

THE TOUCH OF ABNER

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TOUCH OF ABNER

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THE TOUCH OF ABNER

BY

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"IF ANY MAN SIN," "THE FOURTH WATCH,"
"THE UNKNOWN WRESTLER," ETC.

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To the Various Tribes of Zeb
And
The Wandering Spirits of Abner
This Book is
Affectionately Dedicated.

"Dear Sir,—Your letter come to han',
Requestin' me to please be funny;
But I ain't made upon a plan
That knows wut's comin', gall or honey."
THE BIGLOW PAPERS, No. X

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THE TOUCH OF ABNER

CHAPTER I

BRAINS, GALL, AN' LUCK

"Put me down fer a thousand."

These words drawled slowly forth produced an immediate effect, and caused fifty people to straighten suddenly up and look enquiringly around. The reporter of *The Live Wire* gave one lightning glance toward the speaker, and then began to write rapidly upon his pad lying before him. The chairman, too, was visibly affected. He leaned forward, and searched the room with his small squinting eyes.

"Did I hear aright?" he asked. "Did someone say 'a thousand?"

At once a man in the back row started to rise, but was pulled quickly down by a woman sitting at his side.

"Let go my coat-tails, Tildy," he whispered.

"But, Abner, are you crazy?"

"Crazy, be hanged! Leave me alone, can't ye?"

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Andrews, is it?" the chairman remarked.

"Yes, it's me all right."

"And you wish to give one thousand dollars?"

"That's what I said."

"Well, then, will you please step forward and sign your name?"

"Oh, that feller waggin' the pen kin do it better'n me. Jist tell him to put Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, down fer a thousand."

"But we would prefer to have your own signature," the chairman insisted.

"It is always customary in cases such as this."

"Are ye afraid that I'll back out, an' won't pay?"

"No, not at all, Mr. Andrews. But, you see, it's more business-like to get your name in your own handwriting. We shall make an exception, though, in your case if you so earnestly desire it."

"Now ye're shoutin'."

"Doing what?"

"Shoutin'; talkin' sense. Don't ye git me?"

"H'm, I see," and the chairman leaned his elbow upon the table and gently stroked his chin with the fingers of his right hand. "I didn't understand you at first, as I am not accustomed to such expressions."

"But ye understand the meanin' of a thousand dollars, don't ye?"

"Indeed, I do, Mr. Andrews, and what is more, I wish to thank you very heartily. I am sure that all here to-night feel most grateful to you for your gen-

erosity.”

”Oh, I don’t want ye’r gratitude, an’ as fer as I kin see, it’s worth darn little.”

”Abner! Abner!” the voice at his side chided. ”What are you saying?”

”Didn’t ye hear, Tildy? Where’s ye’r ears?” and Abner turned slightly toward his protesting wife. ”I was merely remarkin’ that the gratitude of this gatherin’ of men an’ women is worth darn little. Now, d’ye hear?”

”How do you make that out, Mr. Andrews?” the chairman sharply questioned. ”Such a statement demands an explanation.”

”Hear! Hear!” came from several.

”How do I make that out?” Abner repeated, as he scratched the back of his head, and let his eyes roam for a few seconds around the room. ”Well, I’m jist judgin’ accordin’ to what I have seen an’ heard. Me an’ Tildy came to town today to do a little shoppin’, an’ happenin’ to hear that there was to be a meetin’ of the influential people of this place to see about the buildin’ of a Home fer orphan children, we made up our minds to come too. We’re mightily interested in orphans, we surely are. I’ve often told Tildy that it’s a downright shame that this town hasn’t sich a Home, where poor little orphan kids kin be well looked after.”

”You’re quite right, Mr. Andrews,” the chairman assented. ”We have delayed this matter too long already. But now that you have given us such splendid assistance, the work should go rapidly forward. I am very glad that you and your wife came to this meeting.”

”Yes, me an’ Tildy came here,” Abner continued, ”expectin’ to see somethin’ real grand. We’ve heard a great deal of highfalutin’ talk about poor little orphans an’ what ought to be done fer ’em. But, skiddy-me-shins, as fer as I kin see it’ll all end in wind, an’ nuthin’ll be done.”

”I object to such remarks,” a pompous little man protested, rising suddenly to his feet, and appealing to the chairman. ”We didn’t come here to listen to such language and abuse from this ignorant countryman.”

”You jist flop down an’ hold ye’r tongue, Ikey Dimock,” Abner ordered. ”I’ve got the floor at present, an’ I intend to keep it, too, until I’ve had my say. You made a big harangue a little while ago, an’ how much was it worth? Ten dollars, that’s all. An’ you one of the richest men in town. An’ that’s the way with the rest of yez. Ye’ve talked, but when it came to givin’ yez wer’n’t there. That’s the reason why I said ye’r gratitude is worth darn little. I don’t want ye’r gratitude, anyway. It’s them poor little orphan kids I’m worried about, an’ I guess I’ll worry a long time before any Home is built, judgin’ by this meetin’. Come, Tildy, let’s go home. I’ve had enough of this.”

A complete silence reigned in the room as Abner and his wife walked slowly to the door. When they were at last out of the building, the chairman

breathed a sigh of relief, and a slight smile flickered across his face.

"Now that the cyclone is over," he remarked, "we will gather up the fragments that remain and go on with our building."

A ripple of amusement passed through the assembly, and there were numerous whispered conversations. Instead of being very indignant at what Abner had said, all, except Isaac Dimock, were inclined to treat the countryman's cutting words as a joke. They wondered, nevertheless, at the offer he had made of one thousand dollars. The reporter kept steadily on with his writing. He was alive to the situation, and chuckled to himself as he thought of the stirring article he would have for *The Live Wire* in the morning.

Abner untied his horse from the post near the place of meeting, while his wife scrambled up into the carriage. Neither had spoken a word since leaving the building. It was only when well started on their homeward way that Mrs. Andrews ventured to speak.

"What was the matter with you to-night, Abner?" she enquired.

"Nuthin', as fer as I know."

"Yes, there was, or you wouldn't have spoken and acted the way you did."

"Oh, I jist wanted to give them folks a jolt, that's all."

"And made a fool of yourself, didn't you?"

"De ye think I did, Tildy? Gid-dap, Jerry."

"I know it. Only a fool or a lunatic would offer to give one thousand dollars when he hasn't a cent to his name."

"Ye'r wrong, Tildy. I'm not crazy, an' I don't think I'm altogether a fool. It was somethin' else that shook me timbers at the meetin'."

"What was it?"

"Oh, you know as well as I do. I imagined I was as rich as I used to be several hundred years ago, an'—"

"For pity sakes, Abner, stop that nonsense. Because you think you lived hundreds of years ago, and that you were very rich and a great man, doesn't make you rich and great now. You're only Abner Andrews of Ash Point, and can hardly pay your bills, let alone give one thousand dollars toward building a Home for orphan children."

"But, Tildy, I thought I was really old man Astor, an' saw millions of dollars right before me."

"Well, if that's the way you felt, I think it's about time we called in the doctor. There's surely something wrong with your head."

"But, Tildy, ye don't understand. De ye think I was goin' to set there an' let them people git off with their cussed meanness? Not by a jugful! Gid-dap, Jerry, what's the matter with ye?"

"But what about that thousand dollars? Do you expect to pay it?"

"Sure I do."

"Where's it to come from, then?"

"Oh, I'll find it somewheres."

"Not out of that old farm of ours, let me tell you that. Why, it's nothing but a heap of gravel, and you know as well as I do how hard we scratch and dig to raise anything. But you would buy the place, no matter what I said."

"It's a mighty fine situation, though, Tildy. G'long, Jerry."

"It may be that, Abner, but you can't live on a fine situation these days. Haven't you always had fine situations for over twenty years now, and what have they amounted to?"

"Yes, I've touched on a good many things in that time, Tildy. I ran the old 'Flyin' Scud' on the river fer five years; an' then I bought that thrashin' machine from Sol Britt, an' ran it fer awhile. After that I went in fer lumberin', an' kept it up fer several winters. Now I'm into farmin'. Yes, ye'r quite right about the situations. I've had several fine ones, sure enough."

"And made a mess of them all, Abner. Everything you touched failed. And I expect it will be the same with the farm."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Tildy. We manage to git along an' make a comfortable livin'. I've allus depended upon three things to pull me through."

"You have? What are they? I never heard of them."

"Brains, gall, an' luck. They've never failed me yit, an' I guess they won't now."

"H'm," and Mrs. Andrews tossed her head in disgust. "I know you've got plenty of gall, but as for brains and luck, well, I have my serious doubts."

"Yes, I guess ye'r right, Tildy. I reckon I had a lot of gall when I asked ye to marry me. But as fer brains an' luck, well I don't know. Gid-dap, Jerry."

To these words Mrs. Andrews made no reply. Silence reigned for a few minutes, save for the rattle of the carriage and the beat of the horse's feet upon the road. Abner grew restless. He shifted uneasily in his seat, and coughed. Then he began to whistle, a sure sign of the agitated state of his mind. The whistle soon gave place to the humming of the only piece he knew:

"When Bill Larkins made his money,
Piled it up in heaps galore,
Dam old fool he wasn't happy,
'Cause he always wanted more."

Even this didn't have the desired effect. He could stand anything from his wife but dead silence. That alone affected him.

"Say, Tildy," he at length ventured.

"Well, what is it? I should think you'd be ashamed to speak to me after such insulting words."

"But, Tildy."

"Yes, I hear you. What is it?"

"Didn't Ikey Dimock squirm when I landed on him? Ho, ho!"

"And I squirmed, too, Abner. I never felt so ashamed of anything in all my life."

"But ye didn't squirm like Ikey, though, Tildy. My, it tickled me all to pieces to give him that jolt. Why, I knew Ikey when he used to pick pin-feathers off his mother's chickens when she was gittin' 'em ready fer market. He wasn' sich a bad critter then. But since he got hitched to that high-flyer, an' set up in the hardware bizness, ye can't touch him with a ten-foot pole. But I made him squirm. Ho, ho! G'long, Jerry."

"Maybe you'll squirm, Abner, when they come for that money. Then it won't be such fun. I wonder what Jess'll say. She's coming home to-morrow, remember."

"Jess! Skiddy-me-shins! I fergot all about her!"

"You certainly did. And you must have forgotten that it took every cent we could make and scrape together to put her through the Seminary. What will she say and think when she finds out what you have done?"

"Don't let's tell her, Tildy. She needn't know anythin' about it."

"H'm, that's easier said than done. You'll be the first one to tell her, Abner, when you meet her in the morning at the station."

"No, I won't, Tildy. Jess'll not hear it from me, blamed if she will. G'long, Jerry."

CHAPTER II

TEN-CENTERS

Abner was early at the station the next morning, and after he had hitched his horse to a post near the building, he strolled into the waiting-room. Seeing the station agent busily reading *The Live Wire* he stepped toward the ticket-window and peered through.

"'Mornin', Sam," he accosted. "How's the train?"

"Fifteen minutes late," the agent replied as he lowered his paper. "You're early, Mr. Andrews. You'll have to wait nearly an hour."

"Oh, I don't mind that, Sam," and Abner reached down into his pocket as he spoke and brought forth a pipe, tobacco, and knife. "I allus make a bizness of bein' ahead of time. I s'pose ye often see people runnin' to catch the train, eh?"

"Indeed I do, and they generally make a lot of trouble for themselves and everybody else."

"That's jist it. I've often told Tildy that if people'd use their brains more an' their legs less it'd be a darn sight better fer all consarned. What's the news, Sam?"

"Why, haven't you seen the paper this morning, Mr. Andrews?" the agent asked in surprise.

"Naw, I don't go much on dailies; they've too many 'vertisement. I take the *Family Herald* and git a hull library every week fer one dollar a year. Ye kin find most everythin' ye want in the *Herald* from raisin' hogs to teethin' babies. It's sartinly great."

"But *The Live Wire* should interest you this morning, Mr. Andrews. It has a long article on the meeting last night, and about your generous gift toward the Orphan Home."

"Ye don't tell! Well, I guess I know as much about last night's meetin' as the feller who was there waggin' the pen. That's the trouble with *The Live Wire*; it tells ye things ye already know."

Although Abner pretended to be completely indifferent about the account of the meeting, in reality he was most anxious to read what the paper had to say about it. But after what he had said about the dailies, it would not do for him to back down now. The agent would have a laugh at his expense. He could buy a copy at the drug-store up the street.

"Keep an eye on my hoss, will ye, Sam? I've got to git some corn-salve fer Tildy. She fergot it yesterday, an' her corns were mighty bad last night."

"Is your horse afraid of trains, Mr. Andrews?"

"Afraid of trains! Well, I guess ye don't know Jerry. Why, that hoss likes a noise better'n he does his oats."

"That's curious, isn't it?"

"S'pose 'tis. But ye see, Jerry was raised in a pasture near the railroad, an' then he lived in town fer a few years. After I bought him an' took him to Ash Pint, it was so quiet there he began to pine an' pine, an' wouldn't eat nor drink. Thinkin' he was goin' to die, I brought him to town to see the hoss doctor. But, skiddy-me-shins, if he didn't buck right up as soon as he heard the whistle of the train. He was like a new hoss."

"Has he got over the quietness of the country yet?" the agent enquired.

"Not altogether. He kin stand it fer a few days, an' then when I see he's longin' fer the trains, I tak' the big tin horn and blow it close to his ears fer all I'm worth. That cheers him up a bit; but there's nothin' like the yell of one of them big en-gines to give him solid comfort. Jerry is sartinly a knowin' hoss."

Abner left the waiting-room and sauntered along the street in the direction of the drug-store. He knew all the business men in Glucom, and they always spoke or nodded to him in passing. But this morning the ones he met seemed unusually friendly, and stopped to shake hands, and enquire after his health. It was Lawyer Rackshaw, however, who was the most effusive. He met Abner just in front of the drug-store, and accosted him as a long-lost friend.

"How is your wife, Mr. Andrews, and your pretty daughter?" he asked, at the same time shaking the farmer's hand most vigorously.

"Say, let up," Abner protested, as he struggled to free his hand. "De ye think I'm an old pump? If ye'r dry, come into the store, an' we'll have a sody together. That's the best I kin do fer ye this mornin'."

"Ha, ha," the lawyer laughed. "I guess you're worth pumping, all right, Mr. Andrews. A man who can flash up a thousand, such as you did at the meeting last night, must have more where that came from, eh?"

"If I have, it's because I have taken darn good care to keep out of the way of lawyers," Abner retorted. "But, there, I must git along," he added, "an' buy Tildy a corn-salve before the train comes in."

"Oh, you have plenty of time," and the lawyer pulled out his watch. "Why, you've half an hour yet. But, say, Mr. Andrews, I've been reading the account of last night's meeting. My, I admire your pluck. You did certainly put it over Ikey Dimock all right. Ha, ha, that was a good one. You've seen the paper, I suppose?"

"Naw, I don't go much on papers," was the reply. "I seldom read 'em."

"But you must read this one, though. Here, you may have mine."

Abner took the paper, and thrust it into his pocket. "Thank ye, I'll read it when I git time. I must be off now, or I'll be late fer the train."

"Have a cigar, Mr. Andrews. Here's a rare Havana. I know you're fond of a good smoke."

"How many of these de ye smoke a day, Mr. Rackshaw?" Abner asked, as he carefully studied the band upon the cigar.

"Oh, generally five or six, and sometimes more. It all depends on what I am doing."

"Cost quite a bit, eh?"

"Yes, I suppose I burn between two and three hundred dollars during the year."

"Ye don't tell! Bizness must be good, eh? I kin hardly afford to keep me old pipe goin', let alone smoke cigars."

"Oh, that's the way you've been able to save, Mr. Andrews, and have a nice sum to give for the orphanage. Isn't that so?"

"How much d' you intend to fork over fer that Home, Mr. Rackshaw?" Abner enquired.

"I? Oh, I shall give my services free; that will be my contribution."

"H'm, in what way?"

"There will be considerable work to be done, such as legal advice, and other important matters to be attended to. I intend to do all that for nothing."

"Well, that is generous of ye, Mr. Rackshaw. I s'pose sich things will be needed, no doubt. From what I understand, others in town are goin' to do the same as you, an' so the poor little orphans will be housed, an' clothed, an' fed by the advice an' good wishes of all. It sartinly will be a great institution. Now, look here," and Abner suddenly reached out and laid his big right hand upon the lawyer's shoulder, "I want to give ye a word of advice."

"Excuse me, Mr. Andrews," and Rackshaw stepped back a pace. "I must hurry away. I have important business on hand, which must be attended to at once. And, besides, I must not detain you any longer, as you might be late for the train. Good-morning, Mr. Andrews."

Abner bought the corn-salve, and made his way back to the station. He chuckled to himself as he moved along the street, and his eyes twinkled with amusement. Finding that he had ten minutes to spare, he seated himself upon a box on the platform, and drew forth the copy of *The Live Wire*. As he did so his hand touched the cigar in his vest pocket. He pulled it out, and looked it over. Then he scratched the back of his head with the fingers of his left hand.

"Wonder what that bait's fer?" he mused. "Rackshaw didn't part with that cigar fer nuthin'. He's fishin' fer somethin', all right. But, skiddy-me-shins, he'll have to use different bait than that if he expects to catch Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint."

Replacing the cigar, he unfolded the paper, and began to read the account of the meeting, which occupied the leading place on the front page. The reporter had written a most stirring article, and had recorded every word that Abner had uttered, including his tilt with Isaac Dimock. Then followed a list of those who had contributed, with Abner's name leading for one thousand dollars. The other amounts were small, the largest being fifty dollars from the chairman, Henry Whittles.

"Great snakes!" Abner exclaimed in disgust. "Is that all Whittles gave, an' him the richest man in town! I wonder——"

But just then the train blew.

CHAPTER III

SOCIETY PIGS

There was little wonder that Abner suddenly straightened himself up while an expression of pride beamed in his eyes, as Jess stepped from the train, and hurried toward him. Nature had been kind to this girl of eighteen, and had endowed her with more than an ordinary charm of form and features. Joy and health radiated from her every movement as naturally and unconsciously as an orchard in bloom sheds its sweetness. Her sympathetic nature and impulsive disposition caused her to be beloved by all who knew her, and Jess Andrews was a general favorite. The eyes of several youths followed her closely as she hurried along the platform to where her father was standing.

"Have you been waiting long, daddy dear?" she asked, after she had given him an affectionate hug and kiss.

"Not overly long," Abner replied, as he held her at arm's length, and viewed her with undisguised admiration. "My you've grown," he added. "Ye look jist like a peach."

"Do I?" Jess laughingly asked, as she brushed back a wayward tress of dark-brown hair. "It has been so long since I have seen a peach that I hardly know what one looks like. I wish I had one now, as I am almost starved. I wouldn't look at it long, I can tell you."

"Well, let's git home at once," Abner replied. "Ye'r ma has some fine preserved peaches, which she's been keepin' fer ye, an' she wouldn't let me touch 'em. Jerry is over there by that post. I brought the express along this mornin' so's to take ye'r trunk. I'll go an' git it right off."

Jess went over and stroked Jerry's glossy neck, and gave him the last chocolate she possessed. It merely whetted his appetite, and he eagerly begged for more, by pawing the ground and thrusting his nose into the friendly hand.

"You have a sweet tooth, haven't you, old boy?" and Jess again patted his neck. "You shall have two pieces of candy when I get more, though dear knows when that will be," she regretfully sighed. "I am hard up, Jerry, as I spent my last cent on these chocolates, and don't like to ask daddy for any more money, for I know how difficult it has been for him to pay my bills at the Seminary. But,

never mind, when I get to work I shall have plenty. But here comes daddy now.”

Abner approached, trundling Jess’ trunk upon a truck he had procured from the station agent. He dumped his load upon the ground at the rear of the wagon, and then stooped to lift the trunk up into the express. As he did so, the copy of *The Live Wire* slipped from his coat pocket and fell at his feet. Jess at once stepped forward and picked it up.

”Hi, there; what are ye doin’?” Abner enquired, as he suddenly straightened himself up, and looked quickly around.

”You dropped this, that’s all,” and Jess held up the paper as she spoke.

”Here, give me that,” was the preemptory order. ”It’s dangerous.”

”Dangerous! What do you mean?”

”It’ll cause an explosion, if ye’r not careful, ’specially if ye open it. ’Taint safe.”

”Why, it’s only *The Live Wire*, daddy! It surely can’t do any harm.”

”Yes, it will, jist as soon as ye open it. There’d be sich an explosion that it ’ud fairly take me head off.”

Into the girl’s eyes came a mingled expression of fear and surprise. What did her father mean by such words? Could there be anything wrong with his brain? He had never acted so strangely before.

”Are ye goin’ to give me that paper?” Abner asked.

”Certainly,” Jess replied as she acceded to his request. ”But I think you might tell me what makes it so dangerous, daddy.”

”High explosives, that’s what ’tis. It’s worse than nitro-glycerine, which goes off jist as soon as ye look at it.”

”But you should not carry it, then, daddy. If it is not safe for me to touch, neither is it for you, so there.”

”Oh, I know how to handle it,” Abner chuckled, as he thrust the paper back into his pocket. ”Climb up now, an’ let’s be off.”

”There is something in it you don’t want me to see; isn’t that it?” Jess asked.

”Mebbe there is. Anyway, I don’t want to be blown to bits. Whoa, there, Jerry. What’s the matter with ye? Take the reins, Jess, an’ hold that hoss. He’s jist dyin’ fer an explosion. I kin tell it by the way he twists his ears.”

As soon as Abner had hoisted the trunk up into the express, he climbed over the wheel, took his seat by his daughter’s side, seized the reins, and headed Jerry for home.

”You didn’t take the truck back,” Jess reminded him as soon as they had started.

”Well, neither I did! But, never mind, Sam’ll git it. He might as well be doin’ somethin’, the lazy rascal. It’s his bizness to wait on the public, an’ we’re as much the public as anybody. G’long, Jerry.”

"My, I'm glad to be back," and Jess gave a deep sigh of contentment. "I never saw the fields look so pretty, nor the trees such a wonderful variety of green. I missed all that at the Seminary. That beautiful maple over there in front of Mr. Sanders' house seems to have grown since I went away."

"H'm," Abner grunted, "Joe should cut that down; it hides the view."

"Oh, daddy, don't say that. Just think what such a tree means. There is so much in it."

"Y'bet there is; more'n a cord of good firewood."

"I don't mean that, daddy. I wasn't thinking of the wood, but of the beauty of form and color on golden, summer days, and the mystic music when the wind is rushing through its branches."

"Oh, it's them things ye'r thinkin' of. Well, mebbe ye'r right. But a piece of good dry maple in our old stove on a cold day in winter gives all the poetry an' music I want. Guess ye've been studyin' sich things at the Seminary, eh?"

"For a time we did. But this last term most of us were greatly interested in Social Service studies."

"Ye don't tell! What's that, anyway? A new kind of religion or prayer-meetin', eh?"

"Oh, no," and Jess laughed merrily. "It is merely social reform, that is, efforts to lessen and remove existing evils."

"Well, that's interestin'. Pretty big problem, I should say; almost as hard as clearin' a dog's hide of fleas."

"Much harder, daddy. You see, we have to deal with human nature at its lowest, and elevate it step by step."

"Oh, now I begin to spy daylight. Ye'r to be a kind of human elevator, sich as they have in big stores, which boosts ye from cellar to garret quicker'n ye kin say 'jack-rabbit.'"

"It's something like that, only this is a long and difficult work, needing no end of patience. It means not only fighting such evils as the liquor traffic, horse-racing, gambling, graft and such things, but we must educate people as to the proper training and welfare of children, and teach them how to keep their houses clean and free from diseases. I could not begin to tell you all the subjects Social Service includes."

"It sartinly must cover a heap of ground," Abner mused, as he flicked Jerry gently with the whip. "But does it tell ye how to cook, darn socks, sew on buttons, an' do sich ordinary household work?"

"Why, no!" and Jess looked her surprise. "It's not supposed to include such things."

"H'm, is that so? Well, it seems to me that's the kind of social reform we need. Most of the gals these days tweedle-dee at the pianner, gass about art,

study the fashion magazines, an' read the new novels, but as fer cookin', sewin', an' darnin', why, they know no more about sich things than a cat knows about a thrashin' machine."

"But I know, daddy," Jess reminded. "Mother taught me, you remember, before I left home."

"Sure, she did, an' she larnt ye well, too. She laid the timbers all right, keel, kilson, an' all. But, skiddy-me-shins, if ye'r goin' to carry all that Social Service sail, ye'll be a mighty different craft from what ye'r mother planned. Ye sartinly won't do fer ordinary home waters, let me tell ye that. Ye'll need a darn more sea room than kin be found at Ash Pint."

"Certainly, daddy, that's just it. I intend to go to some big city where the needs are great, and help to carry on social reform work."

"Ye do!" Abner's hands dropped limp upon his knees, and a troubled expression overspread his wrinkled face. The merry twinkle left his eyes, and the wrinkles upon his bronzed forehead seemed to deepen. "Why, I thought ye was a-goin' to stay home, Jess," he at length continued. "Ye'r ma an' me was settin' great store upon ye'r comin' back, an' castin' anchor at Ash Pint."

"I couldn't think of doing that, daddy. And besides, you have already said that I am not fitted for home waters, didn't you? I certainly do need more sea room."

"But couldn't ye take a reef or two in ye'r sail, Jess? There's considerable social work to be done right here, so why not cruise around a while in this parish? I guess ye'll find enough to keep ye busy fer a year or two at least."

"Why, what can I do, daddy?"

"Well, I can't recall all the needs. But there's Glucom, fer instance. It's right handy, an' it needs its back yards cleaned up, an' other things attended to; it sartinly does. Ye might start with Ikey Dimock, an' Lawyer Rackshaw, an' I think ye'd find enough in their cellars an' basements to occupy ye fer a long time."

"Why, daddy, I didn't know their places needed looking after. Their wives are leaders of Glucom society, and surely conditions are not as bad as you make out."

"I'm not sayin' anythin' about their wives, fer I've learned since marryin' ye'r ma to speak very keerful about women. I was merely referrin' to the men. But, remember, society ain't allus what it seems, fer many a frog kicks up a big fuss an' holler on a rotten log, an' roosters often crow the loudest on a manure heap. I guess if ye knew as much as I do about the way Ikey Dimock an' Lawyer Rackshaw, to say nuthin' of others, made their money ye'd find that I'm not fer astray. G'long, Jerry."

"But what could I do with such people, daddy? They would resent any

interference on my part. They are leaders of society, you know. We work among a different class of people.”

”Yes, I suppose so. But ye told me that Social Service work includes the liquor traffic, gamblin’, graft, an’ sich things, so that’s why I mentioned Glucom. It’s sartinly a fine field fer operations.”

”I shall think it over, daddy,” and Jess gave a deep sigh. Abner’s eyes twinkled, and he glanced toward his daughter.

”S’pose ye try ye’r hand at home, Jess,” he suggested.

”In what way?”

”Oh, upon me an’ ye’r ma. We need a little reformin’, an’ the old house wants to be made a darn sight more sanitary than it is.”

”Why, what do you mean?” Jess asked in surprise.

”Well, ye see, me an’ ye’r ma haven’t been sproutin’ any extry angel-wings since ye left home, Jess. We’ve been havin’ too much of each other’s company, I guess, an’ ye know that ye git tired even of the best candy an’ chocolates if ye have too much of ’em. Then, we’ve been livin’ in the kitchen, eatin’ an’ settin’ there. We never use the dinin’-room, an’ as fer the parlor, well, the blinds have been down fer so long that I have the creeps whenever I go into that room. No, it ain’t sanitary. The house needs more sunshine; a cheery voice now an’ then, an’ some music on that old pianner once in a while. I tell ye the state of affairs at our house ain’t nat’ral. A funeral is necessary occasionally, I s’pose, but ye’d think we was havin’ a funeral at our house every day of the week. Yes, Jess, we need ye’r social reform work right at home as much as anywheres else. Hello! What’s this?”

They had rounded the bend in the road when they saw an elderly man approaching, carrying with difficulty a rough box upon his shoulder.

”Why, it’s Zeb Burns!” Abner exclaimed. ”What in the world is he up to now? Hello, Zeb,” he accosted, as he pulled up his horse. ”Not movin’, are ye?”

”What de ye think I’m doin’, then?” was the retort. ”Do I look as if I’ve been settin’ under the shade of an apple tree all the mornin’?”

Zeb thumped the box down upon the ground, pulled forth a big red pocket-handkerchief, and mopped his perspiring face. As the box touched mother earth, a piercing squeal sounded forth, followed by several protesting grunts.

”Oh, it’s a pig ye’ve got!” and Abner leaned over to obtain a better view. ”One of the Chosen Tribes, I s’pose, ha, ha.”

”No, it’s not; it’s the devil in pig’s clothin’; that’s what it is. It’s been cussin’ an’ squealin’ an’ kickin’ ever since I started from home. Guess it must be one of your ancient ancestors, Abner, shut up in this critter, by the way it acts.”

”Where did ye git the thing, anyway?” Abner enquired. ”Didn’t raise it, did ye?”

"It's a Society pig, ye see," was the reply. "I only got it yesterday, an' sold it at once to Joe Sanders. That's where I'm takin' it now."

"Must be some class to that animal, Zeb. Society pig, eh? I s'pose it has all the marks of high life?"

"It ought to have. It was riz by the Agricultural Society, and they generally turn out good stuff. But this darn critter is certainly an exception by the way it acts."

"Why don't ye try Social Service methods on it, then?"

"Social Service methods!" Zeb exclaimed in surprise.

"Sure. Reform the thing; elevate it, of course."

"Elevate the devil!" was the disgusted retort.

"That's what Social Service is fer, though; to elevate the divil, accordin' to what Jess has been tellin' me."

"But, de ye think ye could elevate a pig?" Zeb savagely asked.

"Don't know. Never tried, except to elevate it by the hind legs after it was killed. But Social Service might work wonders with it, though. As it is a Society pig, it's had a good start, so the rest should be easy."

"Ump!" Zeb snorted. "All the Social Service methods in the world couldn't do more than elevate a pig into a hog."

"Ho, ho, I guess ye'r right, Zeb. G'long, Jerry."

Abner emitted several chuckles as they moved leisurely along the road. Once he turned and looked back just as Zeb was endeavoring to balance the box again upon his shoulder.

"Ho, ho," he laughed, "Zeb hit it that time, all right. Ye surely can't change a pig into anythin' but a hog, even though it is society bred."

"Wasn't it funny, though?" Jess commented.

"What; the pig?"

"Oh, no. But what Zeb said, and the way he looked. Is he as much interested as ever in the Lost Tribes?"

"Sure. Why, he yangs about it every time we meet. We had a regular set-to one day this week."

"But he didn't say a word about it this morning, daddy."

"Neither he did, come to think of it. He had the pig on the brain; that's why. My, that's a good one on Lost Tribes, an' I won't fergit it next time I see him. To think of Zeb bein' side-tracked by a pig! Hello! There's ye'r ma comin'!"

to meet us, blamed if she ain't. Guess she got tired waitin'. Gid-dap, Jerry."

CHAPTER IV UNDER-PINNIN'

Reform work at home began sooner than Abner expected, and in a manner not altogether to his liking. When Jess announced that Isabel Rivers, her special friend at the Seminary, was to pay her a visit, Mrs. Andrews at once decided that the house must be thoroughly cleaned. Abner groaned inwardly as he listened to what would have to be done the next few days.

"We must have everything spotless," his wife declared. "It would not do for Belle Rivers to see a speck of dust around the house. I can hardly believe it true that she is coming, and her the daughter of Andrew Rivers, the famous, what do they call him, Jess?"

"Attorney General," was the reply.

"Strange she'd want to come here," Abner mused, as he puffed at his after-dinner pipe. "She's society bred, like Lost Tribes' pig, an' I guess she'll find it mighty dull. She won't have much chance to put on airs at Ash Pint."

"Belle's not that kind," Jess explained, "as I have told you in my letters. She is fond of quiet life and country ways. We are both greatly interested in Social Service work, and we have planned to continue our studies while she is with me. You will both like her, I am sure."

"It's a wonder her parents don't want her, Joss."

"She has only her father now, and he will be away from home for several weeks this summer. Belle is all he has, and she is the apple of his eye. Mrs. Rivers died last year, and poor Belle misses her so much. She was so grateful when I asked her to visit us."

"Well, I s'pose we kin stand her fer a while," and Abner gave a sigh of resignation. "But, remember, ye mustn't expect me to be harnessed up in Sunday duds an' white collar every day. An' I don't want Social Service flung at my head every time I turn around."

Actual work began upon the parlor the very next day, and by noon the room had the appearance of having been struck by a cyclone. Blinds, curtains, and pictures were taken down; chairs and tables were piled out upon the verandah; mats were spread upon the grass, and the carpet hung upon the clothes-line.

The old-fashioned piano, on account of its size, was the only thing left, and stood forlornly in its place, thickly covered with old copies of *The Family Herald and Weekly Star*.

"That sartinly is a great paper," Abner mused, as he stood in the middle of the room viewing the effect. "It's useful fer most anythin', as I told Sam Dobbins only yesterday, when he was yangin' about *The Live Wire*."

"What was he saying about it?" Mrs. Andrews unexpectedly asked.

"Oh, nuthin', nuthin' perticular, except that once it a fine account of his great-grandmother's funeral, that's all. Anythin' else ye want me to do, Tildy?"

"Certainly. You might as well beat that carpet. It's just full of dust."

For over half an hour Abner whacked away at the carpet, pausing occasionally to sneeze and to wipe his perspiring face.

"Ugh!" he groaned, during one of these resting spells. "If this is Social Service work, then may the Lord help us!"

"You wanted to begin at home, though, didn't you, daddy?" Jess laughingly asked, as she paused in the act of shaking a rug.

"I know I did; fool that I was. But, look here, when anythin' has been dead, laid out, an' buried as long as that parlor has, it's a darn mistake to bring it to life agin."

"But think how clean, fresh and sweet the room will be when we get done," Jess reminded.

"Umph! De ye think I kin ever git this thing clean, fresh an' sweet?" and Abner gave the wobbly carpet a savage bang. "Look at that dust, now. The more I thump the thicker it gits. What's the use of carpets, anyway, I'd like to know?"

After dinner Abner lighted his pipe, and picked up his old straw hat.

"Guess I'll work at them pertaters this afternoon, Tildy," he announced. "They're mighty weedy an' need hoein'. I s'pose you an' Jess kin finish that room, eh?"

"Indeed we can't," his wife replied. "The ceiling has to be whitened, and that is a man's job. I've got to wash those curtains, and do a hundred other things. The potatoes have gone so long already that I guess another day won't do them any harm. You'll find the whitening in a bag on the woodhouse shelf, and the brush is hanging on the wall."

Abner made no reply but strolled off to the woodhouse softly humming, "When Bill Larkins made his money." Mrs. Andrews and Jess went on with their work, one washing the curtains; the other shaking mats and polishing the chairs upon the verandah. About an hour passed, and then from the parlor came a hair-raising yell, followed immediately by a thump. Jess and her mother nearly collided as they rushed into the room, where they saw Abner sitting upon the floor, his clothes covered with whitening.

"For pity sakes! what is the matter now?" his wife demanded. "Did you fall?"

"No, I didn't fall, as ye kin see," was the reply. "The darn old floor riz up an' hit me, that's all. Ugh!" he groaned.

"Where are you hurt, daddy?" Jess asked.

"Where am I hurt?" and Abner glared at his daughter. "Where de ye think I'm hurt? Where do I look as if I'm hurt; on me head?"

"I should say on your face, by the look of it," his wife retorted. "I thought you had more sense than to put that chair upon such a rickety box. You might have broken your neck. What were you doing up there, anyway?"

"Follerin' Social Service methods; that's all, Tildy."

"Social Service methods! Why, what do you mean?"

"Ask Jess; she understands. It's an elevatin' process, ye see. I was jist elevatin' myself to put some plaster on that hole in the ceilin', when me under-pinnin' gave way. Did ye learn anythin' about the under-pinnin' at the Seminary, Jess?"

"Not that I know of, daddy."

"Ye didn't! Well, that's queer. What was the use of ye'r studyin' Social Service if ye didn't learn nuthin' about under-pinnin'."

"I don't know what it is, daddy."

"Ye don't! Why, I thought everybody knew that under-pinnin' is what hold's things up."

"Oh, I see. You mean the foundation, or groundwork, so to speak."

"Well, them may be the highfalutin' names, but I'm used to under-pinnin'. It comes more natural."

"But what has that to do with Social Service?"

"A darn sight, I should say. Ye can't do nuthin' if the under-pinnin' ain't right, any more'n I could stand fer long on that chair with the rickety box underneath. Lost Tribes was right when he said ye can't elevate a pig into nuthin' more'n a hog. Ye'd better allus be sure of ye'r under-pinnin', Jess, before ye begin any elevatin' process. Now, there's Ikey Dimock, fer instance. If he hasn't a—"

"What's all this nonsense about, anyway?" Mrs. Andrews interrupted. "We'll never get through with this room if you two keep talking about 'Social Service' and 'Under-pinnin' all the time."

"Well, I'm through fer the present, Tildy," Abner declared. "Guess I'll go outside fer a while an' shake off this Social Service dose. Jist leave the ceilin'; I'll finish it later."

He shuffled stiffly out of the room, and made his way to a pile of wood a short distance from the house. He started to sit down upon a block but, suddenly changing his mind, he leaned against the clothes-line post instead. Pulling out

a plug of tobacco and a knife, he had just whittled off several slices when an auto came in sight, and stopped in front of the house. A young man, neatly dressed, alighted and, walking briskly into the yard, came over to where Abner was standing.

"Is the boss in?" he enquired.

"Yes, she was a few minutes ago."

"Whew! Hen rule, eh?"

"Seems so. Like to see her?"

"Not on your life. I want to see the old man. Is he around?"

"Guess he'll be around soon. Met with an accident ye see."

"That's too bad. Serious?"

"Pretty bad. His under-pinnin' gave way. Total collapse."

"My, my! Sudden?"

"Very. Any message?"

"You work for him, I suppose?"

"I sartinly do."

"Is he a good boss?"

"Didn't ye ever meet him?"

"No, never saw him. But I believe he's fixed all right by the way he forked over for that Orphan Home Slapped down a cool thousand at the first bang. The firm sent me out to try to sell him an auto. Do you think he wants one?"

"Sure; he wants one bad."

"He does? When do you suppose I could see him? He's a queer one, I understand."

"Yes, a regular divil when he gits goin'. Shoots at sight."

"You don't say so! Now, come to think of it, I did hear that he's a little touched in the head. Has strange notions of living a long time ago. Is that so?"

"Guess ye'r right. The old feller's not altogether himself. He's lived so many lives that he often gits mixed up an' thinks he's old man Astor, Julius Cæsar, or some other notable. He's not too bad then, but when he imagines he's one of them old pirates, ye'd better watch out. He's a holy terror, an' nuthin' will stop him when he gits on the rampage."

"Did he ever hurt you?" the young man anxiously asked.

"Oh, no. Him an' me are great chums. He's never shot at me yit. We're too good friends fer that. I'm his keeper, ye see, an' so he looks up to me fer most everything."

"What! Is he as bad as all that? Does he really need a keeper?"

"Sure. Why, I'm the only one who kin manage him, next to his wife. He allus minds me no matter how bad he is. He generallly does everythin' I say."

"Well, that's interesting. I believe you're just the man I want. I suppose

he'd buy a car if you advised him to do so?"

"Sure thing."

"That's great. Now, look here, if you'll speak a good word for me, I'll make it worth your while. And, say, here's something on account to prove that I mean business."

The young man thrust his hand into his pocket and brought forth a crisp bill, and handed it to Abner. "Don't say a word about this little transaction," he warned. "And you'll let me know when your boss is ready to buy, won't you?"

"Sure, sure; I'll let ye know. I'll put ye next to the old feller."

"That's good. Don't forget."

"Oh, I'll not fergit, not on ye'r life."

"Well, so long," and the salesman held out his hand. "It's a bargain, remember, and more to come when the car is bought."

As the young man started to leave, Jess came around the corner of the house carrying a rug, which she placed upon the clothes-line. At first she did not notice the two men, but stood for a few seconds looking down over the fields out upon the river. As she turned to re-enter the house by the back door, she espied the men, especially the stranger. In her brief glance she noted what a wretched object her father presented, with his old lime-bespattered clothes, by the side of the immaculately dressed young man. The latter noted the flush which mantled her face, and attributed it to shyness.

"Gee whiz!" he exclaimed, after Jess had entered the house. "Where did she drop from?"

"S-sh," Abner warned. "She's the old man's daughter; a chip of the same block."

"She is! Gad, she's a beaut."

"Yes, she's a trim craft, poor gal!" Here he heaved a deep sigh, which the stranger was not slow to notice.

"Why, what's wrong with her?" the young man enquired.

"Touched here, like her dad," and Abner placed the forefinger of his right hand to his head.

"You don't say so! My, my, that's too bad! Inherited, I suppose?"

"Partly. She's got Social Service on the brain, ye see. But, there, ye'd better go now. She was quite excited when she spotted you, an' if ye stay too long she might have a fit. Doesn't take much to set her off, poor thing."

Abner watched the salesman as he walked out of the yard, boarded his car, and set off down the road. Then his solemn face relaxed, and the sad expression fled from his eyes. The skin on his cheeks and under his eyes became suddenly corrugated, and his mouth expanded to a dangerous degree. His body shook, and he emitted a series of half-suppressed chuckles of merriment. He next unfolded

the bill he was still holding in his hand, and looked at it.

"Whew! it's a ten-spot!" he exclaimed. "An' that guy thought he'd bribe me with this, did he? He wanted me to put him next to the old feller. So that's the way he works his game, eh? Heard I'm well fixed, too, an' was sent to sell me a car. A 'queer one,' an' a 'little touched in the head,' ho, ho! But mebbe he'll find the old feller's not so daft after all, an' that Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, is afflicted with a different kind of a touch. That's what he will learn, skiddy-me-shins, if he won't."

CHAPTER V

PLAIN FACTS

The morning sun struggled through the dust-covered window, and fell aslant the pine board which Zebedee Burns was carefully planing. It was a small workroom, littered with boards, tools, and shavings. Adjoining was the blacksmith shop, for Zebedee was a handy man, and combined carpentering with the smith-trade, besides tending his garden. He was seldom rushed with business, and found time to do extra work, such as trading in "Society" pigs.

He had just finished planing the board, and was measuring it with his two-foot rule when a form darkened the doorway.

"Mornin', Zeb," was the cheery greeting.

"Mornin', Abner," was the laconic reply.

"Busy, I see. Makin' a cage fer ye'r society pig, I s'pose," Abner bantered, as he sat down upon the tool-chest.

Zebedee deigned no reply, but went on with his work. He sawed a few inches off the planed board, laid it carefully aside and picked up another. Abner was surprised at his unusual manner, and studied his face most intently.

"What's wrong, Zeb?" he at length enquired. "Ye look as if ye'd been to a funeral. Haven't lost one of the Chosen Tribes, have ye?"

"Quit ye'r foolin', Abner," was the chiding reply. "I haven't been to any funeral, though I expect to be at one to-morrow."

"Ye do!" and Abner's eyes grew suddenly big. "Who's dead?"

"Widder Denton's little boy."

"Whew! Ye don't tell! Never heard a word about it. When did he die?"

"Yesterday. I'm makin' his coffin now."

"Ye are, eh? Somewhat out of ye'r line, isn't it? I thought the undertaker in town allus attended to sich affairs."

"He does if there's any money in it. But this is a different case. Widder Denton's too poor to buy a casket, so that's why I've tackled the job. Guess there'll be more to make fer the same family belong long, if I'm not mistaken."

"What! Diphtheria?"

"No; starvation."

"Holy smoke! Ye don't say so! Didn't know it's as bad as that."

"Well, it is. That poor widder has been workin' so hard to keep her family that she's gone under. I wouldn't be surprised if it's her coffin I'll have to make next."

"Ye don't tell! Why, I thought she got money from the company when her husband was killed."

"H'm, Lawyer Rackshaw got most of it, accordin' to what she told me only yesterday."

"He did! The skunk! An' him smokin' half a dozen ten-cent cigars every day. It's a wonder she never squealed on him."

"Oh, that's jist like her. She wouldn't have told me yesterday if I hadn't pumped it out of her. She's a game one, all right. But I do pity the poor little kids. I don't know what's to become of them."

"How many are there?"

"Five, I guess. The little chap who died was the youngest, an' he was only three."

"My, my!" Abner sighed, while an expression of sincere sympathy came into his eyes. "What de ye s'pose kin be done fer 'em?"

"Don't know, unless we kin git them into that Orphan Home."

"What Home?" Abner asked in surprise.

"Why, you ought to know," and Zeb looked up from his work. "You gave a thousand dollars to it, didn't ye?"

"A thousand be hanged! I didn't give a red cent."

"So I thought. Jist hold these boards together, will ye?"

Abner at once obeyed, and after Zeb had driven in two nails, he straightened himself up, and looked at his companion.

"You never intended to give a thousand to that Home, did ye?" he asked.

"Sure. What de ye think I am? A fool?"

"Not altogether, but next door to one, I should say."

"Ye've got a darn lot of gall," Abner retorted. "Ye must have inherited it from one of the Lost Tribes, didn't ye?"

"Never mind the Lost Tribes now, Abner. You know what I say is true. You're no more able to give a thousand dollars to that Home than I am to buy

out the whole of Glucom. How in the world de ye expect to git out of the scrape, anyway? Ye'll be the laughin'-stock of everyone."

