

Cobb Irvin Shrewsbury

Those Times and These



Irvin Cobb

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«Public Domain»

Cobb I.

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Cobb Irvin S. Irvin Shrewsbury

Those Times and These

THOSE TIMES AND THESE

CHAPTER I. EX-FIGHTIN' BILLY

TO me and to those of my generation, Judge Priest was always Judge Priest. So he was also to most of the people of our town and our county and our judicial district. A few men of his own age – mainly men who had served with him in the Big War – called him Billy, right to his face, and yet a few others, men of greater age than these, spoke of him and to him as William, giving to the name that benignant and most paternal air which an octogenarian may employ in referring to one who is ten or fifteen years his junior.

I was a fairly sizable young person before ever I found out that once upon a time among his intimates the Judge had worn yet another title. Information upon this subject was imparted to me one summery afternoon by Sergeant Jimmy Bagby as we two perched in company upon the porch of the old boat-store.

I don't know what mission brought Sergeant Bagby three blocks down Franklin Street from his retail grocery establishment, unless it was that sometimes the boat-store porch was cool while the rest of the town baked. That is to say, it was cool by comparison. Little wanton breezes that strayed across the river paid fluttering visits there before they struck inland to perish miserably of heat prostration.

For the moment the Sergeant and I had the little wooden balcony to ourselves, nearly everybody else within sight and hearing having gone down the levee personally to enjoy the small excitement of seeing the stem-wheel packet *Emily Foster* land after successfully completing one of her regular triweekly round trips to Clarksburg and way landings.

At the blast of the *Emily Foster's* whistles as she rounded to and put her nose upstream preparatory to sliding in alongside the wharf, divers coloured persons of the leisure class had roused from where they napped in the shady lee of freight piles and lined up on the outer gunwales of the wharf-boat ready to catch and make fast the head-line when it should be tossed across the intervening patch of water into their volunteer hands.

Two town hacks and two town drays had coursed down the steep gravelled incline, with the draymen standing erect upon the jouncing springless beds of their drays as was their way. In the matter of maintaining a balance over rough going and around abrupt turns, no chariot racers of old could have taught them anything. Only Sergeant Bagby and I, of all in the immediate vicinity, had remained where we were. The Sergeant was not of what you could exactly call a restless nature, and I, for the moment, must have been overcome by one of those fits of languor which occasionally descend upon the adolescent manling. We two bided where we sat.

With a tinkle of her engine bells, a calling out of orders and objurgations in the professionally hoarse, professionally profane voice of her head mate and a racking, asthmatic coughing and sighing and pounding from her exhaust pipes, the *Emily Foster* had found her berth; and now her late passengers came streaming up the slant of the hill – a lanky timberman or two, a commercial traveller – most patently a commercial traveller – a dressy person who looked as though he might be an advance agent for some amusement enterprise, and a family of movers, burdened with babies and bundles and accompanied by the inevitable hound dog. The commercial traveller and the suspected advance agent patronised the hacks – fare twenty-five cents anywhere inside the corporate limits – but the rest entered into the city afoot and sweating. At the very tail of the procession appeared our circuit judge,

he being closely convoyed by his black house-boy, Jeff Poindexter, who packed the master's bulging and ancient valise with one hand and bore a small collection of law books under his other arm.

Looking much like a high-land terrapin beneath the shelter of his venerable cotton umbrella, Judge Priest toiled up the hot slant. Observed from above, only his legs were visible for the moment. We knew him, though, by his legs – and also by Jeff and the umbrella. Alongside the eastern wall of the boat-store, nearmost of all buildings to the water-front, he halted in its welcome shadows to blow and to mop his streaming face with a vast square of handkerchief, and, while so engaged, glanced upward and beheld his friend, the Sergeant, beaming down upon him across the whittled banister rail.

"Hello, Jimmy!" he called in his high whine.

"Hello, yourself!" answered the Sergeant. "Been somewheres or jest traveling round?"

"Been somewheres," vouchsafed the newly returned; "been up at Livingstonport all week, settin' as special judge in place of Judge Given. He's laid up in bed with a tech of summer complaint and I went up to git his docket cleaned up fur him. He's better now, but still puny."

"You got back ag'in in time to light right spang in the middle of a warm spell," said Sergeant Bagby.

"Well," stated Judge Priest, "it ain't been exactly whut you'd call chilly up the river, neither. The present thaw appears to be ginerall throughout this section of the country." He waved a plump arm in farewell and slowly departed from view beyond the side wail of the boat-store.

"Looks like Judge Priest manages to take on a little more flesh every year he lives," said the Sergeant, who was himself no lightweight, addressing the remark in my direction. "You wouldn't scursely think it to see him waddlin' 'long, a to tin' all that meat on his bones; but once't upon a time he was mighty near ez slim ez his own ramrod and was commonly known ez little Fightin' Billy. You wouldn't, now, would you?"

The question I disregarded. It was the disclosure he had bared which appealed to my imagination and fired my curiosity. I said: "Mr. Bagby, I never knew anybody ever called Judge Priest that?"

"No, you natchelly wouldn't," said the Sergeant – "not onless you'd mebbe overheard some of us old fellers talkin' amongst ourselves sometimes, with no outsiders present. It wouldn't hardly be proper, ever'thing considered, to be referrin' in public to the presidin' judge of the first judicial district of the State of Kintucky by sech a name ez that. Besides which, he ain't little any more. And then, there's still another reason."

"How did they ever come to call him that in the first place?" I asked.

"Well, young man, it makes quite a tale," said the Sergeant. With an effort he hauled out his big silver watch, looked at its face, and then wedged it back into a hidden recess under one of the overlapping creases of his waistband.

"He acquired that there title at Shiloh, in the State of Tennessee, and by his own request he parted from it some three years and four months later on the banks of the Rio Grande River, in the Republic of Mexico, I bein' present in pusson on both occasions. But ef you've got time to listen I reckon I've got jest about the time to tell it to you."

"Yes, sir – if you please." With eagerness, I hitched my cane-bottomed chair along the porch floor to be nearer him. And then as he seemed not to have heard my assent, I undertook to prompt him. "Er – what were you and Judge Priest doing down in Mexico, Mr. Bagby?"

"Tryin' to git out of the United States of America fur one thing." A little grin, almost a shamefaced grin, I thought, broke his round moist face up into fat wrinkles. He puckered his eyes in thought, looking out across the languid tawny river toward the green towhead in midstream and the cottonwoods on the far bank, a mile and more away. "But I don't marvel much that you never heard the full circumstances before. Our bein' down in Mexico together that time is a fact we never advertised 'round for common consumption – neither one of us."

He withdrew his squinted gaze from the hot vista of shores and water and swung his body about to face me, thereafter punctuating his narrative with a blunted forefinger.

“My command was King’s Hell Hounds. There ought to be a book written some of these days about whut all King’s Hell Hounds done en-durin’ of the unpleasantness – it’d make mighty excitin’ readin’. But Billy and a right smart chance of the other boys frum this place, they served throughout with Company B of the Old Regiment of mounted infantry. Most of the time frum sixty-one to sixty-five I wasn’t throwed with ‘em, but jest before the end came we were all consolidated – whut there was remainin’ of us – under General Nathan Bedford Forrest down in Mississippi. Fur weeks and months before that, we knowed it was a hopeless fight we were wagin’, but somehow we jest kept on. I reckon we’d sort of got into the fightin’ habit. Fellers do, you know, sometimes, when the circumstances are favourable, ez in this case.

“Well, here one mornin’ in April, came the word frum Virginia that Richmond had fallen, and right on top of that, that Marse Robert had had to surrender. They said, too, that Sherman had Johnston penned off somewheres down in the Carolinas, we didn’t know exactly where, and that Johnston would have to give up before many days passed. In fact, he had already give up a week before we finally heard about it. So then accordin’ to our best information and belief, that made us the last body of organised Confederates on the east bank of the Mississippi River. That’s a thing I was always mighty proud of. I’m proud of it yit.

“All through them last few weeks the army was dwindlin’ away and dwindlin’ away. Every momin’ at roll-call there’d be a few more absentees. Don’t git me *wrong*– I wouldn’t call them boys deserters. They’d stuck that long, doin’ their duty like men, but they knowed good and well – in fact we all knowed – ‘twas only a question of time till even Forrest would have to quit before overpowerin’ odds and we’d be called on to lay down the arms we’d toted fur so long. Their families needed ‘em, so they jest quit without sayin’ anything about it to anybody and went on back to their homes. This was specially true of some that lived in that district.

“But with the boys frum up this way it was different. In a way of speakin’, we didn’t have no homes to go back to. Our State had been in Northern hands almost frum the beginnin’ and some of us had prices on our heads right that very minute on account of bein’ branded ez guerrillas. Which was a lie. But folks didn’t always stop to sift out the truth then. They were prone to shoot you first and go into the merits of the case afterward. Anyway, betwixt us and home there was a toler’ble thick hedge of Yankee soldiers – in fact several thick hedges. You know they called one of our brigades the Orphan Brigade. And there were good reasons fur callin’ it so – more ways than one.

“I ain’t never goin’ to furgit the night of the fifth of May. Somehow the tidin’s got round amongst the boys that the next mornin’ the order to surrender was goin’ to be issued. The Yankee cavalry general, Wilson – and he was a good peart fighter, too – had us completely blocked off to the North and the East, but the road to the Southwest was still open ef anybody cared to foller it. So that night some of us held a little kind of a meetin’ – about sixty of us – mainly Kintuckians, but with a sprinklin’ frum other States, too.

“Ez I remember, there wasn’t a contrary voice raised when ‘twas suggested we should try to make it acrost the big river and j’ine in under Kirby Smith, who still had whut was left of the Army of the Trans-Mississippi.

“Billy Priest made the principal speech. ‘Boys,’ he says, ‘South Carolina may a-started this here war, but Kintucky has undertook the contract to close it out. Somewheres out yonder in Texas they tell me there’s yit a consid’ble stretch of unconquered Confederate territory. Speakin’ fur myself I don’t believe I’m ever goin’ to be able to live comfortable an’ reconciled under any other flag than the flag we’ve fit to uphold. Let’s us-all go see ef we can’t find the place where our flag still floats.’

“So we all said we’d go. Then the question ariz of namin’ a leader. There was one man that had been a captain and a couple more that had been lieutenants, but, practically unanimously, we elected little Billy Priest. Even ef he was only jest a private in the ranks we all knowed it wasn’t fur lack of

chances to go higher. After Shiloh, he'd refused a commission and ag'in after Hartsville. So, in lessen no time a-tall, that was settled, too.

“Bright and early next day we started, takin' our guns and our hosses with us. They were our hosses anyway; mainly we'd borrowed 'em off Yankees, or anyways, off Yankee sympathisers on our last raid Northward and so that made 'em our pussonal property, the way we figgered it out. 'Tennyrate we didn't stop to argue the matter with nobody whutsoever. We jest packed up and we put out – and we had almighty little to pack up, lemme tell you.

“Ez we rid off we sung a song that was be-ginnin' to be right fashionable that spring purty near every place below Mason and Dixon's line; and all over the camp the rest of the boys took it up and made them old woodlands jest ring with it. It was a kind of a farewell to us. The fust verse was likewise the chorus and it run something like this:

Oh, I'm a good old rebel, that's jest whut I am;
And fur this land of freedom I do not give a dam',
I'm glad I fit ag'in her, I only wish't we'd won,
And I don't ax your pardon fur anything I've done.

“And so on and so forth. There were several more verses all expressin' much the same trend of thought, and all entirely in accordance with our own feelin's fur the time bein'.

“Well, boy, I reckon there ain't no use wastin' time describin' the early stages of that there pilgrimage. We went ridin' along livin' on the land and doin' the best we could. We were young fellers, all of us, and it was springtime in Dixie – you know whut that means – and in spite of everything, some of the springtime got into our hearts, too, and drove part of the bitterness out. The country was all scarified with the tracks of war, but nature was doin' her level best to cover up the traces of whut man had done. People along our route had mighty slim pickin's fur themselves, but the sight of an old grey jacket was still mighty dear to most of 'em and they divided whut little they had with us and wish't they had more to give us. We didn't need much at that – a few meals of vittles fur the men and a little fodder fur our hosses and we'd be satisfied. We'd reduced slow starvation to an exact 'science long before that. Every man in the outfit was hard ez nails and slim ez a blue racer.

