

Johnston Annie Fellows

Asa Holmes: or, At the Cross-Roads



Annie Johnston

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Chapter I

THERE is no place where men learn each other's little peculiarities more thoroughly than in the group usually to be found around the stove in a country store. Such acquaintance may be of slow growth, like the oak's, but it is just as sure. Each year is bound to add another ring to one's knowledge of his neighbours if he lounges with them, as man and boy, through the Saturday afternoons of a score of winters.

A boy learns more there than he can be taught in schools. It may be he is only a tow-headed, freckle-faced little fellow of eight when he rides over to the cross-roads store for the first time by himself. Too timid to push into the circle around the fire, he stands shivering on the outskirts, looking about him with the alertness of a scared rabbit, until the storekeeper fills his kerosene can and thrusts the weekly mail into his red mittens. Then some man covers him with confusion by informing the crowd that "that little chap is Perkins's oldest," and he scurries away out of the embarrassing focus of the public eye.

But the next time he is sent on the family errands he stays longer and carries away more. Perched on the counter, with his heels dangling over a nail keg, while he waits for the belated mail train, he hears for the first time how the government ought to be run, why it is that the country is going to the dogs, and what will make hens lay in cold weather. Added to this general information, he slowly gathers the belief that these men know everything in the world worth knowing, and that their decisions on any subject settle the matter for all time.

He may have cause to change his opinion later on, when his sapling acquaintance has gained larger girth; when he has loafed with them, smoked with them, swapped lies and spun yarns, argued through a decade of stormy election times, and talked threadbare every subject under the sun. But now, in his callow judgment, he is listening to the wit and wisdom of the nation. Now, as he looks around the overflowing room, where butter firkins crowd the calicoes and crockery, and where hams and saddles swing sociably from the same rafter, as far as his knowledge goes, this is the only store in the universe.

Some wonder rises in his childish brain as he counts the boxes of axle-grease and the rows of shining new pitchforks, as to where all the people live who are to use so many things. He has yet to learn that this one little store that is such a marvel to him is only a drop in the bucket, and that he may travel the width of the continent, meeting at nearly every mile-post that familiar mixture of odours – coal oil, mackerel, roasted coffee, and pickle brine. And a familiar group of men, discussing the same old subjects in the same old way, will greet him at every such booth he passes on his pilgrimage through Vanity Fair.

Probably in after years Perkins's oldest will never realise how much of his early education has been acquired at that Saturday afternoon loafing-place, but he will often find himself looking at things with the same squint with which he learned to view them through 'Squire Dobbs's short-sighted spectacles. Many a time he will find that he has been unconsciously warped by the prejudices he heard expressed there, and that his opinions of life in general and men in particular are the outgrowth of those early conversations which gave him the creed of his boyhood.

"Them blamed Yankees!" exclaims one of these neighbourhood orators, tilting his chair back against the counter, and taking a vicious bite at his plug of tobacco. "They don't know no better than to eat cold bread the year 'round!" And the boy, accepting the statement unquestioningly, stores away in his memory not only the remark, but all the weighty emphasis of disgust which accompanied the

remark in the spitting of a mouthful of tobacco juice. Henceforth his idea of the menu north of the Mason and Dixon line is that it resembles the bill of fare of a penitentiary, and he feels that there is something coldblooded and peculiar about a people not brought up on a piping hot diet of hoe-cake and beaten biscuit.

In the same way the lad whose opinions are being moulded in some little corner grocery of a New England village, or out where the roads cross on the Western prairie, receives his prejudices. It may be years before he finds out for himself that the land of Boone is not fenced with whiskey jugs and feuds, and that the cap-sheaf on every shock of wheat in its domain is not a Winchester rifle.

But these prejudices, popular at local cross-roads, are only the side lines of which every section carries its own specialty. When it comes to staple articles, dear to the American heart and essential to its liberty and progress, their standard of value is the same the country over.

