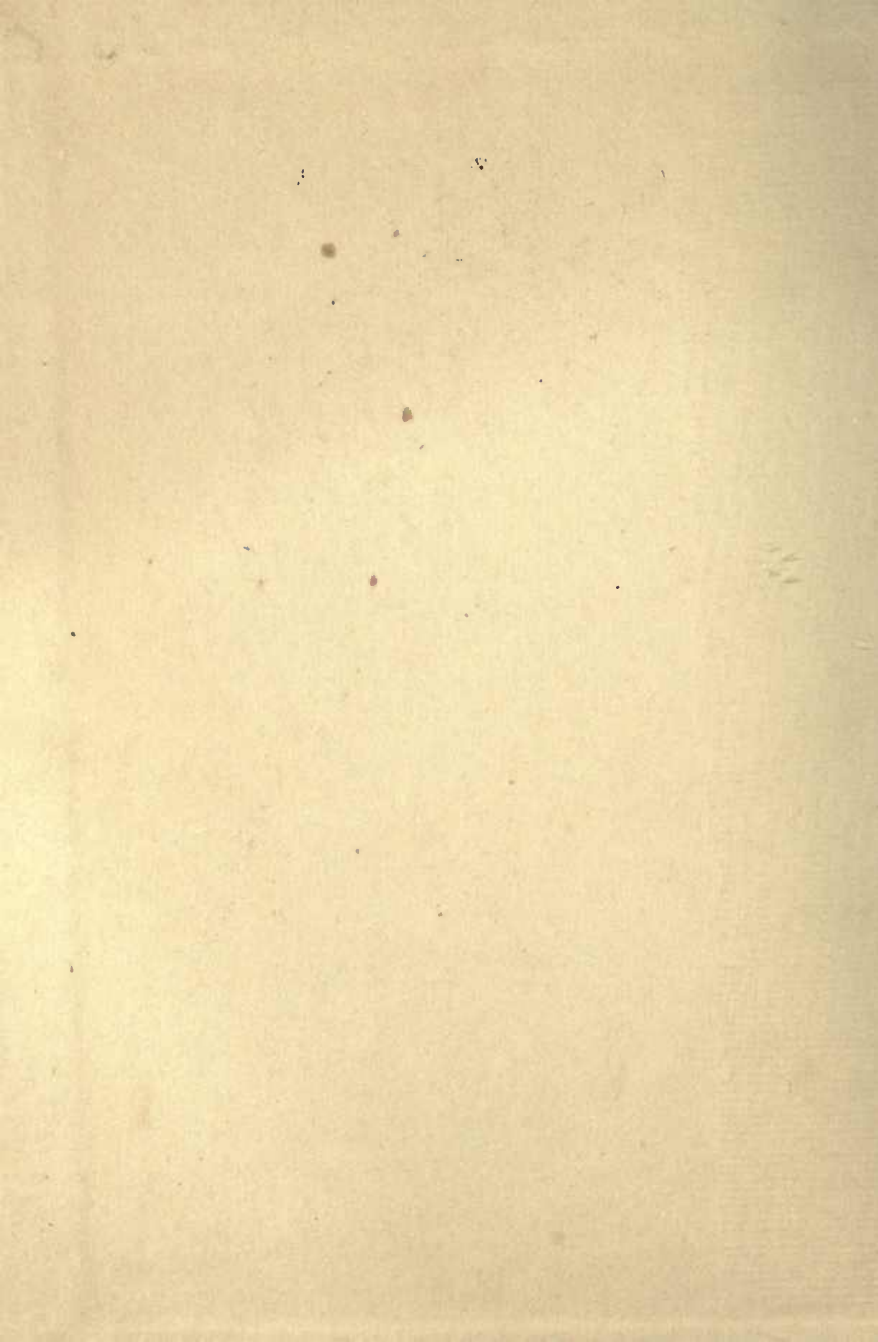


ASA HOLMES

ANNIE·FELLOWS·JOHNSTON





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Esa Holmes
or
At the Cross-roads

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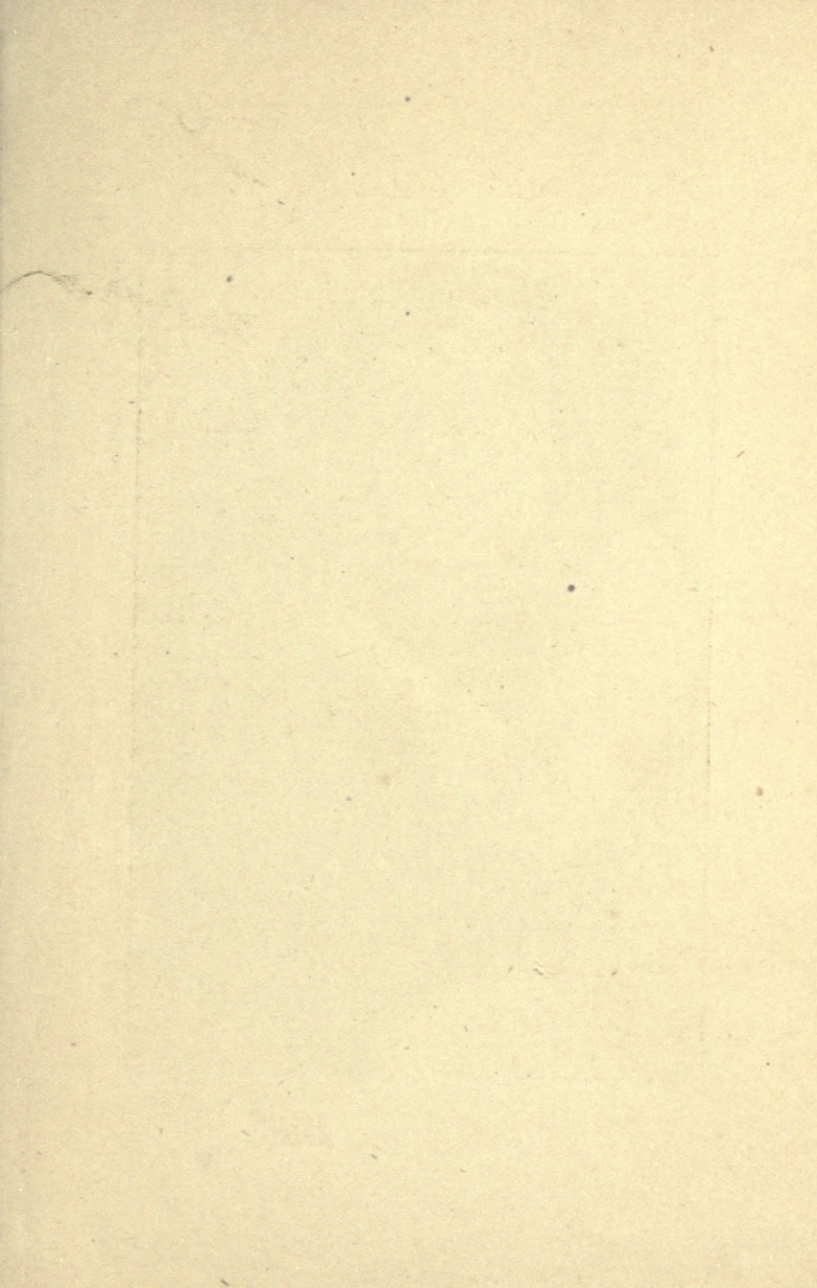
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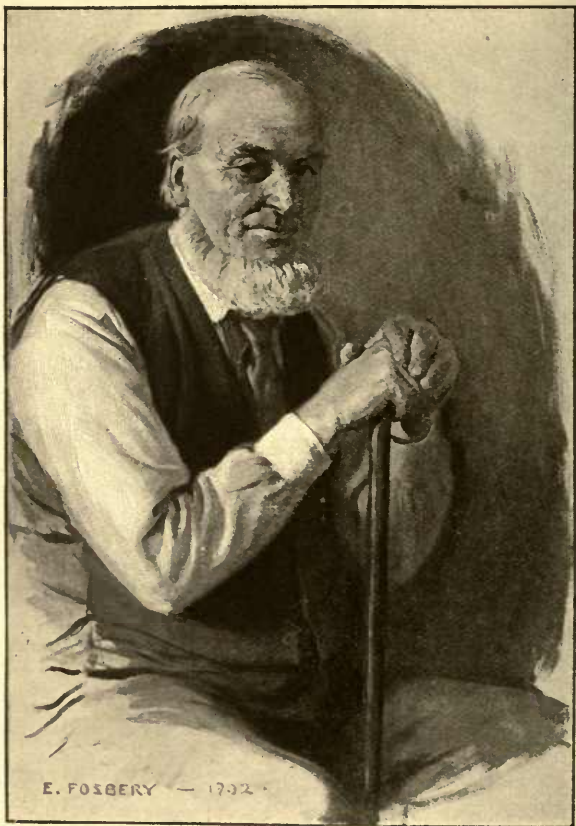
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Asa Holmes

or

At the Cross-Roads

By

Annie Fellows Johnston

Author of

"The Little Colonel," "Two Little Knights
of Kentucky," etc.

With a Frontispiece by
Ernest Fosbery



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TO

A Dear Old Philosopher

WHOSE CHEERFUL OPTIMISM AND SUNNY FAITH HAVE
SWEETENED LIFE FOR ALL WHO KNOW HIM

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Asa Holmes
or
At the Cross-roads

Chapter II

THERE is no place where men learn each other's little peculiarities more thoroughly than in the group usually to be found around the stove in a country store. Such acquaintance may be of slow growth, like the oak's, but it is just as sure. Each year is bound to add another ring to one's knowledge of his neighbours if he lounges with them, as man and boy, through the Saturday afternoons of a score of winters.

A boy learns more there than he can be taught in schools. It may be he is only a tow-headed, freckle-faced little fellow of eight when he rides

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over to the cross-roads store for the first time by himself. Too timid to push into the circle around the fire, he stands shivering on the outskirts, looking about him with the alertness of a scared rabbit, until the storekeeper fills his kerosene can and thrusts the weekly mail into his red mittens. Then some man covers him with confusion by informing the crowd that "that little chap is Perkins's oldest," and he scurries away out of the embarrassing focus of the public eye.

But the next time he is sent on the family errands he stays longer and carries away more. Perched on the counter, with his heels dangling over a nail keg, while he waits for the belated mail train, he hears for the first time how the government ought to be run, why it is that the country is going to the dogs, and what will make

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hens lay in cold weather. Added to this general information, he slowly gathers the belief that these men know everything in the world worth knowing, and that their decisions on any subject settle the matter for all time.

He may have cause to change his opinion later on, when his sapling acquaintance has gained larger girth; when he has loafed with them, smoked with them, swapped lies and spun yarns, argued through a decade of stormy election times, and talked threadbare every subject under the sun. But now, in his callow judgment, he is listening to the wit and wisdom of the nation. Now, as he looks around the overflowing room, where butter firkins crowd the calicoes and crockery, and where hams and saddles swing sociably from the same rafter, as far as

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his knowledge goes, this is the only store in the universe.

Some wonder rises in his childish brain as he counts the boxes of axle-grease and the rows of shining new pitchforks, as to where all the people live who are to use so many things. He has yet to learn that this one little store that is such a marvel to him is only a drop in the bucket, and that he may travel the width of the continent, meeting at nearly every mile-post that familiar mixture of odours — coal oil, mackerel, roasted coffee, and pickle brine. And a familiar group of men, discussing the same old subjects in the same old way, will greet him at every such booth he passes on his pilgrimage through Vanity Fair.

Probably in after years Perkins's oldest will never realise how much of his early education has been acquired

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at that Saturday afternoon loafing-place, but he will often find himself looking at things with the same squint with which he learned to view them through 'Squire Dobbs's short-sighted spectacles. Many a time he will find that he has been unconsciously warped by the prejudices he heard expressed there, and that his opinions of life in general and men in particular are the outgrowth of those early conversations which gave him the creed of his boyhood.

“Them blamed Yankees!” exclaims one of these neighbourhood orators, tilting his chair back against the counter, and taking a vicious bite at his plug of tobacco. “They don't know no better than to eat cold bread the year 'round!” And the boy, accepting the statement unquestioningly, stores away in his memory not only

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the remark, but all the weighty emphasis of disgust which accompanied the remark in the spitting of a mouthful of tobacco juice. Henceforth his idea of the menu north of the Mason and Dixon line is that it resembles the bill of fare of a penitentiary, and he feels that there is something cold-blooded and peculiar about a people not brought up on a piping hot diet of hoe-cake and beaten biscuit.

In the same way the lad whose opinions are being moulded in some little corner grocery of a New England village, or out where the roads cross on the Western prairie, receives his prejudices. It may be years before he finds out for himself that the land of Boone is not fenced with whiskey jugs and feuds, and that the cap-sheaf on every shock of wheat in its domain is not a Winchester rifle.

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But these prejudices, popular at local cross-roads, are only the side lines of which every section carries its own specialty. When it comes to staple articles, dear to the American heart and essential to its liberty and progress, their standard of value is the same the country over.

One useful lesson the youthful loungeur may learn here, if he can learn it anywhere, and that is to be a shrewd reader of men and motives. Since staple characteristics in human nature are repeated everywhere, like staple dry goods and groceries, a thorough knowledge of the group around the stove will be a useful guide to Perkins's oldest in forming acquaintances later in life.

Long after he has left the little hamlet and grown gray with the experiences of the metropolis, he will

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run across some queer Dick whose familiar personality puzzles him. As he muses over his evening pipe, suddenly out of the smoke wreaths will spring the face of some old codger who aired his wisdom in the village store, and he will recognise the likeness between the two as quickly as he would between two cans of leaf lard bearing the same brand.

But Perkins's oldest is only in the primer of his cross-roads curriculum now, and these are some of the lessons he is learning as he edges up to the group around the fire. On the day before Thanksgiving, for instance, he was curled up on a box of soap behind the chair of old Asa Holmes — Miller Holmes everybody calls him, because for nearly half a century his water-mill ground out the grist of all that section of country. He is retired now ; gave

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up his business to his grandsons. They carry it on in another place with steam and modern machinery, and he is laid on the shelf. But he isn't a back number, even if his old deserted mill is. It is his boast that now he has nothing else to do, he not only keeps up with the times, but ahead of them.