"Never you mind, Zeb, how I'll git out of it. I'll square up all right, so ye needn't bust any button off about it. I know a wrinkle or two."

"Ye'll have to git a hustle on, then, if them Denton kids are to be helped."

Abner took three or four steps across the room, and then stopped and looked out of the door. Presently he turned and watched Zebedee for a few seconds.

"How much de ye expect to git fer that job?" he suddenly asked.

"Jist as much as you'd expect, an' that's nuthin'," was the quick reply.

Abner's right hand was now in his trousers pocket, firmly gripping the ten dollar bill which had been given to him by the agent. Then he drew it forth, and flung it upon the work-bench.

"Take that, Zeb, an' give it to Widder Denton," he ordered. "It's been burnin' me pocket until me skin is scorched. There, don't ask me where I got it," he added, as Zeb started to speak. "I've got enough lies scratched down against me already. But I do feel like havin' a good fight."

"Fight! What de ye want to fight fer?" Zeb asked in astonishment.

"Cause I'm ugly, that's why. The sight of that ten-spot makes me want to hit somebody."

"Well, ye'd better git out of this if that's the way ye feel. I've no inclination or time to fight to-day."

"An' ye don't want a scrap over the Ten Lost Tribes? I've given ye plenty of chances. Now, look, Zeb, who was the great-great-great-grandfather of the man who lost the Ten Tribes in the first place? Kin ye tell me that?"

Such a question in the past had always stirred Zebedee to his inmost depths. But now, instead of launching forth in defence of his pet theory, he leaned against the work-bench, folded his arms, and faced his visitor.

"Abner," he began, "I've been thinkin'."

"Well, that's encouragin'," was the reply. "A bit out of the ordinary, eh? I thought there was somethin' wrong with ye."

"Yes, I've been thinkin'," Zeb repeated, "an' if you'd do the same occasion-ally, Abner, it might do ye a world of good."

"H'm, ye needn't judge all ye'r neighbors' pigs by ye'r own," was the retort.

"I'm not, Abner. I'm only judgin' by solid facts. Now, see here. You an' me have been makin' fools of ourselves by always squabblin' over things of little real value. I yanged about the Lost Tribes, an' you yanged about how many lives you've lived."

"They're mighty interestin', though," Abner remarked.

"I know they are, an' there's no harm in discussin' them once in a while.

But it don't seem altogether right fer two men like you an' me to spend so much time over sich things, an' pay little or no heed to what takes place right under our noses."

"Guess there's not much that escapes us, Zeb, is there?"

"What about that Denton family, then?"

"But we thought they was well fixed."

"Did we ever think much about them, anyway, Abner?"

"Guess ye'r right, Zeb. We didn't."

"We certainly didn't, an' that's what's worrin' me. Why, when I looked at that poor little dead boy last night, an' talked to the widder, an' saw the pinched faces of her children, I felt small enough to crawl through a knot-hole."

"Sure, ye did," Abner agreed. "I've felt that way meself, 'specially when Tildy was after me. It's a mighty creepy feelin', isn't it?"

"Indeed it is, an' more so when ye'r conscience is lashin' ye like a thousand divils. I had a hard time to git to sleep last night, fer the picture of the Great Judgment riz right up before me. I heard the Lord a-sayin', 'Zeb Burns, them Denton kids was hungry an' ye gave them nuthin' to eat; they was thirsty an' ye never gave them any fresh milk; they was almost naked an' ye didn't give them any clothes. If ye had done them things that little Denton boy wouldn't have died.' That's what I thought He said, an' when I went to sleep I dreamed that I was bein' sent to the left hand right into hell fire. It gave me sich a scare that I jumped out of bed with a yell, an' my wife thought I was crazy. I tell ye it was an awful experience."

Zebedee pulled out a big red handkerchief, and mopped his brow.

"My! I git all het up when I think of it," he panted.

Abner made no immediate reply, but stood very still with his eyes fixed intently upon the floor.

"Guess I'll go now," he at length announced.

"What are ye workin' at these days?" Zeb asked.

"Pertaters; an' a mighty pesky job it is. Full of weeds."

"Why, I thought ye had them all done."

"So I would if it hadn't been fer house-cleanin'."

"House-cleanin'!"

"Sure. House so spick an' span that I kin hardly step or set anywheres, so

I generally roost on the wood-box. Well, s'long. I must be off."

CHAPTER VI

A FLEA IN THE EAR

Abner was unusually silent at dinner and did not seem to notice the neatly set table, nor the fresh wild flowers artistically arranged in the little vase in the centre. He glanced occasionally at his daughter who was sitting opposite, and his eyes shone with pride. He would have been less than human had his heart not thrilled at the vision before him. Jess was in her brightest mood. Her face glowed with abounding health, and her dark eyes beamed with animation as she talked with her mother about her plans for the future, and of the approaching visit of Isabel Rivers. Mrs. Andrews, too, was in excellent spirits, for the finishing touches had been given to the house that morning, and everything was in readiness for the visitor. She nevertheless noted her husband's preoccupied air, and wondered what was troubling him.

When dinner was over Abner pushed back his chair, and gave a deep sigh.

"What's the matter with you, Abner?" his wife asked. "You don't seem to be yourself to-day. You're not sick, I hope."

"Do I look sick, Tildy?"

"Well, no, judging by the dinner you ate. But you act like a sick man for all that. Maybe it's your liver."

"No, it ain't me liver; it's me heart. That's what's the matter."

"Your heart!" Jess exclaimed. "Why, daddy, I didn't know you had heart trouble."

"Ye didn't, eh? Well, I had it once, jist about the time I asked ye'r mother to marry me. It was a mighty bad dose."

"H'm, you soon got over it," Mrs. Andrews retorted.

"I sure did, Tildy. Ye'r right there. It didn't take long after we got hitched, an' I thought I'd never have another attack."

"What brought it on now, for pity sakes, Abner? It can't be a woman this time."

"It sartinly is."

"A woman!"

"Yes, a woman; a livin' female woman, an' a widdier at that."

"Good gracious, Abner! A widow! What do you mean, anyway?"

"Jist what I said; a widder, an' she's the one who's given me the heart kink this time."

At these words a startled look came into Jess's eyes, and her face grew suddenly pale. But Mrs. Andrews showed no signs of uneasiness. She knew her husband too well to be shocked at anything he might say or do.

"Well," she remarked, "whoever that widow is, she's welcome to all the heart you've got, Abner. If she can find it, then it's more than I can."

"Yes, it's a widder," Abner continued, unheeding his wife's sarcasm, "an' she's got five kids, an' they're worrin' me a lot."

"I should say they would, Abner. You'll have more than one kink in your heart if you undertake to handle such a brood. When do you expect to take charge of your new family?"

"Take charge! Did I say anything about takin' charge?" and Abner glared at his wife. "I only said me heart aches fer 'em, an' it sartinly does, fer they're starvin'."

"Starving!" Jess exclaimed. "Who are they, anyway?"

"Widder Denton an' her brood; that's who they are. Her little boy died yesterday, an' Lost Tribes is makin' a coffin fer him."

"Oh, daddy, I hadn't any idea there was such need so near home, did you?"

"I sure didn't. But it's Gospel truth. Widder's sick, an' kids starvin'."

"Isn't it awful!" and Jess clasped her hands before her. "Can't anything be done for them? The children should be looked after at once, and someone should stay with Mrs. Denton."

"Oh, I guess the neighbors'll attend to that fer a while. Zeb'll find out, no doubt."

"Isn't the Orphan Home ready yet, daddy?"

"What Orphan Home?" and Abner looked keenly into his daughter's face. "What have ye heard about it?"

"Nothing much, only I thought they were building one at Glucom. There was some talk about it, wasn't there?"

"Talk! Sure there was talk. They've been talkin' about it fer years, but I guess that's as fer as it'll go. But there, I must git at them pertaters."

Abner gave a fleeting glance at his wife, picked up his hat and left the room.

"What is the matter with, daddy?" Jess asked, after her father had gone.

"In what way?" Mrs. Andrews enquired.

"I hardly know, except that he seems strange at times. The day I came home he got so excited when I picked up a copy of *The Live Wire* which had dropped from his pocket."

"He did! What did he say?"

"He shouted at me and made me give it back to him at once. He said it was dangerous, and that if I looked at it there would be a terrible explosion. I told him there must be something in it that he did not want me to see, and he did not deny it. Have you seen it, mother?"

"No, he didn't say anything to me about it. I never knew that he brought the paper home. I wonder where he put it."

Mrs. Andrews believed that she knew the cause of her husband's excitement over *The Live Wire*, and what it contained. But she felt annoyed that he had not shown it to her. Was there something in it that he did not wish her to see? she asked herself. The more she thought about it the more determined she became to find out where Abner had hidden the paper. She said nothing, however, to Jess about it, but discreetly changed the subject, and began to talk about Widow Denton and her troubles.

While the women thus lingered at the table and talked, Abner was busy in his potato patch back of the barn. The weeds were thick and stubborn, but he seemed to take a special delight in tearing them out of the ground. "Give me somethin' to shake me timbers an' I kin work like the divil," he had often said. "I kin never accomplish as much in hayin' time as when a thunderstorm is racin' down the valley. I'm somethin' like me old Flyin' Scud. When it was calm she wasn't worth her salt, but let a gale hit her, an' my! how she'd gather her skirts an' run."

Seldom had Abner such thoughts to agitate his mind as on this fine warm afternoon. He was deeply concerned about the Denton affair, and this naturally turned his attention to the proposed Orphan Home. He was fully aware that this case of destitution would revive a greater interest in the building of the institution, and that he might be called upon at any moment for the thousand dollars he had offered. How he was to raise that amount he had not the slightest idea, and he realized that he had made a fool of himself. If he failed to make good, he would be the laughing-stock of all, and he would be ashamed to be seen again on the streets of Glucom.

Added to this worry was the thought of Jess leaving home. He recalled what she had said that morning on the way from the station, as well as her recent conversation at the dinner table. That she was determined to go in a few weeks seemed certain, and Abner groaned inwardly when he thought of the dreariness of the house without her exhilarating presence.

"Hang that Seminary!" he muttered. "I wish to goodness Jess had never seen the place. Social Service! Progress! Uplift! Umph! I wouldn't mind gals studyin' sich things if they'd use common sense. But to galivant off to elevate people in big cities instead of stayin' home where they kin be of some real use, is what makes me hot."

Abner had paused in his work and was leaning upon his hoe. He was gazing thoughtfully out over the field, toward the main highway. And, as he looked, a car containing one man came suddenly into sight, and drew up by the side of the road. Then a man alighted and walked briskly across the field.

"It's Ikey Dimock, skiddy-me-shins, if it ain't!" Abner exclaimed. "What in the world kin the critter want of me! I don't want to see him, nor anyone of his brood."

Isaac Dimock was a little man, but what he lacked in size he tried to make up in pompousness. "It seems to me," Abner once said, "that the Lord got somehow mixed up when he was makin' Ikey Dimock. It is sartin' sure, judgin' from Ikey's ears and brains, that he intended him to be a jackass. But He must have changed his mind, an' finished him up as a man, but a mighty poor job He made of it. It's quite clear that Ikey stopped growin' too soon. The only pity is that he ever grew at all."

Between these two men there had never been any love lost. Abner despised Isaac for his meanness, underhandedness, and pompousness, while Isaac hated Abner for his sharp tongue and biting sarcasm. They seldom met without a wordy battle of one kind or another. They never came to blows, as the hardware merchant had considerable respect for the farmer's great strength and big fists, one of which, on a certain memorable occasion, had been doubled up dangerously near his stub of a nose.

But Isaac seemed to have forgotten and forgiven all animosities as he now drew near. His face was contorted with a smile, such as a wolf might assume when about to pounce upon a lamb.

"How are you, Abner?" he accosted. "Fine day this."

"Why, so it is," and Abner gazed around in apparent astonishment, "I hadn't thought about it before. It's good of ye to come an' tell me."

"You work too hard," the visitor replied, unheeding the sarcasm. "You don't take time to notice the beautiful things around you."

"H'm," Abner grunted. "It takes all my spare minutes tryin' to wring a livin' out of this darn place. Have to keep me nose to the ground most of the time."

"I should say so," and Isaac cast his eyes around until they rested upon the big gravel hill to his right. "Pretty light ground, eh?"

"Light! Should say it is. Why, it's so light I have to keep the place anchored or it 'ud go up like a balloon."

"Ha, ha, it certainly must be light. Rather dangerous, isn't it?"

"Oh, I'm not the least bit afraid of what old Mother Nature does. She's pretty reliable, an' doesn't do any kinky tricks. Ye kin generally depend upon her. But it's human nature on two legs that I'm suspicious of."

Isaac cast a swift glance at the farmer in an effort to interpret the meaning

of his words. But Abner's face was perfectly placid as he leaned upon his hoe and surveyed his garden.

"Why are you suspicious of human nature?" Isaac enquired.

"Cause it's allus tryin' to undermine one, that's why. Now look here, I work this place, plant seeds, fight frost, bugs, cutworms, crows, an' dear knows what all. Then I take me produce to town, an' give it away. Yes, actually give it away, fer I don't make enough profit to keep a shirt on a flea. But when them storekeepers sell the stuff which caused me so much work an' anxiety they make big profits. They call it bizness; but I call it robbery. Is it any wonder that I'm suspicious of human nature on two legs?"

"It certainly is discouraging," Isaac blandly purred. He was thinking of his own big profits in hardware. "It is a wonder you don't give up farming," he continued. "Why not try something else?"

"I'm goin' to give it up," Abner declared.

"You are! Well, it's fortunate that I came to see you to-day."

"Why?"

"Because I want to buy your place."

"Buy my place!" Abner exclaimed. "What de ya want this place fer, I'd like to know?"

"For the situation. I need a place where I can bring my family during the summer, and this farm will suit us fine. The view is excellent, and there is a good beach for boating and bathing. How much do you want for it?"

"I didn't say I was goin' to sell, did I?" Abner roared.

"But you just told me you are going to give up farming, didn't you?"

"Sure, I did. But that doesn't mean I want to sell. I'm goin' to give up farmin' some day, an' you're goin' to give up the hardware bizness, too. But I shall keep the place fer the sake of the situation. I'll want it a few hundred years from now, fer I don't expect to light upon a nicer spot."

Isaac's eyes opened wide with amazement. He gave a slight start and looked keenly at Abner.

"Did you say 'a few hundred years?'" he asked.

"That's jist what I said. But it may be more, fer I can't tell how long it will take me to develop."

"Develop!"

"Sure. Ye see, I've been so long reachin' the Abner Andrews stage that I can't jist tell when I'll arrive."

"Arrive! Arrive where?"

"At the angel stage where I kin live without eatin' an' workin'. It's necessary fer a man to be sich a bein' to live on a place like this. That's what old Parson Shaw said after he'd been at Plunkerville fer several years."

"So you expect to be an angel, do you?" Isaac queried, while his mouth expanded into a grin.

"I'm hopin' that way, providin' I don't git any set-back, which would delay me fer a few hundred years or so."

"Won't it be rather lonesome living here all by yourself?" Isaac bantered. "How will you occupy your time?"

"Oh, I'm not worrin' about that. I'll have plenty to do."

"You will! Along what line?"

"Lookin' after poultry; 'specially geese."

"Geese!"

"Yes, that's what I'll be doin' judgin' from present indications. Guess most of the folks in Glucom will have reached the goose stage by that time, if I'm not much mistaken. Most likely you'll be there, too, Ikey, though your pin-feathers won't be very tender. You'll surely be an old goose by that time."

This was more than Isaac could stand. His face reddened, and his bland smile departed.

"What do you mean by insulting me?" he demanded. "You owe me an apology for those words."

"Ye'r mistaken there, Ikey. It's the geese I should apologize to. I didn't mean to insult them poor critters."

"You're no gentleman," Isaac shouted, now fully aroused. "You're nothing but an ignorant clown."

"Yes, I reckon I am. But I'll improve by the time I'm ready to keep geese. Ye'll hardly know me then. But I'll know you, Ikey, fer no one could ever mistake that nose, even when it's changed into a goose's bill. There'll be lots of grubs and worms fer ye to feed on by the looks of things now."

"You impudent cur!" Isaac roared. "I didn't come here to be insulted, but to have a quiet talk about buying your place."

"No one asked ye to come, Ikey Dimock, an' the sooner ye go the better. Ye've insulted me over an' over agin, an' thought it was all right. But two kin play at that game, an' by the jumpin'-frog I've a good mind to twist ye'r measley neck."

So fierce did Abner look that Isaac retreated a few steps.

"Oh, don't git scared," Abner laughed. "I'll not hurt ye. But next time ye come to buy this place, bring ye'r shot-gun along. I don't like to kill a man without givin' him a chance to defend himself."

"I'll bring a constable, that's who I'll bring."

"All right, bring the hull police force if ye want to. They kin set as long as they like by the side of the road an' watch me hoe. That's as fer as they'll git, fer I'm king on me own ground, an' so long as I mind me own bizness I defy anyone

to meddle with me. You're a trespasser here to-day, Ikey Dimock, an' the sooner ye hit fer the road the better fer all consarned."

"Yes, I'm going, Abner Andrews," Isaac angrily replied. "You have insulted me to-day, and have made a great bluster, but you'll come down with a flop when you're called upon to pay that thousand dollars you subscribed for the Orphans' Home."

"Hey, what's that ye'r gittin' off?" Abner demanded. "What bizness is it of yours, I'd like to know? Why should I flop when I'm asked to pay?"

"Simply because you haven't got it; that's why."

"What'll ye bet?"

"I won't bet."

"No, because ye'r scared. Ye know ye'd lose."

"What's the sense of talking that way, Abner? I know that you were only bluffing when you offered that thousand dollars, and you can't deny it. How could you ever make that much on a place like this?"

"By workin' the skin-game, that's how."

"The skin-game! What is that?"

"Don't ye know, Ikey? Now, I skin the ground fer what I git, an' mighty thin skinnin' it is. But you skin human bein's, 'specially poor widders."

Dimock waited to hear no more, but, turning angrily away, hastened across the field, boarded his car and drove furiously off. Abner watched him until he disappeared around the bend.

"Wasn't he mad, though?" he chuckled. "He got a flea in the ear that time, all right, ho, ho! It's not fer the situation or fer the sake of his health he wants this place, that's quite sartin. Dimock's not that kind. There's somethin' more'n ordinary back of this, an' it's up to me to find out what it is."

CHAPTER VII

BEATING THE MOVIES

The next morning Abner worked at his potatoes. He was not fond of this job, as the weeds were very thick and his temper was none the best. It was hard, anyway, for him to settle down for any length of time to one task. He preferred boating or lumbering, with all the excitement and uncertainty attached to each. But to be penned down in a potato patch was almost more than he could endure.

It might have been different if the soil had been productive, but after hard toil there was little to show for all his efforts.

"Might as well be in a chain-gang," he meditated, as he tore at the weeds. "It's up one row an' down another, hour after hour. I jist feel wild fer somethin' to turn up. Wish to goodness Ikey Dimock 'ud happen along now. Mebbe he'd git somethin' to-day he escaped yesterday."

He paused, leaned on his hoe and looked across the field toward the gravel hill. As he did so his eyes opened wide in amazement, for there right on his land was a man with a strange looking instrument before him. He was pointing it in his direction, too. Maybe it was a gatling gun the fellow had. He had heard about such things. Ikey might have sent him to take the place by force. A fierce anger surged up in Abner's heart, and dropping his hoe, he sped to the house and took down his gun from its rack on the kitchen wall. When Mrs. Andrews asked him what he was going to do, he merely told her that there was a hawk after her chickens. Hurrying from the house, he made his way across the field, clutching his old shot-gun with both hands.

He kept his eyes fixed upon the young man, every instant expecting to see him either run or show some sign of terror and beg for his life. But when the intruder merely paused in his work, tipped back his straw hat a little and faced him without the least shadow of fear, Abner became puzzled. If the stranger had only run, it would have been a great lark chasing him across the field, brandishing his gun and shouting wild words of defiance. But to see the man viewing him so calmly upset his calculations. He slowed down, and when a few yards away he stopped and glared savagely.

"Why don't you shoot?" the stranger asked, in a matter-of-fact manner.

"I'm goin' to," was the reply.

"Well, you're a long time about it."

"Ain't ye afraid?"

"Afraid of what?"

"That I'll shoot ye."

"Not with that old gun. It wouldn't shoot a cat, and, besides, I don't believe it's loaded."

"Want me to try?"

"Sure; go ahead. I don't mind."

"Ye don't!"

"No, not a bit. But hurry up. I'm getting tired waiting."

Abner was now in a fix. He never intended to shoot the intruder, but merely wished to frighten him away. He did not know what to do, and only glared harder than ever.

"Why don't you shoot?" the stranger again asked.

"Hang the shootin'," Abner growled, as he thumped the gun down upon the ground. "De ye think I'm a brute?"

"Well, I wasn't altogether sure at first by the way you acted. I've often met brutes on four legs which performed in a similar manner, so I was somewhat puzzled."

"An' wasn't there reason?" Abner demanded. "What bizness have ye comin' on to my land?"

"What business? Why, my own, of course."

"An' what's that?"

"Don't you know?"

"Surveyin' my place, eh?"

"Sure; what did you ask me for, then?"

"But who sent ye here? Did Ikey Dimock?"

"Ikey Dimock! Let me see," and the young man scratched his head, as if in perplexity. "Say, I can't recall that name. Who is he? A friend of yours?"

"A friend of mine! Say that agin an' I'll punch ye'r face."

"Will you?"

"Sure. I won't stand fer any foolin', mind. Ye'r on my place, an' don't put on any of ye'r high-falutin' airs."

"Maybe two can play at that game of punching faces," and the stranger smiled as he straightened himself up a bit. "But I don't want to fight with you. Just let me alone until I get my work finished. If you want a row, go and fight the men who sent me here. Then you'll have all the fighting you can attend to."

"Who are they?" Abner queried.

"The members of the Government, to be sure."

"What in blazes have they to do in the matter, I'd like to know?"

"A great deal, as you'll find out. They sent me here, so it's no use to shoot me, or try to punch my nose. I'm only working under orders, and don't count."

"But what did they send ye here fer? Tell me that."

"To see how much gravel you have; that's why."

"Gravel! My gravel?"

"Yes. All that hill," and the surveyor motioned to the left.

"An' they want it? What fer?"

"For ballast."

"Ballast!"

"Certainly. The wise ones have been very uneasy of late, and have done considerable thinking. They have at last concluded that there is too much gravel right on this part of the earth's surface, and so they've decided to shift a portion of it to keep the old ship steady."

"Ye don't tell! An' where are they goin' to take it to?"

"Oh, just to the new railroad. They need ballast for that, and this is extra good stuff."

Abner lifted his old straw hat, and ran his fingers slowly through his hair. His eyes, which had been staring wide, now gradually contracted as he looked off toward the gravel hill. A new light was dawning upon his mind. He was face to face with a problem which he knew would tax his entire supply of "brains, gall, an' luck."

The surveyor, observing the expression upon his face, surmised its meaning, and his eyes twinkled.

"Catch on?" he drawled.

"But where do I come in?" Abner questioned.

"Oh, you're in already."

"Like the toad in the swill-pail, it seems to me. Not there by choice. But what am I to git out of it? That's what I want to know."

"Get out of it! Why, man, you'll be lucky to get out of it alive, same as the toad."

"I will, eh? An' why?"

"Simply because you've allowed that hill of gravel to remain there to endanger the world. That's about the first thing they'll tell you, and they'll put up such a big talk that you'll be glad to pay out your bottom dollar to help them take the gravel away."

"De ye think I'm a fool?" Abner roared, and again his eyes blazed.

"Not exactly, though you acted like one a few minutes ago. But I imagine you'll feel like one when that government bunch gets after you. They're past masters at the art of getting what they want. They will come here in autos, parade around the place, puff their expensive cigars, and hand out such talk that you'll feel small enough to crawl through a rat-hole. Oh, I've seen such cases before, and I know just what they'll do."

"H'm, I guess ye don't know Abner Andrews, then, not by a jugfull, skiddy-me-shins, if ye do. There'll be no crawlin', mind ye, to them big bugs. An' what's more, they'll never set foot on this place without my consent."

"They won't wait for your consent. They didn't send word, I suppose, asking if I might make this survey?"

"No, not a line, the skunks."

"Neither will they ask permission to tramp over your land. They'll come unexpectedly, the same as I have."

"An' they'll go as unexpectedly as they'll come," and Abner stamped upon the ground. "So will you go, young man. I ain't got nuthin' agin you personally, but ye represent that bunch of grafters, so out ye go at once, an' don't ye dare to put ye'r foot upon this place agin without my permission."

But the surveyor never moved. With his right arm resting lightly on the theodolite he fixed his eyes steadily upon the farmer.

"Ain't ye goin'?" Abner demanded.

"No."

"Ye ain't! Well, I guess ye'll change ye'r tune, me hearty, before I'm through with ye."

Suddenly raising the gun by the barrel with both hands, he drew it back over his left shoulder in a most threatening manner.

"Git," he roared, "or I'll knock out ye'r brains, providin' ye've got any."

"Go ahead, then," was the quiet reply.

"What! ain't ye afraid?" Abner asked.

"Afraid of what?"

"That I'll kill ye."

"H'm, I wish you would. It would save me from doing it myself. So hurry up."

Abner's eyes bulged with amazement, and he slowly lowered his gun.

"Say, ye'r not luney, are ye?" he queried.

"Do you think I am?"

"Well, there must be somethin' wrong with a chap who wants to be killed, that's all."

"So you're not going to knock out my brains after all?"

"Naw, I ain't no murderer."

"Too bad," and the surveyor gave a deep sigh. "It's very disappointing."

Abner was now completely bewildered, and he knew not what to do. For once in his life he was unable to make any reply. If the young man had shown the least sign of fear, or had even argued, it would have been different. But to see him so calm and unconcerned was what puzzled him. He was mad, and yet it did no good. The more excited he became, the cooler seemed the surveyor. What was he to do? He did not wish to leave the fellow and go back to the house, as that would be an acknowledgment of defeat.

Happening to glance away to the left, he was much relieved to see Jess walking across the field carrying a dish of wild strawberries she had just picked.

"Hi thar, Jess," he called. "Come here. I want ye."

At these words the surveyor turned his head. Seeing the girl approaching, he suddenly straightened himself up from his listless attitude, while an expression of interest dawned in his eyes.

Jess was certainly fair to look upon as she drew near to where the two men were standing. It was little wonder that the surveyor's heart suddenly thrilled, and his hand touched his hat. Her trim lithe figure was clad in a simple white dress, open at the throat. Her arms were bare to the elbows, and her fingers

bore the crimson stains of the strawberries she had recently picked. Beneath her broad-rimmed hat tresses of wavy dark-brown hair drifted waywardly and temptingly over her sun-browned neck, cheeks and forehead. Her eyes expressed surprise as she glanced at the young man, then at her father, and finally at the grounded gun.

"What's the matter, daddy?" she enquired. "You look dangerous."

"An' I feel dangerous," Abner retorted. "But that's as fer as I kin git, blamed if it ain't."

"But what are you going to do with that gun?"

"Nuthin', 'cept tote it back to the house."

"What did you bring it here for, then?"

"To scare *that*," and Abner motioned toward the surveyor.

Jess looked at the young man and detected an expression of amusement in his eyes, although his face remained perfectly grave.

"What did you want to scare him for, daddy?"

"Cause he's trespassin', that's why. He wants to steal our place."

"Steal our place!" Jess repeated in astonishment.

"Yes, that's jist it. He wants it fer a bunch of government grafters, an' when I threatened to shoot him or brain him he up an' says that he wants to be killed. Now, what de ye make of that?"

A new light of animation now beamed in Jess' eyes, and she advanced a step toward the surveyor. Here was a case which demanded her immediate attention, and she felt much elated.

"Why do you want to be killed?" she asked.

"Simply because there is no reason why I should live," was the reply.

"Oh, nonsense," and Jess stamped her right foot lightly upon the ground.

"You should not utter such words. Why, a man is a coward who wants to die. It proves that he is afraid to live. Isn't that the truth?"

"Perhaps it is. But that's the way I feel, anyway."

"You are looking at things in a wrong light," Jess continued. "You need a new outlook on life, a strong, noble view. That is what will lift you out of the depths of despair. You should read 'Above the Clouds.' It is just the book you need, and I shall gladly let you have my copy."

"Give it to him, Jess," Abner encouraged. "Pile on the Social Service dope. That'll fix him, all right."

"You are too self-centred," Jess went on. "You should not let your thoughts dwell on your own troubles, but think of others and try to help them."

"Good advice, young man," Abner chuckled. "Fergit ye'r worries, like a lobster in bilin' water. Go on, Jess; ye'r doin' fine."

But Jess did not go on. A sudden embarrassment seized her, caused by the

peculiar look she observed in the surveyor's eyes. It was an expression, so she thought, of mingled surprise and amusement. What must he be thinking of her? she asked herself. Her enthusiasm had carried her away. Never before had she spoken to a strange man in such a manner. A deep flush mantled her cheeks, and she glanced nervously around as if anxious to hurry away.

"Surely you're not going to leave," the young man remarked. "I am enjoying myself immensely."

"You are!" It was all Jess could say.

"Certainly. I haven't enjoyed myself so much for a long time. To be held up at the point of a gun; threatened to be brained, and then to listen to such words of wisdom all in one day is most unusual."

"Better'n a movie-show, skiddy-me-shins if it ain't," Abner growled.

For a few seconds there was a dead silence. Then the humor of the situation dawned upon Jess, and a sunny smile wreathed her face and her eyes danced with merriment. The surveyor's laugh, on the other hand, was like a pigmy explosion. He evidently had been controlling himself with the greatest effort, and this outburst was a welcome relief to his pent-up feelings. Jess, too, laughed heartily now, while Abner's face was twisted into a broad grin, as he thumped the stock of his gun several times upon the ground.

"Ho ho!" he roared. "This is a movin'-picture show, all right. Gun, villain, an' gal all here. Why, it beats the movies all holler."

Then he stepped up to the surveyor, and held out his hand.

"Say, young feller," he began, "put it thar. Ye'r all right, an' I guess ye kin go ahead with ye'r surveyin'. I do sartinly like the cut of ye'r jib. Drop around to the house some evenin' an' have a smoke."

"Not 'Above the Clouds,' but in them; is that it?" he asked, turning to Jess.

"Whichever you prefer," was the reply. "Or you may have both, if you wish," she added as an afterthought.

The surveyor watched the father and daughter as they left him and walked slowly across the field. He seemed to be in no hurry to go on with his work, but stood there until the two had disappeared within the house.

"And so that is the noted Abner Andrews, is it?" he mused. "And I was told that he wouldn't let me survey his gravel hill. I've won the bet, all right. He certainly is a queer cuss, and I thought at one time that I wouldn't leave this place alive. How in heaven's name does he happen to have a daughter like that?"

Good Lord, what a girl!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE DUMP SCHEME

"I wonder what the critter wants now."

"Who is it from?" Mrs. Andrews asked, as she paused in her work of beating an egg for one of her special company cakes.

For a few minutes Abner studied the letter he was holding in his hand, and paid no attention to his wife's question. He read it through again very carefully, and when he finished he gave a grunt of disgust.

"It must be serious if it makes you feel like that," Mrs. Andrews ventured.

"Hey, what's that?" Abner demanded. "Was ye speakin', Tildy?"

"Yes, I was. But what's the use of my speaking, when you're as deaf as a post. I was merely asking you who's the letter from?"

"Why, it's from Lawyer Rackshaw. I thought I told ye."

"What does he want?"

"He says he wants to see me on very important bizness. But I can't take the time to go to town this fine weather jist to see him. I've got to git to work hayin'."

"But you are going to town, anyway, in the morning, daddy," Jess reminded, looking up from the apples she was peeling.

"I am, eh? An' what for, I'd like to know?"

"Belle is coming on the morning train, and you must meet her."

"Oh, Lord!" Abner groaned. "I fergot all about her. Say, Jess, you take Jerry an' go fer her."

"I'm afraid I can't, daddy. There is so much work I have to do in the morning that I must stay at home. And, besides, you have to see Lawyer Rackshaw."

"So I have, confound it! But how'll I know the gal when I see her, tell me that?"

"Oh, you'll have no trouble. She has beautiful auburn hair."

"Red hair! Oh, my!" and Abner spread out his hands in dismay. "What next? Pink eyes?"

"No, no," and Jess laughed. "Not pink eyes, but sparkling dark ones, animated face, and such beautiful white teeth."

"Whew! I'll know the red hair, sparklin' eyes, an' animated face, all right, won't I, Tildy? I'll be Abner-on-the-spot as fer as they're consarned. But white teeth! How'll I know they're white? Will I have to ask her to open her mouth good an' wide so's I kin see?"

"I guess that won't be necessary," Jess laughingly replied. "As soon as Belle opens her mouth to speak, which she does very often, you will see her teeth, all right. You will know her anyway, for she is sure to be well dressed, and not likely she will be wearing any hat. It's a fad of hers."

"No hat! Gee whittaker! I wish you'd do the same, Jess; it'd save a lot of money."

Abner rose to his feet, picked up his hat, and reached for his pipe.

"I'm goin' over to see Lost Tribes, Tildy," he announced. "I want to know how Widder Denton is makin' out with her kids. Anything ye want me to do before I go?"

"Yes, you can bring in a pail of water and some wood. You might as well fasten up the chicken-coops, as I am too busy. I wish you'd set a trap, for there was a skunk around last night."

"H'm, is that so? Well, I guess it's the bear-trap I'd better set. There'll be more skunks around this place before long, if I'm not mistaken, an' two-legged ones at that. There was one here yesterday, but I soon cleared him out."

"Who was that?" Mrs. Andrews sharply asked. "What in the world were you up to?"

"It was Ikey Dimock. He was the skunk. He wants to buy our farm fer a summer place. What de ye think o' that?"

Abner slipped out of the house before his wife could recover from her astonishment to question him further.

"I've given Tildy a jolt," he chuckled, as he moved across the field toward Zeb's house. "I wonder what she'd think of the Dimocks livin' here? Mebbe it'll make her consider the old place is of some value after all."

Abner soon returned, harnessed Jerry and drove into town. He was hitching his horse to the post near the station-house when the agent appeared around the corner of the building.

"Mornin', Sam," he accosted. "How's the train?"

"On time," was the reply. "Expecting anyone?"

Abner gave the rope a final yank, and then turned toward the agent.

"Say, Sam," he began, "will ye do me a favor?"

"What is it?"

"Well, ye see, I'm expectin' company on the train this mornin', an' as you're mighty slick with women folks I thought mebbe ye'd meet her, in case I don't git back in time."

"Meet who?" Sam demanded in surprise.

"Why, Belle Rivers, of course. Didn't I tell ye? She's the 'torney General's gal, an' she's comin' on a visit to our place. I'm here to meet her, but if you'd do it fer me, break the ice, so to speak, I'd consider it a great favor."

Sam was all alert now, and keen with interest. The Attorney General Rivers' daughter! What a piece of news he would have for the reporter of *The Live Wire* when he made his regular afternoon call. The whole town would be agog at the news, and he mentally pictured the excitement of Mrs. Dimock and Mrs. Rackshaw when they heard it.

"Will ye do it, Sam?" Abner asked.

"Sure, I shall be only too delighted. But how shall I know her?"

"Oh, ye'll have no trouble. Let me see," and Abner scratched the back of his head. "Jess gave me a full description. She's got hair like fire; eyes like diamonds; cheeks like roses; and teeth like the white of an egg; dresses like one of the fashion picters, an' doesn't wear any hat."

"Gee whiz!" Sam exclaimed. "If she's all that she must be worth looking at. And, say, Mr. Andrews, I didn't know you were so poetical."

"Poetical! What de ye mean?"

"Why, the way you described Miss Rivers. I never heard you use such language before."

"Oh, that ain't nuthin' to what I kin do. Ye should hear me when Bill Kincaid's cows break into my oats. Then ye'd know somethin' about my command of the English language."

"I guess there wouldn't be much poetry about such language, would there?" Sam smilingly bantered. "A poet, for instance, needs to be inspired, so I understand."

"An' de ye think I'm not inspired when I'm chasin' them cows? Tildy says I am, an' I guess the cows do, too, by the way they run. I know I feel inspired, anyway, an' I'm all het up an' excited fer the rest of the day. That's the way poets look when they're inspired, accordin' to the picters I've seen of 'em. But, there, I must be off. Ye'll look after that gal, Sam, like a good feller, won't ye? Show her my waggon there, an' tell her she kin study the sights of the town while she waits. If she's nervous, homesick, or anythin' like that, ye might take her into the waitin'-room. I'll make it all right with ye, Sam. Don't fergit what she looks like, 'specially the red hair."

Lawyer Rackshaw was seated at his office desk as Abner entered. He rose briskly to his feet, and grasped the farmer by the hand.

"I've just come in," he told him, "and am enjoying my usual morning smoke. Sit right down and have a cigar."

"Another ten-center, eh?" Abner queried, as he sat down, crossed his legs,

bit off the end of the Havana, and struck a match.

"Yes, Mr. Andrews, it's the real thing, all right. I was quite certain you would call to-day, and so had it ready. You received my letter?"

"Sure; that's why I'm here. I allus hustle when I git a letter from a lawyer jist the same as I do when a hen hollers, fer then I know a hawk's after her. It's a sure sign there's somethin' important astir."

A peculiar smile lurked in the lawyer's eyes as he reached out and picked up a paper lying upon the desk.

"I hope this is not a case of the hen and the hawk," he replied, as he tilted back in his chair and bent his eyes on the paper.

"Hope not," Abner sighed, as he blew forth a great cloud of smoke. "But, then, one kin never tell."

"This has merely to do with the new Orphan Home," the lawyer explained, "and no matter what tricks there might be in other matters, there must be nothing shady in a transaction where poor helpless children are concerned."

"Ye're sartinly right," Abner assented. "When it comes to the care of poor little orphans everythin' must be squared with the great Golden Rule, as old Parson Shaw used to say. How's the Home gittin' along, anyway?"

"First rate. It's in connection with that I wish to speak to you to-day."

"I thought so. Is the buildin' up yit?"

"Oh, no. It's been such a short time since the meeting that we've been able to do little more than settle upon a suitable situation for the institution. We have given considerable thought to the matter, and are most fortunate in obtaining a plot of ground at a very reasonable cost."

"Cost!" Abner exclaimed in astonishment. "Will it cost anythin' fer a piece of ground fer the Home? Why, there's lots of idle land in this town."

"But none so suitable as the one we have settled upon. And it is reasonable, too, considering the many advantages connected with it, such as the fine view, and the distance from private dwellings. It will cost us only one thousand dollars for such a situation as that."

"One thousand dollars!" Abner almost leaped out of his chair. "Good Lord! Has this town come to that, when it wants one thousand dollars fer a piece of ground fer an Orphan Home! Where is this wonderful spot, I'd like to know, an' who owns it?"

"It lies just outside of the town, near the creek, and is a part of the land owned by Mr. Henry Whittles."

"What! The dump?"

"Well, you see, it's not all dump, as there is more land surrounding it which will make an excellent playground for the children."

"An' Hen Whittles wants one thousand dollars fer that?"

"He says he is willing to let it go at that sum, considering what it is to be used for."

"He is sartinly generous. An' so I s'pose ye want the money I offered to pay fer it, eh?"

"Yes, if you can find it convenient to let us have it now. As soon as we get the matter of the land settled we can rush the building along."

This was more than Abner could stand. His pent-up wrath and righteous indignation could be controlled no longer. Bounding from his seat, he towered above the legal light of Glucom. He thrust out his big right hand toward the lawyer's face, forgetting in his excitement that the fingers of that hand clutched the partly smoked cigar. He hardly realized what he was doing. But the lawyer did, and when the hot end of the cigar came into sudden contact with the tip of his nose, he emitted a yell of pain and lurched violently back in an effort to escape the onslaught. The result was most disastrous, for the sudden recoil sent swivel-chair and occupant backwards upon the floor.

With as much dignity as possible the lawyer picked himself up, righted the chair, and sat down again. He was mad, and longed to turn his sharp tongue upon the cause of the disaster. But he was shrewd enough to control his temper, and pretend to make light of the mishap. He would get more than even in due time. But the end of his nose was smarting painfully, and he could not keep his fingers away from the injured member.

Abner was at first surprised at the lawyer's sudden collapse. Then a smile lightened his face.

"De ye do that every day?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Cut up sich capers. Regular mornin' exercise, I s'pose."

"Certainly not. Do you think I'm accustomed to having a hot cigar dashed into my nose every morning?"

"Well, it's not altogether likely, oh, no. But judgin' by the color of ye'r nose I'd say it's been affected by somethin' more fiery than a hot ten-cent cigar."

"Ye do, eh?" The lawyer was visibly irritated now.

"I sure do. But that was an inward application, while mine was outward. It was merely a touch of Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, an' when an' where he touches there's generally somethin' doin' which ain't allus pleasant to the feelin's, either."

"I hope your touch is not always as hot as the one you just applied to my nose, anyway," the lawyer replied.

"Oh, it's a dam sight hotter sometimes, let me tell ye that, 'specially when there's somethin' crooked afoot."

"What are you driving at?"

"What am I drivin' at? Why, at that Orphan Home affair. It jist twists me all to pieces when I think of Hen Whittles wantin' one thousand dollars fer that dump of his, an' him one of the richest men in Glucom, at that."

"But surely you don't expect him to give it for nothing, do you?" the lawyer queried.

"An' why not? It's worth nuthin', an' what's more, Hen Whittles should be fined fer keepin' sich a disgraceful place so near town. Every time I drive past that spot I have to hold me nose, the smell is so bad. An' sich a mess of stuff! Tin cans, dead cats an' dogs, an' every blamed thing that isn't of any use is dumped there. It'd take more'n a thousand dollars to clean it up. The Board of Health should git after Hen an' make him squirm like an angle-worm on a hook."

"But what are we going to do about it?" the lawyer asked, now greatly annoyed.

"Do about it?" Abner roared, rising to his feet. "Why, git a decent place, of course. There's lots of land in town fer that Home without puttin' it on top of a stinkin' dump."

"But suppose we can't get any other place?"

"Then come to Ash Pint. If the people of this town are as mean as all that, I'll give 'em all the land they want fer the Home. An' it'll be clean land, too, with a great view, plenty of fresh air, an' the river right near where the youngsters kin swim. That's all I've got to say."

Abner picked up his hat and started for the door when the lawyer detained him.

"Surely you're not going to back down," he coolly remarked.

"Back down! On what?"

"On the offer you made, that is, the money you promised to give for the Home."

"Back down! No! Did ye ever hear of Abner Andrews backin' down? I'm jist buckin' up, that's what I'm doin'. I'm not goin' to give a red cent fer Hen Whittles' stinkin' dump, so you an' the rest of the gang kin chew on that fer a while."

CHAPTER IX

A SLIP OF A GAL

When Abner had closed the door behind him, he stood in the middle of the sidewalk and looked at his watch. He had half an hour to spare before the arrival of the train, and that would allow him plenty of time to visit the dump, and give it a thorough inspection. He was mad, and to look again upon the mass of rubbish collected there would afford him considerable satisfaction.

It took him but ten minutes to reach the place. Here he stopped and viewed the locality. He longed to have Henry Whittles by his side that he might give expression to the feeling of indignation which was agitating his soul. But not a person could he behold. It was a most unsavoury spot, and the only living creatures there were several crows feasting upon some carrion not far off.

"An' so this is where they want to build the Home!" he growled. "Good Lord! what a place! Why, it's nuthin' more'n the Toefat of the Bible, which I've heard old Parson Shaw speak about. He said it was the place where them ancient divils sacrificed their children to their god Mulick. But I guess we've got jist as big divils now as they had then, an' mebbe a darn sight bigger. Them old fellers didn't know any better. It was a part of their religion, so I understand. But these modern cusses want to sacrifice poor little orphan kids in a hole like this, when they know better, an' have lots of other land where they kin build that Home. An' they call it 'charity.' Holy Smoke! It makes me mad. I want to hit somebody, an' I'd like that somebody to be Hen Whittles. An' him pertendin' to be a Christian. Bah!"

So intense were Abner's feelings that he forgot all about the train. He could think only of the meanness of Henry Whittles and those who were in league with him. Not a cent of money would he give, so he vowed, if they persisted in placing the Home in such a vile place. He knew that it could be levelled off, and cleaned up to a certain extent. But that would take much of the money needed for the erection of the building. Then he thought of Lawyer Rackshaw and his contemptible dealings with Widow Denton. He was glad that his nose had been scorched, and that he had tumbled backwards upon the floor.

"Pity he hadn't broken his neck," he muttered. "This town could well do without sich a thing as that."

Abner was aroused from his reverie by the screech of the train as it approached a crossing about half a mile from the station. He glanced at his watch in astonishment, and then hurried back through the town.

"I had no idea it was train time," he mused. "But I guess Sam'll look after the gal all right. Not bein' there will save me a lot of fussin'. Sam likes that kind of thing, 'specially when a pretty gal's consarned."

Abner was about one hundred yards from the station when he saw a horse,

drawing an express waggon, coming toward him. As it approached, he noticed that a woman held the reins, and that she was bareheaded. In a twinkling the truth flashed upon him, and he paused, uncertain what to do. He knew that it was Belle Rivers driving Jerry at an unusually fast clip. She was using the whip, too, and it was quite evident that Jerry was receiving the surprise of his life.

At first Abner was astonished. Then he grew indignant, and sprang into the middle of the street as Jerry drew near. He reached out to grasp the horse by the bridle, but as he did so the fair driver brought the whip stingingly down upon his head. With a roar Abner made for the waggon, but was met with another and yet another well-aimed blow.

