
THE COPPERHEAD

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BY HAROLD FREDERIC.

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BY

HAROLD FREDERIC

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CHAPTER I

ABNER BEECH

It was on the night of my thirteenth birthday, I know, that the old farm-house was burned over our heads. By that reckoning I must have been six or seven when I went to live with Farmer Beech, because at the time he testified I had been with him half my life.

Abner Beech had often been supervisor for his town, and could have gone to the Assembly, it was said, had he chosen. He was a stalwart, thick-shouldered, big man, with shaggy dark eyebrows shading stern hazel eyes, and with a long, straight nose, and a broad, firmly shut mouth. His expansive upper lip was blue from many years of shaving; all the rest was bushing beard, mounting high upon the cheeks and rolling

downward in iron-gray billows over his breast. That shaven upper lip, which still may be found among the farmers of the old blood in our district was, I dare say, a survival from the time of the Puritan protest against the mustaches of the Cavaliers. If Abner Beech, in the latter days, had been told that this shaving on Wednesday and Saturday nights was a New England rite, I feel sure he would never have touched razor again.

He was a well-to-do man in the earlier time — a tremendous worker, a "good provider," a citizen of weight and substance in the community. In all large matters the neighborhood looked to him to take the lead. He was the first farmer roundabout to set a mowing-machine to work in his meadows, and to put up lightning-rods on his buildings. At one period he was, too, the chief pillar in the church, but that was before the episode of the lightning-rods. Our little Union meeting-house was supplied in those days by an irregular procession of itinerant preachers, who came when the spirit moved and spoke with that entire frankness which is induced by knowledge that the night is to be spent

somewhere else. One of these strolling ministers regarded all attempts to protect property from lightning as an insolent defiance of the Divine Will, and said so very pointedly in the pulpit, and the congregation sat still and listened and grinned. Farmer Beech never forgave them.

There came in good time other causes for ill-feeling. It is beyond the power of my memory to pick out and arrange in proper sequence the events which, in the final result, separated Abner Beech from his fellows. My own recollections go with distinctness back to the reception of the news that Virginia had hanged John Brown; in a vaguer way they cover the two or three preceding years. Very likely Farmer Beech had begun to fall out of touch with his neighbors even before that.

The circumstances of my adoption into his household — an orphan without relations or other friends — were not of the sort to serve this narrative. I was taken in to be raised as a farm-hand, and was no more expected to be grateful than as if I had been a young steer purchased to toil in the yoke. No suggestion was ever made that I had incurred any debt

of obligation to the Beeches. In a little community where everyone worked as a matter of course till there was no more work to do, and all shared alike the simple food, the tired, heavy sleep, and the infrequent spells of recreation, no one talked or thought of benefits conferred or received. My rights in the house and about the place were neither less nor more than those of Jeff Beech, the farmer's only son.

In the course of time I came, indeed, to be a more sympathetic unit in the household, so to speak, than poor Jeff himself. But that was only because he had been drawn off after strange gods.

At all times — even when nothing else good was said of him — Abner Beech was spoken of by the people of the district as a "great hand for reading." His pre-eminence in this matter remained unquestioned to the end. No other farmer for miles owned half the number of books which he had on the shelves above his writing-desk. Still less was there anyone roundabout who could for a moment stand up with him in a discussion involving book-learning in general. This at first secured for him the respect of the whole country-side, and

men were proud to be agreed with by such a scholar. But when affairs changed, this, oddly enough, became a formidable popular grievance against Abner Beech. They said then that his opinions were worthless because he got them from printed books, instead of from his heart.

What these opinions were may in some measure be guessed from the titles of the farmer's books. Perhaps there were some thirty of them behind the glass doors of the old mahogany bookcase. With one or two agricultural or veterinary exceptions, they related exclusively to American history and politics. There were, I recall, the first two volumes of Bancroft, and Lossing's "Lives of the Signers," and "Field-Books" of the two wars with England; Thomas H. Benton's "Thirty Years' View;" the four green-black volumes of Hammond's "Political History of the State of New York;" campaign lives of Lewis Cass and Franklin Pierce, and larger biographies of Jefferson and Jackson, and, most imposing of all, a whole long row of big calf-bound volumes of the *Congressional Globe*, which carried the minutiæ of politics at Washington back into the forties.

These books constituted the entire literary side of my boyish education. I have only the faintest and haziest recollections of what happened when I went during the winter months to the school-house at the Four Corners. But I can recall the very form of the type in the farmer's books. Everyone of those quaint, austere, and beardless faces, framed in high collars and stocks and waving hair — the Marcys, Calhouns, DeWitt Clintons, and Silas Wrights of the daguerreotype and Sartain's primitive graver — gives back to me now the lineaments of an old-time friend.

Whenever I could with decency escape from playing checkers with Jeff, and had no harness to grease or other indoor jobs, I spent the winter evenings in poring over some of these books — generally with Abner Beech at the opposite side of the table immersed in another. On some rare occasion one of the hired men would take down a volume and look through it — the farmer watching him covertly the while to see that he did not wet his big thumbs to turn over the leaves — but for the most part we two had the books to ourselves. The others would sit about till

bedtime, amusing themselves as best they could, the women-folk knitting or mending, the men cracking butternuts, or dallying with cider and apples and fried-cakes, as they talked over the work and gossip of the district and tempted the scorching impulses of the stovehearth with their stockinged feet.

This tacit separation of the farmer and myself from the rest of the household in the course of time begat confidences between us. He grew, from brief and casual beginnings, into a habit of speaking to me about the things we read. As it became apparent, year by year, that young Jeff was never going to read anything at all, Abner Beech more and more distinguished me with conversational favor. It cannot be said that the favoritism showed itself in other directions. I had to work as hard as ever, and got no more playtime than before. The master's eye was everywhere as keen, alert, and unsparing as if I had not known even my alphabet. But when there were breathing spells, we talked together — or rather he talked and I listened — as if we were folk quite apart from the rest.

Two fixed ideas thus arose in my boyish

mind, and dominated all my little notions of the world. One was that Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall were among the most infamous characters in history. The other was that every true American ought to hold himself in daily readiness to fight with England. I gave a great deal of thought to both these matters. I had early convictions, too, I remember, with regard to Daniel Webster, who had been very bad, and then all at once became a very good man. For some obscure reason I always connected him in my imagination with Zaccheus up a tree, and clung to the queer association of images long after I learned that the Marshfield statesman had been physically a large man.

Gradually the old blood-feud with the Britisher became obscured by fresher antagonisms, and there sprouted up a crop of new sons of Belial who deserved to be hated more even than had Hamilton and Marshall. With me the two stages of indignation glided into one another so impreceptibly that I can now hardly distinguish between them. What I do recall is that the farmer came in time to neglect the hereditary enemy, England, and to seem to have quite forgotten our own historic

foes to liberty, so enraged was he over the modern Abolitionists. He told me about them as we paced up the seed rows together in the spring, as we drove homeward on the hay-load in the cool of the summer evening, as we shovelled out a path for the women to the pumps in the farm-yard through December snows. It took me a long time to even approximately grasp the wickedness of these new men, who desired to establish negro sovereignty in the Republic, and to compel each white girl to marry a black man.

The fact that I had never seen any negro "close to," and had indeed only caught passing glimpses of one or more of the colored race on the streets of our nearest big town, added, no doubt, to the mystified alarm with which I contemplated these monstrous proposals. When finally an old darky on his travels did stroll our way, and I beheld him, incredibly ragged, dirty, and light-hearted, shuffling through "Jump Jim Crow" down at the Four Corners, for the ribald delectation of the village loafers, the revelation fairly made me shudder. I marvelled that the others could laugh, with this unspeakable fate hanging over their silly heads.

At first the Abolitionists were to me a remote and intangible class, who lived and wrought their evil deeds in distant places — chiefly New England way. I rarely heard mention of any names of persons among them. They seemed to be an impersonal mass, like a herd of buffaloes or a swarm of hornets. The first individuality in their ranks which attracted my attention, I remember, was that of Theodore Parker. The farmer one day brought home with him from town a pamphlet composed of anti-slavery sermons or addresses by this person. In the evening he read it, or as far into it as his temper would permit, beating the table with his huge fist from time to time, and snorting with wrathful amazement. At last he sprang to his feet, marched over to the wood-stove, kicked the door open with his boot, and thrust the offending print into the blaze. It is vivid in my memory still — the way the red flame-light flared over his big burly front, and sparkled on his beard, and made his face to shine like that of Moses.

But soon I learned that there were Abolitionists everywhere — Abolitionists right here in our own little farmland township of north-

ern New York! The impression which this discovery made upon me was not unlike that produced on Robinson Crusoe by the immortal footprint. I could think of nothing else. Great events, which really covered a space of years, came and went as in a bunch together, while I was still pondering upon this. John Brown was hanged, Lincoln was elected, Sumter was fired on, the first regiment was raised and despatched from our rustic end of Dearborn County — and all the time it seems now as if my mind was concentrated upon the amazing fact that some of our neighbors were Abolitionists.

There was a certain dreamlike tricksiness of transformation in it all. At first there was only one Abolitionist, old "Jee" Hagadorn. Then, somehow, there came to be a number of them — and then, all at once, lo! everybody was an Abolitionist — that is to say, everybody but Abner Beech. The more general and enthusiastic the conversion of the others became, the more resolutely and doggedly he dug his heels into the ground, and braced his broad shoulders, and pulled in the opposite direction. The skies darkened, the wind rose, the storm of angry popular

feeling burst swooping over the country-side, but Beech only stiffened his back and never budged an inch.

At some early stage of this great change, we ceased going to church at all. The pulpit of our rustic meeting-house had become a platform from which the farmer found himself denounced with hopeless regularity on every recurring Sabbath, and that, too, without any chance whatever of talking back. This in itself was hardly to be borne. But when others, mere laymen of the church, took up the theme, and began in class-meetings and the Sunday-school to talk about Antichrist and the Beast with Ten Horns and Seven Heads, in obvious connection with Southern sympathizers, it became frankly insufferable. The farmer did not give in without a fierce resistance. He collected all the texts he could find in the Bible, such as "Servants obey your masters," "Cursed be Canaan," and the like, and hurled them vehemently, with strong, deep voice, and sternly glowing eyes, full at their heads. But the others had many more texts — we learned afterwards that old "Jee" Hagadorn enjoyed the unfair advantage of a Cruden's Concordance — and their tongues

were as forty to one, so we left off going to church altogether.

Not long after this, I should think, came the miserable affair of the cheese-factory.

The idea of doing all the dairy work of a neighborhood under a common roof, which originated not many miles from us, was now nearly ten years old. In those days it was regarded as having in it possibilities of vastly greater things than mere cheese-making. Its success among us had stirred up in men's minds big sanguine notions of co-operation as the answer to all American farm problems — as the gateway through which we were to march into the rural millennium. These high hopes one recalls now with a smile and a sigh. Farmers' wives continued to break down and die under the strain, or to be drafted off to the lunatic asylums; the farmers kept on hanging themselves in their barns, or flying westward before the locust-like cloud of mortgages; the boys and girls turned their steps townward in an ever-increasing host. The millennium never came at all.

But at that time — in the late fifties and early sixties — the cheese-factory was the

centre of an impressive constellation of dreams and roseate promises. Its managers were the very elect of the district; their disfavor was more to be dreaded than any condemnation of a town-meeting; their chief officers were even more important personages than the supervisor and assessor.

Abner Beech had literally been the founder of our cheese-factory. I fancy he gave the very land on which it was built, and where you will see it still, under the willows by the upper-creek bridge. He sent to it in those days the milk of the biggest herd owned by any farmer for miles around, reaching at seasons nearly one hundred cows. His voice, too, outweighed all others in its co-operative councils.

But when our church-going community had reached the conclusion that a man couldn't be a Christian and hold such views on the slave question as Beech held, it was only a very short step to the conviction that such a man would water his milk. In some parts of the world the theft of a horse is the most heinous of conceivable crimes; other sections exalt to this pinnacle of sacredness in property a sheep or a pheasant or a woman.

Among our dairymen the thing of special sanctity was milk. A man in our neighborhood might almost better be accused of forgery or bigamy outright, than to fall under the dreadful suspicion of putting water into his cans.

Whether it was mere stupid prejudice or malignant invention I know not — who started the story was never to be learned — but of a sudden everybody seemed to have heard that Abner Beech's milk had been refused at the cheese-factory. This was not true, any more than it was true that there could possibly have been warrant for such a proceeding. But what did happen was that the cheese-maker took elaborate pains each morning to test our cans with such primitive appliances as preceded the lactometer, and sniffed suspiciously as he entered our figures in a separate book, and behaved generally so that our hired man knocked him head over heels into one of his whey vats. Then the managers complained to the farmer. He went down to meet them, boiling over with rage. There was an evil spirit in the air, and bitter words were exchanged. The outcome was that Abner Beech renounced the

co-operative curds of his earlier manhood, so to speak, sold part of his cattle at a heavy loss, and began making butter at home with the milk of the remainder.

Then we became pariahs in good earnest.

CHAPTER II

JEFF'S MUTINY

THE farmer came in from the fields somewhat earlier than usual on this August afternoon. He walked, I remember, with a heavy step and bowed head, and, when he had come into the shade on the porch and taken off his hat, looked about him with a wearied air. The great heat, with its motionless atmosphere and sultry closeness, had well-nigh wilted everybody. But one could see that Abner was suffering more than the rest, and from something beyond the enervation of dog-days.

He sank weightily into the arm-chair by the desk, and stretched out his legs with a querulous note in his accustomed grunt of relief. On the moment Mrs. Beech came in from the kitchen, with the big china wash-bowl filled with cold water, and the towel and clean socks over her arm, and knelt before her husband. She proceeded to pull off his big, dust-baked boots and the woollen foot-

gear, put his feet into the bowl, bathe and dry them, and draw on the fresh covering, all without a word.

The ceremony was one I had watched many hundreds of times. Mrs. Beech was a tall, dark, silent woman, whom I could well believe to have been handsome in her youth. She belonged to one of the old Mohawk-Dutch families, and when some of her sisters came to visit at the farm I noted that they too were all dusky as squaws, with jet-black shiny curls and eyes like the midnight hawk. I used always to be afraid of them on this account, but I dare say they were in reality most kindly women. Mrs. Beech herself represented to my boyish eyes the ideal of a saturnine and masterful queen. She performed great quantities of work with no apparent effort—as if she had merely willed it to be done. Her household was governed with a cold impassive exactitude; there were never any hitches, or even high words. The hired-girls, of course, called her "M'rye," as the rest of us mostly did, but they rarely carried familiarity further, and as a rule respected her dislike for much talk. During all the years I spent under her roof I was never

clear in my mind as to whether she liked me or not. Her own son, even, passed his boyhood in much the same state of dubiety.

But to her husband, Abner Beech, she was always most affectionately docile and humble. Her snapping black eyes followed him about and rested on him with an almost canine fidelity of liking. She spoke to him habitually in a voice quite different from that which others heard addressed to them. This, indeed, was measurably true of us all. By instinct the whole household deferred in tone and manner to our big, bearded chief, as if he were an Arab sheik ruling over us in a tent on the desert. The word "patriarch" still seems best to describe him, and his attitude toward us and the world in general, as I recall him sitting there in the half-darkened living-room, with his wife bending over his feet in true Oriental submission.

"Do you know where Jeff is?" the farmer suddenly asked, without turning his head to where I sat braiding a whiplash, but indicating by the volume of voice that his query was put to me.

"He went off about two o'clock," I replied,

"with his fish-pole. They say they are biting like everything down in the creek."

"Well, you keep to work and they won't bite you," said Abner Beech. This was a very old joke with him, and usually the opportunity of using it once more tended to lighten his mood. Now, though mere force of habit led him to repeat the pleasantry, he had no pleasure in it. He sat with his head bent, and his huge hairy hands spread listlessly on the chair-arms.

Mrs. Beech finished her task, and rose, lifting the bowl from the floor. She paused, and looked wistfully into her husband's face.

"You ain't a bit well, Abner!" she said.

"Well as I'm likely ever to be again," he made answer, gloomily.

"Has any more of 'em been sayin' or doin' anything?" the wife asked, with diffident hesitation.

The farmer spoke with more animation. "D'ye suppose I care a picayune what *they* say or do?" he demanded. "Not I! But when a man's own kith and kin turn agin him, into the bargain —" he left the sentence unfinished, and shook his head to indicate the impossibility of such a situation.

"Has Jeff — then — " Mrs. Beech began to ask.

"Yes — Jeff!" thundered the farmer, striking his fist on the arm of the chair. "Yes — by the Eternal! — Jeff!"

When Abner Beech swore by the Eternal we knew that things were pretty bad. His wife put the bowl down on a chair, and seated herself in another. "What's Jeff been doin'?" she asked.

"Why, where d'ye suppose he was last night, 'n' the night before that? Where d'ye suppose he is this minute? They ain't no mistake about it, Lee Watkins saw 'em with his own eyes, and ta'nted me with it. He's down by the red bridge — that's where he is — hangin' round that Hagadorn gal!"

Mrs. Beech looked properly aghast at the intelligence. Even to me it was apparent that the unhappy Jeff might better have been employed in committing any other crime under the sun. It was only to be expected that his mother would be horrified.

"I never could abide that Lee Watkins," was what she said.

The farmer did not comment on the relevancy of this. "Yes," he went on, "the

daughter of mine enemy, the child of that whining, backbiting old scoundrel who's been eating his way into me like a deer-tick for years — the whelp that I owe every mean and miserable thing that's ever happened to me — yes, of all living human creatures, by the Eternal! it's *his* daughter that that blamed fool of a Jeff must take a shine to, and hang around after!"

"He'll come of age the fourteenth of next month," remarked the mother, tentatively.

"Yes — and march up and vote the Woollyhead ticket. I suppose that's what'll come next!" said the farmer, bitterly. "It only needed that!"

"And it was you who got her the job of teachin' the school, too," put in Mrs. Beech.

"That's nothing to do with it," Abner continued. "I ain't blamin' her — that is, on her own account. She's a good enough gal so far's I know. But everything and everybody under that tumble-down Hagadorn roof ought to be pizen to any son of mine! *That's* what I say! And I tell you this, mother" — the farmer rose, and spread his broad chest, towering over the seated woman as he spoke

— "I tell you this; if he ain't got pride enough to keep him away from that house — away from that gal — then he can keep away from *this* house — away from me!"

The wife looked up at him mutely, then bowed her head in tacit consent.

"He brings it on himself!" Abner cried, with clenched fists, beginning to pace up and down the room. "Who's the one man I've reason to curse with my dying breath? Who began the infernal Abolition cackle here? Who drove me out of the church? Who started that outrageous lie about the milk at the factory, and chased me out of that, too? Who's been a layin' for years behind every stump and every bush, waitin' for the chance to stab me in the back, an' ruin my business, an' set my neighbors agin me, an' land me an' mine in the poorhouse or the lockup? You know as well as I do — 'Jee' Hagadorn! If I'd wrung his scrawny little neck for him the first time I ever laid eyes on him, it 'd 'a' been money in my pocket and years added onto my life. And then my son — *my* son! must go taggin' around — oh-h!"

He ended with an inarticulate growl of impatience and wrath.

"Mebbe, if you spoke to the boy —" Mrs. Beech began.

"Yes, I'll speak to him!" the farmer burst forth, with grim emphasis. "I'll speak to him so't he'll hear!" He turned abruptly to me. "Here, boy," he said, "you go down the creek-road an' look for Jeff. If he ain't loafin' round the school-house he'll be in the neighborhood of Hagadorn's. You tell him I say for him to get back here as quick as he can. You needn't tell him what it's about. Pick up your feet, now!"

As luck would have it, I had scarcely got out to the road before I heard the loose-spoked wheels of the local butcher's wagon rattling behind me down the hill. Looking round, I saw through the accompanying puffs of dust that young "Ni" Hagadorn was driving, and that he was alone. I stopped and waited for him to come up, questioning my mind whether it would be fair to beg a lift from him, when the purpose of my journey was so hostile to his family. Even after he had halted, and I had climbed up to the seat beside him, this consciousness of treachery disturbed me.

But no one thought long of being serious

with "Ni." He was along in the teens somewhere, not large for his years but extremely wiry and muscular, and the funniest boy any of us ever knew of. How the son of such a sad-faced, gloomy, old licensed exhorter as "Jee" Hagadorn could be such a running spring of jokes and odd sayings and general deviltry as "Ni," passed all our understandings. His very face made you laugh, with its wilderness of freckles, its snub nose, and the comical curl to its mouth. He must have been a profitable investment to the butcher who hired him to drive about the country. The farmers' wives all came out to laugh and chat with him, and under the influence of his good spirits they went on buying the toughest steaks and bull-beef flanks, at more than city prices, year after year. But anybody who thought "Ni" was soft because he was full of fun made a great mistake.

"I see you ain't doin' much ditchin' this year," "Ni" remarked, glancing over our fields as he started up the horse. "I should think you'd be tickled to death."

