

AN HUMBLE HERO

BY THOMAS P. MONTFORT

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(Continued from last week.)

"Humph! You don't know much about women folks or you wouldn't set no store by that. I know what I'm talking about, Sim Banks, an, as I said before, if you live you'll see I do. Lonesome don't love you. I know she don't. But let her go, Sim. She ain't the only woman, an there's one I know that does love you with her whole soul."

"One! Who?"

"Great Lord! Are you blind—plumb blind and dumb?"

Sim did not reply at once, but stood uneasily twirling his hat about in his hands, first looking down at his feet, then casting a furtive glance at his companion. When at last he did speak, it was in cold, unimpassioned tones.

"I reckon I ain't so blind an dumb as I might be," he said, "but you ain't called no names, an I ain't makin no guesses."

"If you wasn't as blind as a bat an dumb as an owl," Mrs. Mann said softly, "you wouldn't need me to call no names, an you wouldn't need to make no guesses either."

"Mebby that's so," Sim replied slowly, "an if I am blind I don't know that I'm sorry. There's times in a body's life, Mrs. Mann, when it's best to be that a-way."

Without a word Mrs. Mann turned away and, entering the house, slammed the door shut behind her. Sim walked on down the street, chuckling softly to himself. But could he have seen the expression on Mrs. Mann's face at that moment and the steady glitter in her eyes he might have had a premonition of some things that were to follow.

When he had passed out of sight, a figure crept out of the shadow of the fence and stole quietly away in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER V.

YOUR UNCLE JONATHAN TURNER. Melvin was more fortunate than he had dared hope, for he had gone but a short distance when he came into a road and after following that a little way ran on to a house.

It was true it was not much of a house, being merely a small log cabin, and its surroundings were meager and uninviting, promising little in the way of comfort; but, for all that, it would afford shelter and food, and that was a great deal under the circumstances.

He rode up to the tumble down rail fence that stood between the yard and the road and was preparing to call to let his presence be known when a man came around a corner of the house. He was a little, wiry, weather-beaten old chap, almost hidden under a mammoth broad-brimmed straw hat. He was not expecting a strange visitor, and the appearance of Melvin was a great surprise to him. He stopped short, his mouth and eyes wide open, and he stood staring in perfect silence.

"It was Melvin who spoke first. 'I have lost my way,' he said, 'and I am looking for a place to spend the night. What chance is there for stopping with you?'

If Melvin expected this man to prove as reticent and morose as the one he had just passed, his mind was soon disabused of that idea, for the response to his speech, although not altogether relevant, was prompt, vigorous and effusive.

"Lord a-massy!" he exclaimed. "You mean to tell me that you done plumb up an lost your way an took to wanderin round in the woods for all the world like a stray suckin calf? Great granny, man, what made you go an do sich a thing as that?"

"For the reason that I couldn't help it, I presume," Melvin answered.

"Couldn't help it! Why, Lord a-massy, man, what do you mean? You ain't aimin to tell me you couldn't help gittin lost, are you?"

"I guess I am."

"Waal, I'll be d-d switched! That shore beats my time, as the feller says. The idea of any human critter havin little enough sense to go an get lost in the woods! Why, say, a cat knows more than that!"

"Very likely," Melvin replied. "But what of it?"

"Nothin, only it shore stumps me that a grown-up man like you'd go an get lost like this."

"Isn't it just barely possible that you might do such a thing?"

"Do sich a thing as what?"

"Get lost."

"Me git lost! Your Uncle Jonathan Turner git lost! Waal, that's a good un shore. Say, did you ever hear tell of a groun' hog gittin lost?"

"I don't know that I ever did."

"Waal, when you do hear of sich a thing you may then begin to figger out that it's just barely possible that Jonathan Turner mought some day lose hisself in the woods."

"Do you think it impossible for you to lose your way in a strange wood?"

"No, I don't think nothin 'bout it. I jest know it's impossible."

"How would you keep from losing your way?"

"Jest like I'd roll offen a log. I'd jest do it."

"Suppose you were in a strange place, and, coming to two roads, you didn't know which one to take. Then what?"

"Oh, I'd know all right which one to take."

"How would you know?"

"Jest have sense enough to know, as the feller says."

