that there might be such a law for his case – a canon of procedure which, unnatural in itself, had come with the passage of the passing years to be quite naturally accepted.

Well, perhaps the man who broke such a law, even though it were originally of his own fashioning, must abide the consequences. Even so, though, things must be different when the minds of people had readjusted. This he told himself over and over again, seeking in its steady repetition salve for his hurt, overwrought feelings.

And his nights – surely they would be different! Therein, after all, lay the roots of the peace and the surcease which henceforth

would be his portion. At thought of this prospect, now imminent, he uplifted his soul in a silent pæan of thanksgiving.

Having no one in whom he ever had confided, it followed naturally that no one else knew what torture he had suffered through all the nights of all these years stretching behind him in so terribly long a perspective. No one else knew how he had craved for the darkness which all the time he had both feared and shunned. No one else knew how miserable a travesty on sleep his sleep had been, he reading until a heavy physical weariness came, then lying in his bed through the latter hours of the night, fitfully dozing, often rousing, while from either side of his bed, from the ceiling above, from the headboard behind him, and from the footboard, strong lights played full and flary upon his twitching, aching eyelids; and finally, towards dawn, with every nerve behind his eyes taut with pain and strain, awakening unrefreshed to consciousness of that nimbus of unrelieved false glare which encircled him, and the stench of melted tallow and the stale reek of burned kerosene foul in his nose. That, now, had been the hardest of all to endure. Endured unceasingly, it had been because of his dread of a thing infinitely worse – the agonized, twisted, dying face of Jess Tatum leaping at him out of shadows. But now, thank God, that ghost of his own conjuring, that wraith never seen but always feared, was laid to rest forever. Never again would conscience put him, soul and body, upon the rack. This night he would sleep – sleep as little children do in the all-enveloping, friendly, comforting dark.

Scarcely could he wait till a proper bedtime hour came. He forgot that he had had no supper; forgot in that delectable anticipation the disillusionizing experiences of the day. Mechanically he had, as dusk came on, turned on the lights throughout the house, and force of habit still operating, he left them all on when at eleven o'clock he quitted the brilliantly illuminated porch and went to his bedroom on the second floor. He undressed and he put on him his night wear, becoming a grotesque shrunken figure, what with his meager naked legs and his ashen eager face and thin dust-colored throat rising above the collarless neckband of the garment. He blew out the flame of the oil lamp which burned on a reading stand at the left side of his bed and extinguished the two candles which stood on a table at the right side.

Then he got in the bed and stretched out his arms, one aloft, the other behind him, finding with the fingers of this hand the turncock of the gas burner which swung low from the ceiling at the end of a goosenecked iron pipe, finding with the fingers of that hand the wall switch which controlled the battery of electric lights roundabout, and with a long-drawn sigh of happy deliverance he turned off both gas and electricity simultaneously and sank his head toward the pillow.

The pæned sigh turned to a shriek of mortal terror. Quaking in every limb, crying out in a continuous frenzy of fright, he was up again on his knees seeking with quivering hands for the switch; pawing about then for matches with which to relight the

gas. For the blackness – that blackness to which he had been stranger for more than half his life – had come upon him as an enemy smothering him, muffling his head in its terrible black folds, stopping his nostrils with its black fingers, gripping his windpipe with black cords, so that his breathing stopped.

That blackness for which he had craved with an unappeasable hopeless craving through thirty years and more was become a horror and a devil. He had driven it from him. When he bade it return it returned not as a friend and a comforter but as a mocking fiend.

For months and years past he had realized that his optic nerves, punished and preyed upon by constant and unwholesome brilliancy, were nearing the point of collapse, and that all the other nerves in his body, frayed and fretted, too, were all askew and jangled. Cognizant of this he still could see no hope of relief, since his fears were greater than his reasoning powers or his strength of will. With the fear lifted and eternally dissipated in a breath, he had thought to find solace and soothing and restoration in the darkness. But now the darkness, for which his soul in its longing and his body in its stress had cried out unceasingly and vainly, was denied him too. He could face neither the one thing nor the other.

Squatted there in the huddle of the bed coverings, he reasoned it all out, and presently he found the answer. And the answer was this: Nature for a while forgets and forgives offenses against her, but there comes a time when Nature ceases to forgive the

mistreatment of the body and the mind, and sends then her law of atonement, to be visited upon the transgressor with interest compounded a hundredfold. The user of narcotics knows it; the drunkard knows it; and this poor self-crucified victim of his own imagination – he knew it too. The hint of it had that day been reflected in the attitude of his neighbors, for they merely had obeyed, without conscious realization or analysis on their part, a law of the natural scheme of things. The direct proof of it was, by this nighttime thing, revealed and made yet plainer. He stood convicted, a chronic violator of the immutable rule. And he knew, likewise, there was but one way out of the coil – and took it, there in his bedroom, vividly ringed about by the obscene and indecent circlet of his lights which kept away the blessed, cursed darkness while the suicide's soul was passing.

CHAPTER II

THE CATER-CORNERED SEX

They had a saying down our way in the old days that Judge Priest administered law inside his courthouse and justice outside of it. Perhaps they were right. Certainly he had a way of seeking short cuts through thickets of legal verbiage to the rights of things, the which often gave acute sorrow to the souls of those members of the bar who venerated the very ink in which the statutory act had been printed and worshiped manfully before the graven images of precedent. But otherwise, generally speaking, it appeared to give satisfaction. Nobody ever beat the judge in any of his races for reelection, and after a while they just naturally quit trying.

Nor did it seem to distress him deeply when the grave and learned lords of the highest tribunal of the commonwealth saw fit, as they sometimes did, to quarrel with a decision of his which, according to their lights, ran counter to the authorities and the traditions revered by these august gentlemen.

"Ah-hah!" he would say in his high penny-flute voice when such a thing happened. "I see where the honorable court of appeals has disagreed with me agin. Well, they've still got quite a piece to go yit before they ketch up with the number of times I've disagreed with them."

But he never said such a thing in open court. Such utterances he reserved for his cronies and confidants. Once he was under the dented tin dome where he sat for so many years he became so firm a stickler for the forms and the dignities that practically a sacerdotal air was imparted to the proceedings. As you might say, he was almost high church in his adherence to the ritualisms. Lawyers coming before him did not practice the law in their shirt sleeves. They might do this when appearing on certain neighbor circuits, but not here. They did not smoke while court was in session, or sit reared back in their chairs with their feet up on the counsel tables and on the bar railings. Of course when not actually engaged in addressing the court one might chew tobacco in moderation, it being an indisputable fact that such was conducive to lubrication of the mental processes and a sedative for the nerves besides; but the act of chewing must be discreetly and inaudibly carried on, and he who in the heat of argument or under the stress of cross-questioning a perverse witness failed to patronize the cuspidors which dotted the floor at suitable intervals stood in peril of a stern admonishment for the first offense and a fine for the second.

Off the bench our judge was the homeliest and simplest of men. On the bench he wore his baggy old alpaca coat as though it were a silken robe. And, as has been heretofore remarked, he had for his official and his private lives two different modes of speech. As His Honor, presiding, his language was invariably grammatical and precise and as carefully accented as might be

expected of a man whose people never had very much use anyway for the consonant "r." As William Pitman Priest, Esq., citizen, taxpayer, and Confederate veteran he mishandled the king's English as though he had but small personal regard for the king or his English either.

Similarly he always showed respect, outwardly at least, for the written letter of the statute as written and cited. But when it seemed to him that justice tempered with mercy stood in danger of being choked in a lawyer's loop of red tape he sheared through the entanglements with a promptitude which appealed more strongly, perhaps, to the lay mind than to the professional. And if, from the bench, he might not succor the deserving litigant or the penitent offender without violation to the given principles of the law, which, aiming ever for the greater good to the greater number, threatened present disaster for one deserving, he very often privily would busy himself in the matter. This, then, was why they had that saying about him.