Well, in one sense I was glad. There used to be no other such back-aching work in all

the year as that picking up of stones to fill into the trenches which the hired men began digging as soon as the hay and grain were in. But on the other hand, I knew that the present idleness meant — as everything else now seemed to mean — that the Beech farm was going to the dogs.

"No," I made rueful answer. "Our land don't need drainin' any more. It's dry as a powder-horn now."

"Ni" clucked knowingly at the old horse. "Guess it's Abner that can't stand much more drainin'," he said. "They say he's looking all round for a mortgage, and can't raise one."

"No such thing!" I replied. "His health's poorly this summer, that's all. And Jeff — he dont seem to take hold, somehow, like he used to."

My companion laughed outright. "Mustn't call him Jeff any more," he remarked with a grin. "He was telling us down at the house that he was going to have people call him Tom after this. He can't stand answerin' to the same name as Jeff Davis," he says.

"I suppose you folks put him up to that," I made bold to comment, indignantly.

The suggestion did not annoy "Ni." "Mebbe so," he said. "You know Dad lots a good deal on names. He's down-right mortified that I don't get up and kill people because my name's Benaiah. 'Why,' he keeps on saying to me, 'Here you are, Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada, as it was in Holy Writ, and instid of preparin' to make ready to go out and fall on the enemies of righteousness, like your namesake did, all you do is read dime novels and cut up monkey-shines generally, for all the world as if you'd been named Pete or Steve or William Henry.' That's what he gives me pretty nearly every day."

I was familiar enough with the quaint mysticism which the old Abolitionist cooper wove around the Scriptural names of himself and his son. We understood that these two appellations had alternated among his ancestors as well, and I had often heard him read from Samuel and Kings and Chronicles about them, his stiff red hair standing upright, and the blue veins swelling on his narrow temples with proud excitement. But that, of course, was in the old days, before the trouble came, and when I still went to

church. To hear it all now again seemed to give me a novel impression of wild fanaticism in "Jee" Hagadorn.

His son was chuckling on his seat over something he had just remembered. "Last time," he began, gurgling with laughter — "last time he went for me because I wasn't measurin' up to his idee of what a Benaiah ought to be like, I up an' said to him, 'Look a-here now, people who live in glass houses mustn't heave rocks. If I'm Benaiah, you're Jehoiada. Well, it says in the Bible that Jehoiada made a covenant. Do you make cove-nants? Not a bit of it! all you make is butter firkins, with now an' then an odd pork barrel.'"

"What did he say to that?" I asked, as my companion's merriment abated.

"Well, I come away just then; I seemed to have business outside," replied "Ni," still grinning.

We had reached the Corners now, and my companion obligingly drew up to let me get down. He called out some merry quip or other as he drove off, framed in a haze of golden dust against the sinking sun, and I stood looking after him with the pleasantest

thoughts my mind had known for days. It was almost a shock to remember that he was one of the abhorrent and hated Hagadorns.

And his sister, too. It was not at all easy to keep one's loathing up to the proper pitch where so nice a girl as Esther Hagadorn was its object. She was years and years my senior — she was even older than "Ni" — and had been my teacher for the past two winters. She had never spoken to me save across that yawning gulf which separates little barefooted urchins from tall young women, with long dresses and their hair done up in a net, and I could hardly be said to know her at all. Yet now, perversely enough, I could think of nothing but her manifest superiority to all the farm girls round about. She had been to a school in some remote city, where she had relations. Her hands were fabulously white, and even on the hottest of days her dresses rustled pleasantly with starched primness. People talked about her singing at church as something remarkable; to my mind, the real music was when she just spoke to you, even if it was no more than "Good-morning, Jimmy!"

I clambered up on the window-sill of the school-house, to make sure there was no one inside, and then set off down the creek-road toward the red or lower bridge. Milking-time was about over, and one or two teams passed me on the way to the cheese-factory, the handles of the cans rattling as they went, and the low sun throwing huge shadows of drivers and horses sprawling eastward over the stubble-field. I cut across lots to avoid the cheese-factory itself, with some vague feeling that it was not a fitting spectacle for anyone who lived on the Beech farm.

A few moments brought me to the bank of the wandering stream below the factory, but so near that I could hear the creaking of the chain drawing up the cans over the tackle, or as we called it, the "teekle." The willows under which I walked stretched without a break from the clump by the factory bridge. And now, low and behold! beneath still other of these willows, farther down the stream, whom should I see strolling together but my school-teacher and the delinquent Jeff!

Young Beech bore still the fish-pole I had seen him take from our shed some hours

earlier, but the line twisted round it was very white and dry. He was extremely close to the girl, and kept his head bent down over her as they sauntered along the meadow-path. They seemed not to be talking, but just idly drifting forward like the deep slow water beside them. I had never realized before how tall Jeff was. Though the school-ma'am always seemed to me of an exceeding stature, here was Jeff rounding his shoulders and inclining his neck in order to look under her broad-brimmed Leghorn hat.

There could be no imaginable excuse for my not overtaking them. Instinct prompted me to start up a whistling tune as I advanced —a casual and indolently unobtrusive tune —at sound of which Jeff straightened himself, and gave his companion a little more room on the path. In a moment or two he stopped, and looked intently over the bank into the water, as if he hoped it might turn out to be a likely place for fish. And the school-ma'am, too, after a few aimless steps, halted to help him look.

"Abner wants you to come right straight home!" was the form in which my message delivered itself when I had come close up to them.

They both shifted their gaze from the sluggish stream below to me upon the instant. Then Esther Hagadorn looked away, but Jeff — good, big, honest Jeff, who had been like a fond elder brother to me since I could remember — knitted his brows and regarded me with something like a scowl.

"Did pa send you to say that?" he demanded, holding my eye with a glance of such stern inquiry that I could only nod my head in confusion.

"An' he knew that you'd find me here, did he?"

"He said either at the school-house or around here somewhere," I admitted, weakly.

"An' there ain't nothin' the matter at the farm? He don't want me for nothin' special?" pursued Jeff, still looking me through and through.

"He didn't say," I made hesitating answer, but for the life of me, I could not keep from throwing a tell-tale look in the direction of his companion in the blue gingham dress.

A wink could not have told Jeff more. He gave a little bitter laugh, and stared above my head at the willow-plumes for a

minute's meditation. Then he tossed his fish-pole over to me and laughed again.

"Keep that for yourself, if you want it," he said, in a voice not quite his own, but robustly enough. "I sha'n't need it any more. Tell pa I ain't a-comin'!"

"Oh, Tom!" Esther broke in, anxiously, "would you do that?"

He held up his hand with a quiet, masterful gesture, as if she were the pupil and he the teacher, "Tell him," he went on, the tone falling now strong and true, "tell him and ma that I'm goin' to Tecumseh to-night to enlist. If they're willin' to say good-by, they can let me know there, and I'll manage to slip back for the day. If they ain't willin'— why, they — they needn't send word; that's all."

Esther had come up to him, and held his arm now in hers.

"You're wrong to leave them like that!" she pleaded, earnestly, but Jeff shook his head.

"You don't know him!" was all he said.

In another minute I had shaken hands with Jeff, and had started on my homeward way, with his parting "Good-by, youngster!" be-

numbing my ears. When, after a while, I turned to look back, they were still standing where I had left them, gazing over the bank into the water.

Then, as I trudged onward once more, I began to quake at the thought of how Farmer Beech would take the news.

CHAPTER III

ABSALOM

Once, in the duck-season, as I lay hidden among the marsh-reeds with an older boy, a crow passed over us, flying low. Looking up at him, I realized for the first time how beautiful a creature was this common black thief of ours — how splendid his strength and the sheen of his coat, how proudly graceful the sweep and curves of his great slow wings. The boy beside me fired, and in a flash what I had been admiring changed — even as it stopped headlong in mid-air — into a hideous thing, an evil confusion of jumbled feathers. The awful swiftness of that transition from beauty and power to hateful carrion haunted me for a long time.

I half expected that Abner Beech would crumple up in some such distressing way, all of a sudden, when I told him that his son Jeff was in open rebellion, and intended to go off and enlist. It was incredible to the senses that any member of the household should set

at defiance the patriarchal will of its head. But that the offence should come from placid, slow-witted, good-natured Jeff, and that it should involve the appearance of a Beech in a blue uniform — these things staggered the imagination. It was clear that something prodigious must happen.

As it turned out, nothing happened at all. The farmer and his wife sat out on the veranda, as was their wont of a summer evening, rarely exchanging a word, but getting a restful sort of satisfaction in together surveying their barns and haystacks and the yellow-brown stretch of fields beyond.

"Jeff says he's goin' to-night to Tecumseh, an' he's goin' to enlist, an' if you want him to run over to say good-by you're to let him know there."

I leant upon my newly-acquired fish-pole for support, as I unburdened myself of these sinister tidings. The old pair looked at me in calm-eyed silence, as if I had related the most trivial of village occurrences. Neither moved a muscle nor uttered a sound, but just gazed, till it felt as if their eyes were burning holes into me.

"That's what he said," I repeated, after a

pause, to mitigate the embarrassment of that dumb steadfast stare.

The mother it was who spoke at last. "You'd better go round and get your supper," she said, quietly.

The table was spread, as usual, in the big, low-ceilinged room which during the winter was used as a kitchen. What was unusual was to discover a strange man seated alone in his shirt-sleeves at this table, eating his supper. As I took my chair, however, I saw that he was not altogether a stranger. I recognized in him the little old Irishman who had farmed Ezra Tracy's beaver-meadow the previous year on shares, and done badly, and had since been hiring out for odd jobs at hoeing and haying. He had lately lost his wife, I recalled now, and lived alone in a tumble-down old shanty beyond Parker's saw-mill. He had come to us in the spring, I remembered, when the brindled calf was born, to beg a pail of what he called "basteings," and I speculated in my mind whether it was this repellent mess that had killed his wife. Above all these thoughts rose the impression that Abner must have decided to do a heap of ditching and wall-building, to have hired a

new hand in this otherwise slack season — and at this my back began to ache prophetically.

"How are yeh!" the new-comer remarked, affably, as I sat down and reached for the bread. "An' did yeh see the boys march away? An' had they a drum wid 'em?"

"What boys?" I asked, in blank ignorance as to what he was at.

"I'm told there's a baker's dozen of 'em gone, more or less," he replied. "Well, glory be to the Lord, 'tis an ill wind blows nobody good. Here am I aitin' butter on my bread, an' cheese on top o' that."

I should still have been in the dark, had not one of the hired girls, Janey Wilcox, come in from the butter-room, to ask me in turn much the same thing, and to add the explanation that a whole lot of the young men of the neighborhood had privately arranged among themselves to enlist together as soon as the harvesting was over, and had this day gone off in a body. Among them, I learned now, were our two hired men, Warner Pitts and Ray Watkins. This, then, accounted for the presence of the Irishman.

As a matter of fact, there had been no secrecy about the thing save with the con-

tingent which our household furnished, and that was only because of the fear which Abner Beech inspired. His son and his servants alike preferred to hook it, rather than explain their patriotic impulses to him. But naturally enough, our farm-girls took it for granted that all the others had gone in the same surreptitious fashion, and this threw an air of fascinating mystery about the whole occurrence. They were deeply surprised that I should have been down past the Corners, and even beyond the cheese-factory, and seen nothing of these extraordinary martial preparations; and I myself was ashamed of it.

Opinions differed, I remember, as to the behavior of our two hired men. "Till" Babcock and the Underwood girl defended them, but Janey took the other side, not without various unpleasant personal insinuations, and the Irishman and I were outspoken in their condemnation. But nobody said a word about Jeff, though it was plain enough that everyone knew.

Dusk fell while we still talked of these astounding events — my thoughts meantime dividing themselves between efforts to realize these neighbors of ours as soldiers on the

tented field, and uneasy speculation as to whether I should at last get a bed to myself or be expected to sleep with the Irishman.

Janey Wilcox had taken the lamp into the living-room. She returned now, with an uplifted hand and a face covered over with lines of surprise.

"You're to all of you come in," she whispered, impressively. "Abner's got the Bible down. We're goin' to have fam'ly prayers, or somethin'."

With one accord we looked at the Irishman. The question had never before arisen on our farm, but we all knew about other cases, in which Catholic hands held aloof from the household's devotions. There were even stories of their refusal to eat meat on some one day of the week, but this we hardly brought ourselves to credit. Our surprise at the fact that domestic religious observances were to be resumed under the Beech roof-tree — where they had completely lapsed ever since the trouble at the church — was as nothing compared with our curiosity to see what the new-comer would do.

What he did was to get up and come along with the rest of us, quite as a matter

of course. I felt sure that he could not have understood what was going on.

We filed into the living-room. The Beeches had come in and shut the veranda door, and "M'rye" was seated in her rocking-chair, in the darkness beyond the bookcase. Her husband had the big book open before him on the table; the lamp-light threw the shadow of his long nose down into the gray of his beard with a strange effect of fierceness. His lips were tight-set and his shaggy brows drawn into a commanding frown, as he bent over the pages.

Abner did not look up till we had taken our seats. Then he raised his eyes toward the Irishman.

"I don't know, Hurley," he said, in a grave, deep-booming voice, "whether you feel it right for you to join us — we bein' Protestants — "

"Ah, it's all right, sir," replied Hurley, reassuringly, "I'll take no harm by it."

A minute's silence followed upon this magnanimous declaration. Then Abner, clearing his throat, began solemnly to read the story of Absalom's revolt. He had the knack, not uncommon in those primitive class-meeting

days, of making his strong, low-pitched voice quaver and wail in the most tear-compelling fashion when he read from the Old Testament. You could hardly listen to him going through even the genealogical tables of Chronicles dry-eyed. His Jeremiah and Ezekiel were equal to the funeral of a well-beloved relation.

This night he read as I had never heard him read before. The whole grim story of the son's treason and final misadventure, of the ferocious battle in the wood of Ephraim, of Joab's savagery, and of the rival runners, made the air vibrate about us, and took possession of our minds and kneaded them like dough, as we sat in the mute circle in the old living-room. From my chair I could see Hurley without turning my head, and the spectacle of excitement he presented — bending forward with dropped jaw and wild, glistening gray eyes, a hand behind his ear to miss no syllable of this strange new tale — only added to the effect it produced on me.

Then there came the terrible picture of the King's despair. I had trembled as we neared this part, foreseeing what heart-wring-

ing anguish Abner, in his present mood, would give to that cry of the stricken father —"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" To my great surprise, he made very little of it. The words came coldly, almost contemptuously, so that the listener could not but feel that David's lamentations were out of place, and might better have been left unuttered.

But now the farmer, leaping over into the next chapter, brought swart, stalwart, blood-stained Joab on the scene before us, and in an instant we saw why the King's outburst of mourning had fallen so flat upon our ears. Abner Beech's voice rose and filled the room with its passionate fervor as he read out Joab's speech — wherein the King is roundly told that his son was a worthless fellow, and was killed not a bit too soon, and that for the father to thus publicly lament him is to put to shame all his household and his loyal friends and servants.

While these sonorous words of protest against paternal weakness still rang in the air, Abner abruptly closed the book with a snap. We looked at him and at one another

for a bewildered moment, and then "Till" Babcock stooped as if to kneel by her chair, but Janey nudged her, and we all rose and made our way silently out again into the kitchen. It had been apparent enough that no spirit of prayer abode in the farmer's breast.

"'Twas a fine bold sinsible man, that Job!" remarked Hurley to me, when the door was closed behind us, and the women had gone off to talk the scene over among themselves in the butter-room. "Would it be him that had thim lean turkeys?"

With some difficulty I made out his meaning. "Oh, no!" I exclaimed, "the man Abner read about was Jo-ab, not Job. They were quite different people."

"I thought as much," replied the Irishman. "'Twould not be in so grand a man's nature to let his fowls go hungry. And do we be hearing such tales every night?"

"Maybe Abner 'll keep on, now he's started again," I said. "We ain't had any Bible-reading before since he had his row down at the church, and we left off going."

Hurley displayed such a lively interest in this matter that I went over it pretty fully,

setting forth Abner's position and the intolerable provocations which had been forced upon him. It took him a long time to grasp the idea that in Protestant gatherings not only the pastor spoke, but the class-leaders and all others who were conscious of a call might have their word as well, and that in this way even the lowliest and meanest of the farmer's neighbors had been able to affront him in the church itself.

"Too many cooks spoil the broth," was his comment upon this. "'Tis far better to hearken to one man only. If he's right, you're right. If he's wrong, why, thin, there ye have him in front of ye for protection."

Bed-time came soon after, and Mrs. Beech appeared in her nightly round of the house to see that the doors were all fastened. The candle she bore threw up a flaring yellow light upon her chin, but made the face above it by contrast still darker and more saturnine. She moved about in erect impassiveness, trying the bolts and the window catches, and went away again, having said never a word. I had planned to ask her if I might now have a bed to myself, but somehow my

courage failed me, so stern and majestic was her aspect.

I took the desired boon without asking, and dreamed of her as a darkling and relentless Joab in petticoats, slaying her own son Jeff as he hung by his hay-colored hair in one of the apple-trees of our orchard.

CHAPTER IV

ANTIETAM

On all the other farms roundabout, this mid-August was a slack season. The hired men and boys did a little early fruit-picking, a little berrying, a little stone-drawing, but for the most part they could be seen idling about the woods or along the river down below Juno Mills, with gun or fish-pole. Only upon the one farm whose turn it was that week to be visited by the itinerant threshing-machine, was any special activity visible.

It was well known, however, that we were not to get the threshing-machine at all. How it was managed, I never understood. Perhaps the other farmers combined in some way to over-awe or persuade the owners of the machine into refusing it to Abner Beech. More likely he scented the chance of a refusal and was too proud to put himself in its way by asking. At all events, we three — Abner, Hurley, and I — had to manage the

threshing ourselves, on the matched wood floor of the carriage barn. All the fishing I did that year was in the prolific but unsubstantial waters of dreamland.

I did not work much, it is true, with the flail, but I lived all day in an atmosphere choked with dust and chaff, my ears deafened with the ceaseless whack! whack! of the hard wood clubs, bringing on fresh shocks of grain, and acting as general helper.

By toiling late and early we got this task out of the way just when the corn was ready to cut. This great job taxed all the energies of the two men, the one cutting, the other stacking, as they went. My own share of the labor was to dig the potatoes and pick the eating-apples — a quite portentous enough undertaking for a lad of twelve. All this kept me very much to myself. There was no chance to talk during the day, and at night I was glad to drag my tired limbs off to bed before the girls had fairly cleared the supper things away. A weekly newspaper — *The World* — came regularly to the post-office at the Corners for us, but we were so over-worked that often it lay there for weeks at a time, and even when someone

went after it, nobody but Abner cared to read it.

So far as I know, no word ever came from Jeff. His name was never mentioned among us.

It was now past the middle of September. Except for the fall ploughing on fields that were to be put to grass under the grain in the spring — which would come much later — the getting in of the root crops, and the husking, our season's labors were pretty well behind us. The women folk had toiled like slaves as well, taking almost all the chores about the cattle-barns off our shoulders, and carrying on the butter-making without bothering us. Now that a good many cows were drying up, it was their turn to take things easy, too. But the girls, instead of being glad at this, began to borrow unhappiness over the certainty that there would be no husking-bees on the Beech farm.

One heard no other subject discussed now, as we sat of a night in the kitchen. Even when we foregathered in the living-room instead, the Babcock and the Underwood girl talked in ostentatiously low tones of the hardship of missing such opportunities for

getting beaux, and having fun. They recalled to each other, with tones of longing, this and that husking-bee of other years — now one held of a moonlight night in the field itself, where the young men pulled the stacks down and dragged them to where the girls sat in a ring on big pumpkins, and merriment, songs, and chorused laughter chased the happy hours along; now of a bee held in the late wintry weather, where the men went off to the barn by themselves and husked till they were tired, and then with warning whoops came back to where the girls were waiting for them in the warm, hospitable farm-house, and the frolic began, with cider and apples and pumpkin-pies, and old Lem Hornbeck's fiddle to lead the dancing.

Alas! they shook their empty heads and mourned, there would be no more of these delightful times! Nothing definite was ever said as to the reason for our ostracism from the sports and social enjoyments of the season. There was no need for that. We all knew too well that it was Abner Beech's politics which made us outcasts, but even these two complaining girls did not venture

to say so in his hearing. Their talk, however, grew at last so persistently querulous that "M'rye" bluntly told them one night to "shut up about husking-bees," following them out into the kitchen for that purpose, and speaking with unaccustomed acerbity. Thereafter we heard no more of their grumbling, but in a week or two "Till" Babcock left for her home over on the Dutch Road, and began circulating the report that we prayed every night for the success of Jeff Davis.

It was on a day in the latter half of September, perhaps the 20th or 21st — as nearly as I am able to make out from the records now — that Hurley and I started off with a double team and our big box-wagon, just after breakfast, on a long day's journey. We were taking a heavy load of potatoes in to market at Octavius, twelve miles distant; thence we were to drive out an additional three miles to a cooper-shop and bring back as many butter-firkins as we could stack up behind us, not to mention a lot of groceries of which "M'rye" gave me a list.

