

# EBEN HOLDEN

By IRVING DACHELLER

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Using. But God knows I have had my share of pleasure and no more bitter than I deserved.

It was a lonely summer for me. I had letters from Hope—ten of them—which I still keep and read, often with something of the old pleasure—girlish letters that told of her work and friends and gave me some sweet counsel and much assurance between the lines.

I traveled in new roads that vacation time. Politics and religion as well as love began to interest me. Slavery was coming into the proportion of a great issue, and the stories of cruelty and outrage on the plantations of the south stirred my young blood and made it ready for the letting of battle in God's time. The speeches in the senate were read aloud in our sitting room after supper the day the Tribune came, and all lent a tongue to their discussion.

Ed Peary was with us one evening, I remember, when our talk turned into long wars the end of which I have never found to this day. Elizabeth had been reading of a slave who, according to the paper, had been whipped to death.

"God knows at such things are laid down why don't he stop 'em?" David asked.

"Don't say that," said Ed Peary. "You're an ignorant," said David.

"That's a bad word, a dangerous one," said the old poet, dropping his dialect as he spoke. "It makes God responsible for evil as well as good. The word carries us beyond our depth. It's too big for our souls. I'd rather think he can do what's do-able an' know what's knowable. In the beginning he gave laws to the world, an' these laws are unchangeable, or they are not wise and perfect. If God were to change them he would thereby acknowledge their imperfection. By this law men and races suffer as they struggle upward. But if the law is unchangeable can it be changed for a better cause—even the relief of a whipped slave? In good time the law shall punish and relieve. The groans of them that suffer shall hasten it, but there shall be no change in the law. There can be no change in the law."

"Let's hard 't' tell jest how powerful God is," said Uncle Eb. "Good deal like tryin' 't' weigh Lake Champlain with a quart pail an' a pair o' steel-yards."

"If God's laws are unchangeable what is the use of praying?" I asked.

"He can give us the strength to bear, the will to obey him an' light to guide us," said the poet.

Hope returned for a few days late in August. Invitations were just issued for the harvest dance at Rickard's.

"You must take 'er," said Uncle Eb. The day she came. "She's a party dancer as a man ever see. Prance right up an' tell 'er she mus' go. Don't want to let any one git ahead o' ye."

"Of course I will go," she said in answer to my invitation. "I shouldn't think you were a beau worth having if you did not ask me."

The yellow moon was peering over Woody ledge when we went away that evening. I knew it was our last pleasure seeking in Faraway, and the crickets in the stubble filled the silence with a kind of mourning.

"She looked so fine in her big hat and new gown with its many dainty accessories of lace and ribbon, adjusted with so much patting and pulling, that she sat beside me I hardly dared touch her for fear of spoiling something. When she shivered a little and said it was growing cool I put my arm about her, and as I drew her closer to my side she turned her hat obligingly and said it was a great nuisance.

I tried to kiss her then, but she put her hand over my mouth and said sweetly that I would spoil everything if I did that.

"I must not let you kiss me, William," she said. "Not—not for all in the world. I'm sure you wouldn't have me do what I think is wrong—would you?"

There was but one answer to such an appeal, and I made myself as happy as possible feeling her head upon my shoulder and her soft hair touching my cheek. As I think of it now the trust she put in me was something sublime and holy.

"Then I shall talk about—about our love," I said. "I must do something."

"Promised I wouldn't let you," she said. Then she added, after a moment of silence: "I'll tell you what you may do. Tell me what is your ideal in a woman—the one you would love best of all. I don't think that would be wicked, do you?"

"I think God would forgive that," I said. "She must be tall and slim, with dainty feet and hands and a pair of big eyes, blue as a violet, shaded with long dark lashes. And her hair must be wavy and light, with a little tinge of gold in it. And her cheek must have the pink of the rose and dimples that show in laughter. And her voice—that must have music in it and the ring of kindness and good nature. And her lips—let them show the crimson of her blood and be ready to give and receive a kiss when I meet her."

She sighed and nestled closer to me. "If I let you kiss me just once," she whispered, "you will not ask me again, will you?"

"No, sweetheart, I will not," I answered. Then we gave each other such

a kiss as may be known once and only once in a lifetime.

"What would you do for the love of a girl like that?" she whispered.

I thought a moment, sounding depths of undiscovered woe to see if there were anything I should hesitate to suffer, and there was nothing.

"I'd lay me down an' die," I said. And I well remember how, when I lay dying, as I believed, in rain and darkness on the bloody field of Bull Run, I thought of that moment and of those words.

"I cannot say such beautiful things as you," she answered when I asked her to describe her ideal. "He must be good, and he must be tall and handsome and strong and brave."

Then she sang a tender love ballad. I have often shared the pleasure of thousands under the spell of her voice, but I have never heard her sing as to that small audience on Farway turnpike.

As we came near Rickard's hall we could hear the fiddles and the calling off.