Everybody goes to him for advice; everybody looks up to him as they do to a hardy old forest tree that's lived through all sorts of hurricanes, but has stood to the last, sturdy of limb, and sound to the core. He is as sweet and mellow as a winter apple, ripened in the sun, and that's why everybody likes to have him around. You don't see many old men like that. Their troubles sour them.

Well, this day before Thanksgiving the old miller was in his usual place at the store, and as usual it was he who

was giving the cheerful turn to the conversation. Some of the men were feeling sore over the recent election; some had not prospered as they had hoped with their crops, and were experiencing the pinch of hard times and sickness in their homes. Still there was a holiday feeling in the atmosphere. Frequent calls for nutmeg, and sage, and cinnamon, left the air spicy with prophecies of the morrow's dinner.

The farmers had settled down for a friendly talk, with the comfortable sense that the crops were harvested, the wood piled away for the winter, and a snug, warm shelter provided for the cattle. It was good to see the hard lines relax in the weather-beaten faces, in the warmth of that genial comradeship. Even the gruffest were beginning to thaw a little, when the door opened,

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and Bud Hines slouched in. The spirits of the crowd went down ten degrees.

Not that he said anything; only gave a gloomy nod by way of greeting as he dropped into a chair. But his whole appearance said it for him; spoke in the droop of his shoulders, and the droop of his hat brim, and the droop of his mouth at the corners. He looked as if he might have sat for the picture of the man in the "Biglow Papers," when he said:

"Sometimes my innard vane pints east for weeks
together,
My natur' gits all goose-flesh, an' my sins
Come drizzlin' on my conscience sharp ez pins."

The miller greeted him with the twinkle in his eye that eighty years and more have never been able to dim; and Perkins's oldest had his first meeting with the man who always finds a

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screw loose in everything. Nothing was right with Bud Hines. One of his horses had gone lame, and his best heifer had foundered, and there was rust in his wheat. He didn't have any heart to keep Thanksgiving, and he didn't see how anybody else could, with the bottom dropped clean out of the markets and the new road tax so high. For his part he thought that everything was on its last legs, and it wouldn't be long till all the Powers were at war, and prices would go up till a poor man simply couldn't live.

It was impossible not to be affected more or less by his gloomy forebodings, and the old miller, looking around on the listening faces, saw them settling back in their old discouraged lines. Claspng his hands more firmly over the top of his cane, he exclaimed: "Now look here, Bud Hines, I'm

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going to give you a proverb that was made on purpose for such a poor, weak-kneed Mr. Ready-to-halt as you are: 'Never be discouraged, and never be a discourager!' If you can't live up to the first part, you certainly can to the second. No matter how hard things go with you, you've no right to run around throwing cold water on other people. What if your horse has gone lame? You've got a span of mules that can outpull my yoke of oxen any day. One heifer oughtn't to send a man into mourning the rest of his days, and it would be more fitting to be thankful over your good tobacco crop than to groan over the failure of your wheat. More fitting to the season. As for the rest of the things you're worrying over, why, man, they haven't happened yet, and maybe never will. My old grandad used to say to

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me when I was a lad, 'Never cross your bridge till you come to it, Asa,' and I've proved the wisdom of that saying many a time. Suppose'n you put that in your pipe and smoke it."

If Perkins's oldest learns no other lesson this year than to put those two proverbs into practice, he will have had a valuable education. How many Thanksgivings they will help to make for him! How many problems and perplexities they will solve!

"Never be discouraged; never be a discourager! Don't cross your bridge until you come to it!" It is a philosophy that will do away with half the ills which flesh imagines it is heir to.

Thanksgiving Day! How much more it means to the old miller than to the little fellow beside him on the soap box! To the child it is only a feast day; to the old man it is a festi-

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val that links him to a lifetime of sacred memories.

“Five and eighty years,” he says, musingly, resting his chin on the wrinkled hands that clasp the head of his cane. A silence falls on the group around the stove, and through the cracked door the red firelight shines out on thoughtful faces.

“It’s a long time; five and eighty years,” he repeats, “and every one of them crowned with a Thanksgiving. Boys,” lifting his head and looking around him, “you’ve got a good bit of pike to travel over yet before you get as far as I’ve gone, and some of you are already half fagged out and beginning to wonder if it’s all worth while — Bud, here, for instance. I’d like to give you all a word of encouragement.

“Looking back, I can see that I’ve had as many ups and downs as any of

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you, and more than your share of work and trouble, for I've lived longer, and nearly all the years are marked with graves. Seems to me that lately I've had to leave a new grave behind me at every mile-stone, till now I'm jogging on all alone. Family gone, old neighbours gone, old friends — I'm the last of the old set. But, still, when all is said and done, I haven't lost heart, for 'I've lived, seen God's hand through a lifetime, and all was for best.'

“When I was milling down there on Bear Creek you'd 'a' thought I was a fool if I hadn't taken my rightful toll out of every bushel of grist that ran through my hopper, and sometimes I think that the Almighty must feel that way about us when we go on grinding and grinding, and never stopping to count up our share of the profit and pleasure and be thankful over it. I believe that

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no matter what life pours into our hopper, we are to grind some toll of good out of it for ourselves, and as long as a man does his part toward producing something for the world's good, some kind of bread for its various needs, he will never go hungry himself.

“And I believe more than that. You've heard people compare old age to a harvest field, and talk about the autumn of life with its ripened corn waiting for the reaper Death, and all that, and speak about the 'harvest home,' as if it were the glorious end of everything. But it never did strike me that way, boys. The best comes after the harvesting, when the wheat is turned into flour and the flour into bread, and the full, wholesome loaves go to make up blood and muscle and brain. That's giving it a sort of immortality, you might say, raising it into a higher

Elisa Holmes

order of life. And it's the same with a man. His old age is just a ripening for something better a little further on. All that we go through with here isn't for nothing, and at eighty-five, when it looks as if a man had come to the stepping-off place, I've come to believe that 'the best is yet to be.' "

There is a stir around the door, and the old miller looks around inquiringly. The mail has come in, and he rises slowly to get his weekly paper. Perkins's oldest, waiting his turn in front of the little case of pigeonholes, eyes the old man with wondering side glances. He has not understood more than half of what he has heard, but he is vaguely conscious that something is speaking to him now, as he looks into the tranquil old face. It is the miller's past that is calling to him; all those honest, hard-working years that show

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themselves in the bent form and wrinkled hands; the serene peacefulness that bespeaks a clear conscience; the big, sunny nature that looks out of those aged eyes; and above all the great hopefulness that makes his days a perpetual Thanksgiving.

The mute eloquence of an unspoken invitation thrills the child's heart, he knows not why :

("Grow old along with me;
The best is yet to be!"

It is the greatest lesson that Perkins's oldest can ever learn.

Chapter 11

ONE would have known that it was the day before Christmas at the Cross-Roads store, even if the big life insurance calendar over the desk had not proclaimed the fact in bold red figures. An unwonted bustle pervaded the place. Rows of plump, dressed turkeys hung outside the door, and on the end of the counter where the pyramid of canned tomatoes was usually stacked, a little evergreen tree stood in a brave array of tinsel and tiny Christmas tapers.

It was only an advertisement. No one might hope to be the proud possessor of the Noah's ark lodged in its branches, or of the cheap toys and candy rings dangling from every limb, unless he had the necessary pennies.

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Still, every child who passed it eyed it with such wistful glances that the little rubber Santa Claus at the base must have felt his elastic heart stretch almost to bursting.

Above the familiar odour of coal-oil and mackerel, new leather, roasted coffee and pickle brine, rose the holiday fragrance of cedar and oranges.

“Makes me think of when I was a kid,” said a drummer who had been joking with the men around the stove, trying to kill time while he waited for the train that was to take him home for Christmas. “There’s nothing like that smell of cedar and oranges to resurrect the boy in a man. It puts me straight back into knickerbockers again, among a whole grove of early Christmas trees. I’ll never forget the way I felt when I picked my first pair of skates off one of them. A house and

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lot wouldn't give me such a thrill now."

"Aw, I don't believe Christmas is at all what it's cracked up to be," said a voice from behind the stove, in such a gloomy tone that a knowing smile passed around the circle.

"Bet on you, Bud Hines, for findin' trouble, every time," laughed the store-keeper. "Why, Bud, there ain't no screw loose in Christmas, is there?"

"Well, there just is!" snapped the man, resenting the laugh. "It comes too often for one thing. I just wish it had happened on leap-year, the twenty-ninth of February. It would be a heap less expensive having it just once in four years. Seems to me we're always treading on its heels. My old woman hardly gets done knitting tidies for one Christmas till she's hard at it for another.

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“ Anyhow, Christmas never measures up to what you think it’s a-going to — not by a jug-full. Sure as you get your heart set on a patent nail-puller or a pair of fur gloves — something that’ll do *you* some good — your wife gives you a carpet sweeper, or an alarm-clock that rattles you out an hour too early every morning.”

The drummer led the uproarious laughter that followed. They were ready to laugh at anything in this season of good cheer, and the drummer’s vociferous merriment was irresistible. He slapped the speaker on the back, adding jokingly, “ That’s one thing Job never had to put up, did he, partner ! He nearly lost his reputation for politeness over the misfit advice he didn’t want. But there’s no telling what he’d have done with misfit Christmas gifts. It would take a star actor

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to play the grateful for some of the things people find in their stockings. For instance, to have a fond female relative give you a shaving outfit, when you wear a full beard.”

“You bet your life,” answered the store-keeper feelingly. “Now, if Santa Claus wasn’t a fake — ”

“Hist!” said the drummer, with a significant glance toward a small boy, perched on a soap-box in their midst, listening open-mouthed to every word. “I’ve children myself, and I’d punch anybody’s head who would shake their faith in Santy. It’s one of the rosy backgrounds of childhood, in my opinion, and I’ve got a heap of happiness out of it since I was a kid, too, looking back and recollecting.”

It was very little happiness that the boy on the soap-box was getting out of anything, that gray December after-

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noon. He was weighed down with a feeling of age and responsibility that bore heavily on his eight-year-old shoulders. He had long felt the strain of his position, as pattern to the house of Perkins, being the oldest of five. Now there was another one, and to be counted as the oldest of six pushed him almost to the verge of gray hairs.

There was another reason for his tear-stained face. He had been disillusioned. Only that noon, his own mother had done that for which the drummer would have punched any one's head, had it been done to his children. "We're too poor, Sammy. There can't be any Christmas at our house this year," she had said, fretfully, as she stopped the noisy driving of nails into the chimney, on which he contemplated hanging the fraternal stockings. To his astonished "Why?"

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she had replied with a few blunt truths that sent him out from her presence, shorn of all his childish hopefulness as completely as Samson was shorn of his strength.

There had been a sorry half-hour in the hay-mow, where he snuffled over his shattered faith alone, and from whence he went out, a hardened little skeptic, to readjust himself to a cold and Santa Clausless world. The only glimmer of comfort he had had since was when the drummer, with a friendly wink, slipped a nickel into his hand. But even that added to his weight of responsibility. He dropped it back and forth from one little red mitten to another, with two impulses strong upon him. The first was to spend it for six striped sticks of peppermint candy, one for each stocking, and thus compel Christmas to come to the house of

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Perkins. The other was to buy one orange and go off in a corner and suck it all by himself. He felt that fate owed him that much of a reparation for his disappointment. He was in the midst of this inward debate when a new voice joined the discussion around the stove. It came from Cy Akers.

“Well, *I* think it's downright sinful to stuff a child with such notions. You may call 'em fairy-tales all you like, but it's nothing more or less than a pack of lies. The idea of a Christian payrent sitting up and telling his immortal child that a big fat man in furs will drive through the air to-night in a reindeer sleigh right over the roofs and squeeze himself down a lot of sooty chimneys, with a bag of gim-cracks on his back — it's all fol-de-rol! I never could see how any

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intelligent young one could believe it. I never did. But that's one thing about me, as the poet says, 'If I've one peccoliar feature it's a nose that won't be led.' I never could be made to take stock in any such nonsense, even as a boy. I'll leave it to Mr. Asa Holmes, here, if it isn't wrong to be putting such ideas into the youth of our land."

The old miller ran his fingers through his short white hair and looked around. His smile was wholesome as it was genial. He was used to being called in judgment on these neighbourhood discussions, and he spoke with the air of one who felt that his words carried weight :

"You're putting it pretty strong, Cy," he said, with a laugh, and then a tender, reminiscent light gleamed in his old eyes.

"You see it's this way with me,

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boys. We never heard any of these things when I was a lad. It's plain facts in a pioneer cabin, you know. Father taught us about Christmas in the plain words that he found set down in the Gospels, and I told it the same way to my boys. When my first little grandson came back to the old house to spend Christmas, I thought it was almost heathenish for his mother to have him send letters up the chimney and talk as if Santa Claus was some real person. I told her so one day, and asked what was going to happen when the little fellow outgrew such beliefs.

“ ‘Why, Father Holmes,’ said she, — I can hear her now, words and tones, for it set me to thinking, — ‘don't you see that he is all the time growing into a broader belief? It's this way.’ She picked up a big apple from the table.

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‘Once this apple was only a tiny seed-pod in the heart of a pink blossom. The beauty of the blossom was all that the world saw, at first, but gradually, as the fruit swelled and developed, the pink petals fell off, naturally and easily, and the growing fruit was left. My little son’s idea of Christmas is in the blossom time now. This rosy glamour of old customs and traditions that makes it so beautiful to him is taking the part of the pink petals. They will fall away by and by, of their own accord, for underneath a beautiful truth is beginning to swell to fruitage. Santa Claus is the Spirit of Christmas love and giving, personified. It is because I want to make it real and vital, something that my baby’s mind can grasp and enjoy, that I incarnate it in the form of the good old Saint Nicholas, but I never let him lose sight of the

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Star. It was the Spirit of Christmas that started the wise men on their search, and they followed the Star and they found the Child, and laid gifts at his feet. And when the Child was grown, he, too, went out in the world and followed the Star and scattered his gifts of love and healing for all the children of men. And so it has gone on ever since, that Spirit of Christmas, impelling us to follow and to find and to give, wherever there is a need for our gold and frankincense and myrrh. That is the larger belief my boy is growing into, from the smaller.'