This excitement, combined with the flourishing of the whip, was more than Jerry could stand. With lowered head, he sped along the street, leaving a huge cloud of dust in his wake. Abner had just time to leap and seize the end of the express as it dashed by, and to pull himself partly aboard. He sprawled across the tailboard, holding on by his elbows, and balancing himself upon his stomach, with his feet beating a tattoo upon the ground. He tried to clutch at something, but the rattle of the waggon, and the steady rain of blows upon his head and shoulders, prevented him from making any progress. And there he hung, speechless and helpless.

The people on the main street of Glucom were greatly excited at the strange spectacle they beheld. They could only stand and stare, unable to do anything. But one of the few policemen of which the town boasted happened to be coming along that very moment, and sprang into the middle of the street to intercept what he believed was a runaway horse. The driver saw him and, with considerable difficulty, reined up Jerry by his side.

"Arrest that man," she ordered, turning around and pointing to Abner, who had just tumbled off the waggon.

"Arrest her," Abner shouted, struggling unsteadily to his feet.

"Why, what's the meaning of all this, Mr. Andrews?" the policeman enquired.

"She stole my hoss an' waggon, an' beat me black an' blue; that's what's the matter."

A startled expression suddenly overspread Belle Rivers' face, and she dropped the reins upon her lap.

"Mr. Andrews!" It was all she could say, as her eyes swiftly scanned Abner's unshaven face, rough, dust-covered clothes, and coarse unblackened boots.

"Yes, it's Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint," he chuckled, noting the girl's embarrassment.

"But I didn't know, that is, I didn't expect——" the girl stammered.

"Oh, no, ye didn't know him. Expected to find him a reg'lar country gentleman, eh? With tan shoes, pants all creased down in front, big panyma hat, an' smokin' a ten-cent cigar."

The girl's cheeks were scarlet as she listened to this charge, which she knew was absolutely true. Then the humor of the situation dawned upon her, and a smile wreathed her face.

"Will you forgive me, Mr. Andrews?" she asked. "I have been cruelly rude."

"But what about me head and shoulders?" Abner queried. "Will ye'r sweet apology cure the lumps ye made with that confounded whip?"

"Perhaps not, but when we get home I shall attend to your bruises with my own hands."

"Ye'll only make 'em worse," Abner growled.

"Say, Mr. Andrews," the policeman interposed, "I've a good mind to arrest you."

"Arrest me! Why?"

"As an idiot."

"Idiot!" Abner was staring hard now at the guardian of the law.

"Yes, as an idiot. You must surely be one, or you'd jump at the chance of having your head and shoulders attended to by the likes of her. I wish it had been me she threshed."

This view of the situation appealed to Abner, and he squinted an eye at the policeman.

"I see ye'r pint, Tom, an' it's a good one. Guess I'd better hustle home, fer I do feel mighty sore."

Scrambling up over the wheel, he flopped himself down by Belle's side and picked up the reins.

"Well, s'long, Tom. Much obliged fer ye'r help an' advice. Will see ye later. Gid-dap, Jerry."

After they had fairly started on the homeward way, Abner pulled out his pipe and tobacco.

"De ye mind smokin'?" he asked.

"No, not at all," the girl replied. "I enjoy the smell of tobacco."

"That's good. Me nerves are a bit upshot to-day, an' terbaccer allus steadies 'em."

"I am afraid that I am the cause of your trouble, Mr. Andrews. I had no idea that it was you I was whipping, but thought it was a scoundrel wishing to harm me."

"Ye didn't know me, eh? Well, where in the name of all creation was ye goin' with Jerry?"

"Merely for a drive. I didn't want to sit in the waggon with the young men

at the station staring at me, so I thought I would drive around for a while until you came back. That was all.”

”H’m, so that was the way of it, eh? But I do admire ye’r pluck. The way ye walloped me was sartinly wonderful, an’ you only a slip of a gal at that.”

”I’m used to taking care of myself, Mr. Andrews. In fact, I like an adventure once in a while, for it adds a little spice to life.”

”Sure, sure, ye’r right, Miss. Guess we must be somethin’ alike as fer’s that’s consarned.”

”And you are fond of adventure, too; of real exciting experiences?” the girl eagerly asked.

”Yes; it’s meat an’ drink to me.”

”But you don’t find much adventure on a quiet farm, do you?”

”Adventure! Well, I guess ye don’t know Ash Pint yit. Why, my old farm is so light that I have to keep it anchored down fer fear it’ll go up like a balloon.”

”Oh!”

”Yep; that’s Gospel truth. G’long, Jerry. Then, there’s a gravel hill on my place which makes the earth top heavy, an’ so the Government is goin’ to take it away.”

”You don’t say so! Why, Jess never told me anything about such things.”

”Oh, she’s used to ’em. Anyway, she’s so sot on Social Service that she can’t come down to common things. Say, de you swaller all that stuff?”

”What stuff?”

”Social Service gas, an’ what it’ll do fer the world, sich as elevatin’ pigs into hogs an’ sich like.”

”I try to be interested,” and Belle gave a deep sigh. ”Jess is so wrapped up in her work that I do all I can to help her. But I ani afraid that I’m too light-headed for such things.”

”Light-headed, be fiddled,” Abner growled. ”Ye may be light-headed as fer as the color of ye’r hair goes, but no further, skiddy-me-shins if ye are. Ye’r all right, an’ I’m mighty glad ye’r not loney over that Social Service bizness.”

”You are!”

”’Deed I am, an’ I wish to goodness that Jess ’ud git sich nonsense knocked out of her head.”

”But it doesn’t hurt her, does it?” Belle queried. ”I don’t believe anything could change Jess from the sweet, jolly girl that she always is.”

”Oh, no, Jess is all right that way. But, ye see, she wants to go away to some big city instead of stayin’ at home where there’s a darn sight of elevatin’ to be done. That’s what riles me.”

”Oh, I see,” Belle meditatively replied. ”You wish her to remain with you?”

”That’s jist it, Miss. There’s only me an’ Tildy, an’ it needs someone to

brighten up the house a bit. I tell ye our house doesn't allus have a heavenly atmosphere when we're alone, not by a jugful. The best wheel an' axle will git hot an' make an unholy noise if they run too long together without bein' greased. I guess most married folks are that way."

"I understand," and Belle smiled. "Jess acts as a go-between to make affairs run smoothly.

"Yep, that's jist it. She's the grease, an' she sartinly works wonders in stoppin' the creakin' in our house. That's why I want her to stay with us."

"Have you spoken to Jess about it?" Belle asked.

"Sure. Had a long talk with her."

"And what did she say?"

"Said there wasn't enough to do at home; that she needed more sailin' room. I wish to goodness she'd lower her sail, an' drop anchor at Ash Pint. It 'ud make all the difference in the world to me an' Tildy."

"Then you must see that she does," was the emphatic reply.

"Does what? Lower her sail and drop anchor at home?"

"Yes."

"But how kin I do it?"

"Get something important for her to do along Social Service lines. That will keep her for a while at least."

"But what kin she do?"

"I cannot say now, but perhaps something will turn up. We must try to work out a plan which will prove attractive."

"Say, you've got a shrewd head on ye'r shoulders, Miss. I guess you've hit the bull's-eye, all right. Yes, we must git an anchor of some kind that'll hold solid."

These two were now becoming firm friends, and they talked about various matters. Belle explained about her life at the Seminary, and Abner told about the proposed Orphan Home, and his conversation that morning with Lawyer Rackshaw. He was somewhat surprised with himself for talking in such a free and easy manner. But the girl was so sympathetic and willing to listen, that he found it a great comfort to confide in her.

"Ye won't say a word about this to Tildy an' Jess, will ye?" he asked. "They don't seem to understand sich things. But you do, an' that's why I've said more to you than to anyone else."

"I'm good at keeping secrets, Mr. Andrews," was the reply, "and I thank you for your confidence."

"It's them Denton kids I'm worryin' about," Abner explained. "They should be put into a good home at once. I really don't know what will become of 'em, to say nuthin' about the widder."

They were in sight of Ash Point now, and Abner directed Belle's attention to his house some distance ahead, nestling among the trees.

"It ain't much of a place," he apologized, "but ye'll git a hearty welcome, lots of room, an' plenty of fresh air. It's a mighty healthy place, if I do say it."

He paused and a peculiar expression suddenly lightened his face. He straightened himself up with a jerk, and brought the palm of his hand down upon his knee with a whack.

"Anything wrong?" Belle enquired.

"Nuthin' but a kink. I have it sometimes an' it makes me kinder queer."

"Where does it affect you?"

"Ginerally in me head."

"That's serious, isn't it? What do you do for it?"

"Jist git out an' make it hustle."

"Make what hustle? The kink?"

"That's it, 'specially if it's a dandy."

"A dandy!"

"Yep; a dandy idea. That's what I've got. But here we are at home, an' there's Tildy an' Jess waitin' at the door."

CHAPTER X

AN UNEXPECTED JOLT

It was a hot afternoon, and Zebedee Burns found the shade of the big maple near his workshop very refreshing. He was sitting with his back against the trunk of the tree, his eyes riveted upon the front page of *The Live Wire*, which the mailman had just left. So intent was he upon what he was reading that he did not notice a man walking toward him from the road. It was Abner, who, when a few yards away, stopped and stood for a few seconds studying his neighbor.

"Some people kin take life easy," Abner presently remarked. "Comes nat'ral, I guess."

Zebedee merely glanced at his visitor, and without a word continued his reading.

"What's the news, Zeb?" Abner asked, coming close and squatting down upon the grass. "Must be mighty interestin' by the way ye keep ye'r eyes glued upon that page."

Zebedee lowered the paper and looked quizzically at his companion.

"Say, Abner," he began, "what were ye doin' yesterday?"

"What was I doin' yesterday! What de ye mean? Wasn't I Abner Andrews?"

"Ye couldn't have been accordin' to this mornin's paper. Ye must have been one o' them ancients ye've told me about so often, an' a mighty savage one at that."

"Hey, what are ye givin' me? What's that dirty sheet sayin' about decent people now?"

"Isn't it true?"

"What true?"

"That you acted like a fool or a lunatic in town yesterday; waylaid a girl drivin' along Main street; that she beat you black an' blue with her whip, an' then had you arrested?"

Abner was on his feet in an instant, greatly excited.

"Is that what it says?" he roared.

"Sure, haven't I jist told ye?"

"But doesn't it explain anythin'? Doesn't it tell who the gal was, an' why I did what I did?"

"Here, read it fer ye'rself," and Zeb handed him the paper.

Slowly and carefully Abner read the article which occupied a prominent position, and was featured in big headlines. The writer had made the most of the incident, and the fact that the girl was the daughter of the Attorney General added all the more to the interest. The story was distorted beyond all semblance of reality and mingled with humor. It ended by saying that the culprit was allowed to go owing to the girl, who interceded on his behalf.

Abner's body trembled from the vehemence of his anger, and when he had finished reading he thrust the paper under Zebedee's nose.

"De ye believe that?" he demanded.

"Ain't it true?" Zeb asked.

"True! True! Did ye ever see anythin' true in that rag? It's a lie, a d—n lie, an' I'm goin' to punch the nose of that feller wot wrote it, see if I don't."

"Ye better be careful," Zeb warned. "Ye might have to punch several noses, the editor's included."

"An' de ye think I can't do it? I kin wipe up the hull bunch with one hand. I'll make 'em take backwater, an' apologize right smart. Why can't they leave decent honest people alone? They've got more ink than brains. If they'd spend some of their energy writin' about Hen Whittles' vile dump, an' how he wants to sell the place fer one thousand dollars fer that Orphan Home, it 'ud be more sensible."

"Are they thinkin' of puttin' the Home on that dump?" Zeb asked in sur-

prise.

"That's jist it. An' they want my money to buy the hole, which is a dam sight worse than that old Toefat of the Bible."

"Did they ask you fer the money?"

"Sure. Lawyer Rackshaw is doin' the bizness, an' when he asked me yesterday fer the money, I burnt the end of his nose with the cigar I was smokin'. It was too bad to spoil a good cigar on a thing like that."

"An' what did he do?"

"Nuthin' 'cept tumble backwards on the floor, chair an' all. He got the jolt of his life that time, all right."

"Ye better be careful," Zeb advised. "Lawyer Rackshaw's not likely to fergit a thing like that, an' I've heard say that he never fergives."

"I hope he won't fergit his burnt nose, an' I don't care a blue divil if he doesn't fergive."

"You must like to be in hot water, Abner."

"I don't mind at all, 'specially when others are in with me. I've got a pretty tough skin, an' kin stand more'n most people."

"Guess ye'r right, Abner," Zeb agreed, as he rose to his feet. "I must git to work now."

Abner went back to his haying, and worked with feverish energy. He was more irritated than usual over the article which had appeared in *The Live Wire*, and he vowed that the editor should apologize for the insult.

"Mebbe they'll find that they can't take liberties with Abner Andrews," he muttered, "even though he doesn't wear biled shirts an' white collars."

When he had worked for about half an hour he went into the house for a drink of buttermilk. As he came out of the milk-room he heard a knock upon the front door.

"Who in time kin that be, now?" he growled, as he shuffled through the dining-room and into the hall-way. Glancing through the small window, he saw an auto in front of the house, with a young man at the wheel.

The door was locked and when Abner tried to turn the key it stuck.

"Hang the thing," he growled. "What's the matter with it, anyway?"

After several minutes of desperate efforts, punctured by numerous ejaculations of disgust and anger, the key turned, the lock moved, and Abner pulled the door open with a savage yank. Great was his surprise to see standing before him a smartly dressed woman, smiling in a most pleasant manner.

"Excuse me," she began. "I am sorry to give you so much trouble. But does Mr. Andrews live here?"

"Naw, he jist sleeps here, an' lives out of doors."

"But it's your place, isn't it?"

"Yes, I s'pose so, when Tildy's not around."

"I have come to see Miss Rivers," the woman explained. "She's staying with you, is she not?"

"Yep, she's here all right, but jist now she's out pickin' berries with Tildy an' Jess. So ye want to see her, eh?"

"Yes, if it's not too much trouble."

"Tain't no trouble fer me, though it might be fer Belle. Come in an' set down while I toot the horn."

Throwing open a door to the left, Abner ushered the visitor into the parlor.

"Set right down, an' make ye'rself at home," he told her.

The woman smiled to herself as Abner left her. Then she studied the room most critically, from the old-fashioned piano to the fresh flowers in the vase upon the center-table.

"Strange that the Attorney General's daughter should be visiting here," she mused. "What an ignorant and uncouth man that farmer is. His language was most profane when he was trying to open the door."

Presently the long-drawn blast of the tin horn sounded upon her ears, and again she smiled, but it was the smile of contempt.

"How primitive," she meditated. "And to think of Miss Rivers picking berries like an ordinary country girl! I wonder if her father knows where she is, and what she is doing. I believe the Andrewses have a daughter. I suppose I must invite her, too."

In a few minutes Abner returned, sat down upon a chair near the piano, and crossed his legs.

"There, I guess that'll bring her," he remarked. "Tildy'll think the house is on fire. She's most scared to death of fire, Tildy is."

"You have a beautiful place here," and the woman glanced out of the window on her left as she spoke.

"Tain't too bad, considerin' everythin'."

"And the view is magnificent, Mr. Andrews."

"So Ikey Dimock told me t'other day."

"Was Mr. Dimock here?"

"Yep. He called to see me when I was hoein' pertaters."

"He did! And what did he want?" The woman seemed unusually curious, and this Abner noted.

"He wanted to buy my place," he explained.

"Buy your place!"

"Yep. Wanted it as a summer place fer his family, so he said."

"Did you come to any agreement?"

"Should say not. I ain't anxious to sell, 'specially to Ikey Dimock."

"Why?"

"Oh, me an' him don't jibe; never did."

"You have known him for some time, then?"

"Should say I have. Why, I knew Ikey Dimock when he was pickin' pin-feathers off his mother's chickens when she was gittin' 'em ready fer market."

At these words the bland expression suddenly left the woman's face, and she straightened herself up haughtily in her chair.

"Mr. Dimock is of good family, so I understand," she challenged.

"Deed he is," was Abner's unexpected agreement. "I knew Ikey's dad well, an' he was the best man I ever saw at steerin' clear of a job. Why, when he was with me on my old Flyin' Scud he spent most of his time plannin' how to git clear of his work. He surely was great at that."

"But he was honest, at any rate, was he not?" the woman asked, now visibly annoyed.

"Honest? He was the honestest man I ever sot eyes on. Why, he was so honest that he was allus tryin' to take care of his neighbors' property. Everythin' he could git his hands on he would take home. He was so honest that at last his neighbors allus kept their barns an' stables locked."

"Do you mean to tell me that he was a thief?" the woman demanded. "You seem to have a very poor opinion of him."

"Yaas, almost as poor an opinion as old Judge Watkins, who sentenced him to six months in jail fer stealin' oats from Bill Armstrong's barn. Ye kin call that anythin' ye like, but the Judge called it stealin', an' he generally knew what he was talkin' about."

The woman was evidently much annoyed at this candid portrayal of the elder Dimock. She glanced toward the door as if meditating a speedy departure. Abner noted this, and it amused him.

"I wonder what in time's keepin' Tildy," he remarked. "She generally comes home like a steam engine, pantin' an' puffin', when I blow the horn at this time of the day. I wish to goodness she'd come, fer I was never any good at entertainin' company, 'specially women."

"You have certainly entertained me in a most unexpected, and, I might add, unpleasant, manner," the woman retorted. "I am not fond of having past histories raked up. It isn't pleasant."

"I reckon it ain't, 'specially sich a one as that of the Dimock family."

"But surely you should not blame Mr. Isaac Dimock for what his father did. He, at any rate, is above reproach, and you can't bring any unworthy charge against him."

"That's true," Abner assented. "It 'ud be no use bringin' any charge aginst Ikey so long as he's hand an' glove with the Government. It 'ud only be workin'

fer nuthin'. Ye couldn't ketch him, not by a jugful."

"Why, what has the Government to do with Mr. Dimock?" the woman asked in apparent surprise.

"It has a great deal to do with him, an' almost any fool could tell ye that. The Government has made Ikey Dimock jist what he is, if ye want to know the plain truth."

"It has! In what way?"

"H'm," and Abner shifted significantly. "Hasn't the Government been feedin' him with pap fer years now? Supplyin' him with big contracts fer hardware, an' givin' him great rake-offs in all sorts of government work? That's the way Ikey Dimock made his money, an' he's nuthin' more'n a chip off the old block. They called it stealin' when his dad took the oats from Bill Armstrong's barn, but now they call it 'high finance,' or some sich name. But it's stealin' jist the same. I could tell ye a few things if I had a mind to."

The woman, however, could stand no more. She had risen to her feet, her face pale, and her eyes blazing with anger.

"Do you know who I am?" she witheringly asked.

"Don't ye know ye'rself? If ye don't, how de ye expect me to?"

"I am Mrs. Isaac Dimock, that's who I am, and I shall tell my husband what you have been saying about him and his father."

"That won't be any news to Ikey; better tell him somethin' new. He knows that already."

"Why, I never had anyone talk to me in such an insolent way before," the woman protested. "I didn't come here to be insulted."

"Is tellin' the truth insultin' ye?" Abner asked, as he, too, rose to his feet. "If the truth of many things was known it 'ud be better fer all consarned. But, there, I hear the women now. I guess ye've had enough of me."

Abner slipped out of the house as speedily as possible, after telling his wife that a visitor was in the parlor. He sat down upon the wood-pile, and meditated over what had just taken place.

"Ho! ho!" he chuckled. "Her ladyship got a jolt to-day, all right. She thought I didn't know her, eh? I knew her the minute I sot eyes on her. She didn't like what I said about the Dimocks. But I could have told her somethin', too, about her own family-tree. My, wasn't she mad! Ho, ho!"

CHAPTER XI

TOWN RATS

"It seems to me, Tildy," Abner remarked, "that your breakin' into Society is some-thin' like the time I broke through the ice skatin' up river."

"In what way?" Mrs. Andrews asked, as she adjusted her hat.

Abner was stretched out upon the kitchen sofa, enjoying his evening smoke, and watching his wife as she gave the final touches to her toilet.

"Well, ye see," he explained, "my breakin' through the ice was very sudden. It was as unexpected as you goin' to Mrs. Ikey Dimock's party."

"And as unpleasant, why don't you say, Abner?"

"That's jist what I was a-goin' to say, Tildy. I think your reception will be about as cool as my duckin' in the river. Mrs. Ikey is not anxious to have ye there, not by a jugful."

"Don't I know that," snapped Mrs. Andrews. "But you understand as well as I do that the girls wouldn't go without me, and so Mrs. Dimock just had to ask me. I tried to get out of going, but finally had to consent. I'm sure I shan't enjoy myself one bit."

"Jist about as much as I did out in the river, with water up to me chin, clingin' to the ice with me fingernails, an' yellin' blue-murder. I hadn't any idea the water was so deep where I went in. Gee whiz! It was easy to go in, but mighty hard to git out. Mebbe that'll be the way with you, Tildy, eh?"

"What, do you think I'll want to keep this thing up, Abner? If you do, then you're much mistaken. I'm sick of it already."

"That's all right, Tildy. I know ye've got enough common sense not to want to be a society belle at ye'r time of life. But ye see, as Mrs. Ikey has invited you to her party, she'll expect you to do somethin' in return. Society, as I understand it, is jist ordinary trade. Ye don't git things fer nuthin'. Mrs. Ikey invites you, then you must invite her, an' that's the way it goes. How does that strike ye, Tildy?"

Before Mrs. Andrews could reply, Belle and Jess entered the kitchen. Abner's eyes brightened as he saw them, and he viewed them with critical eyes.

"My, my!" he exclaimed, "you two'll cut a dash tonight fer sure. Why, all the young fellers in Glucom will be tumblin' over one another."

"So long as they don't tumble over us we won't care," Belle laughingly replied. "We're not out for conquests, are we, Jess?"

"I'm not, anyway," the latter declared. "I haven't any time or inclination to bother with such things."

Abner's eyes twinkled, and he turned to his wife.

"Guess it's up to you, Tildy, to do the grand tonight. These gals don't want any fellers. But there's the car, so yez better hustle."

Abner accompanied the women to the road, and stood watching until the car had disappeared from view.

"Well, well," he mused, "to think of Tildy goin' to a party at Mrs. Ikey Dimock's, an' in Mrs. Ikey's ear, at that! What's goin' to happen next? Wonders'll never cease."

Abner went back to the house, locked the door, and strolled over to Zeb's. He wished to discuss his big idea with his neighbor, and learn what he thought about it. He remained for over an hour, and when he at length left he was much elated. Zeb had been more reasonable than usual, and had agreed that his idea was a good one, and worth trying.

Abner had been home but a short time when he heard a noise at the back door. Then children's voices fell upon his ears, accompanied by a child's cry. Wondering what it could mean, Abner threw open the door, and peered out. It was dark, but not dark enough to prevent his seeing two little figures standing before him.

"Hello! Who in time are yez, an' what de yez want at this hour of the night?" he demanded.

"Are you our uncle?" a little voice asked.

"Uncle! Guess ye've struck the wrong spot this time. Better move on."

"But you must be our uncle," the voice insisted. "The man wot left us here said you are our Uncle Abner."

"Well, I ain't, so that's the end of it," was the curt reply.

At these words the two little creatures broke into a pitiful cry. Abner was helpless and in a quandary.

"What are we to do?" came the wailing question. "The man is gone and we're lost."

"Lost, eh? Well, come in, then, till I have a look at yez."

Quickly the children obeyed, and soon were standing in the middle of the room, two forlorn objects of distress and misery. They were boys, one about seven years of age, the other five. Their clothes were ragged and their faces looked as if they had not been washed for days. But there was something about them that appealed to Abner, whose heart was always affected by the helpless and the unfortunate. The little visitors showed no sign of fear, but stood watching Abner with big, beautiful dark eyes.

"So ye're huntin' fer ye'r uncle, eh?" Abner queried.

"Yep," the older boy replied.

"Yeth," came the other.

"Who brought yez here?"

"A man."

"A man," came the echo.

"An' he gave me this," and the boy held out a piece of soiled paper, which he had been clutching in his right hand.

Abner took the note, unfolded it, and holding it close to the light, read the following:

"Abner Andrews:

"If you are determined to have a Home at Ash Point, you can begin work at once. Here are two young town rats for your care. What do you think of them?"

That was all, and as Abner stood staring at the note, the light of comprehension dawned upon his mind. In fact he stood there so long that he forgot the waiting lads. He was aroused, however, by a light touch upon his arm, and a tired voice saying,

"We're hungry."

"We're hungry," came the response.

"Sure, sure, indeed yez must be hungry," Abner replied, as he turned quickly around. "Rats are allus hungry, but yez must git some of that scum off ye'r faces an' hands before yez eat in this house. Come over here to the sink."

After a vigorous application of soap and water, the waifs presented a more respectable appearance, and Abner stepped back and viewed them critically.

"There," he panted, "guess that'll do fer the present. But yez sartinly need a hoe an' a scrabbin-brush upon ye'r mugs. An' say, what's ye'r names?"

"Mine's Tom," the older boy replied, "an' his is Billy."

"Tom an' Billy, eh? But Tom an' Billy what? What's ye'r other names?"

"Ain't got any. Jist Tom an' Billy."

"Jith Tom an' Billy," came the echo.

"Yes, I know that. But what's ye'r mother's name?"

"Sue."

"Thue."

"Oh, git out, that's not what I want to know. What do people call her?"

"Lazy."

"Lathy."

With a sigh of despair Abner gave up the attempt to gain any more information, and went into the pantry. After he had fumbled about for some time, and knocked down a number of pans and dishes, he returned with two big slices of bread covered with butter and molasses.

"There, fall to," he ordered, "an' help ye'rselves."

The children needed no second bidding. They were ravenous, and ate more like dogs than human beings. Not until they had devoured the third helping were they satisfied, and breathed a sigh of relief. Tom wiped his sticky mouth with his coat sleeve, and Billy did likewise.

"Yez needn't paint ye'r sleeves with molasses," Abner chided. "But I guess

by the look of things they're the only napkins yez ever use. Git over to the sink there, till I give yez another scrubbin'."

When the molasses had been wiped away, Tom gave a deep yawn.

"I'm sleepy," he announced.

"Theepy," lisped Billy.

"Sleepy!" Abner fairly gasped the word, as he looked helplessly around. What was he to do? He could not think of sending the waifs out into the night, and where was he to put them to sleep?

"Confound it!" he muttered. "Wish to goodness the women folks was home; they'd know what to do. Jess'd have a chance to try out her Social Service plan. Wonder what she'd do? Mebbe she'd take 'em to sleep with her."

He paused, his face brightened, and his eyes twinkled.

"Say, kids, come with me," he ordered. "I'll fix yez up fer the night. Ye'r uncle won't send yez away, not by a jugful, skiddy-me-shins, if he will."

Picking up the lamp, he strode through the dining-room into the hall-way, and up the stairs, closely followed by the boys. Reaching the top, he opened a door to the right, entered the room, and placed the lamp upon the dressing-table. Tom and Billy stared around the room with undisguised wonder, for it seemed to them like fairy-land.

"Hurry up an' strip," Abner commanded.

But alas! there was little to strip, for when the lads had removed their outer clothing, there was little underneath except rags.

"Holy smoke!" Abner exclaimed. "Is that all yez have on? Well, I declare! I can't see nuthin' but holes. But yez can't go to bed with them things on. Peel off them rags at once, while I look around fer somethin' fer yez to put on."

When the lads had obeyed and had wriggled out of their rags, Abner seized a quilt from the bed and wrapped it about their bodies.

"Jist hold that close," he ordered, "while I look around fer some duds. Let me see," and he scratched his head in perplexity. "I wonder where Tildy keeps sich things."

Going into an adjoining room, he pulled out several bureau drawers, and in a few minutes returned carrying triumphantly two spotless pillow-slips in his left hand. Replacing the lamp upon the dresser, he held the slips up for careful inspection.

"Pity to do it," he mused, "but it can't be helped."

Drawing a jackknife from his pocket, he opened it and deliberately began to cut open the end of one of the slips, and also a hole in each side.

"Now come here, youngster, you big one, an' stand up straight."

Abner at once dropped the slip over the boy's head, and made him put his arms through the holes in the sides. The gap in the top was small and the boy's

head stuck half way. This was overcome by Abner, who yanked down the slip, which ripped wider, and then flopped down over Tom's tousled head and brought up on the little shoulders.

"There now, guess that'll do all right for a nightgown," was Abner's comment, as he stepped back and viewed his work. "Ye'r surely a queer lookin' bird, but it's better'n nuthin'."

Billy was treated in a similar manner, and when he, too, was robed in another of Mrs. Andrews' pillow-slips, Abner was quite satisfied.

"Now, say ye'r prayers," he ordered.

During the whole of this performance the waifs had not uttered a word. They had been too much taken up with their strange surroundings, and with watching their "uncle." They imagined that he was about to play some new game with them, and when he ordered them to say their prayers they both grinned in anticipation of the game they were expecting.

"Say ye'r prayers, I tell yez," Abner again ordered.

"We don't know that game," Tom explained.

"We don't know thad game," Billy echoed.

"Game!" Abner roared. "De ye think sayin' ye'r prayers is a game?"

"Don't know; never played it."

"Never played it," responded Billy.

"Didn't ye'r mother never learn yez ye'r prayers?"

"No. Guess she didn't know the game."

"Geth she didn't know the game."

Abner sighed and looked helplessly around.

"Well, I never!" he ejaculated. "An' this is a Christian land! S'pose I'll have to leave that to Jess. It'll be a part of her Social Service work. So git into bed with yez, an' don't let me hear a whimper out of yez till mornin'."

Abner went downstairs and out into the kitchen. Having filled and lighted his pipe, he picked up the note which had been lying on the table, and read it again most carefully. Then stretching himself out comfortably upon the sofa, he gave himself up to earnest thought. He remained thus for about an hour. Then he arose and going to the woodhouse brought in a large wire-cage rat-trap. This he baited with considerable care, and, taking it outside, placed it near the pig pen.

"There, guess I ought to have one or two big fellers by mornin'," he chuckled. "It takes more'n one to play a game, an' there's mighty good reason why Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, should have a hand in this game which Lawyer

Rackshaw has started.”

CHAPTER XII

BOTTLED DIVILS

Abner was awakened early the next morning by light footsteps upon the stairs and low whisperings. He did not hear his wife’s voice, but supposed that she was downstairs seeing that the cats were “put out,” and that the back door was fastened. He expected that a tempest would soon burst in the quiet house, and that in a few minutes he would be called sharply to account. He did not mind Jess, but he did shrink at the thought of what his wife would say about the mutilated pillow-slips, and the putting of two dirty street urchins in a clean bed. As he thus lay and listened for the storm to break, he cherished for an instant the hope that in some way Tildy had fallen so much in love with Mrs. Ikey Dimock that she had stayed with her all night.

Abner had little time, however, for such meditations, for a shriek of fear and astonishment presently fell upon his ears. Then hurried footsteps approached his room, and Jess appeared in the doorway.

”Daddy! Daddy!” she called.

But Abner made no response. He was apparently sleeping the sleep of the just.

”Daddy!” Again came the appeal, this time more urgent than before.

Still Abner made no reply.

For a few seconds Jess stood uncertain what to do. Then she crossed the room, laid her hand upon her father’s shoulder, and shook him gently.

”Daddy, daddy, wake up!” she urged.

”Hey, what’s that?” Abner cried, starting suddenly up as if from a sound sleep. ”Who are ye, an’ what de ye want?”

”It’s me,” Jess replied. ”Come quick; there are two people in my bed.”

”Two people in ye’r bed! Nonsense. Ye’r luney.”

”But I tell you there are,” Jess insisted.

”See here, Jess, de ye think I’m a fool? G’long to bed. What’s happened to ye, anyway?”

”Please, daddy, don’t talk that way. Come and see for yourself.”

”Where’s ye’r mother?” Abner suddenly asked.

"Why, isn't she home?" Jess asked in surprise.

"Home! Guess not. I'd surely know it if she was."

"But she left before we did," Jess explained.

"She did! How's that? Didn't yez come in the same car?"

"No, you see—" Jess hesitated, and then stopped.

"I see, I see," and Abner nodded. "Ye needn't explain."

Deep in his heart Abner was pleased that his wife was not present at this awkward moment, but he wondered what had become of her. Although Jess worried about her mother, she was anxious to change the subject which might lead to embarrassing questions.

"Won't you tell me about those boys in my bed?" she asked. "Surely you must know where they came from."

Abner chuckled, and just then Belle appeared in the doorway.

"You do know," Jess insisted. "You're laughing. I know you are. Come, confess everything."

It took Abner some time to relate his experience with the waifs of the night, and when he was through he ordered the girls off to bed.

"Yez kin sleep together," he told them, "unless yez want to set up an' watch them beauties in there. I guess yez both'll find some Social Service work to do in the mornin'."

"But what about mother?" Jess anxiously enquired. "I'm afraid something has happened to her."

"An' so yez didn't come with her, eh?"

"No," Jess somewhat reluctantly replied. "Mother left in Mrs. Dimock's car ahead of us."

"An' you two walked, I s'pose? My, yez must be fond of walkin' all the way from Glucom at this time of night. Fer the good of ye'r health, no doubt. More Social Service idea, eh? I've heard of sich cases before. Tildy used to be fond of walkin' before we was married. Said she liked it, 'specially when a man was along."

"Don't make fun of us, daddy," Jess pleaded. "It is no time for joking when mother may be lying injured somewhere along the road."

"She can't be between here an' town, or you'd have seen her," Abner reasoned. "But mebbe yez didn't, fer there's a time in life when young people are blind an' deaf, so I understand."

"Don't you think we had better go and look for mother?" Jess insisted.

"Oh, she'll turn up safe an' sound, never fear. Ye couldn't lose Tildy. Anyway, if Mrs. Ikey's chafer has run away with her, he'll soon bring her back. So git away to bed now, fer I'm most awful sleepy."

There was no more sleep, however, for Abner after the girls had left. He

was much concerned about his wife, and he lay there trying to imagine what had happened to her. At length he rose, dressed, and went downstairs. Closing the door between the kitchen and the dining-room, he lighted the fire, and prepared a cup of coffee.

"I kin allus think better an' work better," he had often said, "when I've had a cup of coffee. It's as stimulin' to me as the yell of an en-gine is to Jerry."

He next visited the trap he had set the previous evening, and a smile overspread his face when he saw three large rats securely captured, and vainly trying to escape.

"Good mornin', me beauties," he accosted. "How de yez like ye'r new quarters? Rather cramped, I admit, but yez'll be a darn sight more cramped than that before I'm through with yez. But if yez behave ye'rselves as decent rats should, mebbe yez'll have fine new quarters fer ye'r pranks, but not as wholesome, perhaps, as this hog-house."

He then went into his little workshop adjoining the woodhouse, and set earnestly to work. The sun creeping in through the dust-covered window found him giving the finishing touches to a stout tin-lined box.

"There, I guess that'll hold 'em," was his comment, as he stood and viewed his handiwork. "Them holes ought to let in enough air to keep 'em alive an' in good fightin' condition. Now fer some fun."

Jess came downstairs early, and hearing a peculiar noise in the workshop, went out to ascertain what was the matter. She was surprised to see her father tying a thick cord about a strong wooden box. He was panting heavily, and the perspiration was streaming down his face. One of his fingers was bleeding, and he was muttering a strange conglomeration of words.

"For pity sakes! What are you doing?" Jess exclaimed. "And what have you in that box?"

"Divils; that's what I've got."

"Divils!"

"Yep. Divils bottled up in rats. Three of 'em, an' they're straight from hell."

"Oh, daddy, don't talk that way," Jess protested. "You make we shiver."

"Shiver, eh? Guess ye'd shiver in earnest if ye had one of them critters at ye. Ye'd think there was a two-foot icicle slippin' down ye'r spine. Look at that!" and Abner held out his damaged finger.

"What, did the rats do that?"

"Sure. Git me a rag, will ye, and tie it up? Then I must be off."

"Where are you going, daddy?"

"To look fer ye'r mother, of course."

"But where?"

"Guess I'll go to town first. I want to take them rats along. Mebbe the

Dimocks know somethin' about Tildy. They'll know, anyway, what's happened to that chafer an' the car."

After the finger had been carefully bandaged, Abner went to the barn, harnessed Jerry, hitched him to the wagon, and drove up to the back door. Jess watched her father with considerable curiosity as he placed the box in the bottom of the wagon.

"What in the world are you going to do with those rats?" she enquired.

"Jist a little tradin', that's all."

"But I never heard of people trading in rats, daddy."

"Ye didn't, eh? Well, this is jist an exchange of country rats fer town rats, that's all. But, there, I must be off. Keep a sharp eye on them kids when they wake, an' don't let 'em raise ructions. G'long, Jerry."

Abner made a record trip to town that morning. Having hitched his horse to the usual post, and with the box under his arm, he sauntered into the waiting-room, peered through the ticket-office window and saw the agent reading *The Live Wire*.

"Say, Sam," he accosted, "are ye busy?"

"Not especially," was the reply. "What can I do for you, Mr. Andrews?"

"When does the express team go out, Sam?"

"Not until late this afternoon. Got something to send?"

"Sure. Jist see how much this'll cost, will ye?" and Abner motioned to the box. "It's fer Lawyer Rackshaw."

"Why not drop it around there yourself, Mr. Andrews? It might not be delivered until late, and, besides, you will save the express charge."

"Oh, the time don't signify. In fact I'd rather it got there a little late. An' as fer the expense, that doesn't cut any ice."

When this matter had been settled, the agent looked curiously at Abner.

"How's your wife?" he enquired.

"Me wife! Ain't she all right? Why de ye ask?"

"Haven't you seen this morning's paper, Mr. Andrews?"

"Naw. But what's it sayin' now, I'd like to know?"

"Here it is," and Sam handed him his copy. "There, look at that. It says that your wife met with an auto accident at Twin Creek while running away from home with Isaac Dimock's chauffeur."

Abner's bronzed face turned a peculiar hue as he quickly seized the paper and fixed his eyes upon the big staring headline:

"A SUSPICIOUS AFFAIR"

His hands trembled so violently that it was difficult for him to read. Sam, watch-

ing, expected him to burst forth in wild language. In this, however, he was mistaken, for when Abner had finished reading the article, he folded up the paper and shoved it into his coat pocket.

"I'll pay ye fer this, Sam," and he threw down a coin as he spoke.

"Keep your money," the agent replied. "I'm through with it, anyway. And say, Mr. Andrews," he continued, "I'm really sorry for you."

"I know ye are, Sam, an' I thank ye fer ye'r sympathy. Be sure an' send that box this afternoon."

Without another word Abner turned and left the waiting-room. Sam watched him from the window as he strode along the platform, and headed up town.

"I wonder where he's bound for now?" he mused. "I wouldn't like to be that chauffeur who ran away with his wife, nor the man who wrote that article, for that matter. My, I never saw such a look upon any man's face before. It sent the chills down my spine."

CHAPTER XIII

THE JOY-RIDE

The party was a complete revelation to Mrs. Andrews. She enjoyed herself more than she had expected, and the time passed most pleasantly. It was a wonderful change to her whose life for long years had been of a most humdrum nature. The Dimocks exerted their utmost to make her feel perfectly at her ease, and introduced her to several women of her own age with whom she had delightful conversations.

But her greatest happiness was to watch Jess and Belle, and to note the attention they received. They had plenty of admirers, but she especially liked two young men who were agreeable to her, and talked in such an affable and gentlemanly manner. But of the two, Thane Royden was her choice. He was the young surveyor, so Jess laughingly explained, who had tried to steal their gravel hill, and who had so narrowly escaped a terrible death at her father's hands. He paid special attention to Jess, and this met with Mrs. Andrews' silent approval.

The other, Billy Lansing, centred his attention upon Belle, and endeavored to keep her entirely to himself. But a girl of Belle's disposition could not easily be cornered, and the fact that she was the Attorney General's daughter made

her in great demand. This was not at all to Billy's liking, and he became sulky whenever Belle danced with others. Billy was an auto agent, and had not been long at Glucom. But during his short stay he had aroused considerable interest by his fondness for parties, his boastful proclivities, and his fascination for the fair sex.

As the night wore on, Mrs. Andrews became tired and longed to go home. She said nothing to Jess, however, but the latter was quick to notice the weary expression upon her mother's face, and felt it was her duty to go home with her. But Mrs. Dimock would not listen to the idea of Jess and Belle leaving at such an early hour, and suggested that Mrs. Andrews should go alone.

"We have a most reliable chauffeur," she explained to Jess, "and he will take good care of your mother. We have had him for only a week, but have found him most trustworthy."

It did not take Mrs. Andrews long to get ready, and then she had to wait about half an hour for the car to make its appearance. Mrs. Dimock was surprised and apologized, however, for the delay, explaining that no doubt the man had been asleep. When at length the auto arrived at the front door, Jess accompanied her mother to the car and saw that she was safe on board.

"Don't be too late in coming home," was Mrs. Andrews' parting instruction. "I will leave the back door open. And see that you don't let the cats in."

For about a mile the car sped smoothly on its way. Then it began to gather speed, and at times surged dangerously near the ditch. Never had Mrs. Andrews undergone such an experience. Auto-riding was a novel sensation for her, anyway, and she had often remarked about the reckless driving of so many people. But to be alone in the heart of night, on a rough road, and with an unknown man in charge, was most disturbing. As they sped forward, she clutched the side of the car with grim desperation. Every bump lifted her clear of the seat, and so frequent were the bumps that she was in the air most of the time. She was terrified lest any minute she should be tossed out of the car among the rocks by the side of the road.

Her only hope now lay in the near approach to her home. She accordingly breathed a sigh of relief when the car, bounding around a curve in the road, brought her in sight of the river gleaming silvery white beneath the light of the rising moon.

Such a hope, however, was of short duration, for instead of the car slowing up as it reached the Andrews' house, it increased in speed and dashed by like a whirlwind. With a piercing scream Mrs. Andrews tried to arrest the chauffeur's attention. But in vain. He paid no attention to his agitated passenger, but bounced her more furiously than ever.

Mrs. Andrews was now certain that the driver was either drunk or mad,

and her consternation increased. She started to lean forward in an effort to grasp the chauffeur by the shoulder, but no sooner did she attempt to rise than she was flung in a confused heap against the side of the car. And there she remained, clutching desperately at anything on which she could lay her hands. She tried to think, but the wild gyrations of the auto made any calm meditation out of the question. Such was her position, which rendered her helpless and speechless. She was at the mercy of a reckless driver, all the time being borne farther and farther away from home. Uphill and down, and over long stretches of level road the car raced, swaying and bounding more than ever, so the unhappy woman thought.

So far Mrs. Andrews had sustained no serious injury. The bruises she had received upon her hands and body were not noticed, owing to her intense excitement. But when an extra heavy lurch pitched her violently against the side of the car, her nose came into sudden contact with the door. Fear was at once replaced by a burning anger, and with a spring, worthy of a tigress, she was upon the chauffeur in an instant. With a vise-like grip she seized him by the hair and jerked his head back so violently that it was a wonder his neck was not broken. With a startled yell the chauffeur released his right hand from the wheel and caught his assailant by the wrist in a frantic attempt to tear away from the tightening grip, while with the other he endeavored to steer the car. But as his eyes were gazing skyward instead of along the road, this was a most difficult performance.

The outcome of this would have been most disastrous had not the auto just then struck a small newly-made bridge, heaped up with mud. It reared suddenly astern, like a balky mule, and sent Mrs. Andrews forward right on top of the chauffeur. Letting go his hair, she grabbed him about the neck in a last desperate effort to save herself from destruction. Half-choked and bewildered by this unexpected embrace, the chauffeur attempted to keep the car in the middle of the road. He succeeded in reducing the speed, but so excited did he become that his nerve deserted him, with the result that the auto swerved suddenly into a shallow ditch to the right, plowed its way through a mass of tangled bushes, and crashed into a big tree.

All this happened so quickly that for a few seconds the chauffeur was completely dazed. But it was otherwise with Mrs. Andrews. Her senses were keenly alive, and her anger intense. She was now an antagonist of no inferior metal. Leaping from the car, she seized a dead fir bough lying near, and made for the chauffeur. The latter saw her coming, and his senses suddenly returned. With a yell he bounded from the seat, and started to spring from the auto. But in doing so his foot tripped, and he plunged headlong among the mass of bushes. With hands and face scratched, and clothes torn he made frantic efforts to extricate

himself from his painful and humiliating position. But no sooner did he lift his head than he was furiously belabored by the angry woman standing before him.

"For God's sake, let up!" he implored. "You'll kill me."

"Kill you, eh?" was the reply. "Isn't that what you tried to do to me! Take that, and that, you villain."

"I was only in fun," the culprit explained, as he vainly attempted to dodge the rain of blows.

"Fun! Queer fun, you brute. But it isn't such fun now, is it?"

The stick was again about to fall, when with a howl the chauffeur reeled back, tore his way through the bushes, and reached the shelter of the dark woods beyond. From here he watched the irate woman, fully expecting her to follow. To him she seemed unusually large and menacing as she stood there drawn to her full height, the stick still in her hand, and her eyes searching the darkness of the forest.

For about a minute she remained in this position, though it seemed much longer to the trembling chauffeur. At length she turned and looked up and down the road. Hesitating only for an instant, she moved swiftly away, clutching the stick more firmly than ever, so as to be ready for any emergency.