It largely was in a private capacity that Judge Priest figured in the various phases relating to the Millsap case, with which now we are about to deal. The beginning of this was the ending of Felix Millsap, but from its start to its finish he alone held the secrets of all its aspects. The best people in town, those who made up the old families, knew the daughter of this Felix Millsap; the people whose families were not so old perhaps, but by way of compensation more likely to be large ones, the common people, as the word goes, knew the father. The best

people commiserated decorously with the daughter when her father was abruptly taken from this life; the others wondered what was going to become of his widow. For, you see, the daughter moved in very different circles from the one in which her parents moved. Their lines did not touch. But Judge Priest had the advantage on his side of moving at will in both circles. Indeed he moved in all circles without serious impairment to his social position in the community at large.

Briefly, the case of her who had been Eleanor Millsap was the case of a child who, diligently climbing out of the environment of her childhood, has attained to heights where her parents may never hope to come, a common enough case here in flux and fluid America, and one which some will applaud and some will deplore, depending on how they view such matters; a daughter proclaiming by her attitude that she is ashamed of the sources of her origin; a father and a mother visibly proud of their offspring's successful rise, yet uncomplainingly accepting the rôles to which she has assigned them – there you have this small family tragedy in forty words or less.

When the Millsaps moved to our town their baby was in her second summer. With the passage of years the father and the mother came, as suitably mated couples often do, to look rather like each other. But then, probably there never had been a time when they, either in temperament or port, had appeared greatly unlike, seeing that both the pair were colorless, prosaic folk. So for Nature to mold them into a common pattern was merely

a detail of time and patience. But their little Eleanor betrayed no resemblance to either in figure or face or personality. It was in this instance as though hereditary traits had been thwarted; as though two sober barnyard fowl had mated to bear a golden pheasant. They were secluded, shy, unimaginative; she was vivid and sprightly, with dash to her, and audacity.

They lived in one of those small gloomy houses whose shutters always are closed and whose fronts always are blank; a house where the business of living seems to be carried on surreptitiously, almost by stealth. She, from the time she could walk alone, was actively abroad, a bright splash of color in the small oblong of shabby front yard. The father, Felix Millsap, was an odd-jobs woodworker. He made his living by undertakings too trivial for a contracting carpenter and joiner to bid on and too complicated for an amateur to attempt. The mother, Martha by name, took in plain sewing to help out. She had about her the air of the needle drudge, with shoulders bowed in and the pricked, scored fingers of a seamstress, and a permanent pucker at one corner of her mouth from holding pins there. The daughter showed trim, slender limbs and a bodily grace and a piquant face which generations of breeding and wealth so very often fail to fashion.

When she graduated as the valedictorian of her class in the high school she cut a far better figure in the frock her mother had made for her than did any there on the stage at St. Clair Hall; she had a trick of wearing simple garments which gave them

distinction. Already she had half a dozen sweethearts. Boys were drawn to her; girls she repelled rather. Girls found her too self-centered, too intent on attaining her own aims to give much heed to companionships. They called her selfish. Well, if selfishness is another name for a constant, bounding ambition to get on and up in the world Eleanor Millsap was selfish. But for the boys she had a tremendous attraction. They admired her quick, cruel wit, her energy, her good looks. She met her sweethearts on the street, at the soda fountain, in that trysting place for juvenile sweetheartings, the far corner of the post-office corridor.

She never invited any of these youthful squires of hers to her house; they kept rendezvous with her at the corner below and they parted from her at the gate. They somehow gathered, without being told it in so many words, that she was ashamed of the poverty of her home, and, boylike, they felt a dumb sympathy for her that she should be denied what so many girls had. But for all her sidewalk flirtations, she kept herself aloof from any touch of scandal; the very openness of her gaddings protected her from that. Besides, she seemed instinctively to know that if she meant to make the best possible bargain for herself in life she must keep herself unblemished – must give of her charms but not give too freely. Town gossips might call her a forward piece, as they did; jealousy among girls of her own age might have it that she was flip and fresh; but no one, with truth, might brand her as fast.

Having graduated with honors, she learned stenography – learned it thoroughly and well, as was her way with whatever

she undertook – and presently found a place as secretary to Dallam Wybrant, the leading merchandise broker of the three in town. Now Dallam Wybrant was youngish and newly widowed – bereft but rallying fast from the grief of losing a wife who had been his senior by several years. Knowing people – persons who could look through a grindstone as far as the next one, and maybe farther – smiled with meaning when they considered the prospect. A good-looking, shrewd girl, always smart and trig and crisp, always with an eye open for the main chance, sitting hour by hour and day by day in the same office with a lonely, impressionable, conceited man – well, there was but one answer to it. But one answer to it there was. Nobody was very much surprised, although probably some mothers with marriageable daughters on their hands were wrung by pangs of envy, when Dallam Wybrant and Eleanor Millsap slipped away one day to Memphis and there were married.

As Eleanor Millsap, self-reliant, self-sufficient and latterly self-supporting, the girl through the years had steadily been growing out of the domestic orbit which bounded the lives of her parents. As Mrs. Dallam Wybrant, bride of an up-and-coming business man, with an assured social position and wealth – as our town measured wealth – in his own name she was now to pass entirely beyond their humble horizon and vanish out of their narrowed social ken. True enough, they kept right on living, all three of them, in the same town and indeed upon paralleling and adjacent streets; only the parents lived in their shabby little

sealed-up coffin box of a house down at the poorer end of Yazoo Street; the daughter, in her handsome new stucco house, as formal and slick as a wedding cake, up at the aristocratic head of Chickasaw Drive. And yet to all intents and purposes they were as far apart, these two Millsaps and their only child, as though they abode in different countries. For she, mind you, had been taken up by the best people. But none of the best people had the least intention of taking up her father and mother as well. She probably was as far from expecting it or desiring it as any other could be. In fact a tale ran about that she served notice upon her parents that thereafter their lives were to run in different grooves. They were not to seek to see her without her permission; she did not mean to see them except when and where she chose, or if she chose – and she did not choose.

One evening – it might have been about a year and a half after the marriage of his daughter – Felix Millsap was on his way home from work, a middle-aged figure, moving with the clunking gait of a tired laborer who wears cheap, heavy shoes, his broad splayed hands dangling at the ends of his arms as though in either of them he carried an invisible weight. It had been a hot day, and where he had been toiling on a roof shed which required reshingling the sun had blazed down upon him until it sucked his strength out of him, leaving him limp and draggy. He walked with his head down, indifferent in his sweated weariness to things about him. All the same, the motorman on the Belt Line car swinging out of Yazoo Street into Commercial should have

sounded his gong for the turning. Therein lay his contributory negligence. Also, disinterested witnesses subsequently agreed that he took the curve at high speed. It was one of these witnesses who saw what was about to happen and cried out a vain warning even as the motorman ground on his brakes in a belated effort to avoid the inevitable. Felix Millsap was dead when they got him out from under the forward trucks. The doctors said he must have died instantly; probably he never knew what hit him.

In all the short and simple annals of the poor nothing, usually, is shorter and simpler than the funeral of one of them. For the putting away underground of the odd-jobs man perhaps thirty persons of his own walk in life assembled, attesting their sympathies by their presence. But the daughter of the deceased neither attended the brief services at the place of his late residence nor rode to the cemetery to witness the burial. It was explained by the minister and by the undertaker to those who made inquiry that for good and sufficient reasons Mrs. Wybrant was not going anywhere at present. But she sent a great stiff set piece of flowers, an elaborate, inadequate thing with a wire back to it and a tin-foil footing, which sat alongside the black box during the service and afterwards was propped upright in the rank grass at the head of the grave. It was doubly conspicuous by reason of being the only example of what greenhouse men call floral offerings that graced the occasion. And she had written her mother a nice letter; the clergyman made this point plain to such as spoke to him regarding the absence of Mrs. Wybrant. He had

seen the letter; that is to say, he had seen the envelope containing it. What the clergyman did not know was that to the letter the daughter had added a paragraph, underscored, suggesting the name of a leading firm of lawyers as suitable and competent to defend their interests – her mother's and her own – in an action for damages against the street-car company.

