The Canadian Champion

AND COUNTY OF HALTON INTELLIGENCER

VOLUME 40. MILTON, THURSDAY, JULY 12, 1900. No. 3.

CANADIAN CHAMPION

—IS PUBLISHED—

EVERY THURSDAY MORNING,

At the Office of Publication,

MAIN ST., - MILTON, ONT.

TERMS OF SUBSCRIPTION—$1 a year in advance; if not so paid $2 will be charged.

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THE JUCKLINS

BY OPIE READ

Author of "On the Suwanee River," "The Colossus," "Emmet Bonlore," "The Mystery of Polly Lopp," Etc.

The old man paused, and now I walked along carrying the plow in front of me, stumbling, seeing no road, caring not whither my feet might wander. "I'll take it now," he said, reaching for the plow. "You don't know how to tote it, nohow."

I pushed him back and said: "Go on with your story."

I was walking so fast that he was almost trotting to keep up with me. "Right there I was weak," he said. "I thought of what a bright creature my girl was, thought of what education would do for her, thought that I could soon pay back the money, and I agreed. And I want to tell you that it has been hot ashes on me ever since. They are goin' to marry all right enough, but it galls me to think that I had to send her out to have her educated at another man's expense—cuts me to think that she wasn't good enough for any man just as I could give her jo him. And I'm goin' to pay back that money if I have to sell this strip of poor dirt; that's what I'm goin' to do. Yes, sir, even it it's ten years after they are married. Chyd is off at school now, and has been for a long time; only comes home for a while at vacation, and it seems to me that if he's goin' to be a doctor it's time he was at it. But I understand that they are goin' to send him to another place after he gits through with this one. I don't know much about him, but they say that he's a first rate sort of a fellow. Oh, I knowed him well enough when he was little, but I haven't seen so very much of him since he growed up. Guinea thinks all the world of him, of course, and says that they were born for each other. Guinea! Guinea that plow here. You don't know how to tote it nohow. I'm not goin' right straight back to the field; I'm goin' to the house. Them hot ashes is on me an inch thick."

I let him take the plow; I left him at the draw bars, and with heavy and dragging feet I climbed up to my room. I sat down to my desk, but not with elbows resting on the board, not with my chin in my hands; I couldn't hear to think of that attitude. Now, I understood why she had said "Oh" with such coolness when I had declared that I hated doctors. My heart was freezing, my head was hot, and in a fevered fancy I saw Guinea and that boy playing up and down the rivulet. I saw them wading in the water—I heard him tell her that when they grew up she must be his wife, and I saw her, holding her dress about her ankles, look up at him and smile. I knew that he had never been awkward. I knew that he looked like Bentley, knew that he would have made fun of me, and down in my heart there was a poisonous hatred, yellow, green, venomous. I am seeking to hide nothing; I cannot paint myself as a generous and high-minded man. When I stirred. I seem to have more rank sap than other men—less reason, more senseless passion. I roared at the picture, sitting there gripping the desk, and frightened it away; and to myself I acknowledged the faults which I now set forth, but an acknowledgment of a fault is not within itself virtue. The fool's recourse is to call himself a fool, to upbraid himself, curse himself and then in gracious-ness to pardon himself. You might as well reason with a rattlesnake, striking at you—might as well seek to temporize and argue with a dog drooling hydrophobia foam, as to tell the human heart what it ought to do. Reason is a business matter and it can make matches, but it cannot make love.

Long I sat there, gripping the desk, gazing at the rafters overhead, groaning in the lower's conscious luxury of despair. Should I go away? No; I would stay and see it out. I would be light and gay—a bear's waltz. I would laugh and rebuke fate; I would punish Guinea for having played with that boy up and down the brook; I would be all sorts of a fool.

The old man's voice came ringing through the air. "Hike, there, Sam; hike, there, Bob. Get him down. Hike, there!"