"Would you? Well, all right. I am anxious just now to learn whether or not you can give me shelter for the night?"

"I guess that's so. Rid a right smart piece today, I reckon?"

"Yes, quite a way."

"Jedgin from appearances, I'd take you to be a stranger in these parts?"

"I am."

"Waal, whar mought you hail from, if I may make so bold as to ask?"

"I'm from the north."

"From the north, eh? Waal, that's a right smart big spread out sort of a place, as I understand it, an a feller mought come from thar an still not come from n'whar in particular. Reckon you ain't no reason for not tellin jest what identical spot in the north you mought hail from?"

"None in the world. I'm from Chicago."

"Are, eh? I've hearn tell of that place. Considerable little town, I judge?"

"Yes."

"More account than Beckett's Mill likely?"

"I think so."

"Reckoned from whar I'd hearn tell of it that it shorely must be. S'pose, now, you have business in these parts?"

"Yes, some."

"Guess you ain't one of them preachin fellers come down yere sorter figgerin on holdin some meetin's over at the Coon Run meetin' house?"

"No."

"Never preach none, eh?"

"Uh, huh! Jest a plain ever'day common cussin man, I reckon?"

"I haven't ever made it a practice to do much 'cussin,' as you say, but I've almost been tempted today to wish I was an expert in that line. But, say, how about stopping with you tonight? I've got to find lodgin some place, and it's about time I was knowin whar."

"That's so, stranger; yes, s'ee. Jest about time you was findin out whar; yes, s'ir. Reckon you ain't sorter figgerin on tryin to git to teach our school, are you?"

"No, I'm no schoolteacher."

"Hain't, eh? Guess mebby you mought be kinder lookin round with a notion of buyin a farm in these parts?"

"No. All I'm looking around for now is a place to spend the night."

"Edzackly. Naturally you'd be more interested in that than anything else jest now."

"Yes, and I asked if I could stop with you."

"That's a fact, stranger. You shore done that very identical thing. I ain't a-pretendin to say you didn't."

"But you haven't answered me."

"No, I guess I ain't. I'm glad you jogged my memory, stranger, 'cause I got my mind to runnin on them other things, an I clean forgot all about it. You know how sich things are some-times."

"Yes, but are you going to answer me?"

"Why, to be shore I am. What reason under the sun could I have for not answerin you, I'd like to know? Yes, s'ee. I 'low you hain't none of them peddler fellers what comes around sellin of pills, are you, stranger?"

"I am not."

"Reckoned most shore you couldn't be. Ingen'rally them pill peddlers is right smart, peart lookin fellers. Guess now more likely you mought be one of them doctor chaps huntin a place to set up in business?"

"No, I'm nothing of the kind. But, see here, are you going to compel me to spend the night out here in the road?"

"Why, I reckon not. I hain't no right to compel you to do nothin the way I figger it, as the feller says. You're your own boss, I s'pose, an I 'low you go or stay jest whar you please."

"Sometimes I do."

"Guess you're a-goin jest whar you please now, ain't you?"

"Perhaps."

"An I reckon you make it out that it ain't a blamed bit of my business whar you're a-goin nor whar you're a-goin for?"

"I rather suspect you are about correct there, Mr. Turner."

"Jest so, an I guess mebby you're plumb right too. At the same time I 'low you can't be a part of the war come down to try to lick we uns?"

"Certainly not."

"I knowed you couldn't hardly be, but with all them soldiers an armies a-goin about the way they are a feller can't be much shore about nothin no more. Mebby, now, you've come down yere to—"

"Great Scott! It doesn't matter in the least to you what I came down here for, but as you seem determined to know I'll tell you and be done with it. I represent a company of capitalists who believe there are rich deposits of mineral in this section, and my business here is to investigate and learn whether or not their surmises are correct. Now you know why I am here, and I hope you'll tell me without any further delay whether you are going to give me shelter for the night."

"Great Caesar, man! Let me have some supper and a place to rest, and I'll tell you everything I know. I've been in the saddle all day, and I'm dreadfully hungry and tired."

"Why, to be shore you must be. It stan's to reason a feller would be hungry an tired after ridin all day. Yes, s'ee. Guess them fellers hain't no notion that they're a-goin to find gold around here. Have they?"