One useful lesson the youthful lounge may learn here, if he can learn it anywhere, and that is to be a shrewd reader of men and motives. Since staple characteristics in human nature are repeated everywhere, like staple dry goods and groceries, a thorough knowledge of the group around the stove will be a useful guide to Perkins's oldest in forming acquaintances later in life.

Long after he has left the little hamlet and grown gray with the experiences of the metropolis, he will run across some queer Dick whose familiar personality puzzles him. As he muses over his evening pipe, suddenly out of the smoke wreaths will spring the face of some old codger who aired his wisdom in the village store, and he will recognise the likeness between the two as quickly as he would between two cans of leaf lard bearing the same brand.

But Perkins's oldest is only in the primer of his cross-roads curriculum now, and these are some of the lessons he is learning as he edges up to the group around the fire. On the day before Thanksgiving, for instance, he was curled up on a box of soap behind the chair of old Asa Holmes – Miller Holmes everybody calls him, because for nearly half a century his water-mill ground out the grist of all that section of country. He is retired now; gave up his business to his grandsons. They carry it on in another place with steam and modern machinery, and he is laid on the shelf. But he isn't a back number, even if his old deserted mill is. It is his boast that now he has nothing else to do, he not only keeps up with the times, but ahead of them.

Everybody goes to him for advice; everybody looks up to him as they do to a hardy old forest tree that's lived through all sorts of hurricanes, but has stood to the last, sturdy of limb, and sound to the core. He is as sweet and mellow as a winter apple, ripened in the sun, and that's why everybody likes to have him around. You don't see many old men like that. Their troubles sour them.

Well, this day before Thanksgiving the old miller was in his usual place at the store, and as usual it was he who was giving the cheerful turn to the conversation. Some of the men were feeling sore over the recent election; some had not prospered as they had hoped with their crops, and were experiencing the pinch of hard times and sickness in their homes. Still there was a holiday feeling in the atmosphere. Frequent calls for nutmeg, and sage, and cinnamon, left the air spicy with prophecies of the morrow's dinner.

The farmers had settled down for a friendly talk, with the comfortable sense that the crops were harvested, the wood piled away for the winter, and a snug, warm shelter provided for the cattle. It was good to see the hard lines relax in the weather-beaten faces, in the warmth of that genial comradeship. Even the gruffest were beginning to thaw a little, when the door opened, and Bud Hines slouched in. The spirits of the crowd went down ten degrees.

Not that he said anything; only gave a gloomy nod by way of greeting as he dropped into a chair. But his whole appearance said it for him; spoke in the droop of his shoulders, and the droop of his hat brim, and the droop of his mouth at the corners. He looked as if he might have sat for the picture of the man in the "Biglow Papers," when he said:

"Sometimes my innard vane pints east for weeks together,

My natur' gits all goose-flesh, an' my sins
Come drizzlin' on my conscience sharp ez pins."

The miller greeted him with the twinkle in his eye that eighty years and more have never been able to dim; and Perkins's oldest had his first meeting with the man who always finds a screw loose in everything. Nothing was right with Bud Hines. One of his horses had gone lame, and his best heifer had foundered, and there was rust in his wheat. He didn't have any heart to keep Thanksgiving, and he didn't see how anybody else could, with the bottom dropped clean out of the markets and the new road tax so high. For his part he thought that everything was on its last legs, and it wouldn't be long till all the Powers were at war, and prices would go up till a poor man simply couldn't live.