However, as it developed, there was no need for the pressing of suit. The street-railway company, tacitly confessing fault on the part of one of its employees, preferred to compromise out of hand and so avoid the costs of litigation and the vexations of a trial. The sum paid in settlement was by order of the circuit court lodged in the hands of a special administrator, as temporary custodian of the estate of the late Felix Millsap, by him to be handed over to the heirs at law. So far as the special administrator was concerned, this would end his duties in the premises, seeing that other than this sum there was no property to be divided.

The little house at the foot of Yazoo Street belonged to the widow. It had been deeded to her at the time of its purchase years and years before, and she had been a copartner in the undertaking of paying off the mortgage upon it by dribs and bitlets which represented hard work and the strictest economy. Naturally her husband had made no will. Probably it had never occurred to him that he would have any property to bequeath to anyone. But by virtue of his having died under a street car rather than in his bed he was worth more dead than ever, living, he had dreamed of being worth. He was worth eight thousand dollars in cash. So,

as it turned out, he had left something other than a name for sober reliability and a reputation for paying his debts. And no doubt, in that bourn to which his spirit had been translated out of a battered body, his spirit rejoiced that the manner of his taking off had been as it was.

But if the special administrator rested content in the thought that his share in the transaction practically would end with but few added details, his superior, the chief judicial officer of the district, felt called upon to take certain steps on his own initiative solely, and without consulting any person regarding the advisability of his action. It was characteristic of Judge Priest that he should move promptly in the matter. To a greater degree it also was characteristic of him that, setting out for a visit to one of no social account whatsoever, he should garb himself with more care than he might have shown had he been going to see one of those mighty ones who sit in the high places. In a suit of rumply but spotless white linen, and carrying in one hand his best tape-edged palm-leaf fan, he rather suggested a plump old mandarin as, on that same evening of the day when the street-railway company effected settlement, he knocked at the front door of the cottage of the Widow Millsap.

She was in and she was alone. She was one of those women who always are in and nearly always are alone. Immediately, then, they sat in her front room, which was her best room. Her sewing machine was there, and her biggest oil lamp and her few small sticks of company furniture, her few scraps of parlor

ornamentation; a bad picture or two, gaudily framed; china vases on a mantel-shelf; two golden-oak rockers, wearing on their slick and shiny frontlets the brand of an installment-house Cain who murdered beauty and yet failed in his designings to achieve comfort. It was as hot as a Dutch oven, that little box of a room inclosed within its thin-planked walls. It was not a place where one would care to linger longer than one had to. Judge Priest came swiftly to the heart of the business which had sent him thither.

"Ma'am," he was saying, "this is a kind of a pussonal matter that's brought me down here this hot night, and with your consent I'll git right to the point of it. Ordinarily I'm a poor hand at diggin' into the business of other people. But seein' that I knowed your late lamented husband both ez a worthy citizen and ez an honest, hard-workin' man, and seein' that in my official capacity it has been incumbent upon me to issue certain orders in connection with your rights and claims arisin' out of his ontimely death, I have felt emboldened to interest myself, privately, in your case – and that's why I'm here now.

"To-day at the cotehouse, when the settlement wuz formally agreed to by the legal representatives of both sides, an idea come to me. And that idea is this: Now there's eight thousand dollars due the heirs, you bein' one and your daughter, Mrs. Dallam Wybrant, bein' the other. Half of eight thousand dollars wouldn't be so very much to help take keer of a person, no matter how keerful they wuz; but eight thousand dollars, put out at interest,

would provide a livin' in a way fur one who lived simply, and more especially in the case of one who owned their own home and had it free from debt, ez I understand is the situation with regards to you.

"On the other hand, your daughter is well fixed. Her husband is a rich man, ez measured by the standards of our people. It's probable that she'll always be well and amply provided fur. Moreover, she's young, and you, ma'am, will some day come to the time when you won't be able to go on workin' with your hands ez you now do.

"So things bein' thus and so, it seems to me that ef the suggestion was made to your daughter, Mrs. Dallam Wybrant, that she should waive her claim to her share of them eight thousand dollars and sign over her rights to you, thereby inshorin' you frum the fear of actual want in your declinin' years; and her, ez I have jest been statin', not needin' the money – well, it seems to me that she would jest naturally jump at the notion. So if you would go to her yourself with the suggestion, or git somebody in whose good sense and judgment you've got due confidence to go to her and her husband and lay the facts before them, I, fur one, knowin' a little somethin' of human nature, feel morally sure of the outcome. Why, I expect she'd welcome the idea; maybe she's already thinkin' of the same thing and wonderin' how, legally, it kin be done. And that, ma'am, is what brings me here to your residence to-night. And I trust you will appreciate the motive which has prompted me and furgive me if I, who's almost a

stranger to you, seem to have meddled in your affairs without warrant or justification."

He reared back in his chair, a plump hand upon either knee.

Through this the widow had not spoken, or offered to speak. Now that he had finished, she answered him from the half shadow in which she sat on the farther side of the sewing machine upon which the lamp burned. There was no bitterness, he thought, in her words; merely a sense of resignation to and acceptance of a state of things not of her own contriving, and not, conceivably, to be of her own undoing.

"Judge," she said, "perhaps you know by hearsay at least that since my daughter's marriage she has lived apart from us. Neither my husband nor I ever set foot in the house where she lives. It was her wish" – she caught herself here, and he, sensing that she was equivocating, nevertheless inwardly approved of the deceit – "I mean to say that it was not my wish to go among her friends, who are not my friends, or to embarrass her in any way. I am proud that in marrying she has done so well for herself. In thinking of her happiness I shall always try to find happiness for myself.

"But, judge, you must know this too: She did not come to the – the funeral. Well, there was a cause for that; she had a reason. But – but she had not been here for months before that. She – oh, you might as well hear it if you are to understand – she has never once been here since she married!

"And so, Judge Priest, I cannot go to her until I am sent for – not under any circumstances nor for any purpose. If she has

her pride, I in my poor small way have my pride, too, my self-respect. When she needs me – if ever she does – I'll go to her wherever she may be if I have to crawl there on my hands and knees. What has gone before will all be forgotten. But don't you see, sir? – I can't go until she sends for me. And so, Judge Priest, while I thank you with all my heart for your thoughtfulness and your kindness, and while I'd be glad, too, if Ellie saw fit or could be made to see that it would be a fine thing to give me this money in the way you have suggested, I say to you again that I cannot be the one to go to her. I will not even write to her on the subject. That, with me, is final."

"But, ma'am," he said, "ef somebody else went – some friend of yours and of hers – how about it then?"

She shook her head.

"Her friends – now – are not my friends. My friends are not hers any more; most of them never were her friends. Besides, the idea did not originate with me. Either the proposition must come from her direct or it must be presented to her by some third party. And I can think of no third party of my choosing that she would care to hear. No, Judge Priest, I have nobody to send."

"All right then," he stated, "since I set this here ball in motion I'll keep it rollin'. Ma'am, I'll take it on myself to speak to Mrs. Dallam Wybrant in your behalf."

"But, Judge Priest," she protested, "I couldn't ask you to do that for me – I couldn't!"

"Ma'am, you ain't asked me and you don't need to ask me.

I'm askin' myself – I'm doin' this on my own hook, and ef you'll excuse me I'll start at it right away. When there's a thing which needs to be done ez bad ez this thing needs to be done, there oughtn't to be no time lost." He stood up and looked about him for his hat. "Ma'am, I confidently expect to be back here inside of half an hour, or an hour at most, with some good news fur you."

To one who had traveled about more and seen the homes of wealthy folk – to a professional decorator, say, or an expert in furnishing values – the drawing-room into which Judge Priest presently was being ushered might have seemed overdone, overly cluttered up with drapery and adornment. But to Judge Priest's eye the room was all that a rich man's best room should be. The thick stucco walls cut out the heat of the night; an electric fan whirled upon him as he sat in a deep chair of puffed red damask. A mulatto girl in neat uniform – this uniform itself an astonishing innovation – had answered his ring at the door and had ushered him into this wonderful parlor and had taken his name and had gone up the broad stairs with the word that he desired to see the lady of the house for a few minutes upon important business. He had asked first for Mr. and Mrs. Dallam Wybrant; but Mr. Wybrant, it seemed, was out of town; Mrs. Wybrant, then, would do. The maid, having delivered the message, had returned to say her mistress would be down presently and the caller was to wait, please. Waiting, he had had opportunity to contrast the present settings with those he had just quitted. Perhaps the contrast between them appeared all the greater by reason of the freshness

of his recollection of the physical surroundings at the scene of his first visit of that evening.