"And she is right," said the old man, after an impressive pause. "She raised that boy to be an own brother to Santa Claus, as far as good-will to men goes. It's Christmas all the year round wherever *he* is. And now when he brings his boys back to the old

Isa Holmes

home and hangs their stockings up by the fire, I never say a word. Sometimes when the little chaps are hunting for the marks of the reindeer hoofs in the ashes, I kneel down on the old hearthstone and hunt, too.

“A brother to Santa Claus!” The phrase still echoed in the heart of Perkins’s oldest when the group around the stove dispersed. It was that which decided the fate of the nickel, and filled the little red mittens with sticks of striped delight for six, instead of the lone orange for one. Out of a conversation but dimly understood he had gathered a vague comfort. It made less difference that his patron saint was a myth, since he had learned there might be brothers in the Claus family for him to fall back upon. Then his fingers closed over the paper bag of

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peppermints, and, suddenly, with a little thrill, he felt that in some queer way he belonged to that same brotherhood.

As he fumbled at the latch, the old miller, who always saw his own boyhood rise before him in that small tow-headed figure, and who somehow had divined the cause of the tear-streaks on the dirty little face, called him. "Here, sonny!" It was a pair of shining new skates that dangled from the miller's hands into his.

One look of rapturous delight, and two little feet were flying homeward down the frozen pike, beating time to a joy that only the overflowing heart of a child can know, when its troubles are all healed, and faith in mankind restored. And the old man, going home in the frosty twilight of the Christmas eve, saw before him all the way the light of a shining star.

Chapter IIII

IT was an hour past the usual time for closing the Cross-Roads store, but no one made a move to go. Listening in the comfortable glow of the red-hot stove, to the wind whistling down the long pipe, was far pleasanter than facing its icy blasts on the way home. Besides, it was the last night of the old year, and hints of forthcoming cider had been dropped by Jim Bowser, the storekeeper. Also an odour of frying doughnuts came in from the kitchen, whenever Mrs. Bowser opened the door into the entry.

Added to the usual group of loungers was the drummer who had spent Christmas eve with them. He had come in on an accommodation train,

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and was waiting for the midnight express. He had had the floor for some time with his stories, when suddenly in the midst of the laughter which followed one of his jokes, Bud Hines made himself heard.

“I say, Jim,” he exclaimed, turning to the storekeeper, “why don’t you tear off the last leaf of that calendar? We’ve come to the end of everything now; end of the day, end of the year, end of the century! Something none of *us* will ever experience again. It’s always a mighty solemn thought to me that I’m doing a thing for the la-ast time!”

Jim laughed cheerfully, tilting his chair back against the counter, and thrusting his thumbs into the armholes of his vest.

“I don’t know as I feel any call to mourn over takin’ down an old cal-

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endar when I have a prettier one to put in its place, and it's the same way with the century. There'll be a better one to begin on in the morning."

"That's so," asserted Cy Akers. "But some people come bang up against a New Year as if it was a stone wall, and down they set and count up their sins, and turn over new leaves, and load 'emselves down with so many good resolutions that they stick in the mud by the end of the first week. Now I hold that if it wasn't for the almanacs, steppin' from one year to another, or from one century to another, wouldn't jar you no more than steppin' over the equator. They're only imaginary lines, and nobody would ever know where he was at, either in months or meridians, if he didn't have almanacs and the like to keep him posted. Fourth of July is just as good

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a time to take stock and turn over a new leaf as the first of January."

"Maybe you take stock like a man I used to sell to down in Henderson County," said the drummer. "He never kept any books, so he never knew exactly where he was 'at,' as you say. Once a year he'd walk around the store with his hands in his pockets, and size up things in a general sort of way. 'Bill,' he'd say to his clerk, cocking his eyes up at the shelves, 'we've got a right smart chance of canned goods left over. I reckon there's a half shelf full more than we had left last year. I know there's more bottles of ketchup.' Then he'd take another turn around the room. 'Bill, I disremember how many pitchforks we had in this rack. There's only two left now. Nearly all the calico is sold, and (thumping the mo-

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lasses barrel), this here bar'l sounds like it's purty nigh empty. Take it all around, Bill, we've done first-rate this year, so I don't know as it's worth while botherin' about weighin' and measurin' what's left over, so long as we're satisfied.' And maybe that's why Cy makes so little of New Year," added the drummer, with a sly wink at the others. "He thinks it's not worth while to weigh and measure his shortcomings when he can take stock of himself in a general sort of a way, and always be perfectly satisfied with himself."

There was a laugh at Cy's expense, and Bud Hines began again.

"What worries me is, what's been prophesied about the new century. One would think we've had enough famines and plagues and wars and rumours of wars in this here old one to

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do for awhile, but from what folks say, it ain't goin' to hold a candle to the trouble we'll see in the next one."

"Troubles is seasonin'. 'Simmons ain't good till they are frostbit,'" quoted Cy.

"Then accordin' to Bud's tell, he ought to be the best seasoned persimmon on the bough," chuckled the storekeeper.

"No, that fellow that was here this afternoon goes ahead of Bud," insisted Cy, turning to the drummer. "I wish you could have heard him, pardner. He came in to get a postal order for some money he wanted to send in a letter, and he nearly wiped up the earth with poor old Bowser, because there was a two-cent war tax to pay on it.

"'Whose war?' says he. "'Tain't none of *my* makin'," says he, "and I'll be switched if I'll pay taxes on a thing

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I've been dead set against from the start. It's highway robbery,' says he, 'to load the country down with a war debt in times like these. It's kill yourself to keep yourself these days, and as my Uncle Josh used to say after the Mexican war, "it's tough luck when people are savin' and scrimpin' at the spigot for the government to be drawin' off at the bung."'

"Bowser here just looked him over as if he'd been a freak at a side-show, and said Bowser, in a dry sort of way, he guessed, 'when it came to the pinch, the spigot wouldn't feel that a two-cent stamp was a killin' big leakage.'

"The fellow at that threw the coppers down on the counter, mad as a hornet. 'It's the principle of the thing,' says he. 'Uncle Sam had no business to bite off more'n he could chew and then call on me to help.

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What's the war done for this country, anyhow?'

"He was swinging his arms like a stump speaker at a barbecue, by this time. 'What's it done?' says he. 'Why it's sent the soldiers back from Cuba with an itch as bad as the small-pox, and as ketchin' to them citizens that wanted peace, as to them that clamoured for war. I know what I'm talkin' about, for my hired man like to 'uv died with it, and he hadn't favoured the war any more than a spring lamb. And what's it doin' for us, now?' says he. 'Sendin' the poor fellows back from the Philippines by the ship-load, crazy as June-bugs. I know what I'm talkin' about. That happened to one of my wife's cousins. What was it ever begun for,' says he, 'tell me that!'

"Peck here, behind the stove, sung

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out like a fog-horn, ‘*Remember the Maine!*’ Peck knew what a blow the fellow had made at an indignation meeting when the news first came. No tellin’ what would have happened then if a little darky hadn’t put his head in at the door and yelled, ‘Say, mistah, yo’ mules is done backed yo’ wagon in de ditch!’ He tore out to tend to them, or we might have had another Spanish war right here among Bowser’s goods and chattels.”

“No danger,” said Peck, dryly, “he isn’t the kind of a fellow to fight for principle. It’s only when his pocketbook is touched he wants to lick somebody. He’s the stingiest man I ever knew, and I’ve known some mighty mean men in my time.”

“What’s the matter with you all tonight?” said the drummer. “You’re the most pessimistic crowd I’ve struck

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in an age. This is the tune you've been giving me from the minute I lifted the latch." And beating time with foot and hands in old plantation style, the drummer began forthwith to sing in a deep bass voice that wakened the little Bowsers above :

"Ole Satan is loose an' a-bummin'!
De wheels er distruckshin is a-hummin.'
Oh, come 'long, sinner, ef you comin'!"

The door into the entry opened a crack and Mrs. Bowser's forefinger beckoned.

"Here's good-bye to the old and good luck to the new," cried Jim, jumping up to take the big pitcher of cider that she passed through the opening.

"And here's to Mrs. Bowser," cried the drummer, taking the new tin cup filled for him with the sparkling cider,

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and helping himself to a hot doughnut from the huge panful which she brought in. "It's a pretty good sort of world, after all, that gives you cakes as crisp and sugary as these. 'Speak well of the bridge that carries you over' is my motto, so don't let another fellow cheep to-night, unless he can say something good of the poor old century or the men who've lived in it!"

"Mr. Holmes! Mr. Asa Holmes!" cried several voices.

The old miller, who had been silent all evening, straightened himself up in his chair and drew his hand over his eyes.

"I feel as if I were parting with an old comrade, to-night," he said. "The century had only fifteen years the start of me, and it's a long way we've travelled together. I've been sitting here,

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thinking how much we've lived through. Listen, boys."

It was a brief series of pictures he drew for them, against the background of his early pioneer days. They saw him, a little lad, trudging more than a mile on a winter morning to borrow a kettle of hot coals, because the fire had gone out on his own hearthstone, and it was before the days of matches. They saw him huddled with the other little ones around his mother's knee when the wolves howled in the night outside the door, and only the light of a tallow-dip flickered through the darkness of the little cabin. They saw the struggle of a strong life against the limitations of the wilderness, and realised what the battle must have been oftentimes, against sudden disease and accident and death, with the nearest doctor a three days' journey distant, and

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no smoke from any neighbour's chimney rising anywhere on all the wide horizon.

While he talked, a heavy freight train rumbled by outside; the wind whistled through the telegraph wires. The jingle of a telephone bell interrupted his reminiscences. The old man looked up with a smile. "See what we have come to," he said, "from such a past to a time when I can say 'hello,' across a continent. Cables and cross-ties and telegraph poles have annihilated distance. The century and I came in on an ox-cart; we are going out on a streak of lightning.

"But that's not the greatest thing," he said, pausing, while the listening faces grew still more thoughtful. "Think of the hospitals! The homes! The universities! The social settlements! The free libraries! The hu-

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mane efforts everywhere to give humanity an uplift! When I think of all this century has accomplished, of the heroic lives it has produced, I haven't a word to say about its mistakes and failures. After all, how do we know that the things we cry out against *are* mistakes?

“This war may be a Samson's riddle that we are not wise enough to read. Those who shall come after us may be able to say ‘*Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness!*’”

Somewhere in an upper room a clock struck twelve, and deep silence fell on the little company as they waited for the solemn passing of the century. It was no going out as of some decrepit Lear tottering from his throne. Perhaps no man there could have put it in words, but each one felt that its majestic leave-taking was like the hoary old

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apostle's: "I have fought a good fight,
I have finished my course, I have kept
the faith."

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Chapter IV

FOR some occult reason, the successful merchant in small towns and villages is the confidant, if not father-confessor, of a large number of his patronesses. It may be that his flattering air of personal interest, assumed for purely business purposes, loosens not only the purse-strings but the spring that works the panorama of private affairs. Or it may be an idiosyncrasy of some classes of the mind feminine, to make no distinction between a bargain counter and a confessional. Whatever the cause, many an honest merchant can testify that it is no uncommon thing for a woman to air her domestic troubles while she buys a skirt braid, or to drag out her family skeleton with the

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sample of sewing silk she wishes to match.

The Cross-Roads had had its share of confidences, although as a rule the women who disposed of their butter and eggs in trade to Bowser were of the patient sort, grown silent under the repressing influence of secluded farm life. Still, Bowser, quick to see and keen to judge, had gained a remarkable insight into neighbourhood affairs in fifteen years' dealings with his public. "All things come to him who waits" if he wears an air of habitual interest and has a sympathetic way of saying "Ah! indeed!"

It was with almost the certainty of foreknowledge that Bowser counted his probable patrons as he spread out his valentines on the morning of the fourteenth of February. He had selected his comic ones with a view to the

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feud that existed between the Hillock and Bond families, well knowing that a heavy cross-fire of ugly caricatures and insulting rhymes would be kept up all day by the younger members of those warring households. It was with professional satisfaction he smiled over the picture of a fat man with a donkey's head, which he was as sure would be sent by Pete Hillock to old man Bond, as if he had heard Pete's penny dropping into the cash-drawer.

“Nothing like supplying the demand,” he chuckled.

It was with more than professional interest that he arranged the lace-paper valentines in the show-case, for the little embossed Cupids had a strong ally in this rustic haberdasher, whose match-making propensities had helped many a little romance to a happy issue.

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Drawing on his fund of private information, acquired in his rôle of confidant to the neighbourhood gossips, he set out his stock of plump red hearts, forget-me-nots, and doves; and with each addition to the festal array he nodded his head knowingly over the particular courtship it was designed to speed, or the lovers' quarrel that he hoped might be ended thereby.

There had been two weeks of "February thaw." Melting snow had made the mud hub-deep in places. There was a velvety balminess in the touch of the warm wind, and faint, elusive odours, prophetic of spring, rose from the moist earth and sap-quickenened trees.

The door of the Cross-Road store stood open, and behind it, at the post-office desk, sat Marion Holmes, the old miller's granddaughter. Just out

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of college and just into society, she had come to spend Lent in the old place that had welcomed her every summer during her childhood. The group around the stove stared covertly at the pretty girl in the tailor-made gown, failing to recognise in the tall, stylish figure any trace of the miller's "little Polly," who used to dangle her feet from the counter and munch peppermint drops, while she lisped nursery rhymes for their edification.