The windows on the long sides of the big house were open. Long shafts of light shot out upon the gloom. It had always reminded me of a picture of Noah's ark that hung in my bedroom, and now it seemed to be floating, with resting ears of gold, in a deluge of darkness. We were greeted with a noisy welcome at the door. Many of the boys and girls came from all sides of the big hall and shook hands with us.

Ed Peary, whose long forelocks had been oiled for the occasion and combed down so that they touched his right eyebrow, was waiting in a side that jarred the house. His trousers legs were caught on the top of his thin boots. He nodded to me as I came in, snuffed his fingers and doubled his

eyes.

"Here's some money on account," he said. "We'll close 'em later."

"Close 'em later," said David, a little sadness in his tone as he took the money.

It was growing dusk as the man went away. The crickets sang with a loud, accusing clamor. Slowly we turned and went into the dark house. David whistling under his breath. Elizabeth was resting in her chair. She was humming an old hymn as she looked.

"Sold the farm, mother," said David. She stopped singing, but made no answer. In the dusk as we sat down I saw her face leaning upon her hand. Over the hills and out of the fields around us came many voices—the low chant in the stubble, the baying of a hound in the far timber, the cry of the tree toad—a tiny drift of odd things (like that one seen at sea) on the deep eternal silence of the heavens. There was no sound in the room save the low creaking of the rocker in which Elizabeth sat. After all the going and coming and doing and saying of many years here was a little spell of silence, and beyond lay the untried things of the future. For me it was a time of reckoning.

"Been hard at work here all these years, mother," said David. "Oughter be glad to git away."

"Yes," said she sadly, "it's been hard work. Years ago I thought I never could stan' it; but now I've got kind o' used to it."

"Time ye got used 't' pleasure an' comfort," he said. "Come kind o' hard at first, but ye mus' try 't' stan' it. If we're goin' 't' hev sech fun in heaven as Deacon Hesper tells us we oughter begin 't' practice er we'll be 'shamed up ourselves."

The worst was over. Elizabeth began to laugh.

At length a strain of song came out of the distance:

"Maxwellton's brasses are bonnie where ever they braes the dew."

"It's Hope and Uncle Eb," said David, while I went for the lantern. "Wonder what's kep' 'em so late?"

When the lamps were lit the old house seemed suddenly to have got a sense of what had been done. The familiar creak of the stairway as I went to bed had an appeal and a protest. The rude chrome of the voluptuous lady, with red lips and the name of Spring, that had always hung in my chamber had a mournful, accusing look. The stain upon her cheek that had come one day from a little leak in the roof looked now like the path of a tear drop. And when the wind came up in the night and I heard the creaking of lone pine it spoke of the doom of that house and its own that was not far distant.

We rented a new home in town that week and were soon settled in it. Hope went away to resume her studies the same day I began work in college.

Not much in my life at college is essential to this history save the training. The students came mostly from other and remote parts of the north country, some even from other states. Coming largely from towns and cities, they were shorn of those simple and rugged traits that distinguished the men of Faraway and made them worthy of what poor fame this book may afford. In the main they were like other students the world over, I take it, and mostly, as they have shown, capable of winning their own fame. It all seemed very high and mighty and grand to me, especially the names of the courses.

I had my baptism of sophomore scorn and many a heated argument over my title to life, liberty and the pursuit of learning. It became necessary to establish it by force of arms, which I did decisively and with as little delay as possible. I took much interest in athletic sports and was soon a good ball player, a boxer of some skill and the best wrestler in college.

In my second year at college Hope went away to continue her studies in New York. She was to live in the family of John Fuller, a friend of David, who had left Faraway years before and made his fortune there in the big city. Her going filled my days with a lingering and pervasive sadness. I saw in it sometimes the shadow of a heavier loss than I dared to contemplate. She had come home once a week from Ogdensburg, and I had always had a letter between times. She was ambitious, and I fancy they let her go so that there should be no danger of any turning aside from the plan of my life or of hers, for they knew our

hearts as well as we knew them and possible better.

We had the parlor to ourselves the evening before she went away, and I read a little love tale I had written said. "He ought to put his arm about her waist in that love scene."

"Like that," I said, sulking the action to the word.

"About like that," she answered, laughing, "and then be ought to say something very, very nice to her before he proposes—something about his having loved her for so long—you know."

"And how about her?" I asked, my arm still about her waist.

"If she really loves him," Hope answered, "she would put her arms about his neck and lay her head upon his shoulder, so—and then he might say what is in the story." She was smiling now as she looked up at me.

"And kiss her?"

"And kiss her," she whispered—and, let me add, that part of the scene was in no wise neglected."

"And when he says, 'Will you wait for me and keep me always in your heart?' what should be her answer?" I continued.

"Always," she said.

"Hope, this is our own story," I whispered. "Does it need any further correction?"

"It's too short—that's all," she answered as she lit the gas again.

Just then Uncle Eb opened the door suddenly.