She came down soon, wearing a loose, frilly, wrapperlike garment which hid her figure. Approaching maternity had not softened her face, had not given to it the glorified Madonna look. Rather it had drawn her features to haggardness and put in her eyes a look of sharpened apprehension as though dread of the nearing ordeal of suffering and danger overrode the hope which, along with the new life, was quick within her. She greeted Judge Priest with a matter-of-fact directness. Her expression plainly enough told him she was at a loss to account for his coming.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said in her rather metallic fashion of speaking, "that Dallam isn't here. But he was called to St. Louis this morning on business. I hope you will pardon my receiving you in negligée. I'm not seeing much company at present. The maid, though, said the business was imperative."

"Yes, ma'am, it is," answered Judge Priest, rather ceremoniously for him, "and I am grateful to you fur lettin' me see you and I don't aim to detain you very long. I kin tell you in a few words whut it is that has brought me."

He was as good as his promise – he did tell her in a few words. Outlining his suggestion, he used much the same language which he had used once already that night. He did not tell her, though, he had come to her direct from her mother. He did not tell her he had been to her mother at all. It might have been inferred that his present hearer was the first to hear that which now he set forth.

"Well, ma'am," he concluded, "that's the condition ez I view it. And if you likewise see your way clear to view it ez I do the whole thing kin be accomplished with the scratch of a pen. And you'll have the satisfaction of knowin' that through your act your mother will be well provided fur fur the rest of her life." He added a final argument, being moved thereto perhaps by the fact that she had heard him without change of expression and with no glance which might be interpreted as approval for his plan. "I take it, ma'am, that you do not need the money involved. You never will need it, the chances are. You are rich fur this town – your husband is, anyway."

She replied then, and to the old man, harkening, it seemed that her words fell sharp and brittle like breaking icicles. One thing, though, might be said for her – she sought no roundabout course. She did not quibble or seek to enwrap the main issue in specious excuses or apologies for her position.

"I decline to do it," she said. "I do not feel that I have the right to do it. I understand the motives which may have actuated you to interest yourself in this affair, but I tell you very frankly that I have no intention of surrendering my legal rights in the slightest degree. You say I do not need the money, but in the very same breath you go on to say the chances are that I shall never need it. So there you yourself practically admit there is a chance that some day I might need it. Besides, I do not rate my husband a rich man, though you may do so. He is well-to-do, nothing more. And his business is uncertain – all business is. He might lose

every cent he has to-morrow in some bad investment or some poor speculation.

"There is still another reason I think of: I have nothing – absolutely nothing – in my own name. It irks me to ask my husband, generous though he is, for every cent I use, to have to account to him for my personal expenditures. Before I married him I earned my own living and I paid my own way and learned to love the feeling of independence, the feeling of having a little money that was all my own. My share of this inheritance will provide me with a private fund, a fund upon which I may draw at will, or which I may put away for a possible rainy day, just as I choose."

"But ma'am," he blurted, knowing full well he was beaten, yet inspired by a desperate, forlorn hope that some added plea from him might break through the shell of this steel-surfaced selfishness – "but, ma'am, do you stop to realize that it's your own mother who'd benefit by this sacrifice on your part? Do you stop to consider that if there's one person in all this world who's entitled – "

"Pardon me, sir, for interrupting you," she said crisply, her tone icy and sharp, "but the one person who is entitled to most consideration at my hands has not actually come into the world yet. It is of that person that I must think. I had not meant to speak of this, but your insistence forces me to it. As you may guess, Judge Priest, I am about to become a mother myself. If my baby lives – and my baby is going to live – that money will belong to

my child should anything happen to me. I must think of what lies ahead of me, not of what has gone before. My mother owns the home where she lives; she will have her half of this sum of money; she is, I believe, in good health; she is amply able to go on, as she has in the past, adding to her income with her needle. So much for my mother. As a mother myself it will be my duty, as I see it, to safeguard the future of my own child, and I mean to do it, regardless of everything else. That is all I have to say about it – that is, if I have made myself sufficiently plain to you, Judge Priest."

"Madam," said he, and for once at least he dropped his lifelong affectation of ungrammatical speech and reverted to that more stately and proper English which he reserved for his judgments from the bench, "you have indeed made your position so clear by what you have just said that I feel there is nothing whatsoever to be added by either one of us. Madam, I have the pleasure to bid you good night."

He clamped his floppy straw hat firmly down upon his head – a thing the old judge in all his life never before had done in the presence of a woman of his race – and he turned the broad of his back upon her; and if a man whose natural gait was a waddle could be said to stride, then be it stated that Judge Priest strode out of that room and out of that house. Had he looked back before he reached the door he would have seen that she sat in her chair, huddled in her silken garments, on her face a half smile of tolerant contempt for his choler and in her eye a light playing like

winter sunlight on frozen water; would have seen that about her there was no suggestion whatsoever that she was ruffled or upset or in the least regretful of the course she had elected to follow. But Judge Priest did not look back. He was too busy striding.

Perhaps it was the heat or perhaps it was inability long to maintain a gait so forced, but the volunteer emissary ceased to stride long before he had traversed the three-quarters of a mile – and yet, when one came to think it over, a span as wide as a continent – which lay between the restricted, not to say exclusive, head of Chickasaw Drive and the shabby, not to say miscellaneous, foot of Yazoo Street. It was a very wilted, very lag-footed, very droopy old gentleman who, come another half hour or less, let himself drop with an audible thump into a golden-oak rocker alongside the Widow Millsap's sewing machine.

"Ma'am," he had confessed, without preamble, as he entered her house, she holding the door open for his passage, "I come back to you licked. Your daughter absolutely declines even to consider the proposition I put before her. As a plenipotentiary extraordinary I admit I'm a teetotal failure. I return to you empty-handed – and licked."

To this she had said nothing. She had waited until he was seated; then as she seated herself in her former place, with the lamp between them, she asked quietly, almost listlessly, "My daughter saw you then?"

"She did, ma'am, she did. And she refused point-blank!"

"I am sorry, Judge Priest – sorry that you should have been put to so much trouble needlessly," she said, still holding her voice at that emotionless level. "I am sorry, sir, for your sake; but it is no more than I expected. I let you go to her against my better judgment. I should have known that your errand would be useless. Knowing Ellie, I should have known better than to send you."

He snorted.

"Ma'am, when a little while ago, settin' right here, I told you I thought I knowed a little something about human nature I boasted too soon. Sech a thing ez this thing which has happened to-night is brand-new in my experience. You will excuse my sayin' so, but I kin not fathom the workin's of a mind that would – that would – " He floundered for words in his indignation. "It is not natural, this here thing I have just seen and heard. How your own flesh and blood could – "

"Judge Priest," she said steadily, "it is not my own flesh and blood that you accuse. That is my consolation now. For I know the stock that is in me. I know the stock that was in my husband. My own flesh and blood could never treat me so."

He stared at her, his forehead twisted in a perplexed frown.

"I mean to say just this," she went on: "Ellie is not my own child. She has not a drop of my blood or my husband's blood in her. Judge Priest, I am about to tell you something which not another soul in this town excepting me – now that my husband is gone – has ever known. We never had any children, Felix and I.

Always we wanted children, but none came to us. Nearly twenty-three years ago it is now, we had for a neighbor a young woman whose husband had deserted her – had run away with another woman, leaving her without a cent, in failing health and with a six-month-old girl baby. That was less than two years before we came to this town. We lived then in a little town called Calais, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

"Three months after the husband ran away the wife died. I guess it was shame and a broken heart more than anything else that killed her. She had not a soul in the world to whom she could turn for help when she was dying. We two did what we could for her. We didn't have much – we never have had much all through our lives – but what we had we divided with her. We were literally the only friends she had in this world. At the last we took turns nursing her, my husband and I did. When she was dying she put her baby in my arms and asked me to take her and to care for her. That was what I had been praying all along that she would do, and I was glad and I gave her my promise and she lay back on the pillow and died.