It was a warm, sweet aired, hazy autumn day, with a dusky red sun sauntering idly

about in the sky, too indolent to cast more than the dimmest and most casual suggestion of a shadow for anything or anybody. The Irishman sat round-backed and contented on the very high seat overhanging the horses, his elbows on his knees, and a little black pipe turned upside down in his mouth. He would suck satisfiedly at this for hours after the fire had gone out, until, my patience exhausted, I begged him to light it again. He seemed almost never to put any new tobacco into this pipe, and to this day it remains a twin-mystery to me why its contents neither burned themselves to nothing nor fell out.

We talked a good deal, in a desultory fashion, as the team plodded their slow way into Octavius. Hurley told me, in answer to the questions of a curious boy, many interesting and remarkable things about the old country, as he always called it, and more particularly about his native part of it, which was on the sea-shore within sight of Skibbereen. He professed always to be filled with longing to go back, but at the same time guarded his tiny personal expenditure with the greatest solicitude, in order to save money to help one of his relations to get away. Once, when

I taxed him with this inconsistency, he explained that life in Ireland was the most delicious thing on earth, but you had to get off at a distance of some thousands of miles to really appreciate it.

Naturally there was considerable talk between us, as well, about Abner Beech and his troubles. I don't know where I could have heard it, but when Hurley first came to us I at once took it for granted that the fact of his nationality made him a sympathizer with the views of our household. Perhaps I only jumped at this conclusion from the general ground that the few Irish who in those days found their way into the farm-country were held rather at arms-length by the community, and must in the nature of things feel drawn to other outcasts. At all events, I made no mistake. Hurley could not have well been more vehemently embittered against abolitionism and the war than Abner was, but he expressed his feelings with much greater vivacity and fluency of speech. It was surprising to see how much he knew about the politics and political institutions of a strange country, and how excited he grew about them when anyone

would listen to him. But as he was a small man, getting on in years, he did not dare air these views down at the Corners. The result was that he and Abner were driven to commune together, and mutually inflamed each other's passionate prejudices — which was not at all needful.

When at last, shortly before noon, we drove into Octavius, I jumped off to fill one portion of the grocery errands, leaving Hurley to drive on with the potatoes. We were to meet at the little village tavern for dinner.

He was feeding the horses in the hotel shed when I rejoined him an hour or so later. I came in, bursting with the importance of the news I had picked up — scattered, incomplete, and even incoherent news, but of a most exciting sort. The awful battle of Antietam had happened two or three days before, and nobody in all Octavius was talking or thinking of anything else. Both the Dearborn County regiments had been in the thick of the fight, and I could see from afar, as I stood on the outskirts of the throng in front of the post-office, some long strips of paper posted up

beside the door, which men said contained a list of our local dead and wounded. It was hopeless, however, to attempt to get anywhere near this list, and nobody whom I questioned, knew anything about the names of those young men who had marched away from our Four Corners. Someone did call out, though, that the telegraph had broken down, or gone wrong, and that not half the news had come in as yet. But they were all so deeply stirred up, so fiercely pushing and hauling to get toward the door, that I could learn little else.

This was what I began to tell Hurley, with eager volubility, as soon as I got in under the shed. He went on with his back to me, impassively measuring out the oats from the bag, and clearing aside the stale hay in the manger, the impatient horses rubbing at his shoulders with their noses the while. Then, as I was nearly done, he turned and came out to me, slapping the fodder-mess off his hands.

He had a big, fresh cut running transversely across his nose and cheek, and there were stains of blood in the gray stubble of beard on his chin. I saw too that his clothes

looked as if he had been rolled on the dusty road outside.

"Sure, then, I'm after hearin' the news myself," was all he said.

He drew out from beneath the wagon seat a bag of crackers and a hunk of cheese, and, seating himself on an overturned barrel, began to eat. By a gesture I was invited to share this meal, and did so, sitting beside him. Something had happened, apparently, to prevent our having dinner in the tavern.

I fairly yearned to ask him what this something was, and what was the matter with his face, but it did not seem quite the right thing to do, and presently he began mumbling, as much to himself as to me, a long and broken discourse, from which I picked out that he had mingled with a group of lusty young farmers in the market-place, asking for the latest intelligence, and that while they were conversing in a wholly amiable manner, one of them had suddenly knocked him down and kicked him, and that thereafter they had pursued him with curses and loud threats half-way to the tavern. This and much more he proclaimed between mouthfuls, speaking with great rapidity and

in so much more marked a brogue than usual, that I understood only a fraction of what he said.

He professed entire innocence of offence in the affair, and either could not or would not tell what it was he had said to invite the blow. I dare say he did in truth richly provoke the violence he encountered, but at the time I regarded him as a martyr, and swelled with indignation every time I looked at his nose.

I remained angry, indeed, long after he himself had altogether recovered his equanimity and whimsical good spirits. He waited outside on the seat while I went in to pay for the baiting of the horses, and it was as well that he did, I fancy, because there were half a dozen brawny farm-hands and villagers standing about the bar, who were laughing in a stormy way over the episode of the "Copperhead Paddy" in the market.

We drove away, however, without incident of any sort — sagaciously turning off the main street before we reached the post-office block, where the congregated crowd seemed larger than ever. There seemed to be some fresh tidings, for several scattering outbursts

of cheering reached our ears after we could no longer see the throng; but, so far from stopping to inquire what it was, Hurley put whip to the horses, and we rattled smartly along out of the excited village into the tranquil, scythe-shorn country.

The cooper to whom we now went for our butter-firkins was a long-nosed, lean, and taciturn man, whom I think of always as with his apron tucked up at the corner, and his spectacles on his forehead, close under the edge of his square brown-paper cap. He had had word that we were coming, and the firkins were ready for us. He helped us load them in dead silence, and with a gloomy air.

Hurley desired the sound of his own voice. "Well, then, sir," he said, as our task neared completion, "'tis worth coming out of our way these fifteen miles to lay eyes on such fine, grand firkins as these same — such an elegant shape on 'em, an' put together wid such nateness!"

"You could git 'em just as good at Hagadorn's," said the cooper, curtly, "within a mile of your place."

"Huh!" cried Hurley, with contempt,

"Haggydorn is it? Faith, we'll not touch him or his firkins ayether! Why, man, they're not fit to mention the same day wid yours. Ah, just look at the darlins, will ye, that nate an' clane a Christian could ate from 'em!"

The cooper was blarney-proof. "Hagadorn's are every smitch as good!" he repeated, ungraciously.

The Irishman looked at him perplexedly, then shook his head as if the problem were too much for him, and slowly clambered up to the seat. He had gathered up the lines, and we were ready to start, before any suitable words came to his tongue.

"Well, then, sir," he said, "anything to be agreeable. If I hear a man speaking a good word for your firkins, I'll dispute him."

"The firkins are well enough," growled the cooper at us, "an' they're made to sell, but I ain't so almighty tickled about takin' Copperhead money for 'em that I want to clap my wings an' crow over it."

He turned scornfully on his heel at this, and we drove away. The new revelation of our friendlessness depressed me, but Hurley did not seem to mind it at all.

After a philosophic comparative remark about the manners of pigs run wild in a bog, he dismissed the affair from his thoughts altogether, and hummed cheerful words to melancholy tunes half the way home, what time he was not talking to the horses or tossing stray conversational fragments at me.

My own mind soon enough surrendered itself to harrowing speculations about the battle we had heard of. The war had been going on now, for over a year, but most of the fighting had been away off in Missouri and Tennessee, or on the lower Mississippi, and the reports had not possessed for me any keen direct interest. The idea of men from our own district — young men whom I had seen, perhaps fooled with, in the hayfield only ten weeks before — being in an actual storm of shot and shell, produced a faintness at the pit of my stomach. Both Dearborn County regiments were in it, the crowd said. Then of course our men must have been there — our hired men, and the Phillips boys, and Byron Truax, and his cousin Alonzo, and our Jeff! And if so many others had been killed, why not they as well?

"Antietam" still has a power to arrest

my eyes on the printed page, and disturb my ears in the hearing, possessed by no other battle name. It seems now as if the very word itself had a terrible meaning of its own to me, when I first heard it that September afternoon — as if I recognized it to be the label of some awful novelty, before I knew anything else. It had its fascination for Hurley, too, for presently I heard him crooning to himself, to one of his queer old Irish tunes, some doggerel lines which he had made up to rhyme with it — three lines with "cheat 'em," "beat 'em," and "Antietam," and then his pet refrain, "Says the Shan van Vocht."

This levity jarred unpleasantly upon the mood into which I had worked myself, and I turned to speak of it, but the sight of his bruised nose and cheek restrained me. He had suffered too much for the faith that was in him to be lightly questioned now. So I returned to my grisly thoughts, which now all at once resolved themselves into a conviction that Jeff had been killed outright. My fancy darted to meet this notion, and straightway pictured for me a fantastic battle-field by moonlight, such as was depicted in

Lossing's books, with overturned cannon-wheels and dead horses in the foreground, and in the centre, conspicuous above all else, the inanimate form of Jeff Beech, with its face coldly radiant in the moonshine.

"I guess I'll hop off and walk a spell," I said, under the sudden impulse of this distressing visitation.

It was only when I was on the ground, trudging along by the side of the wagon, that I knew why I had got down. We were within a few rods of the Corners, where one road turned off to go to the post-office. "Perhaps it'd be a good idea for me to find out if they've heard anything more — I mean — anything about Jeff," I suggested. "I'll just look in and see, and then I can cut home cross lots."

The Irishman nodded and drove on.

I hung behind, at the Corners, till the wagon had begun the ascent of the hill, and the looming bulk of the firkins made it impossible that Hurley could see which way I went. Then, without hesitation, I turned instead down the other road which led to "Jee" Hagadorn's.

CHAPTER V

"JEE'S" TIDINGS

TIME was when I had known the Hagadorn house, from the outside at least, as well as any other in the whole township. But I had avoided that road so long now, that when I came up to the place it seemed quite strange to my eyes.

For one thing, the flower garden was much bigger than it had formerly been. To state it differently, Miss Esther's marigolds and columbines, hollyhocks and peonies, had been allowed to usurp a lot of space where sweet-corn, potatoes and other table-truck used to be raised. This not only greatly altered the aspect of the place, but it lowered my idea of the practical good-sense of its owners.

What was more striking still, was the general air of decrepitude and decay about the house itself. An eaves-trough had fallen down; half the cellar door was off its hinges, standing up against the wall; the chimney was ragged and broken at the top; the clap-

boards had never been painted, and now were almost black with weather-stain and dry rot. It positively appeared to me as if the house was tipping sideways, over against the little cooper-shop adjoining it — but perhaps that was a trick of the waning evening light. I said to myself that if we were not prospering on the Beech farm, at least our foe "Jee" Hagadorn did not seem to be doing much better himself.

In truth, Hagadorn had always been among the poorest members of our community, though this by no means involves what people in cities think of as poverty. He had a little place of nearly two acres, and then he had his coopering business; with the two he ought to have got on comfortably enough. But a certain contrariness in his nature seemed to be continually interfering with this.

This strain of conscientious perversity ran through all we knew of his life before he came to us, just as it dominated the remainder of his career. He had been a well-to-do man some ten years before, in a city in the western part of the State, with a big cooper-shop, and a lot of men under him, making the barrels for a large brewery. (It was in these

days, I fancy, that Esther took on that urban polish which the younger Benaiah missed.) Then he got the notion in his head that it was wrong to make barrels for beer, and threw the whole thing up. He moved into our neighborhood with only money enough to buy the old Andrews place, and build a little shop.

It was a good opening for a cooper, and Hagadorn might have flourished if he had been able to mind his own business. The very first thing he did was to offend a number of our biggest butter-makers by taxing them with sinfulness in also raising hops, which went to make beer. For a long time they would buy no firkins of him. Then, too, he made an unpleasant impression at church. As has been said, our meeting-house was a union affair; that is to say, no one denomination being numerous enough to have an edifice of its own, all the farmers roundabout — Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and so on — joined in paying the expenses. The travelling preachers who came to us represented these great sects, with lots of minute shadings off into Hard-shell, Soft-shell, Freewill, and other subdivided mys-

teries which I never understood. Hagadorn had a denomination all to himself, as might have been expected from the man. What the name of it was I seem never to have heard; perhaps it had no name at all. People used to say, though, that he behaved like a Shouting Methodist.

This was another way of saying that he made a nuisance of himself in church. At prayer meetings, in the slack seasons of the year, he would pray so long, and with such tremendous shouting and fury of gestures, that he had regularly to be asked to stop, so that those who had taken the trouble to learn and practise new hymns might have a chance to be heard. And then he would out-sing all the others, not knowing the tune in the least, and cause added confusion by yelling out shrill "Amens!" between the bars. At one time quite a number of the leading people ceased attending church at all, on account of his conduct.

He added heavily to his theological unpopularity, too, by his action in another matter. There was a wealthy and important farmer living over on the west side of Agrippa Hill, who was a Universalist. The expenses of

our union meeting-house were felt to be a good deal of a burden, and our elders, conferring together, decided that it would be a good thing to waive ordinary prejudices, and let the Universalists come in, and have their share of the preaching. It would be more neighborly, they felt, and they would get a subscription from the Agrippa Hill farmer. He assented to the project, and came over four or five Sundays with his family and hired help, listened unflinchingly to orthodox sermons full of sulphur and blue flames, and put money on the plate every time. Then a Universalist preacher occupied the pulpit one Sunday, and preached a highly inoffensive and non-committal sermon, and "Jee" Hagadorn stood up in his pew and violently denounced him as an infidel, before he had descended the pulpit steps. This created a painful scandal. The Universalist farmer, of course, never darkened that church door again. Some of our young men went so far as to discuss the ducking of the obnoxious cooper in the duck-pond. But he himself was neither frightened nor ashamed.

At the beginning, too, I suppose that his taking up Abolitionism made him enemies.

Dearborn County gave Franklin Pierce a big majority in '52, and the bulk of our farmers, I know, were in that majority. But I have already dwelt upon the way in which all this changed in the years just before the war. Naturally enough, Hagadorn's position also changed. The rejected stone became the head of the corner. The tiresome fanatic of the 'fifties was the inspired prophet of the 'sixties. People still shrank from giving him undue credit for their conversion, but they felt themselves swept along under his influence none the less.

But just as his unpopularity kept him poor in the old days, it seemed that now the reversed condition was making him still poorer. The truth was, he was too excited to pay any attention to his business. He went off to Octavius three or four days a week to hear the news, and when he remained at home, he spent much more time standing out in the road discussing politics and the conduct of the war with passers-by, than he did over his staves and hoops. No wonder his place was run down.

The house was dark and silent, but there was some sort of a light in the cooper-shop

beyond. My hope had been to see Esther rather than her wild old father, but there was nothing for it but to go over to the shop. I pushed the loosely fitting door back on its leathern hinges, and stepped over the threshold. The resinous scent of newly cut wood, and the rustle of the shavings under my feet, had the effect, somehow, of filling me with timidity. It required an effort to not turn and go out again.

The darkened and crowded interior of the tiny work-place smelt as well, I noted now, of smoke. On the floor before me was crouched a shapeless figure — bending in front of the little furnace, made of a section of stove-pipe, which the cooper used to dry the insides of newly fashioned barrels. A fire in this, half-blaze, half-smudge — gave forth the light I had seen from without, and the smoke which was making my nostrils tingle. Then I had to sneeze, and the kneeling figure sprang on the instant from the floor.

It was Esther who stood before me, coughing a little from the smoke, and peering inquiringly at me. "Oh — is that you, Jimmy?" she asked, after a moment of puzzled inspection in the dark.

She went on, before I had time to speak, in a nervous, half-laughing way: "I've been trying to roast an ear of corn here, but it's the worst kind of a failure. I've watched 'Ni' do it a hundred times, but with me it always comes out half-scorched and half-smoked. I guess the corn is too old now, any way. At all events, it's tougher than Pharaoh's heart."

She held out to me, in proof of her words, a blackened and unseemly roasting-ear. I took it, and turned it slowly over, looking at it with the grave scrutiny of an expert. Several torn and opened sections showed where she had been testing it with her teeth. In obedience to her "See if you don't think it's too old," I took a diffident bite, at a respectful distance from the marks of her experiments. It was the worst I had ever tasted.

"I came over to see if you'd heard anything — any news," I said, desiring to get away from the corn subject.

"You mean about Tom?" she asked, moving so that she might see me more plainly.

I had stupidly forgotten about that trans-

formation of names. "Our Jeff, I mean," I made answer.

"His name is Thomas Jefferson. *We* call him Tom," she explained; "that other name is too horrid. Did — did his people tell you to come and ask *me?*"

I shook my head. "Oh no!" I replied with emphasis, implying by my tone, I dare say, that they would have had themselves cut up into sausage-meat first.

The girl walked past me to the door, and out to the road-side, looking down toward the bridge with a lingering, anxious gaze. Then she came back, slowly.

"No, we have no news!" she said, with an effort at calmness. "He wasn't an officer, that's why. All we know is that the brigade his regiment is in lost 141 killed, 560 wounded, and 38 missing. That's all!" She stood in the doorway, her hands clasped tight, pressed against her bosom. "*That's all!*" she repeated, with a choking voice.

Suddenly she started forward, almost ran across the few yards of floor, and, throwing herself down in the darkest corner, where only dimly one could see an old buffalo-robe spread over a heap of staves, began sobbing as if her heart must break.

Her dress had brushed over the stove-pipe, and scattered some of the embers beyond the sheet of tin it stood on. I stamped these out, and carried the other remnants of the fire out doors. Then I returned, and stood about in the smoky little shop, quite helplessly listening to the moans and convulsive sobs which rose from the obscure corner. A bit of a candle in a bottle stood on the shelf by the window. I lighted this, but it hardly seemed to improve the situation. I could see her now, as well as hear her — huddled face downward upon the skin, her whole form shaking with the violence of her grief. I had never been so unhappy before in my life.

At last — it may not have been very long, but it seemed hours — there rose the sound of voices outside on the road. A wagon had stopped, and some words were being exchanged. One of the voices grew louder — came nearer; the other died off, ceased altogether, and the wagon could be heard driving away. On the instant the door was pushed sharply open, and "Jee" Hagadorn stood on the threshold, surveying the interior of his cooper-shop with gleaming eyes.

He looked at me; he looked at his daughter lying in the corner; he looked at the charred mess on the floor — yet seemed to see nothing of what he looked at. His face glowed with a strange excitement — which in another man I should have set down to drink.

"Glory be to God! Praise to the Most High! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!" he called out, stretching forth his hands in a rapturous sort of gesture I remembered from class-meeting days.

Esther had leaped to her feet with squirrel-like swiftness at the sound of his voice, and now stood before him, her hands nervously clutching at each other, her reddened, tear-stained face a-fire with eagerness.

"Has word come? — is he safe? — have you heard?" so her excited questions tumbled over one another, as she grasped "Jee's" sleeve and shook it in feverish impatience.

"The day has come! The year of Jubilee is here!" he cried, brushing her hand aside, and staring with a fixed, ecstatic, open-mouthed smile straight ahead of him. "The words of the Prophet are fulfilled!"

"But Tom!—*Tom!*" pleaded the girl, piteously. "The list has come? You know he is safe?"

"Tom! *Tom!*" old "Jee" repeated after her, but with an emphasis contemptuous, not solicitous. "Perish a hundred Toms — yea — ten thousand! for one such day as this! 'For the Scarlet Woman of Babylon is overthrown, and bound with chains and cast into the lake of fire. Therefore, in one day shall her plagues come, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God which judged her!'"

He declaimed these words in a shrill, high-pitched voice, his face upturned, and his eyes half-closed. Esther plucked despairingly at his sleeve once more.

"But have you seen? — is *his* name? — you must have seen!" she moaned, incoherently.

"Jee" descended for the moment from his plane of exaltation. "I *didn't* see!" he said, almost peevishly. "Lincoln has signed a proclamation freeing all the slaves! What do you suppose I care for your Toms and Dicks and Harrys, on such a day as this?

'Woe! woe! the great city Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour is thy judgment come!'"

The girl tottered back to her corner, and threw herself limply down upon the buffalo-robe again, hiding her face in her hands.

I pushed my way past the cooper, and trudged cross-lots home in the dark, tired, disturbed, and very hungry, but thinking most of all that if I had been worth my salt, I would have hit "Jee" Hagadorn with the adze that stood up against the door-still.

CHAPTER VI

NI'S TALK WITH ABNER

It must have been a fortnight before we learned that Jeff Beech and Byron Truax had been reported missing. I say "we," but I do not know when Abner Beech came to hear about it. One of the hired girls had seen the farmer get up from his chair, with the newly arrived weekly *World* in his hand, walk over to where his wife sat, and direct her attention to a line of the print with his finger. Then, still in silence, he had gone over to the bookcase, opened the drawer where he kept his account-books, and locked the journal up therein.

