

The Free Press Short Story

MEDDLER'S THREE

BY W. T. PEARSON

Joan Walton was near the front door of the store when the trouble started. She could hear loud, angry talking across the street in front of the post office. She hurried to the door, looked out.

Mr. Tom Warner, tall heavy-set planter who lived two miles south of Lansdowne, was making the noise. He was laying down the law to Dan Borland.

"I won't stand for it, young fellow. You stay away from Elna, or I'll—" "Oh, Dad," a slim girl cried, stepping out of the Warner sedan parked a few feet away. "Please, Dad, don't make a scene."

She broke into sobs, ashamed of what was happening. People were coming from the stores to listen.

Dan hurried to her. "You can't help it, Elna," he was saying comfortingly.

"Stay away from her," Mr. Warner yelled. "I've told you. I'll have the law on you, Elna's just a child—and if she were an old maid and you the last man on earth, I wouldn't let you marry her."

"I wouldn't be the last man on earth," Dan pointed out, "if you were on hand to interfere."

Then he turned and went down the street toward the drugstore. Elna came into the Walton store. "You heard," she said to Joan. "I know you did." Joan broke in, trying to speak soothingly. "Don't feel too bad about it, Elna. Everyone knows it's not your fault."

"It's so awful!" Elna said miserably. "Dan and I love each other. We want to get married, but in the right way with all the blessings. The trouble started when Dan asked Dad for me, over there."

"But why did he choose such a place to ask for you?" Joan asked. "Why didn't he go to your home to do that?"

"Because he isn't allowed at our home. No Borland is. And the Warners don't go to the Borland home, either. It's been like that for years. Oh, Joan, it's so silly. I want two bars of laundry soap and some pickling spice. We'll elope if there's no other way, Joan. People, even our own people, can't do this to us."

"Eloping would make trouble," said Joan. "Why all the feuding, though? You said your families—"

"Oh, I don't know. It's almost primitive, Joan. It has been going on from the times of our great-grandfathers—both old settlers in this section. Something about a loan, or a note, or something. The only thing clear about it is that the two families won't have anything to do with each other."

"I'll speak to Frank about it," Joan offered, as she wrapped soap and spice. "He's your Dad's cousin, isn't he?"

"Yes, Oh, I wish Frank would talk to Dad. He knows Dan's fine. Dad knows it, too, only he won't admit it."

Misry, the tall sleepy-eyed man-of-all-jobs around the Walton store, was in the back of the building, straightening stock, when Elna left. He came toward Joan.

"Somethin' wrong, Miss Jo-ann?" he asked softly. "Ah hope 'tain' no trouble."

Joan told him briefly what she knew of the situation. "I wish I could help them, Misry," she said. "It's a shame people have to be in trouble over something they can't even remember."

"Sho is," Misry agreed. "Ah been knowin' 'bout de Warner-Borland trouble since ah was a young-un, but ah ain't hinged 'nearly what it was 'bout." He scratched his head as if trying to call up something from his amazing storehouse of memories. "By de way, Mistah Frank may know a little somethin' 'bout dis business. His gran'ma an' Mistah Warner's pa wuz fust cousins."

When Frank Barkdale came to town after the mail that morning, he dropped in to see Joan, who gave him an account of the morning's happenings.

"What's it all about?" Joan asked. "Why this trouble?"

"I don't know exactly," Frank said slowly, "but it's something about a note that Tom Warner's grandfather endorsed for Dan's great-grandfather. It was along about the time of the Civil War. Old Mr. Borland is said to have defaulted on the note, and Mr. Warner had to pay it. Around a thousand dollars, I think it was."

"But the Borlands are well-fixed," Joan said. "They could pay off such a note and straighten it out. Why—" "Dan's grandfather," Frank broke in, "stated that the note business had been straightened out. It was done in a sort of round-about trading way."

"But it's so childish, Frank! Won't you go to Mr. Warner and talk to him? Make him see what he's forcing Elna and Dan to do. If they elope,

that will just make things worse—at least for a time."

But Frank shook his head. "I'd rather not talk to Tom. He'd tell me to mind my own business."

"You mean you won't help get it straight," Joan asked, hurt. She looked up at Frank, with both appeal and accusation in her eyes. "You know there's been an injustice being done, and you won't help?"

"I don't think my talking would do any good," Frank told her. "When a fellow meddles in such things, he usually makes them worse."

"But Frank, what if someone were trying to keep us from marrying or planning to marry. Think how you'd feel. This is as important to Elna and Dan as our engagement is to us."

Frank nodded. "We'd work ours out," he said. "They'll have to take care of theirs."

That afternoon Joan questioned Misry again about the Warners and the Borlands and their various connections.

"If of Uncle Jeremiah Dustin was livin'," Misry told her, "he could give you de straight of it. But he been dead since ah was a little boy."