He was having a round with his chickens, to fan off the atmosphere of humiliation, to blow away the hot ashes that were so thick upon him. I remembered that I had not delivered Mrs. Jucklin's message, and I hastened out to the "stockade," and knocked at the gate. "Hike, there, boys! Who's that? Whoa, boys, that'll do! Go in there, Sam! Ho, it's you, eh?" he said, opening the gate. "Sorry, but you didn't git here quite in time. You had the opportunity, but you flung it away. What, gone over to Parker's? That's all right. Well, I must be gettin' back to the field. Looks like the grass will take me in spite of everything I can do. You'll help until they get the school-house built? Now, I'm much obleeged to you, but we can't rig up another outfit. Why, yander you go already," he added, pointing to a wagon load of lumber drawn along the road. "It's Perdue's wagon. Yander comes another one, with Ren Bowles, the carpenter, on board. Oh, they are goin' to git things. I've heard that already this mornin'. You never saw a neighborhood stirred up much worse than this one is over that affair, and there is strong talk of lynchin' them fellers; and this mornin' a party went over to see old Almes and told him that if he wan't gone by 10 o'clock they would string him up, and I reckon he's gone by this time. They are makin' great heroes out'n you and Alf, I tell you. A number of 'em wanted to see you, but Alf wouldn't let 'em wake you up. I saw Parker while I was down at the shop; he'd just got back from town; and he told me that the grand jury that's now in session would indict them fellers to-day, and as court is already set they may be brought to trial for murderous assault and arson right away, and I want to tell you that Parker said that he reckoned you and Alf better go over to Purdy to-morrow. Well, I must git back, for that grass is mustern' its forces every minute I'm away."

I worried through the day, saw Guinea in a haze, heard her voice afar off, and at night I went to bed worn out and limp. Alf did not come up until some time after I lay down. He came softly and whistling a doleful air to prove that his sympathies were with me, sat down upon the edge of my bed and remained there a long time motionless and silent. I knew not what to say to him and he was evidently puzzled as to what he ought to say. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth may speak but out of the heart's fullness there also flows a stone, and just as I was about to speak he said:

"Bill," he said, reaching over and turning down the light which I had left brightly burning, "I killed a snake today that I reckon must be six feet long. Came crawling across the field as if he had important business over in the woods, but he didn't get there. Ever kill many big snakes?"

"Not very many," I answered, "but I am well acquainted with them and I have been bitten by a big snake that lies coiled about the universe, striking at a heart whenever he sees it."

He got up, blew out the low blaze of the lamp, and sat down on his own bed. I could tell from the creaking of the slats; and after a time he said something about the gridiron on which a man was compelled to wallow. Ordinarily I would have laughed, hot ashes on the father and hot coals under the son, but now I sighed deeply.

"Bill, you know, the other day I said that there was something in my favor an outgrowth of my sister's education. A family union, don't you see? But I had no idea when I said it that this very thing would put the fire under a man that has stood by me. I'm awfully sorry that things had to be shaped that way. You know what I mean; father told you all about it. Is it bad, Bill? I won't say a word about it and the old folks don't suspect a thing, but do you love her much? Tell me just as if she wasn't any kin to me."

"Did the martyrs who stood in the fire love their God?" I asked.

He sighed. "She's got you, Bill. The time has been so short that I didn't think it could be so bad, but love doesn't look at the clock nor keep a calendar. Are you going to try to keep on living, Bill?"

"Yes, I'm going to study law when I get through with this school, and I'm going to make the law of divorce a specialty. If I can't do I may undo; I'm going to be a wolf, and whenever I see a man aiming a gun at another man, I'm not going to catch the hammers. Why, yesterday my heart was tender because it thought to please her. Discretion! I've got no discretion, I'm a brute. I murdered an innocent rabbit on my way to your home—killed it just because I could; and what man is as innocent as a rabbit? Yes, Alf, I am going to live."

"But you won't hate Guinea, will you? She couldn't help it."

"Oh. I couldn't hate her. No, I won't hate her. I'm going to stand by, ready to give her my life whenever I think she needs it."

And thus we talked, senseless creatures, sighing in the dark. But so it is with human life everywhere—a foolish chatter and in the dark a sighing.