“Whut Northern forces there was East of the river we dodged. In fact we didn't have occasion to pull our shootin'-irons but once't, and that was after we'd cros't over into Louisiana. There wasn't any organised military force to regulate things and in the back districts civil government had mighty near vanished altogether. People had went back to fust principles – wild, reckless fust principles they were, too. One day an old woman warned us there was a gang of bushwhackers operatin' down the road a piece in the direction we were headin' – a mixed crowd of deserters frum both sides, she said, who'd jined in with some of the local bad characters and were preyin' on the country, hariyin' the defenceless, and terrorism' women and children and raisin' hob ginerally. She advised us that we'd better give 'em a wide berth.

“But Billy Priest he throwed out scouts and located the gang, and jest before sunrise next mornin' we dropped in on 'em, takin' 'em by surprise in the camp they'd rigged up in a live-oak thicket in the midst of a stretch of cypress slashes.

“And when the excitement died down ag'in, quite a number of them bushwhackers had quit whackin' permanently and the rest of 'em were tearin' off through the wet woods wonderin', between jumps, whut had hit 'em. Ez fur our command, we accumulated a considerable passel of plunder and supplies and a number of purty fair hosses, and went on our way rejoicin'. We hadn't lost a man, and only one man wounded.

“When we hit the Texas border, news was waitin' fur us. They told us ef we aimed to ketch up with the last remainders of the army we'd have to hurry, because Smith and Shelby, with whut was left of his Missouri outfit, and Sterlin' Price and Hindman with some of his Arkansaw boys and a

right smart sprinklin' of Texans had already pulled up stakes and were headed fur old Mexico, where the natives were in the enjoyable midst of one of their regular revolutions.

“With the French crowd and part of the Mexicans to help him, the Emperor Maximilian was tryin' to hang onto his onsteady and topplin' throne, whilst the Republikins or Liberals, as they called themselves, were tryin' with might and main to shove him off of it. Ef a feller jest natchelly honed fur an opportunity to indulge a fancy fur active hostilities, Mexico seemed to offer a very promisin' field of endeavour.

“It didn't take us long to make up our minds whut course we'd follow. Billy Priest put the motion. ‘Gentlemen,’ he says, ‘it would seem the Southern Confederacy is bent and determined on gittin' clear out frum under the shad-der of the Yankee government. It has been moved and seconded that we foller after her no matter where she goes. All in favour of that motion will respond by sayin' Aye – contrary-wise, No. The Ayes seem to have it and the Ayes do have it and it is so ordered, unanimously. By fours! Forward, march!’

“That happened in the town of Corsicana in the early summer-time of the year. So we went along acrost the old Lone Star State, headin' mighty nigh due West, passin' through Waco and Austin and San Antonio, and bein' treated mighty kindly by the people wheresoever we passed. And ez we went, one of the boys that had poetic leanin's, he made up a new verse to our song. Let's see, son, ef I kin remember it now after all these years.”

The Sergeant thought a bit and then lifting his voice in a quavery cadence favoured me with the following gem:

I won't be reconstructed; I'm better now than them;
And fur a carpet-bagger I don't give a dam;
So I'm off fur the frontier, fast ez I kin go,
I'll purpare me a weepion and head fur Mexico.

“It was the middle of July and warm enough to satisfy the demands of the most exactin' when we reached the Rio Grande, to find out Shelby's force had done crossed over after buryin' their battle-flag in the middle of the river, wrapped up in a rock to hold it down. On one side was cactus and greasewood and a waste of sandy land, that was already back in the Union or mighty soon would be. On the other side was more cactus and more grease-wood and more sandy loam, but in a different country. So, after spendin' a few pleasant hours at the town of Eagle Pass, we turn't our backs to one country and cros't over to the other, alookin' fur the Confederacy wherever she might be. I figgered it out I was tellin' the United States of America good-by furever. I seem to remember that quite a number of us kept peerin' back over our shoulders toward the Texas shore. They tell me the feller that wrote ‘Home Sweet Home’ didn't have any home to go to but he writ the song jest the same. Nobody didn't say nothin', though, about weakenin' or turnin' back.

“Very soon after we hit Mexican soil we run into one of the armies – a Liberal army, this one was, of about twelve hundred men, and its name suited it to a T. The officers were liberal about givin' orders and the men were equally liberal about makin' up their minds whether or not they'd obey. Also, ez we very quickly discovered, the entire kit and caboodle of 'em were very liberal with regards to other folks' property and other folks' lives. We'd acquired a few careless ideas of our own concernin' the acquirin' of contraband plunder durin' the years immediately precedin', but some of the things we seen almost ez soon ez we'd been welcomed into the hospitable but smelly midst of that there Liberal army, proved to us that alongside these fellers we were merely whut you might call amatoors in the confiscatin' line.

“I wish't I had the words to describe the outfit so ez you could see it the way I kin see it this minute. This purticular army was made up of about twelve hundred head, includin' common soldiers. I never saw generals runnin' so many to the acre before in my life. The Confederacy hadn't been

exactly destitute in that respect but – shuckins! – down here you bumped into a brigadier every ten feet. There was a considerable sprinklin’ of colonels and majors and sech, too; and here and there a lonesome private. Ef you seen a dark brown scarycrow wearin’ fur a uniform about enough rags to pad a crutch with, with a big sorry straw hat on his head and his feet tied up in bull hides with his bare toes peepin’ coyly out, and ef he was totin’ a flint lock rifle, the chances were he’d be a common soldier. But ef in addition to the rest of his regalia he had a pair of epaulettes sewed onto his shoulders you mout safely assume you were in the presence of a general or something of that nature. I ain’t exaggeratin’ – much. I’m only tryin’ to make you git the picture of it in your mind.

“Well, they received us very kindly and furnished us with rations, sech ez they were – mostly peppers and beans and a kind of batter-cake that’s much in favour in them parts, made out of corn pounded up fine and mixed with water and baked ag’inst a hot rock. Ef a man didn’t keer fur the peppers, he could fall back on the beans, thus insurin’ him a change of diet, and the corn batter-cakes were certainly right good-tastin’.

“Some few of our dark-complected friends kin make a stagger at speakin’ English, so frum one of ‘em Billy inquires where is the Confederacy? They explains that it has moved on further South but tells us that first General Shelby sold ‘em the artillery he’d fetched with him that fur to keep it frum failin’ into the Yankees’ hands. Sure enough there’re the guns – four brass field-pieces. Two of ‘em are twelve-pounders and the other two are four-teen-pounders. The Mexicans are very proud of their artillery and appear to set much store by it.

“Well, that evenin’ their commandin’ general comes over to where we’ve made camp, accompanied by his coffee-coloured staff, and through an interpreter he suggests the advisability of our j’inin’ in with them, he promisin’ good pay and offerin’ to make us all high-up officers. He seems right anxious to have us enlist with his glorious forces right away. In a little while it leaks out why he’s so generous with his promises and so wishful to see us enrolled beneath his noble banner. He’s expectin’ a call inside of the next forty-eight hours frum the Imperials that’re reported to be movin’ up frum the South, nearly two thousand strong, with the intention of givin’ him battle.

“Billy Priest, speakin’ fur all of us, says he’ll give him an answer later. So the commandin’ general conceals his disappointment the best he kin and retires on back to his own headquarters, leavin’ us to discuss the proposition amongst ourselves. Some of the boys favour thro win’ in with the Liberals right away, bein’ hongry fur a fight, I reckon, or else sort of dazzled by the idea of becomin’ colonels and majors overnight. But Billy suggests that mebbe we’d better jest sort of hang ‘round and observe the conduct and deportment of these here possible feller warriors of our’n whilst they’re under hostile fire. ‘Speakin’ pusson-ally,’ he says, ‘I must admit I ain’t greatly attracted to them ez they present themselves to the purview of my gaze in their ca’mmer hours. Before committin’ ourselves, s’posen we stand by and take a few notes on how they behave themselves in the presence of an enemy. Then, there’ll be abundant time to decide whether we want to stay a while with these fellers or go long about our business of lookin’ fur the Southern Confederacy.’

“That sounded like good argument, so we let Billy have his way about it, and we settled down to wait. We didn’t have long to wait. The next day about dinner-time, here come the Imperial army, advancin’ in line of battle. The Liberals moved out acrost the desert to meet ‘em and we-all mounted and taken up a position on a little rise close at hand, to observe the pur-ceedin’s.

“Havin’ had consider’ble experience in sech affairs, I must say I don’t believe I ever witnessed such a dissa’pintin’ battle ez that one turn’t out to be. The prevailin’ notion on both sides seemed to be that the opposin’ forces should march bravely toward one another ontill they got almost within long range and then fur both gangs to halt ez though by simultaneous impulse, and fire at will, with nearly everybody shootin’ high and wide and furious. When this had continued till it become mutually bore-some, one side would charge with loud cheers, ashootin’ ez it advanced, but prudently slowin’ down and finally haltin’ before it got close enough to inflict much damage upon the foe or to suffer much damage either. Havin’ accomplished this, the advancin’ forces would fall back in good order and then

it was time fur the other side to charge. I must say this in justice to all concerned – there was a general inclination to obey the rules ez laid down fur the prosecution of tie kind of warfare they waged. Ez a usual thing, I s'pose it would be customary fur the battle to continue ez described until the shades of night descended and then each army would return to its own base, claimin' the victory. But on this occasion something in the nature of a surprise occurred that wasn't down on the books a-tall.

“Right down under the little rise where us fellers sat waitin', stood them four guns that the Liberals bought off of Shelby. Ef brass cannons have feelin's – and I don't know no reason why they shouldn't have – them cannons must have felt like something was radically wrong. The crews were loadin' and firin' and swabbin' and loadin' and firin' ag'in – all jest ez busy ez beavers. But they plum overlooked one triflin' detail which the military experts have always regarded ez bein' more or less essential to successful artillery operations. They forgot to aim in the general direction at the enemy. They done a plentiful lot of cheerin', them gun crews did, and they burnt up a heap of powder and they raised a powerful racket and hullabaloo, but so fur ez visible results went they mout jest ez well have been bombardin' the clear blue sky of heaven.

“Well, fur quite a spell we stayed up there on the brow of the hill, watchin' that there engagement. Only you couldn't properly call it an engagement – by rights it wasn't nothin' but a long distance flirtation. Now several of our boys had served one time or another with the guns. There was one little feller named Vince Hawley, out of Lyon's Battery, that had been one of the crack gunners of the Western Army. He held in ez long ez he could and then he sings out:

“Boys, do you know whut's ailin' them pore mistreated little field-pieces down yonder? Well, I'll tell you. They're Confederate guns, born, bred, and baptised; and they're cravin' fur Confederate hands to pet 'em. It mout be this'll be the last chance a Southern soldier will ever git to fire a Southern gun. Who'll go 'long with me fur one farewell sashay with our own cannons?”

“In another minute eight or ten of our command were pilin' off their horses and tearin' down that little hill behind Vince Hawley and bustin' in amongst the Mexies and laying violent but affectionate hands on one of the twelve-pounders. Right off, the natives perceived whut our fellers wanted to do and they fell back and gave 'em elbow-room. Honest, son, it seemed like that field-piece recognised her own kind of folks, even 'way off there on the aidge of a Mexican desert, and strove to respond to their wishes. The boys throwed a charge into her and Hawley sighted her and then – kerboom – off she went!

“Off the Imperial forces went, too. The charge landed right in amongst their front ranks ez they were advancin' – it happened to be their turn to charge – takin' 'em absolutely by surprise. There was a profound scatteration and then spontaneous-like the enemy seemed to come to a realisation of the fact that the other side had broke all the rules and was actually tryin' to do 'em a real damage. With one accord they turned tail and started in the general direction of the Isthmus of Panama. Ef they kept up the rate of travel at which they started, they arrived there inside of a week, too – or mebbe even sooner. I s'pose it depended largely on whether their feet held out.