It was impossible not to be affected more or less by his gloomy forebodings, and the old miller, looking around on the listening faces, saw them settling back in their old discouraged lines. Claspings his hands more firmly over the top of his cane, he exclaimed: "Now look here, Bud Hines, I'm going to give you a proverb that was made on purpose for such a poor, weak-kneed Mr. Ready-to-halt as you are: 'Never be discouraged, and never be a discourager!' If you can't live up to the first part, you certainly can to the second. No matter how hard things go with you, you've no right to run around throwing cold water on other people. What if your horse has gone lame? You've got a span of mules that can outpull my yoke of oxen any day. One heifer oughtn't to send a man into mourning the rest of his days, and it would be more fitting to be thankful over your good tobacco crop than to groan over the failure of your wheat. More fitting to the season. As for the rest of the things you're worrying over, why, man, they haven't happened yet, and maybe never will. My old grandad used to say to me when I was a lad, 'Never cross your bridge till you come to it, Asa,' and I've proved the wisdom of that saying many a time. Suppose'n you put that in your pipe and smoke it."

If Perkins's oldest learns no other lesson this year than to put those two proverbs into practice, he will have had a valuable education. How many Thanksgivings they will help to make for him! How many problems and perplexities they will solve!

"Never be discouraged; never be a discourager! Don't cross your bridge until you come to it!" It is a philosophy that will do away with half the ills which flesh imagines it is heir to.

Thanksgiving Day! How much more it means to the old miller than to the little fellow beside him on the soap box! To the child it is only a feast day; to the old man it is a festival that links him to a lifetime of sacred memories.

"Five and eighty years," he says, musingly, resting his chin on the wrinkled hands that clasp the head of his cane. A silence falls on the group around the stove, and through the cracked door the red firelight shines out on thoughtful faces.

"It's a long time; five and eighty years," he repeats, "and every one of them crowned with a Thanksgiving. Boys," lifting his head and looking around him, "you've got a good bit of pike to travel over yet before you get as far as I've gone, and some of you are already half fagged out and beginning to wonder if it's all worth while – Bud, here, for instance. I'd like to give you all a word of encouragement.

"Looking back, I can see that I've had as many ups and downs as any of you, and more than your share of work and trouble, for I've lived longer, and nearly all the years are marked with graves. Seems to me that lately I've had to leave a new grave behind me at every mile-stone, till now I'm jogging on all alone. Family gone, old neighbours gone, old friends – I'm the last of the old set. But, still, when all is said and done, I haven't lost heart, for I've lived, seen God's hand through a lifetime, and all was for best.'

"When I was milling down there on Bear Creek you'd 'a' thought I was a fool if I hadn't taken my rightful toll out of every bushel of grist that ran through my hopper, and sometimes I think that the Almighty must feel that way about us when we go on grinding and grinding, and never stopping to count up our share of the profit and pleasure and be thankful over it. I believe that no matter what

life pours into our hopper, we are to grind some toll of good out of it for ourselves, and as long as a man does his part toward producing something for the world's good, some kind of bread for its various needs, he will never go hungry himself.

"And I believe more than that. You've heard people compare old age to a harvest field, and talk about the autumn of life with its ripened corn waiting for the reaper Death, and all that, and speak about the 'harvest home,' as if it were the glorious end of everything. But it never did strike me that way, boys. The best comes after the harvesting, when the wheat is turned into flour and the flour into bread, and the full, wholesome loaves go to make up blood and muscle and brain. That's giving it a sort of immortality, you might say, raising it into a higher order of life. And it's the same with a man. His old age is just a ripening for something better a little further on. All that we go through with here isn't for nothing, and at eighty-five, when it looks as if a man had come to the stepping-off place, I've come to believe that 'the best is yet to be.'"

There is a stir around the door, and the old miller looks around inquiringly. The mail has come in, and he rises slowly to get his weekly paper. Perkins's oldest, waiting his turn in front of the little case of pigeonholes, eyes the old man with wondering side glances. He has not understood more than half of what he has heard, but he is vaguely conscious that something is speaking to him now, as he looks into the tranquil old face. It is the miller's past that is calling to him; all those honest, hard-working years that show themselves in the bent form and wrinkled hands; the serene peacefulness that bespeaks a clear conscience; the big, sunny nature that looks out of those aged eyes; and above all the great hopefulness that makes his days a perpetual Thanksgiving.