"Well, she was buried and we took the child and cared for her. We came to love her as though she had been our own; we always loved her as though she had been our own. Less than a year after the mother died – that was when Ellie was about eighteen months old – we brought her with us out here to this town. Her baptismal name was Eleanor, which had been her mother's name – Eleanor Major. The father who ran away was named Richard Major. We

went on calling her Eleanor, but as our child she became Eleanor Millsap. She has never suspected – she has never for one moment dreamed that she was not our own. After she grew up and showed indifference to us, and especially after she had married and began to behave toward us in a way which has caused her, I expect, to be criticized by some people, we still nursed that secret and it gave us comfort. For we knew, both of us, that it was the alien blood in her that made her turn her back upon us. We knew the reason, if no one else did, for she was not our own flesh and blood. Our own could never have served us so. And to-night I know better than ever before, and it lessens my sense of disappointment and distress.

"Judge Priest, perhaps you will not understand me, but the mother instinct is a curious thing. Through these last few years of my life I have felt as though there were two women inside of me. One of these women grieved because her child had denied her. The other of these women was reconciled because she could see reflected in the actions of that child the traits of a breed of strangers. And yet both these women can still find it in them to forgive her for all that she has done and all that she may ever do. That's motherhood, I suppose."

"Yes, ma'am," he said slowly, "I reckon you're right – that's motherhood." He tugged at his tab of white chin whisker, and his puckered old eyes behind their glasses were shadowed with a deep compassion. Then with a jerk he sat erect.

"I take it that you adopted the child legally?" he said, seeking

to make his tone casual.

"We took her just as I told you," she answered. "We always treated her as though she had been ours. She never knew any difference."

"Yes, ma'am, quite so. You've made that clear enough. But by law, before you left Maryland, you gave her your name, I suppose? You went through the legal form of law of adoptin' her, didn't you?"

"No, sir, we didn't do that. It didn't seem necessary – it never occurred to us to do it. Her mother was dead and her father was gone nobody knew where. He had abandoned her, had shown he didn't care what might become of her. And her mother on her deathbed had given her to me. Wasn't that sufficient?"

Apparently he had not heard her question. Instead of answering it he put one of his own:

"Do you reckon now, ma'am, by any chance that there are any people still livin' back there in that town of Calais – old neighbors of yours, or kinfolks maybe – who'd remember the circumstances in regard to your havin' took this baby in the manner which you have described?"

"Yes, sir; two at least that I know of are still living. One is my half sister. I haven't seen her in twenty-odd years, but I hear from her regularly. And another is a man who boarded with us at the time. He was young then and very poor, but he has become well-to-do since. He lives in Baltimore now; is prominent there in politics. Occasionally I see his name in the paper. He has been

to Congress and he ran for senator once. And there may be still others if I could think of them."

"Never mind the others; the two you've named will be sufficient. Whut did you say their names were, ma'am?"

She told him. He repeated them after her as though striving to fix them in his memory.

"Ah-hah," he said. "Ma'am, have you got some writin' material handy? Any blank paper will do – and a pen and ink?"

From a little stand in a corner she brought him what he required, and wonderingly but in silence watched him as he put down perhaps a dozen close-written lines. She bided until he had concluded his task and read through the script, making a change here and there. Then all at once some confused sense of realization of his new purpose came to her. She stood up and took a step forward and laid one apprehensive hand upon the paper as though to stay him.

"Judge Priest," she said, "what have you written down here? And what do you mean to do with what you have written?"

"Whut I have written here is a short statement – a memorandum, really, of whut you have been tellin' me, ma'am," he explained. "I'll have it written out more fully in the form of an affidavit, and then to-morrow I want you to sign it either here or at my office in the presence of witnesses."

"But is it necessary?" she demurred. "I'm ignorant of the law, and you spoke just now of my failure to adopt Ellie by law. But if at this late date I must do it, can't it be done privately, in secret,

so that neither Ellie nor anyone else will ever know?"

"Ellie will have to know, I reckon," he stated grimly, "and other folks will know too. But this here paper has nothin' to do with any sech proceedin' ez you imagine. It's too late now fur you legally to adopt Mrs. Dallam Wybrant, even though any person should suggest sech a thing, and I, fur my part, don't see how any right-thinkin' person could or would do so. She's a free agent, of full age, and she's a married woman. No, ma'am, she has no legal claim on you and to my way of thinkin' she has no moral claim on you neither. She's not your child, a fact which I'm shore kin mighty easy be proved ef anyone should feel inclined to doubt your word. She ain't your legal heir. She ain't got a leg – excuse me, ma'am – she ain't got a prop to stand on. I thought Ellie had us licked. Instid it would seem that we've got Ellie licked."

He broke off, checked in his exultant flight by the look upon her face. Her fingers turned inward, the blunted nails scratching at the sheet of paper as though she would tear it from him.

"No, no, no!" she cried. "I won't do that! I can't do that! You mustn't ask me to do that, judge!"

"But, ma'am, don't you git my meanin' yit? Don't you realize that not a penny of this eight thousand dollars belongs to Mrs. Dallam Wybrant? That she has no claim upon any part of it? That it's all yours and that you're goin' to have it all for yourself – every last red cent of it – jest ez soon ez the proof kin be filed and the order made by me in court?"

"I'm not thinking of that," she declared. "It's Ellie I think

of. Her happiness means more to me than a million dollars would. What I have told you was in confidence, and, judge, you must treat it so. I beg you, I demand it of you. You must promise me not to go any further in this. You must promise me not to tell a living soul what I have told you to-night. I won't sign any affidavit. I won't sign anything. I won't do anything to humiliate her. Don't you see, Judge Priest – oh, don't you see? She feels shame already because she thinks she was humbly born. She would be more deeply ashamed than ever if she knew how humbly she really was born – knew that her father was a scoundrel and her mother died a pauper and was buried in a potter's field; that the name she has borne is not her own name; that she has eaten the bread of charity through the most of her life. No, Judge Priest, I tell you no, a thousand times no. She doesn't know. Through me she shall never know. I would die to spare her suffering – die to spare her humiliation or disgrace. Before God's eyes I am her mother, and it is her mother who tells you no, not that, not that!"

He got upon his feet too. He crumpled the paper into a ball and thrust it out of sight as though it had been a thing abominable and unclean. He took no note that in wadding the sheet he had overturned the inkwell and a stream from it was trickling down his trouser legs, marking them with long black zebra streaks. He looked at her, she standing there, a stooped and meager shape in her scant, ill-fitting gown of sleazy black, yet seeming to him an embodiment of all the beatitudes and all the beauties of this

mortal world.

"Ma'am," he said, "your wishes shall be respected. It shall be ez you say. My lawyer's sense tells me that you are wrong – foolishly, blindly wrong. But my memory of my own mother tells me that you are right, and that no mother's son has got the right to question you or try to persuade you to do anything different. Ma'am, I'd count it an honor to be able to call myself your friend."

Already, within the hour, Judge Priest had broken two constant rules of his daily conduct. Now, involuntarily, without forethought on his part, he was about to break another. This would seem to have been a night for the smashing of habits by our circuit judge. For she put out to him her hand – a most unlovely hand, all wrinkled at the back where dimples might once have been and corded with big blue veins and stained and shriveled and needle scarred. And he took her hand in his fat, pudgy, awkward one, and then he did this thing which never before in all his days he had done, this thing which never before he had dreamed of doing. Really, there is no accounting for it at all unless we figure that somewhere far back in Judge Priest's ancestry there were Celtic gallants, versed in the small sweet tricks of gallantry. He bent his head and he kissed her hand with a grace for which a Tom Moore or a Raleigh might have envied him.