“Hawley and his gang run the gun forward to the crest of a little swale ready to give the retreatin' forces another treatment in case they should rally and re-form, but a second dose wasn't needed. Howsomever, before the squad came back, they scouted acrost the field to see whut execution their lone charge had done. Near to where the shell had busted they gathered up six skeered soldiers – fellers that had dropped down, skeered but unhurt, when the smash come and had been layin' there in a hollow in the ground, fearin' the worst and hopin' fur the best. So they brung 'em back in with 'em and turned 'em over to the Liberals ez prisoners of war.

“The rest of us were canterin' down on the flat by now. We arrived in time to observe that some of the victorious Liberals were engaged in lashin' the prisoners' elbows together with ropes, behind their backs, and that whut looked like a firin' squad was linin' up conveniently clos't by. Billy Priest went and located a feller that could interpret after a fashion and inquired whut was the idea. The interpreter feller explained that the idea was to line them six prisoners up and shoot 'em to death.

“Boys,’ says Billy, turnin’ to us, ‘I’m afeared we’ll have to interfere with the contemplated festivalities. Our friends are too gently-inclined durin’ the hostilities and too blame’ bloodthirsty afterward to suit me. Let us bid an adieu to ‘em and purceed upon our way. But first,’ he says, ‘let us break into the picture long enough to save those six poor devils standin’ over there in a row, all tied up like beef-critters fur the butcher.’

“So we rid in betwixt the condemned and the firin’ squad and by various devices such ez drawin’ our carbines and our six-shooters, we made plain our purpose. At that a wave of disappointment run right through the whole army. You could see it travellin’ frum face to face under the dirt that was on said faces. Even the prisoners seemed a trifle put-out and downcasted. Later we found out why. But nobody offered to raise a hand ag’instant us.

“All right then,’ says Billy Priest, ‘so fur so good. And now I think we’d better be resum’in’ our journey, takin’ our captives with us. I’ve got a presentiment,’ he says, ‘that they’d probably enjoy better health travellin’ along with us than they would stayin’ on with these here Liberals.’

“How about them four field-pieces?’ says one of the boys, speakin’ up. ‘There’s plenty of hosses to haul ‘em. Hadn’t we better take them along with us, too? They’ll git awful lonesome bein’ left in such scurvy company – poor little things!’

“No,’ says Billy, ‘I reckon that wouldn’t be right. The prisoners are our’n by right of capture, but the guns ain’t. These fellers bought ‘em off Shelby’s brigade and they’re entitled to keep ‘em. But before we depart,’ he says, ‘it mout not be a bad idea to tinker with ‘em a little with a view to sort of puttin’ ‘em out of commission fur the time bein’. Our late hosts mout take a notion to turn ‘em on us, ez we are goin’ away frum ‘em and there’s a bare chance,’ he says, ‘that they might hit some of us – by accident.’

“So we tinkered with the guns and then we moved out in hollow formation with the six prisoners marchin’ along in the middle and not a soul undertakin’ to halt us ez we went. On the whole them Liberals seemed right pleased to get shet of us. But when we’d gone along fur a mile or so, one of the Mexicans flopped down on his knees and begin to jabber. And then the other five follered suit and jabbered with him. After ‘while it dawned on us that they were beggin’ us to kill ‘em quick and not torture ‘em, they thinkin’ we’d only saved ‘em frum bein’ shot in order to do something much more painful to ‘em at our leisure. So then four or five of the boys dropped down off their mounts and untied ‘em and faced ‘em about so the open country was in front of ‘em and give ‘em a friendly kick or two frum behind ez a notice to ‘em to be on their way. They lit out into the scrub and were gone the same ez ef they’d been so many Molly Cottontails.

“Fur upward of a week then, we moved along, headin’ mighty nigh due South. Considerin’ that the country was supposed to be in the midst of civil war we saw powerful few evidences of it ez we rode through. Life fur the humble Mexican appeared to be waggin’ along about ez usual, but was nothin’ to brag about, at that. We seen him ploughin’ amongst the prevalent desolation with a forked piece of wood, one fork bein’ hitched to a yoke of oxen and the other fork bein’ shod with a little strip of rusty iron. We seen him languidly gatherin’ his wheat, him goin’ ahead and pullin’ it up out of the ground, roots and all and pilin’ it in puny heaps, and then the women cornin’ along behind him and tyin’ it in little bunches with strings. Another place we seen him and his women folks threshin’ grain by beatin’ it with sticks and dependin’ on the wind to help ‘em winnow the wheat from the chaff jest ez it is written ‘twas done in the Bible days. We seen him in his hours of ease, fightin’ his chicken-cock against some other feller’s game-bird, and gamblin’ and scratchin’ his flea-bites and the more we seen of him the less we seemed to keer fur him. He mout of been all right in his way, but he wasn’t our kind of folks; I reckon that was it.

“And he repaid the compliment by not appearin’ to keer very deeply fur us strangers neither, but the women seemed to take to us, mightily. They’d come out to us frum their little dried mud cabins bringin’ us beans and them flat batter-cakes of their’n and even sometimes milk and butter. Also they gave us roughage fur our hosses and wouldn’t take pay fur none of it, indicatin’ by signs

that it was all a free gift. Whut between the grazin' they got and the dried fodder the women gave us, our hosses took on flesh and weren't sech ga'nted crowbaits ez they had been.

“Seven days of traversin' that miser'ble land and then, son, we ran smack into the Imperial scouts and found we'd arrived within less 'en a day's march of the city of Monterey. Purty soon out come a detachment of cavalry to meet us and inquire into our business and a most Godforsaken lookin' bunch they were, but with 'em they had half a dozen Confederates – Missouri boys, all of 'em exceptin' one, him bein' frum Louisiana; and these here Missouri fellers told us some news. It seemed that after Shelby and Price and Hindman got to Monterey their little army had split in two, most of its members headin' off toward the City of Mexico with no purticular object in view so fur ez anybody knowed but jest filled with a restless cravin' to stay in the saddle and keep movin', and the rest strikin' Westward toward the Pacific Coast.

“But about two hundred of 'em had stayed behind and enlisted at Monterey, havin' been given a bounty of six hundred dollars apiece and a promise of one hundred dollars a month in pay ef they'd fight fur Maximilian. The delegation that had rode out to meet us now were part and parcel of that two hundred. They seemed tickled to death to see us and they bragged about the money they were gittin', but ef you watched 'em kind of clos't you could tell, mighty easy, they weren't exactly overjoyed and carried away with enthusiasm over their present jobs. They told us in confidence that the French officers in their army were fine soldiers and done the best they could with the material they had, but that the rank and file were small potatoes and few in the hill. In fact, we gathered frum remarks let fall here and there that after servin' ez a Confederate fur a period of years and fightin' ag'inst husky fellers frum Indiana or Kansas or Michigan or somewheres up that way, bein' a soldier of fortune with the Imperials and fightin' ag'inst the Liberals was, comparatively speakin', a mighty tame pursuit – that you'd probably live longer so doin', but you wouldn't have anywheres near the excitement. On top of all that, though, they extended a cordial invitation to us to go on back to Monterey with 'em and enlist under the Maximilian government.

“Some of our outfit seemed to sort of lean toward the proposition and some to sort of lean ag'inst it, without exactly statin' their reasons why and wherefore. But amongst us all there wasn't a man but whut relied mighty implicit on Billy Priest's judgment, and besides which, you've got to remember, son, that discipline had come to be a sort of an ingrained habit with us. We'd got used to lookin' to our leaders to show us the way and give us our orders and then we'd try to obey 'em, spite of hell and high water. That's the way it had been with us for four long years and that's the way it still was with us. So under the circumstances, with sentiment divided ez it was, we-all waited to see how Billy Priest felt, because ez I jest told you, we imposed a heap of confidence in his views on purty near any subject you mout mention. The final say-so bein' put up to him, he studied a little and then he said to the Missouri boys that hearin' frum them about the Confederacy havin' split up into pieces had injected a new and a different aspect into the case and in his belief it was a thing that needed thinkin' over and mebbe sleepin' on. Accordin'ly, ef it was all the same to them, he'd like to wait till next mornin' before comin' to a definite decision and he believed that in this his associates would concur with him. That was agreeable to the fellers that had brung us the invitation, or ef it wasn't they let on like it was anyhow, and so we left the matter standin' where it was without further argument on their part.

“They told us good-by and expressed the hope that they'd see us next day in Monterey and then they rid on back to headquarters to report progress on the part of the committee on new members and to ask further time, I s'pose. Ez fur us, we went into camp right where we was.

“Most of us suspicioned that after we'd fed the hosses and et our supper Billy would call a sort of caucus and git the sense of the meetin', but he didn't take no steps in that direction and of course nobody else felt qualified to do so. After a while the fires we'd lit to cook our victuals on begin to die down low and the boys started to turn in. There wasn't much talkin' or singin', or skylarkin' round, but a whole heap of thinkin' was goin' on – you could feel it in the air. I was layin' there on the ground

under my old ragged blankets with my saddle fur a pillow and the sky fur my bed canopy, but I didn't drop right off like I usually done. I was busy ponderin' over in my mind quite a number of things. I remember how gash'ly and on-earthly them old cactus plants looked, loomin' up all 'round me there in the darkness and how strange the stars looked, a-shinin' overhead. They didn't seem like the same stars we'd been used to sleepin' under before we come on down here into Mexico. Even the new moon had a different look, ez though it was another moon frum the one that had furnished light fur us to go possum-huntin' by when we were striplin' boys growin' up. This here one was a lonesome, strange, furreign-lookin' moon, ef you git my meanin'? Anyhow it seemed so to me.

"Somebody spoke my name right alongside of me, and I tum't over and raised up my head and there was Billy Priest hunkered down. He had a little scrap of dried greasewood in his hand and he was scratchin' with it in the dirt in a kind of an absent-minded way.

"You ain't asleep yet, Jimmy?" he says to me.

"No," I says, 'I've been layin' here, study-in'.'

"That so?" he says. 'Whut about in particular?'

"Oh nothin' in particular," I says, 'jest studyin'.'

"He don't say anything more fur a minute; jest keepin' on makin' little marks in the dirt with the end of his stick. Then he says to me: "Jimmy," he says, 'I've been doin' right smart thinkin' myself.'

"Have you?" I says.

"Yes," he says, 'I have. I've been thinkin' that whilst peppers make quite spicy eatin' and beans are claimed to be very nourishin' articles of food, still when taken to excess they're liable to pall on the palate, sooner or later.'

"They certainly are," I says.

"Let's see," he says. 'This is the last week in July, ain't it? Back in God's country, the first of the home-grown watermelons oughter be comin' in about now, oughten they? And in about another week from now they'll be pickin' those great big striped rattlesnake melons that grow in the river bottoms down below town, won't they?'

"Yes," I says, 'they will, ef the season ain't been rainy and set 'em back.'

"Let us hope it ain't," he says, and I could hear his stick scratchin' in the grit of that desert land, makin' a scrabblin' itchy kind of sound.

"Jimmy Bagby," he says, 'any man's liable to make a mistake sometimes, but that don't necessarily stamp him ez a fool onlessen he sticks to it too long after he's found out it is a mistake.'

"Billy," I says, 'I can't take issue with you there.'"

"F'r instance now," he says, 'you take a remark which I let fall some weeks back touch-in' on flags. Well I've been thinkin' that remark over, Jimmy, and I've about come to the conclusion that ef a man has to give up the flag he fout under and can't have it no longer, he mout in time come to be equally comfortable in the shadder of the flag he was born under. He might even come to love 'em both, mighty sincerely – lovin' one fur whut it meant to him once't and fur all the traditions and all the memories it stands fur, and lovin' the other fur whut it may mean to him now and whut it's liable to mean to his children and their children.'

"But Billy," I says, 'when all is said and done, we fit in defence of a constitutional principle.'

"You bet we did," he says; 'but it's mostly all been said and it's practically all been done. I figger it out this way, Jimmy. Reguardless of the merits of a given case, ef a man fights fur whut he thinks is right, so fur ez he pussonally is concerned, he fights fur whut is right. I ain't expectin' it to happen yit awhile, but I'm willin' to bet you something that in the days ahead both sides will come to feel jest that way about it too.'

"Do you think so, Billy?" I says.