The mute eloquence of an unspoken invitation thrills the child's heart, he knows not why:

"Grow old along with me;
The best is yet to be!"

It is the greatest lesson that Perkins's oldest can ever learn.

Chapter II

ONE would have known that it was the day before Christmas at the Cross-Roads store, even if the big life insurance calendar over the desk had not proclaimed the fact in bold red figures. An unwonted bustle pervaded the place. Rows of plump, dressed turkeys hung outside the door, and on the end of the counter where the pyramid of canned tomatoes was usually stacked, a little evergreen tree stood in a brave array of tinsel and tiny Christmas tapers.

It was only an advertisement. No one might hope to be the proud possessor of the Noah's ark lodged in its branches, or of the cheap toys and candy rings dangling from every limb, unless he had the necessary pennies. Still, every child who passed it eyed it with such wistful glances that the little rubber Santa Claus at the base must have felt his elastic heart stretch almost to bursting.

Above the familiar odour of coal-oil and mackerel, new leather, roasted coffee and pickle brine, rose the holiday fragrance of cedar and oranges.

"Makes me think of when I was a kid," said a drummer who had been joking with the men around the stove, trying to kill time while he waited for the train that was to take him home for Christmas. "There's nothing like that smell of cedar and oranges to resurrect the boy in a man. It puts me straight back into knickerbockers again, among a whole grove of early Christmas trees. I'll never forget the way I felt when I picked my first pair of skates off one of them. A house and lot wouldn't give me such a thrill now."

"Aw, I don't believe Christmas is at all what it's cracked up to be," said a voice from behind the stove, in such a gloomy tone that a knowing smile passed around the circle.

"Bet on you, Bud Hines, for findin' trouble, every time," laughed the storekeeper. "Why, Bud, there ain't no screw loose in Christmas, is there?"

"Well, there just is!" snapped the man, resenting the laugh. "It comes too often for one thing. I just wish it had happened on leap-year, the twenty-ninth of February. It would be a heap less expensive having it just once in four years. Seems to me we're always treading on its heels. My old woman hardly gets done knitting tidies for one Christmas till she's hard at it for another."

"Anyhow, Christmas never measures up to what you think it's a-going to – not by a jug-full. Sure as you get your heart set on a patent nail-puller or a pair of fur gloves – something that'll do *you* some good – your wife gives you a carpet sweeper, or an alarm-clock that rattles you out an hour too early every morning."

The drummer led the uproarious laughter that followed. They were ready to laugh at anything in this season of good cheer, and the drummer's vociferous merriment was irresistible. He slapped the speaker on the back, adding jokingly, "That's one thing Job never had to put up, did he, partner! He nearly lost his reputation for politeness over the misfit advice he didn't want. But there's no telling what he'd have done with misfit Christmas gifts. It would take a star actor to play the grateful for some of the things people find in their stockings. For instance, to have a fond female relative give you a shaving outfit, when you wear a full beard."

"You bet your life," answered the storekeeper feelingly. "Now, if Santa Claus wasn't a fake –"

"Hist!" said the drummer, with a significant glance toward a small boy, perched on a soap-box in their midst, listening open-mouthed to every word. "I've children myself, and I'd punch anybody's head who would shake their faith in Santy. It's one of the rosy backgrounds of childhood, in my opinion, and I've got a heap of happiness out of it since I was a kid, too, looking back and recollecting."

It was very little happiness that the boy on the soap-box was getting out of anything, that gray December afternoon. He was weighed down with a feeling of age and responsibility that bore heavily on his eight-year-old shoulders. He had long felt the strain of his position, as pattern to the house of Perkins, being the oldest of five. Now there was another one, and to be counted as the oldest of six pushed him almost to the verge of gray hairs.