"No. Say, I'm tired of all this fooling, and I'm just going to dismount and spend the night with you, anyhow."

"Why, shorely. Lord a-massy, man, you mought jest as well 'a' done that long ago 'stead of settin thar chewin the rag all this time."

"Why didn't you tell me long ago that I might stop?"

"I was aimin to; but, as I said while ago, my mind got to runnin on some-thin else, an I forgot it. Wonder if them fellers are 'lowin to find silver in these parts?"

"No. Where shall I put my horse?"

"Jest leave him thar at the fence. I'll tote him to the stable directly. Reckon if them fellers hain't calculatin to find gold nor silver 'bout yere they must be a-figgerin on findin somethin else."

"Naturally."

"Guess mebby it moughtn't be iron, now, mought it?"

In spite of the fact that he was tired, hungry and annoyed, Melvin burst into a roar of laughter. Turner's questioning was so persistent and ridiculous that it had become amusing. Presently Melvin said:

"Now, Mr. Turner, I am positively not going to answer another question until I have had supper, so you need not put yourself to the trouble of asking me another thing. Do you understand?"

"To be shore I do, an you'll find I ain't the man to go on askin a feller questions when I see he don't want to be bothered with 'em. Nary time I ain't. But, by gravy, stranger, it puzzles me to figger out what kind of mineral them men are countin on findin yere—it does shore! Reckon they can't be spectin to find copper nor lead, can they?"

Melvin rushed into the house, leaving Turner outside to put away the horse and ponder all alone the questions that, though they did not affect him in the least, interested him deeply.

And as Turner pondered an idea came to him, for he lacked a great deal of being as much of a fool as he seemed. He stopped on his way to the stable with the horse and, nodding his head knowingly, muttered to himself these words:

"Come down yere to smell roun' for mineral! Powerful likely story, that is, when thar ain't as much mineral in this hull blame section as a feller could put in a flea's ear. Come down yere for some rich fellers jest to loaf about an see what he can scent in the ground! That thar's all moughty reasonable, an of course I believe it—in a pig's eye! You are a slick un, young feller, but you ain't quite slick enough to slide down your Uncle Jonathan Turner's throat, not quite. Your Uncle Jonathan mayn't be much to look at, but he lacks a hull passel of bein a durned idiot asyllum, with no more sense than a gatepost, an his opinion is that you are a-lyin an that thar's a good deal back of you that you hain't wantin knowed."

CHAPTER VI.

STIM SURPRISES HIS NEIGHBORS.

Sim Banks did not go home at once, but passed on down the street in the direction of Hicks' store. It had been his custom to go there every night to join the little group of men who always congregated around the store stove in the winter and on the platform in front of the door in the summer to loaf away their idle hours.

He had long been one of the leading spirits in these meetings, and heretofore he had come to them boldly, and in the talks that followed his voice had been heard taking an important part.

But tonight he approached with halting step and shamed face and sat down quietly on the edge of the platform on the very outskirts of the group. He heard no one would notice his presence, and he was careful to do nothing to attract attention to it.

Pap Sampson was there and Jason Roberts and Jim Thorn and a number of others, and most prominent among them all and most in evidence in the conversation was Ebenezer Sparks.

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"Thar, Ebenezer Sparks, that'll do. We all know how brave you are, so thar ain't a grain of truth in the world for you to waste your breath a-tellin us about it. Lord, you made that all plumb plain to us today, you an Sim Banks both."

"Sim don't seem to be doin much talkin 'bout the way he done," Jason observed, with a laugh. "Guess he believes in lettin his actions speak for themselves."

"Lord, Jason, I reckon the way Sim's women done kind of took the tucks outen him," Pap said. Then, turnin' to Sim, he added, "She kind of hit you pooty hard, didn't she, Sim?"

"No harder'n I deserved, I guess," Sim replied dryly. "I did act the miserable coward, an it ain't no wonder she was ashamed of me."

"Say, by granny, but that's one way to talk, ain't it?" Jason said after a short silence. "You ain't a bit like Ebenezer, Sim. He done more cowardly than you, but you won't ketch him cowlin of it, nary a time."

"I can't help nothin 'bout what Ebenezer does," Sim replied. "It don't do no good to deny the truth when ever'body knows what I done."