"Who was he?" Joan wanted to know. "He wuz a slave. Ah seed him an' heard him talk, but he was of den. Uncle Jeremiah knowed a lot about de people in dis country."

"Jeremiah Dustin," Joan mused. "Any connection with the Dustins east of town?"

"Yas'm, he wuz Mr. Dustin's gran'-pa's slave. De Dustins live on de place where of Mr. Warner use to live. It's one uh de oldest places aroun' here."

"They live in the old Warner house?" Joan asked eagerly, sensing a warmer trail.

"Yas'm. An' it sho' is lo'! Dey nearly burnt out one day years ago. It was on de fifth uh March an' ah went out an' helped fight de fyah. It had caught 'um a bad flue in de kitchen loft. Dat was a nach'al bad fyah fight, but us quenched it."

"It must have been a hard fire to control," Joan said. "That's such a old house."

"Sho is. An' de wind was nigh dat day. Ah got right up in dat loft an' throwed water as fas' as de othah boys could hand it up to me. An' you talk 'bout a littered-up place, it was dat loft. Dey wuz of scrap lumber, of magazines, of books wid dust a inch deep on 'em, er, maybe jus' a half inch," he added, avoiding too gross exaggeration.

"What kind of old books?" Joan asked. "Dey wuz all shapes and sizes," Misry told her. "But ah does remember dat dey wuz some of 'count' books 'most 'em."

"Old ledgers," Joan asked quickly. "You mean, like the ones—"

"Yas'm, lah de ones in de office yondah. Dey wuz of and cracked an' peelin'."

"Did they get burned?"

"No'm, ah chunked 'em out of de way uh de fyah. Ah guess dey's still right up in dat loft now."

When Uncle Jim Walton came back to the store at two-fifteen, Joan took Misry in the Walton car and headed for the Dustin place.

She returned to town about an hour later, bringing two old ledgers, and found Lansdowne in a state of high excitement. Frank was waiting for her at the store. People were standing in front of the stores, talking. Frank came out to meet her as she emerged from the car.

"What's happened?" she asked. "Why do you look so worried?"

"Mr. Warner has accused Dan Borland of poisoning his bird dog," Frank said. "But Dan wouldn't do a thing like that," Joan said angrily. "He is not that kind. Mr. Warner ought to be ashamed to accuse him of—"

"Something up your sleeve, Miss Walton?"

"Nothing that would concern you much, Mr. Barkdale," Joan said briskly. "You refused to help when I asked you."

An air of excitement ran through the little town next morning. Elna came into town with her father. Her eyes were red with weeping, indicating that she had been brought rather against her will. And it was clear she was ashamed of the whole thing. She sat in a cane-bottom chair in the rear of the Horton Store where Squire Dodds held court, and stared at the floor.

The crowd was jamming the store when Joan, Frank and Uncle Jim, with Misry shuffling along behind, arrived. Joan was carrying an old ledger under her arm. Dr. Boyd, the veterinarian, came, leading the liver-and-white pointer whose violent illness had precipitated this occasion.

The court proceedings were irregular. "Tom Warner, you accuse Dan Borland of poisoning your dog?" asked Squire Dodds.

"I do, Squire. He—" "Then offer proof," the magistrate cut in. "Any witnesses?"

"He bought some rat poison at the drug store," Mr. Warner said. "Didn't he Bert?" he asked the drug clerk, whom he had summoned there. "Yes, he got a tube of it yesterday morning right after the fyah."

"Nobody asked you when," the magistrate snapped. "I beg your pardon," said Bert Priller nervously. "I—" "Quiet, unless you're asked something else," Squire Dodds ordered. "Now, Tom," he said to Mr. Warner, "did you see Dan Borland administer poison to your dog?"

"Of course not, Squire. He'd be too sick for that. He—" "What other evidence do you have to offer?" asked the magistrate.

"Ask Doc Boyd how the dog was affected," Mr. Warner said triumphantly. "He can tell you."

"The dog," said the veterinarian, without being formally asked, "had been poisoned. I administered an antidote."

"Just a minute," Mr. Warner broke in. "Bert, what was the poison agent in the stuff you sold Dan Borland?"

"Phosphorus," Bert replied. "All right, Doc," Mr. Warner asked. "What kind of antidote did you give?"

"One that would tend to relieve phosphorus poisoning," said the doctor. "I am positive that the dog had been poisoned by—"

"H'm," Squire Dodds grunted, looking sideways at Dan. "Int'festin'!" He asked Mr. Warner, "Where did you find the dog sick?"

"Between town and the Borland place," said Mr. Warner. "Halfway."

"All right, Dan," said Magistrate Dodds, "are you guilty or not?"