There was another reason for his tear-stained face. He had been disillusioned. Only that noon, his own mother had done that for which the drummer would have punched any one's head, had it been done to his children. "We're too poor, Sammy. There can't be any Christmas at our house this year," she had said, fretfully, as she stopped the noisy driving of nails into the chimney, on which he contemplated hanging the fraternal stockings. To his astonished "Why?" she had replied with a few blunt truths that sent him out from her presence, shorn of all his childish hopefulness as completely as Samson was shorn of his strength.

There had been a sorry half-hour in the hay-mow, where he snuffled over his shattered faith alone, and from whence he went out, a hardened little skeptic, to readjust himself to a cold and Santa Clausless world. The only glimmer of comfort he had had since was when the drummer, with a friendly wink, slipped a nickel into his hand. But even that added to his weight of responsibility. He dropped it back and forth from one little red mitten to another, with two impulses strong upon him. The first was to spend it for six striped sticks of peppermint candy, one for each stocking, and thus compel Christmas to come to the house of Perkins. The other was to buy one orange and go off in a corner and suck it all by himself. He felt that fate owed him that much of a reparation for his disappointment. He was in the midst of this inward debate when a new voice joined the discussion around the stove. It came from Cy Akers.

"Well, *I* think it's downright sinful to stuff a child with such notions. You may call 'em fairytales all you like, but it's nothing more or less than a pack of lies. The idea of a Christian payrent sitting up and telling his immortal child that a big fat man in furs will drive through the air to-night in a reindeer sleigh right over the roofs and squeeze himself down a lot of sooty chimneys, with a bag of gimcracks on his back – it's all fol-de-rol! I never could see how any intelligent young one could believe it. I never did. But that's one thing about me, as the poet says, 'If I've one peccoliar feature it's a nose that won't be led.' I never could be made to take stock in any such nonsense, even as a boy. I'll leave it to Mr. Asa Holmes, here, if it isn't wrong to be putting such ideas into the youth of our land."

The old miller ran his fingers through his short white hair and looked around. His smile was wholesome as it was genial. He was used to being called in judgment on these neighbourhood discussions, and he spoke with the air of one who felt that his words carried weight:

"You're putting it pretty strong, Cy," he said, with a laugh, and then a tender, reminiscent light gleamed in his old eyes.

"You see it's this way with me, boys. We never heard any of these things when I was a lad. It's plain facts in a pioneer cabin, you know. Father taught us about Christmas in the plain words that he found set down in the Gospels, and I told it the same way to my boys. When my first little grandson came back to the old house to spend Christmas, I thought it was almost heathenish for his mother to have him send letters up the chimney and talk as if Santa Claus was some real person. I told her so one day, and asked what was going to happen when the little fellow outgrew such beliefs.

"Why, Father Holmes," said she, – I can hear her now, words and tones, for it set me to thinking, – 'don't you see that he is all the time growing into a broader belief? It's this way.' She picked up a big apple from the table. 'Once this apple was only a tiny seed-pod in the heart of a pink blossom. The beauty of the blossom was all that the world saw, at first, but gradually, as the fruit swelled and developed, the pink petals fell off, naturally and easily, and the growing fruit was left. My little son's idea of Christmas is in the blossom time now. This rosy glamour of old customs and traditions that makes it so beautiful to him is taking the part of the pink petals. They will fall away by and by, of their own accord, for underneath a beautiful truth is beginning to swell to fruitage. Santa Claus is the Spirit of Christmas love and giving, personified. It is because I want to make it real and vital, something that my baby's mind can grasp and enjoy, that I incarnate it in the form of the good old Saint Nicholas, but I never let him lose sight of the Star. It was the Spirit of Christmas that started the wise men on their search, and they followed the Star and they found the Child, and laid gifts at his feet. And when the Child was grown, he, too, went out in the world and followed the Star and

scattered his gifts of love and healing for all the children of men. And so it has gone on ever since, that Spirit of Christmas, impelling us to follow and to find and to give, wherever there is a need for our gold and frankincense and myrrh. That is the larger belief my boy is growing into, from the smaller.'