"Jimmy," he say, 'I don't only think so – I jest natchelly knows so. I feel it in my bones.'

"Then I presume you must be correct," I says.

“He waits a minute and then he says: ‘Jimmy,’ he says, ‘I don’t believe I’d ever make a success ez one of these here passenger-pigeons. Now, a passenger-pigeon ain’t got no regular native land of his own. He loves one country part of the time and another country part of the time, dividin’ his seasons betwixt ‘em. Now with me I’m afraid it’s different.’

“‘Billy,’ I says, ‘I’ve about re’ch the conclusion that I wasn’t cut out to be a passenger-pigeon, neither.’

“He waits a minute, me holdin’ back fur him to speak and wonderin’ whut his next subject is goin’ to be. Bill Priest always was a master one to ramble in his conversations. After a while he speaks, very pensive:

“‘Jimmy,’ he says, ‘ef a man was to git up on a hoss, say to-morrow momin’ and ride along right stiddy he’d jest about git home by hog-killin’ time, wouldn’t he?’

“‘Jest about,’ I says, ‘ef nothin’ serious happened to delay him on the way.’

“‘That’s right,’ he says, ‘the spare ribs and the chitterlin’s would jest about be ripe when he arrove back.’

“I didn’t make no answer to that – my mouth was waterin’ so I couldn’t speak. Besides there didn’t seem to be nothin’ to say.

“‘The fall revivals ought to be startin’ up about then, too,’ he says, ‘old folks gittin’ religion all over ag’in and the mourners’ bench overflowin’, and off in the back pews and in the dark comers young folks flirtin’ with one another and holdin’ hands under cover of the hymn-books. But all the girls we left behind us have probably got new beaux by now, don’t you reckon?’

“‘Yes, Billy,’ I says, ‘I reckon they have and I don’t know ez I could blame ‘em much neither, whut with us streakin’ ‘way off down here like a passel of idiots.’

“He gits up and throws away his stick.

“‘Well, Jimmy,’ he says, ‘I’m powerful glad to find out we agree on so many topics. Well, good night,’ he says.

“‘Good night,’ I says, and then I rolled over and went right off to sleep. But before I dropped off I ketched a peep of Billy Priest, squattin’ down alongside one of the other boys, and doubtless fixin’ to read that other feller’s thoughts like a book the same ez he’d jest been readin’ mine.

“‘Well, son, the next mornin’ at sun-up we were all up, too. We had our breakfast, sech ez it was, and broke camp and mounted and started off with Billy Priest ridin’ at the head of the column and me stickin’ clos’t beside him. I didn’t know fur sure whut was on the mind of anybody else in that there cavalcade of gentlemen rangers, but I was mighty certain about whut I aimed to do. I aimed to stick with Billy Priest; that’s whut. Strange to say, nobody ast any questions about whut we were goin’ to do with regards to them Imperalists waitin’ there fur us in Monterey. You never saw such a silent lot of troopers in your life. There wasn’t no singin’ nor laughin’ and mighty little talkin’. But fur half an hour or so there was some good, stiddy lopin’.

“‘Presently one of the boys pulled out of line and spurred up alongside of our chief.

“‘S’cuse me, commander,’ he says, ‘but it begins to look to me like we were back trackin’ on our own trail.’

“‘Billy looks at him, grinnin’ a little through his whiskers. We all had whiskers on our faces, or the startin’s of ‘em.

“‘Bless my soul, I believe you’re right!’ says Billy. ‘Why, you’ve got the makin’s of a scout in you.’

“‘But look here,’ says the other feller, still sort of puzzled-like, ‘that means we’re headin’ due North, don’t it?’

“‘It means I’m headin’ North,’ says Billy, and at that he quit grinnin’. ‘But you, nor no one else in this troop don’t have to fol-ler along onlessen you’re minded so to do. Every man here is a free agent and his own boss. And ef anybody is dissatisfied with the route I’m takin’ and favours some

other, I'd like fur him to come out now and say so. It won't take me more'n thirty seconds to resign my leadership.'

“‘Oh, that's all right,’ says the other feller, ‘I was merely astin’ the question, that's all. I ain't dissatisfied. I voted fur you ez commander fur the entire campaign – not fur jest part of it. I was fur you when we elected you, and I'm fur you yit.’

“And with that he wheeled and racked along back to his place. Purty soon Billy looked over his shoulder along the column and an idea struck him. Not fur behind him Tom Moss was joggin' along with his old battered banjo swung acrost his back. Havin' toted that there banjo of his'n all through the war he'd likewise brought it along with him into Mexico. He had a mighty pleasin' voice, too, and the way he could sing and play that song about him bein' a good old rebel and not carin' a dam' made you feel that he didn't care a dam', neither. Billy beckoned to him and Tom rid up alongside and Billy whispered something in his ear. Tom's face all lit up then and he on-slung his banjo frum over his shoulder and threwed one laig over his saddle-bow and hit the strings a couple of licks and reared his head back and in another second he was singin' at the top of his voice. But this time he wasn't singin' the song about bein' a good old rebel. He was singin' the one that begins:

The sun shines bright on my Old Kintucky Home;
'Tis Summer, the darkies are gay,
The corn tops are ripe and the medders are in bloom,
And the birds make music all the day.'

“In another minute everybody else was singin', too – singin' and gallopin'. Son, you never in your whole life seen so many hairy, ragged, rusty fellers on hoss-back a-tear in' along through the dust of a strange land, actin' like they were all in a powerful hurry to git somewheres and skeered the gates would be shut before they arrived. Boy, listen: the homesickness jest popped out through my pores like perspiration.

“It taken us all of seven days to git frum the border acros't that long stretch of waste to within a day's ride of the city of Monterey. It only taken us four and a half to git back ag'in to the border, the natives standin' by to watch us as we tore on past 'em. The sun was still several hours high on the evenin' of the fifth day when we come in sight of the Rio Grande River; and I don't ever seem to recall a stretch of muddy yaller water that looked so grateful to my eyes ez that one looked.

“We come canterin' down to the water's edge, all of us bein' plum' jaded and mighty travel-worn. And there, right over yond' on the fur bank we could see the peaky tops of some army tents standin' in rows and we heard the notes of a bugle, soundin' mighty sweet and clear in that still air. And it dawned on us that by a strange coincidence whut wouldn't be liable to happen once't in a dozen years had happened in our purticular case – that the United States Government, ez represented by a detachment of its military forces, had moved down to the line at a point almost opposite to the place where we aimed to cross back over.

“I ain't sure yit whut it was – it mout a-been the first sight of the foeman he'd fit ag'inst so long that riled him or it mout a-been merely a sort of sneakin' desire to make out like he purposed to hold off to the very last and then be won over by sweet blandishments – but jest ez we reached the river, a big feller hailin' frum down in Bland County rid up in front of Billy Priest and he says he wants to ast him a question.

“‘Fire away,’ says Billy.

“‘Bill Priest,’ says the Bland County feller, ‘I take it to be your intention to go back into the once't free but now conquered state of Texas?’

“‘Well, pardner,’ says Billy in that whiny way of his'n, ‘you certainly are a slow one when it comes to pickin' up current gossip ez it flits to and fro about the neighbourhood. Why do you s'pose

we've all been ridin' hell-fur-leather in this direction endurin' of the past few days onlessen it was with that identical notion in mind?

“Never mind that now,” says the other feller. ‘Circumstances alter cases. Don’t you see that there camp over yonder is a camp of Yankee soldiers?’

“Ef my suspicions are correct that’s jest whut it is,” says Billy very politely. ‘Whut of it?’

“Well,” says the other feller, ‘did it ever occur to you that ef we cross here them Yankees will call on us to lay down the arms which we’ve toted so long? Did it ever occur to you that mebbe they’d even expect us to take their dam’ oath of allegiance?’

“Yes,” says Billy Priest, ‘sence you bring up the subject, it had occurred to me that they mout do jest that. And likewise it has also occurred to me that when them formalities are concluded they mout extend the hospitalities of the occasion by invitin’ us to set down with them to a meal of real human vittles. Why,’ he says, ‘I ain’t tasted a cup of genuwyne coffee in so long that – !’

“The other feller breaks in on him before Billy can git done with whut he’s sayin’.

“And you,” he says, sort of sneerful and insinuatın’, ‘you, here only some three or four months back was a ring-leader and a head-devil in formin’ this here expedition. You was goin’ round makin’ your brags that you’d be the last one to surrender – you! And we’ve been callin’ you Fightin’ Billy! Fightin’ Billy? Hell’s fire!’

“Billy rammed his heels in his hoss’s flanks and shoved over, only reinin’ up when he was touchin’ laigs with the Bland County feller. A shiny little blue light come into his eyes and the veins in his neck all swelled out.

“My esteemed friend and feller-country-man,” says Billy, speakin’ plenty slow and plenty polite, ‘ef any gentleman present is inclined to make a pussonal matter of it, I’ll undertake to endeavour to prove up my right to that there title right here and now. But ef not, I wish to state fur the benefit of all concerned that frum this minute I ain’t figgerin’ on wearin’ the nickname any longer. Frum where I set it looks to me like this is a mighty fitten and appropriate time to go out of the fightin’ business and resume the placid and pleasant ways of peace. Frum now on, to friends ez well ez to strangers, I’m goin’ to be jest plain William Pitman Priest, Esquire, attorney and counsellor-at-law. I ast you all to kindly bear it in mind. And furthermore speakin’ solely and exclusively fur the said William Pitman Priest, I will state it is my intention of gittin’ acrost this here river in time to eat my supper on the soil of my own country. Ef anybody here feels like goin’ along with me I’ll be glad of his company. Ef not, I’ll bid all you good comrades an affectionate farewell and jest jog along over all by my lonesome self.’

“But, of course, when he said that last he was jest funnin’ – talkin’ to hear hisself talk. He knowed good and well we would all go with him. And we did. And ez fur ez I know none of us ever had cause to regret takin’ the step.

“By hurryin’, we did git back home before hog-killin’ time. And then after a spell, when we’d had our disabilities removed, some of us like Billy Priest started runnin’ fur office and bein’ elected with reasonable regularity and some of us, like me, went into business. We lived through bayonet rule and reconstruction and carpet-baggery, and we lived to see all them evils die out and a better feelin’ and a better understandin’ come in. We’ve been livin’ ever since, sech of us ez are still survivin’. I’ve done consider’ble livin’ myself. I’ve lived to see North and South united. I’ve even lived to see my own daughter married to the son of a Northern soldier, with the full consent of the families on both sides. And so that’s how it happens I’ve got a grandson that’s part Yankee and part Confederate in his breedin’. I reckon there ain’t nobody that’s ez plum’ foolish ez I am about that there little, curly-headed sassy tike, without it’s his grandfather on the other side, old Major Ashcroft. We differ radically on politics, the Major bein’ a besotted and hopeless black Republikin; and try ez I will I ain’t never been able to cure him of a delusion of his’n that the Ninth Michigan could a-helt its own ag’inst King’s Hell Hounds ef ever they’d met up on the field of battle; but in other respects he’s a fairly intelligent man; and he certainly does coincide with me that betwixt us we’ve got the smartest four-year-old youngster

fur a grandchild that ever was born. There's hope fur a nation that kin produce sech children ez that one, ef I do say it myself.”

He stood up and shook himself.

“In fact, son,” concluded Sergeant Bagby, “you mout safely say that, takin’ one thing with another, this country is turnin’ out to be quite a success.”

CHAPTER II. AND THERE WAS LIGHT

SO many things that at first seem amazingly complex turn out amazingly simple. The purely elemental has a trick of ambushing itself behind a screen of mystery; but when by deduction and elimination – in short, by the simple processes of subtraction and division – we have stripped away the mask, the fact stands so plainly revealed we marvel that we did not behold it from the beginning. Elemental, you will remember, was a favourite word with Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and one much employed by him in the elucidation of problems in criminology for the better enlightenment of his sincere but somewhat obvious-minded friend, the worthy Doctor Watson.