"Not guilty," Dan snapped. "I wouldn't do such a—"

"Nobody asked you that, young fellow. What have you got to say?" Dan turned to Frank.

"You take over now. I'm too mad to talk!"

Joan looked at Frank, who had turned to Mr. Warner. Her heart leaped.

"Four farmers," said Frank, "have put out, in the past two days, the very kind of rat poisoning that Dan bought. One of them, Joe Taylor, lives halfway between town and the Borland place, where you found the dog sick. The dog was a tramp. Say, Joe," he called, turning to the crowd, "did you see that pointer near your barn yesterday morning?"

"Yes," a tall farmer answered. "But I didn't think he could get at the poison. I had it in the crib, but a rat must've drug some of the meat out through a crack."

Frank turned to Dan. "Give me the tube of poison you bought." He held the tube up. "The seal isn't broken. Tom, your so-called evidence is washed up."

Someone cheered. "Hooray for Frank!" "Quiet!" bellowed Squire Dodds. "Case dismissed."

Joan pushed forward. "Wait, Dan and Mr. Warner. I've found something you must know about. Look here."

"Let's go. I'm so glad we both meddled!"

Frank nodded as they went out. "Where's Misry?" he asked. "His memory must have played a part in this some way."

"It did. Oh, there's Misry over on our store porch, sprawled out. He's almost asleep."

Joan was wrong. Misry was asleep, snoring contentedly in the warm sunshine. All was well again in Lansdowne. The third meddler rested.

Lady Nelson's Career Varied

Service-men's Families Find Real Welcome on Former Hospital Ship

HALIFAX (CP) — The liner Lady Nelson, one of the last of the white "Lady" boats which ran in peacetime between Canadian ports and the British West Indies, recently passed the 200,000-mile mark in her voyages as a hospital ship and repatriation transport.

Of the Canadian National Steamships' "Lady" boat fleet, only the Lady Nelson and Lady Rodney remain. The Lad Somers, Lady Drake and Lady Hawkins were lost by enemy action.

The Lady Nelson herself bears scars of war. A German U-boat fired a torpedo into her while she was moored at a pier in St. Lucia in 1942. Salvaged and repaired, she carried some 25,000 wounded servicemen through the submarine-infested waters of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

Once in the Bay of Biscay, she slipped through a cordon of German destroyers which later were routed by a task force of British and Canadian fighting ships.

When most of the wounded had been brought home, her hospital wards were turned into nurseries and play rooms for servicemen's children, who, with their mothers, now are coming to Canada.

PEANUTS FOR UKRAINE

PRINCE RUPERT, B. C. (CP) — Eighty-five tons of peanuts, sealed in cans, from U. S. Army stores here, have been shipped to the Ukraine where it is understood they will be distributed through United Nations Rehabilitation Relief.

BANK ROUTH TROUT

"It is unusual in nature," states J. R. Dymond of the Royal Ontario Museum, "to find bass and trout occurring in the same water except in large lakes such as The Great Lakes. Competition usually results in the elimination, sooner or later, of either bass or trout from small and medium-sized lakes. There is evidence in many cases of diminution in the numbers of trout following the successful introduction of bass."

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PRAIRIE SCHOONER Jimmie Gowler, whose pioneer ancestors set sail in a prairie schooner for Canada's west, gets the feel of the wagon and the pioneer life by taking his own "schooner" out beyond the gates of Winnipeg. With him is Mary Koschowski, soprano soloist, who often assists at the microphone when Jimmie Gowler and his musical company recreate the ballads and times of the early settlers in the weekly broadcasts of "Prairie Schooner" over the CBC Trans-Canada network, Fridays, at 10:30 p.m. EDT.



"What do you mean . . . I'm lucky?"

Lucky lad! Getting snagged on the wire in his effort to climb over a Hydro barrier . . . probably to recover a ball . . . may have saved his life. Some boys have not been so lucky.

Hydro energy is one of the finest things we have in Ontario to make for better living. But it can stop one from living, if you thoughtlessly give it a chance to flash through your body. Every possible precaution for safety is taken by your Hydro; but once in a while someone gets careless or "takes a chance," and tragedy strikes. A boy climbs a pole and touches a wire. Or he flies his kite near a Hydro line, and it contacts a high-voltage circuit and carries death or injury to whoever is holding it. Sometimes a storm breaks down a line and someone takes hold of the broken live wire with disastrous results. These are just examples of acts that are beyond the power of Hydro to prevent. Your Hydro can only warn of danger, and seek co-operation of parents and teachers and all who have influence with those who might expose themselves to that danger.

- Hydro need never be a threat to anyone who: 1. Will not climb poles. 2. Will stay away from distribution lines and transformer stations. 3. Will keep away from fallen wires.

For your safety, in case of trouble immediately notify your nearest Hydro office. But never, never touch a fallen wire.

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