"And she is right," said the old man, after an impressive pause. "She raised that boy to be an own brother to Santa Claus, as far as good-will to men goes. It's Christmas all the year round wherever *he* is. And now when he brings his boys back to the old home and hangs their stockings up by the fire, I never say a word. Sometimes when the little chaps are hunting for the marks of the reindeer hoofs in the ashes, I kneel down on the old hearthstone and hunt, too.

"A brother to Santa Claus!" The phrase still echoed in the heart of Perkins's oldest when the group around the stove dispersed. It was that which decided the fate of the nickel, and filled the little red mittens with sticks of striped delight for six, instead of the lone orange for one. Out of a conversation but dimly understood he had gathered a vague comfort. It made less difference that his patron saint was a myth, since he had learned there might be brothers in the Claus family for him to fall back upon. Then his fingers closed over the paper bag of peppermints, and, suddenly, with a little thrill, he felt that in some queer way he belonged to that same brotherhood.

As he fumbled at the latch, the old miller, who always saw his own boyhood rise before him in that small tow-headed figure, and who somehow had divined the cause of the tear-streaks on the dirty little face, called him. "Here, sonny!" It was a pair of shining new skates that dangled from the miller's hands into his.

One look of rapturous delight, and two little feet were flying homeward down the frozen pike, beating time to a joy that only the overflowing heart of a child can know, when its troubles are all healed, and faith in mankind restored. And the old man, going home in the frosty twilight of the Christmas eve, saw before him all the way the light of a shining star.

Chapter III

IT was an hour past the usual time for closing the Cross-Roads store, but no one made a move to go. Listening in the comfortable glow of the red-hot stove, to the wind whistling down the long pipe, was far pleasanter than facing its icy blasts on the way home. Besides, it was the last night of the old year, and hints of forthcoming cider had been dropped by Jim Bowser, the storekeeper. Also an odour of frying doughnuts came in from the kitchen, whenever Mrs. Bowser opened the door into the entry.

Added to the usual group of loungers was the drummer who had spent Christmas eve with them. He had come in on an accommodation train, and was waiting for the midnight express. He had had the floor for some time with his stories, when suddenly in the midst of the laughter which followed one of his jokes, Bud Hines made himself heard.

"I say, Jim," he exclaimed, turning to the storekeeper, "why don't you tear off the last leaf of that calendar? We've come to the end of everything now; end of the day, end of the year, end of the century! Something none of *us* will ever experience again. It's always a mighty solemn thought to me that I'm doing a thing for the la-ast time!"

Jim laughed cheerfully, tilting his chair back against the counter, and thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his vest.

"I don't know as I feel any call to mourn over takin' down an old calendar when I have a prettier one to put in its place, and it's the same way with the century. There'll be a better one to begin on in the morning."

"That's so," asserted Cy Akers. "But some people come bang up against a New Year as if it was a stone wall, and down they set and count up their sins, and turn over new leaves, and load 'emselves down with so many good resolutions that they stick in the mud by the end of the first week. Now I hold that if it wasn't for the almanacs, steppin' from one year to another, or from one century to another, wouldn't jar you no more than steppin' over the equator. They're only imaginary lines, and nobody would ever know where he was at, either in months or meridians, if he didn't have almanacs and the like to keep him posted. Fourth of July is just as good a time to take stock and turn over a new leaf as the first of January."