She had come for the letters herself, she told Bowser, because she was expecting a whole bag full, and her grandfather's rheumatism kept him at home. Installed in the post-office chair, behind the railing that enclosed the sanctum of pigeon-holes, she amused herself by watching the customers while she waited for the mail-train.

"It's like looking into a kaleido-

Isa Holmes

scope," she told Bowser in one of the pauses of trade. "Every one who comes in gives me a different point of view and combination of opinions. Now, those valentines! I was thinking what old-fashioned things those little lace-paper affairs are, and wondering how anybody could possibly get up any thrills over them, when I walked Miss Anastasia Dill. Prim and gentle as ever, isn't she? Still getting her styles from *Godey's Lady's Books* of the early sixties; she must draw on their antiquated love stories for her sentiment, too, for she seemed lost in admiration of those hearts and darts. What *do* you suppose is Miss Anastasia's idea of a lover?"

Marion rattled on with all of a debutante's reckless enthusiasm for any subject under discussion. "Wouldn't he be as odd and old-fashioned as the

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lace valentines themselves? She'd call him a *suitor*, wouldn't she? I wonder if she ever had one."

Then Bowser, piecing together the fragmentary gossip of fifteen years, told Marion all he knew of Miss Anastasia's gentle romance; and Marion, idly clasping and unclasping the little Yale pin on her jacket, gained another peep into the kaleidoscope of human experiences.

"I have read of such devotion to a memory," she said when the story was done, "but I never met it in the flesh. What a pity he died while he was on such a high pedestal in her imagination. If he had lived she would have discovered that there are no such paragons, and all the other sons of Adam needn't have suffered by comparison. So she's an old maid simply because she put her ideal of a lover so high in

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the clouds nobody could live up to it! Dear old Miss Anastasia!"

Bowser pulled his beard. "Such couples make me think of these here lamps with double wicks," he said. "They hardly ever burn along together evenly. One wick is sure to flare up higher than the other; you either have to keep turning it down and get along with a half light or let it smoke the chimney — maybe crack it — and make things generally uncomfortable. But here comes somebody, Miss Marion, who's burned along pretty steady, and that through three administrations. It's her brag that she's had three husbands and treated them just alike, even to the matter of tombstones. 'Not a pound difference in the weight nor a dollar in the price,' she always says."

The newcomer was a fat, wheezy woman, spattered with mud from the

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hem of her skirt to the crown of her big crape bonnet, which had tipped on one side with the jolting of the wagon.

“Well, Jim Bowser!” she exclaimed, catching sight of the valentines. “Ef you ain’t got out them silly, sentimental fol-de-rols again! My nephew, Jason Potter, — that’s my second husband’s sister’s son, you know, — spent seventy-five cents last year to buy one of them silly things to send to his girl; and I says to him, ‘Jason,’ says I, ‘ef *I’d* been Lib Meadows, that would ’uv cooked your goose with *me*! Any man simple enough to waste his substance so, wouldn’t make a good provider.’ I ought to know — I’ve been a wife three times.”

This, like all other of Mrs. Power’s conversational roads, led back to the three tombstones, and started a flow

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of good-natured badinage on the subject of matrimony, which continued long after she had taken her noisy departure. "Well!" exclaimed Bud Hines, as the big crape bonnet went jolting down the road, "I guess there's three good men gone that could tell why heaven is heaven."

"Why?" asked Cy Akers.

"Because there's no marryin' or givin' in marriage there."

"Bud speaks feelingly!" said Cy, winking at the others. "He'd better get a job on a newspaper to write Side Talks with Henpecked Husbands."

"Shouldn't think *you'd* want to hear any extrys or supplements," retorted Bud. "You get enough in your own daily editions."

"St. Valentine has been generous with my little Polly," said the old mil-

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ler, looking up fondly at the tall, graceful girl, coming into his room, her face aglow and her arms full of packages.

“But what’s the good of it all, grandfather?” answered Marion. “I’ve been looking into Cupid’s kaleidoscope through other people’s eyes this afternoon, and nothing is rose-coloured as I thought. Everything is horrid. ‘Marriage is a failure,’ and sentiment is a silly thing that people make flip-pant jokes about, or else break their hearts with, like Mr. Bowser’s double-wick lamps, that flare up and crack their chimneys. I’ve come to the conclusion that St. Valentine has outlived his generation.”

She broke the string which bound one of the boxes that she had dropped on the table, and took out a great dewy bunch of sweet violets. As their fragrance filled the room, the old man

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looked around as if half expecting to see some familiar presence; then dropped his white head with a sigh, and gazed into the embers on the hearth, lost in a tender reverie.

Presently he said, "I wish you would hand me that box on my wardrobe shelf, little girl." As Marion opened the wardrobe door, something hanging there made her give a little start of surprise. It was an old familiar gray dress, with the creases still in the bent sleeves just as they had been left when the tired arms last slipped out of them. That was ten years ago; and Marion, standing there with a mist gathering in her eyes, recalled the day her grandfather had refused to let any one fold it away. It had hung there all those years, the tangible reminder of the strong, sweet presence that had left its imprint on every part of the household.

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“It is like my life since she slipped out of it,” the old man had whispered, smoothing the empty sleeve with his stiff old fingers. “Like my heart — set to her ways at every turn, and left just as she rounded it out — but now — so empty !”

He lifted an old dog-eared school-book from the box that Marion brought him, a queer little “Geography and Atlas of the Heavens,” in use over fifty years ago. Inside was a tiny slip of paper, time-yellowed and worn. The ink was faded, until the words written in an unformed girlish hand were barely legible :

“True as grapes grow on a vine,
I will be your Valentine.”

“I had put a letter into her Murray’s grammar,” he explained, holding up another little book. “Here is the

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page, just at the conjugation of the verb 'to love.' You see I was a big, shy, overgrown boy that lost my tongue whenever I looked at her, although she wasn't fifteen then, and only reached my shoulder. This valentine was the answer that she slipped into my atlas of the heavens. I thought the sky itself had never held such a star. We walked home across the woodland together that day, never saying a word. It was the last of the February thaw, and the birds were twittering as if it were really spring. Just such a day as this. All of a sudden, right at my feet, I saw something smiling up at me, blue as the blue of my Polly's eyes. I stooped and brushed away the leaves, and there were two little violets.

"As I gave them to her I wanted to say, 'There will always be violets in my heart for you, my Polly,' but I

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couldn't speak a word. I know she understood, for long years after — when she was dead — I found them here. She had pinned them on the page where my letter had lain, here on the conjugation that says, 'we love,' and she had added the word '*for ever.*' "

A tear dropped on the dead violets as the old man reverently closed the book, and sat gazing again into the dying embers. There was a tremulous smile on his face. Was it backward over the hills of their youth he was wandering, or ahead to those heights of Hope, where love shall "put on immortality?"

Marion laid her warm cheek against her violets, still fragrant with the sweetness of their fresh, unfaded youth. Then taking a cluster from the great dewy bunch, she fastened it at her throat with the little Yale pin.

Chapter V

TRADE was dull at the Cross-Roads. Jim Bowser, his hands thrust into his pockets and his lips puckered to a whistle, stood looking through the dingy glass of his front door. March was coming in with a snow-storm, and all he could see in any direction was a blinding fall of white flakes. There were only three men behind the stove that afternoon, and one of them was absorbed in a newspaper. Conversation flagged, and from time to time Bud Hines yawned audibly.

“This is getting to be mighty monotonous,” remarked the storekeeper, glancing from the falling snow to the silent group by the stove.

“March always is,” answered Bud

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Hines. "The other months have some holiday in 'em; something to brighten 'em up, if it's no more than a family birthday. But to me, March is as dull and uninteresting as a mud road."

"There's the inauguration this year," suggested Cy Akers, looking up from his newspaper. "That's a big event. This paper is full of it."

"Well, now you've hit it!" exclaimed Bud, with withering scorn, as he bit off another chew of tobacco. "That is exciting! Just about as interesting as watching a man take his second helping of pie. I wouldn't go across the road to see it. Now in a monarchy, where death makes the changes, it can't get to be a cut and dried affair that takes place every four years. They make a grand occasion of it, too, with their pomp and cere-

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mony. Look at what England's just seen. It's the sight of a lifetime to bury a queen and crown a king. But what do we see when we change Presidents? One man sliding into a chair and another sliding out, same as when the barber calls 'Next!' Humph!"

Cy Akers rubbed his chin. "Fuss and feathers! That's all it amounts to," he exclaimed. "I'm down on monopolies, and in my opinion it's the worst kind of monopoly to let one family crowd out everybody else in the king business. I like a country where every man in it has a show. Not that I'd *be* President, if they offered me double the salary, but it is worth a whole lot to me to feel that in case I did want the office, I've as good a right to it as any man living. And talk about sights — I say it's the sight of a lifetime to see a man step out from his

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place among the people, anywhere he happens to be when they call his name, take his turn at ruling as if he'd been born to it, and then step back as if nothing had happened."

Bud smiled derisively. "You only see that on paper, my boy. Men don't step quietly into offices in this country. They run for 'em till they are red in the face, and it's the best runner that gets there, not the best man. Monopoly in the king business keeps out the rabble, any how, and it gives a country a good deal more dignity to be ruled by a dynasty than by Tom, Dick, and Harry."

"Well, there's no strings tied to you," said Cy, testily, taking up his newspaper again. "When people don't like the way things are run on this side of the water, there's nothing to hinder emigration."

Alsa Holmes

There was a stamping of snowy feet outside the door, and a big, burly fellow blustered in, whom they hailed as Henry Bicking. He was not popular at the Cross-Roads, having the unenviable reputation of being a "born tease," but any diversion was welcome on such a dull day.

In the catalogue of queer characters which every neighbourhood possesses, the Autocrat, Bore, and Crank may take precedence of all others alphabetically, but the one that heads the list in disagreeableness is that infliction on society known as the "born tease." One can forgive the teasing propensity universally found in boys, as he would condone the playful destructiveness of puppyhood; something requiring only temporary forbearance. But when that trait refuses to be put away with childish things it makes of the man it domi-

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nates a sort of human mosquito. He regards every one in reach his lawful prey, from babies to octogenarians, and while he does not always sting, the persistency of his annoying attacks becomes exasperating beyond endurance.

The same motive that made Henry Bicking pull cats' whiskers out by the roots when he was a boy, led him to keep his children in a turmoil, and his sensitive little wife in tears half the time. He had scarcely seated himself by the stove when he was afforded opportunity for his usual pastime by the entrance of half a dozen children, who came tumbling in on their way home from school to warm.

He began with a series of those inane questions by which grown people have made themselves largely responsible for the pertness of the younger generation. If children of this day

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have departed from that delectable state wherein they were seen and not heard, the fault is due far more to their elders than to them. Often they have been made self-conscious, and forced into saucy self-assertion by the teasing questions that are asked merely to provoke amusing replies.

Henry Bicking's quizzing had an element of cruelty in it. His was the kind that pinches his victims' ears, that tickles to the verge of agony, that threatens all sorts of disagreeable things, for the sake of seeing little faces blanch with fright, or eyes fill with tears of pain.

"Come here, Woodpecker," he began, reaching for a child whose red hair was the grief of his existence. But the boy deftly eluded him, and the little fellow standing next in line, drying his snowball-soaked mittens,

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became the victim. He was dragged unwillingly to his tormentor's knee.

"What are you going to be when you're a man?" was demanded, when the first questions had elicited the fact that the child's name was Sammy Perkins, and that he was eight years old. But Perkins's oldest, having no knowledge of the grammar of life beyond its present tense indicative, hung his head and held his tongue at mention of its future potential.

"If you don't tell me you sha'n't have your mittens!" Bicking dangled them tantalisingly out of reach, until, after an agonising and unsuccessful scramble, the child was forced into a tearful reply.

Then he began again: "Which are you for, Democrats or Republicans?"

"Ain't for neither."

"Well, you're the littlest mugwump

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I ever did see. Mugwumps ain't got any right to wear mittens. I've a notion to pitch 'em in the stove."

"Oh, *don't!*" begged the child. "Please, mister! I'm not a mugwump!"

The tragic earnestness of the child as he disclaimed all right to the term of reproach which he could not understand, yet repudiated because of its obnoxious sound, amused the man hugely. He threw back his head and laughed.

"Tell me who you holler for!" he continued, catching him up and holding him head downward a moment. Then goaded by more teasing questions and a threatenin' swing of his red mittens toward the stove door, Perkins's oldest was at last led to take a bold stand on his party platform, and publicly declare his political preference.

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But it was in a shaking voice and between frightened sobs.

“M-ma, she’s for McKinley, an’ p-pap, he’s for B-Bryan, so I jus’ holler for Uncle Sam!”

“Good enough for you, sonny,” laughed the storekeeper. “That’s true blue Americanism. Stick to Uncle Sam and never mind the parties. They’ve had new blades put on their old handles, and new handles put on those old blades again, till none of ’em are what we started out with. We keep on calling them ‘genuine Barlows,’ but it’s precious little of the original Barlows we’re hanging on to nowadays.”

It was a woman’s voice that interrupted the conversation. Mrs. Teddy Mahone had come in for some tea.

“Arrah, Mither Bicking! Give the

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bye his mitts! You're worrse than a cat with a mouse."

The loud voice with its rich Irish brogue drew Cy Akers's attention from his newspaper. "By the way, Bud," he exclaimed, raising his voice so that Mrs. Mahone could not fail to hear, "you were complaining about March being so dull and commonplace without any holidays. You've forgotten St. Patrick's Day."

"No, I haven't. St. Patrick is nothing to me. There's no reason I should take any interest in him."

"And did you hear that, Mrs. Mahone," asked Henry Bicking, anxious to start a war of words.

"Oh, Oi heard it, indade Oi did!" she answered with a solemn shake of the head. "It grieves the heartt of me to hear such ingratichude. There's niver a sowl in all Ameriky but has

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cause to be grateful for what he's done for this country."