We took it for granted that thus the elderly couple had learned the news about their son. They said so little nowadays, either to each other or to us, that we were driven to speculate upon their dumb-show, and find meanings for ourselves in their glances and actions. No one of us could imagine himself or herself ventur-

ing to mention Jeff's name in their hearing.

Down at the Corners, though, and all about our district, people talked of very little else. Antietam had given a bloody welcome to our little group of warriors. Ray Watkins and Lon Truax had been killed outright, and Ed Phillips was in the hospital, with the chances thought to be against him. Warner Pitts, our other hired man, had been wounded in the arm, but not seriously, and thereafter behaved with such conspicuous valor that it was said he was to be promoted from being a sergeant to a lieutenancy. All these things, however, paled in interest after the first few days before the fascinating mystery of what had become of Jeff and Byron. The loungers about the grocery-store evenings took sides as to the definition of "missing." Some said it meant being taken prisoners; but it was known that at Antietam the Rebels made next to no captives. Others held that "missing" soldiers were those who had been shot, and who crawled off somewhere in the woods out of sight to die. A lumberman from Juno Mills, who was up on a horse-trade, went so far as

to broach still a third theory, viz., that "missing" soldiers were those who had run away under fire, and were ashamed to show their faces again. But this malicious suggestion could not, of course, be seriously considered.

Meanwhile, what little remained of the fall farm-work went on as if nothing had happened. The root-crops were dug, the fodder got in, and the late apples gathered. Abner had a cider-mill of his own, but we sold a much larger share of our winter apples than usual. Less manure was drawn out onto the fields than in other autumns, and it looked as if there was to be little or no fall ploughing. Abner went about his tasks in a heavy, spiritless way these days, doggedly enough, but with none of his old-time vim. He no longer had pleasure even in abusing Lincoln and the war with Hurley. Not Antietam itself could have broken his nerve, but at least it silenced his tongue.

Warner Pitts came home on a furlough, with a fine new uniform, shoulder-straps and sword, and his arm in a sling. I say "home," but the only roof he had ever slept under in these parts, was ours, and now he stayed as

a guest at Squire Avery's house, and never came near our farm. He was a tall, brown-faced, sinewy fellow, with curly hair and a pushing manner. Although he had been only a hired man he now cut a great dash down at the Corners, with his shoulder-straps and his officer's cape. It was said that he had declined several invitations to husking-bees, and that when he left the service, at the end of his time, he had a place ready for him in some city as a clerk in a drygoods store — that is, of course, if he did not get to be colonel or general. From time to time he was seen walking out through the dry, rustling leaves with Squire Avery's oldest daughter.

This important military genius did not seem able, however, to throw much light upon the whereabouts of the two "missing" boys. From what I myself heard him say about the battle, and from what others reported of his talk, it seems that in the very early morning Hooker's line — a part of which consisted of Dearborn County men — moved forward through a big cornfield, the stalks of which were much higher than the soldiers' heads. When they came out, the rebels

opened such a hideous fire of cannon and musketry upon them from the woods close by, that those who did not fall were glad to run back again into the corn for shelter. Thus all became confusion, and the men were so mixed up that there was no getting them together again. Some went one way, some another, through the tall corn-rows, and Warner Pitts could not remember having seen either Jeff or Byron at all after the march began. Parts of the regiment formed again out on the road toward the Dunker church, but other parts found themselves half a mile away among the fragments of a Michigan regiment, and a good many more were left lying in the fatal cornfield. Our boys had not been traced among the dead, but that did not prove that they were alive. And so we were no wiser than before.

Warner Pitts only nodded in a distant way to me when he saw me first, with a cool "Hello, youngster!" I expected that he would ask after the folks at the farm which had been so long his home, but he turned to talk with someone else, and said never a word. Once, some days afterward, he called out as I passed him, "How's the old Copper-

head?" and the Avery girl who was with him laughed aloud, but I went on without answering. He was already down in my black-books, in company with pretty nearly every other human being roundabout.

This list of enemies was indeed so full that there were times when I felt like crying over my isolation. It may be guessed, then, how rejoiced I was one afternoon to see Ni Hagadorn squeeze his way through our orchard-bars, and saunter across under the trees to where I was at work sorting a heap of apples into barrels. I could have run to meet him, so grateful was the sight of any friendly, boyish face. The thought that perhaps after all he had not come to see me in particular, and that possibly he brought some news about Jeff, only flashed across my mind after I had smiled a broad welcome upon him, and he stood leaning against a barrel munching the biggest russet he had been able to pick out.

"Abner to home?" he asked, after a pause of neighborly silence. He hadn't come to see me after all.

"He's around the barns somewhere," I replied; adding, upon reflection, "Have you heard something fresh?"

Ni shook his sorrel head, and buried his teeth deep into the apple. "No, nothin'," he said, at last, with his mouth full, "only thought I'd come up an' talk it over with Abner."

The calm audacity of the proposition took my breath away. "He'll boot you off'm the place if you try it," I warned him.

But Ni did not scare easily. "Oh, no," he said, with light confidence, "me an' Abner's all right."

As if to put this assurance to the test, the figure of the farmer was at this moment visible, coming toward us down the orchard road. He was in his shirt-sleeves, with the limp, discolored old broad-brimmed felt hat he always wore pulled down over his eyes. Though he no longer held his head so proudly erect as I could remember it, there were still suggestions of great force and mastership in his broad shoulders and big beard, and in the solid, long-gaited manner of his walk. He carried a pitchfork in his hand.

"Hello, Abner?" said Ni, as the farmer came up and halted, surveying each of us in turn with an impassive scrutiny.

"How 'r' ye!" returned Abner, with cold

civility. I fancied he must be surprised to see the son of his enemy here, calmly gnawing his way through one of our apples, and acting as if the place belonged to him. But he gave no signs of astonishment, and after some words of direction to me concerning my work, started to move on again toward the barns.

Ni was not disposed to be thus cheated out of his conversation: "Seen Warner Pitts since he's got back?" he called out, and at this the farmer stopped and turned round. "You'd hardly know him now," the butcher's assistant went on, with cheerful briskness. "Why you'd think he'd never hoofed it over ploughed land in all his life. He's got his boots blacked up every day, an' his hair greased, an' a whole new suit of broadcloth, with shoulder-straps an' brass buttons, an' a sword — he brings it down to the Corners every evening, so't the boys at the store can heft it — an' he's — "

"What do I care about all this?" broke in Abner. His voice was heavy, with a growling ground-note, and his eyes threw out an angry light under the shading hat-brim. "He can go to the devil, an' take his sword with him, for all o' me!"

Hostile as was his tone, the farmer did not again turn on his heel. Instead, he seemed to suspect that Ni had something more important to say, and looked him steadfastly in the face.

"That's what I say, too," replied Ni, lightly. "What's beat me is how such a fellow as that got to be an officer right from the word 'go!' — an' him the poorest shote in the whole lot. Now if it had a' ben Spencer Phillips I could understand it — or Bi Truax, or — or your Jeff — "

The farmer raised his fork menacingly, with a wrathful gesture. "Shet up!" he shouted; "shet up, I say! or I'll make ye!"

To my great amazement Ni was not at all affected by this demonstration. He leaned smilingly against the barrel, and picked out another apple — a spitzenberg this time.

"Now look a-here, Abner," he said, argumentatively, "what's the good o' gittin' mad? When I've had my say out, why, if you don't like it you needn't, an' nobody's a cent the wuss off. Of course, if you come down to hard-pan, it ain't none o' my business — "

"No," interjected Abner, in grim assent, "it ain't none o' your business!"

"But there is such a thing as being neighborly," Ni went on, undismayed, "an' meanin' things kindly, an' takin' 'em as they're meant."

"Yes, I know them kindly neighbors o' mine!" broke in the farmer with acrid irony, "I've summered 'em an' I've wintered 'em, an' the Lord deliver me from the whole caboodle of 'em! A meaner lot o' cusses never cumbered this foot-stool!"

"It takes all sorts o' people to make up a world," commented this freckled and sandy-headed young philosopher, testing the crimson skin of his apple with a tentative thumb-nail. "Now you ain't got anything in particular agin me, have you?"

"Nothin' except your breed," the farmer admitted. The frown with which he had been regarding Ni had softened just the least bit in the world.

"That don't count," said Ni, with easy confidence. "Why, what does breed amount to, anyway? You ought to be the last man alive to lug *that* in — you, who've up an' soured on your own breed — your own son Jeff!"

I looked to see Abner lift his fork again,

and perhaps go even further in his rage. Strangely enough, there crept into his sunburnt, massive face, at the corners of the eyes and mouth, something like the beginnings of a puzzled smile. "You're a cheeky little cuss, anyway!" was his final comment. Then his expression hardened again. "Who put you up to comin' here, an' talkin' like this to me?" he demanded, sternly.

"Nobody — hope to die!" protested Ni. "It's all my own spec. It riled me to see you mopin' round up here all alone by yourself, not knowin' what'd become of Jeff, an' makin' b'lieve to yourself you didn't care, an' so givin' yourself away to the whole neighborhood."

"Damn the neighborhood!" said Abner, fervently.

"Well, they talk about the same of you," Ni proceeded with an air of impartial candor. "But all that don't do you no good, an' don't do Jeff no good!"

"He made his own bed, and he must lay on it," said the farmer, with dogged firmness.

"I ain't sayin' he mustn't," remonstrated the other. "What I'm gittin' at is that you'd

feel easier in your mind if you knew where that bed was — an' so'd M'rye!"

Abner lifted his head. "His mother feels jest as I do," he said. "He sneaked off behind our backs to jine Lincoln's nigger-worshippers, an' levy war on fellow-countrymen o' his'n who'd done him no harm, an' whatever happens to him it serves him right. I ain't much of a hand to lug in Scripter to back up my argyments — like some folks you know of — but my feelin' is: 'Whoso taketh up the sword shall perish by the sword!' An' so says his mother too!"

"Hm-m!" grunted Ni, with ostentatious incredulity. He bit into his apple, and there ensued a momentary silence. Then, as soon as he was able to speak, this astonishing boy said: "Guess I'll have a talk with M'rye about that herself."

The farmer's patience was running emptings. "No!" he said, severely, "I forbid ye! Don't ye dare say a word to her about it. She don't want to listen to ye — an' I don't know what's possessed *me* to stand round an' gab about my private affairs with you like this, either. I don't bear ye no ill-will. If fathers can't help the kind o' sons they bring

up, why, still less can ye blame sons on account o' their fathers. But it ain't a thing I want to talk about any more, either now or any other time. That's all."

Abner put the fork over his shoulder, as a sign that he was going, and that the interview was at an end. But the persistent Ni had a last word to offer — and he left his barrel and walked over to the farmer.

"See here," he said, in more urgent tones than he had used before, "I'm goin' South, an' I'm goin' to find Jeff if it takes a leg! I don't know how much it'll cost — I've got a little of my own saved up — an' I thought p'r'aps — p'r'aps you'd like to — "

After a moment's thought the farmer shook his head. "No," he said, gravely, almost reluctantly. "It's agin my principles. You know me — Ni — you know I've never b'en a near man, let alone a mean man. An' ye know, too, that if Je — if that boy had behaved half-way decent, there ain't anything under the sun I wouldn't 'a' done for him. But this thing — I'm obleeged to ye for offrin — but — No! it's agin my principles. Still, I'm obleeged to ye. Fill your pockets with them spitzenbergs, if they taste good to ye."

With this Abner Beech turned and walked resolutely off.

Left alone with me, Ni threw away the half-eaten apple he had held in his hand. "I don't want any of his dummed old spitzenbergs," he said, pushing his foot into the heap of fruit on the ground, in a meditative way.

"Then you ain't agoin' South?" I queried.

"Yes I am!" he replied, with decision. "I can work my way somehow. Only don't you whisper a word about it to any livin' soul, d'ye mind!"

Two or three days after that we heard that Ni Hagadorn had left for unknown parts. Some said he had gone to enlist — it seems that, despite his youth and small stature in my eyes, he would have been acceptable to the enlistment standards of the day — but the major opinion was that much dime-novel reading had inspired him with the notion of becoming a trapper in the mystic Far West.

I alone possessed the secret of his disappearance — unless, indeed, his sister knew — and no one will ever know what struggles I had to keep from confiding it to Hurley.

CHAPTER VII

THE ELECTION

Soon the fine weather was at an end. One day it was soft and warm, with a tender blue haze over the distant woods and a sun like a blood-orange in the tranquil sky, and birds twittering about among the elders and sumac along the rail fences. And the next day everything was gray and lifeless and desolate, with fierce winds sweeping over the bare fields, and driving the cold rain in sheets before them.

Some people — among them Hurley — said it was the equinoctial that was upon us. Abner Beech ridiculed this, and proved by the dictionary that the equinoctial meant September 22d, whereas it was now well-nigh the end of October. The Irishman conceded that in books this might be so, but stuck wilfully to it that in practice the equinoctial came just before winter set in. After so long a period of saddened silence brooding over our household, it was quite a relief to

hear the men argue this question of the weather.

Down at the Corners old farmers had wrangled over the identity of the equinoctial ever since I could remember. It was pretty generally agreed that each year along some time during the fall, there came a storm which was properly entitled to that name, but at this point harmony ended. Some insisted that it came before Indian Summer, some that it followed that season, and this was further complicated by the fact that no one was ever quite sure when it *was* Indian Summer. There were all sorts of rules for recognizing this delectable time of year, rules connected, I recall, with the opening of the chestnut burrs, the movement of birds, and various other incidents in nature's great processional, but these rules rarely came right in our rough latitude, and sometimes never came at all — at least did not bring with them anything remotely resembling Indian Summer, but made our autumn one prolonged and miserable succession of storms. And then it was an especially trying trick to pick out the equinoctial from the lot — and even harder still to prove to sceptical neighbors that you were right.

Whatever this particular storm may have been it came too soon. Being so short-handed on the farm, we were much behind in the matter of drawing our produce to market. And now, after the first day or two of rain, the roads were things to shudder at. It was not so bad getting to and from the Corners, for Agrippa Hill had a gravel formation, but beyond the Corners, whichever way one went over the bottom lands of the Nedahma Valley, it was a matter of lashing the panting teams through seas of mud punctuated by abyssmal pitch-holes, into which the wheels slumped over their hubs, and quite generally stuck till they were pried out with fence-rails.

Abner Beech was exceptionally tender in his treatment of live-stock. The only occasion I ever heard of on which he was tempted into using his big fists upon a fellow-creature, was once, long before my time, when one of his hired men struck a refractory cow over its haunches with a shovel. He knocked this man clear through the stanchions. Often Jeff and I used to feel that he carried his solicitude for horse-flesh too far — particularly when we wanted to drive down to the creek for a summer evening swim, and he thought the teams were too tired.

So now he would not let us hitch up and drive into Octavius with even the lightest loads, on account of the horses. It would be better to wait, he said, until there was sledding; then we could slip in in no time. He pretended that all the signs this year pointed to an early winter.

The result was that we were more than ever shut off from news of the outer world. The weekly paper which came to us was full, I remember, of political arguments and speeches — for a Congress and Governor were to be elected a few weeks hence — but there were next to no tidings from the front. The war, in fact, seemed to have almost stopped altogether, and this paper spoke of it as a confessed failure. Farmer Beech and Hurley, of course, took the same view, and their remarks quite prepared me from day to day to hear that peace had been concluded.

But down at the Corners a strikingly different spirit reigned. It quite surprised me, I know, when I went down on occasion for odds and ends of groceries which the bad roads prevented us from getting in town, to discover that the talk there was all in favor of having a great deal more war than ever.

This store at the Corners was also the post-office, and, more important still, it served as a general rallying place for the men-folks of the neighborhood after supper. Lee Watkins, who kept it, would rather have missed a meal of victuals any day than not to have had the "boys" come in of an evening, and sit or lounge around discussing the situation. Many of them were very old boys now, garrulous seniors who remembered "Matty" Van Buren, as they called him, and told weird stories of the Anti-Masonry days. These had the well-worn arm-chairs nearest the stove, in cold weather, and spat tobacco-juice on its hottest parts with a precision born of long-time experience. The younger fellows accommodated themselves about the outer circle, squatting on boxes, or with one leg over a barrel, sampling the sugar and crackers and raisins in an absent-minded way each evening, till Mrs. Watkins came out and put the covers on. She was a stout, peevish woman in bloomers, and they said that her husband, Lee, couldn't have run the post-office for twenty-four hours if it hadn't been for her. We understood that she was a Woman's Rights' woman, which some held was much the

same as believing in Free Love. All that was certain, however, was that she did not believe in free lunches out of her husband's barrels and cases.

The chief flaw in this village parliament was the absence of an opposition. Among all the accustomed assemblage of men who sat about, their hats well back on their heads, their mouths full of strong language and tobacco, there was none to disagree upon any essential feature of the situation with the others. To secure even the merest semblance of variety, those whose instincts were cross-grained had to go out of their way to pick up trifling points of difference, and the arguments over these had to be spun out with the greatest possible care, to be kept going at all. I should fancy, however, that this apparent concord only served to keep before their minds, with added persistency, the fact that there *was* an opposition, nursing its heretical wrath in solitude up on the Beech farm. At all events, I seemed never to go into the grocery of a night without hearing bitter remarks, or even curses, levelled at our household.

It was from these casual visits — standing

about on the outskirts of the gathering, beyond the feeble ring of light thrown out by the kerosene lamp on the counter — that I learned how deeply the Corners were opposed to peace. It appeared from the talk here that there was something very like treason at the front. The victory at Antietam — so dearly bought with the blood of our own people — had been, they said, of worse than no use at all. The defeated Rebels had been allowed to take their own time in crossing the Potomac comfortably. They had not been pursued or molested since, and the Corners could only account for this on the theory of treachery at Union headquarters. Some only hinted guardedly at this. Others declared openly that the North was being sold out by its own generals. As for old "Jee" Hagadorn, who came in almost every night, and monopolized the talking all the while he was present, he made no bones of denouncing McClellan and Porter as traitors who must be hanged.

He comes before me as I write — his thin form quivering with excitement, the red stubbly hair standing up all round his drawn and livid face, his knuckles rapping out one fierce

point after another on the candle-box, as he filled the hot little room with angry declamation. "Go it Jee!" "Give 'em Hell!" "Hangin's too good for 'em!" his auditors used to exclaim in encouragement, whenever he paused for breath, and then he would start off again still more furiously, till he had to gasp after every word, and screamed "Lincoln-ah!" "Lee-ah!" "Antietam-ah!" and so on, into our perturbed ears. Then I would go home, recalling how he had formerly shouted about "Adam-ah!" and "Eve-ah!" in church, and marvelling that he had never worked himself into a fit, or broken a blood-vessel.

So between what Abner and Hurley said on the farm, and what was proclaimed at the Corners, it was pretty hard to figure out whether the war was going to stop, or go on much worse than ever.

Things were still in this doubtful state, when election Tuesday came round. I had not known or thought about it, until, at the breakfast-table Abner said that he guessed he and Hurley would go down and vote before dinner. He had some days before secured a package of ballots from the organi-

zation of his party at Octavius, and these he now took from one of the bookcase drawers, and divided between himself and Hurley.

"They won't be much use, I dessay, peddlin' 'em at the polls," he said, with a grim momentary smile, "but, by the Eternal, we'll vote 'em!"

"As many of 'em as they'll be allowin' us," added Hurley, in chuckling qualification.

They were very pretty tickets in those days, with marbled and plaided backs in brilliant colors, and spreading eagles in front, over the printed captions. In other years I had shared with the urchins of the neighborhood the excitement of scrambling for a share of these ballots, after they had been counted, and tossed out of the boxes. The conditions did not seem to be favorable for a repetition of that this year, and apparently this occurred to Abner, for of his own accord he handed me over some dozen of the little packets, each tied with a thread, and labelled, "State," "Congressional," "Judiciary," and the like. He, moreover, consented — the morning chores being out of the way — that I should accompany them to the Corners.

The ground had frozen stiff overnight, and the road lay in hard uncompromising ridges between the tracks of yesterday's wheels. The two men swung along down the hill ahead of me, with resolute strides and their heads proudly thrown back, as if they had been going into battle. I shuffled on behind in my new boots, also much excited. The day was cold and raw.

The polls were fixed up in a little building next to the post-office — a one-story frame structure where Lee Watkins kept his bob-sleigh and oil barrels, as a rule. These had been cleared out into the yard, and a table and some chairs put in in their place. A pane of glass had been taken out of the window. Through this aperture the voters, each in his turn, passed their ballots, to be placed by the inspectors in the several boxes ranged along the window-sill inside. A dozen or more men, mainly in army overcoats, stood about on the sidewalk or in the road outside, stamping their feet for warmth, and slapping their shoulders with their hands, between the fingers of which they held little packets of tickets like mine — that is to say, they were like mine in form and brilliancy of

color, but I knew well enough that there the resemblance ended abruptly. A yard or so from the window two posts had been driven into the ground, with a board nailed across to prevent undue crowding.