On the other hand, traits and tricks that appear to betray the characters, the inclinations and, most of all, the vocations of their owners may prove misleading clues, and very often do. You see a black man with a rolling gait, who spraddles his legs when he stands and sways his body on his hips when he walks; and, following the formula of the deductionist cult of amateur detectives, you say to yourself that here, beyond peradventure, is a deep-water sailor, used to decks that heave and scuppers that flood. Inquiry but serves to prove to you how wrong you are. The person in question is a veteran dining-car waiter.

Then along comes another – one with a hearty red face, who rears well back and steps out with martial precision. Evidently a retired officer of the regular army, you say to yourself. Not at all; merely the former bass drummer of a military brass band. The bass drummer, as will readily be recalled, leans away from his instrument instead of toward it.

For a typical example of this sort of thing, let us take the man I have in mind for the central figure of this tale. He was a square-built man, round-faced, with a rather small, deep-set grey eye, and a pair of big hands, clumsy-looking but deft. He wore his hair short and his upper lip long. Appraising him upon the occasion of a chance meeting in the street, you would say offhand that this, very probably, was a man who had been reasonably successful in some trade calling for initiative and expertness rather than for technic. He wouldn't be a theatrical manager – his attire was too formal; or a stockbroker – his attire was not formal enough.

I imagine you in the act of telling yourself that he might be a clever life-insurance solicitor, or a purchasing agent for a trunk line, or a canny judge of real-estate values – a man whose taste in dress would run rather to golf stockings than to spats, rather to soft hats than to hard ones, and whose pet hobby would likely be trout flies and not first editions. In a part of your hypothesis you would have been absolutely correct. This man could do things with a casting rod and with a mid-iron too.

Seeing him now, as we do see him, wearing a loose tweed suit and sitting bareheaded behind a desk in the innermost room of a smart suite of offices on a fashionable side street, surrounded by shelves full of medical books and by wall cases containing medical appliances, you, knowing nothing of him except what your eye told you, would probably hazard a guess that this individual was a friend of the doctor, who, having dropped in for social purposes and having found the doctor out, had removed his hat and taken a seat in the doctor's chair to await the doctor's return.

Therein you would have been altogether in error. This man was not the doctor's friend, but the doctor himself – a practitioner of high repute in his own particular line. He was known as a specialist in neurotic disorders; privately he called himself a specialist in human nature. He was of an orthodox school of medicine, but he had cast overboard most of the ethics of the school and he gave as little as possible of the medicine. Drugs he used sparingly, preferring to prescribe other things for most of his patients – such things, for instance, as fresh air, fresh, vegetables and fresh thoughts. His cures were numerous and his fees were large.

On the other side of a cross wall a woman sat waiting to see him. She was alone, being the first of his callers to arrive this day. A heavy, deep-cushioned town car, with a crest on its doors and a

man in fine livery to drive it, had brought her to the doctor's address five minutes earlier; car and driver were at the curb outside.

The woman was exquisitely groomed and exquisitely overdressed. She radiated luxury, wealth and the possession of an assured and enviable position. She radiated something else, too – unhappiness.

Here assuredly the lay mind might make no mistake in its summarising. There are too many like her for any one of us to err in our diagnosis when a typical example is presented. The city is especially prolific of such women. It breeds them. It coddles them and it pampers them, but in payment therefore it besets them with many devils. It gives them everything in reason and out of reason, and then it makes them long for something else – anything else, so long as it be unattainable. Possessed of the nagging demons of unrest and discontent and satiation, they feed on their nerves until their nerves in retaliation begin to feed on them. The result generally is smash. Sanitariums get them, and divorce courts and asylums – and frequently cemeteries.

The woman who waited in the reception room did not have to wait very long, yet she was hard put to it to control herself while she sat there. She bit her under lip until the red marks of her teeth showed in the flesh, and she gripped the arms of her chair so tightly and with such useless expenditure of nervous force that through her gloves the knuckles of her hands exposed themselves in sharp high ridges.

Presently a manservant entered and, bowing, indicated mutely that his master would see her now. She fairly ran past him through the communicating door which he held open for her passage. As she entered the inner room it was as though her coming into it set all its orderliness awry. Only the ruddy-faced specialist, intrenched behind the big table in the middle of the floor, seemed unchanged. She halted on the other side of the table and bent across it toward him, her finger tips drumming a little tattoo upon its smooth surface. He did not speak even the briefest of greetings; perhaps he was minded not to speak. He waited for her to begin.

“Doctor,” she burst out, “you must do something for me; you must give me medicine – drugs – narcotics – anything that will soothe me. I did not sleep at all last night and hardly any the night before that. All night I sat up in bed or walked the floor trying to keep from screaming out – trying to keep from going mad. I have been dressed for hours – I made my maid stay up with me – waiting for your office to open so that I might come to you. Here I am – see me! See the state I am in! Doctor, you must do something for me – and do it now, quickly, before I do something desperate!”

She panted out the last words. She put her clenched hands to her bosom. Her haggard eyes glared into his; their glare made the carefully applied cosmetics upon her face seem a ghastly mask.

“I have already prescribed for you, madam,” the doctor said. “I told you that what you mainly needed was rest – complete and absolute rest.”

“Rest? Rest! How can I rest? What chance is there for me to rest? I can't rest! If I try to rest I begin to think – and then it is worse than ever. I must keep on the go. Something drives me on – something inside me, here – to go and go, and to keep on going until I drop. Oh, doctor, you don't know what I suffer – what I have to endure. No one knows what I have to endure. No one understands. My husband doesn't understand me – my children do not, nor my friends.

“Friends? I have no friends. I can't get on with any one – I quarrel with every one. I know I am sick, that I am irritable and out-of-sorts sometimes. And I know that I am self-willed and want my own way. But I've always been self-willed; it's a part of my nature. And I've always had my own way. They should appreciate that. But they don't. They cross me. At every turn somebody crosses me. The whole world seems in a conspiracy to deny me what I want.

“It can't be my fault always that I am forever quarrelling with people – with my own family; with my husband's family; with every one who crosses my path. I tell you they don't understand me, doctor. They don't make allowances for my condition. If they would only make allowances! And they

don't give me any consideration. I can't stand it, doctor! I can't go on like this any longer. Please – please, doctor, do something for me!”

Mounting hysteria edged her voice with a sharpened, almost a vulgar shrillness. The austere and studied reserve of her class – a reserve that is part of it poise and the rest of it pose – dropped away from her like a discarded garment, and before her physician she revealed herself nakedly for what she was – a creature with the passions, the forwardness and the selfishness of a spoiled and sickly child; and, on top of these, superimposed and piled up, adult impulses, adult appetites, adult petulance, adult capacity for misery.

“I told you,” he said, “to go away. I thought, until my man brought me your name a bit ago, that you had gone. Weeks ago I told you that travel might help you – not the sort of travel to which you have been used, but a different sort – travel in the quiet places, out of the beaten path, and rest. I told you the same thing again less than a week ago.”

“But where?” she demanded. “Where am I to go? Tell me that! I have been everywhere – I have seen everything. What is there left for me to see in the world? What is there in the world that is worth seeing? You told me before there was nothing organically wrong with me, nothing fundamentally wrong with my body. Then it must be my mind, and travel couldn't cure a mind in the state that mine is in. How can I rest when I am so distracted, when small things upset me so, when – ”

In the midst of this new outburst she broke off. Her eyes, wandering from his as she pumped herself up toward a frenzy, were focused now upon some object behind him. She pointed toward it.

“I never saw that before,” she said. “It wasn't there when I was here last.”

He swung about in his chair, its spiral creaking under his weight.

“No,” he said; “you never saw that before. It came into my possession only a day or two ago. It is a – ”

She broke in on him.

“What a wonderful face!” she said. “What beauty there is in it – what peace! I think that is what made me notice it – the peace that is in it. Oh, if I could only be like that! Doctor, the being to whom that face belonged must have had everything worth having. And to think there can be such beings in this world – beings so blessed, so happy – while I – I – ”

Tears of self-pity came into her eyes. She was slipping back again into her former mood. With his gaze he caught and held hers, exerting all his will to hold it. A brother psychologist seeing him in that moment would have said that to this man a possible way out of a dilemma had come – would have said that an inspiration suddenly had visited him.

“Perhaps you would like to see it at closer range,” he said, still steadfastly regarding her. “There is a story regarding it – a story that might interest you, madam.”

He rose from his place, crossed the room and, reaching up, took down a plaster cast of a face that rested upright against the broad low moulding that ran along his walls on two sides.

As he brought it to her he saw that she had taken a chair. Her figure was relaxed from its recent rigidity. Her elbows were upon the tabletop. He put the cast into her gloved hands and reseated himself. She held it before her at arm's length, and one gloved hand went over its surface almost caressingly.

“It is wonderful!” she said. “I never saw such an expression on any human face – why, it is soothing to me just to look at it. Doctor, where did you get it? Who was the original of it – or don't you know? What living creature sat for the artist who made it?”

“No living creature sat for it,” he said slowly.

“Oh!” she said disappointedly. “Well, then, what artist had the imagination to conjure up such a conception?”

“No artist conjured it up,” he told her.

“Then how-”

“That, madam,” he said, “is a death mask.”

“A death mask!” Her tone was incredulous. “A death mask, doctor?”

“Yes, madam – a death mask. See, the eyes are closed – are half closed, anyway.”

“Do you mean to tell me that death can leave such an expression on any face? How could – ”
She broke off, staring incredulously at the thing.

“That is what makes the story I mean to tell you,” he said – “if you care to hear it?”

“Of course I want to hear it.” Her manner was insistent, impatient, demanding almost. “Please go on.”

He kept her in suspense a moment or two; and so they both sat, he squinting up at the ceiling as though marshalling a narrative in its proper sequence in his mind, she holding fast to the disked shape of white plaster. At length he began, speaking slowly.

“Here is the story,” he said: “A few weeks ago an acquaintance of mine – a fellow physician – told me of a case he thought might interest me. Primarily it was a surgical case, and I, as perhaps you know, do not practise surgery; but there was another aspect of it that did have a direct and personal appeal for me.

“It seems that some weeks before there had been put into his hands for treatment a man – a young man – who was stone-deaf and stone-blind, and whose senses of taste and of smell were greatly affected – perhaps I should say impaired. He could speak, more or less imperfectly, and his sense of touch was good; in fact, better than with ordinary mortals. These two faculties alone remained to him. He had been afflicted so from childhood; the attack, or the disease, which left him in this state had come upon him very early, before his mind had registered very many sensible impressions.

“Speech and feeling – these really were what remained intact. Yet his intelligence, considering these handicaps, was above the average, and his body was healthy, and his temperament, in the main, sanguine. Practically all his life he had been in an asylum – a charity institution. Until chance brought him to the attention of this acquaintance of mine it had seemed highly probable that he would spend the rest of his life in this institution.

“The physicians there regarded his case as hopeless. They were conscientious men – these physicians – and they were not lacking in sympathy, I think; but their hands and their thoughts were concerned with their duties, and perhaps – mind you, I say perhaps – perhaps an individual case more or less did not mean to them what it means to the physician in private practice. You understand? So this young man, who was well formed physically, who was normal in his mental aspects, seemed to be doomed to serve a life sentence inside walls of utter darkness and utter silence.

“Well, this man came under the attention of the surgeon I have mentioned. Possibly because it seemed so hopeless, the case interested the surgeon. He made up his mind that the affliction – afflictions rather – were not congenital, not incurable. He made up his mind that a tumorous growth on the brain was responsible for the present state of the victim. And he made up his mind that an operation – a delicate and a risky and a difficult operation – might bring about a cure. If the operation failed the subject would pass from the silence and the blackness he now endured into a silence and a blackness which many of us, similarly placed, would find preferable. He would die – quickly and painlessly. If the operation succeeded he probably would have back all his faculties – he would begin really to live. The surgeon was willing to take the chance, to assume the responsibility.

“The other man was willing to take his chance too. Both of them took it. The operation was performed – and it was a success. The man lived through it, and when he was lifted off the table my friend had every reason to believe – in fact, to know as surely as a man whose business is tampering with the human organism can know anything – that before very long this man, who had walked all his days in darkness, lacking taste and smell, and hearing no sound, would have back all that his afflictions had denied him.