"What's he ever done?" asked Bud, skeptically. There was a twinkle in Mrs. Mahone's eyes as she answered:

"It was this way. A gude while back whin it was at the beginnin' iv things, Ameriky said to herself wan day, 'It's a graand pudding Oi'll be afther makin' meself, by a new resait Oi've just thought iv.' So she dips into this counthry for wan set iv immy-grants, an' into another counthry for another batch, and after a bit a foine mess she had iv 'em. Dutch an' Frinch an' Eytalian, Rooshian, Spaniards an' haythen Chinees, all stirred up in wan an' the same pudding-bag.

"'Somethin's lackin',' siz she, afther awhile, makin' a wry face.

"'It's the spice,' siz St. Pathrick, 'ye lift out iv it, an' the leaven. Ye'll

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have to make parsinal application to meself for it, for Oi'm the only wan knowin' the saicret of where it's to be found.'

“ ‘Then give me some,’ siz she, an’ St. Pathrick, not loikin’ to lave a leddy in trouble, reached out from the auld sod and handed her a fair shprinklin’ of them as would act as both spice an’ leaven.

“ ‘They’ll saison the whole lot,’ siz he, ‘an’ there’s light-heartedness enough among them to raise the entoire heavy mass in your whole united pudding-bag.’

“ ‘Thanks,’ siz she, stirrin’ us in. ‘It’s the makin’ of the dish, sorr, and Oi’m eternally obliged to ye, sorr. Oi’ll be afther puttin’ the name of St. Pathrick in me own family calendar, and ivery year on that day, it’s the pick iv the land that’ll take pride in addin’

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to me own shtars an' shtripes the wearin' o' the green.'

"Ye see, Misther Hines, ye may think ye're under no parsinal obligation to him, but down-hearted as ye are by nature, what wud ye have been had ye niver coom in conthact with the leaven of St. Pathrick at all, sorr? Oi ask ye that."

Late that night Bowser pushed his ledger aside with a yawn, and got down from his high stool to close the store. As he counted the meagre contents of the cash drawer, he reviewed the day, whose minutes had been as monotonous in passing as the falling of the snowflakes outside. It had left nothing behind it to distinguish it from a hundred other days. The same old faces! The same kind of jokes! The same round of commonplace duties! A

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spirit of unrest seized him, that made him chafe against such dreary monotony.

When he went to the door to put up the shutters, the beauty of the night held him a moment, and he stood looking across the wide fields, lying white in moonlight and snow. Far down the road a lamp gleamed from the window of an upper room in the old miller's house, where anxious vigil had been kept beside him for hours. The crisis was passed now. Only a little while before, the doctor had stopped by to say that their old friend would live. Down the track a gleaming switch-light marked the place where a wreck had been narrowly averted that morning.

“And no telling how many other misfortunes we've escaped to-day,” mused Bowser. “Maybe if a light

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could be swung out for each one, folks would see that the dull gray days when nothing happens are the ones to be most thankful for, after all."

Chapter VII

APRIL sunshine of mid-afternoon poured in through the open door of the Cross-Roads. The usual group of loungers had gathered around the rusty stove. There was no fire in it; the day was too warm for that, but force of habit made them draw their chairs about it in a circle, as if this common centre were the hub, from which radiated the spokes of all neighbourly intercourse.

The little schoolmistress was under discussion. Her short reign in District No. 3 had furnished a topic of conversation as inexhaustible as the weather, for her régime was attended by startling changes. Luckily for her, the young ideas enjoyed being taught to shoot at wide variance from the targets set up

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by parental practice and tradition, else the tales told out of school might have aroused more adverse criticism than they did.

“You can’t take much stock in her new-fangled notions,” was the unanimous opinion at the Cross-Roads. She had “put the cart before the horse” when she laid the time-honoured alphabet on the shelf, and gave the primer class a whole word at a mouthful, before it had cut a single orthographic tooth on such primeval syllables as a-b ab.

“Look at my Willie,” exclaimed one of the district fathers. “Beating around the bush with talk about a picture cow, and a real cow, and a word cow, and not knowing whether B comes after W or X. At his age I could say the alphabet forwards or backwards as fast as tongue could go without a slip.”

Isa Holmes

“She’s done *one* sensible thing,” admitted Cy Akers. “They tell me she’s put her foot down on the scholars playing April fool tricks this year.”

“I don’t see why,” said Henry Bicking. “It has been one of the customs in this district since the schoolhouse was built. What’s the harm if the children do take one day in the year for a little foolishness? Let them have their fun, I say.”

“But they’ve carried it too far,” was the answer. “It’s scandalous they should be allowed to abuse people’s rights and feelings and property as they have done the last few years. First of April doesn’t justify such cutting up any more than the first of August.”

“She’s got Scripture on her side,” said Squire Dobbs. “You know Solomon says, ‘As a mad man who casteth

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firebrands, arrows, and death, so is the man that deceiveth his neighbour and saith, am I not in sport?' ”

“She can't stamp out such a deep-rooted custom in one day,” protested Bicking.

“You can bet on the little school-ma'am every time,” laughed Bowser. “My daughter Milly says they didn't have regular lessons yesterday afternoon. She had them put their books in their desks.

“Said they'd been studying about wise men all their lives, now they'd study about fools awhile; the fools of Proverbs and the fools of history.

“She read some stories, too, about a cruel disappointment and the troubles brought about by some thoughtless jokes on the first of April. Mighty interesting stories, Milly said. You could have heard a pin drop, and some

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of the girls cried. Then she drew a picture on the blackboard of a court jester, in cap and bells, and asked if they wouldn't like a change this year. Instead of everybody acting the fool and doing silly things they'd all be ashamed of if they'd only stop to think, wouldn't they rather she'd appoint just one scholar to play the fool for all of them, as the old kings used to do.

“They agreed to that, quick enough, thinking what fun they'd have teasing the one chosen to be it. Then she said she'd appoint the first one this morning who showed himself most deserving of the office. Milly says from the way she smiled when she said it, they're all sure she means to choose the first one who plays an April Fool joke. She'd put it so strong to 'em how silly it was, that there ain't a child in school you could hire to run

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the risk of being appointed fool for the day. So I think she's coming out ahead as usual."

"After all," said Bud Hines, "there's some lessons to be got out of those old tricks we used to play. For instance, the pocketbook tied to a string. Seems to me that everything in life worth having has a string tied to it, and just as I am about to pick it up, Fate snatches it out of my hands."

"Don't you believe it, Buddy," said Bowser, cheerfully; "you take notice those pocketbooks on strings are always empty ones, and they don't belong to us, so we have no business grabbing for them or feeling disappointed because we can't get something for nothing."

But Bud waved aside the interruption mechanically.

"Then there's the *gifts* with strings

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tied to 'em," he continued. " My wife has a rich aunt who is always sending her presents, and writing, ' Understand this is for *you*, Louisy. You're too generous, and I don't want anybody but your own deserving self to wear this.' Now out in the country here, my wife doesn't have occasion to wear handsome clothes like them once a year, while they'd be the very thing for Clara May, off at Normal School. But not a feather or a ribbon can the child touch because her great-aunt bought them expressly for her ma. Goodness knows she'd have a thousand times more pleasure in seeing Clara May enjoy them, than knowing they were lying away in bureau drawers doing nobody any good. When she takes 'em out at house-cleaning times I say, 'Ma,' says I, 'deliver me from gifts with strings tied to 'em. I'd rather

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have a ten-cent bandanna, all mine, to have and to hold or to give away as pleased me most, than the finest things your Aunt Honigford's money could buy, if I had to account to her every time I turned around in them.'

"When I give anything I *give* it, and don't expect to come back, spying around ten years afterward to see if it's worn out, or cracked, or faded, or broken. That's my doctrine."

Marion Holmes, driving along the country road in the old miller's antiquated chaise, drew rein in front of a low picket gate, overhung by mammoth snowball bushes. Down the path, between the rows of budding lilacs and japonicas, came an old gentleman in a quaintly cut, long-tailed coat. He was stepping along nimbly, although he leaned hard on his gold-headed cane.

Elsa Holmes

“‘A man he was to all the country dear,’” quoted Marion softly to herself as the minister’s benign face smiled a greeting through his big square-bowed spectacles. “I know he must have been Goldsmith’s friend, and I wish I dared ask him how long he lived in the Deserted Village.” But all she called out to him as he stopped with a courtly bow, under the snow-ball bushes, was a cheery good morning and an invitation to take a seat beside her if he wanted to drive to the Cross-Roads store.

“Thank you, Miss Polly,” he answered, “that is my destination. I am on my way there for a text.”

“For a what?” exclaimed Marion in surprise, turning the wheel for him to step in beside her.

“For a text for my Easter sermon,” he explained as they drove on in the

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warm April sunshine. "Ah, I see, Miss Polly, you have not discovered the school of philosophers that centres around the Cross-Roads store. Well, it's not to be wondered at; few people do. I spent a winter in Rome, when I was younger, and one of my favourite walks was up on the Pincian Hill. The band plays in the afternoons, you know, and tourists flock to see the queen drive by. There is a charming view from the summit — the dome of St. Peters against the blue Italian sky, the old yellow Tiber crawling along under its bridges from ruin to ruin, and the immortal city itself, climbing up its historic hills. And on the Pincio one meets everybody, — soldiers and courtiers, flower girls and friars, monks in robes of every order, and pilgrims from all parts of the world.

"The first time I was on the hill,

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as I wandered among the shrubbery and flowers, I noticed a row of moss-grown pedestals set along each side of the drive for quite a distance. Each pedestal bore the weather-beaten bust of some old sage or philosopher or hero.

“They made no more impression on my mind then, than so many fence-posts, but later I found a workman repairing the statuary one day. He had put a new nose on the mutilated face of an old philosopher, and that fresh white nasal appendage, standing out jauntily in the middle of the ancient gray visage, was so ludicrous I could not help smiling whenever I passed it. I began to feel acquainted with the old fellow, as day after day that nose forced my attention. Sometimes, coming upon him suddenly, the only familiar face in a city full of strangers, I felt that he was an old

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friend to whom I should take off my hat. Then it became so that I rarely passed him without recalling some of his wise sayings that I had read at college. Many a time he and his row of stony-eyed companions were an inspiration to me in that way.

“It was so that I met these men at the Cross-Roads. They scarcely claimed my attention at first. Then one day I heard one of them give utterance to a time-worn truth in such an original way that I stopped to talk to him.

“Trite as it was, he had hewn it himself out of the actual experiences of his own life. It was the result of his own keen observation of human nature. Set as it was in his homely, uncouth dialect, it impressed me with startling force. Then I listened to his companions, and found that they, too, were sometimes worthy of pedestals.

Elsa Holmes

Unconsciously to themselves they have often given me suggestions for my sermons. Ah, it's a pity that the backwoods has no Pincio on which to give its philosophers to posterity !”

Half an hour later as they drove homeward, Marion glanced at her companion. “No text this time,” she laughed, breaking the reverie into which the old minister had fallen. “Your sages said nothing but ‘good morning, sir,’ and there wasn't a single suggestion of Easter in the whole store, except the packages of egg dyes, and some impossible little chocolate rabbits. Oh, yes, — those two little boys playing on the doorstep. Tommy Bowser had evidently taken time by the forelock and sampled his father's dyes, for he had a whole hatful of coloured eggs, and was teaching that little Perkins

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boy how to play 'bust.' He was an apt scholar, for while I watched he won five of Tommy's eggs and never cracked his own. You should have seen them."

"Oh, I saw them," said the minister, with a smile. "It was those same little lads who suggested the text for my Easter sermon."

Marion gave a gasp of astonishment. "Would you mind telling me *how*?" she exclaimed.

"It came about very naturally. There they stood with their hands full of the Easter eggs, with never a thought of what they symbolised — the breaking shell — the rising of this little embryo earth-existence to the free full-winged life of the Resurrection. They were too intent on their little game, on their small winnings and losings, to have a thought for higher things. As I

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watched them it occurred to me how typical it was of all the children of men, and instantly that text from Luke flashed into my mind: '*Their eyes were holden.*' Do you remember? It was when the two disciples went down to Emmaus. I often picture it," mused the old man after a little pause. "The green of the olive groves, the red and white of the blossoming almond-trees, the late afternoon sunshine, and those two discouraged fishermen trudging along the dusty road. They were turning away from a lost cause and a buried hope, too absorbed in their overwhelming grief to see that it was the risen Lord Himself who walked beside them. Not till the end of their journey did they know why it was that their hearts had burned within them as He talked with them by the way. Their eyes were holden.

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“How typical that is, too, Miss Polly. Sometimes we go on to the end of life, missing the comfort and help that we might have had at every step, because we look up at our Lord only through eyes of clay, and hold communion with him as with a stranger. Yes, I shall certainly make that the subject of my Easter sermon, Miss Polly. Thank you for helping me discover it.”

That next Sunday as Marion sat in church beside the old miller, her gaze wandered from the lilies in the chancel to the faces of the waiting congregation. Bud Hines was there and Bowser, Cy Akers, and even Perkins's oldest, whose game of “bust” had suggested the helpful sermon of the morning. Marion studied the serious, weather-beaten faces with new interest. “It is not in spiritual things alone

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that our eyes are holden," she said to herself. "I have been looking at only the commonplace exterior of these people. It takes a man like the old minister to recognise unpedestalled virtues and to set them on the Pincio they deserve."

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Chapter VIII

THE old saying that "there are always two sides to a story" has worn a deep rut into the popular mind. It has been handed down to us so often with an air of virtuous rebuke, that we have come to regard the individual who insists on his two-sided theory as the acme of all that is broad-minded and tolerant. But in point of fact, if two sides is all he sees, he is only one remove from the bigot whose mental myopia limits him to a single narrow facet.

Even such a thing as a May-day picnic is polyhedral. The little school-mistress, who was the chief promoter of the one at the Cross-Roads, would have called it a parallelopiped, if she had been there that morning, to have

Elsa Holmes

seen the different expressions portrayed on the faces of six people who were interested in it.