Abner and Hurley marched up to the polls without a word to anyone, or any sign of recognition from the bystanders. Their appearance, however, visibly awakened the interest of the Corners, and several young fellows who were standing on the grocery steps sauntered over in their wake to see what was going on. These, with the ticket-peddlers, crowded up close to the window now, behind our two men.

"Abner Beech!" called the farmer through the open pane, in a defiant voice. Standing on tiptoe, I could just see the heads of some men inside, apparently looking through the election books. No questions were asked, and in a minute or so Abner had voted and stood aside a little, to make room for his companion.

"Timothy Joseph Hurley!" shouted our hired man, standing on his toes to make himself taller, and squaring his weazened shoulders.

"Got your naturalization papers?" came out a sharp, gruff inquiry through the window-sash.

"That I have!" said the Irishman, wagging his head in satisfaction at having foreseen this trick, and winking blandly into the wall of stolid, hostile faces encircling him. "That I have!"

He drew forth an old and crumpled envelope, from his breast-pocket, and extracted some papers from its ragged folds which he passed through to the inspector. The latter just cast his eye over the documents and handed them back.

"Them ain't no good!" he said, curtly.

"What's that you're saying?" cried the Irishman. "Sure I've voted on thim same papers every year since 1856, an' niver a man gainsaid me. No good, is it? Huh!"

"Why ain't they no good?" boomed in Abner Beech's deep, angry voice. He had moved back to the window.

"Because they ain't, that's enough!" returned the inspector. "Don't block up the window, there! Others want to vote!"

"I'll have the law on yez!" shouted Hurley. "I'll swear me vote in! I'll — I'll —"

"Aw, shut up, you Mick!" someone called out close by, and then there rose another voice farther back in the group: "Don't let him vote! One Copperhead's enough in Agrippa!"

"I'll have the law —" I heard Hurley begin again, at the top of his voice, and Abner roared out something I could not catch. Then as in a flash the whole cluster of men became one confused whirling tangle of arms and legs, sprawling and wrestling on the ground, and from it rising the repellant sound of blows upon flesh, and a discordant chorus of grunts and curses. Big chunks of icy mud flew through the air, kicked up by the boots of the men as they struggled. I saw the two posts with the board weave under the strain, then give way, some of the embattled group tumbling over them as they fell. It was wholly impossible to guess who was who in this writhing and tossing mass of fighters. I danced up and down in a frenzy of excitement, watching this wild spectacle, and, so I was told years afterward, screaming with all my might and main.

Then all at once there was a mighty upheaval, and a big man half-scrambled, half-hurled himself to his feet. It was Abner,

who had wrenched one of the posts bodily from under the others, and swung it now high in air. Some one clutched it, and for the moment stayed its descent, yelling, meanwhile, "Look out! Look out!" as though life itself depended on the volume of his voice.

The ground cleared itself as if by magic. On the instant there was only Abner standing there with the post in his hands, and little Hurley beside him, the lower part of his face covered with blood, and his coat torn half from his back. The others had drawn off, and formed a semicircle just out of reach of the stake, like farm-dogs round a wounded bear at bay. Two or three of them had blood about their heads and necks.

There were cries of "Kill him!" and it was said afterward that Roselle Upman drew a pistol, but if he did others dissuaded him from using it. Abner stood with his back to the building, breathing hard, and a good deal covered with mud, but eyeing the crowd with a masterful ferocity, and from time to time shifting his hands to get a new grip on that tremendous weapon of his. He said not a word.

The Irishman, after a moment's hesitation, wiped some of the blood from his mouth and jaw, and turned to the window again. "Timothy Joseph Hurley!" he shouted in, defiantly.

This time another inspector came to the front — the owner of the tanyard over on the Dutch road, and a man of importance in the district. Evidently there had been a discussion inside.

"We will take your vote if you want to swear it in," he said, in a pacific tone, and though there were some dissenting cries from the crowd without, he read the oath, and Hurley mumbled it after him.

Then, with some difficulty, he sorted out from his pocket some torn and mud-stained packets of tickets, picked the cleanest out from each, and voted them — all with a fine air of unconcern.

Abner Beech marched out behind him now with a resolute clutch on the stake. The crowd made reluctant way for them, not without a good many truculent remarks, but with no offer of actual violence. Some of the more boisterous ones, led by Roselle Upman, were for following them, and renewing

the encounter beyond the Corners. But this, too, came to nothing, and when I at last ventured to cross the road and join Abner and Hurley, even the cries of "Copperhead" had died away.

The sun had come out, and the frosty ruts had softened to stickiness. The men's heavy boots picked up whole sections of plastic earth as they walked in the middle of the road up the hill.

"What's the matter with your mouth?" asked Abner at last, casting a sidelong glance at his companion. "It's be'n a-bleedin'."

Hurley passed an investigating hand carefully over the lower part of his face, looked at his reddened fingers, and laughed aloud.

"I'd a fine grand bite at the ear of one of them," he said, in explanation. "'Tis no blood o' mine."

Abner knitted his brows. "That ain't the way we fight in this country," he said, in tones of displeasure. "Bitin' men's ears ain't no civilized way of behavin'."

"'Twas not much of a day for civilization," remarked Hurley, lightly; and there was no further conversation on our homeward tramp.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ELECTION BONFIRE

THE election had been on Tuesday, November 4th. Our paper, containing the news of the result, was to be expected at the Corners on Friday morning. But long before that date we had learned — I think it was Hurley who found it out — that the Abolitionists had actually been beaten in our Congressional district. It was so amazing a thing that Abner could scarcely credit it, but it was apparently beyond dispute. For that matter, one hardly needed further evidence than the dejected way in which Philo Andrews and Myron Pierce and other followers of "Jee" Hagadorn hung their heads as they drove past our place.

Of course it had all been done by the vote in the big town of Tecumseh, way at the other end of the district, and by those towns surrounding it where the Mohawk Dutch were still very numerous. But this did not

at all lessen the exhilaration with which the discovery that the Radicals of our own Dearborn County had been snowed under, filled our breasts. Was it not wonderful to think of, that these heroes of remote Adams and Jay Counties should have been at work redeeming the district on the very day when the two votes of our farm marked the almost despairing low-water mark of the cause in Agrippa?

Abner could hardly keep his feet down on the ground or floor when he walked, so powerfully did the tidings of this achievement thrill his veins. He said the springs of his knees kept jerking upward, so that he wanted to kick and dance all the while. Janey Wilcox, who, though a meek and silent girl, was a wildly bitter partisan, was all eagerness to light a bonfire out on the knoll in front of the house Thursday night, so that every mother's son of them down at the Corners might see it, but Abner thought it would be better to wait until we had the printed facts before us.

I could hardly wait to finish breakfast Friday morning, so great was my zeal to be off to the post-office. It was indeed not alto-

gether daylight when I started at quick step down the hill. Yet, early as I was, there were some twenty people inside Lee Watkins's store when I arrived, all standing clustered about the high square row of glass-faced pigeon-holes reared on the farther end of the counter, behind which could be seen Lee and his sour-faced wife sorting over the mail by lamp-light. "Jee" Hagadorn was in this group and Squire Avery, and most of the other prominent citizens of the neighborhood. All were deeply restless.

Every minute or two some one of them would shout: "Come, Lee, give us out one of the papers, anyway!" But for some reason Mrs. Watkins was inexorable. Her pursed-up lips and resolute expression told us plainly that none would be served till all were sorted. So the impatient waiters bided their time under protest, exchanging splenetic remarks under their breath. We must have stood there three-quarters of an hour.

At last Mrs. Watkins wiped her hands on the apron over her bloomers. Everybody knew the signal, and on the instant a dozen arms were stretched vehemently toward Lee,

struggling for precedence. In another moment wrappers had been ripped off and sheets flung open. Then the store was alive with excited voices. "Yes, sir! It's true! The Copperheads have won!" "*Tribune* concedes Seymour's election!" "We're beaten in the district by less'n a hundred!" "Good-by, human liberty!" "Now we know how Lazarus felt when he was licked by the dogs!" and so on — a stormy warfare of wrathful ejaculations.

In my turn I crowded up, and held out my hand for the paper I saw in the box. Lee Watkins recognized me, and took the paper out to deliver to me. But at the same moment his wife, who had been hastily scanning the columns of some other journal, looked up and also saw who I was. With a lightning gesture she threw out her hand, snatched our *World* from her husband's grasp, and threw it spitefully under the counter.

"There ain't nothing for *you!*" she snapped at me. "Pesky Copperhead rag!" she muttered to herself.

Although I had plainly seen the familiar wrapper, and understood her action well enough, it never occurred to me to argue

the question with Mrs. Watkins. Her bustling, determined demeanor, perhaps also her bloomers, had always filled me with awe. I hung about for a time, avoiding her range of vision, until she went out into her kitchen. Then I spoke with resolution to Lee:

"If you don't give me that paper," I said, "I'll tell Abner, an' he'll make you sweat for it!"

The postmaster stole a cautious glance kitchenward. Then he made a swift, diving movement under the counter, and furtively thrust the paper out at me.

"Scoot!" he said, briefly, and I obeyed him.

Abner was simply wild with bewildered delight over what this paper had to tell him. Even my narrative about Mrs. Watkins, which ordinarily would have thrown him into transports of rage, provoked only a passing sniff. "They've only got two more years to hold that post-office," was his only remark upon it.

Hurley and Janey Wilcox and even the Underwood girl came in, and listened to Abner reading out the news. He shirked nothing, but waded manfully through long

tables of figures and meaningless catalogues of counties in other States, the names of which he scarcely knew how to pronounce: "'Five-hundred and thirty-one townships in Wisconsin give Brown 21,409, Smith 16,329, Ferguson 802, a Republican loss of 26.' Do you see that, Hurley? It's everywhere the same." "'Kalapoosas County elects Republican Sheriff for first time in history of party.' That isn't so good, but its only one out of ten thousand." "'Four-hundred-and-six townships in New Hampshire show a net Democratic loss of —' pshaw! there ain't nothing in that! Wait till the other towns are heard from!"

So Abner read on and on, slapping his thigh with his free hand whenever anything specially good turned up. And there was a great deal that we felt to be good. The State had been carried. Besides our Congressman, many others had been elected in unlooked-for places — so much so that the paper held out the hope that Congress itself might be ours. Of course Abner at once talked as if it were already ours. Resting between paragraphs, he told Hurley and the others that this settled it. The war must

now surely be abandoned, and the seceding States invited to return to the Union on terms honorable to both sides.

Hurley had assented with acquiescent nods to everything else. He seemed to have a reservation on this last point. "An' what if they won't come?" he asked.

"Let 'em stay out, then," replied Abner, dogmatically. "This war — this wicked war between brothers — must stop. That's the meaning of Tuesday's votes. What did you and I go down to the Corners and cast our ballots for? — why, for peace!"

"Well, somebody else got my share of it, then," remarked Hurley, with a rueful chuckle.

Abner was too intent upon his theme to notice. "Yes, peace!" he repeated, in the deep vibrating tones of his class-meeting manner. "Why, just think what's been a-goin' on! Great armies raised, hundreds of thousands of honest men taken from their work an' set to murderin' each other, whole deestricks of country torn up by the roots, homes desolated, the land filled with widows an' orphans, an' every house a house of mournin'."

Mrs. Beech had been sitting, with her mending-basket on her knee, listening to her husband like the rest of us. She shot to her feet now as these last words of his quivered in the air, paying no heed to the basket or its scattered contents on the floor, but putting her apron to her eyes, and making her way thus past us, half-blindly, into her bedroom. I thought I heard the sound of a sob as she closed the door.

That the stately, proud, self-contained mistress of our household should act like this before us all was even more surprising than Seymour's election. We stared at one another in silent astonishment.

"M'rye ain't feelin' over 'n' above well," Abner said at last, apologetically. "You girls ought to spare her all you kin."

One could see, however, that he was as puzzled as the rest of us. He rose to his feet, walked over to the stove, rubbed his boot meditatively against the hearth for a minute or two, then came back again to the table. It was with a visible effort that he finally shook off this mood, and forced a smile to his lips.

"Well, Janey," he said, with an effort at

briskness, "ye kin go ahead with your bonfire, now. I guess I've got some old bar'ls for ye over 'n' the cow-barn."

But having said this, he turned abruptly and followed his wife into the little chamber off the living-room.

CHAPTER IX

ESTHER'S VISIT

THE next day, Saturday, was my birthday. I celebrated it by a heavy cold, with a bursting headache and chills chasing each other down my back. I went out to the cow-barn with the two men before daylight, as usual, but felt so bad that I had to come back to the house before milking was half over. The moment M'rye saw me, I was ordered on to the sick-list.

The Beech homestead was a good place to be sick in. Both M'rye and Janey had a talent in the way of fixing up tasty little dishes for invalids, and otherwise ministering to their comfort, which year after year went a-begging, simply because all the men-folk kept so well. Therefore, when the rare opportunity did arrive, they made the most of it. I had my feet and legs put into a bucket of hot water, and wrapped round with burdock leaves. Janey prepared for my

breakfast some soft toast — not the insipid and common milk-toast — but each golden-brown slice treated separately on a plate, first moistened with scalding water, then peppered, salted, and buttered, with a little cold milk on top of all. I ate this sumptuous breakfast at my leisure, ensconced in M'rye's big cushioned rocking-chair, with my feet and legs, well tucked up in a blanket-shawl, stretched out on another chair, comfortably near the stove.

It was taken for granted that I had caught my cold out around the bonfire the previous evening — and this conviction threw a sort of patriotic glamour about my illness, at least in my own mind.

The bonfire had been a famous success. Though there was a trifle of rain in the air, the barrels and mossy discarded old fence-rails burned like pitch-pine, and when Hurley and I threw on armfuls of brush, the sparks burst up with a roar into a flaming column which we felt must be visible all over our side of Dearborn County. At all events, there was no doubt about its being seen and understood down at the Corners, for presently our enemies there started an answering

bonfire, which glowed from time to time with such a peculiarly concentrated radiance that Abner said Lee Watkins must have given them some of his kerosene-oil barrels. The thought of such a sacrifice as this on the part of the postmaster rather disturbed Abner's mind, raising, as it did, the hideous suggestion that possibly later returns might have altered the election results. But when Hurley and I dragged forward and tipped over into the blaze the whole side of an old abandoned corn-crib, and heaped dry brush on top of that, till the very sky seemed afire above us, and the stubble-fields down the hill-side were all ruddy in the light, Abner confessed himself reassured. Our enthusiasm was so great that it was nearly ten o'clock before we went to bed, having first put the fire pretty well out, lest a rising wind during the night should scatter sparks and work mischief.

I had all these splendid things to think of next day, along with my headache and the shivering spine, and they tipped the balance toward satisfaction. Shortly after breakfast M'rye made a flaxseed poultice and muffled it flabbily about my neck, and brought me

also some boneset-tea to drink. There was a debate in the air as between castor-oil and senna, fragments of which were borne in to me when the kitchen door was open. The Underwood girl alarmed me by steadily insisting that her sister-in-law always broke up sick-headaches with a mustard-plaster put raw on the back of the neck. Every once in a while one of them would come in and address to me the stereotyped formula: "Feel any better?" and I as invariably answered, 'No." In reality, though, I was lazily comfortable all the time, with Lossing's "Field-Book of the War of 1812" lying open on my lap, to look at when I felt inclined. This book was not nearly so interesting as the one about the Revolution, but a grandfather of mine had marched as a soldier up to Sackett's Harbor in the later war, though he did not seem to have had any fighting to do after he got there, and in my serious moods I always felt it my duty to read about his war instead of the other.

So the day passed along, and dusk began to gather in the living-room. The men were off outdoors somewhere, and the girls were churning in the butter-room. M'rye had

come in with her mending, and sat on the opposite side of the stove, at intervals casting glances over its flat top to satisfy herself that my poultice had not sagged down from its proper place, and that I was in other respects doing as well as could be expected.

Conversation between us was hardly to be thought of, even if I had not been so drowsily indolent. M'rye was not a talker, and preferred always to sit in silence, listening to others, or, better still, going on at her work with no sounds at all to disturb her thoughts. These long periods of meditation, and the sedate gaze of her black, penetrating eyes, gave me the feeling that she must be much wiser than other women, who could not keep still at all, but gabbled everything the moment it came into their heads.

We had sat thus for a long, long time, until I began to wonder how she could sew in the waning light, when all at once, without lifting her eyes from her work, she spoke to me.

"D' you know where Ni Hagadorn's gone to?" she asked me, in a measured, impressive voice.

"He — he — told me he was a-goin' away," I made answer, with weak evasiveness.

"But where? Down South?" She looked up, as I hesitated, and flashed that darkling glance of hers at me. "Out with it!" she commanded. "Tell me the truth!"

Thus adjured, I promptly admitted that Ni had said he was going South, and could work his way somehow. "He's gone, you know," I added, after a pause, "to try and find — that is, to hunt around after —"

"Yes, I know," said M'rye, sententiously, and another long silence ensued.

She rose after a time, and went out into the kitchen, returning with the lighted lamp. She set this on the table, putting the shade down on one side so that the light should not hurt my eyes, and resumed her mending. The yellow glow thus falling upon her gave to her dark, severe, high-featured face a duskier effect than ever. It occurred to me that Molly Brant, that mysteriously fascinating and bloody Mohawk queen who left such an awful reddened mark upon the history of her native Valley, must have been like our M'rye. My mind began sleepily to clothe the farmer's wife in blankets and chains of

wampum, with eagles' feathers in her raven hair, and then to drift vaguely off over the threshold of Indian dreamland, when suddenly, with a start, I became conscious that some unexpected person had entered the room by the veranda-door behind me.

The rush of cold air from without had awakened me and told me of the entrance. A glance at M'rye's face revealed the rest. She was staring at the newcomer with a dumfounded expression of countenance, her mouth half-open with sheer surprise. Still staring, she rose and tilted the lamp-shade in yet another direction, so that the light was thrown upon the stranger. At this I turned in my chair to look.

It was Esther Hagadorn who had come in!

There was a moment's awkward silence, and then the school-teacher began hurriedly to speak. "I saw you were alone from the veranda — I was so nervous, it never occurred to me to rap — the curtains being up — I — I walked straight in."

As if in comment upon this statement, M'rye marched across the room, and pulled down both curtains over the veranda windows. With her hand still upon the cord

of the second shade, she turned and again dumbly surveyed her visitor.

Esther flushed visibly at this reception, and had to choke down the first words that came to her lips. Then she went on better: "I hope you'll excuse my rudeness. I really did forget to rap. I came upon very special business. Is Ab — Mr. Beech at home?"

"Won't you sit down?" said M'rye, with a glum effort at civility. "I expect him in presently."

The school-ma'am, displaying some diffidence, seated herself in the nearest chair, and gazed at the wall-paper with intentness. She had never seemed to notice me at all — indeed had spoken of seeing M'rye alone through the window — and I now coughed, and stirred to readjust my poultice, but she did not look my way. M'rye had gone back to her chair by the stove, and taken up her mending again.

"You'd better lay off your things. You won't feel 'em when you go out," she remarked, after an embarrassing period of silence, investing the formal phrases with chilling intention.

Esther made a fumbling motion at the loop

of her big mink cape, but did not unfasten it.

"I — I don't know *what* you think of me," she began, at last, and then nervously halted.

"Mebbe it's just as well you don't," said M'rye, significantly, darning away with long sweeps of her arm, and bending attentively over her stocking and ball.

"I can understand your feeling hard," Esther went on, still eying the sprawling blue figures on the wall, and plucking with her fingers at the furry tails on her cape. "And — I *am* to blame, *some*, I can see now — but it didn't seem so, *then*, to either of us."

"It ain't no affair of mine," remarked M'rye, when the pause came, "but if that's your business with Abner, you won't make much by waitin'. Of course it's nothing to me, one way or t'other."

Not another word was exchanged for a long time. From where I sat I could see the girl's lips tremble, as she looked steadfastly into the wall. I felt certain that M'rye was darning the same place over and over again, so furiously did she keep her needle flying.

All at once she looked up angrily. "Well," she said, in loud, bitter tones: "Why not

out with what you've come to say, 'n' be done with it? You've heard something, *I* know!"

Esther shook her head. "No, Mrs. Beech," she said, with a piteous quaver in her voice, "I — I haven't heard anything!"

The sound of her own broken utterances seemed to affect her deeply. Her eyes filled with tears, and she hastily got out a handkerchief from her muff, and began drying them. She could not keep from sobbing aloud a little.

M'rye deliberately took another stocking from the heap in the basket, fitted it over the ball, and began a fresh task — all without a glance at the weeping girl.

Thus the two women still sat, when Janey came in to lay the table for supper. She lifted the lamp off to spread the cloth, and put it on again; she brought in plates and knives and spoons, and arranged them in their accustomed places — all the while furtively regarding Miss Hagadorn with an incredulous surprise. When she had quite finished she went over to her mistress and, bending low, whispered so that we could all hear quite distinctly: "Is *she* goin' to stay to supper?"