Let us now for a briefened space cast up in a preliminary way the tally on behalf of the whimsical devils of circumstance and the part they are to play in the culminating and concluding

periods of this narrative. On the noon train of the day following the night when that occurred which has been set forth in the foregoing pages, Judge Priest, in the company of Doctor Lake and Sergeant Jimmy Bagby, late of King's Hell Hounds, C.S.A., departs for Reelfoot Lake upon his annual fishing trip. In the afternoon Jeff Poindexter, the judge's body servant, going through his master's wardrobe seeking articles suitable for his own adornment in the master's absence, is pained to discern stripings of spilled ink down the legs of a pair of otherwise unmarred white trousers, and, having no intention that garments which will one day come into his permanent possession shall be thus disfigured and sullied, promptly bundles them up and bears them to the cleansing, pressing and repairing establishment of one Hyman Pedaloski. The coat which matches the trousers goes along too. Upon the underside of one of its sleeves there is a big ink blob. Include in the equation this *émigré*, Hyman Pedaloski, newly landed from Courland and knowing as yet but little of English, whether written or spoken, yet destined to advance by progressive stages until a day comes when we proudly shall hail him as our most fashionable merchant prince – Hy Clay Pedaloski, the Square Deal Clothier, Also Hats, Caps & Leather Goods. Include as a factor Hyman by all means, for lacking him our chain of chancy coincidence would lack a most vital link.

At Reelfoot Lake many black bass, bronze-backed and big-mouthed, meet the happy fate which all true anglers wish for them; and the white perch do bite with a whole-souled

enthusiasm only equaled by the whole-souled enthusiasm with which also the mosquitoes bite. This brings us to the end of the week and to the fifth day of the expedition, with Judge Priest at rest at the close of a satisfactory day's sports, exhaling scents of the oil of penny-royal. Sitting-there under a tent fly, all sun blistered and skeeter stung, all tired out but most content, he picks up a two-day-old copy of the *Daily Evening News* which the darky boatman has just brought over to camp from the post office at Walnut Log, and he opens it at the department headed Local Laconics, and halfway down the first column his eye falls upon a paragraph at sight of which he gives so deep a snort that Doctor Lake swings about from where he is shaving before a hand mirror hung on a tree limb and wants to know whether the judge has happened upon disagreeable tidings. What the judge has read is a small item in this wise, namely:

Born last evening to Mr. and Mrs. Dallam Wybrant, at their palatial mansion on Chickasaw Drive, in the new Beechmont Park Realty Development tract, an infant daughter, their first-born. Mother and child both doing well; the proud papa reported this morning as being practically out of danger and is expected to be entirely recovered shortly, as Dock Boyd, the attending medico, says he has brought three hundred babies into the world and never lost a father yet. Ye editor extends heartiest congrats. Dal, it looks like the cigars were on you!

The next chapter in the sequence of chapters leading to our

climax is short but essential. Returning home Sunday evening, Judge Priest is informed that twice that day a strange young white lady has stopped at the house urgently requesting that immediately upon his arrival he be so good as to call on Mrs. Dallam Wybrant on a matter of pressing moment. Bidden to describe the messenger, Jeff Poindexter can only say that she 'uz a powerful masterful-lookin' Yankee-talkin' lady, all dressed up lak she mout belong to some kind of a new secret s'ciety lodge, which is Jeff's way of summing up his impressions of the first professional trained nurse ever imported, capped, caped and white shod, to our town.

It was this same professional, a cool and starchy vision, who led the way up the wide stairs of the Chickasaw Drive house, the old judge, much mystified, following close behind her. She ushered him into a bedroom, bigger and more gorgeous than any bedroom he had ever seen, and leaving him standing, hat in hand, at the bedside of her chief charge, she went out and closed the door behind her.

From the pillows there looked up at him a face that was paler than when he had last seen it, a face still drawn from pangs of agony recently endured, but a face transfigured and radiant. The Madonna look was in it now. Outside, the dusk of an August evening was thickening; and inside, the curtains were half drawn and the electrics not yet turned on, but even so, in that half light, the judge could mark the change here revealed to him. He could sense, too, that the change was more spiritual than physical,

and he could feel his animosity for this woman softening into something distantly akin to sympathy. At her left side, harbored in the crook of her elbow, lay a cuddling bundle; a tiny head, all red and bare, as though offering to Judge Priest's own bald, pinkish pate the sincere flattery of imitation, was exposed; and the tip of a very small ear, curled and crinkled like a sea shell. You take the combination of a young mother cradling her first-born within the hollow of her arm and you have the combination which has tautened the heartstrings of man since the first man child came from the womb. The old man made a silent obeisance of reverence; then waited for her to speak and expose the purpose behind this totally unexpected summons.

"Judge Priest," she said, "I have been lying here all day hoping you would come before night. I have been wishing for you to come ever since I came out from under the ether. Thank you for coming."

"Ma'am, I started fur here ez soon ez I got your word," he said. "In whut way kin I be of service to you? I'm at your command."

She slid her free hand beneath the pillow on which her head rested and brought forth a crinkled sheet of paper and held it out to him.

"Didn't you write this?" she asked.

He took it and looked at it, and a great astonishment and a great chagrin screwed his eyes and slackened his lower jaw.

"Yes, ma'am," he admitted, "I wrote it. But it wuzn't meant fur you to see. It wuzn't meant fur anybody a-tall to see – ever.

And I'm wonderin', ma'am, and waitin' fur you to tell me how come it to reach you."

"I'll tell you," she answered. "But first, before we get to that, would you mind telling me how you came to write it, and when, and all? I think I can guess. I think I have already pieced the thing together for myself. Women can't reason much, you know; but they have intuition." She smiled a little at this conceit. "And I want to know if my deductions and my conclusions are correct."

"Well, ma'am," he said, "ez I wuz sayin', no human eye wuz to have read this here. But since you have read it, I feel it's my bounden duty, in common justice to another, to tell you the straight of it, even though in doin' so I'm breakin' a solemn pledge."

So he told her – the how and the why and the where and the when of it; details of which the reader is aware.

"I thought I wasn't very far wrong, and I wasn't," she said when he had finished his confession. She was quiet for a minute, her eyes fixed on the farther wall. Then: "Judge Priest, unwittingly, it seems, you have been the god of the machine. I wonder if you'd be willing to continue to serve?"

"Ef it lies within my powers to do so – yessum, and gladly."

"It does lie within your power. I want you to have the necessary papers drawn up which will signalize my giving over to my mother my share of that money which the railway paid two weeks ago, and then if you will send them to me I will sign them. I want this done at once, please – as soon as possible."

"Ma'am," he said, "it shall be as you desire; but ef it's all the same to you I'd like to write out that there paper with my own hand. I kin think of no act of mine, official or private, in my whole lifetime which would give me more honest pleasure. I'll do so before I leave this house." He did not tell her that by the letter of the law she would be giving away what by law was not hers to give. He would do nothing to spoil for her the sweet savor of her surrender. Instead he put a question: "It would appear that you have changed your mind about this here matter since I seen you last?"

"It was changed for me," she said. "This paper helped to change it for me; and you, too, helped without your knowledge; and one other, and most of all my baby here, helped to change it for me. Judge Priest, since my baby came to me my whole view of life seems somehow to have been altered. I've been lying here to-day with her beside me, thinking things out. Suppose I should be taken from her, and suppose her father should be taken, too, and she should be left, as I was, to the mercy of the world and the charity of strangers. Suppose she should grow up, as I did – although until I read that paper I didn't know it – beholden to the goodness and the devotion and the love of one who was not her real mother. Wouldn't she owe to that other woman more than she could have owed to me, her own mother, had I been spared to rear her? I think so – no, I know it is so. Every instinct of motherhood in me tells me it is so."

"Lady," he answered, "to a mere man woman always will be

an everlastin' puzzle and a riddle; but even a man kin appreciate, in a poor, faint way, the depths of mother love. It's ez though he looked through a break in the clouds and ketched a vision of the glories of heaven. But you ain't told me yit how you come to be in possession of this here sheet of note paper."

"Oh, that's right! I had forgotten," she answered. "Try to think now, judge – when my mother refused to let you go farther with your plan that night at her house, what did you do with the paper?"

"I shoved it out of sight quick ez ever I could. I recall that much anyway."

"Did you by any chance put it in your pocket?"