"Maybe you take stock like a man I used to sell to down in Henderson County," said the drummer. "He never kept any books, so he never knew exactly where he was 'at,' as you say. Once a year he'd walk around the store with his hands in his pockets, and size up things in a general sort of way. 'Bill,' he'd say to his clerk, cocking his eyes up at the shelves, 'we've got a right smart chance of canned goods left over. I reckon there's a half shelf full more than we had left last year. I know there's more bottles of ketchup.' Then he'd take another turn around the room. 'Bill, I disremember how many pitchforks we had in this rack. There's only two left now. Nearly all the calico is sold, and (thumping the molasses barrel), this here bar'l sounds like it's purty nigh empty. Take it all around, Bill, we've done first-rate this year, so I don't know as it's worth while botherin' about weighin' and measurin' what's left over, so long as we're satisfied.' And maybe that's why Cy makes so little of New Year," added the drummer, with a sly wink at the others. "He thinks it's not worth while to weigh and measure his shortcomings when he can take stock of himself in a general sort of a way, and always be perfectly satisfied with himself."

There was a laugh at Cy's expense, and Bud Hines began again.

"What worries me is, what's been prophesied about the new century. One would think we've had enough famines and plagues and wars and rumours of wars in this here old one to do for awhile, but from what folks say, it ain't goin' to hold a candle to the trouble we'll see in the next one."

"Troubles is seasonin'. 'Simmons ain't good till they are frostbit,'" quoted Cy.

"Then accordin' to Bud's tell, he ought to be the best seasoned persimmon on the bough," chuckled the storekeeper.

"No, that fellow that was here this afternoon goes ahead of Bud," insisted Cy, turning to the drummer. "I wish you could have heard him, pardner. He came in to get a postal order for some money he wanted to send in a letter, and he nearly wiped up the earth with poor old Bowser, because there was a two-cent war tax to pay on it.

"'Whose war?' says he. 'Tain't none of *my* makin',' says he, 'and I'll be switched if I'll pay taxes on a thing I've been dead set against from the start. It's highway robbery,' says he, 'to load the country down with a war debt in times like these. It's kill yourself to keep yourself these days, and as my Uncle Josh used to say after the Mexican war, 'it's tough luck when people are savin' and scrimpin' at the spigot for the government to be drawin' off at the bung.'"

"Bowser here just looked him over as if he'd been a freak at a side-show, and said Bowser, in a dry sort of way, he guessed, 'when it came to the pinch, the spigot wouldn't feel that a two-cent stamp was a killin' big leakage.'

"The fellow at that threw the coppers down on the counter, mad as a hornet. 'It's the principle of the thing,' says he. 'Uncle Sam had no business to bite off more'n he could chew and then call on me to help. What's the war done for this country, anyhow?'

"He was swinging his arms like a stump speaker at a barbecue, by this time. 'What's it done?' says he. 'Why it's sent the soldiers back from Cuba with an itch as bad as the smallpox, and as ketchin' to them citizens that wanted peace, as to them that clamoured for war. I know what I'm talkin' about, for my hired man like to 'uv died with it, and he hadn't favoured the war any more than a spring lamb. And what's it doin' for us, now?' says he. 'Sendin' the poor fellows back from the Philippines by the ship-load, crazy as June-bugs. I know what I'm talkin' about. That happened to one of my wife's cousins. What was it ever begun for,' says he, 'tell me that!'

"Peck here, behind the stove, sung out like a fog-horn, '*Remember the Maine!*' Peck knew what a blow the fellow had made at an indignation meeting when the news first came. No tellin' what would have happened then if a little darky hadn't put his head in at the door and yelled, 'Say, mistah, yo' mules is done backed yo' wagon in de ditch!' He tore out to tend to them, or we might have had another Spanish war right here among Bowser's goods and chattels."

"No danger," said Peck, dryly, "he isn't the kind of a fellow to fight for principle. It's only when his pocketbook is touched he wants to lick somebody. He's the stingiest man I ever knew, and I've known some mighty mean men in my time."

"What's the matter with you all to-night?" said the drummer. "You're the most pessimistic crowd I've struck in an age. This is the tune you've been giving me from the minute I lifted the latch." And beating time with foot and hands in old plantation style, the drummer began forthwith to sing in a deep bass voice that wakened the little Bowsers above:

"Ole Satan is loose an' a-bummin'!
De wheels er distruckshin is a-hummin.'
Oh, come 'long, sinner, ef you comin'!"