M'rye hesitated, but Esther lifted her head and put down the handkerchief instantly. "Oh, no!" she said, eagerly: "don't think of it! I must hurry home as soon as I've seen Mr. Beech." Janey went out with an obvious air of relief.

Presently there was a sound of heavy boots out in the kitchen being thrown on to the floor, and then Abner came in. He halted in the doorway, his massive form seeming to completely fill it, and devoted a moment or so to taking in the novel spectacle of a neighbor under his roof. Then he advanced, walking obliquely till he could see distinctly the face of the visitor. It stands to reason that he must have been surprised, but he gave no sign of it.

"How d' do, Miss," he said, with grave politeness, coming up and offering her his big hand.

Esther rose abruptly, peony-red with pleasurable confusion, and took the hand stretched out to her. "How d' do, Mr. Beech," she responded with eagerness, "I — I came up to see you — a — about something that's very pressing."

"It's blowing up quite a gale outside," the

farmer remarked, evidently to gain time the while he scanned her face in a solemn, thoughtful way, noting, I doubt not, the swollen eyelids and stains of tears, and trying to guess her errand. "Shouldn't wonder if we had a foot o' snow before morning."

The school-teacher seemed in doubt how best to begin what she had to say, so that Abner had time, after he lifted his inquiring gaze from her, to run a master's eye over the table.

"Have Janey lay another place!" he said, with authoritative brevity.

As M'rye rose to obey, Esther broke forth: "Oh, no, please don't! Thank you so much, Mr. Beech — but really I can't stop — truly, I mustn't think of it."

The farmer merely nodded a confirmation of his order to M'rye, who hastened out to the kitchen.

"It'll be there for ye, anyway," he said. "Now set down again, please."

It was all as if he was the one who had the news to tell, so naturally did he take command of the situation. The girl seated herself, and the farmer drew up his armchair and planted himself before her, keeping his

stockinged feet under the rungs for politeness' sake.

"Now, Miss," he began, just making it civilly plain that he preferred not to utter her hated paternal name, "I don't know no more'n a babe unborn what's brought you here. I'm sure, from what I know of ye, that you wouldn't come to this house jest for the sake of comin', or to argy things that can't be, an' mustn't be, argied. In one sense, we ain't friends of yours here, and there's a heap o' things that you an' me don't want to talk about, because they'd only lead to bad feelin', an' so we'll leave 'em all severely alone. But in another way, I've always had a liking for you. You're a smart girl, an' a scholar into the bargain, an' there ain't so many o' that sort knockin' around in these parts that a man like myself, who's fond o' books an' learnin', wants to be unfriendly to them there is. So now you can figure out pretty well where the chalk line lays, and we'll walk on it."

Esther nodded her head. "Yes, I understand," she remarked, and seemed not to dislike what Abner had said.

"That being so, what is it?" the farmer asked, with his hands on his knees.

"Well, Mr. Beech," the school-teacher began, noting with a swift side-glance that M'rye had returned, and was herself rearranging the table. "I don't think you can have heard it, but some important news has come in during the day. There seems to be different stories, but the gist of them is that a number of the leading Union generals have been discovered to be traitors, and McClellan has been dismissed from his place at the head of the army, and ordered to return to his home in New Jersey under arrest, and they say others are to be treated in the same way, and Fath — *some* people think it will be a hanging matter, and —"

Abner waved all this aside with a motion of his hand. "It don't amount to a hill o' beans," he said, placidly. "It's jest spite, because we licked 'em at the elections. Don't you worry your head about *that!*"

Esther was not reassured. "That isn't all," she went on, nervously. "They say there's been discovered a big conspiracy, with secret sympathizers all over the North."

"Pooh!" commented Abner. "We've heer'n tell o' that before!"

"All over the North," she continued, "with

the intention of bringing across infected clothes from Canada, and spreading the small-pox among us, and — "

The farmer laughed outright; a laugh embittered by contempt. "What cock-'n'-bull story'll be hatched next!" he said. "You don't mean to say you — a girl with a head on her shoulders like *you* — give ear to such tomfoolery as that! Come, now, honest Injin, do you mean to tell me *you* believe all this?"

"It don't so much matter, Mr. Beech," the girl replied, raising her face to his, and speaking more confidently — "it don't matter at all what I believe. I'm talking of what they believe down at the Corners."

"The Corners be jiggered!" exclaimed Abner, politely, but with emphasis.

Esther rose from the chair. "Mr. Beech," she declared, impressively; "they're coming up here to-night! That bonfire of yours made 'em mad. It's no matter how I learned it — it wasn't from father — I don't know that he knows anything about it, but they're coming *here!* and — and Heaven only knows what they're going to do when they get here!"

The farmer rose also, his huge figure towering above that of the girl, as he looked

down at her over his beard. He no longer dissembled his stockinged-feet. After a moment's pause he said: "So that's what you came to tell me, eh?"

The school-ma'am nodded her head. "I couldn't bear not to," she explained, simply.

"Well, I'm obleeged to ye!" Abner remarked, with gravity. "Whatever comes of it, I'm obleeged to ye!"

He turned at this, and walked slowly out into the kitchen, leaving the door open behind him. "Pull on your boots again!" we heard him say, presumably to Hurley. In a minute or two he returned, with his own boots on, and bearing over his arm the old double-barrelled shot-gun which always hung above the kitchen mantel-piece. In his hands he had two shot-flasks, the little tobacco-bag full of buckshot, and a powder-horn. He laid these on the open shelf of the bookcase, and, after fitting fresh caps on the nipples put the gun beside them.

"I'd be all the more sot on your stayin' to supper," he remarked, looking again at Esther, "only if there *should* be any unpleasantness, why, I'd hate like sin to have you mixed up in it. You see how I'm placed."

Esther did not hesitate a moment. She walked over to where M'rye stood by the table replenishing the butter-plate. "I'd be very glad indeed to stay, Mr. Beech," she said, with winning frankness, "if I may."

"There's the place laid for you," commented M'rye, impassively. Then, catching her husband's eye, she added the perfunctory assurance "You're entirely welcome."

Hurley and the girls came in now, and all except me took their seats about the table. Both Abner and the Irishman had their coats on, out of compliment to company. M'rye brought over a thick slice of fresh buttered bread with brown sugar on it, and a cup of weak tea, and put them beside me on a chair. Then the evening meal went forward, the farmer talking in a fragmentary way about the crops and the weather. Save for an occasional response from our visitor, the rest maintained silence. The Underwood girl could not keep her fearful eyes from the gun lying on the bookcase, and protested that she had no appetite, but Hurley ate vigorously, and had a smile on his wrinkled and swarthy little face.

The wind outside whistled shrilly at the

windows, rattling the shutters, and trying its force in explosive blasts which seemed to rock the house on its stone foundations. Once or twice it shook the veranda-door with such violence that the folk at the table instinctively lifted their heads, thinking someone was there.

Then, all at once, above the confusion of the storm's noises, we heard a voice rise, high and clear, crying:

"*Smoke the damned Copperhead out!*"

CHAPTER X

THE FIRE

"THAT was Roselle Upman that hollered," remarked Janey Wilcox, breaking the agitated silence which had fallen upon the supper table. "You can tell it's him because he's had all his front teeth pulled out."

"I wasn't born in the woods to be skeert by an owl!" replied Abner, with a great show of tranquillity, helping himself to another slice of bread. "Miss, you ain't half makin' out a supper!"

But this bravado could not maintain itself. In another minute there came a loud chorus of angry yells, heightened at its finish by two or three pistol shots. Then Abner pushed back his chair and rose slowly to his feet, and the rest sprang up all around the table.

"Hurley," said the farmer, speaking as deliberately as he knew how, doubtless with the idea of reassuring the others, "you go out into the kitchen with the women folks,

an' bar the woodshed door, an' bring in the axe with you to stan' guard over the kitchen door. I'll look out for this part o' the house myself."

"I want to stay in here with you, Abner," said M'rye.

"No, you go out with the others!" commanded the master with firmness, and so they all filed out with no hint whatever of me. The shadow of the lamp-shade had cut me off altogether from their thoughts.

Perhaps it is not surprising that my recollections of what now ensued should lack definiteness and sequence. The truth is, that my terror at my own predicament, sitting there with no covering for my feet and calves but the burdock leaves and that absurd shawl, swamped everything else in my mind. Still, I do remember some of it.

Abner strode across to the bookcase and took up the gun, his big thumb resting determinedly on the hammers. Then he marched to the door, threw it wide open, and planted himself on the threshold, looking out into the darkness.

"What's your business here, whoever you are?" he called out, in deep defiant tones.

"We've come to take you an' Paddy out for a little ride on a rail!" answered the same shrill, mocking voice we had heard at first. Then others took up the hostile chorus. "We've got some pitch a-heatin' round in the back yard!" "You won't catch cold; there's plenty o' feathers!" "Tell the Irishman here's some more ears for him to chaw on!" "Come out an' take your Copperhead medicine!"

There were yet other cries which the howling wind tore up into inarticulate fragments, and then a scattering volley of cheers, again emphasized by pistol-shots. While the crack of these still chilled my blood, a more than usually violent gust swooped round Abner's burly figure, and blew out the lamp.

Terrifying as the first instant of utter darkness was, the second was recognizable as a relief. I at once threw myself out of the chair, and crept along back of the stove to where my stockings and boots had been put to dry. These I hastened, with much trembling awkwardness, to pull on, taking pains to keep the big square old stove between me and that open veranda door.

"Guess we won't take no ride to-night!" I heard Abner roar out, after the shouting had for the moment died away.

"You got to have one!" came back the original voice. "It's needful for your complaint!"

"I've got somethin' here that'll fit *your* complaint!" bellowed the farmer, raising his gun. "Take warnin'—the first cuss that sets foot on this stoop, I'll bore a four-inch hole clean through him. I've got squirrel shot, an' I've got buck-shot, an' there's plenty more behind—so take your choice!"

There were a good many derisive answering yells and hoots, and someone again fired a pistol in the air, but nobody offered to come up on the veranda.

Emboldened by this, I stole across the room now to one of the windows, and lifting a corner of the shade, strove to look out. At first there was nothing whatever to be seen in the utter blackness. Then I made out some faint reddish sort of diffused light in the upper air, which barely sufficed to indicate the presence of some score or more dark figures out in the direction of the pump. Evidently they *had* built a fire around in the

back yard, as they said — probably starting it there so that its light might not disclose their identity.

This looked as if they really meant to tar-and-feather Abner and Hurley. The expression was familiar enough to my ears, and, from pictures in stray illustrated weeklies that found their way to the Corners, I had gathered some general notion of the procedure involved. The victim was stripped, I knew, and daubed over with hot melted pitch; then a pillow-case of feathers was emptied over him, and he was forced astride a fence-rail, which the rabble hoisted on their shoulders and ran about with. But my fancy balked at and refused the task of imagining Abner Beech in this humiliating posture. At least it was clear to my mind that a good many fierce and bloody things would happen first.

Apparently this had become clear to the throng outside as well. Whole minutes had gone by, and still no one mounted the veranda to seek close quarters with the farmer — who stood braced with his legs wide apart, bare-headed and erect, the wind blowing his huge beard sidewise over his shoulder.

"Well! ain't none o' you a-comin'?" he called out at last, with impatient sarcasm. "Thought you was so sot on takin' me out an' havin' some fun with me!" After a brief pause, another taunt occurred to him. "Why, even the niggers you're so in love with," he shouted, "they ain't such dod-rotted cowards as you be!"

A general movement was discernible among the shadowy forms outside. I thought for the instant that it meant a swarming attack upon the veranda. But no! suddenly it had grown much lighter, and the mob was moving away toward the rear of the house. The men were shouting things to one another, but the wind for the moment was at such a turbulent pitch that all their words were drowned. The reddened light waxed brighter still — and now there was nobody to be seen at all from the window.

"Hurry here! Mr. Beech! *We're all afire!*" cried a frightened voice in the room behind me.

It may be guessed how I turned.

The kitchen door was open, and the figure of a woman stood on the threshold, indefinitely black against a strange yellowish-drab

half light which framed it. This woman — one knew from the voice that it was Esther Hagadorn — seemed to be wringing her hands.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she cried again, and I could see now that the little passage was full of gray luminous smoke, which was drifting past her into the living-room. Even as I looked, it had half obscured her form, and was rolling in, in waves.

Abner had heard her, and strode across the room now, gun still in hand, into the thick of the smoke, pushing Esther before him and shutting the kitchen door with a bang as he passed through. I put in a terrified minute or two alone in the dark, amazed and half-benumbed by the confused sounds that at first came from the kitchen, and by the horrible suspense, when a still more sinister silence ensued. Then there rose a loud crackling noise, like the incessant popping of some giant variety of corn. The door burst open again, and M'rye's tall form seemed literally flung into the room by the sweeping volume of dense smoke which poured in. She pulled the door to behind her — then gave a snarl of excited emotion

at seeing me by the dusky reddened radiance which began forcing its way from outside through the holland window shades.

"Light the lamp, you gump!" she commanded, breathlessly, and fell with fierce concentration upon the task of dragging furniture out from the bed-room. I helped her in a frantic, bewildered fashion, after I had lighted the lamp, which flared and smoked without its shade, as we toiled. M'rye seemed all at once to have the strength of a dozen men. She swung the ponderous chest of drawers out end on end; she fairly lifted the still bigger bookcase, after I had hustled the books out on to the table; she swept off the bedding, slashed the cords, and jerked the bed-posts and side-pieces out of their connecting sockets with furious energy, till it seemed as if both rooms must have been dismantled in less time than I have taken to tell of it.

The crackling overhead had swollen now to a wrathful roar, rising above the gusty voices of the wind. The noise, the heat, the smoke, and terror of it all made me sick and faint. I grew dizzy, and did foolish things in an aimless way, fumbling about among

the stuff M'rye was hurling forth. Then all at once her darkling, smoke-wrapped figure shot up to an enormous height, the lamp began to go round, and I felt myself with nothing but space under my feet, plunging downward with awful velocity, surrounded by whirling skies full of stars.

. . . . . .

There was a black night-sky overhead when I came to my senses again, with flecks of snow in the cold air on my face. The wind had fallen, everything was as still as death, and someone was carrying me in his arms. I tried to lift my head.

"Aisy now!" came Hurley's admonitory voice, close to my ear. "We'll be there in a minyut."

"No — I'm all right — let me down," I urged. He set me on my feet, and I looked amazedly about me.

The red-brown front of our larger hay-barn loomed in a faint unnatural light, at close quarters, upon my first inquiring gaze. The big sliding doors were open, and the slanting wagon-bridge running down from their threshold was piled high with chairs, bedding, crockery, milk-pans, clothing — the jumbled

remnants of our household gods. Turning, I looked across the yard upon what was left of the Beech homestead — a glare of cherry light glowing above a fiery hole in the ground.

Strangely enough this glare seemed to perpetuate in its outlines the shape and dimensions of the vanished house. It was as if the house were still there, but transmuted from joists and clap-boards and shingles, into an illuminated and impalpable ghost of itself. There was a weird effect of transparency about it. Through the spectral bulk of red light I could see the naked and gnarled apple-trees in the home-orchard on the further side; and I remembered at once that painful and striking parallel of Scrooge gazing through the re-edified body of Jacob Marley, and beholding the buttons at the back of his coat. It all seemed some monstrous dream.

But no, here the others were. Janey Wilcox and the Underwood girl had come out from the barn, and were carrying in more things. I perceived now that there was a candle burning inside, and presently Esther Hagadorn was to be seen. Hurley had disappeared, and so I went up the sloping platform to join the women — noting with weak

surprise that my knees seemed to have acquired new double joints and behaved as if they were going in the other direction. I stumbled clumsily once I was inside the barn, and sat down with great abruptness on a milking-stool, leaning my head back against the hay-mow, and conscious of entire indifference as to whether school kept or not.

Again it was like some half-waking vision — the feeble light of the candle losing itself upon the broad high walls of new hay; the huge shadows in the rafters overhead; the women-folk silently moving about, fixing up on the barn floor some pitiful imitation, poor souls, of the home that had been swept off the face of the earth, and outside, through the wide sprawling doors, the dying away effulgence of the embers of our roof-tree lingering in the air of the winter night.

Abner Beech came in presently, with the gun in one hand, and a blackened and outlandish-looking object in the other, which turned out to be the big pink sea-shell that used to decorate the parlor mantel. He held it up for M'rye to see, with a grave, tired smile on his face.

"We got it out, after all — just by the skin

of our teeth," he said, and Hurley, behind him, confirmed this by an eloquent grimace.

M'rye's black eyes snapped and sparkled as she lifted the candle and saw what this something was. Then she boldly put up her face and kissed her husband with a resounding smack. Truly it was a night of surprises.

"That's about the only thing I had to call my own when I was married," she offered in explanation of her fervor, speaking to the company at large. Then she added in a lower tone, to Esther: "*He* used to play with it for hours at a stretch — when he was a baby."

"'Member how he used to hold it up to his ear, eh, mother?" asked Abner, softly.

M'rye nodded her head, and then put her apron up to her eyes for a brief moment. When she lowered it, we saw an unaccustomed smile mellowing her hard-set, swarthy face.

The candle light flashed upon a tear on her cheek that the apron had missed.

"I guess I *do* remember!" she said, with a voice full of tenderness.

Then Esther's hand stole into M'rye's and the two women stood together before Abner,

erect and with beaming countenances, and he smiled upon them both.

It seemed that we were all much happier in our minds, now that our house had been burned down over our heads.

CHAPTER XI

THE CONQUEST OF ABNER

Some time during the night, I was awakened by the mice frisking through the hay about my ears. My head was aching again, and I could not get back into sleep. Besides, Hurley was snoring mercilessly.

We two had chosen for our resting-place the little mow of half a load or so, which had not been stowed away above, but lay ready for present use over by the side-door opening on the cow-yard. Temporary beds had been spread for the women with fresh straw and blankets at the further end of the central threshing-floor. Abner himself had taken one of the rescued ticks and a quilt over to the other end, and stretched his ponderous length out across the big doors, with the gun by his side. No one had, of course, dreamed of undressing.

Only a few minutes of wakefulness sufficed to throw me into a desperate state of fidgets.

The hay seemed full of strange creeping noises. The whole big barn echoed with the boisterous ticking of the old eight-day clock which had been saved from the wreck of the kitchen, and which M'rye had set going again on the seat of the democrat wagon. And then Hurley!

I began to be convinced, now, that I was coming down with a great spell of sickness — perhaps even "the fever." Yes, it undoubtedly was the fever. I could feel it in my bones, which now started up queer prickly sensations on novel lines, quite as if they were somebody else's bones instead. My breathing, indeed, left a good deal to be desired from the true fever standpoint. It was not nearly so rapid or convulsive as I understood that the breathing of a genuine fever victim ought to be. But that, no doubt, would come soon enough — nay! was it not already coming? I thought, upon examination, that I did breathe more swiftly than before. And oh! that Hurley!

As noiselessly as possible I made my way, half-rolling, half-sliding, off the hay, and got on my feet on the floor. It was pitch dark, but I could feel along the old disused stan-

chion-row to the corner; thence it was plain sailing over to where Abner was sleeping by the big front doors. I would not dream of rousing him if he was in truth asleep, but it would be something to be nigh him, in case the fever should take a fatal turn before morning. I would just cuddle down on the floor near to him, and await events.

When I had turned the corner, it surprised me greatly to see ahead of me, over at the front of the barn, the reflection of a light. Creeping along toward it, I came out upon Abner, seated with his back against one of the doors, looking over an account-book by the aid of a lantern perched on a box at his side. He had stood the frame of an old bob-sleigh on end close by, and hung a horse-blanket over it, so that the light might not disturb the women-folk at the other end of the barn. The gun lay on the floor beside him.

He looked up at my approach, and regarded me with something, I fancied, of disapprobation in his habitually grave expression.

"Well, old seventy-six, what's the matter with you?" he asked, keeping his voice down to make as little noise as possible.

I answered in the same cautious tones that I was feeling bad. Had any encouragement suggested itself in the farmer's mien, I was prepared to overwhelm him with a relation of my symptoms in detail. But he shook his head instead.

"You'll have to wait till morning, to be sick," he said — "that is, to get 'tended to. I don't know anything about such things, an' I wouldn't wake M'rye up now for a whole baker's dozen o' you chaps." Seeing my face fall at this sweeping declaration, he proceeded to modify it in a kindlier tone. "Now you just lay down again, sonny," he added, "an' you'll be to sleep in no time, an' in the morning M'rye 'll fix up something for ye. This ain't no fit time for white folks to be belly-achin' around."

"I kind o' thought I'd feel better if I was sleeping over here near you," I ventured now to explain, and his nod was my warrant for tiptoeing across to the heap of disorganized furniture, and getting out some blankets and a comforter, which I arranged in the corner a few yards away and simply rolled myself up in, with my face turned away from the light. It was better over here than with

Hurley, and though that prompt sleep which the farmer had promised did not come, I at least was drowsily conscious of an improved physical condition.