"You're right thar, Sim," Pap Sampson said heartily. "Addin vinegar to a sound puddin ain't goin to make it no sweeter, an addin a lie to another fault ain't goin to make the other fault no less. Them is gospel truths if thar ever was one outside of the Holy Writ, an it'd be a good thing for you, Ebenezer Sparks, to take 'em into your craw an digest 'em along at odd spells."

"Pap Sampson," Ebenezer exclaimed, bristling up, "do you 'low to insinuate that I been a-lyin?"

"Lord, no, Ebenezer! I ain't no hand to insinuate, but when a coward makes out like he's brave if he ain't lyin he's gittin right slap next door to it."

"You better be keerful, Pap," Jim Thorn said, "or first thing you know

"Pap Sampson and the rest interferred."

you'll have Ebenezer's old woman down on you. Can't nobody make her think he ain't brave, you bet!"

"Sim ain't much like Sim's wife, is she?" Jason asked. Then he added: "By jinks, I think Sim's wife cut up too rough with him. I tell you right now I'd like to see my woman try any sich capers as them on me, especially right afore folks. Lord, I'd leave 'er so quick that it'd make her head swim."

"You all hearn whar Mary Mann said, I guess," Jim Thorn remarked. "I been thinkin 'bout that, an I don't know if the word she spoke wa'n't a true word. Sim's woman did 'pear to be a right smart struck with the looks of that stranger, an—"

"Jim Thorn, you are a liar!"

They all looked up in astonishment, and there was Sim Banks standing among them, his eyes ablaze with anger and his form trembling with suppressed rage.

"Jim Thorn," he repeated, "you are a liar, a dirty, cowardly, miserable, sneakin liar, an you'll take back them words or I'll knock your head clean down your throat!"

Thorn sprang to his feet and started to run, but in an instant Sim had hold of his collar with one hand and with the other had given him a blow on the side of the head that sent him to the floor as limp as a rag. Sim would have followed up his advantage and pounded Thorn unmercifully, but Pap Sampson and the rest interferred, and five or six of them held him while the others got Thorn away.

After it was all over and Sim had been released they stood about him for some time, looking at him in silence and with a kind of awe. To them he had suddenly become a new man, and they felt that they did not know him.

It was Hicks who broke the pause.

"Why, Sim," he said, "what's come over you? Who'd 'a' ever dreamed of you doin sich a thing as that?"

"Let him keep his mouth shet an quit a-lyin 'bout Lonesome, then," Hicks replied, not exactly in line with Hicks' questions. "I'll hit him ag'in if he dast to say sich another thing, an I'll hit anybody else that does it, an I'll hit to kill."

"Well, that's all right, Sim, but you jest cool down now. Jim Thorn was the only one that said anything, an you've done hit him, so thar ain't no more to do, an you'd jest as well git quiet."

"My land, Sim, you shore hit him a good un!" Jason said. "I never see a purtier lick struck in all my life."

"An it was all so quick," they all observed. "Why, them words wa'n't much more'n outen Jim Thorn's mouth till Sim was a-standin up here an sayin, 'Jim Thorn, you are a liar' jest that a-way. Then Jim starts to run, an afore I knowed it Sim had gathered him by the collar an give him that lick."

"An wasn't it a lick, though?" Jason said. "Why, say, it jest keeled Jim over thar so quick that I bet he never knowed what done it."

"I bet he didn't know nothin touched him—jest fopped down thar for all the world like a shot hog. Didn't 'low it was in you to hit a feller like that, Sim."

What did it mean?

went in and struck a light and prepared to retire. His wife was asleep, and he moved about noiselessly so as not to wake her.

Presently his eye fell on a scrap of paper lying on the floor. Mechanically he took it up and glanced at the writing it bore. Instantly he sat up and read it eagerly through. Then, puzzled and mystified, he read it again and again. These were the words the paper contained:

My Dear Louisa—Never let anybody know that you know me, and for God's sake don't tell a living soul who I am. So soon as possible I will see you and explain.

What did it mean?

(To be Continued)

We Want 10,000 lbs Butter to be covered with our Vegetable Parchment Paper. We will print name and address on them at reasonable rates.

What did it mean?

(To be Continued)

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