The business side of the picnic appealed to Bowser. As he bustled around, dusting off cases of tinned goods that he had long doubted his ability to dispose of, and climbed to the top shelves for last summer's shop-worn cans of sardines and salmon, as he sliced cheese, and counted out the little leathery lemons that time had shrivelled, his smile was as bland as the May morning itself. One could plainly see that he regarded this picnic as a special dispensation of Providence, to help him work off his old stock.

There were no loungers in the store. Field and garden claimed even the idlest, and only the old miller, who had long ago earned his holiday, sat in the sun on the porch outside, with his chair

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tipped back against the wall. At intervals a warm breath from the apple orchard, in bloom across the road, touched his white hair in passing, and stirred his memory until he sat oblivious of his surroundings. He was wholly unmindful of the gala stir about him, save when Polly recalled his wandering thoughts. She, keenly alive to every sensation of the present, stood beside him with her hand on his shoulder, while she waited for her picnic basket to be filled.

“Isn't it an ideal May-day, grandfather?” she exclaimed. “It gives me a real Englishy feeling of skylarks and cuckoos and cowslips, of primroses and village greens. I think it is dear of the little school-ma'am to resurrect the old May-pole dance, and give the children some idea of 'Merrie old England' other than the dates and dust of its ancient history.” Uncon-

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sciously beating time with light fingertips on the old man's shoulder, she began to hum half under her breath :

“ ‘ And then my heart with rapture thrills,
And dances with the daffodills-o-dills —
And dances with the daffodils ! ’ ”

Suddenly she broke off with a girlish giggle of enjoyment. “ Listen, grandfather. There's little Cora Bowser up-stairs, rehearsing her speech while she dresses. Isn't it delicious to be behind the scenes ! ”

Through an open bedroom window, a high-pitched, affected little voice came shrilly down to them : “ ‘ If you're *wa*-king, call me *early* ! Call me *early*, mother dear ! ’ ”

“ Now, Cora, ” interrupted the maternal critic, “ you went and forgot to make your bow ; and how many times have I told you about turning

At the Cross-roads

your toes out? You'll have to begin all over again." Then followed several beginnings, each brought to a stop by other impatient criticisms. There were so many pauses in the rehearsal and reminders to pay attention to manners, commas, and refractory ribbons, that when Cora was finally allowed to proceed, it was in a tearful voice punctuated with sobs, that she declared, "'To-morrow will be the ha-happiest day of all the g-glad new year.'"

"'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,'" quoted the old miller with a smile, as Mrs. Bowser's parting injunction reached their ears.

"Now, Cora, for goodness' sake, don't you forget for one minute this whole enduring day, that them daisies on your crown came off your teacher's best hat, and have to be put back on.

Isa Holmes

If you move around much to the picnic you might lose some of 'em. Best keep pretty quiet anyway, or your sash will come unpinned, and the crimp will all get out of your hair. Wish I'd thought to iron them plaits before I unbraided 'em. They'd have been lots frizzier."

It was a very stiffly starched, precise little Queen o' the May who came down the steep back stairs into the store. She stepped like a careful peacock, fearing to ruffle a feather of her unrivalled splendour. Her straight flaxen hair, usually as limp as a string, stood out in much crimped profusion from under her gilt paper crown. Polly could not decide whether the pucker on the little forehead came from anxiety concerning the borrowed daisies which starred her crown, or the fact that it was too tightly

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skewered to the royal head by a relentless hat-pin.

One of the picnic wagons was waiting at the door, and as Bowser lifted her in among her envious and admiring schoolmates, Polly saw with sympathetic insight which of its many sides the picnic parallelopiped was presenting to the child in that proud moment. The feeling of supreme importance that it bestowed is a joy not permitted to all, and rarely does it come to any mortal more than once in a lifetime.

But for every Haman, no matter how resplendent, sits an unmoved Mordecai in the king's gate. So to this little Sheba of the Cross-Roads there was one who bowed not down. Perkins's oldest, on the front seat beside the driver, had no eyes for her. He scarcely looked in her direction. His

Alsa Holmes

glances were all centred on the baskets which Bowser was packing in around his feet. He smelled pickles and pies and ham sandwiches. He knew of sundry tarts and dressed eggs in his own basket, and wild rumours had reached his ears that Miss Polly intended to stand treat to the extent of Bowser's entire stock of bananas and candy. Aside from hopes of a surreptitious swim in the creek and a wild day in the woods, his ideas of a picnic were purely prandial.

Across the road, Miss Anastasia Dill, peeping through the blinds, watched the wagon rattle off with its merry load. Long after the laughing voices had passed beyond her hearing, she still stood there, one slender hand holding back the curtain, and the other shading her faded blue eyes, as she gazed absently after them. It was the sunshine of an-

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other May-day she was looking into. Presently with a little start she realised that she was not out in the cool green woods with a May-basket in her hands, brimming over with anemones. She was all alone in her stuffy little parlour, with its hair-cloth furniture and depressing crayon portraits. And the canary was chirping loudly for water, and the breakfast cups were still unwashed. But for once, heedless of her duties, even unmindful of the fact that she had left the shutters open, and the hot sun was streaming across her cherished store carpet, she drew a chair up to the marble-topped centre table, and deliberately sat down. There was a pile of old-fashioned daguerreotypes in front of her. She opened them one by one, and then took up another that lay by itself on a blue beaded mat. So the face it dimly pictured held a

Essa Holmes

sacred place, apart, in her memory. When her eyes had grown misty with long gazing, she lifted a book from its place beside the family Bible. It was bound in red leather, and it had a quaint wreath of embossed roses around the gilt letters of its title, "The Album of the Heart." It was an autograph album, and as she slowly turned the pages she remembered that every hand that had traced a sentiment or a signature therein had once upon a time gathered anemones with her in some one of those other May-days.

Then she turned through the pages again. Of all that circle of early friends not one was left to give her a hand-clasp. She had friends in plenty, but the old ones — the early ones — the roots of whose growth had twined with hers in the intimacy known only to childhood, were all gone. The

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May-day picnic brought only a throb of pain to gentle Miss Anastasia, for to her it was but the lonely echo of a "voice that was still."

Bud Hines watched the wagon drive away with far different emotions. He had happened to come into the store for a new hoe, as the gay party started. "It's all foolishness," he grumbled to the miller, "to lose a whole day's schooling while they go gallivanting around the country for nothing. They'll ride ten miles to find a place to eat their dinner in, and pass by twenty on the way nicer than the one they finally pick out. They'd better be doing sums in school, or grubbing weeds out of the garden, instead of playing 'frog in the meadow' around a fool British May-pole."

He looked around inquiringly as if he expected his practical listener to

Asa Holmes

agree with him. But all the sympathy he got from the old miller was one of the innumerable proverbs he seemed to keep continually on tap. “‘All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,’ Bud. Life is apt to be little but sums and grubbing for the youngsters by and by, so let them make the most of their May-days now.”

The sequels of picnics are also polyhedral. Miss Anastasia, lingering at her front gate in the early twilight, that she might enjoy to the last moment the orchard odours that filled all the balcony outdoors, heard the rattle of returning wheels. She had had a pleasant day, despite the tearful retrospection of the morning, for she had attended the great social function of the neighbourhood, the monthly missionary tea. It had brought im-

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measurable cheer, and now she was returning with a comfortable conviction that she was to be envied far above any of her neighbours. The consciousness of having on her best gown, of being the mistress of the trim little home to which she was going, of freedom from a hundred harassing cares that she had heard discussed that afternoon, all combined to make her supremely contented with her lot.

“Poor children,” she sighed, as the tired, dirty little picnickers were lifted from the wagon across the road. “They look as if the game hadn’t been worth the candle. I’m glad that I’ve outgrown such things.”

Perkins’s oldest, having soaked long in the cold creek, and sampled every dinner-basket with reckless abandon till he could sample no more, sat doubled up in the straw of the wagon-

Elsa Holmes

bed. He was white about the mouth, and had he been called upon to debate the time-worn question, "Resolved, that there is more pleasure in pursuit than in possession," the tarts and sandwiches of that day's picnic would have furnished several dozen indisputable arguments for the affirmative.

The dishevelled little queen sat beside him, tired out by her day's wild frolic, with starch and frizzes all gone.

As she was lifted over the wheel, and put down on the doorstep, a limp little bunch of woe, Miss Anastasia heard her bewailing her fate. She had lost the stars from her crown, the borrowed daisies that must be reckoned for on the morrow. The amused listener smiled to herself under cover of the twilight, as she heard Bowser's awkward attempts at consolation, for all the comfort that he could muster was

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an old saw learned from the miller :
“ Never mind, Cora, pa’s mighty sorry
for his little girl. But you know :

“ ‘ When a man buys meat he buys bone,
And when he buys land he buys stone.
You must take the bad with the good.’ ”

Chapter VIII

THERE is something in the air of June that stirs even insentient things with a longing to blossom. Staid old universities blaze out with the gala colours of commencement week, when the month of roses is ushered in, and on every college campus the social life of the student year comes to flower in the crowning exercises of class-day.

One wonders sometimes if the roots, burrowing underground in order to fill the bush overhead with myriads of roses, have any share in the thrill of success at having produced such a wealth of sweetness and beauty. But there need be no surmise about college florescence. Faculties may beam with complacency on their yearly cluster of

At the Cross-roads

full-blown graduates, the very walls of the gray old universities may thrill as they echo the applause of admiring audiences, but the greatest pride is not felt within the college town itself where the student life centres. It is back in the roots that have made college life possible. Back in some parental existence that daily sinks itself farther into the commonplace in order that some son or daughter may blossom into the culture of arts and belles-lettres. The Jacqueminot that flaunts its glory over the garden wall may not sweeten life for the fibres that lift it, but the valedictorian who flaunts his diploma and degree in the classic halls of some sea-board college may be glorifying the air of some little backwoods village a thousand miles inland. Even the Cross-Roads are bound with a network of such far-reaching roots

Asa Holmes

to the commencements of Harvard and Yale.

It was Cy Akers's boy who came home this June, a little lifted up, perhaps, by the honours he had won; thoroughly impressed with the magnitude of his own knowledge and the meagreness of other peoples', but honestly glad at first to get back to the old home and neighbours.

The family pride in him was colossal. Old Cy encouraged his visits to the Cross-Roads store, inventing excuses for going which he considered the acme of subtle diplomacy. But his motives were as transparent as a child's. Illiterate himself, he wanted his neighbours to see what college had done for his boy in the way of raising him head and shoulders above them all. And the boy was good-naturedly compliant. He was as willing to show off men-

At the Cross-roads

tally as he had been to lend a hand in the wheat harvest, and demonstrate what football training had done for him in the way of developing muscle.

Like Perkins's oldest, his education had begun with the primer of the Cross-Roads. He could remember the time when he, too, had ignorantly believed this to be the only store in the universe, and wondered if there were enough people living to consume all its contents. Now he smiled to himself when he looked around the stuffy little room and saw the same old butter firkins crowding the — apparently — same old calico and crockery, and looked up at the half-dozen hams still swinging sociably from the low rafters.

Time had been, too, when he thought the men who gossiped around its rusty stove on Saturday afternoons knew

Asa Holmes

everything. Like Perkins's oldest, he had unquestioningly formulated the creed of his boyhood from their conversations, and he smiled again when he recalled how he had been warped in those early days by their prejudices and short-sighted opinions.

The smile extended outwardly when he walked into their midst to find them repeating the same old saws about the weather, and the way the country was going to the dogs. Yet in his salad days these time-honoured prognostications had seemed to him the wisdom of seers and sages.

Probably it was the thought that he had travelled far beyond the narrow confines of the Cross-Roads that gave his conversation a patronising tone. But the Cross-Roads refused to be patronised. He learned that on the day of his arrival. It was the first

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lesson of a valuable post-graduate course. That a man away from home may be Mister Robert Harrison Hamilton Akers, with all the A. B.'s and LL. D.'s after his name that an educational institution can bestow ; but as soon as he sets foot again on his native heath, where he has gone through the vicissitudes of boyhood, he is shorn of titles and degrees as completely as Samson was shorn of his locks, and his strength straightway falls from him. He is nobody but Bobby Akers, and everybody remembers when he robbed birds' nests, and stole grapes, and played hooky, and was a little freckle-faced, snub-nosed neighbourhood terror. A man cannot maintain his importance long in the face of such reminiscences. No amount of university culture is going to lay the ghost of youthful indiscretions, and he might as well put

Asa Holmes

his patronising proclivities in his pocket. They will not be tolerated by those who have patted him on the head when he wore roundabouts.

It was Saturday afternoon, but it was also the end of the wheat-harvest, and the men were afield who usually gathered on the Cross-Roads porch to round up the week over their pipes and plugs of chewing tobacco. Only three chairs were tilted back against the wall, and on these, with their heels caught over the front rungs, sat Bowser, the old miller, and Robert Akers.

The whirr of reaping machines came faintly up from the fields and near by, where several acres of waving yellow grain still stood uncut, a bob-white whistled cheerily. No one was talking. "Knee-deep in June" would have voiced the thoughts of the trio, for

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they were "Jes' a sort o' lazein' there," with their hats pulled over their eyes, enjoying to the utmost the perfect afternoon. Every breeze was redolent with red clover and wild honeysuckle, and vibrant with soothing country sounds.

"Who is that coming up the road?" asked the miller, as a team and wagon appeared over the brow of the hill.

"They wobble along like Duncan Smith's horses," answered the store-keeper, squinting his eyes for a better view. "Yes, that's who it is. That's Dunk on the top of the load. Moving again, bless Pete!"

As the wagon creaked slowly nearer, a feather bed came into view, surmounting a motley collection of household goods, and perched upon it, high above the jangle of her jolting tins and crockery, sat Mrs. Duncan Smith. A

Elsa Holmes

clock and a looking-glass lay in her lap, and, like a wise virgin, in her hands she carefully bore the family lamp. From frequent and anxious turnings of her black sunbonnet, it was evident that she was keeping her weather eye upon the chicken-coop, which was bound to the tail-board of the wagon by an ancient clothes-line.

A flop-eared dog trotted along under the wagon. Squeezed in between a bureau and the feather bed, two shock-headed children sat on a flour barrel, clutching each other at every lurch of the crowded van to keep from losing their balance.