Perhaps I drifted off more than half-way into dreamland, for it was with a start that all at once I heard someone close by talking with Abner.

"I saw you were up, Mr. Beech" — it was Esther Hagadorn who spoke — "and I don't seem able to sleep, and I thought, if you didn't mind, I'd come over here."

"Why, of course," the farmer responded. "Just bring up a chair there, an' sit down. That's it — wrap the shawl around you good. It's a cold night — snowin' hard outside."

Both had spoken in muffled tones, so as not to disturb the others. This same dominant notion of keeping still deterred me from turning over, in order to be able to see them. I expected to hear them discuss my illness, but they never referred to it. Instead, there was what seemed a long silence. Then the school-ma'am spoke.

"I can't begin to tell you," she said, "how glad I am that you and your wife aren't a bit cast down by the — the calamity."

"No," came back Abner's voice, buoyant even in its half-whisper, "we're all right. I've be'n sort o' figurin' up here, an' they ain't much real harm done. I'm insured pretty well. Of course, this bein' obleeged to camp out in a hay-barn might be improved on, but then it's a change — somethin' out o' the ordinary rut — an' it'll do us good. I'll have the carpenters over from Juno Mills in the forenoon, an' if they push things, we can have a roof over us again before Christmas. It could be done even sooner, p'raps, only they ain't any neighbors to help *me* with a raisin' bee. They're willin' enough to burn my house down, though. However, I don't want them not an atom more'n they want me."

There was no trace of anger in his voice. He spoke like one contemplating the unalterable conditions of life.

"Did they really, do you believe, *set* it on fire?" Esther asked, intently.

"No, *I* think it caught from that fool-fire they started around back of the house, to heat their fool tar by. The wind was blowing a regular gale, you know. Janey Wilcox, she will have it that that Roselle Upman set it on purpose. But then, she don't like him

— an' I can't blame her much, for that matter. Once Otis Barnum was seein' her home from singin' school, an' when he was goin' back alone this Roselle Upman waylaid him in the dark, an' pitched onto him, an' broke his collar-bone. I always thought it puffed Janey up some, this bein' fought over like that, but it made her mad to have Otis hurt on her account, an' then nothing come of it. I wouldn't a' minded pepperin' Roselle's legs a trifle, if I'd had a barrel loaded, say, with birdshot. He's a nuisance to the whole neighborhood. He kicks up a fight at every dance he goes to, all winter long, an' hangs around the taverns day in an' day out, inducin' young men to drink an' loaf. I thought a fellow like him 'd be sure to go off to the war, an' so good riddance; but no! darned if the coward don't go an' get his front teeth pulled, so 't he can't bite ca'tridges, an' jest stay around, a worse nuisance than ever! I'd half forgive that miserable war if it — only took off the — the right men."

"Mr. Beech," said Esther, in low fervent tones, measuring each word as it fell, "you and I, we must forgive that war together!"

I seemed to feel the farmer shaking his head. He said nothing in reply.

"I'm beginning to understand how you've felt about it all along," the girl went on, after a pause. "I knew the fault must be in my ignorance, that our opinions of plain right and plain wrong should be such poles apart. I got a school-friend of mine, whose father is your way of thinking, to send me all the papers that came to their house, and I've been going through them religiously — whenever I could be quite alone. I don't say I don't think you're wrong, because I *do*, but I am getting to understand how you should believe yourself to be right."

She paused as if expecting a reply, but Abner only said, "Go on," after some hesitation, and she went on:

"Now take the neighbors all about here — "

"Excuse *me!*" broke in the farmer. "I guess if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not. They're too rich for my blood."

"Take these very neighbors," pursued Esther, with gentle determination. "Something must be very wrong indeed when they behave to you the way they do. Why I know that even now, right down in their

hearts, they recognize that you're far and away the best man in Agrippa. Why, I remember, Mr. Beech, when I first applied, and you were school-commissioner, and you sat there through the examination — why, you were the only one whose opinion I gave a rap for. When you praised me, why, I was prouder of it than if you had been a Regent of the University. And I tell you, everybody all around here feels at bottom just as I do."

"They take a dummed curious way o' showin' it, then," commented Abner, roundly.

"It isn't *that* they're trying to show at all," said Esther. "They feel that other things are more important. They're all wrought up over the war. How could it be otherwise when almost everyone of them has got a brother, or a father, or — or — *a son* — down there in the South, and every day brings news that some of these have been shot dead, and more still wounded and crippled, and others — *others*, that God only knows *what* has become of them — oh, how can they help feeling that way? I don't know that I ought to say it — " the schoolma'am stopped to catch her breath, and hesi-

tated, then went on — "but yes, you'll understand me *now* — there was a time here, not so long ago, Mr. Beech, when I downright hated you — you and M'rye both!"

This was important enough to turn over for. I flopped as unostentatiously as possible, and neither of them gave any sign of having noted my presence. The farmer sat with his back against the door, the quilt drawn up to his waist, his head bent in silent meditation. His whole profile was in deep shadow from where I lay — darkly massive and powerful and solemn. Esther was watching him with all her eyes, leaning forward from her chair, the lantern-light full upon her eager face.

"M'rye an' I don't lay ourselves out to be specially bad folks, as folks go," the farmer said at last, by way of deprecation. "We've got our faults, of course, like the rest, but — "

"No," interrupted Esther, with a half-tearful smile in her eyes. "You only pretend to have faults. You really haven't got any at all."

The shadowed outline of Abner's face softened. "Why, that *is* a fault itself, ain't it?" he said, as if pleased with his logical acuteness.

The crowing of some foolish rooster, grown tired of waiting for the belated November daylight, fell upon the silence from one of the buildings near by.

Abner Beech rose to his feet with ponderous slowness, pushing the bedclothes aside with his boot, and stood beside Esther's chair. He laid his big hand on her shoulder with a patriarchal gesture.

"Come now," he said, gently, "you go back to bed, like a good girl, an' get some sleep. It'll be all right."

The girl rose in turn, bearing her shoulder so that the fatherly hand might still remain upon it. "Truly?" she asked, with a new light upon her pale face.

"Yes — truly!" Abner replied, gravely nodding his head.

Esther took the hand from her shoulder, and shook it in both of hers. "Good-night again, then," she said, and turned to go.

Suddenly there resounded the loud rapping of a stick on the barn-door, close by my head.

Abner squared his huge shoulders and threw a downright glance at the gun on the floor.

"Well?" he called out.

"*Is my da'ater inside there?*"

We all knew that thin, high-pitched, querulous voice. It was old "Jee" Hagadorn who was outside.

CHAPTER XII

THE UNWELCOME GUEST

Abner and Esther stood for a bewildered minute, staring at the rough unpainted boards through which this astonishing inquiry had come. I scrambled to my feet and kicked aside the tick and blankets. Whatever else happened, it did not seem likely that there was any more sleeping to be done. Then the farmer strode forward and dragged one of the doors back on its squeaking rollers. Some snow fell in upon his boots from the ridge that had formed against it over night. Save for a vaguely faint snow-light in the air, it was still dark.

"Yes, she's here," said Abner, with his hand on the open door.

"Then I'd like to know—" the invisible Jee began excitedly shouting from without.

"Sh-h! You'll wake everybody up!" the farmer interposed. "Come inside, so that I can shut the door."

"Never under your roof!" came back the shrill hostile voice. "I swore I never would, and I won't!"

"You'd have to take a crowbar to get under my roof," returned Abner, grimly conscious of a certain humor in the thought. "What's left of it is layin' over yonder in what used to be the cellar. So you needn't stand on ceremony on *that* account. I ain't got no house now, so't your oath ain't bindin'. Besides, the Bible says, 'Swear not at all!'"

A momentary silence ensued; then Abner rattled the door on its wheels. "Well, what are you goin' to do?" he asked, impatiently. "I can't keep this door open all night, freezin' everybody to death. If you won't come in, you'll have to stay out!" and again there was an ominous creaking of the rollers.

"I want my da'ater!" insisted Jehoiada, vehemently. "I stan' on a father's rights."

"A father ain't got no more right to make a fool of himself than anybody else," replied Abner, gravely. "What kind of a time o' night is this, with the snow knee-deep, for a girl to be out o' doors? She's all right here, with my women-folks, an' I'll bring her down with the cutter in the mornin' — that is, if

she wants to come. An' now, once for all, will you step inside or not?"

Esther had taken up the lantern and advanced with it now to the open door. "Come in, father," she said, in tones which seemed to be authoritative. "They've been very kind to me. Come in!"

Then, to my surprise, the lean and scrawny figure of the cooper emerged from the darkness, and stepping high over the snow, entered the barn, Abner sending the door to behind him with a mighty sweep of the arm.

Old Hagadorn came in grumbling under his breath, and stamping the snow from his feet with sullen kicks. He bore a sledge-stake in one of his mittened hands. A worsted comforter was wrapped around his neck and ears and partially over his conical-peaked cap. He rubbed his long thin nose against his mitten and blinked sulkily at the lantern and the girl who held it.

"So here you be!" he said at last, in vexed tones. "An' me traipsin' around in the snow the best part of the night lookin' for you!"

"See here, father," said Esther, speaking in a measured, deliberate way, "we won't talk about that at all. If a thousand times

worse things had happened to both of us than have, it still wouldn't be worth mentioning compared with what has befallen these good people here. They've been attacked by a mob of rowdies and loafers, and had their house and home burned down over their heads and been driven to take refuge here in this barn of a winter's night. They've shared their shelter with me and been kindness itself, and now that you're here, if you can't think of anything pleasant to say to them, if I were you I'd say nothing at all."

This was plain talk, but it seemed to produce a satisfactory effect upon Jehoiada. He unwound his comforter enough to liberate his straggling sandy beard and took off his mittens. After a moment or two he seated himself in the chair, with a murmured "I'm jest about tuckered out," in apology for the action. He did, in truth, present a woeful picture of fatigue and physical feebleness, now that we saw him in repose. The bones seemed ready to start through the parchment-like skin on his gaunt cheeks, and his eyes glowed with an unhealthy fire, as he sat, breathing hard and staring at the jumbled heaps of furniture on the floor.

Esther had put the lantern again on the box and drawn forward a chair for Abner, but the farmer declined it with a wave of the hand and continued to stand in the background, looking his ancient enemy over from head to foot with a meditative gaze. Jehoiada grew visibly nervous under this inspection; he fidgeted on his chair and then fell to coughing — a dry, rasping cough which had an evil sound, and which he seemed to make the worse by fumbling aimlessly at the button that held the overcoat collar round his throat.

At last Abner walked slowly over to the shadowed masses of piled-up household things and lifted out one of the drawers that had been taken from the framework of the bureau and brought over with their contents. Apparently it was not the right one, for he dragged aside a good many objects to get at another, and rummaged about in this for several minutes. Then he came out again into the small segment of the lantern's radiance with a pair of long thick woolen stockings of his own in his hand.

"You better pull off them wet boots an' draw these on," he said, addressing Hagadorn, but looking fixedly just over his head. "It

won't do that cough o' yours no good, settin' around with wet feet."

The cooper looked in a puzzled way at the huge butternut-yarn stockings held out under his nose, but he seemed too much taken aback to speak or to offer to touch them.

"Yes, father!" said Esther, with quite an air of command. "You know what that cough means," and straightway Hagadorn lifted one of his feet to his knee and started tugging at the boot-heel in a desultory way. He desisted after a few half-hearted attempts, and began coughing again, this time more distressingly than ever.

His daughter sprang forward to help him, but Abner pushed her aside, put the stockings under his arm, and himself undertook the job. He did not bend his back overmuch, but hoisted Jee's foot well in the air and pulled.

"Brace your foot agi'n mine an' hold on to the chair!" he ordered, sharply, for the first effect of his herculean pull had been to nearly drag the cooper to the floor. He went at it more gently now, easing the soaked leather up and down over the instep until the

boots were off. He looked furtively at the bottoms of these before he tossed them aside, noting, no doubt, as I did, how old and broken and run down at the heel they were. Jee himself peeled off the drenched stockings, and they too were flimsy old things, darned and mended almost out of their original color.

These facts served only to deepen my existing low opinion of Hagadorn, but they appeared to affect Abner Beech differently. He stood by and watched the cooper dry his feet and then draw on the warm dry hose over his shrunken shanks, with almost a friendly interest. Then he shoved along one of the blankets across the floor to Hagadorn's chair that he might wrap his feet in it.

"That's it," he said, approvingly. "They ain't no means o' building a fire here right now, but as luck would have it we'd jest set up an old kitchen stove in the little cow-barn to warm up gruel for the ca'aves with, an' the first thing we'll do'll be to rig it up in here to cook breakfast by, an' then we'll dry them boots o' yourn in no time. You go an' pour some oats into 'em now," Abner added, turning to me. "And you might as well

call Hurley. We've got considerable to do, an' daylight's breakin'."

The Irishman lay on his back where I had left him, still snoring tempestuously. As a rule he was a light sleeper, but this time I had to shake him again and again before he understood that it was morning. I opened the side-door, and sure enough, the day had begun. The clouds had cleared away. The sky was still ashen gray overhead, but the light from the horizon, added to the whiteness of the unaccustomed snow, rendered it quite easy to see one's way about inside. I went to the oat-bin.

Hurley, sitting up and rubbing his eyes, regarded me and my task with curiosity. "An' is it a stovepipe for a measure ye have?" he asked.

"No; it's one of Jee Hagadorn's boots," I replied. "I'm filling 'em so't they'll swell when they're dryin'."

He slid down off the hay as if someone had pushed him. "What's that ye say? Haggydorn? *Ould* Haggydorn?" he demanded.

I nodded assent. "Yes, he's inside with Abner," I explained. "An' he's got on

Abner's stockin's, an' it looks like he's goin' to stay to breakfast."

Hurley opened his mouth in sheer surprise and gazed at me with hanging jaw and round eyes.

"'Tis the fever that's on ye," he said, at last. "Ye're wandherin' in yer mind!"

"You just go in and see for yourself," I replied, and Hurley promptly took me at my word.

He came back presently, turning the corner of the stanchions in a depressed and rambling way, quite at variance with his accustomed swinging gait. He hung his head, too, and shook it over and over again perplexedly.

"Abner 'n' me'll be bringin' in the stove," he said. "'Tis not fit for you to go out wid that sickness on ye."

"Well, anyway," I retorted, "you see I wasn't wanderin' much in my mind."

Hurley shook his head again. "Well, then," he began, lapsing into deep brogue and speaking rapidly, "I've meself seen the woman wid the head of a horse on her in the lake forninst the Three Castles, an' me sister's first man, sure he broke down the ditch round-about the Danes' fort on Dunkelly, an'

a foine grand young man, small for his strength an' wid a red cap on his head, flew out an' wint up in the sky, an' whin he related it up comes Father Forrest to him in the potaties, an' says he, 'I do be suprised wid you, O'Driscoll, for to be relatin' such loies.' 'I'll take me Bible oat' on 'em!' says he. ''Tis your imagination!' says the priest. 'No imagination at all!' says O'Driscoll; 'sure, I saw it wid dese two eyes, as plain as I'm lookin' at your riverence, an' a far grander sight it was too!' An' me own mother, faith, manny's the toime I've seen her makin' up dhrops for the yellow sicknest wid woodlice, an' sayin' Hail Marys over 'em, an' thim same 'ud cure annything from sore teeth to a wooden leg for moiles round. But, saints help me! I never seen the loikes o' *this!* Haggydorn is it? *Ould* Haggydorn! *Huh!*"

Then the Irishman, still with a dejected air, started off across the yard through the snow to the cow-barns, mumbling to himself as he went.

I had heard Abner's heavy tread coming along the stanchions toward me, but now all at once it stopped. The farmer's wife had fol-

lowed him into the passage, and he had halted to speak with her.

"They ain't no two ways about it, mother," he expostulated. "We jest got to put the best face on it we kin, an' act civil, an' pass the time o' day as if nothing'd ever happened atween us. He'll be goin' the first thing after breakfast."

"Oh! I ain't agoin' to sass him, or say anything uncivil," M'rye broke in, reassuringly. "What I mean is, I dont want to come into the for'ard end of the barn at all. They ain't no need of it. I kin cook the breakfast in back, and Janey kin fetch it for'ard for yeh, an' nobody need say anythin', or be any the wiser."

"Yes, I know," argued Abner, "but there's the looks o' the thing. *I* say, if you're goin' to do a thing, why, do it right up to the handle, or else don't do it at all. An' then there's the girl to consider, and *her* feelin's."

"Dunno't her feelin's are such a pesky sight more importance than other folkses," remarked M'rye, callously.

This unaccustomed recalcitrancy seemed to take Abner aback. He moved a few steps forward, so that he became visible from where

I stood, then halted again and turned, his shoulders rounded, his hands clasped behind his back. I could see him regarding M'rye from under his broad hat-brim with a gaze at once dubious and severe.

"I ain't much in the habit o' hearin' you talk this way to me, mother," he said at last, with grave depth of tones and significant deliberation.

"Well, I can't help it, Abner!" rejoined M'rye, bursting forth in vehement utterance, all the more excited from the necessity she felt of keeping it out of hearing of the unwelcome guest. "I don't want to do anything to aggravate you, or go contrary to your notions, but with even the willin'est pack-horse there is such a thing as pilin' it on too thick. I can stan' bein' burnt out o' house 'n' home, an' seein' pretty nigh every rag an' stick I had in the world go kitin' up the chimney, an' campin' out here in a barn — My Glory, yes! — an' as much more on top o' that, but, I tell you flat-footed, I can't stomach Jee Hagadorn, an' I *won't!*"

Abner continued to contemplate the revolted M'rye with displeased amazement written all over his face. Once or twice I

thought he was going to speak, but nothing came of it. He only looked and looked, as if he had the greatest difficulty in crediting what he saw.

Finally, with a deep-chested sigh, he turned again. "I s'pose this is still more or less of a free country," he said. "If you're sot on it, I can't hender you," and he began walking once more toward me.

M'rye followed him out and put a hand on his arm. "Don't go off like that, Abner!" she adjured him. "You *know* there ain't nothin' in this whole wide world I wouldn't do to please you — if I *could!* But this thing jest goes ag'in' my grain. It's the way folks are made. It's your nater to be forgivin' an' do good to them that despitefully use you."

"No, it ain't!" declared Abner, vigorously. "No, sirree! 'Hold fast' is my nater. I stan' out ag'in' my enemies till the last cow comes home. But when they come wadin' in through the snow, with their feet soppin' wet, an' coughin' fit to turn themselves inside out, an' their daughter is there, an' you've sort o' made it up with her, an' we're all campin' out in a barn, don't you see — "

"No, I can't see it," replied M'rye, regretful

but firm. "They always said we Ramswells had Injun blood in us somewhere. An' when I get an Injun streak on me, right down in the marrow o' my bones, why, you musn't blame me — or feel hard if — if I — "

"No-o," said Abner, with reluctant conviction, "I s'pose not. I dare say you're actin' accordin' to your lights. An' besides, he'll be goin' the first thing after breakfast."

"An' you ain't mad, Abner?" pleaded M'rye, almost tremulously, as if frightened at the dimensions of the victory she had won.

"Why, bless your heart, no," answered the farmer, with a glaring simulation of easy-mindedness. "No — that's all right, mother!"

Then with long heavy-footed strides the farmer marched past me and out into the cow-yard.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BREAKFAST

If there was ever a more curious meal in Dearborn County than that first breakfast of ours in the barn, I never heard of it.

The big table was among the things saved from the living-room, and Esther spread it again with the cloth which had been in use on the previous evening. There was the stain of the tea which the Underwood girl had spilled in the exitement of the supper's rough interruption; there were other marks of calamity upon it as well — the smudge of cinders, for one thing, and a general diffused effect of smokiness. But it was the only table-cloth we had. The dishes, too, were a queer lot, representing two or three sets of widely differing patterns and value, other portions of which we should never see again.

When it was announced that breakfast was ready, Abner took his accustomed arm-chair at the head of the table. He only half

turned his head toward Hagadorn and said in formal tones, over his shoulder, "Won't you draw up and have some breakfast?"

Jee was still sitting where he had planted himself two hours or so before. He still wore his round cap, with the tabs tied down over his ears. In addition to his overcoat, someone — probably his daughter — had wrapped a shawl about his thin shoulders. The boots had not come in, as yet, from the stove, and the blanket was drawn up over his stockinged feet to the knees. From time to time his lips moved, as if he were reciting scripture texts to himself, but so far as I knew, he had said nothing to anyone. His cough seemed rather worse than better.

"Yes, come, father!" Esther added to the farmer's invitation, and drew a chair back for him two plates away from Abner. Thus adjured he rose and hobbled stiffly over to the place indicated, bringing his foot-blanket with him. Esther stooped to arrange this for him and then seated herself next the host.