Several days passed and yet we were not summoned to appear at court. I did not avoid Guinea, neither did I seek her. But often we were together, sometimes alone, on the oak bench under the tree, at the spring, on the old and smooth rock at the brink of the ravine; and her smile none the less bright, was warmed with sympathy. A Sunday had gone by and Alf had seen Millie, but she was riding to church with Dan Stuart.

One evening Parker sent us word to be in Purdy early the next day. And at dawn the next morning the buckboard stood ready for the journey. Mrs. Jucklin had worked nearly the night through, baking bread and roasting chickens to tide us over the trip. Alf complained at the load we were expected to carry, and this grieved her. "You know there's nothin' fitten to eat there," she said. "You know that Lum Smith stayed there three days a year before last and come home and was sick for a month. Mr. Hawes, I appeal to you—make him eat it."

And off we drove with our bread and roasted chickens. The women stood on the step and shouted at us, and we waved our hands at them as we turned a bend in the road. Ours was an important journey, and many of the neighbors came out as we passed along and cried words of encouragement. On a hill-top we heard the gallop of a horse, and out of a lane dashed a girl—Millie. She smiled at us, nodded as her horse jumped, and gave us a gleam of her white hand as she sped off down into the woods.

"They tell us that the Saviour rode an ass," said Alf; "but we have seen heaven gallop by on a horse." He stood up and gazed toward the woods. Our horse gradually came to a standstill, but Alf stood there, gazing, shading his eyes with his hand. "It ain't the sun that dazzles," he said. "It's her smile."

"She'll make a poet of you, 'Alf."

"She could do more than that; she could make a man of me."

I don't know of a more dingy and desolate-looking town than Purdy. The houses are old, and the streets are rutted. The court-house, in the center of the square—my temple of fame—is mean and rain-streaked. And this is what I saw at a glance: An enormous wooden watch, with its paint cracking off, hanging in front of a jeweler's; the mortar and pestle of a druggist on top of a post; a brick jail, with a pale face at the bars; lawyers' signs; doctors' signs; a livery stable, with a negro in front pouring water on the wheels of a buggy; a red-looking negro, with a string of shuck horse collars; a dog in front of the court-house sniffing at a hog; the tavern, with its bell outside on a pole; men pitching horse-shoes in the shade; —a woman, with her arms on a gate; a girl trying to pull a dirty child into a yard; a man in front of a store stuffing straw into a box; horses tied to racks about the square; men lolling about the court-house—these features made the court-house—these features made the face of Purdy.

We had put up the horse. Alf had gone to see a friend of his and I was walking past a vacant lot when some one shouted at me, and, turning round, I saw a man coming toward me. "Hellos, there," he said, coming up, smiling. "You ought not to forget your old friends."

"Oh," I replied, recalling his face, "you are the agent at the station where I got off the train."

"Yes, used to be," he said, shaking hands with me, "but I'm over here now, but not as a railroad agent, for there's no road here. I am the honored and distinguished telegraph operator of this commercial emporium. Couldn't stay over yonder any longer. No callers—not a rag there. Got to see the flirt of calico. See here, don't you—don't you—that's—that's—I'm—there! A woman was passing. "You stand here and see it going along all the specimen toward it. I tell you, for there's a shot-gun in every house and a father or a brother more than ready to pull both triggers at once. That's right, I suppose; but it does hamper a fellow mightily. Ever in St. Louis? That's the place. Muslin and soft goods everywhere and nine chances to one there ain't a gun in the house. Might be, you know, but there is so much mull and moriantique and all that sort of thing that there ain't guns enough to go round, so you can smile and nod on the street; but you can't do it here. Here you've got to have a three-ply doubled and twisted introduction before you can smile even at cottonade. I've been here a week, and hold about the most responsible position in the town, and society hasn't taken me up yet, but I reckon it will after a while. I reckon you could get in all right. They have heard all about your fight—know that you are game, and nothing counts more than that, for they have an idea that a game fellow is always a gentleman."