Not until the chauffeur was certain that she was some distance away did he venture forth. Going cautiously to the auto, he brought from beneath the seat a half-drained bottle of whiskey. Holding it up in his hand, he looked in the direction Mrs. Andrews had taken.

"Here's to ye'r health, ye old she-cat, an' may the devil take me quick if I ever try to play any pranks upon the likes of you again."

Placing the flask to his lips, he drained the contents with much relish, and with a curse hurled the bottle among the trees. Then curling himself up in the back seat, and pulling over his body a heavy robe, in a few minutes he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

SURPRISED AT HERSELF

After the chauffeur's ignominious retreat Mrs. Andrews was uncertain what to do. The place was strange to her, and she had no idea how far she was from home. She looked up and down the road, but not a sign of a human habitation

could she behold. The only spark of hope was a break in the forest a short distance ahead, and thinking that there might be a house near, she hastened forward. She had not advanced far when a light to the left attracted her attention. This was encouraging, so keeping steadily on, she ere long reached a gateway. The light came from a house over in a cleared field, and with this to guide her she soon reached the building and rapped upon the door. It was opened by a woman, who stared in amazement at the night visitor. A slight cry of fear also escaped her lips, for Mrs. Andrews presented a somewhat formidable appearance. Her hat was lop-sided, her hair dishevelled, her clothes covered with dust, and her face strained and defiant.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" the woman in the door asked.

"I want the police," was the curt reply.

"The police!"

"Yes. An attempt has been made upon my life, and I only barely escaped. Oh, it was terrible!"

"Isn't that awful!" and the woman held up her hands in fear, at the same time glancing anxiously around. "But there are no policemen here."

"I know that. But isn't there a telephone somewhere near? I must send word to town at once and have that villain arrested."

"We have a telephone at our store," the woman explained. "My husband would phone for you, if he knew about your trouble."

"Don't you live here?"

"Oh, no. I live about half a mile up the road."

"Well, then, go at once and phone for the police," Mrs. Andrews ordered.

"I can't do that very well now," was the reply. "I'm looking after a sick woman, and it would not do for me to leave."

"A sick woman! Here?"

"Yes. It's Mrs. Denton, poor soul. She's had a hard time of late, and the strain has been too much for her, and so she took to her bed last week. The women around here have taken turns staying with her. I do not know what will become of her."

"Is she very ill?" Mrs. Andrews asked.

"I'm afraid so. It is a nervous breakdown. I am going to take two of the children for a while, but what will happen to the other three the Lord only knows. But dear me, I've been keeping you standing here all this time. Come in and rest yourself, for you must be tired out after your trying experience."

The room into which Mrs. Andrews was ushered was the kitchen. It was spotlessly clean, and a fire was burning in the stove.

"She's in there," the woman whispered, pointing to a door on the left. "The children are upstairs."

Mrs. Andrews at once removed her hat, arranged her dishevelled hair, and brushed some of the dust from her dress. When she had accomplished this, she announced her intention of remaining with the patient.

"But I don't mind staying," the woman informed her.

"Perhaps not, but I want you to go and phone to the police. Tell them that Isaac Dimock's chauffeur ran away with Mrs. Abner Andrews, of Ash Point, and nearly killed her by running the auto into a ditch. You will do that, won't you? I hope it will not be too much trouble."

"Oh, I don't mind going," the woman replied.

"But—" Here she hesitated, and lowered her voice as she glanced toward the bedroom. "I don't like to leave her."

"Can't I look after her as well as you?" Mrs. Andrews asked.

"Perhaps so. But you might not altogether understand her. She's greatly worried about her children, and she's afraid they'll starve. It's necessary to keep cheering her up and telling her that they'll be all right."

"H'm, I guess you can leave that to me," Mrs. Andrews replied. "I'm used to odd people, so you go along and telephone for the police. I don't want that rascal to escape."

The woman at once obeyed, and when she returned several hours later it was broad daylight. She was surprised to find Mrs. Denton asleep, and Mrs. Andrews preparing breakfast for the children.

"How did you do it?" she asked, as she peeked into the bedroom.

"Do what?"

"Get her to sleep?"

"Oh, that was no trouble. I simply told her that her children would be all right; that you were to take two and that I would be responsible for the others."

"What! Do you mean to take three?"

"Certainly. What else is there to do? I shall look after them until some other arrangement is made. You phoned to the police, I suppose?"

"Yes, and they said the matter would be attended to at once."

"That is good," and Mrs. Andrews gave a sigh of relief. "I must go home now, and I wish to take these children with me. Is there anyone you can get to drive us?"

"My husband will," the woman replied. "He is going to town right after dinner, and will be glad to take you and the children along."

During the rest of the morning Mrs. Andrews found plenty to do in tending the sick woman and looking after the children. Nevertheless, the time passed all too slowly. She was anxious to get home, and yet she dreaded going back with the little ones. She wondered what Abner would say. She knew very well what she would have said had he done such a thing. She was really surprised at herself,

and almost repented of her hasty action as she sat silently in the waggon that afternoon. Where would she put the children to sleep? Where was the food to come from for such an increase in the family? For months there had just been herself and Abner, and they had lived very simply. Since Belle's arrival they had fared more sumptuously than ever before. But now with three extra mouths to feed, making seven in all to provide for, it would mean a hard struggle. "I have been a fool," she told herself, "and have let my heart run away with my head."

It seemed a long time to Mrs. Andrews before she reached home. When the team at last stopped in front of the house she was surprised to see two little boys perched upon the limb of an apple-tree near the back door. Who could they be, and what were they doing there? Her attention was diverted by the sudden appearance of Jess and Belle from the house, who bore down upon her, and bombarded her with a stream of questions before she had time to alight from the waggon.

"For pity sakes! Give me time to breathe," Mrs. Andrews gasped. "It will take me a whole day to answer all your questions. Come, help these boys down."

Instead of at once obeying, Jess and Belle looked at each other in consternation. Then they stared at the children.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Andrews demanded. "Haven't you ever seen boys before? They won't bite."

"Whose are they?" Jess found voice to ask.

"They're ours now; that is, for a time, anyway."

"And are we to keep them, mother?"

"Certainly; until Mrs. Denton gets better."

"But we have two already," and Jess turned and looked toward the lads perched upon the apple-tree.

Mrs. Andrews also looked, and it was upon her face that an expression of consternation now appeared. Intuitively she realized that something unusual had taken place during her absence.

"Are they here to stay?" she demanded.

"It seems so," Jess replied.

"Where's your father?"

"He left home this morning in search of you, and we haven't seen him since."

For a few minutes Mrs. Andrews sat perfectly still, staring straight before her. Then she roused to action, sprang from the waggon and fairly dragged down the children. Thanking the driver for his kindness, she headed straight toward the house without once looking back. Jess and Belle rounded up the boys and marched them to the back door. By this time the two urchins of the night were down from the tree, eager to make friends with the new-comers. Leaving the five

in the yard, the girls followed Mrs. Andrews into the house. Seating herself upon a chair in the kitchen, the troubled woman began to fan herself furiously with a copy of *The Family Herald and Weekly Star*. Her face was a study. An expression of anger and consternation was depicted there, her lips quivered and she was evidently making a great effort to control herself. Seeing this, Jess' sympathy was aroused, and stepping quickly forward, she placed her arms lovingly about her mother's neck.

"There, mother dear," she soothed, "don't feel so badly. There has been some mistake, I am sure."

"Mistake! How could there be any mistake? Your father must have planned to bring these boys here while I was away."

"Oh, no, he didn't," Jess explained. "They dropped upon him last night." Then she related the story as her father had told it to her the night before.

Mrs. Andrews said nothing for a while when Jess was through, but sat lost in thought.

"I wonder why Abner hasn't come back," she at length remarked. "He has had plenty of time to hunt for me all over town."

"Perhaps he is afraid to come," Jess suggested.

"Afraid to come!" Mrs. Andrews exclaimed in astonishment.

"Yes, afraid of what you might say."

"Oh, I see," and Mrs. Andrews looked meaningfully at her daughter. "I guess we're quits, then, for I was really afraid to meet him."

A merry ringing laugh from Belle followed this candid confession. The humorous side of the situation had appealed to her from the moment of Mrs. Andrews' arrival with the three boys. There was nothing tragic about it to her, as she had no idea of the straitened circumstances of the Andrews' household. It had never dawned upon her what a struggle Mr. and Mrs. Andrews had made to eke out a precarious living from their gravel hill of a farm, and to keep Jess at the Seminary. Had she known this, and what an addition of five children would mean, she would have seen nothing amusing in the situation. It was as well, however, that she did not know at this critical moment, for her merriment dispelled the clouds, causing Jess to laugh, and the semblance of a smile to lurk about the corners of Mrs. Andrews' mouth.

"Well, I never!" the latter declared. "I believe that's just what's keeping Abner away. I always knew he was afraid of my tongue, but I never imagined it would cause him to run away from home."

"And were you really afraid to come home, mother?" Jess laughingly asked.

"Oh, of course not afraid. Though I must confess I had serious qualms of conscience as to what I had done. You see, when I promised Mrs. Denton to take the children I let my heart run away with my head."

"What do you mean, mother?"

"Well, I should have carefully considered what we should do with the boys, where we could put them to sleep, for instance. Perhaps it would have been better if I had come home first and talked the matter over."

"It's lucky you didn't, mother. You never would have brought those boys had you known there were two here already, would you?"

"Certainly not. But now that we have five on our hands where in the world are we to put them? That's what I want to know."

"Why not let them sleep out in the woodshed?" Jess suggested.

"In the woodshed! That would never do."

"And why not? There is plenty of room there near the kitchen, and it is clean and neat. It is just the place for them this warm weather."

"But we haven't enough beds for them all."

"Let them sleep on the floor; they will think it great fun. Then when daddy comes home he can fix up little canvas bunks for them. He will know the kind I mean."

"And would you let them sleep there all alone?"

"We can take turns sleeping out there with them. That sofa behind you will make a most comfortable bed. Oh, I think it will be great, don't you, Belle?"

"Indeed, I do," was the enthusiastic reply. "Why, it's just like a story, though much better, for this is the real thing."

"Well, I suppose there is nothing else to do," and Mrs. Andrews gave a deep sigh. "We might as well get to work at once, as it will be supper time before we know where we are. I wish to goodness Abner would come home."

In a remarkably short time that part of the woodshed near the kitchen was made ready. Boxes and barrels were moved, and beds spread down upon the floor.

"There, I guess that is the finish," Jess declared, when the sofa had been brought from the kitchen. "I shall sleep like a babe on that to-night."

"Not to-night," her mother informed her. "I intend to take the first turn, as I want to see for myself how the youngsters behave."

"And you won't be afraid, mother?"

"Afraid! Did you ever hear of me being afraid? Of course, I shall fasten the door securely, and I'd like to see anyone try to get in through that opening there. I've told Abner over and over again to fix in that window which was blown out by that big gale last fall. But maybe it's just as well as it is, for it will let in plenty of air, which no doubt we'll need. I hope to goodness you gave those street-Arabs a special scrubbing, Jess?"

"Yes, I tubbed them thoroughly this morning, and they certainly needed it."

"And did you change everything on your bed?"

"Indeed I did, and the clothes are all out on the line yet."

"I looked after the 'sudden' night-gowns myself," Belle laughingly remarked.

"Sudden night-gowns!" Mrs. Andrews repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Why, they were sudden, were they not? From pillow-slips to night-gowns in a minute was rather a quick change, I should say. It was the finest piece of conjuring I have ever seen," and in a few words she explained what Abner had done.

"Oh, my poor pillow-slips!" and Mrs. Andrews sighed. "But, then, it might have been much worse. You can never tell what Abner will do when he starts on the rampage. I wonder where he can be."

The boys had been very busy playing that afternoon, and were thoroughly tired when summoned to bed. They were delighted at the idea of sleeping on the floor, and considered it great fun. While Jess and Belle looked after their welfare Mrs. Andrews milked the two cows, and attended to the milk, after which she fed the pigs, and fastened up the hens and chickens. She was very tired after her trying experiences and the sleepless night at Mrs. Denton's. In fact, she could have slept anywhere, "even on a fence-pole without once rolling off," she informed the girls as she bade them good-night. Trying the door to see that it was securely fastened, and glancing at the two pails filled with water near at hand, she blew out the light, and laid herself down upon the sofa.

CHAPTER XV

COUNTRY RATS

Lawyer Rackshaw was in such an excellent frame of mind that he invited Henry Whittles to spend an evening with him at his office. This was something unusual, and as the two men sat down to a friendly game of poker, Whittles wondered what scheme the lawyer had in his mind. That there was some object he was quite sure, as Rackshaw never did anything out of the ordinary unless for some definite purpose.

It was a cozy room, comfortably furnished, clean and neat. A large greyhound lay at his master's feet, with his nose between his paws.

"Do you always bring that dog with you?" Whittles asked, as he shuffled the cards.

"Only at night," the lawyer replied as he looked down fondly upon the fine brute. "I like to have him along then—for company."

"For fear of what your enemies might do, eh?" and Whittles smiled somewhat knowingly.

"Well, perhaps you're right. Pedro never has his supper before he comes here, as I am always expecting him to get a good meal before he gets home."

"One of your special enemies, I suppose."

"Sure."

"Has he eaten any yet?"

"Not a d—n one, though I expect he'll have a meal before long."

"To-night?"

"Oh, no," and the lawyer chuckled as he threw down a card. "The meal's in cold storage to-night as far as I know. But, then, one can never tell."

"Cold storage!" and Whittles' eyes opened wide as he paused in his play.

"Yes, in cold storage. Or, to be more exact, in jail. That's where the special meal is to-night."

"In jail! Why, man, what do you mean? Who's in jail?"

"Ho, ho! That's one on you, Hen, isn't it? Didn't know why I invited you here to-night, did you?"

"No; couldn't guess. Thought it must be something special, though."

"So it is, and I expected to have something special to drink, too. Confound that express company! It's as slow as cold molasses. I ordered something good for to-night, and it was to have been here before this."

"Going to drink the health of your special friends, are you?" Whittles queried, looking quizzically at the lawyer.

"To one friend only to-night, Hen. He's our mutual friend—a friend that sticketh closer than a brother, as the Good Book says, and whose tongue is as sharp as a razor, and stings like a hornet. That's the friend whose health we are going to drink to-night."

"I know of only one person who answers to your description," Whittles replied, "and that's Abner Andrews, of Ash Point. But he's no friend of ours."

"You're mistaken, Hen. He's my special friend, and yours, too, for that matter."

"Mine! H'm I guess you're astray there."

"Not at all. Didn't he offer a thousand dollars for that Orphanage?"

"A thousand be hanged! He offered it, but that's as far as it goes. He'll never pay a cent."

"Won't he? Well, we'll see about that. Anyway, he's got two kids at his home now. I sent them there last night so that he could start the Orphanage at once at Ash Point."

"You did!"

"Yes, and sent a note along, asking him how he liked town rats. My, they were a tough pair of youngsters, about as dirty as you'll find anywhere. 'Sloppy' Sue's kids, you know."

"Ho, ho, that's a good one," Whittles roared. "Have you heard from Abner since?"

"Sure. He did me a great favor this morning, and that's why I'm so friendly to him now."

"What did he do?"

"Walked into the office of *The Live Wire*, and smashed up Joe Preston so badly that he's in the hospital now getting patched up."

Whittles' eyes fairly started out of his head at this astounding piece of news, and he dropped his cards upon the table.

"What was it all about?" he at length found voice to ask.

"Oh, merely over that article in the paper about Mrs. Andrews running away with Ikey Dimock's chauffeur. I got the news from the police station late last night, and phoned it to the *Wire*. I knew that Joe would make the most of it, and get something in return. I'm mighty glad he did, for he's been very bumptious of late, and has rapped me pretty hard. Abner's saved me a nasty job."

"He did? Well, I declare!"

"Yes, and Abner's in jail, repenting, no doubt."

"Repenting? Not a bit of it. He's raging like a caged lion, if I'm not mistaken. My, how I'd like to have seen him at Joe. I've had no love for that fellow since he wrote that nasty skit about me last year. Did he put up much of a fight?"

"Who? Abner?"

"No; Joe."

"He tried to, so I heard, but he hadn't the ghost of a chance against that farmer giant. He came into the office, stuck a copy of the *Wire* before Joe's nose, and asked him if he had written that article about his wife. Joe got mad, blazed up, and consigned Abner to the hot place."

"Good Lord!" Whittles gasped. "Joe must have been crazy."

"If he wasn't crazy then, he was a few minutes later. Tom, the office boy, said it was terrible. Abner gave a roar like thunder and sailed into Joe. When the police arrived there wasn't much of Joe left, according to Tom. He was unconscious, and the office was badly damaged."

"Did the police have any trouble with Abner?" Whittles asked almost breathlessly.

"No, I guess not. He went like a lamb, though Tom said he had a wild look in his eyes."

Whittles suddenly gasped; his face turned deathly pale, and his hands trem-

bled.

"What's wrong, Hen?" the lawyer asked, noting his companion's agitation. "I didn't know you were subject to nervous trouble. This story has upset you a bit. You need a stimulant. Why in thunder doesn't that express team show up!"

"Say, Tom," and Whittles leaned over the table, "suppose it had been you or me instead of Joe?"

"You or me! What do you mean?"

"Abner loves us about as much as he loved Joe this morning, doesn't he?"

"Oh, I see," and the lawyer rubbed his chin in a thoughtful manner. "I never thought of that."

"I know you didn't. Now, suppose Abner gets out of jail and learns who gave Joe that information, what then?"

Rackshaw shifted somewhat uneasily in his chair, and glanced down at the dog. Then he laughed and picked up the cards he had dropped upon the table.

"I guess Abner won't do any more of his wild stunts for a while," he remarked. "He's in deep enough water now. He'll need a lawyer to defend him, and I'm the only one in town."

"He won't come to you."

"Just you wait. He's in a trap and knows very well that I can get him out; that is, if I want to."

"Want to! Won't you want to get him out? Won't you do everything for him that you can if he engages you to defend him?"

"That all depends. If he comes to me I'll do all I can under certain conditions."

"What are the conditions?"

The lawyer bit savagely at his cigar, but offered no explanation.

"D—n that express team!" he growled. "What can have happened to it?"

"Abner can't afford to engage a lawyer, can he?" Whittles asked, noting Rackshaw's silence.

"Why not?"

"He hasn't any way of paying, has he?"

"He hasn't? What about his farm?"

"Farm! Why, that's nothing but a bed of gravel. I wouldn't have it as a gift."

"You wouldn't, eh? But suppose the Government should want that same bed of gravel for ballast, what then?"

Whittles' eyes opened wide, and he looked enquiringly at the lawyer. Light was beginning to dawn upon his mind.

"Oh, I see your game, now," he at length replied. "You hope to get the farm, and turn it over to the Government?"

"Yes, that's just what I expect to do."

"But you'll never do it."

"I won't? And why not?"

"Abner'll not engage you to defend him. He has little use for you, and you should know by this time what a cranky cuss he is."

"Well, if he won't engage me, I shall take up Joe's case."

"Do what?"

"Didn't you hear what I said? I'll defend Joe."

"But how can you? You love Joe about as much as you do Abner."

"H'm, that's all right. Joe doesn't know what I think of him. And I guess you've got to learn a few things yet, Hen. You're not as sharp as I thought you were. But, say, here's the express team, now."

The next instant the door was pushed open, and a fair-sized box was handed to the lawyer.

"What do you mean by being so late?" the latter demanded of the expressman.

"Couldn't help it, sir," was the reply. "I'm all mixed up to-night. There's only one team on the road."

Rackshaw carried the box to the table, cut the strings, and tore away the paper wrapping. Then he turned to his desk and produced a hammer.

"Down, Pedro," he ordered, as the dog began to sniff excitedly at the box. "Surely you're not thirsty, too."

"Following his master's example, eh?" Whittles smilingly queried. "Queer box, that."

"Queer! I should say so," the lawyer growled, as he began to pry up the cover. "I never got a box like this before. Down, Pedro, I say. What's the matter with the dog, anyway? He's half crazy."

Scarcely had he finished speaking when a portion of the cover came off, and at once a big gray rat leaped full into the lawyer's startled face. With a yell of fright Rackshaw let go the box, dropped the hammer, and staggered back. Trying to recover himself, he came into sudden contact with the dog and was hurled over a chair full length upon the floor. He endeavored to get up, and had reached a sitting position when Pedro again landed on him like a catapult. Had a cyclone burst upon that room the confusion could not have been more appalling. Frantic squeals of terrified rats and the snapping yelps of the pursuing dog mingled with the crash of falling chairs and tables. It was, as the lawyer afterwards expressed it, "hell let loose."

When Rackshaw was at length able to crawl to his knees he looked around the disordered room. Pedro was still cavorting here and there, first after one rat and then another. Whittles was nowhere to be seen.

"Hen, where are you?" the lawyer called.

A groan from beneath one of the tables was the only response.

"Are you hurt, Hen?"

"Dying," was the feeble reply. "For God's sake, call off that dog!"

To "call off the dog" was easier to order than to do. Rackshaw staggered to his feet, and shouted wildly to the excited brute. But the louder he called, and the more furiously he swore, the more frantic did the greyhound become. The rats had turned his brain, and he was a crazy fool. Around and around the room he dashed, clearing chairs and tables with great bounds, but not a rat could he catch.

Rackshaw started for the door. If he could get it open it would give the rats an avenue of escape. He was but part way across the room when Pedro, attempting to pass through the legs of an overturned chair, stuck fast. With a howl he tried to extricate himself, but in vain. He had now something more than rats to think of, and furiously he threshed from side to side, breaking chairs, and damaging everything with which he came into contact.

The lawyer was now desperate. The perspiration poured down his face, while the shouts and curses he hurled at the dog were of no avail. With a savage yank he tore open the door, and the dog, catching sight of the opening, bounded for it like a tank going into battle.

It so happened that just at this critical moment the expressman had stepped to the door, carrying in his hands the long-expected box which he had overlooked. He saw the grotesque object bounding toward him, and before he had time to move aside, Pedro, now dragging the battered chair, dashed full upon him. With a yell of terror, he fell backwards, dropping as he did so the precious box upon the pavement. There was a sudden crash of bottles, and a liberal flow of spirits such as the town had never before known.

Half dazed, the expressman sat upon the sidewalk, and viewed the shattered box lying in the path of light from the open door. The lawyer approached and stood over the bewildered man.

"What's the meaning of all this?" he demanded.

"Meaning!" the man replied, rubbing his bruised right shoulder. "Why do you ask me? What's on here to-night, anyway? A menagerie, or a wild-west show?"

"Get up, and explain why you brought that box of rats here," Rackshaw ordered, ignoring the other's question.

"Rats! Brought rats here! I don't understand."

"Yes, rats. That first box you brought was full of rats; big rats, gray rats and all kinds of rats. They've turned hell loose in there."

"Good Lord!" the expressman gasped, as he leaned over to obtain a better view of the office. "Did the rats do that?"

"Indeed they did."

"And was that one of them that knocked me down?"

"Get up," Rackshaw commanded. "What's the matter with you? Did you ever see a rat the size of that? Don't you know a dog when you see it?"

"A dog! Good heavens! But you said something about rats."

"So I did, and you should know something about them, too. You left a box here full of rats, and when I opened it the devils came out and turned my dog's brain. Look at that room there. Isn't it a great mess? Somebody'll have a nice bill to pay. Where in h—l did you get that box, anyway?"

"Where I got the rest, of course. I didn't know it was full of rats. But that wouldn't have made any difference. It's not my business to know what the things are which I deliver. Guess you'll have to enquire elsewhere."

The expressman rose slowly to his feet, and again rubbed his shoulder.

"Darn it!" he growled. "I'm going to sue for damages, see if I don't. If a man can't attend to his business without being half-killed by a mad dog, with a pile of furniture on his back, it's a strange thing."

Rackshaw stood and watched him as he climbed up into his waggon, and drove off, grumbling and vowing vengeance upon everybody in general. Then he turned and re-entered the building. He found Whittles sitting on the floor, propped up against the office desk. His hair and clothes were dishevelled, and his face was expressive of his deep misery.

"Oh, you've come back, have you?" he meaningly queried.

"Sure. Did you think I had run away?"

"I couldn't tell. I don't know what to expect next. Is that raging devil gone yet?"

"What, the dog?"

"Yes."

"And the rats? Oh!" Whittles' body shivered.

"I guess they've gone, too. I don't see any of them. But get up and act like a man."

"I'm nearly dead," Whittles wailed. "I'm sure I'll never get over this. I'm all shaken to pieces, and I believe some of my bones are broken."

"Nonsense," the lawyer chided. "Get up, I say, and don't be a fool."

"Give me a drop to steady my nerves," Whittles implored. "The expressman brought the stuff at last, didn't he?"

"You'll have to lick it up off the sidewalk, then."

"What! Was it all lost? Wasn't there a little saved?"

"Not a drop. But get up. You're head's turned topsy-turvy."

"And everything else as far as I can see. Look at the mess this room is in. Isn't it a fright! Where do you suppose the rats came from?"

The lawyer made no reply, but picked up the box lying upon the floor, and examined it carefully. Inside he found a small thin piece of wood containing the following scrawl:

"These are country rats. What do you think of them?"

He stood for a few seconds, staring at these words. Then the light of understanding flashed upon his mind, and with an oath he tossed the chip to Whittles.

"Read that," he ordered. "It will explain matters."

A puzzled expression overspread Whittles' face as he read the writing.

"Don't you understand it?" Rackshaw asked.

"Blamed if I do," and Whittles scratched his head, as he again studied the words. "Who would want to send rats to you, of all men?"

"Wouldn't the man who got my 'city rats'?"

"What, not Abner Andrews!"

"And why not?"

"Sure, sure; I might have known."

"Known what?"

"That you couldn't get ahead of him. He'll get more than even every time. It's the touch of Abner, all right. You might have known what a dangerous cuss he is, the old devil. Rats! Well, I declare! Ugh!"

CHAPTER XVI IN THE KLINK

The police court room of Glucom was seldom a busy place, and as a rule the police magistrate had little to do. A few drunks generally made up the list for the week, with an occasional family "affair" to add a little spice of excitement. It was, therefore, a welcome relief to the monotony when Abner Andrews was brought into court, and charged with assault upon the Editor of *The Live Wire*.

Abner felt keenly the position in which he was placed as he stood in the dock and listened to the words of the sergeant who had arrested him. He realized how serious was the nature of the charge against him, and he clutched the rail of the dock firmly with both hands and carefully studied the face of the magistrate. He did not regret what he had done, neither was he much concerned about himself. It was of those at home he thought, for he knew how badly they would feel, and how they would worry when they heard of his arrest. He was anxious,

too, about his wife. He surmised that something unusual had happened to her, otherwise that scurrilous article would not have appeared in the paper.

"You have heard the charge, Mr. Andrews?" It was the magistrate now speaking. "Do you plead 'Guilty' or 'Not Guilty'?"

"Not guilty, ye'r Honor," was the prompt reply.

"Not guilty!" the magistrate repeated in surprise. "Why do you say that? Didn't you make an assault upon Joseph Preston this morning?"

"Ye bet I did, and gave him a lickin' he won't fergit to the end of his days."

"Well, then, if you acknowledge all that, why do you plead 'Not guilty'?"

"But I'm not guilty. I don't feel one bit guilty. My conscience doesn't bother me any more'n if I'd beat up a skunk that was after my chickens. Joe got jist what was comin' to him. Somebody had to do it sooner or later, and that's all there is about it."

If it had been anyone else than Aimer Andrews the magistrate would have remanded him at once. But in truth he felt a certain sympathy for the prisoner, as he well knew that Joe Preston had merely received a just punishment. He himself had often mentally vowed vengeance upon the editor for his mean attacks upon him as police magistrate. But he had the dignity of his position to maintain, and it would not do for him to give expression to his feelings, especially in the court room, of all places.

"Did you not take a mean advantage of Mr. Preston?" he presently asked. "You gave him no chance, so I understand, but sprang upon him and hit him while he was sitting at his desk. Wasn't that rather a mean thing to do?"

"Mean! Isn't there different ways of hittin', ye'r Honor? Some hit with their eyes, an' some with their tongues. But Joe Preston hits with that dirty sheet of his."

"And you hit with your fists, eh?"

"I sartinly do when it's necessary."

"They get you into a lot of trouble, don't they?"

"Mebbe so. But they save me from a darn lot of trouble, too. I'm nat'rally a man of peace, an' mind me own bizness, but when a critter like Joe Preston hits me a mean, nasty cut below the belt, well, he won't do it no more. It saves one from doin' it to others, that's all."

The magistrate stroked his chin as he thoughtfully mused for a few seconds. He was thinking of a story he would have to tell his wife when he went home to dinner.

"But why did you take matters into your own hands?" he asked. "You might have brought in an action for libel and receive damages."

"Receive damages! Good Lord! That's what I was afraid of. If I'd gone to law with Joe Preston I wouldn't have had a ghost of a chance, an' you know it."

So that's why I was anxious fer Joe to receive all the damages straight from my shoulder, an' with my special compliments. He's welcome to sich damages, an' I guess they're the only kind he understands."

"Perhaps your damages are yet to come," was the magistrate's reminder. "Mr. Preston is not likely to forget the injuries he has received, that is, providing he recovers."

A startled expression came into Abner's eyes at these words.

"Won't he recover?" he asked. "He's not as bad as that, is he?"

"The doctors are not certain, so I understand. Preston received a nasty blow on the head when he fell against the desk. If he doesn't get better it will go hard with you. But there, I guess that is all for to-day. I shall have to remand you. I am sorry, but I cannot help it."

"Surely ye'r not goin' to send me back to that hole agin, are ye?" Abner anxiously asked. "Why it's not a fit place fer a dog, let alone a human bein'. There's a drunken brute in the cell next to mine who's cuttin' up pretty lively."

"I can't help it, Mr. Andrews. You'll have to stay there unless you get someone to bail you out."

"Bail me out! Good heavens! De ye think I'm a leaky old boat, or a tub, an' need to be baled out?"

"It's not that kind I mean," the magistrate explained. He would have another good story to tell his wife.

"Well, then, ye must think I've got water on the brain, or I'm a bloomin' watered-stock company."

"I guess you know what I mean," and the magistrate smiled. "You're not so thick-headed as you try to make out."

"I ought to be pretty thick-headed, ye'r Honor. Wouldn't anyone be that way with more'n a dozen heads on his shoulders?"

"A dozen heads!"

"Sure. Sometimes I'm Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, an' agin I'm old Baron Rothschild, the Dook of Wellington, or some other guy. I guess I was the Dook all right when I walked over Joe Preston, though now I feel like old Boney Part when he was on that Island."

The magistrate looked curiously at the prisoner.

"Don't you often get mixed up?" he asked.

"Should say so. I'm never jist sure who I am. It gives me a lot of trouble."

"Well, if that's the way you feel, Mr. Andrews, I think the proper place for you to be is the lunatic asylum and not here. Anyway, we've got you now, and so must keep you for a while. Sergeant, you may take the prisoner down," he added, turning to the officer who had been standing quietly by during this interview.

During the rest of the morning Abner paced up and down the room ad-

joining his cell. He knew very well how people would regard his imprisonment and how most of them would say it served him right. He wondered how long he would have to stay in that hole. He had not the remotest hope of getting out on bail, for he knew of no one interested in his welfare who was able to put up the money whatever it might be. He thought, too, of Joe Preston. Suppose the man should die, what then? He would be tried for murder, perhaps convicted, and he would be either hung or given a life-sentence in the penitentiary. The perspiration stood out in beads on his forehead as he thought of this, and it was a relief when the jailer brought him his dinner of bread and water.

"Is that the best this hotel kin afford?" he demanded, as he took the mean meal.

"Hotel! This is no hotel," was the curt reply. "This is the Klink, and that's the food fer birds that come here. It's more'n they deserve, too."

Abner stepped up close to, the iron grate, and looked fiercely at the jailor.

"De ye know who I am?" he roared.

"H'm, I have a pretty good idea."

"Ye think ye do, ye old goat. But I guess ye'r mistaken. I'm a public benefactor, that's what I am."

"A public benefactor!"

"Sure. I did what many in this town were too cowardly to do. I gave Joe Preston the lickin' he desarved, an' this is the way I'm treated fer it. I can't eat this dry stuff. Hurry up an' bring me a piece of roast chicken, with all the fixin's an' some plum puddin', an' don't fergit the cigars, either. Them's the things fer a public benefactor."

Abner chuckled to himself as the jailor ambled away.

"They'll think I'm luney, fer sure, the magistrate, an' the hull dang bunch, an' mebbe they'll not be fer astray. What's the use of bein' a public benefactor if ye've got to eat this stuff?" He glanced at the bread he was holding in his hands. "Ugh! What trash! Heavy as lead, soggy, an' sure death. Well, I'm not goin' to commit suicide yit a while. The rats kin if they want to."

Tossing the bread into a corner of the room, he went into his narrow cell, and stretched himself out upon his hard rough cot.

"Might as well take life easy," he soliloquized. "What's the use of worryin', anyway. Guess a nap'll do me good."

He had no intention of sleeping and was quite surprised when he at length opened his eyes and saw a young man standing by his side.

"Where in h—l am I?" the visitor unceremoniously asked.

Abner looked curiously at the man without replying. He noted his blood-shot eyes, unshaven, haggard face, unkempt hair, and dirty, dishevelled clothes.

"Are you deaf?" the fellow demanded. "Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Oh, yes, I heard, all right," Abner drawled. "But I was merely tryin' to figger out what part of the hot place you've jist come from."

The wild-eyed youth emitted a hoarse mirthless laugh. "I certainly have come from a hot place, the hottest I ever struck."

"Well, ye don't tell! Ye sartinly look it. Run up against somethin' pretty hard, eh?"

"Should say so. Greatest ever. A hen, a real livin' hen in the shape of a woman; that's what it was."

"My, my," Abner commented, now becoming much interested. "An' de ye consider ye'rself a man to be knocked out by sich a critter?"

"But you should have seen her. My G—d, it was awful! When she caught me by the hair with both hands, and pulled with all her might, I was sure my neck would be broken or my head would come off."

"That sartinly was some doin's, young man."

"Indeed it was, ye bet ye'r boots. And when she added her blood-curdling screeches to her claws, I thought for sure a whole bunch of wild cats was on my back."

"Look here, young man," Abner remarked, rousing to a sitting position. "You've had the D.T.'s; that's what's wrong with you. Guess ye've been seein' things."

"But it's Gospel truth, I tell you," the other insisted. "It was only last night, when I was taking a joy-ride in Dimock's car that it happened. I only meant a little fun at the old hen's expense, but, Lord! it proved the other way round."

The mention of Dimock's car made Abner fully alert, and in an instant he surmised that this was the chauffeur who had run away with his wife. His first feeling was one of anger, accompanied by a strong impulse to give the fellow a thrashing. He banished this idea, however, as another method of punishment flashed upon his mind.

"So ye got more'n ye looked fer, eh?" he at length queried.

"Should say so. I didn't expect to find such a wild cat in that old hen."

"Easy, go easy there," Abner warned, as he slowly doubled up his fists. "Leave out all sich flourishes. They ain't becomin' when ye'r speakin' of a woman. Mebbe she's somebody's wife an' mother."

"I pity them, then, whoever they are," the young man replied. "Why, that she-devil ought to be put in a cage and placed on exhibition. When the car went into the ditch, because I couldn't see to steer, she bounded out like a rocket, seized a stick, and flew upon me like a whirlwind. My head and body are black and blue from her blows. It's a wonder I'm alive to tell the story."

"It sartinly is, young man, it sartinly is," Abner assented. "Ye'r lucky to be alive, though perhaps it'd have been better if she'd finished ye outright."

"I almost wish she had," was the mournful agreement. "I'm sick, nearly dead, and in jail, as far as I can see."

"Oh, cheer up, young man, ye'r troubles are jist beginnin'. The worst is yit to come. Ye'r in jail, all right, an' most likely ye'll stay here fer some time. But that ain't the worst that's comin' to ye."

"What do you mean?" and a look of fear came into the chauffeur's eyes.

"Oh, you'll find out later when the Queen of Sheby brings in damages. Then ye'll squirm, let me tell ye that."

"The Queen of Sheby! Who in the devil is she?"

"Why, the woman ye took fer a joy-ride last night. Ye see, she doesn't know much about autos. She's used to travellin' on camels, so I believe, an' they didn't go so fast."

"Travel on camels!" the other gasped.

"Sure. She travelled over hundreds of miles on them hump-backed critters to see old King Solomon several thousand years ago."

"Say, what are you giving me?" the chauffeur demanded. "Do you think I'm a fool? That wild cat is no queen and never was. She's the wife of Abner Andrews, a queer cuss, so I've heard, who lives at Ash Point. Do you know him?"

"Y'bet I do. Better'n his own brother. I've known him fer several thousand years."

The chauffeur did not reply, but stood staring at the man before him. He was trying to make out whether he was a fool or a madman.

"Yes," Abner continued, enjoying the other's astonishment. "I knew that old feller well when he was rich old Baron Rothschild, the Dook of Wellington, old Boney Part, an' the husband of the Queen of Sheby."

The chauffeur was now certain that Abner was making fun of him, and he was in no mood for any pleasantries.

"You must be a pretty old bird yourself," he retorted, "if you knew all of those guys. It's no wonder you've lost your brains, that is, if you ever had any. Who the devil are you, anyway?"

"Me? Oh, it doesn't matter much who I am. But if ye want to know, I'll tell ye as a great secret that I'm the Queen of Sheby's husband."

"The devil!"

"No, I ain't his Satanic majesty. I'm jist the Queen of Sheby's husband. She's allus ruled me, ye see, an' kept me to black her boots, button up her dress, an' do sich odd jobs that husbands are generally called upon to do. I have allus done as she said except that time several thousand years ago when she started to pay a visit to King Solomon. She had heard of his wisdom, an' thought she'd like to see him, an' hear some of his wise sayin's. But, my lands, when I bucked

up, an' said she couldn't go, she landed upon me jist like she did upon you last night. I had to be put to bed, rubbed with palm-olive oil, an' fed like a baby fer a hull month. By the time I was able to set up the Queen was somewheres out in the desert on her way to the wise old king. I kin sartinly sympathize with you, young feller, fer I've been there meself, an' know what the Queen of Sheby is like when she gits roused."

"Look here," the chauffeur demanded, "are you kidding me or are you a blooming fool? I can't see any connection between that old queen and the creature that landed on me last night." He paused and a sudden look of fear leaped into his eyes. "Say," he gasped, "surely you're not Abner Andrews, are you?"

"I am an' I ain't. I was an' I isn't, so there ye are. Now kin ye jist tell me who I am, anyway?"

But the chauffeur did not wait to reply. He had retreated, and was out in the adjoining room when Abner had finished.

"Don't be skeered, young man," the latter remarked. "Ye can't run very fer in this hole, anyway, an' I kin ketch ye whenever I want ye."

"Oh, Lord!" the unhappy chauffeur groaned. "It's her husband, and he's crazy! What am I to do?"

"Hold ye'r tongue, that's what ye kin do," Abner roared. "De ye think I'm goin' to kill ye right off? That'd be too good fer the likes of you. Come in here an' set down, an' tell me why ye ran off with my queen."

"Your queen! Good heavens! Why didn't you tell me she belonged to you? Are you sure you're not crazy?"

"I will be soon if ye don't stop ye'r gab and set down. There, that's better," he continued, when the other had perched himself gingerly upon the edge of the cot. "Now, look here, young feller, I want to know why ye chose my queen fer ye'r joy-ride last night? It wasn't fer her beauty, or attractive manner, was it?"

"Oh, Jerusalem, no!"

"Well, why was it? Out with it."

But the young man held down his head, and made no reply. Abner studied him for a few minutes in silence.

"Did somebody put ye up to that job?" he presently enquired. "Don't be afraid to tell me. But if ye don't, I'll be as tender with ye as a cat with a mouse. Somebody set ye on, didn't he?"

"Yes," the chauffeur finally blurted out.

"Ah, I thought so. We're gittin' on nicely now with our little teeter game, you at one end, me at the other, an' someone in the middle. Now, who was that someone?"

"It was Lawyer Rackshaw; that's who it was."

"H'm, I guessed as much. I s'pose he paid ye fer the job?"

"Yes; money and whiskey."

"Ho, ho, money an' whiskey, eh? Well, I declare! An' all fer the sake of givin' the Queen of Sheby a joy-ride. He was sartinly kind. I wish he'd been along too."

"So do I, the mean devil. He got me into the fix, and he'll snap his fingers at me now."

"Will he?"

"Certainly. That's the kind he is."

"But can't you do somethin'?"

"Do! What can I do?"

"Swear to what ye've jist told me."

"Oh, yes, I'll swear to that at any old time. But what good will it do?"

"It might do ye a lot of good, an' me too."

"You!"

"Sure. I'm in this hole fer bein' a public benefactor, an' if you'll jist swear to what ye've told me, it might help us both out, see?"

"Have you something against Rackshaw?"

"Yes, a few things, more or less."

"Then I'll swear. But say, you'll not do anything to me for giving your wife that joy-ride last night, will you?"

"No, no, that's all right, now that I know who put ye up to it. But look here, young feller, take an old man's advice and let whiskey alone after this. It's put a good many more chaps than you in the ditch when they were joy-ridin' with women. Yes, whiskey an' women have sartinly got many a fine bright chap into trouble, as ye know from experience. Women ain't allus what they seem, an' it's hard sometimes to tell the difference between the Queen of Sheby an' Tildy Andrews, of Ash Pint."

CHAPTER XVII

FRIENDLY ADVICE

It seemed to Abner that all his friends had forsaken him. He paced up and down the room outside his cell most of the evening. The chauffeur was asleep, and his deep breathing was the only sound which broke the intense stillness which prevailed. The nap he had taken that afternoon drove all sleep from Abner's

eyes. In fact, he could not have slept, anyway, as the story the chauffeur had told gave him food for much thought. So Rackshaw was at the bottom of it all, he mused. He had surmised as much, but he had no means of proving it until he had heard it from the lips of the wild-eyed youth. Perhaps the lawyer was responsible, too, for the article in *The Live Wire*. How could the editor have obtained the information unless someone had communicated with him? The police, of course, could have done so, but they would not have twisted the story beyond all semblance of reality. He felt that Joe Preston was guilty, and deserved all that he had received. But was Rackshaw in league with him?

He was lost in such thoughts when he heard the jailor's approaching footsteps. The man was coming, no doubt, to lock him in his cell for the night. The thought of being confined in that narrow stuffy place for long hours angered him, so when he heard the key rattle in the lock he was in a most dangerous frame of mind. Accustomed as he was from childhood to unbounded freedom, and an abundance of fresh air, this close confinement in such poorly-ventilated quarters was most galling. He had started to walk back to the other end of the room as the key turned in the lock. He could hardly trust himself then, and he needed a few seconds to calm his feelings.

As the door swung open the jailor called to him, and demanded why he was running away. Fiercely Abner wheeled around, but the words of wrath which were glowing hot on his tongue suddenly cooled when he beheld Zeb Burns standing before him. For an instant he stood as if he had seen an apparition, staring hard at his neighbor. Zeb saw the look of astonishment, and the faint semblance of a smile lurked about the corners of his mouth.

"What's the matter, Abner?" he asked. "Ye look scared."

"So I am."

"What about?"

"You."

"Me! Why are you scared about me?"

"What have ye been doin', Zeb?"

"Doin'! What de ye mean?"

"But why are ye here? Have they got you, too?"

"Ho, ho, I see," and Burns laughed outright. "Ye think that because you're in the Klink everybody else is headin' the same way. But I guess there are a few sensible people left yit in the world, which is a mighty lucky thing."

"An' they're not goin' to lock you up too?" Abner asked in surprise. "Ye haven't been beatin' anybody up, eh?"

"Certainly not. What's the matter with ye, anyway, Abner? I'm here to take you out of this hole, so git a hustle on an' come with me at once. There now, never mind talkin'," he added. "We've got lots of time fer that later. I want to git

away.”

Like a child Abner followed Zeb out of the jail, and not until they had reached the street did he open his lips. Then he stopped, looked around, and drew in a long, deep breath of fresh air.

”My, that feels good!” he exclaimed. ”The Lord never meant a man to be shut up in a place like that.”

”I know he didn’t,” Zeb replied. ”Neither did He intend that a man in his common sense should act the fool.”

”De ye think I have?” Abner demanded.

”It looks very much like it. But, let’s hurry up. I guess the judge will settle whether you are a fool or a lunatic, so it’s no use fer us to spend our time arguin’ about it.”

”Where are ye goin’?” Abner asked.

”Home, of course. Where else would we go?”

”Did ye walk to town, Zeb?”

”Sure; I’ve no other means of conveyance, have I?”

”An’ ye’re goin’ to walk home?”

”Guess so from present appearance.”

”But Jerry’s here,” Abner explained. ”Sam must know where he is.”

”That’s good. We’ll hustle there at once an’ git the old nag.”

They moved rapidly along the street leading to the railway station. This route led them by Rackshaw’s office, and as they were about to pass they glanced in at the open door. The sight which met their eyes filled them with astonishment, causing them to stop and look into the room. To Zeb the scene of chaos was puzzling, but Abner surmised the cause in an instant. His face brightened, and his mouth expanded into a grin when he saw Whittles upon the floor and the lawyer standing before the box.

”Evenin’, gentlemen,” he accosted, ”an’ may the Lord fergive me fer mis-callin’ yez. Havin’ a pink tea, eh?”

Rackshaw stood staring at Abner as if he could not believe his eyes.

”Good Lord!” he ejaculated. ”Are you that devil, Andrews, or his ghost? I thought you were in jail.”