The door into the entry opened a crack and Mrs. Bowser's forefinger beckoned.

"Here's good-bye to the old and good luck to the new," cried Jim, jumping up to take the big pitcher of cider that she passed through the opening.

"And here's to Mrs. Bowser," cried the drummer, taking the new tin cup filled for him with the sparkling cider, and helping himself to a hot doughnut from the huge panful which she brought in. "It's a pretty good sort of world, after all, that gives you cakes as crisp and sugary as these. 'Speak well of the bridge that carries you over' is my motto, so don't let another fellow cheep to-night, unless he can say something good of the poor old century or the men who've lived in it!"

"Mr. Holmes! Mr. Asa Holmes!" cried several voices.

The old miller, who had been silent all evening, straightened himself up in his chair and drew his hand over his eyes.

"I feel as if I were parting with an old comrade, to-night," he said. "The century had only fifteen years the start of me, and it's a long way we've travelled together. I've been sitting here, thinking how much we've lived through. Listen, boys."

It was a brief series of pictures he drew for them, against the background of his early pioneer days. They saw him, a little lad, trudging more than a mile on a winter morning to borrow a kettle of hot coals, because the fire had gone out on his own hearthstone, and it was before the days of matches. They saw him huddled with the other little ones around his mother's knee when the wolves howled in the night outside the door, and only the light of a tallow-dip flickered through the darkness of the little cabin. They saw the struggle of a strong life against the limitations of the wilderness, and realised what the battle must have been oftentimes, against sudden disease and accident and death, with the nearest doctor a three days' journey distant, and no smoke from any neighbour's chimney rising anywhere on all the wide horizon.

While he talked, a heavy freight train rumbled by outside; the wind whistled through the telegraph wires. The jingle of a telephone bell interrupted his reminiscences. The old man looked up with a smile. "See what we have come to," he said, "from such a past to a time when I can say 'hello,' across a continent. Cables and cross-ties and telegraph poles have annihilated distance. The century and I came in on an ox-cart; we are going out on a streak of lightning.

"But that's not the greatest thing," he said, pausing, while the listening faces grew still more thoughtful. "Think of the hospitals! The homes! The universities! The social settlements! The free libraries! The humane efforts everywhere to give humanity an uplift! When I think of all this century has accomplished, of the heroic lives it has produced, I haven't a word to say about its mistakes and failures. After all, how do we know that the things we cry out against *are* mistakes?

"This war may be a Samson's riddle that we are not wise enough to read. Those who shall come after us may be able to say '*Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.*'"

Somewhere in an upper room a clock struck twelve, and deep silence fell on the little company as they waited for the solemn passing of the century. It was no going out as of some decrepit Lear tottering from his throne. Perhaps no man there could have put it in words, but each one felt that its majestic leave-taking was like the hoary old apostle's: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

Chapter IV

FOR some occult reason, the successful merchant in small towns and villages is the confidant, if not father-confessor, of a large number of his patronesses. It may be that his flattering air of personal interest, assumed for purely business purposes, loosens not only the purse-strings but the spring that works the panorama of private affairs. Or it may be an idiosyncrasy of some classes of the mind feminine, to make no distinction between a bargain counter and a confessional. Whatever the cause, many an honest merchant can testify that it is no uncommon thing for a woman to air her domestic troubles while she buys a skirt braid, or to drag out her family skeleton with the sample of sewing silk she wishes to match.

The Cross-Roads had had its share of confidences, although as a rule the women who disposed of their butter and eggs in trade to Bowser were of the patient sort, grown silent under the repressing influence of secluded farm life. Still, Bowser, quick to see and keen to judge, had gained a remarkable insight into neighbourhood affairs in fifteen years' dealings with his public. "All things come to him who waits" if he wears an air of habitual interest and has a sympathetic way of saying "Ah! indeed!"

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