Just then a boy came up and told him that there was a call. "I'll be there after awhile," the operator replied. "Go on back. I've been pitching horse-shoes with some fellows," he continued, speaking to me, "and ain't quite through yet. I'll have to teach him so that he will be able to tell them that I'm busy when I'm not there. I've found out that what we want in this life is leisure. People are getting too swift. There's no need of half the telegraphing there's done. Why don't they write and save trouble and expense? there goes a nice piece of calico. I must get acquainted with it, too, I tell you. Well, believe I'll stroll on back. Come in while you're here. The trial won't take much cut and dried anyhow."

At 10 o'clock the Almes brothers were brought before the bar. The jury was already selected and the trial was at once taken up. I was put upon the stand and instructed to tell my story without any fear of reflecting too much credit upon myself. I could see that they wanted a thrilling recital and I gave it to them. And when Alf followed, he found them eager for more. The prosecuting attorney made a speech, as red as the fire that had burned the school-house; the lawyer appointed for the defence made a few cool remarks, and the case was closed. We were anxious to take the verdict home with us, and we had made preparations to remain over night, but the jury came to an agreement without leaving the box, so we had nothing to do but to return home. The Almes brothers were given a term of fifteen years each in the penitentiary.

The sun was down when we got upon the buck-board, and over the road we drove, under the stars, our stars, for in sympathy they looked down upon us. The moon was late, but we preferred the dark—it was sadder.

"I wonder how it's all going to end," said Alf.

"If we could only rip apart that black thing down the road and look into the future."

"And if you could rip it," I replied, "if you could and were about to do so, I would grab your hand with a harder grip than I gave the gun when I caught the hammers."

"Then you don't want to know? You'd rather continue to writhe on the gridiron than to turn over and fall into the fire and end the matter?"

"Alf," said I, "does it strike you that we are a couple of as big fools as ever drove along a country road?"

"Whoa!" he shouted, pulling upon the reins and stopping the horses. And then he laughed. "Fools; why, two idiots are two Solomons compared with us. Let's stop it; let's be sensible; let's be men."

"I'm with you, Alf. Shake hands."

We drove along in silence. After a long time he said: "Here's where she crossed the road; and do you see that?" he asked, pointing to the Milky Way. "That was done by the waving of her hand. I wish to the Lord I knew just how much she thinks of Dan Stuart."

"Ah, but that wouldn't relieve you," I replied, "for I know how much Guinea thinks of Chyd Lundsford and feel all the worse for it. There are always two hopes, walking with a doubt one on each side, but a certainty walks along alone."

"I reckon you are right," he rejoined with a sigh. "How many strange things love will make a man say, things that an unpoisoned man would never think of. Poisoned is the word, Bill; and I'll bet that if I'd bite a man it would kill him in a minute."

"What sort of a fellow is young Lundford?" I asked, with my teeth set and my feet braced against the dashboard.

"Oh, he ain't a bad fellow; he ain't our sort exactly, but he's all right."

"Smart and full of poetry, isn't he?"

"I never heard him say anything that had poetry in it. Don't think he knows half as much about books as you do. Oh, about certain sorts of books he does, books with skeletons in them, but knowing all about skeletons don't make a man interesting to a woman. I have read enough to find that out. Why, I have more than held my own with men that are well up in special books—have held my own with all except that fellow Stuart. Now there's Etheredge, that I told you about one day—kin to Dan Stuart. He's a doctor, and they tell me that he is well educated, but I never heard him say a thing worth remembering. I reckon old Mrs. Nature has a good deal to do with it after all."

They were sitting up waiting for us at home, although it was past the midnight hour when we drove into the yard. Old Lim snorted when he learned that the Almes boys were not to be hanged, but his wife, merciful creature, was sadened to think that even more mercy had not been shown them. And then she anxiously inquired whether we had found ourselves short in the matter of provisions. We told her that we had brought back enough of the load which her kindness had imposed upon us and then with dismal appointment she said: "Goodness alive, why didn't you give it to those poor fellows to take to the penitentiary with 'em, for I know that there's nothin' there fit ten to eat."