”H’m,” Abner sniffed. ”I’m St. Peter now. This is me angel in the shape of Zeb Burns, who came to-night an’ brought me out of prison. Look’s to me as if you an’ Hen have been holdin’ a prayer meetin’. Guess ye’r prayers must have been answered, fer here I be.”

”You’re no saint,” Rackshaw roared. ”You’re Beelzebub, the prince of devils; that’s who you are. What did you mean by sending me those rats?”

”Rats!” and again Abner grinned. ”Oh, I see,” and his eyes surveyed the room. ”Country rats, eh?”

"Indeed, they were," was the emphatic reply. "And look what they've done to my office. You'll have a nice sum to pay for all this damage."

"Me! Me pay?"

"Yes, you I mean!" the lawyer yelled, now fairly beside himself. "You are the cause of all this, an' I'll skin you alive, see if I don't, you miserable devil."

The grin vanished from Abner's face, his form suddenly straightened, and his eyes blazed. Walking slowly across the room, he stood before the angry lawyer.

"Jist say them words agin," he warned, in that drawling tone which betokened danger. "If ye're thinkin' of skinnin' me alive, as no doubt ye'll try to do, I might as well have my full satisfaction now. I'm in deep water as it is over Joe Preston, an' I feel jist in the mood to have another scalp scored to my credit. Another skunk like you won't make much difference, so jist say them words agin, will ye?"

Rackshaw was in a trap and knew it. His body shook and his eyes blazed fire. But he was an arrant coward, and the huge form bulked very large before him just then. He knew that Abner would not hesitate to deal with him as he had with Joe Preston, and he did not relish the thought of going to the hospital for repairs. As the two men thus faced each other, Zeb approached and laid a firm hand upon Abner's arm.

"Come along out of this," he commanded. "You're in enough trouble now. Don't be a fool. I'm losin' faith in this ancestor business of yours. St. Peter never acted like you're actin' to-night."

For an instant only Abner hesitated. He did long to give the lawyer something that was coming to him. But he knew that Zeb was right, and he followed him to the door. He couldn't refrain, however, from giving a parting shot ere he left.

"Don't fergit, Rackshaw," he reminded, "that country rats are not to be fooled with, no matter whether they walk on four legs or two. Keep ye'r city rats where they belong, and let them mind their own bizn'ess, an' ye'll have no trouble with country rats."

"Fer heaven's sake, hold ye'r tongue, an' come along," Zeb ordered. "I'm sick an' tired of all this confounded fuss."

"But would ye put up with sass from a thing like that?" Abner asked. "I wish I had punched his head."

"It's lucky ye didn't."

"Why?"

"You ought to know as well as I do. What kin you do agin a lawyer? He'll make it hot fer you as it is. I don't know what's comin' over ye, Abner. I always knew that you were a queer critter, but I thought ye had some brains left."

For a wonder Abner made no reply, but walked along silently until the station house was reached. It was locked, and Sam was nowhere to be found. Upon enquiry from a man who was standing upon the platform, they learned that the agent had gone to a party out in the country, and had taken Jerry with him.

"Confound that feller!" Abner growled. "What right has he to run off with my hoss, I'd like to know?"

"He looked after him, though, when you were in the pen, didn't he?" Zeb queried.

"Sure, sure he did, an' I s'pose I must fergive him."

"Now you're beginnin' to talk like a reasonable man, Abner. It's the first sensible thing I've heard ye say to-night. But we've got to git home, so I guess there's nothin' else to do but to foot it. What de ye say?"

"I'm game, so let's git on."

They made their way through the town, and when they were at last out into the country, they filled and lighted their pipes as they trudged along. So far little had been said, but the soothing effect of the tobacco seemed to make them more communicable, and they discussed the affairs of the evening. Abner was unusually fierce in his denunciation of everything in general. He believed that he had been unjustly treated, and he longed for suitable retaliation. Zeb listened to him for some time without arguing. He knew that Abner must unburden his soul before he could feel better. At length, however, he stopped and laid his hand upon his companion's sleeve.

"Look here, Abner," he solemnly began, "I don't like ye to talk that way. It doesn't do any good."

"But it does me a lot of good to blow off steam," Abner retorted.

"Yes, mebbe it does. But remember, there's a great difference between blowin' off steam and bustin' ye'r biler, an' that's what you're in danger of doin'."

"But de ye think I'm goin' to put up with a hull bunch of rogues who are tryin' to down me?"

"An' ye'r helpin' them with ye'r actions, ain't ye?"

"What else am I to do? They'll walk over me rough shod if I don't put up a fight. If ye run away from a little snappin' cur he'll run after ye, an' bite ye'r heels, an' bark like mad. But turn around, face the critter, an' give it a good kick, an' then ye'll see how it'll scoot away with its tail between its legs."

"But suppose it isn't a cur, Abner, but a big bulldog, what then?"

"Why, I'd use a stick, or mebbe somethin' else."

"Yes, that's jist it. You'd do somethin' that ye'd regret all ye're life. Now, look here. You've got to stop all this. What you need is a change of heart."

"Change of heart!" Abner repeated. "Good Lord, what de ye mean by that?"

Ye haven't been attendin' a revival meetin', have ye, Zeb?"

"No, I haven't, an' don't intend to. But common sense tells me that a man won't accomplish much in this world when he is always rubbin' people the wrong way. Even a cat won't stand it fer long."

"The way I rubbed Rackshaw, Ikey Dimock an' Joe Preston, eh?" Abner asked.

"That's what I mean. It makes the sparks fly, an' soon there's a big fire which is hard to put out."

"What de ye expect me to do, then?"

"Rub people the other way, fer instance, and see how it'll work."

"Ho, ho," and Abner laughed outright. "Imagine me rubbin' Ikey Dimock an' Rackshaw, an' pattin' 'em on the back an' callin' 'em 'me dear friends.' No, I guess I'm too old a bird fer that. Never had the trainin', ye see. Anyway, it's no use now; it's too late. Everybody's dead set aginst me, an' is tryin' to do me."

"Everybody is not, Abner. I'm not, anyway, or else I wouldn't have taken all the trouble to walk to town to git ye out of jail."

"Sure, sure, I know you'd stand by me, Zeb. But, say, how did ye do it?"

"Do what?"

"Git me out of jail, of course."

"Oh, bailed ye out, that was all."

"But where did ye git the money?"

"Never mind where I got it. That's my own business, so don't say anythin' more about it."

Abner was silent for a few minutes as he plodded along.

"Say," he presently began, "does Tildy an' the gals know about this?"

"Can't say fer sure," was the reply. "But I don't believe they do. I jist heard of it by chance, but I never said a word to ye'r folks."

"That's good of ye, Zeb." And once more Abner became silent.

The night was dark, and when the men were about a mile from their homes it began to rain, first a gentle drizzle, then a steady downpour. They hastened their steps, but the roads became muddy and slippery, which made progress slow.

"Say, Zeb," Abner at length panted, "an' ye really think I need a change of heart?"

"Don't ye think so ye'rself?" was the evasive reply. "Is this rain softenin' ye up? It is me, at any rate, an' I'm gittin' soaked."

"But how kin I begin the change, Zeb?"

"Guess ye'll have to work out that sum ye'rself, Abner, if it's not too hard."

"Now, that's jist the trouble. It is too hard. Ye see, me ancestors are to blame. They were all fightin' men, an' so that spirit has come down to me."

"H'm," Zeb sniffed. "The trouble with you is that ye've chosen ye'r own

ancestors.”

”Chosen me own ancestors! How could a man do that?”

”Easy enough. Ye’ve got a quarrelsome spirit, Abner, an’ ye naturally choose sich dead men as suit ye. Ye kin go to the past fer anythin’, it seems t’ me, jist as people go to the Bible to find what agrees with their way of thinkin’. Now, isn’t that so?”

”But what am I to do, Zeb?”

”Think of men who have followed peace instead of war; men who have served their country an’ sacrificed themselves. If ye kin do that, perhaps ye’ll git their spirit, which, in my opinion, will do ye a great deal of good.”

”Mebbe ye’r right, Zeb,” Abner agreed. ”But darn it all, I don’t know nuthin’ about men of peace who sacrificed themselves fer others. I’ve already sacrificed much fer Glucom by lookin’ after Joe Preston. If that wasn’t a good deed fer the welfare of the community, then I’d like to know what it was.”

”But ye’r heart wasn’t right, Abner,” Zeb explained. ”There was anger there, an’ when ye knocked Joe out ye never thought of the public good, but of ye’r own personal injury. That’s not the way. Git them good ancestors to work, then ye’ll know what I mean, an’ ye’ll begin to rub people the right way. Life will be much more pleasant, see if it isn’t.”

”Good ancestors, rubbin’ people the right way,” Abner muttered, as he plodded along. ”I’d like to know how to begin, skiddy-me-shins if I wouldn’t.”

CHAPTER XVIII

A MOIST RECEPTION

Abner was somewhat uneasy as to the reception he would be likely to receive at home. What would his wife say about the two waifs he had sheltered for the night and the ruined pillow-slips? Judging from past experiences, he felt quite sure that a lively time lay ahead of him, and he knew that he would need the combined spirits of all his peace-loving ancestors to aid him in keeping calm.

Thinking of such things, he walked slowly to the back door after he had parted from Zeb at the gate. He had no idea what time of the night it was, though he was sure that it was late, for the house was wrapped in complete darkness. He decided to slip in unnoticed and occupy the sofa in the kitchen for the night. And glad would he be to rest, for he was very tired after such a trying day and

his long walk home.

Reaching the back door, he gently tried the latch, but it was firmly secured from within. He had partly expected this, as he knew how particular his wife was about fastening the doors before going to bed. She had often told about a robbery which had once taken place at a certain house because the back door had been left open. Abner thought she might have departed from her strict rule for this night, at least, in case of his return. It annoyed him to think how little his absence was considered by his own family.

Failing to find an entrance here, he at once remembered the window in the woodshed.

"Lucky fer me," he mused, "that I didn't fix that winder. That's a time when I was right, an' I won't fergit to remind Tildy of it, neither."

It was so dark that he made considerable noise as he walked around the end of the woodshed. He tripped over a pail, and when he had with difficulty recovered himself, the clothes-line, which had been drawn taut by the rain, caught him under the chin, and gave his head such a jerk that he was sure his neck was cracked. These mishaps by no means sweetened his temper, but he managed to restrain his feelings so far as speech was concerned, though, as he afterwards expressed it, he was "bilin' within."

It took him several minutes to find the window, and this he accomplished by feeling his way along the side of the building. When his hands at length reached the opening, which was about up to his shoulders, he gave a spring, caught his elbows upon the sill and pulled himself up. This was somewhat hard to do as Abner's body almost filled the opening. After two or three frantic wriggles he progressed far enough to balance himself upon his stomach upon the sill. Another wriggle and he would be through. But just at this critical juncture there was a sudden movement within the shed, a rush was heard, and then a flood of cold water was dashed into his face. With a half-smothered yell of surprise Abner recoiled, and ere he could regain himself, he lost his balance and fell sprawling upon the ground.

For a few seconds he lay there puzzled and half dazed. What did it all mean? he asked himself. Who could be in the woodshed at that hour of the night? Why had the water been thrown into his face? Then the terrible thought flashed into his mind that something must have happened to his family, that robbers might be in control of the house, who had committed some terrible deed. The silence of the house lent color to this suspicion, and a wild fury filled Abner's soul. He scrambled to his knees, then to his feet. He would teach the villains a lesson they would not soon forget. They would not escape his wrath, and he must be quick.

Hurrying around the building as fast as possible, he reached the door, and was about to force it open, when the sound of splashing water fell upon his ears,

accompanied by a heavy thump upon the floor, as if somebody had fallen. Instantly a woman's wild shriek rent the air, mingled with children's cries of distress. Certain now that something was seriously wrong within, Abner put his shoulder to the door, which immediately gave way with a crash. This only tended to cause the cries and shrieks to grow louder than ever, and Abner was completely confused by the din. He could see nothing, and he did not know which way to step. He felt around through the blackness, but could touch nothing.

"Shet up ye'r yellin'," he roared, "an' tell me what's the matter."

This command had the desired effect, for the babel lessened.

"Abner, oh, Abner, is that you?" came a voice from his left, which he recognized as belonging to his wife.

"Sure, it's me," was the reply. "What in the divil does all this mean?"

"I thought you were a pack of robbers," Mrs. Andrews moaned. "Get a light, quick; I'm afraid I've killed one of the boys."

As Abner turned toward the kitchen a light suddenly illumined the darkness. Jess was coming, carrying a lamp in her hand, closely followed by Belle. Both girls were clad in their dressing-gowns, and their faces were white with fear.

"Daddy, daddy, what is the matter?" Jess asked.

"Look out, there, ye'll let that lamp fall," Abner warned. "Give it to me. My, ye're tremblin' all over."

"Oh, tell me what has happened," Jess pleaded. "Is anybody killed?"

"Sounds like somethin's dyin'," Abner replied, as he took the lamp from the girl's trembling hand and turned the light upon the shed. As he did so he saw a peculiar sight. Lying on the floor, with her back to the wall, was his wife, with an expression of misery depicted upon her face. On each side of her was a little boy, hopelessly entangled in the bed-clothes, and with wide staring eyes, filled with wonder and terror. Near by he saw three other little chaps also awake, and watching all that was taking place.

"What's the meaning of this?" Abner demanded. "An' what's all that water doin' on the floor? There's as much there as there is on me an' down me neck."

Mrs. Andrews made no reply. She seemed to be greatly overcome. At once Jess stooped down and put her arms around her mother's shoulders.

"Mother dear, are you sick?" she asked. "Let me help you up. Something dreadful must have happened. Come into the kitchen."

Breathing heavily and moaning, Mrs. Andrews was rescued from her lowly position, assisted into the kitchen, and placed upon a chair.

"I'm afraid I'm dying," the woman moaned. "I never had such a fright in all my life. It was worse than the auto."

"She's luney," Abner remarked. "Her brain's turned. Better git the smellin'-"

salts, Jess; they'll bring her to."

"My brain's not turned," was the emphatic and unexpected protest. "You're luney yourself, Abner Andrews, and everybody knows it. What do you mean by prowling about the house at this time of night, scaring people out of their wits?"

"An' what do people mean by sleepin' in the woodshed?" Abner retorted. "How did I know ye was there with a hull bunch of kids."

"They're some of yours, though, Abner. I have as much right to bring children into this house as you have. You needn't think that you run this place."

Abner was about to make a strong sarcastic reply, when he suddenly thought of his peaceful ancestors, and checked himself just in time.

"There now, me love," he replied in his most affable manner, "I know I don't run this place, an' never did. You run it so well, Tildy, that I wouldn't dare to interfere."

Abner felt quite proud of this effort, and smiled broadly upon his wife, expecting her to be astonished at these words. In this, however, he was disappointed. Mrs. Andrews was in no mood for soft words, and she viewed him critically from head to foot.

"Have you been drinking, Abner?" she asked. "Is that why you are so late coming home?"

"Drinkin'! Good Lord!" Abner gasped. "What makes ye think that I have, Tildy?"

"By the way you've acted ever since you came home. You first tramped around the house as if you were afraid to come in, and scared me most to death, and now you get off a whole lot of senseless nonsense. I never heard the like of it."

"No, I guess ye ain't used to sich things, Tildy. I've been in the habit of sayin' pretty nasty things, but I've had a change of heart, ye see, an' that makes the difference."

"A change of heart!"

"Sure," and Abner stroked his chin and smiled.

"Have you been to a revival meeting in town?" his wife demanded.

"No, not as bad as that. But I've had a change of heart, all right, an' I'm havin' a wonderful experience. I see all me good ancestors a-hoverin' over me head, smilin' an' breathin' upon me peaceful spirits. Oh, it's great! Don't ye wish you felt like that, Tildy? I think a new heart 'ud do you good, too."

"What I need is a new husband," was the scornful reply.

"But ye have a new husband, Tildy. He's come back to ye from the pit of destruction. He's changed, I tell ye, an' his heart is like the heart of a little child."

"And as simple, why don't you say? I'd like to know what's come over you."

"An' I'd like to know what's happened to you, Tildy. Why were ye sleepin'?"

out in the woodshed? Were ye mournin' so much over me that ye couldn't stay in the old bed where we've slept fer years? Guess ye've got a warm spot in ye'r heart fer me after all, haven't ye?"

"It wasn't for your sake I was sleeping in the woodshed," Mrs. Andrews explained, "but to look after those children."

"Oh, I see; an' ye armed ye'rself with pails of water, eh?"

"I certainly did, as you should know."

Abner glanced down at his wet clothes and smiled.

"What happened to the other pail, Tildy?"

"I tripped over it; that's what I did."

"And landed upon the kids, ho, ho."

"Is it anything to laugh at? I might have killed the poor little things."

"Sure, sure, ye might, Tildy. It's nuthin' to laff at, oh, no. I shouldn't laff at anythin' like that when I've had a change of heart, should I? De ye think me good ancestors 'ud act that way?"

While this conversation was going on, Jess and Belle were attending to the children, soothing their fears and arranging the disordered bed-clothes. They had overheard the animated talk, nevertheless, and it amused them. They looked upon the whole affair as a joke when they knew that no harm had been done. Belle, especially, enjoyed the fun. It was the first real family scene of this kind she had witnessed since coming to Ash Point, although Jess had often told her that she might expect it at any time, but not to be at all alarmed when it did happen. They came back into the kitchen just as Abner was speaking about his peaceful ancestors.

"Don't you think you should go to bed, daddy?" Jess asked. "That seems to me to be the best way to settle all disputes to-night."

"Indeed, I do," Abner agreed, "'specially fer a man who wants to imbibe the spirits of his ancestors."

"I'm still convinced that you've been imbibing Tom Grogan's spirits," Mrs. Andrews replied. "Why, I can smell it on your breath, can't you, Jess?"

"I guess ye'r wrong this time, Tildy. Ye've never smelled the spirits of me ancestors, not by a jugful."

"Indeed, I haven't, and I hope to goodness I never shall," his wife retorted. "But get away to bed, all of you."

"I'm goin' to watch them kids fer the rest of the night," Abner announced.

"No, you're not," his wife declared. "I couldn't trust you with them. I've undertaken the job for to-night, and I intend to carry it through, so, away with you all, and let me get some rest."

Abner at once started off, humming as he went:

"When Bill Larkins made his money."

Mrs. Andrews and the girls watched him until he had disappeared. Then they looked at one another with wondering eyes. Jess was the first to speak.

"I'm afraid there's something wrong with daddy," she whispered.

"I'm sure of it," her mother replied. "He's either loney, or he's been drinking."

But Belle laughed at them.

"You needn't worry about him," she declared. "He's neither crazy nor drunk. He has more sense left than most men. It's only his way."

"Which way? I'd like to know," and Mrs. Andrews sighed. "He's had so many ways since we've been married that I don't know which way you mean."

"That may be so, Mrs. Andrews, but I believe this way is a good one, so we must not worry."

"Let us hope so," was all that Mrs. Andrews said. Nevertheless, she found it hard to get to sleep again, for she knew her husband better than either of the girls.

CHAPTER XIX

JERRY, ME PARDNER

It was late when Abner awoke the next morning. This was a most unusual thing for him, and he felt annoyed at himself as he hurriedly dressed and hastened downstairs. The house seemed to be deserted. He glanced at the clock, and was surprised to find that it was a quarter to nine. His breakfast was all ready on the table, but no one was to be seen. A copy of *The Live Wire* lying by his plate arrested his attention.

"Some class to this," he remarked, half aloud, as he unfolded the paper. "Jist like a hotel; breakfast waitin', an' the mornin' paper right at hand. Reg'lar Waldorf-Astoria style. Hello! what in time—!"

His eyes had caught sight of the big headlines, and he saw his own name prominently displayed along with Joe Preston's. It was a great write-up, and Abner read it through to the bitter end. It told of his savage attack upon the editor, how he looked and acted, and of his arrest and confinement in jail. Then followed

a description of his life's history, which ended by saying that he had been looked upon as dangerous for some time. It was really believed by many that, owing to his peculiar actions, he was not altogether in his right mind. The incident of his offering one thousand dollars toward the Orphanage was mentioned, and how he did not have enough money to pay even five dollars, let alone the whole amount. Not a word was said in his favor. He was painted in the darkest colors, and it was suggested that he should either be placed in the Asylum as a lunatic, or in the Penitentiary as a most dangerous character.

A peculiar expression overspread Abner's face as he finished reading. He laid the paper aside and began his breakfast. When he was through, he filled his pipe and walked out of the house. The rain had ceased in the night, but the air was damp and heavy. It was a gloomy morning, and accorded perfectly with the state of his mind. He heard the voices of the children in the barn and knew that the girls were with them. It was the best place to play on a day such as this. He had no mind to join them, as he wished to be alone in order to think.

He stood for a few minutes near the woodshed, looking down upon the river, over which drifted a heavy mist. He longed to be out there in the Flying Scud, away from all land-lubbers. It was the life to which he was especially fitted. Picking up his axe, which was lying by the chopping-block, he threw it over his shoulder and walked rapidly toward the shore. There was considerable drift-wood to be gathered, and he generally spent wet days at this work. He needed something to do, and in wrestling with the roots, logs, and blocks he could give physical vent to his pent-up feelings.

His row-boat was pulled up on the beach, and his small canoe, used for muskrat and duck shooting, was lying bottom up among the bushes. He was tempted to launch the latter, cross to the island and spend the day there. Any place was preferable to remaining near home where he knew that ere long he must submit to a regular bombardment of questions. He wondered what had become of his wife. It was a most unusual thing for her to be absent from home at this time of the morning. He could see the house plainly from where he stood on the shore, and he occasionally turned and looked in that direction. Abner was well aware that he should go to town for Jerry, but he was in no mood for the long walk over the muddy roads. He would need the horse for haying as soon as the weather cleared.

"Confound it all!" he growled. "I don't want to see that town agin fer a long time. I'm sick of it. Why can't people leave me alone, anyway? They'll all read that piece in the paper, an' they'll think I'm the biggest villain on the face of the hull earth. I wonder how Zeb would act if he'd been rubbed the wrong way most of his life sich as I have. Peaceful ancestors, be blowed!"

In order to express his feelings he started to work, and every blow of the

axe was not only upon log or block, but upon his enemies. This violent exercise did him a great deal of good, and he mentally compared the joy of being in the fresh air with the stuffy and unsavory jail.

After an hour of such work he felt in a better frame of mind. He had put all of his enemies to flight and was the victor. There was joy in the feeling, and his face wore a more benign expression when he at length paused, seated himself upon a log, and began to re-fill his pipe. He thus sat looking out over the water, thinking of his previous day's experiences, and of what Zeb had to say about his peaceful ancestors. At times he felt that his neighbor was right, but the spirits of his war-like ancestors had been with him for so long that he found it most difficult to rid himself of their influence.

"It's a darn hard thing to shake off old friends," he muttered. "It's 'specially hard when ye'r in sympathy with 'em, an' want to do jist as they did. They've stood by me fer many a year now, an' their words an' actions have allus jibed with mine. I wonder if me peaceful ancestors will see eye to eye with me. That's the pint Zeb didn't take into consideration. If I've got to trim me sails to their gentle actions I'm afraid I'll land in the lunatic asylum fer sure."

He was aroused from his meditation by a step behind him, and looking quickly around, he saw a man approaching but a few yards away. The presence of this stranger annoyed Abner. What right had anyone to creep upon him that way? he asked himself.

But the visitor was by no means daunted by Abner's surly expression. He came jauntily forward, and held out a big fat hand.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Andrews," he accosted. "Having a quiet time here all by yourself, I see. Beautiful spot, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Abner sullenly asked, as he viewed the man most carefully. He did not like his looks, and he believed him to be an agent, who wished to sell him apple-trees.

"It's the finest place I've seen in a long time," the man replied. "And look at that wood! I suppose you get your winter's supply here. You are fortunate. We in the city have to buy ours, while the Lord casts yours right at your door."

"You come from the city, eh?" Abner queried.

"Oh, yes. Have lived there all my life, though I do long to spend the rest of my days in the country, away from all bustle and confusion, and live the quiet life."

"To pile drift-wood and do sich jobs, I s'pose?"

"Yes, that would be a pleasure. Good for the appetite."

"Think ye'd make enough to eat on this place?" Abner asked.

"I'm sure I could. Why, all you farmers have to do is to go into the garden, for your supplies, and to the shore for your fuel, while we in the city have to pay

for such things.”

Abner felt like kicking this fellow and telling him in no uncertain language what a fool he was. But he thought of his peaceful ancestors and so changed his mind.

”Yes, ye’r quite right, Mister,” he drawled. ”We do have a great time here in the bush. Lots to eat in the summer time fer nuthin’. An’ in the winter it’s jist the same. We eat icicles fer breakfast, warmed-up snow fer dinner, an’ fer supper we have a slice off one of them cedar blocks there. Ye see, them sticks have been floatin’ so long in the river that they have a fishy smell, an’ when a piece is fried in molasses, why, ye couldn’t tell it from the finest lake trout. Did ye ever try one?”

”I certainly never did,” the stranger smilingly replied. ”It must be rather hard to digest, isn’t it?”

”Oh, we don’t use our digesters in the winter time. We lay ’em away in the cellar until spring. It’s great how they work then, after a good long rest.”

”I see you’re quite a humorist, Mr. Andrews,” and again the visitor smiled. ”Life in the country is conducive to humor, I suppose?”

”Sure. It’s the funniest place ye ever sot eyes on. It makes people roarin’ funny all the time. Why, when we go to the city people jist stand and laff at us, an’ the funny papers fill their pages with humor about the doin’s of the bush. Everythin’ is funny here. Even Abner Andrews is considered a humorous cuss, an’ that’s sayin’ a good deal.”

The visitor now realized that this quaint farmer was slyly poking fun at him, and he was anxious to change the subject.

”I’ve come to see you on an important matter, Mr. Andrews,” he explained, ”and as I am in a hurry, I shall come to business at once. I’m a real estate agent, with my office in the city, and I am anxious to make some enquiries about your farm. I have come in the interest of a man who is seeking for a suitable place to build a large summer hotel. Now, as you have such an excellent location here, I feel that this is just the right spot for the hotel. The view is excellent, the river is right near for boating and bathing, and from all accounts there are fine lakes and brooks back in the hills for trout fishing. Is not that so?”

”Ye’r sartinly right,” Abner assented. ”Ye couldn’t find a nicer spot if ye hunted the hull province over.”

”I’m very glad that you agree with me, Mr. Andrews,” the visitor replied, somewhat surprised as he had been warned to beware of the farmer, as he was a most disagreeable man to deal with.

”Oh, I don’t mind agreein’ with sich things, Mister, ’specially so when they’re correct.”

”And you think it would be an excellent place for a summer hotel?”

"Sure, I do. Why, a man 'ud make his fortune in no time. It wouldn't cost him nuthin' to feed the people. They'd catch all the trout they could eat, an' when they didn't want fish they could jist set on the grass an' feed upon the beauties of Nature. It 'ud be cheap fer the people, too, 'cause they wouldn't have to bother with fine clothes. When they weren't fishin' they'd be in bathin', when they wouldn't need no clothes at all."

"Ha, ha, that certainly would be fine," the agent laughed. "Utopia, eh?"

"I'm not," Abner declared. "Don't ye say that agin."

"Say what?" the stranger asked in surprise.

"Ask me if I'm a toper. I never got real drunk in me life. I never took too much."

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Andrews," the agent explained, much amused. "I didn't say 'toper,' but 'Utopia,' which means a most delightful place, where people are all happy, and life is simple and free."

"Oh, that's what ye mean, is it? Well, fer heaven's sake, why didn't ye say so an' speak plain English instid of sich city jargon? I ain't got time to waste this mornin', if you have."

"Neither have I," the agent replied, looking at his watch. "My, I have to be in Glucom in half an hour! Look here, will you sell your place?"

"How are ye travellin'?" Abner asked.

"By auto. It's out there on the road."

"An' ye're goin' right straight to Glucom, eh?"

"Yes, as soon as I get through with this business. Will you sell, Mr. Andrews?"

For a few seconds Abner did not reply. He thought of his horse in town, an' then of his peaceful ancestors. If he could rub this man the right way, as Zeb suggested, it might save him that long walk.

"I am willing to make you a liberal offer," the agent continued. "But I must have an answer to-day, or I shall have to choose another locality and you would be the loser."

"I'm willin' to sell," Abner replied, as he slowly took the pipe from his mouth and studied it very carefully.

"That's good," the agent encouraged. "Now, what's your figure?"

"Figger! Well, I can't jist tell ye off-hand. I've got to consult me pardner."

"Your wife, eh?"

"No she's not me pardner; she's me boss. Me pardner's in town jist now. We work this place together ye see, so I couldn't give ye a price without consultin' Jerry."

"And Jerry's in town, is he?"

"Sure. An' I can't do nuthin' without consultin' him."

"Suppose, then, you come along with me, and we can see Jerry," the visitor suggested.

"Jist the thing, Mister," Abner agreed, rising to his feet and throwing the axe over his shoulder. "I'll be with ye in a jiffy."

Abner hurried up to the house, chuckling as he went, while the agent strolled slowly toward the road, viewing the farm as he walked. Abner found no one in the house, and this made him wonder. But he had no time to delay just then, so, donning his coat, he was standing waiting as the car stopped at the gate.

It did not take long to speed into Glucom. Abner compared this trip with the toilsome one he and Zeb had made the night before, and he decided that he would have a car of his own when he was able.

"Where shall we go?" the agent asked, as he swung the car into the main street.

"To the station," Abner replied.

And to the station they sped, and when Abner stepped out he went at once into the office. There he found Sam, who greeted him like a long-lost brother, and offered him a chair.

"Can't set down, Sam," Abner told him. "I want Jerry; where is he?"

"In Dingman's barn. He let me have the use of it for a few days. You'll find Jerry all right and in good condition."

Sam was much surprised at Abner's excited manner, and he watched him through the window as he spoke to the stranger in the car, and then hurried up the street.

"What in time is Abner up to now, I wonder. Surely he's not going to sell his horse."

It did not take Abner long to find Jerry, and when mounted upon the wagon, he drove proudly back to the station to the expectant agent.

"Look here," the agent impatiently demanded, "you have kept me a deuce of a long time. I'm in a hurry."

"I can't help that," Abner replied, as he reined Jerry up close to the station platform. "I didn't tell ye to wait, did I?"

"But you wanted me to wait till you had consulted with your partner, didn't you?"

"So I did. What was I thinkin' about?"

"And you've seen him?" was the eager question.

"Sure, sure; I've seen Jerry, all right."

"Is he willing to sell?"

"Ye bet ye'r boots he is. Jerry's willin', fer he's more tired of Ash Pint than of anythin' else. He needs more excitement than he kin find on a farm. He wants

to be near the train so's he kin hear the en-gines holler. It allus puts new life into him."

"That's fine. I suppose you've agreed on the price?"

"Oh, yes, we agree, all right, we allus do. Never had a fallin' out yit."

"Now, how much do you want for the place, Mr. Andrews?"

"Well, let me see," and Abner scratched his head in a thoughtful manner.

"Oh, I guess fifteen thousand'll do all right."

"Fifteen thousand!" the agent exclaimed. "Fifteen thousand for that wretched place of yours, which is as poor as Job's turkey, so I understand. You must be crazy, man. Your farm isn't worth more than seven hundred dollars, and how have you the gall to value it at fifteen thousand? You don't pay taxes on more than five hundred, do you?"

"Mebbe I don't, Mister. But ye see there are some things ye'r not taxed fer, an' them's the things which you an' others seem to think very valuable. There's the situation, which is the finest in the country, accordin' to ye'r own statement. That should be worth five thousand; the view, fresh air, an' the boatin' an' swimmin' privileges, another five, so that makes ten thousand. Then there's the gravel on the place, an' I guess it's nearly all gravel, an' that's worth a great deal fer ballast, so I understand. It alone should bring fifteen thousand, but Jerry an' me are quite willin' to let ye have the hull outfit fer that amount, an' throw in the situation, air, an' sich things fer nuthin'."

The agent was angry now, and it was with considerable effort that he controlled his temper. He knew that Abner was making fun of him, and this nettled him exceedingly. He was, in fact, beginning to doubt the farmer's sanity. He glanced at Jerry and then at the waggon. In his excitement he had not thought of their presence as unusual. Where had they come from, anyway?

"Is that your horse?" he abruptly asked.

"Guess so."

"But aren't you sure?"

"No, sir-ee, I'm not. Ye'r never sure of that hoss. He's got a mind of his own, he has, jist like any pardner should have."

"Partner!" and the agent's eyes bulged with a new light. "Do you mean to tell me that he's the partner you've been speakin' about?"

"Sure; I was tellin' ye no fib. A man might have a darn sight worse one, let me tell ye that."

"And he's Jerry?"

"Yep; that's what I call him."

This was too much for the agent. With a savage oath, he settled himself back in his seat, and started the engine.

"Don't ye want to buy our place?" Abner asked. "We're willin' to sell, ain't

we, Jerry?"

"To h—l with your place," the agent snarled, as he started the car. "I wouldn't do business with a fool, and that's what you are."

"Thanks fer the compliment an' fer the ride to town," Abner replied. "If it hadn't been fer you I'd had to walk here after Jerry. Guess it pays to rub people the right way, after all, ha, ha."

He watched the agent as he sped away. His mouth was expanded into a grin, and his gray eyes twinkled.

"Peaceful ancestors!" he chuckled. "Whew! Guess Zeb was right after all. It sartinly does the work. That feller's been set on by Ikey Dimock as sure as I'm livin'. But Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, wasn't caught nappin', not by a jugful, skiddy-me-shins if he was. Gid-dap, Jerry, me dear old pardner. We must git home an' face the music there."

CHAPTER XX UNDER SUSPICION

The kind of music that Abner expected to face when he reached home was wanting. Instead of a severe scolding, tirades, and a regular bombardment of embarrassing questions, he was received in a most gracious manner. The children flocked about him as he unhitched Jerry and put him in the stable. It was somewhat late and dinner was over, but Mrs. Andrews had his place set and everything hot in the oven. She even smiled as he entered the kitchen, a most unusual thing for her. But Abner thought that she watched him somewhat curiously and anxiously as he hung up his coat and hat. He could also feel her eyes upon him as he washed himself and brushed his tangled hair before the little mirror. He wondered what it all meant, though he made no comment, but at once took his seat at the table. After serving him, Mrs. Andrews sat down on the opposite side of the table, another remarkable thing for her.

"How are the kids gittin' along?" Abner at length enquired, more for something to say than anything else.

"Very well, I guess," was the somewhat absent-minded reply. "They seem to be having a good time."

Silence then ensued after this effort to start conversation, and Abner went on with his meal. But he was restless, and glanced occasionally out of the win-

dow. Once he stopped and listened intently. This Mrs. Andrews noted, and her face became grave.

"It's only the children," she explained. "The girls are playing with them near the barn."

"Say," Abner at length remarked, "has this change-of-heart bizness struck yez all, too?"

"Why, what do you mean?" his wife asked.

"But what has come over yez all, Tildy? This house seems strange. I ginerally got a reg'lar dressin' down, when I came home late fer dinner. I was so used to it that this peaceful reception is gittin' on me nerves. I'm like Jerry, an' can't stand things when they're too quiet."

"When did you experience a change of heart, Abner?"

"Last night when walkin' home with Zeb. He's the best hand at that I ever come across. He kin beat Billy Sunday all to bits. He put the punch into me, all right, an' I guess you must have got a touch of it too, Tildy."

"Maybe I have, Abner. But, you see, I'm feeling sorry for you after what you've gone through of late."

"An' ye don't blame me, Tildy?" Abner asked in astonishment.

"How can I? It wasn't your fault. I know you couldn't help it, and that is what worries me. But there, never mind that now. I have something to tell you. Abe Dugan wants to know if you will give him a hand this afternoon with that boat he's making."

"He does, eh? Well, I like his gall. Does he think I've got nuthin' to do?"

"But it's a dull day, Abner, and I want you to take back a pattern I borrowed from Mrs. Dugan this morning."

"So that's where ye were, was it? I thought ye had cleared out entirely."

"I merely ran over to get a pattern. I want to make some trousers for the boys, and as we have had no need for such a thing I knew that Mrs. Dugan would let me have hers. She's going to help me with the work."

"She is? Good fer her. I didn't know that she would stoop to sich things."

"Oh, yes, she's much interested in the boys, and is going to do all she can. But she wants that pattern back this afternoon, and if you won't take it, then I shall have to do so, though I have so much cooking to do since we have all those extra mouths to feed."

"An' more grub to buy, eh? An' where's the stuff to come from fer them pants, I'd like to know?"

"I am going to use some of your old clothes. I can make them over. The poor little boys are almost in rags."

Abner rose from the table, filled and lighted his pipe.

"Where's that pattern?" he abruptly asked.

"So you're going, are you, Abner?"

"Sure, I am. When ye rub me the way ye have to-day, an' when Mrs. Abe is goin' to help with them pants, I can't very well refuse to give a hand out on that boat. My, we're all gittin' mighty holy an' neighborly all of a sudden. Guess a change of heart must have struck all around. I wonder if it has affected Abe. He could stand a good dose of it."

Abner was really glad of an excuse to go to his neighbor's, as he had not seen him for some time. The building of a boat was of greater interest to him than splitting and piling wood down on the shore. He would find out, too, if Abe had heard anything about his experiences in town; how Joe Preston was getting along, and what people were saying about the affair.

It was about three in the afternoon when he reached the Dugan house, and he was informed by Mrs. Dugan that Abe had been called over to Joe Sanders to see his sick horse. Abe considered himself a specialist on animal diseases, and was much in demand.

"But you needn't mind Abe's absence," Mrs. Dugan told him. "You know more about boats than he does, so you can go right on with the work. The boat is there in the workshop. It is only just started."

Abner noticed that Mrs. Dugan eyed him somewhat curiously, although he paid little attention to it. Perhaps she had heard about his arrest, and wished to see what a man looked like who had been in jail. He was soon lost in the work upon the boat and forgot all about Mrs. Dugan's close scrutiny.

The workshop was adjoining the woodshed, which led off from the kitchen, and for an hour Abner worked away with no one to disturb him. About four o'clock, however, women began to come into the shop. Not all together, but one at a time. First there was Mrs. Bennett, who was anxious, so she said, to see the building of the boat. She asked a number of questions, and interfered with Abner. He treated her most courteously, however, remembering his peaceful ancestors. Then came Mrs. Hopkins. She, too, wished to see the building of the boat, and she had much to say about the time she used to sail on the river with her husband before they were married. Abner breathed a sigh of relief when she left, and wondered how many more women the house contained, and what in the world they were doing there that afternoon. He was not left long alone, however, for in a few minutes Miss Julia Tomkins, a maiden of uncertain age, came out and questioned him about the orphans he had taken into his house.

"I am so much concerned about those children," she informed him, "that I have lain awake at nights thinking about them. And I know others are, too, and we have met here this afternoon to make up clothes for them."

"An' so that's what ye'r doin', eh?" Abner asked, as he paused in the act of driving in a nail. "I was wonderin' what kind of a hen-party Mrs. Dugan was

havin' this afternoon. How many more are there of yez?"

"There are about ten in all. It shows what an interest the women are taking in those children."

"Ten! Good Lord!" Abner ejaculated. "It's no wonder Abe cleared out. Are they all comin' to see me build this boat?"

"Does your head hurt you much to-day?" Miss Tomkins asked.

"Me head! Gee whiz, no! What makes ye think it does?"

"Because you look so worried."

"An' wouldn't anyone look worried with so many visitors? It's not me head but me hands that hurt. Look at that, now," and Abner held out his big rough left hand for inspection. "I sawed that finger twice when Mrs. Bennett was snookin' around here, an' I hit that thumb with the hammer when Mrs. Hopkins was gittin' on me nerves. If any more of them hens come I don't know what will happen. I'm feelin' rather dangerous, an' might lose me head altogether. So it's better fer 'em to stay away."

"You poor man," Miss Tomkins sympathized. "You have been badly treated. I shall see that you are not bothered by any more visitors. But——" Here she hesitated.

"But what?" Abner queried.

"Oh, I was just going to add that if you don't feel well at any time just call out, will you?"

"Call out! What fer?"

"For help, of course. If you feel an attack coming on you at any time, just let me know. I had an uncle who was subject to such spells, and I know more about them than most people. Now, be sure," and Miss Tomkins smiled most sweetly. "So few people understand such cases."

Abner stared at his visitor in amazement, and watched her as she walked away. Was Miss Tomkins going out of her mind? he wondered. He had heard that she often had queer notions, and did strange things. So an uncle of hers had been odd, too, and had spells, so she said. Ah, that accounted for it. It ran in the family. He resumed his work, but he could not forget Miss Tomkins' peculiar words and looks. Why had she spoken like that to him? and why had Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Hopkins looked at him so curiously?

He had just raised the hammer to drive in a nail when his arm suddenly weakened and the blow fell upon the board instead. An idea had flashed into his mind with startling intensity. Did Miss Tomkins and the rest of the women think that he was off his head? He thought, too, of Tildy's looks and actions, and in a twinkling the whole thing was as clear as day. She believed that there was something wrong with his head, and she had arranged with Mrs. Dugan to have those women meet him there that afternoon, that they might talk with him and

give their opinions.

The first feeling that came into Abner's heart was a strong resentment. He felt like walking right into the house and telling those women what he thought. This soon passed away, however, and a smile illumined his face. He remembered his peaceful ancestors, and what Zeb had told him. He became calm and went on with his work. But his mind was busy and he thought of more than the boat that afternoon. Several times he chuckled, and once he paused and gazed absently out of the dust-laden window. In half an hour he was in a great humor and would even have embraced Ikey Dimock had he happened along just then. He had what he considered a brilliant idea, and he was never satisfied until he had worked it out of his system by definite action.

Abner now was losing interest in the boat. He had something else on hand, and he was wondering how he could best put it into practice.

He was thinking of this when Mrs. Dugan came into the workshop, and invited him in to have a cup of tea. "We are all ready," she informed him, "and would like to have you with us. You don't mind a lot of women, do you?"

"Should say not," was the reply, "I'm used to 'em. But I ain't fitted up fer afternoon tea," and he glanced down at his clothes.

"Oh, you're all right, Mr. Andrews. It's not your clothes we're anxious to see, but you."

"I guess ye'r right," Abner thought. "I see through ye'r game. Yez want to see how I'll act, an' if I'm really luney? Well, yez'll have a chance, me hearties."

"You'll come, won't you?" Mrs. Dugan pleaded. "The women will be so disappointed if you don't."

"Sure, I'll go," and Abner laid down the saw, and followed the woman into the house.

They passed through the kitchen and into the dining-room, where the women were all gathered. They were talking in a most animated manner, but suddenly ceased and a dead silence ensued as Abner entered. Several nodded and smiled their welcome, but no one spoke.

"I've got him at last," Mrs. Dugan informed them. "He didn't want to come, but when I told him how anxious you all were to see him, he just couldn't refuse, could you, Mr. Andrews?"

"Should say not," Abner gallantly replied, "'specially when a hull bunch of women wish to look upon me handsome features, an' when they've somethin' good to eat. Tildy says I allus shine then."

"He's not luney," Mrs. Parker whispered to Mrs. Peters, who was sitting next her.

"He doesn't seem so," was the reply. "But, my! look what he's doing!"

Mrs. Dugan had offered Abner a chair, but instead of sitting down he stood

upon it, and gazed around smilingly upon the astonished women.

"I allus like to stand in the presence of ladies," he explained. "But on an occasion sich as this, it is better fer me to stand as high as possible, so's yez all kin git a good look at me."

"My lands!" Mrs. Hepburn exclaimed, holding up her hands in horror. "What's going to happen next?"

"You can't eat standing up there, can you?" Mrs. Dugan asked, as she stood before Abner with tea and cake upon a tray.

"Sure, why not? It's good fer the digester. When I was runnin' the old Flyin' Scud an' had an attack of indigestion, I uster climb to the top of the mast an' stand there an' eat me meals. This is a cinch to that. No, thank ye, I won't have no cake or doughnut; I'll jist have a piece of ye'r dish-cloth instid. I got so used to that last night in jail, where they feed ye on sich things, that somehow I can't git along without it. Why, it gave me a real change of heart, the same as ye git at a revival meetin'."

By this time the women were pretty badly frightened. They were now sure that Abner was very much wrong in the head, but no one dared to move or say anything. Even Mrs. Dugan was nonplussed. Abner was now in his element, and he thoroughly enjoyed the diversion he was creating. He drank the cup of tea, and then stepped down softly from the chair. He placed the cup on the table, and looked around the room. A cold chill passed up and down the spine of every woman present. What in the world was the man going to do next? each asked herself. The excitement grew intense when Abner presently fixed his eyes upon Miss Tomkins, who was sitting like a statue, paralyzed with fear, as Abner walked straight toward her.

"Go away! go away!" she screamed. "Don't come near me!"

But Abner made no reply. He began to walk around her, and as he walked, Miss Tomkins began to revolve, chair and all. Three times Abner slowly made the circuit, and three times the damsel revolved, keeping her face to his. Then he paused, and looked at the rest of the women, who were standing huddled together at one end of the room.

"Don't git skeered, ladies," he soothed. "I was jist tryin' to see what kind of a heart Miss Julia has, or if she has any. But, blame it all, she wriggles so much I can't find out. I've heard it said that she was heartless as fer as young men are consarned, an' if that's so, then she needs a change of heart right off, if she ever expects to git married."

"You're crazy," Miss Julia retorted, forgetting her fear in her anger. "Get out of this room at once, you brute."