"Tut, tut!" he said, turning quickly about.

"Come in, Uncle Eb," said Hope.

"Come right in, we want to see you. In a moment she had caught him by the arm.

"Don't want 't' break up the mood," said he, laughing.

"We don't care if you do know," said Hope. "We're not ashamed of it."

"Hain't got no cause 't' be," he said. "Do it while ye're young an' full o'

vinegar! That's what I say every time. It's the best fun there is. I thought I'd like 't' hev ye both come up 't' my room for a minute 'fore yer mother an' father come back," he said in a low tone that was almost a whisper.

Then he shut one eye suggestively and beckoned with his head as we followed him up the stairway to the little room in which he slept. He knelt by the bed and pulled out the old skin covered trunk that David Brower had given him soon after we came. He felt a moment for the keyhole, his hand trembling, and then I helped him open the trunk. From under that sacred suit of broadcloth, worn only on the grandest occasions, he fetched a bundle about the size of a man's head. It was tied in a big red handkerchief. We were both sitting on the floor beside him.

"Heft it," he whispered.

I did so and found it heavier than I expected.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Spondoolix," he whispered.

Then he untied the bundle, a close packed hoard of bank bills with some pieces of gold and silver at the bottom.

"Hain't never had no use fer it," he said as he drew out a layer of the bills and spread them with trembling fingers. Then he began counting them slowly and carefully.

"There!" he whispered when at length he had counted \$100. "There, Hope! Take that an' put it away in yer wallet. Might come handy when ye're 'way fr'm hum."

She kissed him tenderly.

"Put it 'a yer wallet an' say nothin'—not a word 't' nobody," he said.

Then he counted over a like amount for me.

"Say nothin'," he said, looking up at me over his spectacles.

Father and mother were coming in below stairs, and, hearing them, we helped Uncle Eb tie up his bundle and stow it away. Then we went down to meet them.

Next morning we bade Hope goodby at the cars and returned to our home with a sense of loss that for long lay heavy upon us all.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNCLE EB and David were away buying cattle half the week, but Elizabeth Brower was always at home to look after my comfort. She was up betimes in the morning and singing at her work long before I was out of bed. When the breakfast was near ready she came to my door with a call so full of cheerfulness and good nature it was the best thing in the day. And often at night I have known her to come into my room when I was lying awake with some hard problem to see that I was properly covered or that my window was not open too far. As we sat alone together on an evening I have seen her listen for hours while I was committing the odes of Horace with a curiosity that finally gave way to resignation. Sometimes she would look over my shoulder at the printed page and try to discern some meaning in it. When Uncle Eb was with us he would often sit a long time, his head turned

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city. She came home intending to surprise us all the first summer, but unfortunately I had gone away in the woods with a party of surveyors and missed her. We were a month in the wilderness and came out a little west of Albany, where I took a boat for New York to see Hope. I came down the North river between the great smoky cities on either side of it one damp and chilly morning. The noise, the crowds, the immensity of the town appalled me.

At John Fuller's I found that Hope had gone home, and, while they tried to detain me longer, I came back on the night boat of the same day. Hope and I passed each other in that journey, and I did not see her until the summer preceding my third and last year in college, the faculty having allowed me to take two years in one. Her letters had come less frequently, and when she came I saw a grand young lady of fine manners, her beauty shaping to an ampler mold, her form straightening to the dignity of womanhood.

At the depot our hands were cold and trembling with excitement, neither of us, I fancy, knowing quite how far to go in our greeting. Our correspondence had been true to the promise made mother. There had not been a word of love in it, only now and then a suggestion of our tender feeling. We hesitated only for the briefest moment. Then I put my arm about her neck and kissed her.

"I am so glad to see you," she said.

"Well, she was charming and beautiful, but different, and probably no more different than was I. She was no longer the laughing, simple minded child of Faraway, whose heart was as one's hand before him in the daylight. She had now a bit of the woman's reserve—her prudence, her skill in hiding the things of the heart. I loved her more than ever, but somehow I felt it hopeless; that she had grown out of my life. She was much in request among the people of Hillsborough, and we went about a good deal and had many callers. But we had little time to ourselves. She seemed to avoid that and had much to say of the grand young men who came to call on her in the great city.

Anyhow it all hurt me to the soul and even robbed me of my sleep. A better lover than I would have made an end of dallying and got at the truth, come what might. But I was of the Puritans and not of the cavaliers, and my way was that which God had marked for me, albeit I must own no man had ever a keener eye for a lovely woman or more heart to please her. A mighty pride had come to me, and I had rather have thrown my heart to vultures than see it an unwelcome offering. And I was quite out of courage with Hope. She, I dare say, was as much out of patience with me.

She returned in the late summer, and I went back to my work at college in a hopeless fashion that gave way under the whip of a strong will.

I made myself as contented as possible. I knew all the pretty girls and went about with some of them to the entertainments of the college season. (To be continued.)

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