The old man stood looking at her, with his coat off and with his shirt-sleeves rolled up. "Susan," said he, "I don't want to git mad, I don't want to go out yander, snatch them chickens out of the coop an' make 'em pod at each other in the dark, but when you talk agin that tree, hard enough to butt the bark off. Do you reckon they are takin' them fellers down there to feed 'em, to fatten 'em up and then turn 'em loose? Hah, is that your idee? 'Zounds, madam, they are lucky to get there with their necks. And here you are lamentin' that there's nothin' at the penitentiary fitten to eat. Go on to bed, Susan, for if you don't I'm afeered that I'll have to say somethin' to hurt your feelin's, and then I'd worry about it all night."

"Now Linnuel, what is the use in smortin' 'round that way? Can't a body say a word?"

"It do look like a body can," he rejoined; "and I'm afeered that a body will, and that's the reason I want you to go to bed."

Old Lim sat down and the subject was dropped. I noticed his wife looking anxiously at me, and just as I was about to leave the room she said: "Mr. Hawes, you'll please pardon me for mentionin' it, but there's a button off your coat, and I'll be glad to sew it on if you will be so kind as to leave it down here."

"No, I will sew it on," Guinea spoke up. "Give me your coat, Mr. Hawes."

"I will not be the means of keeping you up longer," I replied, looking into her eyes, and feeling the thrill of their sweet poison; "I will do it myself."

"And rob me of a pleasure?" she asked.

"No, relieve you of a drudgery. Come on, Alf."

Two fools went to bed in the dark and sighed themselves to sleep, and two fools dreamed; I know one did—dreamed of eyes and smiles and a laugh like a musical cluck.

CHAPTER X.

More than a month passed and they were still working on the school-house. The simple plan had been drawn with but a few strokes of a pencil, the sills had been placed without delay, but they had to plane the boards by hand and that had taken time. Alf and I had again sat at the old General's table, had listened to his words so rounded out with kindliness, and upon returning to the porch had heard him storm at something that had gone amiss. Millie showed her dimples and her pretty teeth, smiling at Alf and at me, too, but I saw no evidence that she loved him. Indeed, she had been so much petted that I thought she must be a flirt, and yet she said nothing to give me that impression. Guinea was just the same, good-humored, rarely serious. One Sunday I went to church with her, walked, though the distance was two miles; stood near the cave wherein the British soldiers had hidden themselves, and talked of everything save love. I cannot say that I had a sacred respect for her feelings; I think that I should have liked to torture her, but something closed my heart against an utterance of its heavy fullness.

One Saturday afternoon I was told that the school-house would be ready on the following Monday. I had been out many times to view the work, but I decided to go again to see that everything was complete. I expected that Alf would go with me, for the corn was laid by, but I could not find him. His mother told me that he had put on his Sunday clothes and that she had seen him going down the road. And so I went alone. The house was done, and what a change from the pile of old logs! The walls were painted white and the blinds were green. The bushes were cleared off, and the scorched trees had been cut down, split up and hauled away. I have never seen a neater picture, and in it I saw not only the progress of the people, but the respect in which they held me.

I had come out of the woods on my way home and was on a high piece of grazing land not far from the house when I saw a man ride up to the new fence, dismount, tie his horse and go into the house. This within itself was nothing, for I had seen many of the neighbors come and go, but a sudden chill seized me now, and there I shook, though the heat of June lay upon the land; and it was some time before I could go forward, stumbling, quaking, with my eyes fixed upon the horse tied at the fence. In the yard behind the house I came upon Mrs. Jucklin, gathering up white garments that had been spread to dry upon the shrubbery bushes. "Chyd Lundsford has come," she said, and I replied: "Yes, I know it."

I stepped upon the passage and passed the sitting-room door without looking in; I sat down in a rocking chair that had been placed near the state-way, sat there and listened to a girl's laugh and the low mumble of a man's voice. "Let me go out where it's cooler," I heard Guinea say, and I got up with my head in a whirl.

"Mr. Hawes, this is Mr. Lundsford."

"Glad to meet you, sir," I said, taking hold of something—his hand, I suppose. I was urged to sit down again; Guinea said that she would bring two more chairs, and when I had dropped back between the arms of the rocker I looked at the man standing there, and a sort of glad disappointment cleared my vision and placed him before me in a strong light. He was short, almost fat, and in his thin, whitish hair there was a hint at coming baldness. The close attention that he had been compelled to give practical things, the sawing of bones, the tracing of nerves, the undoing of man's machinery, had given him the cynical look of a hard materialist. But when he stepped back to take the chair which Guinea had brought I saw that he moved easily, that he was cool and knew well how to handle himself. And this drove away the meager joy of my glad disappointment.