“Howdy, Dunk!” called the store-keeper, as the dusty pilgrims halted in front of the porch. “Where are you bound now?”

“Over to the old Neal place,” answered the man, handing the reins to

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his wife, and climbing stiffly down over the wheel. Going around to the back of the wagon, he unstrapped a kerosene can which swung from the pole underneath.

“Gimme a gallon of coal-ile, Jim,” he said. “I don’t want to be left in the dark the first night, anyway. It takes awhile to git your bearings in a strange place, and it’s mighty confusing to butt agin a half-open door where you’ve always been used to a plain wall, and it hurts like fire to bark your shins on a rocking-chair when you’re steering straight for bed, and hain’t no idee it’s in the road. This time it’ll be a little more so than usual,” he added, handing over the can. “The house backs up agin a graveyard, you know. Sort o’ spooky till you git used to it.”

“What on earth did you move there

Elsa Holmes

for?" asked Bowser. "They say the place is ha'nted."

"To my mind the dead make better neighbours than the living," came the tart reply from the depths of the black sunbonnet. "At any rate, they mind their own business."

"Oh, come now, Mrs. Smith," began Bowser, good-naturedly. "Maybe you've been unfortunate in your choice of neighbours."

"I've had a dozen different kinds," came the emphatic answer. "This'll make the twelfth move in eight years, so you can't say that I'm speaking from hearsay."

"Twelve moves in eight years!" exclaimed Bowser, as the wagon went lurching and creaking on through the dust. "There's gipsy blood in that Dunk Smith, sure as you live. Seems like that family can't be satisfied any-

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where ; always thinking they can better themselves by changing, and always getting out of the frying-pan into the fire. There wa'n't no well in the place where they settled when they was first married, and they had to carry water from a spring. The muscle put into packing that water up-hill those six months would have dug a cistern, but they were too short-sighted to see that. They jest played Jack and Jill as long as they could stand it, and then moved to a place where there was a cistern already dug. But there wa'n't any fruit on that place. If they'd have set out trees right away they'd have been eating from orchards of their own planting by this time. But they thought it was easier to move to where one was already set out.

“Then when they got to a place where they had both fruit and water,

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it was low, and needed draining. The water settled around the house, and they all had typhoid that summer. Oh, they've spent enough energy packing up and moving on and settling down again in new places to have fixed the first one up to a queen's taste. They seem to be running a perpetual Home-seeker's Excursion. Well, such a life might suit some people, but it would never do for me."

"But such a life has some things in its favour," put in Rob Akers, always ready to debate any question that offered, for the mere pleasure of arguing. "It keeps a man from getting into a rut, and develops his ability to adapt himself to any circumstance. A man who hangs his hat on the same peg for fifty or sixty years gets to be so dependent on that peg that he would be uncomfortable if it were suddenly denied him.

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Now Dunk Smith can never become such a slave to habit. Then, too, moving tends to leave a man more unhampered. He gradually gets rid of everything in his possessions but the essentials. He hasn't a garret full of old claptraps, as most people have who never move from under their ancestral roof-trees. You saw for yourself, one wagon holds all his household goods and gods.

“It is the same way with a man mentally. If he stays in the spot where his forefathers lived, in the same social conditions, he is apt to let his upper story accumulate a lot of worn-out theories that he has no earthly use for; all their old dusty dogmas and cob-webbed beliefs. He will hang on to them as on to the old furniture, because he happened to inherit them. If he would move once in awhile, keep

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up with the times, you know, he'd get rid of a lot of rubbish. It is especially true in regard to his religion. All those old superstitions, for instance, about Jonah and the whale, and Noah's ark and the like.

“He hangs on to them, not because he cares for them himself, but because they were his father's beliefs, and he doesn't like to throw out anything the old man had a sentiment for. Now, as I say, if he'd move once in awhile — do some scientific thinking and investigating on his own account — he'd throw out over half of what he holds on to now. He'd cut the most of Genesis out of his Bible, and let Job slide as a myth. One of the finest bits of literature, to be sure, that can be found anywhere, but undoubtedly fiction. The sooner a man moves on untrammelled, I say, by those old heir-

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looms of opinion, the better progress he will make."

"Toward what?" asked the old miller, laconically. "Dunk's moving next door to the graveyard." There was a twinkle in his eye, and the young collegian, who flattered himself that his speech was making a profound impression, paused with the embarrassing consciousness that he was affording amusement instead.

"The last time I went East to visit my grandson," said the old man, meditatively, "his wife showed me a mahogany table in her dining-room which she said was making all her friends break the tenth commandment. It was a handsome piece of furniture, worth a small fortune. It was polished till you could see your face in it, and I thought it was the newest thing out in tables till she told me she'd rum-

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maged it out of her great-grandmother's attic, and had it 'done over' as she called it. It had been hidden away in the dust and cobwebs for a lifetime because it had been pronounced too time-worn and battered and scratched for longer use ; yet there it stood, just as beautiful and useful for this generation to spread its feasts on as it was the day it was made. Every whit as substantial, and aside from any question of sentiment, a thousand times more valuable than the one that Dunk Smith drove past with just now. His table is modern, to be sure, but it's of cheap pine, too rickety to serve even Dunk through his one short lifetime of movings.

"I heard several lectures while I was there, too. One was by a man who has made a name for himself on both sides of the water as a scientist and a liberal thinker. He took up

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Genesis, all scratched and battered as it is by critics, and showed us how it had been misunderstood and misconstrued. And by the time he'd polished up the meaning here and there, so that we could see the original grain of the wood, what it was first intended to be, it seemed like a new book, and fitted in with all the modern scientific ideas as if it had been made only yesterday.

“There it stood, like the mahogany table that had been restored after people thought they had stowed it away in the attic to stay. Just as firm on its legs, and as substantial for this generation to put its faith on, as it was in the days of the Judges.

“Take an old man's word for it, Robert, who has lived a long time and seen many a restless Dunk Smith fling out his father's old heirlooms, in his

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fever to move on to something new. Solid mahogany, with all its dust and scratches, is better than the modern flimsy stuff, either in faith or furniture, that he is apt to pick up in its stead."

Chapter II

THE booming of distant cannon had been sounding at intervals since midnight, ushering in the Fourth, but Bowser, although disturbed in his slumbers by each reverberation, did not rouse himself to any personal demonstration until dawn. Then his patriotism manifested itself in a noisy tattoo with a hammer, as he made the front of his store gay with bunting, and nailed the word *Welcome* over the door, in gigantic letters of red, white, and blue.

When he was done, each window wore a bristling eyebrow of stiff little flags, that gave the store an air of mild surprise. The effect was wholly unintentional on Bowser's part, and, unconscious of the likeness to human

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eyes he had given his windows, he gazed at his work with deep satisfaction.

But the expression was an appropriate one, considering all the astonishing sights the old store was to look upon that day. In the woodland across the railroad track, just beyond Miss Anastasia Dill's little cottage, preparations were already begun for a grand barbecue. Even before Bowser had finished tacking up his flags, the digging of the trench had begun across the way, and the erection of a platform for the speakers. In one corner of the woodland a primitive merry-go-round had already been set in place, and the first passenger train from the city deposited an enterprising hoky-poky man, a peanut and pop-corn vender, and a lank black-bearded man with an outfit for taking tin-types.

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By ten o'clock the wood-lot fence was a hitching-place for all varieties of vehicles, from narrow sulkies to cavernous old carryalls. A haze of thick yellow dust, extending along the pike as far as one could see, was a constant accompaniment of fresh arrivals. Each newcomer emerged from it, his Sunday hat and coat powdered as thickly as the wayside weeds. Smart side-bar buggies dashed up, their shining new tops completely covered with it. There was a great shaking of skirts as the girls alighted, and a great flapping of highly perfumed handkerchiefs, as the young country beaux made themselves presentable, before joining the other picnickers.

Slow-going farm wagons rattled along, the occupants of their jolting chairs often representing several generations, for the drawing power of a

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Fourth of July barbecue reaches from the cradle to the grave.

The unusual sight of such a crowd, scattered through the grove in gala attire, was enough of itself to produce a holiday thrill, and added to this was the smell of gunpowder from occasional outbursts of firecrackers, the chant of the hoky-poky man, and the hysterical laughter of the couples patronising the merry-go-round, as they clung giddily to the necks of the wooden ostriches and camels in the first delights of its dizzy whirl.

“Good as a circus, isn’t it?” exclaimed Robert Akers, pausing beside the bench where the old miller and the minister sat watching the gay scene. “I’m having my fun walking around and taking notes. It is amusing to see how differently the affair impresses people, and what seems to

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make each fellow happiest. Little Tommy Bowser, for instance, is in the seventh heaven following the hoky-poky man. He gets all that people leave in their dishes for helping to drum up a crowd of patrons. Perkins's boy sticks by the merry-go-round. He has spent every cent of his own money, and had so many treats that he's spun around till he's so dizzy he's cross-eyed. One old fellow I saw back there is simply sitting on the fence grinning at everything that goes by. He's getting his enjoyment in job lots."

"Sit down," said the minister, sociably moving along the bench to make room beside him for the young man. "Mr. Holmes and I are finding our amusement in the same way, only we are not going around in search of it. We are catching at it as it drifts by."

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“What has happened to Mrs. Teddy Mahone?” exclaimed Rob, as a red-faced woman with an important self-conscious air hurried by. “She seems ubiquitous this morning, and as proud as a peacock over something. One would think she were the mistress of ceremonies from her manner.”

“Or hostess, rather,” said the miller. “She met me down by the fence on my arrival, and held out her hand as graciously as if she were a duchess in her own drawing-room, and I an invited guest.

“‘Gude marnin’ to yez, Mr. Holmes,’ she said. ‘I hope ye’ll be afther enjyin’ yerself the day. If anything intherferes wid yer comfort ye’ve but to shpake to Mahone about it. He’s been appinted *constable* for the occasion, ye understhand. If I do say it as oughtn’t, he can carry the title wid the best av

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'im ; him six fut two in his stockin's,
an' the shtar shinin' on his wes'cut loike
he'd been barn to the job.'

“Then she turned to greet some
strangers from Morristown, and I heard
her introducing herself as Mrs. *Con-
stable* Mahone, and repeating the same
instructions she had given me, to report
to her husband, in case everything was
not to their liking.”

Both listeners laughed at the miller's
imitation of her brogue, and the min-
ister quoted, with an amused smile :

“ ‘ For never title yet so mean could prove,
But there was eke a mind, which did that title
love.’

It is a pity we cannot dress more of
them in ‘ a little brief authority.’ It
seems to be a means of grace to a cer-
tain class of Hibernians. It has Ameri-
canised the Mahones, for instance.

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You'll find no patriots on the ground to-day more enthusiastic than Mr. and Mrs. Constable Mahone. Fourth of July will be an honoured feast-day henceforth in their calendar. It is often surprising how quickly a policeman's buttons and billy will make a good citizen out of the wildest bog-trotter that ever brandished a shillalah."

Later, in subsequent wanderings around the grounds, the young collegian spied the little schoolmistress helping to keep guard over the cake-table. He immediately crossed over and joined her. She was looking unusually pretty, and there was an amused gleam in her eyes as she watched the crowds, which made him feel that she was viewing the scene from his standpoint; that he had found a kindred spirit.

"What incentive to patriotism do

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you see in all this, Miss Helen?" he asked, when he had induced her to turn over her guardianship of the cake-table to some one else, and join him in his tour among the boisterous picnickers.

"None at all — yet," she answered. "I suppose that will come by and by with the songs and speeches. But all this foolishness seems a legitimate part of the celebration to me. You remember Lowell says, 'If I put on the cap and bells, and made myself one of the court fools of King Demos, it was less to make his Majesty laugh than to win a passage to his royal ears for certain serious things which I had deeply at heart.' It takes a barbecue and its attendant attractions to draw a crowd like this. See what a hotch-potch it is of all nationalities. Now that Schneidmacher family never would have driven ten miles in this heat

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and dust simply to hear the band play 'Hail, Columbia,' and Judge Jackson make one of his spread-eagle speeches on the Duty of the American Citizen. Neither would the O'Gradys or any of the others who represent the foreign element in the neighbourhood. Even Young America himself, the type we see here, is more willing to come and bring his best girl on account of the diversions offered."

"Well, that may be so," was the reluctant assent, "but if this is a sample of the Fourth of July observances all over the country I can't help feeling sorry for Uncle Sam. Patriotism has sadly degenerated from the pace that Patrick Henry set for it."

"The old miller says not," answered the little schoolmistress. "I made that same complaint last Washington's Birthday, when I was trying to work my

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school up to proper enthusiasm for the occasion. He recalled the drouth of the summer before when nearly every well and creek and pond in the township went dry. Cattle died of thirst, gardens dried up like brick-kilns, and people around here were almost justified in thinking that the universe would soon be entirely devoid of water. The skies were like brass, and there was no indication of rain for weeks. But one day there was a terrific earthquake shock. It started all the old springs, and opened new ones all over this part of the country, and the water gushed out of the earth where it had been pent up all the time, only waiting for some such touch to call it forth. 'And you're afraid that patriotism is going dry in this generation,' he said to me. 'But it only takes some shock like the sinking of the *Maine*, or some sudden

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menace to the public safety, to start a spring that will gush from Plymouth Rock to the Golden Gate. There is a deep underground vein in the American heart that no drouth can ever dry. Maybe it does not come to the surface often, but it can always be depended on in time of need.' ”

The speakers for the day began to arrive, and Rob, seeing the crowds gravitating toward the grand stand, took the little schoolmistress to the bench where the miller had stationed himself.