“To my friend, the surgeon, it seemed likely that I, as a person concerned to a degree in psychologic manifestations and psychologic phenomena, would be glad of the opportunity to be present at the hour when this man, through his eyes, his ears, his tongue and his palate, first registered

intelligible and actual impressions. And I was glad of the opportunity. Almost it would be like witnessing the rebirth of a human being; certainly it would be witnessing the mental awakening, through physical mediums, of a human soul.

“At first hand I would see what this world, to which you and I are accustomed and of which some of us have grown weary, meant to one who had been so completely, so utterly shut out from that world through all the more impressionable years of his life. Naturally I was enormously interested to hear what he might say, to see what he might do in the hour of his reawakening and re-creation.

“So I went with the surgeon on the day appointed by him for testing the success of his operation. Only five of us were present – the man himself, the surgeon who had cured him, two others and myself. Until that hour and for every hour since he had come out from under the ether, the patient’s eyes had been bandaged to shut out light, and his ears had been muffled to shut out sounds, and he had been fed on liquid mixtures administered artificially.”

“Why?” asked the woman, interrupting for the first time.

For a moment the doctor hesitated. Then he went on smoothly to explain:

“You see, they feared the sudden shock to senses and to organs made sensitive by long disuse until he had completely rallied from the operation. So they had hooded his eyes and his ears.”

“But food – why couldn’t he have eaten solid food before this?” she insisted. “That is what I mean.”

“Oh, that?” he said, and again he halted for an instant. “That was done largely on my account. I think the surgeon wanted the test to be complete at one time and not developed in parts. You understand, don’t you?”

She nodded. And he continued, watching her face intently as he proceeded:

“So, first of all, we led him into a partly darkened room and sat him down at a table; and we gave him food – very simple food – a glass of cold water; a piece of bread, buttered; a baked Irish potato, with butter and salt upon it – that was all. We stood about him watching him as he tasted of the things we put before him – for it was really the first time he had ever properly tasted anything.

“Madam, if I live to be a hundred years old, I shall never forget the look that came into his face then. Even though he lacked the words to express himself, as you and I with our greater vocabularies might conceivably have expressed ourselves had such an experience come to us, I knew that to him the bread was ambrosia and the water was nectar.

“He didn’t wolf the food down as I had rather expected he might. He ate it slowly, extracting the flavour from every crumb of it. And the water he took in sips, allowing it to trickle down his throat, drop by drop almost. And then he spoke to us, touching the bread and the potato and the water glass. Mind you, I am reproducing the sense of what he said rather than his exact words. He said:

“What is this – and this – and this? What are these delicious things you have given me to eat? And what is this exquisite drink I have swallowed?”

“We told him and he seemed not to believe it at first. He said:

“Why, I have handled such things as these often. I have taken them up in my hands a thousand times and I have swallowed them. I should have known what they were by the touch of my fingers – but the taste of them deceived me. Can it be possible that these things are common things – that even poor people can feast upon such meals as this which I am eating? Can it even be possible that there is food within the reach of ordinary mortals which has a finer zest than this?”

“And when his friend, the surgeon, told him ‘Yes’ – told him ‘Yes’ many times and in many ways – still he seemed loath to believe it. When he had finished, to the last scrap of the potato skin and the last morsel of the bread crust and the last drop in the glass, he bowed his head and outspread his hands before him as though returning thanks for a glorious benefaction.

“Perhaps I should have told you that this took place late in the afternoon. We waited a little while after that, and then just before sunset we took him outdoors into a little shabby garden on the

asylum grounds; and we freed his eyes and we unmuffled his ears. And then we drew back from him a distance and watched him to see what he would do.

“For a little while he did nothing except stand in his tracks, transfixed and transfigured. He saw the sky and the sunlight and the earth and the grass and the shadows upon the earth and the trees and the flowers that were about him – saw them literally in a celestial vision; and he smelled the good wholesome smells of the earth, and the scents of the struggling, straggling flowers in the ill-kept flower beds, and the scents of the green things growing there too.

“And just then, as though it had known and had been inspired to choose this instant for bringing to him yet another sensation, a thrush – a common brown thrush – began singing in an elm tree almost directly above him. Of course it was merely a coincidence that a thrush should begin singing then and there. Thrushes are plentiful enough about the country in this climate at this season of the year. Central Park is full of them, sometimes. Most of us scarcely notice them, or their singing either. But, you see, with this man it was different. He literally was undergoing re-creation, re-incarnation, resurrection. Call it what you please. It was one of those three things. In a way of speaking it was all three of them.

“At the first note of music from the bird he gave a quick start, and then he threw back his head and uplifted his face; and quite near at hand he saw the little rusty-coloured chap, singing away there, with its speckled throat feathers rising and falling, and he heard the sounds that poured from the thrush’s open beak. And as he looked and listened he put his hands to his breast as though something were hurting him there. He didn’t move until the bird had fluttered away. Nor did we move either.

“Then he turned and came stumbling and reeling toward us, literally drunk with joy. His intoxication of ecstasy thickened his tongue and choked him until he, at first, could not speak to us. After a bit, though, the words came outpouring from his lips.

“‘Did you hear that?’ he cried out. ‘Did you hear it? Do you smell the earth and the flowers? And the sky – I have seen it! I can see it now. Oh, hasn’t God been good to us to give us all this? Oh, hasn’t He been good to me?’

“In an outburst of gratitude he seized the hand of my friend and kissed it again and again. I had meant to take notes of his behaviour as we went along, but I took none. I knew that afterward I could reproduce from memory all that transpired.

“Presently he was calmer, and the surgeon said to him:

“‘My son, there is something yet to be seen – something that you, having so many other things to see, have overlooked. Look yonder!’ And he pointed to the West, where the sun was just going down.

“And, at that, the other man faced about and looked full into his first sunset. Instantly his whole mood changed. It became rapt, reverential – you might say worshipful. His lips moved, but no words came from them at first, and he made as though to shut out the sight with his hands, as though the beauty of the vision was too great for him to endure. I went to him and put my hand on his shoulder. He was quivering from head to foot in an ague of sheer happiness. He seemed hardly to know I was there. He did not look toward me. He kept his eyes fixed upon the West as if he were greedy to miss nothing of the spectacle.

“Until now the sunset had seemed to me less beautiful by far than many another summer sunset I had seen, for the sky was rather overcast and the colours not particularly vivid; but, standing there beside him, in physical contact with him, I caught from him something of what he felt, and I saw that glow in the west as some-thing of indescribable grandeur and unutterable splendour, a miracle too glorious for words to describe or painters to reproduce upon squares of canvas.

“Presently he spoke to me, still without turning his head in my direction.

“‘How often does this – this – come to pass?’ he asked, panting the words out.

“‘Many times a year,’ I told him. ‘At this season nearly every evening.’

“‘And is it ever so beautiful as this?’ he said.

“‘Often more beautiful,’ I said. ‘Often the colours are richer and deeper.’

“Why are there not more of us here to look upon it?” he asked. “Surely at this hour all mankind must cease from its tasks – from whatever it is doing – to see this miracle – this free gift of the Creator!”

“I tried to tell him that mankind had grown accustomed to the daily repetition of the sunset, but he seemed unable to comprehend. As the last flattened ray of sunshine faded upon the grass, and the afterglow began to spread across the heavens, I thought he was about to faint; and I put both my arms round him to steady him. But he did not faint, though he trembled all over and took his breath into his lungs in great sobbing gulps. I showed him the evening star where it shone in the sky, and he watched it brighten, saying nothing at all.

“Suddenly he turned to me and said:

“At last I have lived, and I have found that life is sweet. Life is sweeter than I ever dared to hope it might be.’

“Then he said:

“I have a home. Will you show me where it is? While I was blind I could feel my way to it; but, now that I can see, I feel lost – all things are so changed to me. Please lead me there – I want to see with my own eyes what a home is like.’

“So I took his hand in mine and we went toward it, and the three others who were there followed after us.

“Madam, his home – the only home he had, for so far as we knew, he had no living kinspeople – was a room in that big barn of an asylum. I led him to the door of it. It was a barren enough room – you know how these institutions are apt to be furnished, and this room was no exception to the rule. Bare walls, a bare floor, bare uncurtained windows, a bed, a chair or two, a bare table – a sort of hygienic and sanitary brutality governed all its appointments.

“I imagine the lowest servant in your employ has a more attractively furnished room than this was. Now, though, it was flooded with the afterglow, which poured in at the windows; that soft light alone redeemed its hideousness of outline and its poverty of furnishings.

“He halted at the threshold. We know what home means to most of us. How much must it have meant, then, to him! He could see the walls closing round to encompass him in their friendly companionship; he could see the roof coming down to protect him.

“Home!” he said to himself in a half whisper, under his breath. ‘What a beautiful word home is! And what a beautiful place my home is!’

“Nobody gave the signal, none of us made the suggestion by word or gesture; but with one accord we four, governed by the same impulse, left him and went away. We felt in an inarticulate way that he was entitled to be alone; that no curious eye had any right to study his emotions in this supreme moment.

“In an hour we went back. He was lying where he had fallen – across the threshold of his room. On his face was a beatific peace, a content unutterable – and he was dead. Joy I think had burst his heart. That bit of plaster you hold in your hand is his death mask.”

The doctor finished his tale. He bent forward in his chair to see the look upon his caller’s face. She stood up; and she was a creature transformed and radiant!

“Doctor,” she said – and even her voice was altered – “I am going home – home to my husband and my children and my friends. I believe I have found a cure for my – my trouble. Rather, you have found it for me here to-day. You have taught me a lesson. You have made me see things I could not see before – hear things I could not hear before. For I have been blind and deaf, as blind and as deaf as this man was – yes, blinder than he ever was. But now” – she cried out the words in a burst of revelation – “but now – why, doctor, I have everything to live for – haven’t I?”

“Yes, madam,” he said gravely; “you have everything to live for. If only we knew it, if only we could realise it, all of us in this world have everything to live for.”

She nodded, smiling across the table at him. “Doctor,” she said, “I do not believe I shall ever come back here to see you – as a patient of yours.”

“No,” he affirmed; “I do not believe you will ever come back – as a patient of mine.”

“But, if I may, I should like to come sometimes, just to look at that face – that dead face with its living message for me.”

“Madam,” he told her, “you may have it on two conditions – namely, that you keep it in your own room, and that you do not tell its story – the story I have just told you – to any other person. I have reasons of my own for making those conditions.”

“In my own room is exactly where I would keep it,” she said. “I promise to do as you ask. I shall never part with it. But how can you part with it?”

“Oh, I think I know where I can get another copy,” he said, “The original mould has not been destroyed. I am sure my – my friend – has it. This one will be delivered at your home before night. My servant shall take it to you.”

“No,” she said. “If you do not mind, I shall take it with me now – in my own hands.”

She clasped the gift to her breast, holding it there as though it were a priceless thing – too priceless to be intrusted to the keeping of any other than its possessor.

For perhaps five minutes after the departure of his recent patient the great specialist sat at his desk smiling gently to himself. Then he touched with his forefinger a button under the desk. His manservant entered.

“You have heard of troubles being started by a lie, haven’t you?” asked the doctor abruptly.

“Yes, sir – I think so, sir.”

The man was not an Englishman, but he had been trained in the school of English servants. His voice betrayed no surprise.

“Well, did you ever hear of troubles being ended by a lie?”

“Really, sir, I can’t say, sir – offhand.”

“Well, it can be done,” said the doctor; “in fact, it has been done.”

The man stood a moment.

“Was that all, sir?”

“No; not quite,” said the master. “Do you remember an Italian pedlar who was here the other day?”

“An Italian pedlar, sir?”

“Yes; don’t you remember? A street vender who passed the door. I called him in and bought a plaster cast from him – for seventy-five cents, as I recall.”

“Oh, yes, sir; I do remember now.”

The man’s eyes flitted to an empty space on the wall moulding above the bookcase behind his employer’s chair, and back again to his employer’s face.

“Well,” said the doctor, “you keep a lookout for him, in case he passes again. I want to buy another of those casts from him. I think it may be worth the money – the last one was, anyhow.”