"I hear you are going to take up school Monday," he said. "Rather late to begin school just now, I should think."

"Under ordinary circumstances it would be regarded as late in the season," I answered, "but we have been so interrupted that we now decide to have no vacation."

"I guess you are right. Had a pretty close shave with those fellows, didn't you? Ought to have killed them right there. I've seen Scott. Though he was a pretty bright fellow, naturally; rather witty. Would make a first-rate subject on the slab."

"Because you thought him witty, sir?" I asked.

"Of course not; but because he is a good specimen—big fellow." He looked at me and I thought that he was measuring my chest. "Yes," he continued, "ought to have killed them. Man's got to take care of himself, you know, and he can't make it his business to show mercy. Most all the virtues now are backwoods qualities."

"I don't believe that," Guinea spoke up. "Every day we read of the generosity of the world."

"Oh," he said, passing his short fingers through his chin hair, "you read about it, and people who want to shine as generous creatures take particular pains that you shall read about it. You've a great deal to learn, my dear little woman."

"And perhaps there is a great deal that she doesn't care to learn," I ventured to suggest; and I quickly looked at her to see whether I had made another mistake. I had not, her quiet smile told me, and I felt bold enough to have thrown him over the fence.

"What we wish to know and what we ought to know are two different matters," he said. "But I hold that we ought to know the truth, no difference what the truth may be. I want facts; I don't want paint. I don't want to believe that the gilt on the dome goes all the way through."

"But," said I, "the gilt on the dome doesn't prove that the dome is rotten; it may be strong with seasoned wood and ribs of iron."

"Yes," he drawled, "that's all very good, very well put, but it means nothing. By the way, before we get into a discussion let me invite you over to our house to-night. Quite a number of young people will drop in. Not exactly the night, you know; but the old idea that white people shouldn't go out of a Saturday night, the night reserved for negroes, is all nonsense. So, I have asked them to come. Alf will come, I suppose, and so will our little spring branch nymph."

"I didn't suppose that you believed in nymphs, now that you have gone out and learned that everything is false," Guinea spoke up.

"I don't believe in painted ones," he replied, "but you are not painted."

"I shall be pleased to come," I remarked, and then I asked him how long he expected to remain at home.

"Oh, about a month, I should think. I am gradually getting along and I don't want to go to school all my life. I want to begin practice next year."

"In this neighborhood?" I asked, and he gave me a contemptuous look. "Well, not if I have any sense left," he answered. "I might ride around here a thousand years and not win anything of a name. Look at Dr. Etheredge, fine physician but what has he done? No, I'm going to a city, north, I think."

He stayed to supper and this angered me, for I had set my heart on walking to the General's house with Guinea. Alf had not returned and we wondered whither he could have gone. And when the time came to go, that impudent sprig of a doctor asked me if I would ride his horse around by the road, said he wanted to walk across the meadows with Guinea. How I should have enjoyed knocking him on the head, but I thought that Guinea supplemented his request with a look, and I consented.