"You see, I'm going to sit beside you, Mr. Beech," she said, with a wan little smile.

"Glad to have you," remarked Abner, gravely.

The Underwood girl brought in a first plate of buckwheat cakes, set it down in front of Abner, and took her seat opposite Hagadorn and next to me. There remained three vacant places, down at the foot of the table, and though we all began eating without comment, everybody continually encountered some other's glance straying significantly toward these empty seats. Janey Wilcox, very straight and with an uppish air, came in with another plate of cakes and marched out again in tell-tale silence.

"Hurley! Come along in here an' git your breakfast!"

The farmer fairly roared out this command, then added in a lower, apologetic tone: "I 'spec' the women-folks 've got their hands full with that broken-down old stove."

We all looked toward the point, half-way down the central barn-floor, where the democrat wagon, drawn crosswise, served to divide our improvised living-room and kitchen. Through the wheels, and under its uplifted pole, we could vaguely discern two petticoated figures at the extreme other end, moving about the stove, the pipe of which was carried up and out through a little window

above the door. Then Hurley appeared, ducking his head under the wagon-pole.

"I'm aitin' out here, convanient to the stove," he shouted from this dividing-line.

"No, come and take your proper place!" bawled back the farmer, and Hurley had nothing to do but obey. He advanced with obvious reluctance, and halted at the foot of the table, eying with awkward indecision the three vacant chairs. One was M'rye's; the others would place him either next to the hated cooper or diagonally opposite, where he must look at him all the while.

"Sure, I'm better out there!" he ventured to insist, in a wheedling tone; but Abner thundered forth an angry "No, sir!" and the Irishman sank abruptly into the seat beside Hagadorn. From this place he eyed the Underwood girl with a glare of contemptuous disapproval. I learned afterward that M'rye and Janey Wilcox regarded her desertion of them as the meanest episode of the whole miserable morning, and beguiled their labors over the stove by recounting to each other all the low-down qualities illustrated by the general history of her "sap-headed tribe."

Meanwhile conversation languished.

With the third or fourth instalment of cakes, Janey Wilcox had halted long enough to deliver herself of a few remarks, sternly limited to the necessities of the occasion. "M'rye says," she declaimed, coldly, looking the while with great fixedness at the hay-wall, "if the cakes are sour she can't help it. We saved what was left over of the batter, but the Graham flour and the sody are both burnt up," and with that stalked out again.

Not even politeness could excuse the pretence on anyone's part that the cakes were *not* sour, but Abner seized upon the general subject as an opening for talk.

"'Member when I was a little shaver," he remarked, with an effort at amiability, "my sisters kicked about havin' to bake the cakes, on account of the hot stove makin' their faces red an' spoilin' their complexions, an' they wanted specially to go to some fandango or other, an' look their pootiest, an' so father sent us boys out into the kitchen to bake 'em instid. Old Lorenzo Dow, the Methodist preacher, was stoppin' over-night at our house, an' mother was jest beside herself to

have everything go off ship-shape — an' then them cakes begun comin' in. Fust my brother William, he baked one the shape of a horse, an' then Josh, he made one like a jack-ass with ears as long as the griddle would allow of lengthwise, and I'd got jest comfortably started in on one that I begun as a pig, an' then was going to alter into a ship with sails up, when father, he come out with a hold-back strap, an' — well — mine never got finished to this day. Mother, she was mortified most to death, but old Dow, he jest lay back and laughed — laughed till you'd thought he'd split himself."

"It was from Lorenzo Dow's lips that I had my first awakening call unto righteousness," said Jee Hagadorn, speaking with solemn unction in high, quavering tones.

The fact that he should have spoken at all was enough to take even the sourness out of M'rye's cakes.

Abner took up the ball with solicitous promptitude. "A very great man, Lorenzo Dow was — in his way," he remarked.

"By grace he was spared the shame and humiliation," said Hagadorn, lifting his voice as he went on — "the humiliation of living to

see one whole branch of the Church separate itself from the rest — withdraw and call itself the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in defence of human slavery!"

Esther, red-faced with embarrassment, intervened peremptorily. "How *can* you, father!" she broke in. "For all you know he might have been red-hot on that side himself! In fact, I dare say he would have been. How on earth can *you* know to the contrary, anyway?"

Jee was all excitement on the instant, at the promise of an argument. His eyes flashed; he half rose from his seat and opened his mouth to reply. So much had he to say, indeed, that the words stumbled over one another on his tongue, and produced nothing, but an incoherent stammering sound, which all at once was supplanted by a violent fit of coughing. So terrible were the paroxysms of this seizure that when they had at last spent their fury the poor man was trembling like a leaf and toppled in his chair as if about to swoon. Esther had hovered about over him from the outset of the fit, and now looked up appealingly to Abner. The farmer rose, walked down the table-side, and gathered

Jee's fragile form up under one big engirdling arm. Then, as the girl hastily dragged forth the tick and blankets again and spread them into the rough semblance of a bed, Abner half led, half carried the cooper over and gently laid him down thereon. Together they fixed up some sort of pillow for him with hay under the blanket, and piled him snugly over with quilts and my comfortable.

"There — you'll be better layin' down," said Abner, soothingly. Hagadorn closed his eyes wearily and made no answer. They left him after a minute or two and returned to the table.

The rest of the breakfast was finished almost wholly in silence. Every once in a while Abner and Esther would exchange looks, his gravely kind, hers gratefully contented, and these seemed really to render speech needless. For my own part, I foresaw with some degree of depression that there would soon be no chance whatever of my securing attention in the *rôle* of an invalid, at least in this part of the barn.

Perhaps, however, they might welcome me in the kitchen part, as a sort of home-product

rival to the sick cooper. I rose and walked languidly out into M'rye's domain. But the two women were occupied with a furious scrubbing of rescued pans for the morning's milk, and they allowed me to sit feebly down on the wood-box behind the stove without so much as a glance of sympathy.

By and by we heard one of the great front doors rolled back on its shrieking wheels and then shut to again. Someone had entered, and in a moment there came some strange, inarticulate sounds of voices which showed that the arrival had created a commotion. M'rye lifted her head, and I shall never forget the wild, expectant flashing of her black eyes in that moment of suspense.

"Come in here, mother!" we heard Abner's deep voice call out from beyond the democrat wagon. "Here's somebody wants to see you!"

M'rye swiftly wiped her hands on her apron and glided rather than walked toward the forward end of the barn. Janey Wilcox and I followed close upon her heels, dodging together under the wagon-pole, and emerging, breathless and wild with curiosity, on the fringe of an excited group.

In the centre of this group, standing with a satisfied smile on his face, his general appearance considerably the worse for wear, but in demeanor, to quote M'rye's subsequent phrase, "as cool as Cuffy," was Ni Hagadorn.

CHAPTER XIV

FINIS

"He's all right; you can look for him here right along now, any day; he *was* hurt a leetle, but he's as peart an' chipper now as a blue-jay on a hick'ry limb; yes, he's a-comin' right smack home!"

This was the gist of the assurances which Ni vouchsafed to the first rush of eager questions — to his sister, and M'rye, and Janey Wilcox.

Abner had held a little aloof, to give the weaker sex a chance. Now he reasserted himself once more: "Stan' back, now, and give the young man breathin' room. Janey, hand a chair for'ard — that's it. Now set ye down, Ni, an' take your own time, an' tell us all about it. So you reely found him, eh?"

"Pshaw! there ain't anything to that," expostulated Ni, seating himself with nonchalance, and tilting back his chair. "*That* was easy as rollin' off a log. But what's the

matter *here?* That's what knocks me. We — that is to say, I — come up on a freight train to a ways beyond Juno Junction, an' got the conductor to slow up and let me drop off, an' footed it over the hill. It was jest about broad daylight when I turned the divide. Then I began lookin' for your house, an' I'm lookin' for it still. There's a hole out there, full o' snow an' smoke, but nary a house. How'd it happen?"

"'Lection bonfire — high wind — woodshed must 'a' caught," replied Abner, sententiously. "So you reely got down South, eh?"

"An' Siss here, too," commented Ni, with provoking disregard for the farmer's suggestions; "a reg'lar family party. An', hello!"

His roving eye had fallen upon the recumbent form on the made-up bed, under the muffling blankets, and he lifted his sandy wisps of eyebrows in inquiry.

"Sh! It's father," explained Esther. "He isn't feeling very well. I think he's asleep."

The boy's freckled, whimsical face melted upon reflection into a distinct grin. "Why," he said, "you've been havin' a reg'lar old love-feast up here. I guess it was *that* that set the house on fire! An' speakin' o' feasts,

if you've got a mouthful o' somethin' to eat handy — "

The women were off like a shot to the impromptu larder at the far end of the barn.

"Well, thin," put in Hurley, taking advantage of their absence, "an' had ye the luck to see anny rale fightin'?"

"Never mind that," said Abner; "when he gits around to it he'll tell us everything. But, fust of all — why, he knows what I want to hear about."

"Why, the last time I talked with you, Abner — " Ni began, squinting up one of his eyes and giving a quaint drawl to his words.

"That's a good while ago," said the farmer, quietly.

"Things have took a change, eh?" inquired Ni.

"That's neither here nor there," replied Abner, somewhat testily. "You oughtn't to need so dummed much explainin'. I've told you what I want specially to hear. An' that's what we all want to hear."

When the women had returned, and Ni, with much deliberation, had filled both hands with selected eatables, the recital at last got

under way. Its progress was blocked from time to time by sheer force of tantalizing perversity on the part of the narrator, and it suffered steadily from the incidental hitches of mastication; but such as it was we listened to it with all our ears, sitting or standing about, and keeping our eyes intently upon the freckled young hero.

"It wasn't so much of a job to git down there as I'd figured on," Ni said, between mouthfuls. "I got along on freight trains — once worked my way a while on a hand-car — as far as Albany, an' on down to New York on a river-boat, cheap, an' then, after foolin' round a few days, I hitched up with the Sanitary Commission folks, an' got them to let me sail on one o' their boats round to 'Napolis. I thought I was goin' to die most o' the voyage, but I didn't, you see, an' when I struck 'Napolis I hung around Camp Parole there quite a spell, talkin' with fellers that'd bin pris'ners down in Richmond an' got exchanged an' sent North. They said there was a whole slew of our fellers down there still that'd been brought in after Antietam. They didn't know none o' their names, but they said they'd all be sent North in time, in

exchange for Johnny Rebs that we'd captured. An' so I waited round — "

"You *might* have written!" interrupted Esther, reproachfully.

"What'd bin the good o' writin'? I hadn't anything to tell. Besides writin' letters is for girls. Well, one day a man come up from Libby — that's the prison at Richmond — an' he said there *was* a tall feller there from York State, a farmer, an' he died. He thought the name was Birch, but it might 'a' been Beech — or Body-Maple, for that matter. I s'pose you'd like to had me write *that* home!"

"No — oh, no!" murmured Esther, speaking the sense of all the company.

"Well, then I waited some more, an' kep' on waitin', an' then waited ag'in, until bimeby, one fine day, along comes Mr. Blue-jay himself. There he was, stan'in' up on the paddle-box with a face on him as long as your arm, an' I sung out, 'Way there, Agrippa Hill!' an' he come mighty nigh fallin' head over heels into the water. So then he come off, an' we shook han's, an' went up to the commissioners to see about his exchange, an' — an' as soon's that's fixed, an' the papers drawn

up all correct, why, he'll come home. An' that's all there is to it."

"And even *then* you never wrote!" said Esther, plaintively.

"Hold on a minute," put in Abner. "You say he's comin' home. That wouldn't be unless he was disabled. They'd keep him to fight ag'in, till his time was up. Come, now, tell the truth — he's be'n hurt bad!"

Ni shook his unkempt red head. "No, no," he said. "This is how it was. Fust he was fightin' in a cornfield, an' him an' Bi Truax, they got chased out, an' lost their regiment, an' got in with some other fellers, and then they all waded a creek breast-high, an' had to run up a long stretch o' slopin' ploughed ground to capture a battery they was on top o' the knoll. But they didn't see a regiment of sharp-shooters layin' hidden behind a rail fence, an' these fellers riz up all to once an' give it to 'em straight, an' they wilted right there, an' laid down, an' there they was after dusk when the rebs come out an' started lookin' round for guns an' blankets an' prisoners. Most of 'em was dead, or badly hurt, but they was a few who'd simply lain there in the hollow because it'd

have bin death to git up. An' Jeff was one o' *them*."

"You said yourself 't he had been hurt — some," interposed M'rye, with snapping eyes.

"Jest a scratch on his arm," declared Ni. "Well, then they marched the well ones back to the rear of the reb line, an' there they jest skinned 'em of everything they had — watch an' jack-knife an' wallet an' everything — an' put 'em to sleep on the bare ground. Next day they started 'em out on the march toward Richmond, an' after four or five days o' that, they got to a railroad, and there was cattle cars for 'em to ride the rest o' the way in. An' that's how it was."

"No," said Abner, sternly; "you haven't told us. How badly is he hurt?"

"Well," replied Ni, "it was only a scratch, as I said, but it got worse on that march, an' I s'pose it wasn't tended to anyways decently, an' so — an' so —"

M'rye had sprung to her feet and stood now drawn up to her full height, with her sharp nose in air as if upon some strange scent, and her eyes fairly glowing in eager excitement. All at once she made a bound

past us and ran to the doors, furiously digging her fingers in the crevice between them, then, with a superb sweep of the shoulders, sending them both rattling back on their wheels with a bang.

"I knew it!" she screamed in triumph.

We who looked out beheld M'rye's black hair and brown calico dress suddenly suffer a partial eclipse of pale blue, which for the moment seemed in some way a part of the bright winter sky beyond. Then we saw that it was a soldier who had his arm about M'rye, and his cap bent down tenderly over the head she had laid on his shoulder.

Our Jeff had come home.

A general instinct rooted us to our places and kept us silent, the while mother and son stood there in the broad open doorway.

Then the two advanced toward us, M'rye breathing hard, and with tears and smiles struggling together on her face under the shadow of a wrathful frown. We noted nothing of Jeff's appearance save that he had grown a big yellow beard, and seemed to be smiling. It was the mother's distraught countenance at which we looked instead.

She halted in front of Abner, and lifted the blue cape from Jeff's left shoulder, with an abrupt gesture.

"Look there!" she said, hoarsely. "See what they've done to my boy!"

We saw now that the left sleeve of Jeff's army-overcoat was empty and hung pinned against his breast. On the instant we were all swarming about him, shaking the hand that remained to him and striving against one another in a babel of questions, comments, and expressions of sympathy with his loss, satisfaction at his return. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should kiss Esther Hagadorn, and that Janey Wilcox should reach up on tiptoes and kiss him. When the Underwood girl would have done the same, however, M'rye brusquely shouldered her aside.

So beside ourselves with excitement were we all, each in turn seeking to get in a word edgewise, that no one noticed the approach and entrance of a stranger, who paused just over the threshold of the barn and coughed in a loud perfunctory way to attract our attention. I had to nudge Abner twice before he turned from where he stood at

Jeff's side, with his hand on the luckless shoulder, and surveyed the new-comer.

The sun was shining so brightly on the snow outside, that it was not for the moment easy to make out the identity of this shadowed figure. Abner took a forward step or two before he recognized his visitor. It was Squire Avery, the rich man of the Corners, and justice of the peace, who had once even run for Congress.

"How d' do?" said Abner, shading his eyes with a massive hand. "Won't you step in?"

The Squire moved forward a little and held forth his hand, which the farmer took and shook doubtfully. We others were as silent now as the grave, feeling this visit to be even stranger than all that had gone before.

"I drove up right after breakfast, Mr. Beech," said the Squire, making his accustomed slow delivery a trifle more pompous and circumspect than usual, "to express to you the feeling of such neighbors as I have, in this limited space of time, being able to foregather with. I believe, sir, that I may speak for them all when I say that we regret,

deplore, and contemplate with indignation the outrage and injury to which certain thoughtless elements of the community last night, sir, subjected you and your household."

"It's right neighborly of you, Square, to come an' say so," remarked Abner. "Won't you set down? You see, my son Jeff's jest come home from the war, an' the house bein' burnt, an' so on, we're rather upset for the minute."

The Squire put on his spectacles and smiled with surprise at seeing Jeff. He shook hands with him warmly, and spoke with what we felt to be the right feeling about that missing arm; but he could not sit down, he said. The cutter was waiting for him, and he must hurry back.

"I am glad, however," he added, "to have been the first, Mr. Beech, to welcome your brave son back, and to express to you the hope, sir, that with this additional link of sympathy between us, sir, bygones may be allowed to become bygones."

"I don't bear no ill will," said Abner, guardedly. "I s'pose in the long run folks act pooty close to about what they think is

right. I'm willin' to give 'em that credit — the same as I take to myself. They ain't been much disposition to give *me* that credit, but then, as our school-ma'am here was a sayin' last night, people 've been a good deal worked up about the war — havin' them that's close to 'em right down in the thick of it — an' I dessay it was natural enough they should git hot in the collar about it. As I said afore, I don't bear no ill will — though prob'ly I'm entitled to."

The Squire shook hands with Abner again. "Your sentiments, Mr. Beech," he said, in his stateliest manner, "do credit alike to your heart and your head. There is a feeling, sir, that this would be an auspicious occasion for you to resume sending your milk to the cheese-factory."

Abner pondered the suggestion for a moment. "It would be handier," he said, slowly; "but, you know, I ain't goin' to eat no humble pie. That Rod Bidwell was downright insultin' to my man, an' me too —"

"It was all, I assure you, sir, an unfortunate misunderstanding," pursued the Squire, "and is now buried deep in oblivion. And

it is further suggested, that, when you have reached that stage of preparation for your new house, if you will communicate with me, the neighbors will be glad to come up and extend their assistance to you in what is commonly known as a raising-bee. They will desire, I believe, to bring with them their own provisions. And, moreover, Mr. Beech" —here the Squire dropped his oratorical voice and stepped close to the farmer — "if this thing has cramped you any, that is to say, if you find yourself in need of — of — any accommodation — "

"No, nothin' o' that sort," said Abner. He stopped at that, and kept silence for a little, with his head down and his gaze meditatively fixed on the barn floor. At last he raised his face and spoke again, his deep voice shaking a little in spite of itself.

"What you've said, Square, an' your comin' here, has done me a lot o' good. It's pooty nigh wuth bein' burnt out for — to have this sort o' thing come on behind as an after-clap. Sometimes, I tell you, sir, I've despaired o' the republic. I admit it, though it's to my shame. I've said to myself that when American citizens, born an' raised right on the same

hill-side, got to behavin' to each other in such an all-fired mean an' cantankerous way, why, the hull blamed thing wasn't worth tryin' to save. But you see I was wrong — I admit I was wrong. It was jest a passin' flurry — a kind o' snow-squall in hayin' time. All the while, right down't the bottom, their hearts was sound an' sweet as a butter-nut. It fetches me — that does — it makes me prouder than ever I was before in all my born days to be an American — yes, sir — that's the way I — I feel about it."

There were actually tears in the big farmer's eyes, and he got out those finishing words of his in fragmentary gulps. None of us had ever seen him so affected before.

After the Squire had shaken hands again and started off, Abner stood at the open door, looking after him, then gazing in a comtemplative general way upon all out-doors. The vivid sunlight reflected up from the melting snow made his face to shine as if from an inner radiance. He stood still and looked across the yards with their piles of wet straw smoking in the forenoon heat, and the black puddles eating into the snow as the thaw went on; over the further prospect, made

weirdly unfamiliar by the disappearance of the big old farm-house; down the long broad sloping hill-side with its winding road, its checkered irregular patches of yellow stubble and stacked fodder, of deep umber ploughed land and warm gray woodland, all pushing aside their premature mantle of sparkling white, and the scattered homesteads and red barns beyond — and there was in his eyes the far-away look of one who saw still other things.

He turned at last and came in, walking over to where Jeff and Esther stood hand in hand beside the bed on the floor. Old Jee Hagadorn was sitting up now, and had exchanged some words with the couple.

"Well, Brother Hagadorn," said the farmer, "I hope you're feelin' better."

"Yes, a good deal — B — Brother Beech, thank'ee," replied the cooper, slowly and with hesitation.

Abner laid a fatherly hand on Esther's shoulder and another on Jeff's. A smile began to steal over his big face, broadening the square which his mouth cut down into his beard, and deepening the pleasant wrinkles about his eyes. He called M'rye

over to the group with beckoning nod of the head.

"It's jest occurred to me, mother," he said, with the mock gravity of tone we once had known so well and of late had heard so little — "I jest be'n thinkin' we might 'a' killed two birds with one stun while the Square was up here. He's justice o' the peace, you know — an' they say them kindo' marriages turn out better'n all the others."

"Go 'long with yeh!" said M'rye, vivaciously. But she too put a hand on Esther's other shoulder.

The school-teacher nestled against M'rye's side. "I tell you what," she said, softly, "if Jeff ever turns out to be half the man his father is, I'll just be prouder than my skin can hold."

THE END

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