But Abner only smiled.

"Don't git excited, Miss. I'm here now, an' am in no hurry to go. I've got a

word to say to these women. They seem to be somewhat uneasy. I guess they're all gittin' a change of heart by the look of things."

"They'll have heart failure, if you're not careful," Miss Tomkins warned. She was surprised at herself for her sudden burst of courage.

"Heart failure, eh?" and Abner viewed the women again. "My, that would be serious. Somethin' must be done."

He took a step toward them, and raised both hands above his head.

"Are yez ready to die?" he asked, in a deep voice. Screams followed this fearful statement, and several women hurried toward the door.

"No, ye don't git out yit," Abner declared, as he sprang forward, blocked the way, and stood with his back to the door. "Yez got me in here, an' yez think I'm luney. Now, I want to know if yez are all ready to die."

"No, we're not!" Mrs. Dugan replied, "and I'm surprised at you, Mr. Andrews, for frightening us this way. What in the world do you mean?"

Abner gazed at her for a few seconds, and then at the women behind her.

"Well, I was thinkin' if yez are not ready to die, an' if yez all are in danger of dyin' of heart failure, yez ought to have a change of heart right off. It might do yez a world of good. I've had it already, an' it makes me feel fine. Ask Tildy, an' she'll tell yez."

"Why, it was your wife who told us about you, and your strange actions," Mrs. Dugan explained. "She asked us all to meet you here, talk with you, and try to find out if anything is wrong."

"God bless Tildy!" was Abner's unexpected prayer. "I had no idea that she took sich an interest in me. Guess she's had a change of heart, all right. Now, set down, ladies, I want to say somethin'. There, that's more sociable," he added, when they were once again seated. "Now, look here, ladies, I don't want yez to go away with the notion that I'm luney. I was jist foolin' yez when I stood on that chair an' walked around Miss Julia. Yez thought mebbe I was crazy, but I was only havin' a little fun. Tildy is anxious about me 'cause I've got into trouble lately, an' a pretty bad mess it is over that Joe Preston affair. Then, I've got five little kids on me hands to clothe and feed. Dear knows, it's enough to turn any man's head. But my head's all right, as fer as the Lord made it right, though Tildy sometimes thinks He got tired before he was through. But that's neither here nor there. My head's as it 'tis, an' 'tis no 'tiser. That's all, ladies, an' so I bid yez good afternoon, an' thank yez kindly fer a very pleasant time. May yez all have a change of heart soon, an' think of me sometimes as I think of yez allus, yours most lovingly an' remarkably, Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint."

With his left hand pressed to his heart, he gave a profound, sweeping bow,

and, turning, left the women puzzled and speechless.

CHAPTER XXI

HARD OF HEARING

"Hello, Lost Tribes. What are ye makin'?"

Zeb looked quickly around, and seeing Abner standing in the doorway, a smile overspread his face.

"Glad to see ye," he replied. "Feelin' better, eh?"

"I haven't been sick. What are ye givin' me, Zeb?"

"Ye haven't, eh? Well, from all accounts, ye've been up to queer pranks of late. How did the sewin'-circle come along?"

"Oh, I see," and Abner sat down upon a box. "Ye've been hearin' somethin'." Zeb did not reply, but went on quietly with his work.

"What are ye makin', Zeb?"

"What de ye think I'm makin'? A baby carriage?"

"Looks to me like a goose-poke."

"So it is; de ye want one?"

"De ye think I do?" Abner snapped.

"Well, judgin' from ye'r actions yesterday, one wouldn't come fer astray."

"Here, never mind that racket, Zeb. I've had enough of it. What's the news?"

"News! Lots of it: Joe Preston in the hospital, his assailant in jail, Lawyer Rackshaw's been givin' a rat-party, an' Abner Andrews has been holdin' a free entertainment at Mrs. Dugan's. That's some news, isn't it?"

"Ah, git out. I know all about that, an' too much in fact. I want to know how Joe's gittin' along. Have ye heard?"

"Oh, he's on the mend, an' is makin' ready to git after you."

"He is?"

"Sure. He's had Rackshaw up to see him several times already. They're a pair, all right, an' I guess it's up to you to git busy if ye expect to come off with a whole skin."

"H'm," Abner sniffed, "I don't care a snap of me finger fer 'em."

"But ye will, let me tell ye that," and Zeb laid down the stick he was holding in his hand and looked at his neighbor. "Yell lose ye'r place if ye don't do

somethin'. Ye must git a lawyer, Abner, to defend ye."

"But I can't afford one, Zeb."

"An' ye can't afford to do without one, it seems to me."

"Mebbe so." And Abner sighed. "Guess I'll have to be me own lawyer as fer as I kin see. I'm pretty glib with the tongue."

"A pretty mess you'd make of it. Why, Rackshaw would wind you up in no time. He's mighty good on a case, so I've been told. An' he's tricky, too. Will stop at nuthin' to gain his point."

Just then an auto went by, filled with men.

"Who kin they be?" Abner enquired, watching the car as it disappeared amid a cloud of dust.

"Must be men from the Capital," was the reply. "There's to be an election soon, an' the members are gittin' busy, so I hear."

"An election! Why, I never heard a word about it."

"Oh, you were too busy with other things, Abner, so ye didn't hear. An', besides, ye don't take the *Wire*, so how kin ye expect to know what's goin' on?"

"When's the 'lection to take place, Zeb?"

"Next month, an' it's goin' to be a hard fight. That railroad business has put the Government in a bad hole."

"So I've heard. Graftin', eh?"

"I never knew of anythin' like it. Why, every one of the whole bunch, from the premier down, has been gittin' his rake-off."

"I know somethin' about it, Zeb. All them fellers who were in with the government bunch got big slices, whether they did any work or not. One man got ten thousand dollars fer whistlin' the right tune, an' another got over a hundred thousand fer winkin' with his left eye at the right instant. Oh, I've heard lots about it."

"An' it's true, Abner. True as the Gospel. An' them same fellers are comin' to you an' me to ask us to re-elect 'em."

"We won't do it, Zeb."

The latter turned and looked intently at his visitor.

"What about that place of yours, Abner?"

"Well, what about it?"

"Don't ye know? If ye buck that government bunch ye'll not stand a ghost of a chance to git anythin' fer ye'r gravel hill. But they might do somethin' big if ye side with 'em."

"De ye mean to insinuate, Zeb, that they kin buy me?"

"Not exactly that, but ye might make a better deal if ye rub 'em the right way."

"H'm. I'll rub 'em the right way, Zeb. There's only one right way to rub

them fellers, an' that's the way I rubbed Joe Preston the other mornin'."

"An' git into trouble, Abner."

"Mebbe so. But when wasn't I in trouble? I've been more or less in trouble ever since I was born, an' I'll be that way as long as there's snakes an' skunks in the country."

Abner rose to his feet, pulled out his pipe, and started to fill it.

"Say, Zeb," he presently began, "I wish ye'd give me a hand this mornin'."

"What is it ye want?"

"Help me to fix up me woodshed, will ye? We've had a big surprise at our house."

"Should say ye had. Twins one night an' triplets the next day. Rapid increase, that. How's the missus?"

Abner struck a match and paid no attention to this sally.

"Yes, we've had a big surprise," he continued. "A team came from town last night with a hull load of cots, mattresses, boxes of clothin' an' dear knows what all."

"Ye don't tell!" Zeb was much interested now. "Where did they come from?"

"Guess it's some of Belle's doin's. She's written to her pa an' some friends, if I'm not mistaken, tellin' 'em about the kids we've taken under our roof, an' they sent the things. Why, the dooryard is filled chock-a-block."

"Where are ye goin' to put 'em, Abner?"

"In the woodshed. It's got to be fixed up, an' I want ye to give me a hand this mornin'. Tildy an' the gals have taken the kids over to the island to pick berries, an' I want to have it all done when they come back. It'll be a kind of surprise."

"What are ye goin' to do?"

"Fix the floor an' walls, an' partition off a part of the shed. It'll make a dang fine place, an' I've got the boards. Will ye give me a hand?"

"Sure," was the ready response. "I'll go right along. I ain't very busy this mornin'. I was only makin' a goose-poke. That gander of mine is a reg'lar old nick fer crawlin' through small holes in the fence. But I guess this'll keep him in, all right."

"It's a pity ye can't make pokes fer men as easy as ye kin fer ye'r old gander, Zeb. I'd order two right off, one fer Ikey Dimock an' t'other fer Lawyer Rackshaw. There should be a law passed makin' goose-pokes necessary fer some people who are allus botherin' their neighbors."

"Ye couldn't git that law passed, Abner."

"Why not?"

"'Cause them who make the laws 'ud be the first ones to use the pokes. They'd be carryin' 'em around all the time."

"Ho, ho, I guess ye'r right, Zeb. But come on, an' let's git at that job."

For two hours the men worked upon the woodshed, and at the end of that time they had made excellent progress. The walls and the floor had been repaired, the partition put up, and the place thoroughly swept.

"There, I guess that's some work," Abner remarked, as he critically surveyed the room. "Doesn't take us long to do a job when we once git at it, eh, Zeb?"

"Let's finish it, though," was the reply. "We might as well fix up the cots while we're about it."

"Sure, an' have everythin' ready when the folks git back. My, won't they be surprised. An' Orphan Home built in two hours! I wonder what them slow-pokes in town would think of that."

They had just begun to carry in the cots, when an auto stopped before the house, and the impatient call of a klaxon sounded forth.

"It's the same men who went by when we were in the shop," Zeb explained. "Must be them members after ye'r vote, Abner. They want ye to go out. Listen to the noise that thing's makin'."

"Jerry'll like that," was the reply. "He must be shiverin' with delight. Let 'em keep it up."

And keep it up they did for a whole minute, while Zeb and Abner went on with their work.

"Hi there," shouted an impatient voice. "Are you deaf?"

Abner winked at Zeb.

"S'pose we let 'em think we are deaf," he suggested. "I don't like their gall. Anyway, we might as well have a little fun, so let's bring down their topsails. They're carryin' too much sail fer sich crafts."

"All right, Abner, I'm game," Zeb agreed. "But be careful."

"Oh, I'll be as keerful as I was with Joe Preston. You jist go on with the work as if ye didn't hear nuthin', an' let me handle this show. But, say, they're runnin' the car into the yard. What impudence!"

When a short distance away from the back door the auto was stopped, and the man who had previously spoken asked why in the devil no one had answered when spoken to. Zeb was hard at work, thus leaving Abner to face the irritated man.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" the stranger roared.

"Hey?" Abner asked, coming close to the car, and putting his left hand up to his ear.

"Why, the old fool's deaf!" the man exclaimed, turning to his companions. "Good Lord! Have I got to yell everything to him! Look here," he shouted, leaning well over the side of the car, "are you Abner Andrews?"

"Oh, huntin' rabbits, are ye?" Abner's face cleared as he spoke. "Well, ye've

come to a poor place, an' it's the wrong time of the year, anyway. Better wait till winter. They're good eatin' then."

"I didn't say 'rabbits,'" the man again yelled. "I said 'are you Abner Andrews?'"

"Don't mention it. I allus like to give a lift if I kin. But I advise yez to wait till winter," Abner solemnly replied.

"Oh, h—I!" the man exclaimed in disgust. "What am I to do? He's stone deaf."

"Ask him something else," one of his companions suggested.

"Is this your place?" the man once more roared.

"Is this my face?" Abner queried. "Sure, whose de ye s'pose it is?"

"Your place," the man roared again.

"Oh, place. Well, why didn't ye say so? Sartinly, it's my place. What de ye want to know fer?"

"Will you sell?"

"Have I a well? Yes, and a good one, too. De ye want a drink?"

The other three occupants of the car were highly amused, and made all kinds of remarks.

"Speak louder, Tom," one advised. "You're only whispering."

"Speak yourself, then," was the retort. "Don't you see I'm splitting my lungs shouting to the old fool?"

"Get up closer," another urged with a laugh.

"Ugh! I'm as close as I want to be now. He smells like a pig-pen."

"Why not try that other old cuss," the third suggested, motioning to Zeb. "Surely he's not deaf."

Acting on this advice, the spokesman looked at Abner, and pointed to Zeb, who had just come out of the woodshed. But Abner shook his head.

"He's deaf as a post," was the reply. "He can't hear nuthin'. Ye'll have to talk to me."

Tom fetched a big sigh, looked around in despair, and mopped his perspiring brow.

"What in the world are we to do?" he panted. "We must find out if he will sell, and how much he wants. Dimock's support depends upon our getting this place. I'd let him go to the devil, where he belongs, if election wasn't so near."

"Write out your questions, Tom," came the suggestion. "That's the easiest way."

"Why, sure. We might have thought of it sooner."

Whipping out his note-book and pencil he scribbled down a few lines, and handed the book to Abner. The latter took it, and studied it for a few seconds.

"So yez are the Directors of the Big Draw Railway, eh?" he drawled. "I

thought mebbe yez were government heelers. An' yez want to buy my place? Well, that's interestin'."

"Is the gravel good?" Tom again wrote.

"Good," Abner mused, as he carefully studied the words. "Well, I never heard anythin' to the contrary. It was behavin' itself the last time I saw it. It's never done any swearin' or cheatin' to my knowledge. It minds its own bizness, which is more'n I kin say of most people."

These words caused the men in the car to laugh uproariously. Abner seemed surprised at their merriment, and looked enquiringly at the spokesman.

"Have yez all been drinkin'?" he asked. "Better leave it alone, young men. It's bad fer the health."

"We've not been drinking," Tom wrote. "We're as dry as old Parson Jackson. How much gravel have you and how deep is it?"

"Let me see," and Abner scratched his head. "Oh I guess fifty acres, more or less, good gravel. An' it's deep, too. Why, it's as deep as any government grafter ye ever saw, an' as unsartin. It's so shifty ye jist never know what it's goin' to do next."

"Will you sell?" was the next question written.

"Sell? Well, that all depends. I was thinkin' of keepin' the place, as I might want it several hundred years from now. But mebbe it 'ud be as well to git clear of it when the chance comes. If I'm to have a mansion in the sky, as I've heard about, no doubt there'll be lots of ground around the buildin', enough anyway, fer my purpose."

The men in the auto looked at one another in surprise.

"Why, I believe the old chap's batty," one remarked. "He's talking blooming nonsense. He'll have a mansion here on earth pretty soon, with keepers, too, if I'm not much mistaken."

"Never mind that," Tom replied. "All we want is his place, and he can go to the Asylum or to the devil for all I care. I'm sick and tired of the old fool." He then wrote another question.

"How much do you want for your place?"

"How much?" and Abner looked lingeringly over toward the big gravel hill. "Well, I want all I kin git, an' a darn sight more, if ye don't mind."

"But how much?" came the next question.

"How much? Let me see. Oh, I guess fifteen thousand'll do, though I hate to sacrifice the place."

"Fifteen thousand!" the men in the car fairly rose from their seats.

"Too much," Tom wrote.

"So I imagined," Abner drawled. "Too much fer me to git, but not enough fer the grafters, eh? Ye'r willin' to pay one man a hundred thousand fer winkin'

at the right minute, an' another fifty thousand fer holdin' his tongue. Ye didn't consider twenty thousand too much to give Ben Slosson fer twelve acres of land, an' most of it mud an' rocks at that, did ye?"

Abner now saw that the men were becoming angry and impatient, and it greatly amused him. All but Tom agreed to leave at once and not waste any more time.

"I'm going to have another crack at him, though," and Tom wrote another question.

"Ye'll give me two thousand, will ye?" Abner queried. "Well, there's nuthin' doin'; then, so yez might as well trot off. It's fifteen thousand or nuthin'."

"But we can expropriate your place," Tom again wrote.

"What's that thing?" Abner asked.

"The Government can take your place and give you what they like. They have the power."

"They have, eh? Well, let 'em try, that's all. Let the hull dang bunch come. I'm the government here, an' I intend to be so. I've paid fer me place, an' until I git what it's worth I intend to keep it. So, good-day to yez all, an' give my compliments to Ikey Dimock, an' thanks fer ye'r personal remarks."

At these words the four men started, while an expression of consternation appeared upon their faces.

"Did you hear what we said?" Tom asked.

"Sure; how could I help it?"

"And you're not deaf?"

"Just as deaf as he is," and Abner motioned to Zeb.

"You old devil!" Tom roared, now wild with rage. "What did you mean by deceiving us?"

"An' what did yez all mean by comin' here an' tryin' to buy me place fer two thousand dollars, that yez might sell it to the Government fer a big sum, an' divvy up with Ikey Dimock? Tell me that."

"But we didn't," Tom protested. "We are honest men."

"H'm, honest men," Abner snorted. "I've got ears like a deer an' eyes like a hawk. Ye can't fool me with any of ye'r tricks. If I am an' 'old cuss', 'fit fer the lunatic asylum, an' 'smell like a pig-pen', I've got a few ounces of sense left yit, thank the Lord."

The visitors were completely confounded. They were furious, and made no attempt to conceal their anger. They swore and vowed what they would do. But Abner only smiled in a most tantalizing manner, and stood watching as they backed the car out of the yard and sped rapidly away.

"Well, Zeb, how did she go?" he asked, turning to his companion, who was standing by his side.

"Say, Abner, you should be a politician or an actor," was the reply. "You'd make ye'r fortune at either."

"I'm goin' to make it, Zeb, jist as Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, an' nuthin' else. I guess a man needs to be a politician or an actor no matter who he is, to keep step with them beauties. Ho, ho, weren't they surprised when I opened up on 'em! Thought we was both deaf, ha, ha. Come in, Zeb, an' let's have dinner on this. Tildy's left some things in the house. 'Old cuss,' 'batty,' 'smells like a pig-pen.' Ho, ho, that's the best yit."

CHAPTER XXII

EARNING THEIR PASSAGE

It did not take Abner long to get dinner ready, for Mrs. Andrews had left the table set and food near at hand. The men talked as they ate, and there was none of their usual bantering, for the subject of conversation was a serious one. Abner was worried about his trial, which he knew would not be postponed much longer. He was also troubled over the extra mouths he had to feed, and he unburdened his mind to his companion. He laid aside his mask of light-heartedness and indifference, and the expression upon his face touched his neighbor's heart.

"I'm really hard up, Zeb," he explained, "an' I don't know where the next barrel of flour is to come from. This place doesn't raise much, as ye know, an' what little I had saved up from sellin' the Flyin' Scud went fer Jess' eddication at the Seminary. If I turn them kids away, what is to become of 'em? An', besides, I'll be the laffln'-stock of all the fools in the country. Then, there is that trial. How in the world am I goin' to pay a lawyer? Why, it'll take my place."

Abner's head was bowed as he finished, and he sat bent over the table.

"Come, come, man, don't git too down-hearted," Zeb encouraged, rising from the table. "Ye'r not ready fer the Poor House yit. Let's go out under the shade of that big tree at the back of the house an' have a smoke."

Abner rose and pulled out his pipe.

"I must git that hay in, Zeb," he remarked. "It's been out too long already. I turned it out of cock this mornin', an' it's in fine condition now."

"Oh, I guess it won't hurt fer another hour, Abner. A smoke is allus good after dinner before ye go to work. Come on."

For half an hour they sat in the cool shade of the tree, and when at last Zeb

went home Abner was feeling much better and more like himself. He harnessed Jerry, and was just hitching him to the waggon when an auto stopped before the house. A young man alighted, and walked at once into the yard. Abner recognized him as the surveyor he had threatened to shoot some time before, and he wondered what he could want now.

But Thane Royden seemed to have forgotten all about that incident, for he shook Abner heartily by the hand, and enquired after the family. When he learned that they were all on the island he was much disappointed.

"That is too bad," he remarked. "I'm leaving town in a few days and wish to say good-bye."

Abner now remembered that it was this young man who had driven Jess home from the party, and surmised that it was she he was most anxious to see.

"Is there any way I can get over there?" Royden asked, as he looked off toward the island.

"I s'pose ye could swim," Abner replied, "but that wouldn't be very comfortable. If ye wait till I git that hay in I'll run ye over in the canoe. I'm to have supper with them, ye see. I would take ye in my little yacht, but she's layin' above the Pint, an' it 'ud take too long to bring her around."

"That will be fine," the surveyor replied. "Let me help with the hay, and we can soon get through."

"Did ye ever pitch hay?"

"I was brought up on a farm, and should know something about it."

"Sure, ye ought. Come on. There's a fork leanin' against the barn. Ye kin pitch on, if ye don't mind."

Abner liked this young man, and the skilful manner in which he worked won his heartiest approval. They became very friendly and talked as they worked.

"So ye'r goin' to leave, are ye?" Abner at length queried. "All through with ye'r work, eh?"

"I'm through with the Government, or rather they're through with me," was the reply. "They've fired me because I spoke my mind very plainly. They wanted me to do dirty work, and when I refused they gave me the G.B."

"They did? Well, that's too bad," was Abner's comment, as he stowed away a forkful of hay which had just been handed up. "Where are ye goin'?"

"I have accepted a good offer with the Morton & Griffin Cement Company, and will begin work with them in a few weeks. It is a far better position, for I shall not have to bother about grafters there. It is a big reliable concern, with fine opportunities for advancement."

"An' so they expected ye to do dirty work, did they?"

"Yes. You have no idea what they wanted me to do. Even in my report of

your place here they asked me to say that the gravel was of little value for ballast."

"An' did ye?"

"Certainly not. I told them that it is the best I have ever seen, and so far as I could tell there is almost an unlimited supply."

"Good fer you, young man. I shan't fergit that. Jist fasten up that check-rein, will ye? Jerry'll have all the hay eaten up if we're not keerful."

"Have they been after you yet?" Royden asked, when they had moved to another bunch of hay.

"Oh, yes, they've been after me, all right," and Abner laughed.

"But you haven't sold?"

"Not on ye'r life."

"That's good. Don't let them have anything unless they pay you well."

"But they say they will 'spropriate, whatever that means."

"Yes, they have the power. But they'll not be anxious to do that. There are several in the game. They hope to buy the place from you for a mere song, and then turn it over to the Government for a big figure. Oh, I know their tricks. They've done it before in other ways, such as buying horses and cattle."

"But how kin I git me price?"

"Sit tight, and when necessary go after them with hammer and tongs. Don't be afraid of them, and stand your ground."

The load was now all on, and Abner had just picked up the reins when a young man was seen walking toward them from the house.

"It's Billy Lansing," Royden exclaimed in disgust. "What in the world does the fellow want?"

"Who's Billy Lansing?" Abner asked.

"Why, you ought to know, Mr. Andrews. He's the one who bribed you to put him next to your boss, isn't he?"

"He is! Well, I'll be jiggered! I've never seen him since."

"Neither has he seen you, though he's told that story very often, so I hear."

"He has, eh? An' did anyone put him wise?"

"Not that I know of. He's not liked in town, so people let him tell the story and then laughed at him behind his back. He thinks yet that you're the hired man, so I believe."

"Say, s'pose we let him think so?" Abner suggested in a low voice, for Billy was now quite near. "You jist call me Bob, an' we'll have some fun."

Royden agreed and turned toward Billy.

"Hello, you here!" the latter accosted. "Didn't know you had turned farmer. Where are the girls?"

"What girls?"

"Why, the ones we met at the party, of course."

"I guess you'll have to ask Bob," and Royden motioned to Abner. He had to turn his face away to keep from laughing.

"Say, old top, de ye know where they are?" Billy questioned.

"Hey, what's that?" Abner asked as if he had not heard.

"Are the girls around? They're not in the house."

"Want to see the gals, eh? What gals?"

"Your boss' daughter and that other one. My, she's a peach!"

"Oh, ye mean Jess an' Belle. Well, they was around this mornin', all right, but now I reckon they're anchored over on the island."

"The devil! Say, is there any way I can get over?"

"Got any more ten-spots in ye'r pocket?" Abner asked. "I'll take ye over if ye have."

Billy looked at him in a quizzical manner.

"Say, you haven't earned the money I gave you some time ago," he reminded.

"What money?"

"Don't ye remember? The ten-spot to put me next to the old man."

"Oh yes, I do recollect that ye shoved somethin' into me hand. Well, that money's gone to feed the hungry, an' clothe the naked. It's been put to good use."

"But it hasn't done what it was intended to do though. It was to put me next to your boss, so's I could sell him a car."

"There's lots of time yit to git next to the old feller, so don't worry."

"But he's in jail and likely to be sent further, from all accounts."

"Yes, he's in a pretty bad mess," Abner agreed. "But, there, I must git this hay in. Gid-dap, Jerry."

"Hold on a minute," Billy ordered. "And you won't take me to the island?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't, did I?"

"No, but you wanted ten dollars, though."

"Oh, well, I'll cut it out if you can't afford to pay that much. I'm goin' over, anyway, when I git through with this hay, an' if ye'll give us a hand I'll take ye along."

"Sure, I'll help you," was the ready response.

"Did ye ever do any hayin'?"

"Never did. But there's nothing to learn about it, is there? Just tell me what to do."

"Ye kin mow away. Scoot along an' climb up that ladder, an' stow away fer all ye'r worth."

Abner chuckled to himself as he headed Jerry for the barn. "I was goin' to put this in the empty bay," he mused, "but since I've these two love-sick fellers here I might as well finish that other mow. It ought to hold another load or two

with close packin'. Guess Billy'll find it's the hottest place he was ever in. Stiddy, there, Jerry."

With a rush the horse surged the load into the barn, and at once Abner picked up his fork and started to work. Royden was in his place to receive the hay as it was handed up. He understood the work, and found it easy to toss it back to Billy. To the latter, however, it was something new, and the heat of the loft was oppressive. The perspiration poured down his face, and at times he felt that he would smother, as he struggled with the hay, stowing it into every corner, and tramping it down. When at length the hay was unloaded and he climbed down the ladder he was a pitiable sight to behold. His eyes were wild and bloodshot, his face a fiery hue, and steaming wet, while his immaculate clothes were clinging to his body as if he had been plunged into the river.

"Fer heaven's sake! What's the matter with ye?" Abner asked, as Billy dropped into the bottom of the waggon.

The only reply of the exhausted man was a series of moans, as he lay there panting and gasping for breath. Abner backed the horse and waggon out of the barn, and when the cool air fanned Billy's face he began to revive.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "It's hell up there!"

"Thought it was down below, eh?" Abner queried. "Guess hell ain't located in any special place. Ye'll find it most anywhere, even in a hay-mow."

"But what did you put me in a hole like that for?" Billy angrily demanded. "You knew what it was like, didn't you?"

"Why, I gave ye the easiest job, young man," Abner replied. "If ye don't like that, ye kin load or pitch on whichever ye prefer. It's all the same to me."

"To hell with it all. I'm done with haying. I feel sick, anyway."

"Look here," Abner warned, "ye'll feel a darn sight sicker than ye do at present if ye don't stop ye'r swearin'."

"What's that you say? How dare you speak to me an that way? I'll tell your boss on you."

"Tell all ye like. But, there, I've lost enough time with ye already, so trot along."

But Billy did not leave. He followed the team about the field for a few minutes, silent and sulky.

"You'll take me to the island, won't you?" he at length pleaded.

"Sure, I'll take ye, if ye'll hold ye'r tongue an' wait till we git this hay in. Ye'd better go over and set down under that big shady tree. A nap's good fer babies in the afternoon."

Lansing made no reply, but did as Abner had indicated. He sprawled out upon the ground, and spent his time smoking cigarettes.

"I wish Billy would go home," Royden remarked, as he tossed up a forkful

of hay.

"H'm, that's not his way, seems to me," Abner replied. "He's lookin' fer the soft spots in life, like too many fellers. He feels more at home layin' there under that tree than standin' up. But he got a dose up in that mow, though."

When at last the hay was all in and Jerry stabled, Billy was on hand, ready to go to the island.

"Feel better now?" Abner asked as they walked to the shore. "Sickness all gone, eh?"

"Sure, I'm tip-top," was the reply.

"Subject to faintin' spells, are ye?"

"I've had them ever since I was a child."

"Specially when there's work to be done. Ye'r not alone in that. Hop in now," he ordered, when the canoe had been launched.

Abner paddled, while Royden sat in the bottom of the canoe. Billy persisted in sitting well up on the bow, notwithstanding Abner's warning.

"Ye might tumble off there," he told him. "This is not a scow nor an ocean liner ye'r in now, but a cranky canoe, an' ye kin never tell what might happen."

"De ye think I'm a kid?" Billy indignantly asked. "I'm all right here. You get a hustle on, and never mind me."

Abner made no reply, though a peculiar expression appeared in his eyes. He paddled with long steady strokes, and looked straight ahead. It was a beautiful day, and only a gentle ripple ruffled the surface of the river. It took but a few minutes to cross the channel, and then they were in shallow water in the midst of eel-grass, broad water-lily leaves, snags and half-sunken logs.

Billy was deliberately smoking a cigarette, with an air of bored indifference. Suddenly the canoe struck a partly submerged root, which tilted it dangerously to the right. The force of the impact sent Billy backwards, and with a yell of fright he plunged headlong into the water. He was up again in an instant, spluttering and trying to disentangle himself from the eel-grass, which was entwined about his face and neck. The canoe by now was several yards away, and as Billy endeavored to walk, he not only sank ankle deep in the soft, yielding mud, but several times he stumbled and almost fell over a sunken log or root.

"Hello, what are ye doin' out there?" Abner asked in apparent surprise. "Fishin' fer clams? There ain't none there."

"D—n you," was the angry reply. "You know what I'm doing. It was all your fault. You struck that log on purpose."

"What log? Did we strike a log?" and Abner appealed to Royden.

"I didn't see any," was the laughing reply. "But Billy says we did, and he evidently knows from the look of things."

By this time the unfortunate man had struggled to the side of the canoe.

"Be keerful, now, how ye board this craft," Abner warned.

"I've a good mind to dump you both into the water," was the retort.

"Try it on, young man, if ye want to stay down in that mud till ye stop bubblin'."

With considerable difficulty Lansing was helped on board, and once more the canoe sped forward.

"Look at my clothes," Billy whined. "What a mess they are in!"

"Oh, they'll soon dry out," Abner comforted. "When ye git ashore ye kin jist set in the sun, an' them duds'll he dry in no time. Then ye kin roll over a log, an' they'll he ironed an' ye'r pants creased quicker an' better than they could at any landry."

"But this mud won't come off, though," and Billy mournfully viewed several big daubs on his white trousers.

"Not if ye rub it. Jist let it dry, an' then it'll brush off without hardly a stain. It's somethin' like scandal, mud is. Rub it when it's wet, an', Lord, it makes an awful mess! But jist leave it alone fer a while, an' it'll disappear, an' ye'll scarcely know it was there. That's what old Parson Shaw uster say, an' it's true, fer I've tried it. But here we are at the island."

CHAPTER XXIII

RESCUED

"Where in thunder kin they be!"

Abner and Royden were standing on the bank of the shore looking up and down in an effort to locate the berry pickers. They had been over the island, and had now come back to where Billy was lying upon the sand. Not a sign of the women and children could they see, and Abner was somewhat anxious.

"Surely the spooks haven't carried 'em off," he continued. "I've heard people tell about strange sights an' noises in this place, but I allus luffed at 'em. Mebbe they was right, though."

Royden was standing upon a rock looking keenly down river.

"Do you suppose they're in that old barn out on that stretch of lowland?" he asked.

"What would they be doin' there?" Abner enquired, as he, too, turned his face in that direction.

"Perhaps they've gone in out of the sun. Children like to play in old barns. I did, anyway, when I was a kid."

The barn to which Royden referred was on a narrow strip of marsh land, which ran for some distance out into the river. Hay was stored here until it could be hauled to the mainland in winter. It was an old weather-beaten building, and had been much battered by the flowing ice in the great spring rush.

"Surely they wouldn't be in a place like that," Abner mused, as he stood looking at the barn. "But ye kin never tell what notions women an' kids'll take, so it's jist as well to investigate."

Royden at once offered to go, but Abner detained him.

"Look here, young man, you've done enough trampin' fer a while. Let that lazy feller down there go. I guess his clothes are dry by this time. If they ain't, then a little touch of this breeze'll finish the job."

Billy, however, was loth to go, and said that he didn't feel well. He preferred to stay where he was.

"Sick, are ye?" and Abner turned suddenly upon him. "Well, it's fer the good of ye'r health that I'm askin' ye to take this little jant. If ye stay here ye'll be a darn sight sicker than ye are at present, let me tell ye that."

Something about Abner's voice and manner made Billy realise that he must obey. Slowly he rose to his feet and stretched himself.

"Confound it all!" he growled. "Why can't a fellow have a minute's peace!"

"Peace! Peace!" Abner roared, now thoroughly disgusted. "I'll give ye a kind of peace ye ain't lookin' fer, an' that'll be a piece of me boot. That's the only kind the likes of you understand. Hustle along there now, an' don't dilly-dally."

The two men watched Billy as he sauntered leisurely along the shore, picking his way among the stones.

"Well, if that don't beat the Dutch!" Abner exclaimed. "I wonder what the Lord was thinkin' of when he made sich a critter."

"He must be fond of making that kind, though," Royden replied. "He has a long list to His credit."

Abner pulled out his pipe, filled and lighted it. He then stretched himself out upon the ground in such a position that he could keep his eye upon Billy, who was now some distance away.

"Come to think of it," he began, "I don't believe the Lord is altogether to blame fer sich articles that walk on two legs an' call themselves men. He intended that they should be all right, an' gave them their own free will. But seems to me that that critter's ancestors, let the sap run out of the tree, an' there's mighty little left to work with. Zeb was right when he said that all the Social Service in the world won't do more'n elevate a pig into a hog. Jess will come to see that, too, as sure as guns."

"Is Miss Andrews as keen as ever on Social Service?" Royden asked.

"Jist as keen," Abner replied. "But she's got her hands full now with them kids. That's one reason why I'm willin' to keep 'em. Jess an' Belle are mighty interested in 'em, an' that's a great deal to me an' Tildy. But jist look at that feller; he ain't to the barn yit. I wonder how long he intends to hang around. I don't want him, an' I'm dang sure Belle doesn't, either. How de ye s'pose we kin git clear of him?"

"Can't you think of some way?" Royden asked, with a twinkle in his eyes. "If you should behave to him like you did to me the first day we met, I don't believe Billy would remain long."

"I was pretty het up that day I took the gun to ye," Abner acknowledged. "But it didn't work. Ye was too much fer me, all right, an' I ain't ashamed to confess it. Why, most chaps would have hollered, an' made no end of a fuss. But you was dead game, an' that put me off me reckonin'."

Before Royden could reply a yell of terror fell upon their ears. Startled, they both sprang to their feet, and looked anxiously in the direction from which the sound came. And as they did so, they saw Billy coming toward them with great leaps, followed by an animal which they at once recognized as an infuriated bull.

"Good Lord!" Abner ejaculated. "Where in thunder did that critter come from? Why, I know. It's Pete Slocum's. He said he was goin' to put it on the island, as he couldn't keep it in the pasture. I forgot all about it, blamed if I didn't."

"Billy will be killed," Royden exclaimed, much excited.

"Not at the rate he's runnin' now," was the reply. "Did ye ever see anythin' like it? Why, the grass must be hot under his feet. I didn't know he had sich speed aboard. Look at that fer jumps! An' listen to his yells. He'll have lockjaw if he isn't keerful."

It certainly was a wild run Billy was making, with the bull in close pursuit. Notwithstanding Abner's apparent amusement, he was really concerned, and was about to rush forward, though he was sure he could not reach the youth in time to be of any assistance, as he had no weapon with which to fight the bull. He was on the point of starting, anyway, when he noticed that Billy was making straight for a clump of birch trees standing low on the bank of the island.

"Good fer him!" he exclaimed. "He's some sense left yit."

"Will he make it, do you think?" Royden almost breathlessly asked.

"Make it? Sure. If that feller makes heaven as sartin as he'll make that tree, he'll be all right, though I guess he won't make it as fast. Look at that! Why, he went up it like a cat. He's safe, all right, now," and Abner breathed a sigh of relief. "Gee whittaker! He's a wonder when a bull's after him."

"What shall we do?" Royden asked. "We can't leave him there, and the bull

doesn't seem inclined to go away. Look how he's roaring around that tree and tearing up the ground."

"We'll fix that critter, all right," Abner replied. "Let's git a couple of hand-spikes. Wish to goodness I'd brought me axe along."

Searching among the drift-wood, they soon found two stout sticks.

"I guess these'll do," Abner remarked, as he tested them over a log. "Now fer some fun."

Royden could not see much fun in the undertaking, though he followed his companion without a word. Making their way as speedily as possible along the shore, they at length came near enough for the bull to observe their presence. He stopped pawing for a few seconds, and stared angrily at the intruders. Then his right fore hoof again tore up the turf, and his roars became more furious than ever.

Abner now seemed in his element. His eyes glowed with the light of battle, and, grasping his stick firmly with both hands, he rushed forward.

"Come on, me beauty," he challenged. "I'll make ye roar."

And the bull did come. With a toss of its great head, and another angry bellow, it charged upon the two men. Seeing it coming, Abner slowed down, and was about to stop, when in an instant his foot caught on a root, and before he could recover himself he had fallen headlong upon the ground. The bull was now almost upon him, and in another second its horns would have pierced the prostrate man's body, but as the brute lowered its head for a great thrust, Royden dealt him a staggering blow right across the forehead, which brought him to his knees. Before he could recover, a second blow followed, which caused him to plunge heavily and fall headlong upon the ground, tearing up as he did so long strips of turf with his powerful horns.

By this time Abner was on his feet, angry at himself for falling, and ready to have revenge upon the animal. Seizing his stick, which he had dropped, he thrust it into the bull's side.

"Git up, ye brute," he cried. "Ye'll have better manners next time, all right. Git up, I say. Take that, an' that, an' that, ye divil."

So fierce were the thrusts that the half-stunned animal bellowed with increased vigor, and with a great effort scrambled to his feet, where he stood for a few seconds shaking his head, while his eyes glowed like red-hot coals. With Royden standing before him ready to administer another blow, and Abner goring his side and yelling words of defiance, the brute became completely bewildered. A nameless terror seized him, and with a peculiar growl of rage and fear, he attempted to escape. He staggered from side to side for a few yards, but presently he started on a run, which shortly developed into a mad gallop, as if all the fiends in the world were after him.

"Ye've forgot somethin'," Abner shouted. "Come back an' git the change."

The bull kept on with his headlong flight, dashed into the woods, and disappeared from view. They could hear him crashing his way among the trees as he sped onward. Farther and farther he went, the sounds of his flight growing fainter and fainter, until at last they could no longer be heard.

"Guess he's gone fer good," and Abner breathed a deep sigh. "He'll have somethin' to think over fer a while. Mebbe he'll let folks alone after this. But, jiminey! He nearly fixed me, all right."

"It was a close call," Royden replied. "He was almost upon you."

"I wonder where I'd been now," Abner mused, "if you hadn't brought him to his knees. I expect to sprout me final wings some day, but, hang it all, I didn't think I'd come so close to doin' it so soon, an' on this island at that. But, then, one never knows what to expect next, as Tom Bentley said when his big ram butted him clean through the barn-door. I'm mighty obliged to ye, young man, fer gittin' me out of that scrap, an' I shan't fergit it soon, either."

Seeing that the danger was past, Billy climbed down from the tree and came over to where the two men were standing. He was angry, and he did not mince matters.

"Look here," he began, "what did you mean by sending me to that barn when you knew that devil was there? That's the reason you wouldn't go yourselves. A pretty mess you got me into, didn't you?"

"Keep cool, young man," Abner advised. "Don't blame anyone, fer I didn't know that critter was here. But seems to me you was the best one to go, even if we had known."

"Why is that, I'd like to know?"

"'Cause that face of yours would stop anythin', even a bull."

"But it didn't, you fool," was the angry retort.

"No, sartinly not, fer ye never gave the critter a chance to look at it. If ye had, it would have busted itself runnin' the other way."

"Well, I'm done with this whole shooting match," Billy declared. "I've had enough to do me the rest of my life. I shall report you to your boss, for I'm d—sure that was a put-up job, and nothing else."

"All right, me hearty, report all ye like, an' the sooner ye go the better. When I was a kid we generally handed out somethin' interestin' to the chap that told tales on others. He was put down as a baby an' the fellers didn't have much use fer him, let me tell ya that."

"Do you mean to say that I'm a baby?" Billy demanded.

"Well, not altogether, as fer as size an' tongue goes, at any rate. But, my, how ye'r parents must have loved ye to let ye grow up. If they could only have seen ye when ye was sprintin' in front of that bull, an' climbin' that tree, I'm sure

they'd have been mighty proud of ye. But, hello, what in the deuce is all this?"

Angry though he was, Billy was compelled to turn in the direction Abner was looking. Coming across the marsh were the berry pickers, lined out in single file, like Indians on the march. Mrs. Andrews led, followed by the five children, with Belle and Jess bringing up in the rear. As they approached it was plainly evident that they were tired and greatly excited.

"Well, where in time did yez all drop from?" Abner demanded, as they at last rounded up in front of him.

"From that barn, of course," his wife impatiently replied. "Where else did you think we had come from?"

"Chased in there by that bull, eh? Well, it was mighty lucky ye had sich a place to flee to, let me tell ye that."

"Oh, daddy, it was awful!" Jess exclaimed. "We just got there in the nick of time when that terrible creature came after us."

As Jess uttered the word 'daddy' Billy gave a great start and looked keenly at Abner. His face grew suddenly pale, and his body trembled. He began to understand something now which he had never suspected. He hardly knew what to do.

"Did ye see the fight?" Abner asked. "We settled that critter, all right. But I'm mighty disapp'inted, Jess."

"What at, daddy?"

"That ye didn't try some of ye'r Social Service dope upon that brute."

"Social Service on a creature like that!"

"Sure. That's what it's fer, so ye've told me. To elevate things, lift 'em up, so to speak."

"But we couldn't do anything with an animal like that," Jess explained. "A stick is the only way you can handle such a beast."

"Ho, ho, Jess, ye'r sartinly right this time. A club's the only thing a critter like that understands. An' it's jist the same with a lot of people, 'specially men. They understand gentle handlin', soothin' words, an' sich things about as much as that bull does, an' ye know what effect they'd have upon him. There are some critters ye kin elevate by rubbin' gently an' pilin' on the honey, but as fer as I kin see, there's a dang lot of people ye kin handle only one way, an' that's with a thick club. That's the Social Service dope they need."

"For pity's sake, Abner, will you ever stop talking?" his wife asked. "You seem to be wound up and guaranteed to run forever. We're all tired out, and the children are hungry."

"Hungry!" and Abner looked around. "Where kin we find grub fer all these in a place like this? I s'pose the bull ate up everything, did he?"

"The baskets are all right," Mrs. Andrews explained. "We left them in a safe

place near the boat.”

”Good fer you, Tildy. I’d bank on you every time to look after sich matters. The grub’s safe, hurrah! Come on, one an’ all, an’ let’s jine in the feast.”

CHAPTER XXIV

EXIT BILLY

”What in the world’s keepin’ ’em?”

Abner was standing before the fire he had built on the shore, and supper was all ready. It needed only the arrival of Jess and Royden, and they were long in coming. Belle smiled as she watched Abner and listened to his remarks about people being late for their meals. Mrs. Andrews and the children were already seated on the ground, but Abner would not let them touch a thing until all were present.

”It ain’t good manners,” he declared, when his wife protested. ”We’ve company fer supper, an’ I guess it’s the fashion fer ’em allus to be late. I know it was so when I was a kid. Now, I remember once when—”

”Here they come now,” one of the boys shouted, with delight.

Abner fixed his eyes sternly upon the lad who had interrupted him.

”Look here, sonny,” he began, ”don’t ye know any better’n that, to speak when ye’r uncle’s about begin a story? You need a dose of Social Service, all right. Jess’ll have to git busy.”

Belle laughed heartily at Abner’s words and looks in which the children all joined. They had no fear of him, and were always much delighted when he took any notice of them.

Jess was very animated, and looked prettier than ever so Abner thought, as she and Royden drew near. Her cheeks were flushed, and she merely smiled at her father’s bantering words.

”My, this looks good!” she exclaimed, as she sat down by her father’s side and examined the supper. ”This is something like living.”

”This is real Social Service, Jess,” Abner remarked. ”Ye may use all the elevatin’ schemes in the world, but they don’t cut no ice unless ye’r under-pinnin’ is right, as I told ye once before. Now, the real under-pinnin’, to my way of thinkin’, is grub.”

”How do you make that out, daddy?” Jess asked, as her father paused to sip

his tea.

"How do I make that out? Well, jist try an' ye'll soon find out fer ye'rself. Soap an' water are all right; I daresen't say nuthin' agin' 'em, fer Tildy is here, an' she's great on sich things. But back of soap an' water, an' art an' music, an' all other things ye learnt at the Seminary, there must be grub, or else ye'r Social Service plans'll fall flatter'n did Lawyer Rackshaw the day I stuck the hot end of me cigar into his measely nose. Ho, ho, that was a joke, an' I'll tell yez about it some day. No, ye must have grub as ye'r under-pinnin', Jess, even if ye expect to elevate a pig into a hog."

Billy was the only one who did not seem to be enjoying himself. He ate his supper in silence, and when he was through, he sat a little apart smoking the inevitable cigarette. There was reason for this. Belle would have nothing to do with him. She kept very close to Abner before supper, and talked and chatted with him in the most animated manner. But when Billy tried to divert her attention she told him each time that she was very busy. He was sulky, too, over the way Abner had deceived him in making him believe that he was the hired man. It did not improve his mood when he saw Jess and Royden so happy together. He felt that he had been badly treated, and that his experience with the bull had been planned by Abner and the surveyor. He brooded over these things while the rest laughed and talked, and enjoyed themselves thoroughly.