There were many horses tied at the General's fence, and there was laughter within, when I rode up, and I was reminded of the night when I had stood with my hot hand melting the frost on the fence. But I thought of what the men had said on the railway platform, of the woman whom I had seen on the train, and boldly walked in. The General met me with a warm grasp, and was asking me if I had seen his son, when in walked the young fellow himself, with Guinea beside him. The parlor and the library, opening one into the other, were well filled with good-humored young folk, and among them were old people, some of the less good-humored. I was surprised to find myself so much in demand, for every one asked for an introduction, but with bitterness I knew that it was because I had come near being burned up in an old house. They played games, but of this they soon tired; they sang and one of the ladies plucked a sparkling fandango, and then Chydister Lundsford was called upon for a speech. He was not at all embarrassed and he talked fairly well; and when he was done they called upon me. I got up with one hand resting on the piano, and stood there, nervous at first, but strangely steady later on. I told them that I could not make a speech, but that with their permission I would tell them a story—one of my own. They cried out that they would rather have a story than a speech, and I gave them a half humorous, half pathetic sketch, something that had long been running in my head and which I intended to write. What a strong confidence came upon me as I noted the effect of my words! I was drawing a picture and they were eager to see it; I was playing on a strange, rude instrument, and how they bent to catch every vibration. I was astonished at myself, thrilled with myself. And when the climax came, chairs were tipped over as if in a scramble, and a wild applause broke out. Every hand was stretched out toward me, every eye was bright with a tear. The old General grabbed me and, throwing back his great head, almost bellowed a compliment; and through it all I saw Guinea sweetly smiling. They urged me to give them another story, were almost frantic in their entreaty; they had heard the heart-beat of their own life and they must hear it again. I told another story, one over which I had fondly mused, and again the hands came out toward me, and again the General bellowed a compliment. I can scarcely recall anything else that passed that evening. Yes, I remember that as I was taking my leave, to walk across the meadows with Guinea and Chyd, Millie stood in front of me. Once or twice I thought that she had something that she would tell me, for her lips moved, but she said nothing except to bid me good-night.

And where was Alf all this time? No one had spoken his name; Millie had not asked me about him. I walked briskly in advance, half happy, but, of course, with my mind on Guinea, whose low voice reached my ears through the quiet that lay on the grass-land.

"Why don't you wait for us?" she cried. I turned about and waited, and as she came up, holding Chyd's arm, she said: "I hope your success to-night hasn't turned your head."

"And I hope that I don't deserve such a suspicion," I answered, not with bitterness, but with joy to think that she had felt my apparent indifference.

"Oh, I don't see anything to cause a spat," said Chyd, straining himself to take long steps. "Good stuff, of course, but nothing to turn a man's head—a mere bit of fancy paint. But you ought to write it. Good many people like nonsense. I mean something light, you know. Two-thirds of the human family make it their business to dodge the truth. But it is a good thing for a school-teacher to make himself felt in that way."

"Perhaps Mr. Hawes doesn't intend to be a teacher all his life," Guinea replied, speaking in kindliness, but with no interest, as to whether or not I was to remain a pedagogue.

"God forbid," I replied. And the young doctor gave me a sarcastic laugh. "Man ought to do what he's best fitted for," said he. "Trouble is that a man generally thinks that he's fitted for something that he isn't—hates the thing that he can do best."

"Your knowledge of these practical fortifies you against any advance that I might make," I replied. "I don't pretend to be practical."

"Hum," I should think not," he rejoined. "Good deal of a dreamer, I take it. And you are in the right place. Everything dreams here, the farmers and even the cattle. Going to pull down the fence, eh?—Guinea'll be over by the time you get it down. What did I tell you? Regular fawn, eh?"

We had passed out of the meadow. They waited in the road until I replaced the rails which I had let down. The road ran along the ravine and home was in sight. I looked across toward the smooth old rock and saw a dark object upon it. We went down into the ravine and as we were coming out, a voice cried: "Is that you, Bill?" And instantly Guinea answered for me. "Yes, Alf. And here's Chyd."

"How are you, Chyd?" he shouted, and then he added: "Bill, I want to see you a minute. Stay where your are and I'll come down."