"Well, by Nathan Bedford Forrest!" he exclaimed. "I believe that's purzackly the very identical thing I did do. And bein' a careless old fool, I left it there instid of tearin' it up or burnin' it, and then I went on home and plum' furgot it wuz still there – not that I now regret havin' done so, seein' whut to-night's outcome is."

"And did your servant, after you were gone, send the suit you had worn that night downtown to be cleaned or repaired? Or do you know about that?"

"I suspicion that he done that very thing," he said, a light beginning to break in upon him. "Jeff is purty particular about keepin' my clothes in fust-rate order. He aims fur them to be in good condition when he decides it's time to confiscate 'em away frum me and start in wearin' 'em himself. Yessum, my Jeff's

mighty funny that way. And now, come to think of it, I do seem to reckon that I spilt a lot of ink on 'em that same night."

"Well, then, the mystery is no mystery at all," she said. "On that very same day – the day your darky sent your clothes to the cleaner's – I had two of Dallam's suits sent down to be pressed. That little man at the tailor shop – Pedaloski – found this paper crumpled up in your pocket and took it out and then later forgot where he had found it. So, as I understand, he tried to read it, seeking for a clue to its ownership. He can't read much English, you know, so probably he has had no idea then or thereafter of the meaning of it; but he did know enough English to make out the name of Wybrant. Look at it and you'll see my name occurs twice in it, but your name does not occur at all. So don't you see what happened – what he did? Thinking the paper must have come from one of my husband's pockets, he smoothed it out as well as he could and folded it up and pinned it to the sleeve of Dallam's blue serge and sent it here. My maid found it when she was undoing the bundle before hanging up the clothes in Dallam's closet, and she brought it to me, thinking, I suppose, it was a bill from the cleaner's shop, and I read it. Simple enough explanation, isn't it, when you know the facts?"

"Simple," he agreed, "and yit at the same time sort of wonderful too. And whut did you do when you read it?"

"I was stunned at first. I tried at first not to believe it. But I couldn't deceive myself. Something inside of me told me that it was true – every word of it. I suppose it was the woman in

me that told me. And somehow I knew that you had written it, although really that part was not so very hard a thing to figure out, considering everything. And somehow – I can't tell you why though – I was morally sure that after you had written it some other person had forbidden your making use of it in any way, and instinctively – anyhow, I suppose you might say it was by instinct – I knew that it had reached me, of all persons, by accident and not by design.

"I tried to reach you – you were gone away. But I did reach that funny little man Pedaloski by telephone, and found out from him why he had pinned the paper on Dallam's coat. I did not tell my husband about it. He doesn't know yet. I don't think I shall ever tell him. For two days, judge, I wrestled with the problem of whether I should send for my mother and tell her that now I knew the thing which all her life she had guarded from me. Finally I decided to wait and see you first, and try to find out from you the exact circumstances under which the paper was written, and the reason why, after writing it, you crumpled it up and hid it away.

"And then – and then my baby came, and since she came my scheme of life seems all made over. And oh, Judge Priest" – she reached forth a white, weak hand and caught at his – "I have you and my baby and – yes, that little man to thank that my eyes have been opened and that my heart has melted in me and that my soul has been purged from a terrible selfish deed of cruelty and ingratitude. And one thing more I want you to know: I'm not really sorry that I was born as I was. I'm glad, because – well, I'm

just glad, that's all. And I suppose that, too, is the woman in me."

One given to sonorous and orotund phrases would doubtless have coined a most splendid speech here. But all the old judge, gently patting her hand, said was:

"Well, now, ma'am, that's powerful fine – the way it's all turned out. And I'm glad I had a blunderin' hand in it to help bring it about. I shorely am, ma'am. I'd like to keep on havin' a hand in it. I wonder now ef you wouldn't like fur me to be the one to go right now and fetch your mother here to you?"

She shook her head, smiling.

"Thank you, judge, that's not necessary. She's here now. She was here when the baby came. I sent for her. She's in her room right down the hall; it'll be her room always from now on. I expect she's sewing on things for the baby; we can't make her stop it. She's terribly jealous of Miss McAlpin – that's the trained nurse Dallam brought back with him from St. Louis – but Miss McAlpin will be going soon, and then she'll be in sole charge. She doesn't know, Judge Priest, that what she told to you I now know. She never shall know if I can prevent it, and I know you'll help me guard our secret from her."

"I reckon you may safely count on me there, ma'am," he promised. "I've frequently been told by disinterested parties that I snore purty loud sometimes, but I don't believe anybody yit caught me talkin' in my sleep. And now I expect you're sort of tired out. So ef you'll excuse me I'll jest slip downstairs, and before I go do that there little piece of writin' we spoke about a

while ago."

"Wouldn't you like to see my baby before you go?" she asked. Her left hand felt for the white folds which half swaddled the tiny sleeper. "Judge Priest, let me introduce you to little Miss Martha Millsap Wybrant, named for her grandmammy."

"Pleased to meet you, young lady," said he, bowing low and elaborately. "At your early age, honey, it's easier fur a man, to understand you than ever it will be agin after you start growin' up. Pleased indeed to meet you."

If memory serves him aright, this chronicler of sundry small happenings in the life and times of the Honorable William Pitman Priest has more than once heretofore commented upon the fact that among our circuit judge's idiosyncrasies was his trick, when deeply moved, of talking to himself. This night as he went slowly homeward through the soft and velvety cool of the summer darkness he freely indulged himself in this habit. Oddly enough, he punctuated his periods, as it were, with lamp-posts. When he reached a street light he would speak musingly to himself, then fall silent until he had trudged along to the next light. Something after this fashion:

Corner of Chickasaw Drive and Exall Boulevard:

"Well, sir, the older I git the more convinced I am that jest about the time a man decides he knows a little something about human nature it's a shore sign he don't know nothin' a-tall about it, 'specially human nature ez it applies to the female of the species. Now, f'rinstance, you take this here present instance: A

woman turns agin the woman she thinks is her own mother. Then she finds out the other woman ain't her own mother a-tall, and she swings right back round agin and – well, it's got me stumped. Now ef in her place it had 'a' been a man. But a woman – oh, shuckin's, whut's the use?"

Corner of Chickasaw Drive and Sycamore Avenue:

"Still, of course we've got to figger the baby as a prime factor enterin' into the case and helpin' to straighten things out. Spry little trick fur three days old, goin' on four, wuzn't she? Ought to be purty, too, when she gits herself some hair and a few teeth and plumps out so's she taken up the slack of them million wrinkles, more or less, that she's got now. Babies, now – great institutions anyway you take 'em."

Corner of Sycamore Avenue, turning into Clay Street:

"And still, dog-gone it, you'll find folks in this world so blind that they'll tell you destiny or fate, or whutever you want to call it, jest goes along doin' things by haphazard without no workin' plans and no fixed designs. But me, I'm different – me. I regard the scheme of creation ez a hell of a success. Look at this affair fur a minute. I go meddlin' along like an officious, absent-minded idiot, which I am, and jest when it looks like nothin' is goin' to result frum my interference but fresh heartaches fur one of the noblest souls that ever lived on this here footstool, why the firm of Providence, Pedaloski and Poindexter steps in, and bang, there you are! It wouldn't happen agin probably in a thousand years, but it shore happened this oncet, I'll tell the world. Let's see, now,

how does that there line in the hymn book run? – 'moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.' Ain't it the truth?"

Last street lamp on Clay Street before you come to Judge Priest's house:

"And they call 'em the opposite sex! I claim the feller that fust coined that there line wuz a powerful conservative pusson. Opposite? Huh! Listen here to me: They're so dad-gum opposite they're plum' cater-cornered!"

CHAPTER III

A SHORT NATURAL HISTORY

If ever a person might be said to have dedicated his being to the pursuit of leisure, that selfsame was Red Hoss Shackelford, of color, and highly so. He was one who specialized in the deft and fine high art of doing nothing at all. With him leisure was at once a calling to be followed regularly and an ideal to be fostered. But also he loved to eat, and he had a fancy for wearing gladsome gearings, and these cravings occasionally interfered with the practice of his favorite vocation. In order that he might enjoy long periods of manual inactivity it devolved upon him at intervals to devote his reluctant energies to gainful labor. When driven to it by necessity, which is said to be the mother of invention and which certainly is the full sister to appetite, Red Hoss worked. He just naturally had to – sometimes.