CHAPTER III. MR. FELSBURG GETS EVEN

OF all the human legs ever seen in our town I am constrained to admit that Mr. Herman Felsburg's pair were the most humorous legs. When it came to legs – funny legs – the palm was his without a struggle. Casting up in my mind a wide assortment and a great range of legs, I recall no set in the whole of Red Gravel County that, for pure comedy of contour or rare eccentricity of gait, could compare with the two he owned. In his case his legs achieved the impossible by being at one and the same time bent outward and warped inward, so that he was knock-kneed at a stated point and elsewhere bow-legged. And yet, as legs go, they were short ones. For a finishing touch he was, to a noticeably extent, pigeon-toed.

I remember mighty well the first time Mr. Felsburg's legs first acquired for me an interest unrelated to their picturesqueness of aspect. As I think backward along the grooves of my memory to that occasion, it defies all the rules of perspective by looming on a larger scale and in brighter and more vivid colours than many a more important thing which occurred in a much more recent period. I reckon, though, that is because our Creator has been good enough to us sometimes to let us view our childhood with the big, round, magnifying eyes of a child.

I feel it to be so in my case. By virtue of a certain magic I see a small, inquisitive boy sitting on the top step of the wide front porch of an old white house; and as he sits he hugs his bare knees within the circle of his arms and listens with two wide-open ears to the talk that shuttles back and forth among three or four old men who are taking their comfort in easy-chairs behind a thick screen of dishrag and morning glory and balsam-apple vines.

I am that small boy who listens; and, as the picture forms and frames itself in my mind, one of the men is apt to be my uncle. He was not my uncle by blood ties or marriage, but through adoption only, as was the custom down our way in those days and, to a certain degree, is still the custom; and, besides, I was his namesake.

I know now, when by comparison I subject the scene to analysis, that they were not such very old men – then. They are old enough now – such of them as survive to this day. None of that group who yet lives will ever see seventy-five again. In those times grown people would have called them middle-aged men, or, at the most, elderly men; but when I re-create the vision out of the back of my head I invest them with an incredible antiquity and a vasty wisdom, because, as I said just now, I am looking at them with the eyes of a small boy again. Also, it seems to me, the season always is summer – late afternoon or early evening of a hot, lazy summer day.

It was right there, perched upon the top step of Judge Priest's front porch, that I heard, piece by piece, the unwritten history of our town – its tragedies and its farces, its homely romances and its homely epics. There I heard the story of Singin' Sandy Riggs, who, like Coligny, finally won by being repeatedly whipped; and his fist feud with Harve Allen, the bully; and the story of old Marm Perry, the Witch. I don't suppose she was a witch really; but she owned a black cat and she had a droopy lid, which hung down over one red eye, and she lived a friendless life.

And so when the babies in the settlement began to sicken and die of the spotted fever somebody advanced the very plausible suggestion that Marm Perry had laid a spell upon the children, and nearly everybody else believed it. A man whose child fell ill of the plague in the very hour when Marm Perry had spoken to the little thing took a silver dollar and melted it down and made a silver bullet of it – because, of course, witches were immune to slugs of lead – and on the night after the day when they buried his baby he slipped up to Marm Perry's cabin and fired through the window at her as she sat, with her black cat in her lap, mouthing her empty gums over her supper. The bullet missed her – and he was a good shot, too, that man was. Practically all the men who lived in those days on the spot where our town was to stand were good shots. They had to be – or else go hungry frequently.

When the news of this spread they knew for certain that only by fire could the evil charm be broken and the conjure-woman be destroyed. So one night soon after that a party of men broke into Marm Perry's cabin and made prisoners of her and her cat. They muffled her head in a bedquilt and they thrust the cat into a bag, both of them yowling and kicking; and they carried them to a place on the bluff above Island Creek, a mile or so from the young settlement, and there they kindled a great fire of brush; and when the flames had taken good hold of the wood they threw Marm Perry and her cat into the blaze and stood back to see them burn. Mind you, this didn't happen at Salem, Massachusetts, in or about the year 1692. It happened less than a century ago near a small river landing on what was then the southwestern frontier of these United States.

There were certain men, though – leaders of opinion and action in the rough young community – who did not altogether hold with the theory that the evil eye was killing off the babies. Somehow they learned what was afoot and they followed, hot-speed, on the trail of the volunteer executioners. As the tale has stood through nearly a hundred years of telling, they arrived barely in time. When they broke through the ring of witch burners and snatched Marm Perry off the pyre, her apron strings had burned in two. As for the cat, it burst through the bag and ran off through the woods, with its fur all ablaze, and was never seen again. I remember how I used to dream that story over and over again. Always in my dreams it reached its climax when that living firebrand went tearing off into the thickets. Somehow, to me, the unsalvaged cat took on more importance than its rescued owner.

There were times, too, when I chanced to be the only caller upon Judge Priest's front porch, and these are the times which in retrospect seem to me to have been the finest of all. I used to slip away from home alone, along toward suppertime, and pay the Judge a visit. Many and many a day, sitting there on that porch step, I watched the birds going to bed. His big front yard was a great place for the birds. In the deep grass, all summer long and all day long, the cock partridge would be directing the attention of a mythical Bob White to the fact that his peaches were ripe and overripe. If spared by boys and house cats until the hunting season began he would captain a covey. Now he was chiefly concerned with a family. Years later I found that his dictionary name was American quail; but to us then he was a partridge, and in our town we still know him by no other title.

Forgetting all about the dogs and the guns of the autumn before he would even invade Judge Priest's chicken lot to pick up titbits overlooked by the dull-eyed resident flock; and toward twilight, growing bolder still, he would whistle and whistle from the tall white gate post of the front fence, while his trim brown helpmate clucked lullabies to her speckled brood in the rank tangle back of the quince bushes.

When the redbirds called it a day and knocked off, the mocking birds took up the job and on clear moonlight nights sang all night in the honey locusts. Just before sunset yellow-hammers would be flickering about, tremendously occupied with things forgotten until then; and the chimney swifts that nested in Judge Priest's chimney would go whooshing up and down the sooty flue, making haunted-house noises in the old sitting room below.

Sprawled in his favourite porch chair, the Judge would talk and I would listen. Sometimes, the situation being reversed, I would talk and he listen. Under the spell of his sympathetic understanding I would be moved to do what that most sensitive and secretive of creatures – a small boy – rarely does do: I would bestow my confidences upon him. And if he felt like laughing – at least, he never laughed. And if he felt that the disclosures called for a lecture he rarely did that, either; but if he did the admonition was so cleverly sugar-coated by his way of framing it that I took it down without tasting it.

As I see the vision now, it was at the close of a mighty warm day, when the sun went down as a red-hot ball and all the west was copper-plated with promise of more heat to-morrow, when Mr. Herman Felsburg passed. I don't know what errand was taking him up Clay Street that evening – he lived clear over on the other side of town. But, anyway, he passed; and as he headed into the sunset glow I was inspired by a boy's instinctive appreciation of the ludicrous to speak of the peculiar

conformation of Mr. Felsburg's legs. I don't recall now just what it was I said, but I do recall, as clearly as though it happened yesterday, the look that came into Judge Priest's chubby round face.

"Aha!" he said; and from the way he said it I knew he was displeased with me. He didn't scold me, though – only he peered at me over his glasses until I felt my repentant soul shrivelling smaller and smaller inside of me; and then after a bit he said: "Aha! Well, son, I reckon mebbe you're right. Old Man Herman has got a funny-lookin' pair of laigs, ain't he? They do look kinder like a set of hames that ain't been treated kindly, don't they? Whut was it you said they favoured – horse collars, wasn't it?" I tucked a regretful head down between my hunched shoulders, making no reply. After another little pause he went on:

"Well, sonny, ef you should be spared to grow up to be a man, and there should be a war comin' along, and you should git drawn into it someway, jest you remember this: Ef your laigs take you into ez many tight places and into ez many hard-fit fights as I've saw them little crookedy laigs takin' that little man, you won't have no call to feel ashamed of 'em – not even ef yours should be so twisted you'd have to walk backward in order to go forward."

At hearing this my astonishment was so great I forgot my remorse of a minute before. I took it for granted that off yonder, in those far-away days, most of the older men in our town had seen service on one side or the other in the Big War – mainly on the Southern side. But somehow it never occurred to me that Mr. Herman Felsburg might also have been a soldier. As far back as I recalled he had been in the clothing business. Boylike, I assumed he had always been in the clothing business. So —

"Was Mr. Felsburg in the war?" I asked.

"He most suttinly was," answered Judge Priest.

"As a regular sure-nuff soldier!" I asked, still in doubt.

"Ez a reg'lar sure-nuff soldier."

I considered for a moment.

"Why, he's Jewish, ain't he, Judge?" I asked next.

"So fur as my best information and belief go, he's practically exclusively all Jewish," said Judge Priest with a little chuckle.

"But I didn't think Jewish gentlemen ever did any fighting, Judge?"

I imagine that bewilderment was in my tone, for my juvenile education was undergoing enlargement by leaps and bounds.

"Didn't you?" he said. "Well, boy, you go to Sunday school, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, sir – every Sunday – nearly."

"Well, didn't you ever hear tell at Sunday school of a little feller named David that taken a rock-sling and killed a big giant named Goliath?"

"Yes, sir; but –"

"Well, that there little feller David was a Jew."

"I know, sir; but – but that was so long ago!"

"It was quite a spell back, and that's a fact," agreed Judge Priest. "Even so, I reckon human nature continues to keep right on bein' human nature. You'll be findin' that out, son, when you git a little further along in years. They learnt you about Samson, too, didn't they – at that there Sunday school?"

I am quite sure I must have shown enthusiasm along here. At that period Samson was, with me, a favourite character in history. By reason of his recorded performances he held rank in my estimation with Israel Putnam and General N. B. Forrest.

"Aha!" continued the Judge. "Old Man Samson was right smart of a fighter, takin' one thing with another, wasn't he? Remember hearin' about that time when he taken the jawbone of an ass and killed up I don't know how many of them old Philistines?"

"Oh, yes, sir. And then that other time when they cut off his hair short and put him in jail, and after it grew out again he pulled the temple right smack down and killed everybody!"

“It strikes me I did hear somebody speakin’ of that circumstance too. I expect it must have created a right smart talk round the neighbourhood.”

I can hear the old Judge saying this, and I can see – across the years – the quizzical little wrinkles bunching at the corners of his eyes.

He sat a minute looking down at me and smiling.

“Samson was much of a man – and he was a Jew.”

“Was he?” I was shocked in a new place.

“That’s jest exactly what he was. And there was a man oncet named Judas – not the Judas you’ve heard about, but a feller with the full name of Judas Maccabæus; and he was such a pert hand at fightin’ they called him the Hammer of the Jews. Judgin’ by whut I’ve been able to glean about him, his enemies felt jest as well satisfied ef they could hear, before the hostilities started, that Judas was laid up sick in bed somewheres. It taken considerable of a load off their minds, ez you might say.

“But – jest as you was sayin’, son, about David – it’s been a good while since them parties flourished. When we look back on it, it stretches all the way from here to B. C.; and that’s a good long stretch, and a lot of things have been happenin’ meantime. But I sometimes git to thinkin’ that mebbe little Herman Felsburg has got some of that old-time Jew fightin’ blood in his veins. Anyhow, he belongs to the same breed. No, sirree, sonny; it don’t always pay to judge a man by his laigs. You kin do that with regards to a frog or a grasshopper, or even sometimes with a chicken; but not with a man. It ain’t the shape of ‘em that counts – it’s where they’ll take you in time of trouble.”

He cocked his head down at me – I saying nothing at all. There didn’t seem to be anything for me to say; so I maintained silence and he spoke on:

“You jest bear that in mind next time you feel moved to talk about laigs. And ef it should happen to be Mister Felsburg’s laigs that you’re takin’ fur your text, remember this whut I’m tellin’ you now: They may be crooked; but, son, there ain’t no gamer pair of laigs nowheres in this world. I’ve seen ‘em carry in’ him into battle when, all the time, my knees was knockin’ together, the same ez one of these here end men in a minstrel show knocks his bones together. His laigs may ‘a’ trembled a little bit too – I ain’t sayin’ they didn’t – but they kept right on promenadin’ him up to where the trouble was; and that’s the main p’int with a set of shanks. You jest remember that.”

Being sufficiently humbled I said I would remember it.