I halted to wait for him. He stopped a moment to shake hands with Chyd, and then he hastened to me. "Old man, I've got something to tell you," he said. "Let's walk down this way—no, not over in the road, but up the hollow." He gripped my arm tightly, walked fast, then slowly and then stopped. "Let's sit down here, Bill." We seated ourselves on a rock. "You have been over to the General's, along with Chyd and Guinea, haven't you? Of course, you have—what's the use of asking that? Do you know what I did to-day? Not long after dinner I went over there determined to find out how I stood. I was brave until I got nearly to the house and then my courage failed. I stood by the fence in the blackberry briars and gazed at the house. After a while I saw her come out and start down the Ebenezer road. And then I whipped round and met her. And as I stood beside the road, waiting for her to come up I noticed for the first time that the sun was nearly down. For hours I had been standing in the briars. I pretended not to see her; let on like I was hunting for a squirrel up in a tree, until she came up. Then I spoke to her and she started as if she was scared. She said that she was going over to Lum Smith's to tell the young people to come over at night; and I asked her if I might walk along with her. She said with a laugh that I might go part of the way, and then I knew that she was ashamed for any one to see her with me. This cut me to the red, but I walked along with her. I felt that I had nothing to say that would interest her, but I kept on talking, and once in a while she would look up at me and laugh. At last, and it was just as we came within sight of Smith's place, I asked her what she really thought of Dan Stuart. I knew that this was a fool's break, and if it hadn't been I don't suppose I would have made it. She looked up at me, but she didn't laugh this time. I begged her pardon for my rudeness, and she reminded me that I was only to come a part of the way with her. I then told her that I would wait for her to come back. She said that she might not come back that way. I replied that no matter which way she came back I would see her. She went on, laughing now, and I waited, but I didn't have to wait long before I saw her coming. As she came up I asked her if she was ready to grant my pardon and she wanted to know what about. We walked along together and she began to tell me about her brother, how smart he was and all that, and I said that I didn't think that he was as smart as you, Bill; I wanted to take credit for a friendship I had formed, you see? But a moment later I was sorry, for I was afraid that she might say something against you, but she didn't. She said that you were a smart man — a distinguished-looking man, and that she liked you ever so much. At first I was pleased, but a second afterward I was jealous of you, Bill. Did you ever see as blamed a fool as I am? But I didn't hate you, Bill. No, my heart was warm toward you even while she was praising you—even while I was jealous. I again asked her what she thought of Dan Stuart, and she looked up at me and wanted to know if I knew what he thought of her. I told her that ev ery body loved her, and that I didn't suppose he was mean enough not to love her. She said that she knew people who didn't love her, and I told her that if she would show them to me I would butt their heads together for being such idiots. We were now almost within sight of the General's home and I was not getting along very fast. I was determined to make a break. We were on a hill, where the trees were tall, almost over-lapping the road. To the right ran a path through the briars, a nearer way home. I asked her to wait and she stopped. The sun was down and it was now almost dark. And it was then that I told her that I loved her. I don't know now I acted or what I said, but I know that I was down in the dust at her feet. She stood there, pale and trembling, looking around as if she would call for help. I asked her to marry me, and she laughed, Bill—laughed at me and darted down the path. Then I went into the woods and roamed about I don't know where; and that is the reason I wasn't at the gathering to-night. I'm bruised and crippled, Bill—my heart is sore, but I want to tell you that when she's standing on the floor with that fellow Stuart, with the preacher in front of her, I'll be there, putting in my plea. I won't give up as long as there is a fighting chance left. Don't say a word about it. Forgive me for dragging you off down here. God knows you've got a deep trouble of your own. And I wish my word could settle it—I'd speak it, though it might hurt my chances at the General's. Well, let's go to the house."

CHAPTER XI.

Guinea and Chyd, old Lim and his wife went to church the next day, leaving Alf and me alone. Alf held himself in reasonable restraint until the old people were gone, and then he broke out so violently that I really feared for his reason. And it was mainly my fault, for I read him a passionate poem, the outcry of a maddened soul, and he swore that it had been written for him, that it was his, and I caught his spirit and fancied that he might have written it, for I believed then, as I believe now, that great things do not come from a quiet heart, that quiet hearts may criticise, but that they do not create, that genius is a condition, an agony, a tortured John Bunyan.

I went to the spring to get a bucket of fresh water, and when I returned Alf was nowhere to be found. I went out and shouted his name, but no answer came back. I went out into the woods, walked up and down the road, but could see nothing of him. The shadows fell short and the old people and Guinea and Chyd returned from church, and the noon-tide meal was spread, but Alf came not. But save with me there was no anxiety, as he was wont to poke about alone, they said. Evening, bed-time came. Chyd went home, and I went up to my room. I heard the old man locking the smoke-house door—heard his wife singing a hymn,