You see, in the matter of being maintained vicariously he was less fortunately circumstanced than so many of his fellows in our town were, and still are. He had no ministering parent doing cookery for the white folks, and by night, in accordance with a time-hallowed custom with which no sane housekeeper dared meddle, bringing home under a dolman cape loaded tin buckets and filled wicker baskets. Ginger Dismukes, now – to cite a conspicuous example – was one thus favored by the indulgent

fates.

Aunt Ca'line Dismukes, mother of the above, was as honest as the day was long; but when the evening of that day came, such trifles, say, as part of a ham or a few left-over slices of cake fell to her as a legitimate if unadvertised salvage. Every time the quality in the big house had white meat for their dinner, Ginger, down the alley, enjoyed drumsticks and warmed-up stuffing for his late supper. He might be like the tapeworm in that he rarely knew in advance what he would have to eat, but still, like the tapeworm, he gratefully absorbed what was put before him and asked no questions of the benefactor. Without prior effort on his part he was fed even as the Prophet Elijah was fed by the ravens of old. This simile would acquire added strength if you'd ever seen Aunt Ca'line, her complexion being a crow's-wing sable.

Red Hoss had no dependable helpmate, such as Luther Maydew had, with a neatly lettered sign in her front window: Going-Out Washing Taken in Here. Luther's wife was Luther's only visible means of support, yet Luther waxed fat and shiny and larded the earth when he walked abroad. Neither had Red Hoss an indulgent and generous patron such as Judge Priest's Jeff – Jeff Poindexter – boasted in the person of his master. Neither was he gifted in the manipulation of the freckled bones as the late Smooth Crumbaugh had been; nor yet possessed he the skill of shadow boxing as that semiprofessional pugilist, Con Lake, possessed it. Con could lick any shadow that ever lived, and the punching bag that could stand up before his onslaughts

was not manufactured yet; wherefore he figured in exhibition bouts and boxing benefits, and between these lived soft and easy. He enjoyed no such sinecure as fell to the lot of Uncle Zack Matthews, who waited on the white gentlemen's poker game at the Richland House, thereby harvesting many tips and whose otherwise nimble mind became a perfect blank twice a year when he was summoned before the grand jury.

Red Hoss did, indeed, have a sister, but the relations between them were strained since the day when Red Hoss' funeral obsequies had been inopportunately interrupted by the sudden advent among the mourners of the supposedly deceased, returning drippingly from the river which presumably had engulfed him. His unexpected and embarrassing reappearance had practically spoiled the service for his chief relative. She never had forgiven Red Hoss for his failure to stay dead, and he long since had ceased to look for free pone bread and poke chops in that quarter.

So when he had need to eat, or when his wardrobe required replenishing, he worked at odd jobs; but not oftener. Ordinarily speaking, his heart was not in it at all. But at the time when this narrative begins his heart was in it. One speaks figuratively here in order likewise to speak literally. A romantic enterprise carried on by Red Hoss Shackleford through a period of months promised now a delectable climax. As between him and one Melissa Grider an engagement to join themselves together in the bonds of matrimony had been arranged.

Before he fell under Melissa's spell Red Hoss had been regarded as one of the confirmed bachelors of the Plunkett's Hill younger set. He had never noticeably favored marriage and giving in marriage – especially giving himself in marriage. It may have been – indeed the forked tongue of gossip so had it – that the fervor of Red Hoss' courting, when once he did turn suitor, had been influenced by the fortuitous fact that Melissa ran as chambermaid on the steamboat *Jessie B.* The fact outstanding, though, was that Red Hoss, having ardently wooed, seemed now about to win.

But Melissa, that comely and comfortable person, remained practical even when most loving. The grandeur of Red Hoss' dress-up clothes may have entranced her, and certainly his conversational brilliancy was altogether in his favor, but beyond the glamour of the present, Melissa had the vision to appraise the possibilities of the future. Before finally committing herself to the hymeneal venture she required it of her swain that he produce and place in her capable hands for safe-keeping, first, the money required to purchase the license; second, the amount of the fee for the officiating clergyman; and third, cash sufficient to pay the expenses of a joint wedding journey to St. Louis and return. It was specified that the traveling must be conducted on a mutual basis, which would require round-trip tickets for both of them. Melissa, before now, had heard of these one-sided bridal tours. If Red Hoss went anywhere to celebrate being married she meant to go along with him.

Altogether, under these headings, a computed aggregate of at least eighty dollars was needed. With his eyes set then on this financial goal, Red Hoss sought service in the marts of trade. Perhaps the unwonted eagerness he displayed in this regard may have been quickened by the prospect that the irksomeness of employment before marriage would be made up to him after the event in a vacation more prolonged than any his free spirit had ever known. Still, that part of it is none of our affair. For our purposes it is sufficient to record that the campaign for funds had progressed to a point where practically fifty per cent of the total specified by his prudent inamorata already had been earned, collected and, in accordance with the compact, intrusted to the custodianship of one who was at once fiancée and trustee.

On a fine autumnal day Red Hoss made a beginning at the task of amassing the remaining half of the prenuptial sinking fund by accepting an assignment to deliver a milch cow, newly purchased by Mr. Dick Bell, to Mr. Bell's dairy farm three miles from town on the Blandsville Road. This was a form of toil all the more agreeable to Red Hoss – that is to say, if any form of toil whatsoever could be deemed agreeable to him – since cows when traveling from place to place are accustomed to move languidly. By reason of this common sharing of an antipathy against undue haste, it was late afternoon before the herder and the herded reached the latter's future place of residence; and it was almost dusk when Red Hoss, returning alone, came along past Lone Oak Cemetery. Just ahead of him, from out of

the weed tangle hedging a gap in the cemetery fence, a half-grown rabbit hopped abroad. The cottontail rambled a few yards down the road, then erected itself on its rear quarters and with adolescent foolhardiness contemplated the scenery. In his hand Red Hoss still carried the long hickory stick with which he had guided the steps of Mr. Bell's new cow. He flung his staff at the inviting mark now presented to him. Whirling in its flight, it caught its target squarely across the neck, and the rabbit died so quickly it did not have time to squeak, and barely time to kick.

Now it is known of all men that luck of two widely different kinds resides in the left hind foot of a graveyard rabbit. There is bad luck in it for the rabbit itself, seeing that the circumstance of its having a left hind foot, to begin with, renders life for that rabbit more perilous even than is the life of a commonplace rabbit. But there is abiding good luck in it for the human who falls heir to the foot after the original possessor has passed away. To insure the maximum of fair fortune for the legatee, the rabbit while in the act of jumping over a sunken grave in the dark of the moon should be killed with a crooked stick which a dead man has carried; but since there is no known record of a colored person hanging round sunken graves in the dark of the moon, the left hind foot of an authentic graveyard rabbit slain under any circumstances is a charm of rare preciousness.

With murky twilight impending, it was not for Red Hoss Shackleford to linger for long in the vicinity of a burying ground. Already, in the gloaming, the white fence palings gleamed

spectrally and the shadows were thickening in the honeysuckle jungles beyond them. Nor was it for him to think of eating the flesh of a graveyard rabbit, even though it be plump and youthful, as this one was.

Graveyard rabbits, when indubitably known to be such, decorate no Afro-American skillet. Destiny has called them higher than frying pans.

Almost before the victim of his aim had twitched its valedictory twitch he was upon it. In his hand, ready for use, was his razor; not his shaving razor, but the razor he carried for social purposes. He bent down, and with the blade made swift slashes right and left at a limber ankle joint, then rose again and was briskly upon his homeward way, leaving behind him the maimed carcass, a rumpled little heap, lying in the dust. A dozen times before he reached his boarding house he fingered the furry talisman where it rested in the bottom of his hip pocket, and each touching of it conveyed to him added confidences in propitious auguries.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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