“There’s still another thing about Herman Felsburg’s laigs that most people round here don’t know, neither,” added Judge Priest when I had made my pledge: “All up and down the back sides of his calves, and clear down on his shins, there’s a whole passel of little red marks. There’s so many of them little scars that they look jest like lacework on his skin.”

“Did he get them in the war?” I inquired eagerly, scenting a story.

“No; he got them before the war came along,” said Judge Priest. “Some of these times, sonny, when you’re a little bit older, I’ll tell you a tale about them scars on Mr. Felsburg’s laigs. There ain’t many besides me that knows it.”

“Couldn’t I hear it now?” I asked.

“I reckon you ain’t a suitable age to understand – y it,” said Judge Priest. “I reckon we’d better wait a few years. But I won’t for-git – I’ll tell you when the time’s ripe. Anyhow, there’s somethin’ else afoot now – somethin’ that ought to interest a hongry boy.”

I became aware of his house servant – Jeff Poindexter – standing in the hall doorway, waiting until his master concluded whatever he might be saying in order to make an important announcement.

“All right, Jeff!” said Judge Priest. “I’ll be there in a minute.” Then, turning to me: “Son-boy, hadn’t you better stay here fur supper with me? I expect there’s vittles enough fur two. Come on – I’ll make Jeff run over to your house and tell your mother I kept you to supper with me.”

After that memorable supper with Judge Priest – all the meals I ever took as his guest were memorable events and still are – ensues a lapse, to be measured by years, before I heard the second

chapter of what might be called the tale of Mr. Felsburg's legs. I heard it one evening in the Judge's sitting room.

A squeak had come into my voice, and there was a suspicion of down – a mere trace, as the chemists say – on my upper lip. I was in the second week of proud incumbency of my first regular job. I had gone to work on the *Daily Evening News*– the cubbiest of cub reporters, green as a young gourd, but proud as Potiphar over my new job and my new responsibilities. This time it was professional duty rather than the social instinct that took me to the old Judge's house.

I had been charged by my editor to get from him divers litigious facts relating to a decision he had that day rendered in the circuit court where he presided. The information having been vouchsafed, the talk took a various trend. Somewhere in the course of it Mr. Felsburg's name came up and my memory ran back like a spark along a tarred string to that other day when he had promised to relate to me an episode connected with certain small scars on those two bandy legs of our leading clothing merchant.

The present occasion seemed fitting for hearing this long-delayed narrative. I reminded my host of his olden promise; and between puffs at his corncob pipe he told me the thing which I retell here and now, except that, for purposes of convenience, I have translated the actual wording of it out of Judge Priest's vernacular into my own.

So doing, it devolves upon me, first off, to introduce into the main theme a character not heretofore mentioned – a man named Thomas Albritton, a farmer in our country, and at one period a prosperous one. He lived, while he lived – for he has been dead a good while now – six miles from town, on the Massac Creek Road. He lived there all his days. His father before him had cleared the timber off the land and built the two-room log house of squared logs, with the open “gallery” between. With additions, the house grew in time to be a rambling, roomy structure, but from first to last it kept its identity; and even after the last of the old tenants died off or moved off, and new tenants moved in, it was still known as the Albritton place. For all I know to the contrary, it yet goes by that name.

From pioneer days on until this Thomas Albritton became heir to the farm and head of the family, the Albrittons had been a forehanded breed – people with a name for thrift. In fact, I had it that night from the old Judge that, for a good many years after he grew up, this Thomas Albritton enjoyed his due share of affluence. He raised as good a grade of tobacco and as many bushels of corn to the acre as anybody in the Massac Bottoms raised; and, so far as ready money went, he was better off than most of his neighbours.

Perhaps, though, he was not so provident as his sire had been; or perhaps, in a financial way, he had in his latter years more than his share of bad luck. Anyhow, after a while he began to go downhill financially, which is another way of saying he got into debt. Piece by piece he sold off strips of the fertile creek lands his father had cleared. There came a day when he owned only the house, standing in its grove of honey locusts, and the twenty acres surrounding it; and the title to those remaining possessions was lapped and overlapped by mortgages.

It is the rule of this merry little planet of ours that some must go up while others go down. Otherwise there would be no room at the top for those who climb. Mr. Herman Felsburg was one who steadily went up. When first I knew him he was rated among the wealthy men of our town. By local standards of those days he was rich – very rich. To me, then, it seemed that always he must have been rich. But here Judge Priest undeceived me.

When Mr. Felsburg, after four years of honourable service as a private soldier in the army of the late Southern Confederacy, came back with the straggling handful that was left of Company B to the place where he had enlisted, he owned of this world's goods just the rags he stood in, plus a canny brain, a provident and saving instinct, and a natural aptitude for barter and trade.

Somewhere, somehow, he scraped together a meagre capital of a few dollars, and with this he opened a tiny cheap-John shop down on Market Square, where he sold gimcracks to darkies and poor whites. He prospered – it was inevitable that he should prosper. He took unto himself a wife of his own

people; and between periods of bearing him children she helped him to save. He brought his younger brother, Ike, over from the old country and made Ike a full partner with him in his growing business.

Long before those of my own generation were born the little store down on Market Square was a reminiscence. Two blocks uptown, on the busiest corner in town, stood Felsburg Brothers' Oak Hall Clothing Emporium, then, as now, the largest and the most enterprising merchandising establishment in our end of the state. If you could not find it at Felsburg Brothers' you simply could not find it anywhere – that was all. It was more than a store; it was an institution, like the courthouse and the county-fair grounds.

The multitudinous affairs of the industry he had founded did not engage the energies of the busy little man with the funny legs to the exclusion of other things. As the saying goes, he branched out. He didn't speculate – he was too conservative for that; but where there seemed a chance to invest an honest dollar with a reasonable degree of certainty of getting back, say, a dollar-ten in due time, he invested. Some people called it luck, which is what some people always call it when it turns out so; but, whether it was luck or just foresight, whatsoever he touched seemed bound to flourish and beget dividends.

Eventually, as befitting one who had risen to be a commanding figure in the commercial affairs of the community, Mr. Felsburg became an active factor in its financial affairs. As a stockholder, the Commonwealth Bank welcomed him to its hospitable midst. Soon it saw its way clear to making him a director and vice president. There was promise of profit in the use of his name. Printed on the letterheads, it gave added solidity and added substantiality to the bank's roster. People liked him too. Behind his short round back they might gibe at the shape of his legs, and laugh at his ways of butchering up the English language and twisting up the metaphors with which he besprinkled his everyday walk and conversation; but, all the same, they liked him.

So, in his orbit Mr. Herman Felsburg went up and up to the very peaks of prominence; and while he did this, that other man I have mentioned – Thomas Albritton – went down and down until he descended to the very bottom of things.

In the fullness of time the lines of these two crossed, for it was at the Commonwealth Bank that Albritton negotiated the first and, later, the second of his loans upon his homestead. Indeed, it was Mr. Felsburg who both times insisted that Albritton be permitted to borrow, even though, when the matter of making the second mortgage came up, another director, who specialised in county property, pointed out that, to begin with, Albritton wasn't doing very well; and that, in the second place, the amount of his indebtedness already was as much and very possibly more than as much as the farm would bring at forced sale.

Even though the bank bought it in to protect itself – and in his gloomy mind's eye this director foresaw such a contingency – it might mean a cash loss; but Mr. Felsburg stood pat; and, against the judgment of his associates, he had his way about it. Subsequently, when Mr. Felsburg himself offered to relieve the bank of all possibility of an ultimate deficit by buying Albritton's paper, the rest of the board felt relieved. Practically by acclamation he was permitted to do so.

Of this, however, the borrower knew nothing at all, Mr. Felsburg having made it a condition that his purchase should be a private transaction. So far as the borrower's knowledge went, he owed principal and interest to the bank. There was no reason why Albritton should suspect that Mr. Herman Felsburg took any interest, selfish or otherwise, in his affairs, or that Mr. Felsburg entertained covetous designs upon his possessions. Mr. Felsburg wasn't a money lender. He was a clothing merchant. And Albritton wasn't a business man – his present condition, stripped as he was of most of his inheritance, and with the remaining portion heavily encumbered, gave ample proof of that.

Besides, the two men scarcely knew each other. Albritton was an occasional customer at the Oak Hall. But, for the matter of that, so was nearly everybody else in Red Gravel County; and when he came in to make a purchase it was never the senior member of the firm but always one of the

clerks who served him. At such times Mr. Felsburg, from the back part of the store, would watch Mr. Albritton steadily. He never approached him, never offered to speak to him; but he watched him.

One day, not so very long after the date when Mr. Felsburg privately took over the mortgages on the Albritton place, Albritton drove in with a load of tobacco for the Buckner & Keys Warehouse; and, leaving his team and loaded wagon outside, he went into the Oak Hall to buy something. Adolph Dreifus, one of the salesmen, waited on him as he often had before.

The owners of the establishment were at the moment engaged in conference in the rear of the store. Mr. Ike Felsburg was urging, with all the eloquence at his command, the advisability of adding a line of trunks and suit cases to the stock – a venture which he personally strongly favoured – when he became aware that his brother was not heeding what he had to say. Instead of heeding, Mr. Herman was peering along a vista of counters and garment racks to where Adolph Dreifus stood on one side of a show case and Tom Albritton stood on the other. There was a queer expression on Mr. Felsburg's face. His eyes were squinted and his tongue licked at his lower lip.

"Hermy," said the younger man, irritated that his brother's attention should go wandering afar while a subject of such importance was under discussion, "Hermy, would you please be so good as to listen to me what I am saying to you?"

There was no answer. Mr. Herman continued to stare straight ahead. Mr. Ike raised his voice impatiently:

"Hermy!"

The older man turned on him with such suddenness that Mr. Ike almost slipped off the stool upon which he was perched.

"What's the idea – yelling in my ear like a graven image?" demanded Mr. Herman angrily. "Do you think maybe I am deaf or something?"

"But, Hermy," complained Mr. Ike, "you ain't listening at all. Twice now I have to call you; in fact, three times."

"Is that so?" said Mr. Herman with elaborate sarcasm. "I suppose you think I got nothing whatever at all to do except I should listen to you? If I should spend all my time listening to you where would this here Oak Hall Clothing Emporium be? I should like to ask you that. Gabble, gabble, gabble all day long – that is you! Me, I don't talk so much; but I do some thinking."

"But this is important, what I am trying to tell you, Hermy. Why should you be watching yonder, with a look on your face like as if you would like to bite somebody? Adolph Dreifus ain't so dumb in the head but what he could sell a pair of suspenders or something without your glaring at him every move what he makes."

"Did I say I was looking at Adolph Dreifus?" asked Mr. Herman truculently.

"Well, then, if you ain't looking at Adolph, why should you look so hard at that Albritton fellow? He don't owe us any money, so far as I know. For what he gets he pays cash, else we positively wouldn't let him have the goods. I've seen you acting like this before, Hermy. Every time that Albritton comes in this place you drop whatever you are doing and hang round and hang round, watching him. I noticed it before; and I should like to ask –"

"Mister Ikey Felsburg," said Mr. Herman slowly, "if you could mind your own business I should possibly be able to mind mine. Remember this, if you please – I look at who I please. You are too nosey and you talk too damn much with your mouth! I am older than what you are; and I tell you this – a talking jaw gathers no moss. Also, I would like to know, do my eyes belong to me or do they maybe belong to you, and you have just loaned 'em to me for a temporary accommodation?"

"But, Hermy –"

"Ike, shut up!"

And Mr. Ike, warned by the tone in his brother's voice, shut up.

One afternoon, perhaps six months after this passage between the two partners, Mr. Herman crossed the street from the Oak Hall to the Commonwealth Bank to make a deposit.

Through his wicket window Herb Kivil, the cashier, spoke to him, lowering his voice: “Oh, Mr. Felsburg; you remember that Albritton matter you were speaking to me about week before last?”

Mr. Felsburg nodded.

“Well, the last interest payment is more than a month overdue now; and, on top of that, Albritton still owes the payment that was due three months before that. There’s not a chance in the world of his being able to pay up. He practically admitted as much when he was in here last, asking for more time. So I’ve followed your instructions in the matter.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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