When it was time to go home, Jess stepped into the canoe, and Royden stood at the bow ready to push it off from the shore. The others were to go in the big flat-bottomed boat, and were already on board, except Abner. He was searching around to see that nothing was left behind before shoving the boat into the water. Billy had taken his seat next to Belle, feeling certain that she could not escape him now. But to his surprise that young lady suddenly stood up and stepped ashore.

"Is there room for me?" she asked Royden, who was now paddling close by.

"Sure," was the reply, as he ran the bow gently upon the beach.

In an instant Belle was aboard, and as the canoe cut through the water, she waved her hand to Billy.

"I hope you will have a nice time," she bantered. "It's great here."

Abner chuckled with delight, and even Mrs. Andrews' face relaxed into a smile, as they realized why she had left them. But Billy was furious. He sprang out of the boat, and ordered Royden to bring back the canoe.

The surveyor paid no attention, however, but paddled steadily away. This angered Billy all the more, and he swore and stamped on the ground in his fury.

"Here, cut that out," Abner commanded. "I'll give ye somethin' to dance fer

in real earnest if ye don't. Hustle up an' git on board. I want to be off."

"Go to h—l," was the angry retort. "I'm going to stay here."

Abner was about to leap ashore and administer the chastisement the cur deserved. But he soon changed his mind, while a smile flitted across his face.

"All right," he replied, "stay where ye are. Ye kin be old Robinson Crusoe fer all I care. Good-bye, me beauty, an' pleasant dreams to ye to-night. Ye kin eat the bull if ye'r hungry."

Pushing off the boat, he seized the oars and settled himself down to work. They had gone but a short distance when a yell from Billy fell upon their ears. He was standing upon the shore, frantically waving his arms, and imploring them to return. The cause of his distress was at once apparent, for coming toward him from the rear was the bull, pawing and growling in an angry manner. It had evidently recovered from its fright, and was seeking revenge upon his enemies. It may have been longing for human companionship in his loneliness, though Billy did not fancy the brute's company, no matter how friendly he might prove. He was wild with terror, and his cries increased the nearer the animal approached.

"Oh, hurry back, Abner," Mrs. Andrews implored. "The poor fellow will be killed."

"I'm goin' to stay right here," Abner announced. "If Billy wants to come on board he kin wade. I offered to take him, but he refused. It's up to him now to make the next move."

Billy was not long in doing this. As the bull drew near, and he saw that the boat was not returning, he plunged into the water and waded as fast as he could, casting frightened glances back over his shoulder at his enemy.

"Ye'r doin' fine," Abner encouraged, at which all the children shouted with laughter. It was great sport for them to see the man stumbling and splashing along, and groaning at every step.

"So that's the second bath ye've had to-day," Abner remarked, after Billy had scrambled into the boat. "Guess ye'r hide's cleaner than it's been since ye'r mother tubbed ye. It's a pity the same can't be done to that dirty mouth of yours."

Billy made no reply, but sat shivering on one of the seats.

"Are ye cold?" Abner asked.

"I do feel that way."

"Take the oars, then, an' warm ye'rself up. There's a chilly breeze sprung up, an' ye might catch cold. It 'ud be too bad to lose sich a valuable person. Don't know how the world 'ud wag along."

Reluctantly Billy took Abner's place, and began to row. But he was like a child at the work, and the boat, with no keel, went around and around in a circle.

"Say, where are ye takin' us?" Abner asked. "I'm gittin' dizzy."

"But I can't keep the d—d thing straight," was the reply. "There's something

wrong with the boat or with these oars.”

”Here, give ’em to me,” Abner ordered. ”I don’t want any more wheels in me head. The fault’s not with the oars or the boat, young man, but with you. Now, watch how I do it. My, you’d be great in a race with a dog chasin’ its tail, wouldn’t ye?”

It did not take long to reach the shore, and all to land. Abner spoke a word to his wife, and she at once left with the children for the house. He remained a few minutes behind with Billy, and when the latter left and headed for the main highway, Abner picked up the remaining basket and walked slowly up through the field. He chuckled several times and twice turned and looked to see how far Billy had gone.

When Abner reached the house he was surprised at the commotion which was taking place in the dooryard. A big truck was standing there, loaded with provisions. It had just arrived and the driver was asking Mrs. Andrews where he should put the stuff. The latter was somewhat bewildered, and was trying to make the man understand that there must have been some mistake, and that the goods could not be intended for them.

”But it’s all marked for Abner Andrews, of Ash Point,” the man insisted. ”There’s no mistake about that. I’ve brought it, and here it’s going to stay.”

”Very well, then,” Mrs. Andrews replied. ”Here comes my husband, and you can talk with him.”

Abner was greatly astonished at the truck-load of goods and questioned the driver most closely. He could only learn, however, that the supplies had been sent from Dill & McBain, leading grocers of Glucom, and that was all he knew about it.

”It’s for you, though, Mr. Andrews,” the driver insisted. ”I’m certain. I have made no mistake. Mr. Dill himself looked after the stuff, which is unusual for him, and he warned me not to leave it anywhere else.”

”It sartinly is queer,” and Abner scratched his head in perplexity. ”Can’t imagine where it all came from. Howsomever, here it is, an’ so ye might as well dump it off, while I stow it away. Plenty of room’s about the only thing which we have about this place at present.”

As the driver unloaded the goods Abner stored them away in the wood-house adjoining the room fitted up for the children. There were several barrels of flour, sides of ham, slabs of bacon, sugar, rice, and boxes filled with all kinds of things.

When they were at last stored away and the driver had departed, Abner and his wife stood looking at the articles with a puzzled expression upon their

faces.

"Well, I'll be blessed if I kin understand this!" Abner exclaimed. "Where de ye s'pose them things have come from?"

"They came from town, all right," Mrs. Andrews replied. "But I'd like to know who sent them. Maybe you'll get a bill later, Abner. You haven't been doing any more of your crazy actions, have you? Are you sure you didn't order these things, thinking you were old man Astor, or some other rich ancestor?"

"Should say not. I don't know no more about 'em than you do, Tildy. It may have been one of me wealthy ancestors, though," he mused. "Ye kin never tell what them spirits are goin' to do next."

"H'm, I guess the spirits who sent all those things are flesh and blood like ourselves, and know how badly off we are. But here comes Belle. She may know something about them."

Belle was alone, and Jess and Royden were nowhere to be seen. She was delighted when she saw the provisions, and her eyes danced.

"Oh, I am so glad they have come," she exclaimed. "You won't have to worry any more now, will you?" and she turned to Abner.

"Worry! How did you know we was worryin'?" Abner asked in amazement.

"Oh, I know a thing or two," and the girl smiled. "I am not altogether blind, even though I am a little giddy at times."

"An' de ye know where them things came from?"

"I have a fairly good idea,"

"Ye have!"

"Why, yes," and again Belle smiled at Abner's astonishment. "I think my father sent them."

"He did! Ye'r father! How in blazes did he know how we was fixed?"

"I write to him, don't I? It was only natural that I should tell him about the boys we have here, and how the people of Glucom acted about that Orphans' Home, wasn't it?"

"Sure, sure. An' ye'r dad didn't send them things out of charity, did he?"

"Charity to the children, of course," was Belle's evasive reply. "He knows how greatly interested I am in the boys, and he sent those things merely to help along the work. My father is fond of doing such things and he wouldn't like it one bit if he knew that I have told on him. If you want to save me from a big scolding don't say anything to him about it. I shall write at once and tell him that they have arrived, and so that will be enough. Now, you must both promise me that you won't say anything to my father about what he has done. You will, won't you?"

As neither Abner nor Mrs. Andrews made any reply, Belle looked keenly into their faces, thinking that perhaps they were offended. Great was her surprise

to see tears stealing slowly down Mrs. Andrews' cheeks. She brushed them hurriedly away, but not before Belle had seen her emotion.

"Oh, Mrs. Andrews, I didn't mean to offend you," Belle explained. "I'm afraid I have hurt your feelings. I thought you would understand. I am so sorry."

In reply, Mrs. Andrews threw her arms about the girl's neck, and began to weep, a most unusual thing for her.

"You dear good girl," she sobbed. "You have not offended us. But I am completely overcome by your kindness."

Abner turned his face away and softly hummed, "When Bill Larkins made his money." Belle touched him gently on the arm.

"Are you offended, Mr. Andrews?" she asked.

Abner swung suddenly around, and there was a mistiness in his eyes.

"Offended!" he repeated. "I'm not offended one bit, but I have a queer, creepy feelin', which I haven't had since the first time I saw Jess, when she was put in me arms as a tiny little mite. Why, I nearly blubbered right out, an' me a big strong man at that! Jist think of it!"

"I am so glad that you're not offended," Belle replied. "And if you feel as you say you do, then everything is all right."

"Why, I couldn't help feelin' any other way. Guess them peaceful spirits of mine must be hoverin' round by the appearance of things. Billy didn't think so, though, this afternoon, did he?"

"Oh, I forgot all about that man," and Belle looked around, as if she expected to see him.

"He couldn't have made much impression on ye, eh?" and Abner's eyes twinkled. "He's got it bad, Billy has; but I guess he won't commit suicide yit awhile."

"Where did he go to, anyway?" Belle asked. "He didn't come to the house, did he?"

"Should say not. I had a quiet little interview with him down on the shore. I had a heart to heart talk with him; told him that he was in danger of injurin' the morals of the kids, an' that 'distance lends enchantment,' as old Parson Shaw uster to say."

"Was he willing to go?"

"Willin'! Well, he wasn't overly anxious at first, but he soon changed his mind, let me tell ye that. When he saw that me warlike ancestors were gittin' busy, an' that they were inspirin' me, he more'n took the hint, an' lit out. Ye won't have no more bother with him, Belle. If ye do, jist let me know; that's all ye have to do."

"Thank you, Mr. Andrews," was the reply. "I don't want to see him again. He gives me a creepy feeling, very different from yours, though."

At that moment Jess and Royden appeared, looking very happy and animated. They had enjoyed the afternoon and evening, and Billy's troubles did not in the least mar their pleasure.

CHAPTER XXV

LAFFIN'-GAS

"Hello, Lost Tribes!" Abner accosted. "What's the matter? Not sick, are ye?"

"Do I look sick?" Zebedee asked, as he took his pipe from his mouth, and glared at his neighbor.

"Well, I can't altogether say that ye have the appearance of dyin'," Abner replied, as he sat down by Zeb's side on the workshop steps. "But ye don't look as spry as a skippin' lamb, an' ye'r face ain't as bright as a shiny mug. What's wrong?"

"Nuthin'."

"H'm, so that's it, eh? It's no wonder ye look glum. Nuthin' wrong! Everythin' runnin' as smooth as molasses in summer time. That's sartinly too bad. Nuthin' wrong! What's the nuthin', Zeb?"

"You," was the unexpected reply.

"Me!" Abner exclaimed in astonishment.

"Sure. You're the nuthin', an' it's you that's wrong."

"Thanks fer the compliment, Zeb. 'Tisn't every day I git handed one so free an' easy like. What's started ye? Wife cranky, or is it indigestion ye've got?"

Zebedee did not deign to reply for a few minutes, but pulled steadily at his pipe, and gazed out over the fields.

"Say, Abner," he at length began, "what's the meanin' of ye'r actions, anyway?"

"Actions! What actions?"

"Why, you ought to know. How many customers de ye expect to have?"

"Customers!"

"Sure. Haven't ye started store-keepin'? Didn't I see a big truck at ye'r back door last night, loaded with enough goods to keep a lumber camp fer a month?"

"Oh, I see," and Abner's eyes twinkled with amusement as light began to dawn upon his mind. "Why shouldn't I start store-keepin'?"

"Why? Simply because ye would ruin ye'rself in a few weeks."

"I would, eh?"

"Certainly. Where would ye git the customers, I'd like to know?"

"They'd flock from all parts, of course. Half of Glucom 'ud be here in no time."

"H'm," Zeb sniffed in disgust. "Ye'r mistaken there, Abner. It wouldn't work."

"What'll ye bet?"

"I won't bet. It wouldn't be fair."

"That's not it, Zeb. Ye wouldn't dare to bet, fer ye know ye'd lose."

"Quit ye'r foolin', Abner, an' let's git down to business. Are ye goin' crazy, man, to start store-keepin' in a place like this? Ye can't afford to do sich a thing. If ye have any money to throw away ye'd better keep it fer that trial of yours."

"But I need money, Zeb, an' if I can't git it one way I'll have to try another."

"Well, leave store-keepin' alone."

"I intend to."

"Ye do?"

"Sure. Never thought of it till ye put the notion into me head. It might be a good scheme, though."

"Well, what's all that stuff at your place fer, then?"

"Oh, that's a gift. Belle's dad sent it fer the kids."

"He did!" Zeb's eyes opened wide in amazement.

Abner smiled. He was enjoying himself immensely now.

"It shook ye'r timbers, did it?" he queried. "Thought I was goin' store-keepin'. No, I don't intend to start that at present. I've somethin' else on me mind."

"Ye have? Some more fool-nonsense, I s'pose."

"No, this is the real thing, first class an' up to date. I'm goin' to make money hand-over-fist. Listen to this."

Fumbling in his vest pocket, Abner brought forth a newspaper clipping and unfolded it with great care.

"I cut it from *The Family Herald an' Weekly Star*," he explained. "Read it last night, an' I've been laffin' ever since. Say, it's a great idea, an' struck me all at once, like that ram did Tom Bentley. Ye ought to read *The Herald*, Zeb. It tells ye most everything an' what it doesn't tell isn't worth knowin'."

"Well, fer pity sakes what is it, Abner?"

"Oh, haven't I told ye? Why, I thought I had. Here it is, then. It tells about an old feller who lived thousands of years ago, though I can't make out his name. It's a funny one, an' I never heard of that ancestor of mine before. Kin ye give it the right twist, Zeb?"

"Spell it, Abner. My eyes ain't good, an' me glasses are in the house."

"It's the darndest word I ever sot me eyes on. It goes this way: D-i-o, now that spells Dio. The next is g-e-n; that's gen, all right. The last two letters are e-s, and the hull bunch put together gives us D-i-o-g-e-n-e-s, Dio-genes. Ain't that a whopper, though? I dare say Jess knows the hang of it, but blamed if I do."

"Tut, man, I've heard of that feller before. It's pronounced Diogenes," Zeb explained. "Ye'r not so smart after all, are ye, even though ye do read *The Family Herald*. But what are ye drivin' at, Abner?"

"He's one of me ancestors, ye see, an' it's nice to know the hang of his name. It's a great one, isn't it? Diogenes! Gee! that sounds high class."

"Ancestors be hanged! What good are sich ancient critters, I'd like to know?"

"Look here, Zeb," and Abner looked thoughtfully at his neighbor. "Haven't I been inspired by me ancestors all me life? First the warlike ones overshadowed me, an' then the peaceful spirits hovered round. Now, ain't that so?"

"Wouldn't be surprised at anythin'," Zeb agreed. "Ye seem to have sich a dang lot of ancestors that I don't know which ones ye'r goin' to follow next."

"I sartinly have, Zeb. That's the time ye hit the nail on the head. I try out one bunch, an' when I git tired of them I shift to another. That's why I'm keen on that old feller, what's his name?"

"Diogenes?"

"Yes, that's him, though I guess you'd better do the pronouncin'. It doesn't seem to come handy to me, nohow. Well, I'm much interested in that old feller I've been laffin', as I told ye, ever since I read that piece in *The Family Herald*."

"What did he do that was so funny, Abner?"

"Do! He set the hull world laffin' to split its sides, that's what he did."

"In what way? Fer pity sakes, git on with ye'r yarn."

"Yes, he sartinly did funny things. He lived in a tub, jist think of that. How would you like to have a tub fer a house, Zeb? Wouldn't it be great! There'd be no house-cleanin' days, an' no carpets to beat, an' sich unnecessary things to attend to."

"What did he do in the tub?" Zeb inquired, now becoming much interested.

"What did he clo? Why, he made the hull world laff, of course. Wasn't that enough?"

"But how did he do it, Abner? I don't see anythin' so funny about that. Anybody could set in a tub, couldn't they?"

"Sure. But, ye see, that old feller lived in the tub, ate his meals in it, an' slept there. When folks came to see him he showed 'em his house, kitchen, dinin'-room, parlor an' bedroom, all in one. After they was shown around, so to speak, they nearly all died laffin'. Ye see, they thought he was luney. Then when they stopped laffin' long enough, he up an' says, 'Now jist look at all the things I do

not need. It doesn't take much to keep a man goin', does it?' That's what he says."

"I s'pose they thought he was crazy, Abner?"

"Not a bit of it after that. They had more sense. They called him a philosopher, or some sich name, an they all flocked to see him an' to hear his wisdom."

"They did!"

"Sure. They came in crowds, an' though they laffed an' laffed at the queer old feller, they paid attention to what he said. Even the king came to see him."

"Ye don't tell!"

"Yes, Alexander the Great, they called him. He came too, an' he asked the old feller if he could do anythin' fer him. An' what de ye s'pose me ancient ancestor said?"

"I couldn't guess."

"Sure, ye couldn't, an' no one else. Now, you or me, Zeb, would have asked fer a hull lot of things if the King of England came by an' wanted to do somethin' fer us. We would ask him fer some soft government persition, wouldn't we?"

"Most likely we would."

"But that old feller didn't ask fer no sich things. He looked at the king, squinted his eyes a little, an' says he, 'Yes, Alec, ye kin do me a great favor.'"

"An' what is it?' says the king, soft an' pleasant like, expectin' to be asked fer somethin' great."

"Ye kin jist stand from between me an' th' sun,' says the old feller. 'Ye'r hidin' the light, an' I feel chilly.' That's what he says to the king."

"And wasn't the king hoppin' mad?" Zeb asked.

"Mad! Not a bit of it. He grinned, an' went away. I bet ye'r boots he told his wife about it, an' they both had a good laff, the first they'd had, I reckon, fer a long time. Ye see, it did 'em good. That's what they needed to cheer 'em up. An' look here, Zeb, that's what people need to-day. If they'd laff more they'd feel a darned sight better, let me tell ye that. You'd feel better ye'rself, Zeb."

"I feel better, already, Abner," was the reply. "I'm jist holdin' me sides to keep from splittin', ye'r story was so funny."

"H'm, I guess if ye saw an' heard me when I was real funny ye'd be tied up in a knot in no time. If the spirits of me humorous ancestors got busy there'd be somethin' doin' worth while. An' they're really needed. It 'ud do people a world of good if they could be affected jist fer a day by them wonderful spirits."

"What are ye talkin' about, anyway, Abner? What could the spirits of ye'r ancestors do?"

"Do? Why, they could cure all kinds of diseases, an make people well an' strong."

"Fiddlesticks! Ye'r talkin' nonsense, Abner. How could they do sich

things?"

"With laffin'-gas, that's how."

"Laffin'-gas?"

"Sure. Ye see, people don't laff enough. They go round with faces as long as Miss Julie Tomkins' tongue an' that's some length, skiddy-me-shins if it ain't. Most of the folks ye meet now-a-days look as if they was about dyin', or had lost their best friends. They need to be stimulated by a good laff once in a while. It 'ud help their digesters an' make life more pleasant."

"An' so ye think ye'r ancestors could make people laff, do ye?" Zeb enquired.

"Sartin! They'll work through me, an' I feel 'em gittin' busy jist now. They've given me the power, an' I'm ready to try it upon anybody. Anythin' wrong with you, Zeb? Tooth-ache, stummick-ache, heart-ache, boils, or any dang thing ye might mention. I'm a specialist on all."

"Good Lord, no!" Zeb exclaimed. "I know enough of ye'r spirit-movin' business, Abner. Try it on someone else, but I warn ye to leave me alone unless ye want an ache that all ye'r spirits combined couldn't cure."

"There now, don't git cranky an' sassy, Zeb. It was only fer ye'r welfare that I offered me services. But if ye won't accept 'em then I'll have to try it on others."

"An' de ye think people would come to be treated by you?"

"Why not? They want to be cured, don't they?"

"I s'pose they do, most of 'em at any rate. But they prefer to go to someone who knows what he's talkin' about."

"An' de ye think I don't know? De ye imagine I'm jist spoutin' to hear meself?"

"I wouldn't like to say that, Abner. But people wouldn't come to you. They'd laff at you an' call ye a fool."

"Let 'em call me whatever they like, Zeb. But they'd laff, an' that's jist what they need, as I told ye."

"H'm, I don't doubt about their laffin', providin' they'd come. They couldn't help splittin' their sides when they looked at ye."

"An' so ye think they wouldn't come, eh?"

"I'm certain they wouldn't."

"What'll ye bet?"

"Well, I wouldn't bet much with you, Abner, fer ye couldn't stand to lose anythin'."

"But I'll not lose. Now see here, I'll bet ye a fig of terbaccar; how'll that do?"

"I'll take ye, Abner."

"That's right, Zeb, fer I'm hard up fer a plug of terbaccer at this present minute. I'll borrow a little on account, if ye don't mind. Me pipe's gone out."

"How de ye plan to start?" Zeb asked, as he handed over a part of a fig of T. & B.

"I'm thinkin' of puttin' an ad. in *The Live Wire*," Abner replied, as he thoughtfully whittled off several liberal slices of tobacco. "Wish ye'd write it out fer me, Zeb. Ye'r good at sich things. Ye often write ads. about ye'r 'Society' pigs, don't ye?"

Zeb pulled a note-book and pencil from his vest pocket and told his companion to go ahead.

"Go ahead ye'rself," Abner ordered. "Jist say that I'm a specialist on diseases, an' will treat anyone wot comes to me next Saturday evenin' after supper. That's the grain an' you know how to grind it up."

After much thought and head scratching Zeb managed to write out an advertisement which he thought would do. Then he read it aloud:

DISEASE SPECIALIST

"Abner Andrews, of Ash Point, has a new remedy for all kinds of diseases. For the sum of twenty-five cents he will treat all who come to him. Office Hours, Saturday afternoon, from 6 o'clock to midnight."

"There, how does that suit ye?" Zeb asked, when he had finished reading.

"It's a master-piece, all right," Abner replied. "But haven't ye made the fee rather low?"

"Guess it's enough fer the first time. If ye find ye'r rushed ye kin put up the price."

"Sure. Anyway, I'll make up in numbers, all right. Better have that terbaccer ready, Zeb, for I'll want it to soothe me nerves when I git through with the gang."

"Seems to me ye'r partly paid already, Abner. Ye've pocketed the plug I jist let ye have."

"Well, I declare! Good job ye reminded me, Zeb," and Abner chuckled as he handed back his neighbor's property.

"I feel so sure of winnin' the bet that I thought I owned that plug. Now ye mention office hours in that ad. Where am I to git an office?"

"In ye'r own house, of course. That's the right place."

"H'm, I s'pose it is. But, ye see, I'm afraid Tildy an' the gals might object

to havin' a crowd around. Let me have this place, will ye, Zeb?"

"My workshop!"

"Sure. Ye kin sweep it up a bit, an' it'll do fine. Ye won't be usin' it Saturday night, will ye?"

"Seems to me, Abner, ye'r gittin' me too much into this affair. I don't want people to think that I've lost me senses, even if you have. But ye'r welcome to the place fer all the good it'll do ye."

"Thank ye, Zeb. An' ye'll be sure an' send that ad. to *The Wire*, won't ye? I'm hard up fer cash jist now. I'll pay ye out of what I make. We'll be pardners, ye see."

Zeb looked at his neighbor in astonishment.

"Well, if you haven't enough gall to start a vinegar factory then I'll be jiggered," he exclaimed. "Pardners, eh? An' I'm to run the hull durned shootin'-match!"

"Don't worry, Zeb," Abner replied, as he rase to his feet. "I'll do all the shootin' that's necessary. But, there, I must git home to dinner. Then I'll have to look after me laffin'-gas. S'long, Zeb, an' don't fergit that ad. Ten cents a line, remember, an' twenty cents fer a header."

CHAPTER XXVI

HEART TROUBLE

When the advertisement appeared in *The Live Wire* the next day it did not attract much attention. People who read it laughed, called Abner a fool, and then forgot all about it. Most likely it would have ended at that if the assistant editor of the paper had not seized upon it for a special editorial the following morning. He was anxious to hit back at the man who had produced such havoc in the office and given him so much extra work to do. Since the editor in chief had been unable to attend to his duties he had been called upon to do the work of two men, and this was all due to Abner Andrews, who was now posing as a specialist on all kinds of diseases.

The article was a scathing one under the caption of
"A FOOL AND HIS TRICKS."

It ridiculed the idea of a man like Abner Andrews setting himself up as a specialist, and warned people to beware of his wiles. The advertisement proved most conclusively that the man was either a fool or a deep-dyed villain. He was a fool to make such a pretence at healing all kinds of diseases. If not a fool, he was pretending to be one. The article then told of the serious charge which was hanging over the farmer, and this advertisement of his might be a ruse to make people think that he was not responsible for his actions, and thus act as a blind to his real villainous character. It closed with a second warning to all, and strongly suggested that the law should step in and prohibit the man from such actions.

This article aroused people much more than the advertisement, and the talk was most general around town about this peculiar farmer. People became curious to go to Ash Point to see for themselves what the "specialist" would do and say, and to learn more about his methods of healing. The interest increased on Friday, especially among certain young men, who saw in Abner an object for considerable sport. Even staid business men, knowing something about Abner's odd ways, smiled to themselves, or discussed the matter with one another. They, too, longed for a little excitement, and when they mentioned it to their wives they found a ready response. Thus a number of the leading citizens of Glucom planned a trip to Ash Point Saturday evening. Of course they would not visit the man, but merely drive by, or stop and listen to what he had to say. It would be great fun, so they imagined.

It was Lawyer Rackshaw, however, who saw most in the advertisement. Here was a chance to get more than even with the man he hated. He was so elated that he invited Hen Whittles into his office Friday night, upon the special promise that there would be no more rats present. They drank, played cards, and discussed Abner Andrews.

"That man is crazy," Hen declared.

"Not crazy, but a fool," was the emphatic reply. "Only a fool would do what he has done, and to cap it all, to put such an ad. as that in the paper! But it's just what I need. My, it gives me a fine opening to get even with him."

"In what way?" Hen asked.

Rackshaw smiled as he threw down an ace, and then helped himself to another drink.

"Oh, I've a plan," he at length replied. "I'll fix that old fool this time, all right. He'll get patients he's not looking for."

"But do you think people will go to be treated?" Hen asked.

"Go? Sure, they'll go. Why, it's the talk of the town, as you must know."

"But, will sick people go?"

"Sure. I've been talking to several already, and they're so sick they can hardly get along. Ho, ho!" and Rackshaw leaned back in his chair and laughed

heartily.

"Where's the joke?" Hen was becoming impatient now. "You seem to have something funny up your sleeve."

"I have. Listen."

"By Jove!" Hen exclaimed, when Rackshaw had explained his purpose. "That's a good one, all right. You're a wonder, for sure. I'd never have thought of that. Ha, ha, the old cuss will get more'n he bargains for if I'm not mistaken. But you must be careful though. Remember the rats."

"There'll be no come-back this time, mind you," was the decided reply. "I hold the trump cards in this game, so don't worry."

Zeb read the scathing editorial in the paper and smiled. He showed it to Abner and asked him what he thought of it.

"It's jist what I wanted," was the enthusiastic reply. "Jist what ye wanted!" Zeb exclaimed. "How de ye make that out?"

"Don't ye know? Haven't ye enough sense left to see wot that article will do? Why, it'll bring a hull crowd here Saturday night quicker'n anythin' else."

"H'm, so that's the way ye look at it, eh? But don't be too sure, Abner."

"Never ye mind about that, Zeb. I wish I was as sartin of goin' to heaven as I am of that gang comin'."

"Got ye'r tub all ready?" Zeb bantered. "An' what about ye'r laffin'-gas? Ye mustn't fergit that."

"An' 'ye'r brains,' why don't ye say? Yes, every dang thing's in shape, even me old shot-gun."

"De ye expect to have to use that?"

"One kin never tell. This dodge of mine is somethin' out of the ordinary, an' the crowd might git a bit unruly. It's jist as well to be on the safe side."

"Seems to me, Abner, the safest side fer you to-morrow night will be the other side of sun-down. I wish to goodness ye hadn't started this thing."

"Keep ye'r shirt on, Zeb, an' don't worry. But, there, I must git home an' see how me laffin'-gas is comin' along."

Saturday evening was bright and warm. Not a breath of wind was astir, and the river was like one huge mirror. But the people who came to Ash Point from Glucom were not thinking of such things. They were more concerned about seeing Abner Andrews and his method of healing than all the beautiful things of Nature. Had they been with Moses when he was tending the sheep, they would have been much more interested in watching two rams fighting than in studying the burning bush and heeding its divine message.

Abner was in the workshop, and Zeb was out on the road as director of ceremonies, or "office-boy" as Abner termed him, when the vanguard arrived. There were waggons and autos which went slowly by and then returned later. The oc-

cupants craned their necks in their efforts to see something out of the ordinary. Several made enquiries of Zeb, and when the latter pointed to the workshop, they laughed and went on their way.

This looked at first as if all intended to do the same, and Zeb chuckled as he thought of Abner's disappointment, and the fig of tobacco he would have to hand over.

At length, however, an auto, containing four young men and women, sped up the road and stopped near Zeb.

"Where is the specialist?" the driver laughingly enquired.

"Eight over there," and Zeb pointed to the workshop. "Go in that door."

"Queer office, that," was the reply. "A new stunt, eh?"

There was much laughing and joking as they moved away, and Zeb watched them with keen interest.

Abner was waiting to receive his patients, and had with much difficulty twisted his long legs into the tub by the time the visitors were at the door. By his side on the work-bench he had a number of ginger-beer bottles, all tightly corked. His face was wreathed with his most engaging smile as he motioned the young people to sit down.

"Glad to see yez," he told them, when they were at length seated upon the chairs Zeb had brought from his house. "Now what kin I do fer yez?"

"We're very sick," the driver explained, "and seeing your ad. in the paper, we've come to you for help."

With considerable difficulty his companions kept from laughing outright, and this Abner noted. But he pretended to be deeply concerned, and studied the four most critically.

"Yez sartinly do look sick," he agreed, "an' it's lucky that yez have come this evenin'. Now, what seems to be the matter, an' where is the trouble?"

"Eight here," and the spokesman placed his hand upon his heart in a most solemn manner.

"H'm, heart trouble, eh? Well, that's serious. Are yez all affected the same way?"

"Yes, all of us. We can't work or do anything, the attacks are so bad."

The young women were forced to turn away their heads at these words, while one stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth to keep from laughing outright.

"My, my!" and Abner thoughtfully stroked his chin. "But look here, young gal, it'll be ye'r stummick that'll be troublin' ye instid of ye'r heart if ye swaller that handkerchief. I can't do nuthin' with that kind of trouble."

The girl's face grew scarlet as she hurriedly withdrew her handkerchief, while her companions laughed heartily.

"Laff all yez like," Abner encouraged. "That's part of me cure. It's jist what yez need."

"But is that all you have to say about our real trouble?" the spokesman demanded.

"Well, now, first of all I want the fees. Twenty-five cents fer each; that'll make a dollar. Thank yez. That's better," he continued, as he slipped the bill into his pocket, "I kin now prescribe fer yez. But, remember, yez must follow the directions I give yez, or else yez'll git a dang sight worse than yez are at present."

"Fire ahead," was the reply. "We're all willing to do as you say."

"That's good. I allus like obedient patients. Now, the first thing I want yez to do is to go an' git two licences. Ye'll have to pay five dollars apiece fer 'em. The Government's more expensive than I am."

The young women now became visibly embarrassed, and wished that they had not come.

"The next thing yez must do," Abner went on, "is to go an' see some parson. Ye'll have to pay him, too, remember. But as fer curin' heart trouble any parson kin do it quicker'n anything yez ever saw. I had it afore I married Tildy, an' a bad attack it was. But after old Parson Shaw had hitched us together with that double an' twisted knot of his, I've never had a touch of heart trouble since. It sartinly did work wonders with me."

The consternation upon the faces of the patients was most amusing to Abner. He liked the way the girls blushed, and the young men turned red to the roots of their hair. He knew that they were merely out for fun and were getting more than they had expected.

"Don't go yit," he ordered, as he saw the young women move toward the door. "I haven't given yez the full prescription."

"But suppose the parson doesn't cure our heart trouble, what then?" the second young man at length found courage to ask. "It might not work on every-one as it did on you."

"Don't ye worry about that, young man," Abner replied. "The symptoms may hang on fer a while, but as soon as ye git several extra mouths to feed, ye'll find that all trouble will pass away. It did in my case, I know, an' I guess it'll be so with you."

By this time the girls were at the door, blushing more furiously than ever. They were far from enjoying the interview, and longed to be outside. The young men were about to follow, when Abner hailed them.

"Say, ye've fergot somethin'. I've given yez the prescriptions, but I'd like fer yez to take somethin' with yez to use when yez set up house-keepin'." Here he reached up and lifted a bottle from off the work-bench. "Now this is the greatest stuff out," he explained. "Jist keep it handy in the pantry or on the kitchen shelf

where ye'll know where to find it in a jiffy. On wash days or when things go crooked jist open this an' take a little whiff, an' it'll make yez all good natured in no time. If the baby gits cranky or gits wind on its little stummick, all yez need do is to give it a smell of that bottle, an' ye'll be surprised to see how soon it'll begin to— But, good gracious! What's wrong with them gals? They've gone, blamed if they ain't!"

They had all gone except the young man who had last spoken. He was angry, and expressed his opinion in no mild language. The young women had been insulted, so he said, and he called upon Abner to apologize.

"Apologize, eh?" was the reply. "What is there to apologize about? Yez came here in order to make fun of me, an' because I handed out wot was coinin' to yez I'm expected to apologize! Not on ye'r life, young man, an' ye kin jist tell them things to the one who sent yez."

"How do you know that anyone sent us?" the young man evasively queried.

"H'm, I'm not altogether a fool. I've a little brains left yit. Come now, on y'er word of honor, didn't Lawyer Rackshaw put yez up to this job?"

Abner smiled as the young man made no reply. He was certain now that his surmise had been correct, and he was satisfied.

"That'll do. Ye may go. Ye needn't answer if ye don't want to. But remember the prescriptions, an' also yours truly, Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint."

The young man looked as if he would like to do more than express his feelings in words. But Abner seemed exceptionally big just then, as he lifted himself out of the tub and stood before him. He decided that retreat was the better part of valor, so in no enviable frame of mind he joined his companions who were waiting for him in the car. In a few seconds they were hurrying down the road, a defeated and angry quartet.

They had not gone far, however, when they met a truck filled with a number of reckless young men. They stopped, and in a few words aired their grievances. Shouts of laughter and cheers came from the new-comers.

"Well fix the old fellow," they shouted, as they hurried on. "Leave him to us."

Abner saw them coming, and hearing the noise they were making, knew what to expect. Peering through the little window facing the road, he watched them as they approached. Then in an instant a regular bombardment of balls of mud, rotten eggs, and stones were hurled at the building. One stone crashed through the window and struck Abner a glancing blow above the eye. With yells of delight the crowd passed and then all was still.

Abner's blood was now up. Seizing his shot-gun, he stood just within the door and waited. He saw Zeb coming toward him, and called to him to keep back.

"Let me handle the bunch," he shouted. "I'll fix 'em."

"Be careful," was the reply. "Don't shoot. Here they come agin."

As the car was almost opposite the workshop, and the youths were about to make another bombardment, Abner stepped quickly out of the building and ordered them to stop. As the driver hesitated for an instant, Abner threw his gun into position and threatened to shoot if he did not obey. This had the desired effect, and soon the car was motionless.

The occupants were speechless, and their faces betrayed their complete consternation at this sudden turn of affairs. They dropped the eggs, mud, and stones they had ready to hurl, and stared at the man with the gun.

"Why don't yez go ahead?" Abner asked. "Now's ye'r chance. Tired of ye'r fun, eh? Well, then, jist hop out an' run that Tin-Lizzie into the yard here. Git a hustle on," he ordered, as the youths hesitated.

Seeing that Abner meant business, the joy-riders scrambled out and stood in the road while the car was run into the yard.

"There, that's better," was Abner's comment, when this had been accomplished. "Now, yez kin hustle."

"But what about the car?" the driver asked, as he alighted. "It doesn't belong to us. We hired it."

"Yez did, eh? Well, then, it's safer here than with sich reckless kids. Scoot along now. I'll keep the car fer damages rendered to that buildin' an' to my dignity."

"Damages!" the driver exclaimed. "Why, we were only having a little fun."

"Is that so? Fun, was it? Well, ye'r fun'll cost ye jist five dollars apiece, an' not a cent less. I'm a specialist, ye see, on all kinds of diseases. You fellers are troubled with swelled heads an' want of brains, so five dollars out of y'er inside pockets will be the best cure that I kin recommend."

By this time the joy-riders were very angry, and their language was far from Scriptural. They vowed that they wouldn't pay a cent, and that they would have Abner arrested for threatening to shoot them.

"Go ahead," Abner announced. "But before yez git ye'r Tin-Lizzie ye'll fork out that money. I'll give yez jist five minutes to make up ye'r minds. Come here, Zeb," he called. "I might want ye."

The young men were now in a fix, and they discussed the matter in an excited manner.

"We haven't the money," they at length announced.

"All right, then, me hearties, I'll keep the car."

"Will you take two dollars apiece?" Abner was asked.

"It's five or nuthin'," was the reply. "Hustle up there, fer time's most up."

Finding that their captor was relentless, with many protests and threatening words the needed forty dollars were at length produced and handed forth.

"There, that's better," Abner chuckled, as he pocketed the money. "There's ye'r car, so take it an' git."

Abner and Zeb stood and watched the crestfallen joyriders as they scrambled on board.

"Don't fer git to send in ye'r bill to ye'r lawyer," Abner called out, as the visitors sped away. He then turned to his companion.

"Where's that plug of T. & B, Zeb?" he asked. "I'm dyin' fer a smoke. Me nerves are pretty shaky.

"I don't believe ye have sich things as nerves," Zeb replied, as he pulled a fig of tobacco from his pocket. "How in the name of all creation kin ye do sich things??"

"Brains, gall, an' luck, that's how, with a little laffin'-gas thrown in. Ho, ho! But, say, there's Tildy an the gals!"

CHAPTER XXVII

A SERMON WITH A PUNCH

"We are going to church in town to-night," Mrs. Andrews announced the next day when dinner was over. She and Abner were alone, for Jess and Belle were out for a ramble with the boys.

"That's good," Abner replied, as he filled his pipe. "I'll look after the kids."

"But you're goin', too, Abner."

"Me!"

"Yes, you. If anyone needs to go to church it is you after what you did yesterday. The burden of your many sins must be pretty heavy by this time. I am thoroughly ashamed of you. What in the world possessed you to do such a thing?"

"Brains, gall, an' luck, as I've informed ye before."

"I don't see what they had to do with it. You have the gall all right, and luck helped you out. But you might have used your brains to a far better advantage. You were never like any man I ever knew, and you're getting worse all the time."

"Tildy, I'm not like other men." Abner blew out a match and looked thoughtfully at his wife. "I couldn't be like other men if I tried. The Lord didn't build me that way. I guess He got so tired making so many men alike, who all do an' say the right things, that when He came to me He gave a different twist to my

make-up. He was experimentin' on Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint."

"H'm, if He did, then I don't believe He's ever tried it again."

"Mebbe not, Tildy. But He might do worse. Now look here, I'm different from most men, I acknowledge. But in what way? I'll tell ye, if ye don't know. I'm not afraid to speak me mind when necessary, an' fight like the devil against a bunch of grafters, an' git more'n even with 'em if I kin. I enjoy a bit of fun now an' then."

"Queer fun you like, it seems to me," his wife retorted.

"Mebbe so. But fun with no punch in it is no fun at all to my way of thinkin'."

"To hurt the feelings of others; that's the kind of fun you like."

"Don't be so sure of that. I have never hurt a fly in fun, remember, an' hope I never shall. But when it comes to Rackshaw, Ikey Dimock, an' a bunch sich as came from Glucom yesterday, then I'm willin' to see 'em squirm under me fun. Them's my religious convictions, though mebbe they don't altogether jibe with wot ye hear at church."

"Indeed they don't," was the emphatic reply. "And that's the reason why you must go to church to-night. There's a new man at St. Felix, and I understand he is a wonder. He is not afraid to speak his mind, and he always talks about present-day affairs. The church is crowded to the doors every Sunday night, so I have heard."

"Say, Tildy, I wonder if they have made up their minds in that church yit who is to say the 'Amen'? They were in a great way about it the last time I was there, nigh three years ago."

"What do you mean, Abner?"

"Oh, don't ye remember? When the parson got through with his prayin' the choir kicked up a terrible fuss as to who was to say 'Amen.' One young woman, with a big feather in her hat, lifted up her voice an' said it all right to my way of thinkin'. But no sir-ree, that didn't suit a feller behind her, so he growled out another 'Amen.' An' jimmy-crickets! no sooner was he done than two more said it, each in a different way. Then they started it all together, an' sich a time as they had over it! It was 'Amen! A-men! A-A-men!!! A-A-A-Amen!!!, an' last of all a big 'Amen' that nearly took the roof off the buildin'. I don't know to this day who won out, but I imagine there was some high talkin' an' hair-pullin' when church was over."

"Why, don't you know that they were singing?" Mrs. Andrews asked.

"They were not fighting over it. I thought it was most beautiful, and so did others."

"So I've heard ye say, Tildy. But, my, it sounded funny to me, an' it didn't seem altogether becomin' to scramble sich as they did fer that word in a sacred

buildin'. I ain't been back there since."

"And nowhere else," was the retort. "You're worse than a heathen, Abner Andrews, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. You must go to-night, though, and then perhaps you'll get the habit."

Abner sighed and blew forth several great clouds of smoke.

"My, that's great terbaccer I got from Zeb yesterday," he remarked. "Don't know what I'd a done if I hadn't won that bet."

"I wish you'd stop betting, Abner. Mr. Parker, that new minister at St. Felix, preached a great sermon on the subject recently, so Julia Tomkins told me."

"He did, eh? What did he say?"

"I don't know all, but he laid it down pretty plain that it was a fearful sin, and that money raised that way was dishonest. It was 'tainted,' so he said, and he would have nothing to do with it."

"Is that what he said? Well, that's interestin'. I wonder if he knows that quite a bunch of his flock, Ikey Dimock, Hen Whittles, an' sich like, put tainted money into the plate every Sunday? I bet ye'r life he doesn't turn a cent down. I'd like to see that new parson. Guess I'll go to church. He might hand out something spicy to-night, an' I'd like to see how the 'holy ones' of his flock take it. But who'll look after the kids, Tildy, if I go?"

"I've arranged with Mrs. Zeb to look after them," was the reply, "She and Zeb like the boys, and it will be a change for them to have children around the house for an afternoon."

"We'll have to start early, Tildy. Jerry ain't as spry as he used to be. He's not been to town fer a day or two, an' he's pinin' fer the yell of an en-gine."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Abner, that Mr. Royden is to take us in his car. We are to go to the hotel for supper. Belle has invited us, and she is determined that we shall all go."

"She has, eh? Well, that's nice of her. I was afraid when ye mentioned supper at the hotel that I'd have to foot the bill. Belle's some gal, she sure is. Yes, I guess I'll go. But, my, I do hate to dress up in all me finery. This style bizness gits on me nerves."

Abner enjoyed himself that evening at the hotel, and when dinner was over he and Royden went into the smoking-room.

"This is sartinly comfort," he remarked as he settled himself back in one of the big chairs. "There's some class to us, eh? Might think we had some soft government job, or were politicians, fer that matter."

"You are happier as you are, Mr. Andrews," Royden replied, as he touched a match to his cigar. "Politicians seem to me to be the men we should least envy."

"Ye don't tell! Why, I thought they had a cinch."

"You're mistaken, then, so far as I have seen. A politician is very uncertain

of his position; he has all sorts and conditions of people to meet and keep in good humor, and has to make promises which he knows he can never fulfil. He is subjected to all kinds of criticisms, no matter what he does, for his opponents are watching him with jealous and envious eyes. Politics is a great game when rightly played, but sad to say it has degenerated into mud-throwing and a wild scramble for money and position."

"That's what it is to-day, young man," Abner replied. "There's nuthin' noble about it in this province, let me tell ye that. The politicians I know are like so many hawks flyin' here an' there, seekin' to grab all they kin find. Look at them heelers who are tryin' to git my gravel hill. But I gave 'em somethin' they won't fergit in a hurry."

"You must be always on your guard, Mr. Andrews," Royden warned. "If they can't get you one way they will try other means. They have the pull, you see. Election day is near, and they can't afford to lose much time."

"Let 'em pull all they want to. I guess I kin pull, too, when it comes to that. Say, that's a fine smoke," and Abner looked at the cigar he had just taken from between his teeth. "It's as good as Rackshaw's. De ye smoke this kind often?"

"Very rarely. These are special ones for to-night. We must celebrate a little on an event like this."

The men thus talked and smoked until it was time to go to church. Abner was inclined to remain where he was, but Mrs. Andrews would not listen to him.

"You've come to town to go to church, and going you are," she declared. "I've got you this far, and you shall not go back now."

"But I feel sleepy, Tildy, an' would like to have a nap," Abner pleaded.

"Well, sleep in church, then, providing you don't snore."

"Jist the thing," and Abner rose with alacrity. "I've often said the best part of goin' to church is the fine sleep one kin git durin' the sermon."

When they reached the church they were surprised to find the building almost full, and only with difficulty were they able to obtain a place where they all could sit together. Before the service began every seat was taken, and people were standing in the aisles.

"Guess there must be somethin' hot on to-night, Tildy," Abner whispered. "I never saw sich a crowd at church before. Ye'd think this was a movin'-picture house."

Abner paid little attention to the first part of the service. It was all somewhat unintelligible to him, and he found the prayers and hymns very long. He was interested, however, in observing the people in the church, especially the familiar forms of Isaac Dimock and Henry Whittles, who were sitting well up in front. But this diversion soon lost its charm, and he longed to be back at Ash Point talking with Zeb Burns. He wondered how long it would be before the

sermon, and if that did not interest him he could go to sleep. Tildy would keep him from snoring, he had no doubt about that.

Abner watched the clergyman as he went into the pulpit, and he wondered what there was about him which attracted such large congregations. He was somewhat enlightened when the text, "I have played the fool," was announced. He was wide awake now and did not feel one bit sleepy. He wanted to know what the speaker would make out of those words. He had not long to wait, for soon the minister was telling about King Saul, destined for such noble things and yet acting in such a selfish and ridiculous way that he was forced to utter the words, "I have played the fool."

The speaker applied the lesson to present-day affairs, and asked if there were not many people who were playing the fool like that king of old. They were endowed with various talents, and yet they were either making wrong use of them, or wasting them in senseless ways.

"I come now," he at length said, "to the main question up to which my words have been leading. We call ourselves Christian men and women, and we are so self-satisfied that we cannot see how little we are really doing, nor how far we are from Him whom we call Master. There are things in our very community which should make us blush for shame. One of these is the criminal neglect of the destitute children. What has been done for them? An effort was made a short time ago to erect a Home for needy orphans. But what has become of the plans? Nothing. We have played the fool, and in the meantime the destitute ones have been suffering."

The speaker paused for a few seconds, and looked around. Everyone was almost breathless, waiting to hear his next word, Abner, too, was keenly alert. He was glad that he had come, for he was greatly interested. Here was a man, so he thought, who knew what he was talking about, and was not afraid to express his views.

"During the last few days," the speaker continued, "this town has been much stirred over the peculiar antics of a man living about five miles from here. He has been doing peculiar things of late, and it is the general opinion that the man is a fool or crazy. I have heard people laughing and talking about him, and wondering what idiotic thing he would do next."

Abner's eyes now were fairly starting out of his head, and he leaned forward so as not to miss the slightest word. "What in the world is the man drivin' at?" he asked himself.

"But while most of you have been joking about that farmer at Ash Point, and considering him a fool," the speaker went on, "I have been studying the other side of the question. I have learned that he bears a good name along the river, and although he is impetuous at times, and is not afraid to speak his mind like

a man should, yet he is highly respected and minds his own business when he is let alone. He was arrested a short time ago, and placed in jail. And why? For thrashing a man who wrote a libellous article in *The Live Wire* about his wife. I would have done the same myself, as would any man, unless he were an arrant coward. You have been calling that man a miscreant and a fool, but let me tell you what he has done. He offered a thousand dollars toward the building of a Home for orphan children. But he has not paid it, some might say. No, certainly not, and for a very good reason. He had sense enough not to put that money into a dump-heap, where it was proposed to build the Home, when there are excellent sites right in this town. His one idea was to do something for helpless children, and not to help a man sell a piece of ground which was absolutely useless for anything else except a dump.”

Abner almost emitted a chuckle, as he turned and looked at Henry Whittles, whose face was very red, and who was writhing under the minister’s scathing words. Others were looking at him, too, for all knew that he was the man referred to by the clergyman.

”But what has that man you call a fool done?” the speaker asked. ”If you do not know, let me tell you. When he found that the people of this town were playing the fool, and doing nothing toward the erection of an Orphan Home, he took into his own house five destitute children, all boys. He and his family are caring for them, and are doing all in their power for those little ones. The children are decently clothed, well fed and happy. And all that from people who have very little of this world’s goods, depending entirely upon a poor gravel farm for their living. Let me now ask who have played the fool: that farmer and his family, or the people of this town?”

It was quite evident that his message was stirring the entire congregation, and there was considerable whispering here and there. This was noted by the minister, and he knew that his words were having their desired effect. But he had more to say, and continued:

”You were all much interested this last week in that farmer’s peculiar advertisement in the paper, which brought forth such a scathing editorial. A number of people, I believe, went to Ash Point yesterday to have fun at Mr. Andrews’ expense. But they came back wiser than they went, having learned a very useful and salutary lesson, which, I trust, they will not soon forget. Now, was that advertisement the work of a fool or of a madman? I believe not. If I understand rightly, Mr. Andrews took that method of testing the people of this town. They would take but little interest in the welfare of helpless children, and would not even go to see how they were getting along. But they would travel miles to see a man perform in a wash-tub and say funny things. That is my conclusion, and I feel that I am right. Mr. Andrews is far from being a fool, even though he follows

the method of Diogenes, that famous actor and wit of olden days.”

Again he paused and looked quizzically around.

”I see you are getting restless,” he resumed, ”and I know that some of you have made up your minds never to come to this church again, and if possible to starve me out. You may go ahead and say and do what you like. Starve me if you wish, but I appeal to you in my Master’s name not to let His little ones starve or go homeless. Take the burden off the shoulders of that worthy farmer at Ash Point. Provide a place for those children and others like them in this very town. A big building is not necessary just now. A house large enough can surely be secured for them at a reasonable expense, and I have every reason to believe that the Government will give some assistance, and if so the matter should be easily arranged. But there should be no delay. I hope the people of this town will get together at once. We have been playing the fool in the past; let us now see that we do it no longer.”

When the sermon was ended, Abner slipped quietly out of the church. He did not wish to meet the people when the service was over. He wanted to be alone that he might think about all that he had heard. He made his way back to the hotel, and sat down in the smoking-room. It was there that Jess found him some time later, smoking and gazing thoughtfully out of the window. There was no one else in the room.

”You didn’t go to sleep after all, did you, daddy?” she accosted, while her face beamed with joy.

Abner slowly took the pipe from his mouth, and looked at his daughter. There was a peculiar expression upon his face and a mistiness in his eyes.

”No, Jess, I didn’t go to sleep,” he drawled. ”But I guess them kids at home’ll be sleepy if we don’t hustle back. An’ say, I fergot to tell Zeb to feed Jerry, blamed if I didn’t.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HOLD-UP

There was great discussion over the sermon preached at St. Felix Sunday night. Several people were very angry at the outspoken words, among whom was Henry Whittles. He made haste to see Lawyer Rackshaw, and poured out to him his troubles, and how he had been grossly insulted.

"It serves you right," was the unsympathetic reply he received. "If you will insist upon going to church you must not complain at what is handed out to you. I've cut loose from all such superstitious and sentimental gush, and I advise you to do the same."

"I intend to do so while that idiot is there," Whittles declared. "And to think that Abner Andrews was at church, too."

"He was!" and the lawyer looked his astonishment.

"Yes; and his family as well. Miss Rivers, the Attorney General's daughter, was with them, too, so I believe. Abner will have something to chuckle over now, all right."

"Let him chuckle, Hen. He won't do it long. Just wait till that trial comes off."

"When is that?"

"Pretty soon now. He'll chuckle on the other side of his face."

"But Parker upheld Abner in what he did. He said that any man who was not a coward would have done the same if Joe Preston had written such an article about his wife. In fact, he confessed that he would have done so himself if he had been in Abner's place."

"He said that, did he?"

"He certainly did, and if I'm not much mistaken his words will have a strong influence. It will be necessary for you to be on your guard."

Rackshaw made no reply, but sat and gazed thoughtfully out of the office window. In truth he sat there for some time after Whittles had left, and he seemed in no hurry to go on with his business.

The Live Wire made a great deal of the sermon, and scored Mr. Parker for going beyond bounds. It was the duty of a clergyman to preach the Gospel, so the paper piously announced, and to leave civic matters alone. It also hinted that a clergyman was very short-sighted who antagonized members of his flock, who were liberal supporters of his church. Mr. Parker had done this, and accordingly must expect to put up with the results. The real vital matter of a suitable Home for orphans was not mentioned, and no credit was given the Andrews for what they had done. This oversight was noted by many readers and severely criticized. In fact, the editorial did a great deal for Abner, far more than the writer imagined. It made thinking people realize how partisan and narrow it really was, and that the welfare of the community was not its main object.

This was brought out, too, in the accounts it gave of the coming election. The men it advocated were known to be unscrupulous grafters, who had carried on wholesale robbery for several years in connection with various government deals. A long description was given of a great political picnic, which was to be held that afternoon in the Parish of Granton on the opposite side of the river from

Ash Point. The members of the county would be present, and there would also be several noted speakers. All were urged to attend, and to hear the "truth, and nothing but the truth."

Zeb Burns read these articles to Abner as they sat after dinner under the shade of a big maple tree near the workshop.

"Seems to me that paper's tryin' to knife that parson as well as me," Abner remarked, as he blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

"An' I guess it'll meet with about as much success," Zeb replied. "I wish I'd heard that sermon last night, Abner. It must have been a corker."

"It sure was, an' I never thought once of goin' to sleep. But ye should have seen Hen Whittles' face an' ears. Why, they was as red as the reddest beet I ever saw. Say, there goes the *Bluebird*, and he motioned to a steamer out upon the river. Wonder why she's up so early to-day."

"Fer the picnic, of course," Zeb explained. "She's black with people. They've come fer the peanuts, kill-at-first-taste cigars, lemonade, an' hot air. There's to be some great speeches over there this afternoon. How'd ye like to run across in ye'r yacht, Abner? Ye haven't had her out fer a long time."

"That's true. I've been too busy ashore. But I wouldn't go to that picnic fer a good deal. I don't want me morals spiled. All the gas-bags in the province couldn't change me, 'specially them fellers who are to speak this afternoon."

"They'll be after ye to vote fer 'em, though."

"Not on ye'r life. They think I'm luney an' too hard to talk to. Ho, ho, wasn't it funny the way they looked when they learned that we wasn't deaf after all?"

"Mebbe they'll hear about that sermon, an' they might change their minds."

"Sure, sure, ye kin never tell what people'll do. It's made a great difference at my house, anyway."

"It has? In what way?"

"Oh, I can't jist explain. But Tildy isn't nigh so cranky, an' Jess looks very happy. It may be that young feller who comes to see her, though I don't believe that's the full reason. They was all mighty sot up the way that parson stood up fer me last night."

"But how did he know so much about ye, Abner?"

"Blamed if I know. That's been puzzlin' me a great deal. Where he got all that information, an' had my mind turned inside out is more 'n I kin understand. Why, I never spoke to that feller in my life an' he seems to know me like a book."

Scarcely had Abner finished speaking when an auto swung up the road at a fast clip. It was about to pass when the chauffeur suddenly pulled up in front of the big maple. There were three men in the car besides the driver, and they were the very ones who had come to buy the gravel hill. They seemed to be in a

great hurry.

"Good-day, gentlemen," the spokesman, Thomas Dillman, accosted. "Can you tell us what time the steamer from the city arrives here?"

"She's already arrived," Abner replied.

"Arrived! But she's not due here for half an hour yet."

"Can't help that. She's arrived an' gone. That's her smoke 'way up there," and Abner pointed up the river.

Exclamations of consternation burst from the three men at this information, followed by strong denunciatory language.

"What in the devil is the meaning of all this? Dillman demanded, looking fiercely at Abner, as if he were the cause of the trouble.

"Search me," was the reply. "Ye'll have to go an' find out fer ye'rselfes. I'm not runnin' the steamer nor the picnic."

"But we must be at that picnic," the man insisted. "It is absolutely necessary for us to be there. We are to speak, and the people will be expecting us. Confound that steamer! I shall certainly make it hot for the company. It has a government subsidy, too, and to think that we should be treated this way!

"That ain't nuthin' new," Abner explained. "We're more'n used to sich capers. That boat never knows her own mind. She comes an' goes any old time, an' doesn't mind one dang bit how people are put out. I'm mighty glad yez have got a good dose to-day."

"You are!" Dillman indignantly retorted. "You're a nice one. But this is not getting us over the river. How in blazes are we to get there? That's the important thing just now. Isn't there a boat we can hire?"

"S'pose you run 'em over, Abner," Zeb suggested.

"Have you a boat?" Dillman eagerly asked.

"Sure, three of 'em. Now, there's the canoe, the flat-bottomed boat, an' —"

"Oh, never mind telling us about them," Dillman impatiently interrupted. "Get us there; that's all we want. We'll make it worth your while."

Abner knocked the ashes from his pipe, and rose slowly to his feet.

"Jist wait a minute till I git me oars," he told them. "I guess I kin take yez."

There was a peculiar light shining in his eyes as he hurried into the house and returned a few minutes later. No one noticed that he had donned his coat, and that it was buttoned about him in a strange manner. Room was made for him in the car, and, telling the chauffeur where to go, in a few minutes they were at the shore on the upper side of the point. A short distance away the *Scud* was tugging at her anchor, for a stiff breeze was blowing in from the west. The tender was pulled up on the shore.

"Hop in," Abner ordered, "an' set still, all of yez."

It took them but a few minutes to board the *Scud* and get under way. A

rude craft was this yacht which Abner had made with his own hands. She was small and her cock-pit was barely large enough to hold the three men. Here they crowded together and looked ruefully around. They were not accustomed to the water, and when the wind had filled her sail and the yacht began to careen to one side, they almost wished that they had never come. For a while the *Scud* glided steadily along, being somewhat sheltered by the point. But when once beyond this the full force of the breeze caught the boat, and the spray began to dash aboard. The three passengers clutched hard at the sides of the cock-pit, and looked anxiously around.

"Is this blooming thing safe?" one of the men gasped, when a larger spray than usual flung itself over them.

"Sometimes she is an' sometimes she isn't," was the laconic reply. "Kin yez swim?"

The three men shook their heads.

"That's too bad."

"Why, what do you mean?" Dillman asked. "Do you think she'll upset?"

"Can't say," Abner drawled. "Ye never jist know what queer kinks the *Scud*'ll take. Only last month she played one of her funny pranks, an' upsot right near here with a wind no harder'n this."

"She did!" and the men's faces became suddenly white. "What did you do?" one of them anxiously enquired.

"Oh, jist climbed on her bottom until she drifted ashore. That ain't nuthin' fer me. I'm used to the water, an' could swim all day if I had to."

The man made no reply, but clutched the sides harder than ever as the waves increased.

"Yes," Abner continued, "this is a bad place when the tide's runnin' down an' the wind's blowin' up. Two men were drowned right out here a few years ago. They was in a bigger sailin' boat than this when a sudden squall struck her, an' she flopped right over. They couldn't swim, ye see. That's a bad piece of water ahead where ye see them white-caps. I have me doubts about gittin' through."

"Don't go through," the men begged. "For God's sake go back! We've had enough of this."

A gleam of triumph now shone in Abner's eyes. He gave the tiller a vigorous twist and brought the *Scud* full head to the wind.

"So yez don't want to go through, eh?" he queried.

"No, no. Go back."

"Well, I don't have to go through them white-caps, so what's ye'r terms if I go round 'em?"

"Terms! What do you mean?" Dillman gasped.

"Guess you fellers should know, all right. I want a settlement fer me gravel

hill. That's what I mean, an' I intend to have it now."

The men understood most clearly the purport of these words, and their hearts became hot with anger. They realized the helplessness of their position, and how they were at the mercy of this man.

"You're a villain!" Dillman roared. "Do you think it's fair to get us into a tight corner and then hold us up like this?"

"De ye like it?" Abner asked with a chuckle. "How does it feel? Ye know now, don't ye? Ye'r tryin' to do the same with me, an' ye'r jist waitin' the first chance to steal me place. But, by jiminy, ye'll not do it as soon as ye think, not by a jugful, skiddy-me-shins if ye will. I've got yez here, an' here I'll keep yez till ye come to me terms."

"Good gracious, man!" Dillman exploded, "we can't do anything here. Wait until we get ashore and we'll talk this matter over with you."

"Not by a long chalk. Jist write out that ye'll give me fifteen thousand dollars fer that place, an' I'll land yez at the picnic grounds in no time. But yez better hurry up, fer the *Scud's* drifting fast toward them white-caps. Guess, though, I kin hold her nose up stiddy ferninst the wind a few minutes longer."

Dillman looked at the rough water, and then at the imperious commander.

"If this boat overturns," he at length remarked, "you'll go down, too, for you can't surely swim in a place like this."

Abner laughed, and threw open his coat.

"Look," he cried. "I've got a life-belt on. I never come here on a windy day without it."

The three men were now completely stumped and they looked imploringly around. But no help was in sight. A short distance away the water was raging where the wind and the tide were contending with each other.

"Hurry up," Abner ordered, "the *Scud'll* soon take them white-caps full astern, an' then good-bye."

Dillman's hand clawed at a note-book and fountain-pen in his vest pocket. He hesitated, however, and looked at his companions.

"Go ahead, Tom," they advised, "there's nothing else to do."

But Tom delayed, leaned over and whispered something to his comrades in distress. Abner could not hear what was said, though he noticed that they nodded their heads in approval.

"Say, we'll offer you five thousand," Dillman at once announced.

"Fifteen thousand or nuthin'," was the peremptory order. "You government fellers think nuthin' of throwin' that much around, an' a darned sight more, when it suits yez. I might as well have what's due me. Hurry up. Ye've got no time to waste."

With trembling hand Dillman put his pen to the paper, and rapidly wrote.

"How will that do?" he presently asked, handing the paper to Abner.

"Read it," was the order. "Me eyes are not good, an' it's all I kin do to handle the boat."

"On behalf of the local government," Dillman read, "'we agree to give Abner Andrews fifteen thousand dollars for his place at Ash Point.'"

"That's good," was Abner's comment. "Now, sign it, the three of yez."

This was soon done, and in a few seconds the paper was placed in Abner's hand. The three men anxiously watched to see whether their captor would look at it, and they breathed more freely when he thrust it at once into his pocket without even a glance in its direction.

Abner at once threw over the tiller and the *Scud* swung around. Her sail filled, and she darted forward as if glad of her release. The wind had now increased, but the yacht, running dead before it, bore herself bravely. On and on they sped until at length the big picnic tent near the shore could be seen showing white amid its setting of verdant grass and waving trees. Ere long they could discern people moving about, and as they drew near the shore they could see that it was lined with people who had hurried down to watch the superior movements of the little craft, reeling onward, at times half smothered by the leaping waves.

With his passengers landed, Abner at once headed for home. He wondered why the politicians were so affable and had bidden him such a cheery good-bye. They did not seem one bit angry, and he saw them laughing and talking with one another as he sped away.

"Let 'em laff," he mused, "I've got the paper," and he thrust his hand into his pocket to be sure it was safe. "They can't fool Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, not by a jugful, skiddy-me-shins if they kin."

CHAPTER XXIX

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE

It was a great story Abner had to tell that night at supper. The boys, who always ate early, were playing out in the yard, and the sound of their laughter drifted in through the open window. Abner told nothing about what he had demanded of the three men, but merely of the fright he had given them.

"Ye should've seen their faces," he chuckled. "They thought fer sure that I was goin' to swamp 'em in them white-caps. My, how they begged me to go

back!"

"It was a shameful thing to do," Mrs. Andrews declared. "They will never forgive you, and they are government members at that."

But Belle did not consider it in that light. She was highly amused, and her eyes danced with merriment.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Andrews," she said. "It will take more than that before those men get all that's coming to them. I know who they are from Mr. Andrews' description, for daddy has often told me about them. They have been a great worry to him for years, and I can imagine how he will laugh when I tell him how they were frightened. Daddy doesn't approve of such schemes, for I have often heard him say so."

A new feeling pervaded the house since Sunday night. Mrs. Andrews and Jess were more at ease after they had heard that notable sermon. They even felt proud of Abner, and were sorry that they had wrongfully misjudged him. They were doing their best now to make up for their past mistake, and this Abner noted.

But notwithstanding the changed atmosphere in the home Abner was visibly worried. The trial was but two days off, and he looked forward to it with considerable anxiety. He confided his trouble to Zeb as the latter was working at his bench the next afternoon.

"I'm beginnin' to feel shaky," he confessed. "I don't know nuthin' about court proceedin's, an' that's where that cur of a Rackshaw'll have the dead cinch on me."

"Look to ye'r special ancestors, Abner," Zeb bantered, as he paused in the act of measuring a board. "Ye've got so many that ye ought to be able to find a clever lawyer among 'em."

"H'm," Abner grunted, "I'm afraid they won't help me much at the trial. They're too spiritual, ye see, an' they wouldn't make any impression upon him. It needs somethin' like rats, fer instance, to have any effect upon that brute."

"It's a pity ye didn't git a smart lawyer, Abner. I'd like to see Rackshaw butt up against someone more'n his equal. That feller needs to be brought down a peg, an' made to squirm a bit. But I'm afraid there's not much chance of you doin' that."

"I know it, Zeb," Abner agreed, "an' that's what's worryin' me. It's not of meself I'm thinking but of them dependin' on me."

This feeling of depression increased as Abner and Zeb drove into town the next day. The latter was going to stand by his neighbor, and do what he could to help him by his presence, if in no other way. The morning was hot, and Jerry jogged leisurely along. The men were in no hurry, as court did not open until ten o'clock.

For some time neither mentioned the big event of the day. Each hesitated to express his views, for there was no brightness to the cloud hanging dark and lowering.

"It takes good nerves to stand a trial," Abner at length declared.

"Y'bet it does," was the emphatic reply. "An' a big purse, too, let me tell ye that. It's easy to git into trouble, but mighty hard to git out."

"Like them rats in that wire-trap, eh? But it should make a difference when a man has justice on his side."

"Seems to me, Abner, that justice depends upon the way ye look at it," Zeb replied. "Joe Preston thinks that his cause is just, an' so d'you. But it doesn't matter what you or Joe thinks. It's how the judge an' the jury will look at it. An' that depends upon—"

Zeb paused and looked thoughtfully at the horse.

"Upon what?" Abner anxiously enquired.

"Upon the way the case is presented. Now, you know a hull lot, Abner, an' kin spout like a force-pump when ye're settin' with me in the workshop. But when ye git up there in court ye'll find ye'r tongue's tied in a double-an'-twisted knot."

"Sure, sure," Abner agreed. "I've had the feelin' before, 'specially when I proposed to Tildy. I lost me tongue altogether that time. It was awful."

"Well, I'm afraid it'll be awfuller when ye'r called upon to defend ye'rself. Now, if ye had a smart lawyer to do it fer ye it 'ud make a great difference. I s'pose ye'r family felt pretty bad when ye left this mornin'?"

"Tildy an' Jess did, but Belle was as chipper as a sparrow. She didn't feel one bit put out, an' gave me strict instructions to give it to Rackshaw good an' hard."

"She doesn't understand, mebbe, what ye'r up against Abner. Ye see, she's never had to hustle fer herself or fight her way in the world. But ye'r wife an' Jess know somethin' about sich things."

"But Belle is no fool nor giddy headed butterfly let me tell ye that," Abner defended. "She's got a mighty long head on young shoulders, an' if she didn't feel bad about the trial I believe it is because she has sich confidence in me. She somehow thinks that I'm all right. She's surely some gal, that, an' we'll miss her when she goes home."

The court room was already well filled when Abner and Zeb arrived. The trial was of special interest, for people, knowing something of the defendant's peculiarities, expected lively and interesting scenes. Isaac Dimock and Henry Whittles were there. They could not afford to lose the opportunity of seeing the defeat of their enemy, especially when Rackshaw got after him. They were sitting together, and they smiled and whispered as the two countrymen entered the

room. The lawyer was seated at a small table with his client by his side. He was in excellent spirits, smiling and talking with Preston as Abner and Zeb appeared. He was joyfully anticipating his onset upon the man who had so grossly insulted him. He would get more than even for that rat-affair. He looked with satisfaction upon the witnesses lined upon the witness bench, and knew that they would give "proper" evidence. They all had been carefully prepared, as he had seen to that. Everything had been thoroughly arranged, and he could not detect a hitch anywhere. He was anxious now for the judge and jury to arrive that the case might begin. Abner sat alone on one end of the witness seat. He felt more dejected than ever as he glanced at the witnesses who were to testify against him. He observed the eager, triumphant expression upon Rackshaw's face, and it angered him. He knew that he had not the slightest chance against the forces opposed to him. It made him surly and indifferent, and he was in a most dangerous mood by the time the court opened.

Rackshaw began the case, and in eloquent language described every detail of the assault. He referred to the serious bodily damage which had been inflicted upon his client, who had been in the hospital ever since, and was still very weak from the rough handling he had received. He spoke for over half an hour, and closed by stating what a menace to the community the defendant was. He was more than a fool, so he declared; he was a vicious character, and unless stringent measures were taken against him there was no telling what he might do in the future.

Rackshaw's words made a deep impression upon the jury and on all who were in the room, excepting Zeb Burns and a few others. It was quite evident what the verdict would be, for there was no one present able to stand up against the lawyer.

Abner had followed Rackshaw's speech with the keenest attention. As each point was emphasized, he tried to turn over in his mind what he could say in self-defense. But he became hopelessly confused, and when the lawyer was through he knew that it was impossible and futile to try to make any reply. He sat there upon the bench with the eyes of all fixed upon him. The people were now expecting considerable fun, for all were aware of Abner's sharp tongue and marked eccentricities. To see him and listen to his words had drawn many to the court room that morning. But Abner was in no mood for anything of a humorous nature. The situation was too critical, and he felt that the less said the better it would be for him. He would let the rest do the talking and make the next move.

For a few minutes an intense silence prevailed, all wondering what would happen next. Rackshaw was smiling in a most tantalizing manner, and Preston, too, was amused. The members of the jury also smiled as they watched the pathetic figure of the farmer sitting before them. It would be an easy task for them

to arrive at a true decision, so they believed.

As the judge was about to speak, a slight commotion took place near the door, and two men pushed their way through the crowd, and walked swiftly up the aisle. The instant Rackshaw saw them, the triumphant expression fled from his face, and his eyes bulged with apprehension. He grasped in a twinkling the meaning of their presence.

"Good Lord!" he gasped, turning to Preston, "it's Rivers, the Attorney General, and he's got Stevens with him!"

Abner saw the strangers, but they meant nothing to him. He liked the looks of the man who was bowing to the judge and apologizing for his tardiness, owing to the lateness of the train. He was tall and straight, with a noble head crowned with a wealth of hair, thickly streaked with gray. He had a strong face, a manner dignified and imperious, and eyes which never wavered, but pierced, so his opponents were forced to acknowledge, like lightning.

All this Abner noted, and he knew that here was a man of considerable importance, not only by his appearance but by the deference paid him by the judge. His presence was explained in a few minutes, and not only Abner but the entire assembly were completely astonished.

"I have made a great effort to be here this morning," the speaker announced. "It was only lately that I heard of this trial. Had it come to my attention sooner I should have taken immediate steps to have the case settled before it came into court. Even now it may not be too late. I wish to state that I am here this morning on behalf of the defendant, Mr. Abner Andrews, of Ash Point. I am acquainted with all the details of the case, and shall do my best for the defendant. In this I shall be ably assisted by Mr. Stevens, who has accompanied me. You are all familiar, I am sure, with his reputation as a lawyer."

Abner only partly understood the meaning of these words. He was dazed and confused. He knew that the man had come to his assistance, but who he was and why he should defend him was beyond his comprehension.

But Rackshaw knew, and the knowledge filled him with a burning anger, mingled with an intense fear. It was the Attorney General's daughter who was at the bottom of all this, he was certain. She was visiting the Andrews, and for her sake her father had taken this most unusual and unheard-of step. He knew Rivers of old, and realized how utterly useless it would be to oppose such a man. He feared, too, the able lawyer who had accompanied him. The two would form opponents in any court of which any lawyer might have just reason to dread.

Added to this was the knowledge of the influence Rivers wielded in the Government of the province. As Attorney General his power was great, and both Rackshaw and Preston knew that it would be to their advantage to come to some terms of agreement as speedily as possible. They were both in line for political

favours, and it would be necessary for them to move as cautiously as possible.

"There is something else I wish to say," Rivers continued, and he turned his particular attention to Preston. "If the plaintiff is determined to press this case, and is unwilling to make a settlement out of court, I shall at once, on behalf of the defendant, bring in a charge of libel. All here, I believe, are well acquainted with the article which recently appeared in *The Live Wire*, of which the plaintiff is the editor. It made a most serious and uncalled-for statement concerning the defendant's wife, and which was the direct cause of all this trouble. I should regret to take this step, but shall be forced to do so unless matters are otherwise arranged."

Rackshaw and Preston were now in a difficult and most unenviable position. They had entirely overlooked this phase of the case, and it brought consternation into their hearts. They could easily perceive that the people in the room were greatly excited and were watching the next move with the keenest interest. To go forward meant no end of difficulties with such stern opponents to face. Retreat, as Rackshaw knew, was the better part of valor, and his only problem now was how to retreat as gracefully as possible. He had to act, and act quickly, for all were watching him with impatient curiosity. His triumphant, tantalizing manner had entirely vanished, and as he rose to his feet his body trembled, and his face became unusually pale. His statements were broken and he stammered as he proceeded, to the great amusement of the spectators.

"My client here is willing to discuss this matter out of court," he announced. "His cause is just, and he has every reason to press the case. But as the Attorney General has taken the trouble to interest himself in this little affair, it would be most unbecoming on our part not to comply with his request before going further. If a peaceful settlement can be agreed upon it will perhaps be better for all concerned."

Abner was never able to give a clear account of what happened immediately after the court adjourned. He was conscious of a great commotion in the room, and of the Attorney General grasping him by the hand and asking about Belle. He also heard him say that he was coming to Ash Point the next day, and would be there in time for tea. Just what he said in reply Abner was not altogether sure. He stammered something about Belle being well, and that they would all be glad to see him. But his brain was so confused that he could not think clearly until he was out of the building and walking along the street with Zeb by his side. The fresh air revived him, his spirits returned, and he emitted a hearty chuckle.

"My, I'm glad ye'r comin' to," Zeb laconically remarked. "Thought I'd have to call fer the doctor."

"Oh, I'm all right now, Zeb," was the reply. "But, say, the air of that room was bad. It was worse than the jail, blamed if it wasn't. I never imagined that

Rackshaw could foul up a place in sich a short time. Guess all of his evil spirits must have been hoverin' around him pretty lively, from all appearances."

"An' they must have been hoverin' over you, too, Abner, by the way ye looked an' acted."

"Sure, sure. Why, I never felt so mixed up since the day old Parson Shaw hitched up me an' Tildy. I was completely gone then, an' don't know to this day what I said."

"Bad spirits, eh?" and Zeb's eyes twinkled.

"Bad? Ugh! Ask Tildy, Zeb. She knows where I got the stuff."

CHAPTER XXX

THE HEART-TOUCH

There was great excitement around the Andrews' home the next day. Belle was delighted at what her father had done, and she was looking eagerly forward to his arrival for tea. But Mrs. Andrews was not so well pleased. She worried over the idea of entertaining the Attorney General, and wondered what she should have for supper.

"You needn't go to any extra trouble about daddy," Belle laughingly told her. "He might know what he's eating and he might not. He's so absent-minded at times that I really believe he forgets that he has eaten at all."

"But he's used to big hotels and things served up in great style," Mrs. Andrews replied. "What will he think of our humble house and our country ways?"

"He will like everything, I am sure, especially your cooking, Mrs. Andrews. I have heard him say over and over again how tired he was of hotels. He misses his own home so much. And, besides, daddy was brought up on a farm, and he will feel perfectly at home. So you must not worry about him one bit."

This was of some comfort to Mrs. Andrews; nevertheless, she set Belle to work polishing the silver, and Jess to dusting the parlor and dining-room, while she herself spent the morning in the kitchen, making pies, doughnuts, and biscuits.

It was a most beautiful morning, and the hum of bees in the vines, and the twitter and songs of birds were all in harmony with the joy which reigned in the house. A great load had been lifted from all hearts over the outcome of the trial.

"I knew that daddy would not fail to be there," Belle announced, when Ab-

ner had told the whole story. "But it was a close call, for if we had not gone to church on Sunday I would have known little or nothing of what was taking place."

"An' so you was back of it all, eh?" Abner queried. "I was wonderin' how in thunder ye'r dad knew so much about it."

"Oh, yes," Belle smiled, "I wrote to daddy at once. I knew that he would come if I asked him. You see, he is very much interested in us all, especially the children we have taken under our care."

"Well, he arrived jist in the nick of time," Abner replied. "I felt like Tom Duncan said he did when he was nearly drowned out there off the Pint a few years ago. He had given up all hope, an' was goin' down fer the third time when he was rescued an' brought to. So that's the way I felt when ye'r dad reached out an' saved me. My, he's some man, all right, an' I guess his daughter's somethin' like him."

This was the nearest Abner ever came to paying a compliment, and he was pleased at the happy flush which mounted to Belle's cheeks. He left the house and strolled over to his neighbor's. He could well afford to take the day off and enjoy himself to his heart's content.

Zeb was in the workshop busy at the bench. He, too, was very happy at the outcome of the trial, and was most anxious to see his neighbor.

"My, it's good to be out of that hot kitchen!" Abner exclaimed, as he sat down upon a box, and pulled out his pipe. "Why, it's like an oven over there."

"Too hot fer you in more ways than one, eh?" Zeb quizzed.

"No, not a bit of it. Everybody's happy as clams at high-water. All in great spirits. But, ye see, it's the cookin' that's goin' on fer supper which makes it ninety in the shade. We'll have straw an' skimmed water fer dinner, an' Tildy'll give me a talk on eteket, that is how I'm to behave this evenin', fer dessert. But jist wait till supper time, an' then ye'll see the things piled on that table, an' how the silver'll shine. There's nuthin' like a visit from the Attorney General to make women hustle. But, then, I don't mind. He did a great thing fer me yesterday, an' I shan't soon fergit it."

"I guess ye shouldn't, Abner. If it hadn't been for him you'd be in a mighty tight hole by this time, let me tell ye that."

"But de ye think it's ended, Zeb?"

"Sure. I'd stake me bottom dollar on that. Them fellers'll be mighty glad to come to any terms now, since they know what they're up against. When they thought that they had only you to buck they were cocky and dead sartin of their game. But it's different now. They'll squirm, an' git out of it the best they kin, unless I'm much mistaken."

When Abner was not with Zeb in the workshop that day, Zeb was with

Abner out under the big tree at the back of the barn. They could not work, and they were like two boys, who had so many things to talk about, and could not afford to be parted for any length of time. They were in such excellent spirits that they even had one of their old-time discussions over the Ten Lost Tribes and Ancient Ancestors. Abner's tongue was no longer tied, and if he had talked in court as he did there under the tree Rackshaw would have been confounded in a short time. Had a stranger happened along, he would have imagined that these two neighbors were angry and ready to fight. But they understood each other, and were perfectly happy.

Abner had little to say at supper that evening. He was content to listen to the others, especially the Attorney General, who was in great spirits. It was a pleasant little gathering, and the table looked its best, with fresh bright flowers in the centre. Mrs. Andrews was at first a little flustered and excited. But this soon passed when she found how agreeable the guest made himself. He praised her cooking, and appeared perfectly at home.

They did not hurry through supper, for the visitor had much to say of considerable importance. He told them that Preston and Rackshaw had agreed to take no further action, and to let the case drop.

"And they were very glad to do so," he added, with a quiet smile. "In a way I was sorry, for those men really deserve a severe lesson. However, perhaps it is all for the best, and they have been taught a useful lesson."

"Ye didn't come to me assistance any too soon," Abner replied. "I was jist goin' down fer the last time when ye pulled me out. My, it was good to git a breath of fresh air!"

They all laughed heartily, and Rivers turned to his daughter.

"If it hadn't been for Belle I would not have been there," he explained. "I had a thousand and one things to do when I received her long letter. But she has had me under her thumb for so long that I dropped everything and meekly obeyed her summons. It takes a woman to do things, doesn't it, Mr. Andrews?"

"Should say so," was the emphatic agreement. "I found that out the very first thing after Tildy an' me was married."

"I guess if the women didn't do things round this house there wouldn't be much done," Mrs. Andrews retorted.

"Judging from this supper, they certainly know their work," Rivers complimented. "I never tasted such doughnuts in my life. I hope Belle has taken many lessons from you, Mrs. Andrews."

"I'm afraid not, daddy," was the laughing confession. "I've been too giddy to settle down to housework."

"Runnin' away from sich fellers as Billy Lansing, eh?" Abner bantered. "Poor chap, I wonder if he's livin' yit, fer we haven't seen hair nor hide of him

since that island affair.”

”Belle hasn’t been idle, let me tell you that,” Jess defended. ”I never knew her to write so many letters as she has lately.”

”And not all to me, eh?” and Rivers looked quizzically at his daughter. ”Oh, you needn’t blush so furiously,” he added. ”Mr. Parker is a married man and an old friend of ours, so it’s all right.”

”What! Was ye writin’ letters to that minister at St. Felix?” Abner asked in surprise. ”Ye didn’t tell us ye knew him.”

”Yes, ever since I was a child,” Belle explained. ”He was a regular visitor at our house then, and why shouldn’t I write to him?”

”Sure, sure,” Abner agreed. ”It was all right, Belle, so long as ye’r letters was somewhat along the lines ye wrote to ye’r dad.”

”What makes you think they were, Mr. Andrews?”

”The spirits of me ancestors tell me that you had a hand in that sermon Mr. Parker gave us last Sunday night. Ain’t I right?”

”You are,” Rivers replied, as Belle hesitated. ”And I am very glad that Belle gave the information which brought forth that sermon. It roused the best thinking people in Glucom to action, and that was partly the reason why I remained in town last night.”

”What did they do?” Abner eagerly asked.

”They got down to business, and decided to purchase a large, commodious house as a temporary orphanage. The necessary money was raised in a short time, and I am confident that the Government will make a liberal grant toward the running expenses.”

”Ye don’t tell!” Abner was now leaning over the table, unheeding his wife’s chiding looks. ”An’ they won’t need Hen Whittles’ dump?”

”No, not at all,” Rivers laughed. ”He can keep his dump as long as he likes for himself, Rackshaw and the others who were scrambling after a rake-off in the matter. The ones who are connected with the orphanage scheme now are men and women upon whom we can depend, and who mean business.”

”An’ will they want our kids?” Abner asked.

”Not for a few weeks yet. You may have them a while longer until matters are arranged. All I was talking to last night and to-day were very high in their praise of what you have done for those children you now have under your care.”

”Oh, that wasn’t more’n we should’ve done. But we kin do a deal more’n that, can’t we, Tildy?”

The latter, however, made no reply. She was listening to the voices of the children which came through the open window. She was so thankful that a place was to be established for them and for others, and yet she was thinking how she would miss the little ones with their noise and chatter. She hardly heard

the conversation, and was only aroused a few minutes later by Thane Royden arriving with his car. He had come for Jess, and though the latter wished to stay and help with the dishes, her mother and Belle would not hear of it.

"You might not have a chance for another drive in a long time," Belle informed her. "Mr. Royden is going away soon, so he says."

"Git as much Social Service work in as ye kin, Jess," her father suggested. "Ye may not have sich another nice feller to practice on fer a long time."

When they had gone Abner and the Attorney General went out of doors.

"Suppose we walk over to that gravel hill of yours," Rivers suggested, as he offered Abner a cigar out of his well-filled case. "I have heard much about it, and about the efforts which have been made to buy it from you. I congratulate you upon not selling."

"I caught them three government fellers, all right," Abner chuckled. "Ye should've seen their faces, when I held 'em up out there on the river."

"I heard all about it," and Rivers smiled. "And they offered you a certain sum, did they?"

"Oh, yes," and Abner thrust his hand into his pocket. "I have it all down in black an' white, an' their names signed to it, too. Look at that."

Rivers took the paper, read the scrawl, and then when he came to the names his eyes grew wide with astonishment. He glanced curiously at Abner.

"Did you read these names?" he asked.

"Read 'em? No. Anythin' wrong with 'em?"

"They are not the names of the men I was led to believe signed this paper."

"They're not! Whose are they, then?"

"We have no 'T. Smith,' 'J. Brown,' nor 'C. Green' in the Government. Those are the names down here."

"Ye haven't!" Abner stopped short, and his body became tense.

"No; I know nothing about them."

"An' ye think they fooled me?"

"It looks very much like it."

"The devils!" and Abner's hands clenched together. "Jist wait till I git hold of them fellers. I'll fix 'em. An' so that's worth nuthin'?" he asked, pointing to the paper.

"Nothing. And I question whether it would have been of any value had those men signed their own. names. They are bluffers, and have no authority to bind the Government. Oh, they are schemers, all right. I know them of old, and have had my own trouble with them."

"So the Government kin take my gravel an' give me any old price fer it, eh?"

"I suppose so. But the Government is not going to take it."

"Not goin' to take it?"

"No. We have finally decided that the haul is too long, and we have been able to secure plenty along the line which will do for many years to come."

Abner's face expressed his keen disappointment. He sighed, and looked over at the hill. His fond hopes were dashed to the ground in an instant. So his property was once more worthless. Rivers watched him closely and a twinkle shone in his eyes.

"You feel disappointed, I suppose?"

"I sartinly do. I was hopin' to make somethin' out of that gravel that 'ud put me on me feet. I'm gittin' along in years now, an' ain't jist as brisk as I uster be."

"And you're willing to sell, I suppose?"

"Sell! Sure, I'll sell when the first decent chance comes along. I wouldn't have asked so much from them grafters who came here if I hadn't known they wanted to get the place from me fer almost nuthin', an' then hand it over to the Government fer a big sum. That's why I held out."

"I am glad you did, Mr. Andrews, especially as I have now a new proposition to make. A very reliable company, The Morton & Griffin, have for some time been seeking a place to erect a big concrete plant. I have been working for them, and they have requested me to find suitable material for their purposes. Many beds of gravel have been tested, but not one has the same excellent qualities as yours. It is here in abundance, and they are greatly pleased with the samples which have been submitted to them. This was largely due to Royden, the young surveyor, whom you threatened to kill one day, so I believe. He has taken a great interest in the matter, and knowing him to be most trustworthy, I was able to vouch for his report. The company have engaged him, and he is to receive a good salary for his services. This will be news to you, I feel sure. I have not been free to make this known before until the Government had finally decided not to use the gravel for ballast."

Abner's face was a study as the Attorney General paused. The expression was one of surprise, hope and incredulity. He could hardly believe that he had heard aright, and he looked out over the field in an abstracted manner. So the gravel hill was to be of value, after all, he mused. The Government would not take it from him, and a big company wanted it. But how much would he get for the land? Rivers noted his silence, and divined the meaning.

"You are wondering how much the company are willing to pay, are you not?" he smilingly asked.

"Me mind was travellin' along that line," Abner replied. "I s'pose they'll want me to let 'em have it fer almost nuthin'?"

"Oh, no. It is a very powerful company, and quite willing to pay liberally.

In fact, the matter is left almost entirely to me. I feel certain that the company will accept whatever recommendation I make. The question of a few thousand dollars will make no difference so long as the material is suitable and abundant for the company's purpose. Just how much you will be offered I cannot state now, but I can assure you that it will be more than you ever dreamed of getting from the Government. It will make you independent for life. You have been a good friend to my daughter, and for her sake I have taken a keen interest in your welfare."

Abner was too much overcome for words. He was visibly affected, and wished to say something to express his thanks. But words would not come. He felt as puzzled as he did when in court. Rivers noticed his emotion, and understood.

Abner had so many things to think about that he was willing to listen as the Attorney General outlined the possibilities of the work which would shortly begin, and the advantage to the community. It all seemed like a marvelous dream, too good to be true.

It was a happy company which gathered upon the verandah that evening. The sun had gone down, and not a breath of wind stirred the air. The river stretched out before them like a huge mirror, only ruffled when an occasional motor-boat chugged by. It was a scene of peace and perfect contentment. Zeb was there, too, and Abner was satisfied to let him and Rivers talk about the coming election. It had little interest for him now. His great good fortune occupied his mind, and he was already making plans for the future.

And there Jess found them an hour later. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were beaming, telling plainly of something important. They all noted her excitement and surmised its meaning. Jess was not a girl who could keep such good news from those so near and dear to her. Yet she hesitated, and glanced at the Attorney General.

"Don't mind me, my dear," he encouraged. "I was young once myself, and I am most thankful that I am here to-night to be the first to offer my heartiest congratulations."

Rising to his feet, he grasped her hand, and then, stooping, kissed her.

"You will forgive me, I feel sure," he apologized. "But you seem like my own daughter, and the privilege is mine."

Then followed an attack such as Jess had never before experienced. The women hugged and kissed her; they laughed and cried in succession, and bombarded her with all kinds of questions. "Where was Royden?" and, "Why didn't he come to share in the congratulations?" "Was he afraid?" and so on. To all these Jess laughed and blushed more than ever.

"He will come when he is sure he will not be killed," she explained, looking

at her father with a smile. "If he was in danger of losing his life when about to steal your place, he cannot tell what might happen to him when you learn that he is going to steal your daughter."

They all laughed merrily, and Abner chuckled.

"Ye'r Social Service dope worked all right, Jess," he drawled. "Ye didn't need to go away from Ash Pint to practice, did ye? Ye've had that young feller to elevate, an' ye've elevated him well, as fer as I kin see. But, then, his under-pinnin' was good, an' that made all the difference, hey, Zeb? Not much like ye'r 'Society' pig, ho, ho, skiddy-me-shins if it is."

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TOUCH OF ABNER ***

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