“ Watch that old Scotchman just in front of us,” whispered the girl, “ Mr. Sandy McPherson. Last Thanksgiving there was a union service in the school-house. After the sermon ‘ America ’ was sung, and that old heathen stood up and roared out through it all, at the top of his voice, every word of ‘ God

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Save the Queen!' Wasn't that flaunting the thistle in our faces with a vengeance? I am sure that he will repeat the performance to-day. Think of the dogged persistence that refuses to succumb to the fact that we have thrown off the British yoke! The very day we are celebrating that event, he'll dare to mix up our national hymn with 'God Save the King.' "

It was as she had predicted. As the band started with a great clash of brazen instruments, and the whole company rose to the notes of "America," Sandy McPherson's big voice, with its broad Scotch burr, rolled out like a bass drum :

"Thy choicest gifts in store,
On *him* be pleased to pour.
Long may *he* reign.' "

It drowned out every voice around him. "He ought to be choked," ex-

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claimed Rob, in righteous indignation, as they resumed their seats. "To-day of all days! The old Tory has been living in this country for forty-five years, and a good living he's gotten out of it, too, for himself and family. Nobody cares what he sings on his own premises, but he might have the decency to keep his mouth shut on occasions of this kind, if he can't join with us."

There was a gleam of laughter in the little schoolmistress's eyes as she replied: "If the truth were known I have no doubt but that this Fourth of July celebration is very like the pie in Mother Goose's song of sixpence, when her four and twenty blackbirds were baked in a pie. If this pie could be opened, and the birds begin to sing according to their sentiments, there would be a wonderful diversity of

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tunes. One would be twittering the 'Marseillaise,' and another 'Die Wacht am Rhein,' and another echoing old Sandy's tune. America was in too big a hurry to serve her national pie, I am afraid. Consequently she put it in half prepared, and turned it out half baked. The blackbirds should have had their voices tuned to the same key before they were allowed to become vital ingredients of such an important dish."

"In other words," laughed Rob, "you'd reconstruct the enfranchisement laws. Make the term of probationary citizenship so long that the blackbird would have time to change his vocal chords, or even the leopard his anarchistic spots, before he would be considered fit to be incorporated in the national dish. By the way, Miss Helen, have you heard Mrs. Mahone's

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allegory of the United Pudding bag? You and she ought to collaborate. Get the storekeeper to repeat it to you sometime."

"You needn't laugh," responded the little schoolmistress, a trifle tartly. "You know yourself that scores of emigrants are given the ballot before they can distinguish 'Yankee Doodle' from 'Dixie,' and that is only typical of their ignorance in all matters regarding governmental affairs. Too many people's idea of good citizenship is like the man's 'who kept his private pan just where 'twould catch most public drippings.' There is another mistaken idea loose in the land," she continued, after a moment. "That is, that a great hero must be a man who has a reputation as a great soldier. I wish I had the rewriting of all the school histories. They are better now than

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when I studied them, but there is still vast room for improvement. I had to learn page after page of wars. Really, war and history were synonyms then as it was taught in the schools. Every chapter was gory, and we were required to memorise the numbers killed, wounded, and captured in every battle, from the French and Indian massacres, down to the last cannon-shot of the sixties. That is all right for government records and reference libraries, but when we give a text-book to the rising generation, the accounts of battles and the glorifying thereof would be better relegated to the foot-notes. It is loyal statesmanship that ought to be exalted in our school histories. We ought to make our heroes out of the legislators who cannot be bribed and public men who cannot be bought, and the honest private citizen who

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lives for his country instead of dying for it.”

The old miller beside her applauded softly, leaning over to say, as the overture by the band came to a close with a grand clash, “If ever the black-birds are tuned to one key, Miss Helen, America will know whom to thank. Not the legislators, but the patriotic little schoolma’ams all over their land who are serving their country in a way her greatest generals cannot do.”

All day the Cross-Roads store raised its bristling eyebrows of little flags, till the celebration came to a close. Savoury whiffs of the barbecued meats floated across to it, vigorous hand-clapping and hearty cheers rang out to it between the impassioned words of excited orators. Later there were the fireworks, and more rag-time music by

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the band, and renewed callings of the hoky-poky man. But before the moon came up there was a great backing of teams and scraping of turning wheels, and a gathering together of picnic-baskets and stray children.

“Well, it’s over for another year,” said Bowser, welcoming the old miller, who had crossed the road and taken a chair on the porch to wait until the crowds were out of the way.

“Those were fine speeches we had this afternoon, but seemed to me as if they were plumb wasted on the majority of that crowd. They applauded them while they were going off, same as they did the rockets, but they forget in the next breath.” As Bowser spoke, a rocket whizzed up through the tree tops, and the old miller, looking up to watch the shining trail fade out, saw that the sky was full of stars.

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“That’s the good of those speeches, Bowser,” he said. “‘*To leave a wake, men’s hearts and faces skyward turning.*’ I hadn’t noticed that the stars were out till that rocket made me look up. The speeches may be forgotten, but they will leave a memory in their wake that give men an uplook anyhow.”

At the Cross-roads

Chapter ƒ

“GUESS who’s come to board at the Widder Powers’s for the month of August?” It was Bowser who asked the question, and who immediately answered it himself, as every man on the porch looked up expectantly.

“Nobody more nor less than a *multi-millionaire!* The big boot and shoe man, William A. Maxwell. Mrs. Powers bought a bill of goods this morning as long as your arm. It’s a windfall for *her*. He offered to pay regular summer-resort-hotel prices, because she’s living on the old farm where he was born and raised, and he fancied getting back to it for a spell.”

“Family coming with him?” queried Cy Akers, after a moment’s meditation

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over the surprising fact that a millionaire with the world before him should elect such a place as the Cross-Roads in which to spend his vacation.

“No, you can bet your bottom dollar they’re not. And they’re all abroad this summer or *he’d* never got here. They’d had him dragged off to some fashionable watering-place with them. But when the cat’s away the mice’ll play, you know. Mrs. Powers says it is his first visit here since his mother’s funeral twenty years ago, and he seems as tickled as a boy to get back.

“Yesterday evening he followed the man all around the place while she was getting supper. She left him setting up in the parlour, but when she went in to ask him out to the table, he was nowhere to be seen. Pretty soon he came walking around the corner of the

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house with a pail of milk in each hand, sloshing it all over his store clothes. He'd done the milking himself, and seemed mightily set up over it."

"Lawzee! Billy Maxwell! Don't I remember him?" exclaimed Bud Hines. "Seems like 'twas only yesterday we used to sit on the same bench at school doin' our sums out of the same old book. The year old man Prosser taught, we got into so much devilment that it got to be a regular thing for him to say, regular as clock-work, almost, 'I'll whip Bud Hines and Billy Maxwell after the first arithmetic class this morning.' I don't s'pose he ever thinks of those old times since he's got to be one of the Four Hundred. Somehow I can hardly sense it, his bein' so rich. He never seemed any smarter than the rest of us. That's the way of the world, though,

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seesaw, one up and the other down. Of course it's my luck to be the one that's down. Luck always was against me."

"There he is now," exclaimed the storekeeper, and every head turned to see the stranger stepping briskly along the platform in front of the depot, on his way to the telegraph office.

He had the alertness of glance and motion that comes from daily contact with city corners. If there was a slight stoop in his broad shoulders, and if his closely cut hair and beard were iron gray, that seemed more the result of bearing heavy responsibilities than the token of advancing years. His immaculate linen, polished low-cut shoes, and light gray business suit would have passed unnoticed in the metropolis, but in this place, where coats and collars were in evidence only on Sunday, they

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gave him the appearance of being on dress parade.

Perkins's oldest eyed him as he would a zebra or a giraffe, or some equally interesting curiosity escaped from a Zoo. He had heard that his pockets were lined with gold, and that he had been known to pay as much as five dollars for a single lunch. Five dollars would board a man two weeks at the Cross-Roads.

With his mouth agape, the boy stood watching the stranger, who presently came over to the group on the porch with smiling face and cordial outstretched hand. Despite his gray hair there was something almost boyish in the eagerness with which he recognised old faces and claimed old friendships. Bowser's store had been built since his departure from the neighbourhood, so few of the congenial

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spirits accustomed to gather there were familiar to him. But Bud Hines and Cy Akers were old schoolfellows. When he would have gone up to them with old-time familiarity, he found a certain restraint in their greeting which checked his advances.

If he thought he was coming back to them the same freckle-faced, unconventional country lad they had known as Billy Maxwell, he was mistaken. He might feel that he was the same at heart; but they looked on the outward appearance. They saw the successful man of the world who had outstripped them in the race and passed out of their lives long ago. They could not conceive of such a change as had metamorphosed the boy they remembered into the man who stood before them, without feeling that a corresponding change must have

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taken place in his attitude toward them.

They were not conscious that this feeling was expressed in their reception of him. They laughed at his jokes, and indulged in some reminiscences, but he felt, in a dim subconscious way, that there was a barrier between them, and he could never get back to the old familiar footing.

He turned away, vaguely disappointed. Had he dared to dream that he would find his lost youth just as he had left it? The fields and hills were unchanged. The very trees were the same, except that they had added a few more rings to their girth, and threw a larger circling shade. But the old chums he had counted on finding had not followed the same law of growth as the trees. The shade of their sympathies had narrowed, not expanded,

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with the passing years, and left him outside their contracted circle.

Perkins's oldest, awed by reports of his fabulous wealth, could hardly find his tongue when the distinguished visitor laid a friendly hand on his embarrassed tow head, and inquired about the old swimming-hole, and the mill-dam where he used to fish. But the boy's interest grew stronger every minute as he watched him turning over the limited assortment of fishing tackle. The men he knew had outlived such frivolous sports. It was a sight to justify one's gazing open-mouthed, — a grown man deliberately preparing for a month's idleness.

If the boy could have seen the jointed rods, the reels, the flies, all the expensive angler's outfit left behind in the Maxwell mansion; if he could have known of the tarpon this man

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had caught in Florida bays, and the fishing he had enjoyed in northern waters, he would have wondered still more; wondered how a man could be considered in his right mind who deliberately renounced such privileges to come and drop a common hook, on a pole of his own cutting, into the shallow pools of the Cross-Roads creek.

After his purchases no one saw him at the store for several days, but the boy, dodging across lots, encountered him often, — a solitary figure wandering by the mill stream, or crashing through the woods with long eager strides; lying on the orchard grass sometimes with his hat pulled over his eyes; leaning over the pasture bars in the twilight, and following with wistful glance the little foot-path stretching white across the meadows. A pathetic sight to eyes wise enough to

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see the pathos, — a world-weary, middle-aged man in vain quest of his lost boyhood.

On Sunday, Polly, looking across the church from her place in the miller's pew, recognised the stranger in their midst, and straightway lost the thread of the sermon in wondering at his presence. She had gone to school with his daughter, Maud Maxwell. She had danced many a german with his son Claude. They lived on the same avenue, and passed each other daily; but this was the first time she had seen him away from the shadow of the family presence, that seemed to blot out his individuality.

She had thought of him only as Maud's father, a simple, good-natured nonentity in his own household. A good business man, but one who could talk nothing but leather, and whose

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only part in the family affairs was to furnish the funds for his wife and children to shine socially.

“Oh, your father’s opinion doesn’t count,” she had heard Mrs. Maxwell say on more than one occasion, and the children had grown up, unconsciously copying her patronising attitude toward him. As Polly studied his face now in the light of other surroundings, she saw that it was a strong, kindly one; that it was not weakness which made him yield habitually, until he had become a mere figurehead in his own establishment. It was only that his peace-loving nature hated domestic scenes, and his generosity amounted to complete self-effacement when the happiness of his family was concerned.

His eyes were fixed on the chancel with a wistful reminiscent gaze, and

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Polly read something in the careworn face that touched her sympathy. "Grandfather," she said, at the close of the service, "let's be neighbourly and ask Mr. Maxwell home to dinner with us. He looks lonesome."

She was glad afterward that she had suggested it, when she recalled his evident pleasure in the old man's company. There were chairs out under the great oak-trees in the yard, and the two sat talking all afternoon of old times, until the evening shadows began to grow long across the grass. Then Polly joined them again, and sat with them till the tinkle of home-going cow-bells broke on the restful stillness of the country Sabbath.

"All the orchestras in all the operas in the world can't make music that sounds as sweet to me as that does," said Mr. Maxwell, raising his head from

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the big armchair to listen. Then he dropped it again with a sigh.

“It rests me so after the racket of the city. If Julia would only consent, I’d sell out and come back to-morrow. But she’s lost all interest in the old place. I’m country to the core, but she never was. She took to city ways like a duck to water, just as soon as she got away from the farm, and she laughs at me for preferring katydids to the whirr of electric cars.”

A vision rose before the old miller of a little country girl in a pink cotton gown, who long ago used to wait, bright-eyed and blushing, at the pasture bars, for Billy to drive home the cows. Many a time he had passed them at their trysting-place. Then he recalled the superficial, ambitious woman he had met years afterward when he visited his son. He shook

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his head when he thought of her renouncing her social position for the simple pastoral life her husband longed to find the way back to. Presently he broke the silence of their several reveries by turning to Polly.

“What’s that piece you recited to me the other night, little girl, about old times? Say it for Mr. Maxwell.” And Polly, clasping her hands in her lap, and looking away across the August meadows, purple with the royal pennons of the ironweed, began the musical old poem :

“‘ Ko-ling, ko-lang, ko-lingleingle,
Way down the darkening dingle
The cows come slowly home.
(And old-time friends and twilight plays
And starry nights and sunny days
Come trooping up the misty ways,
When the cows come home.)

“‘ And over there on Merlin Hill
Hear the plaintive cry of the whippoorwill.

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And the dewdrops lie on the tangled vines,
And over the poplars Venus shines,
And over the silent mill.

“ Ko-ling, ko-lang, ko-lingeingle,
With ting-aling and jingle
The cows come slowly home.
(Let down the bars, let in the train
Of long-gone songs and flowers and rain,
For dear old times come back again,
When the cows come home.) ’ ”

Once as Polly went on, she saw the tears spring to his eyes at the line “ and mother-songs of long-gone years,” and she knew that the

“ same sweet sound of wordless psalm,
The same sweet smell of buds and balm,”

that had been his delight in the past, were his again as he listened. But, much to her surprise, as she finished, he rose abruptly, and began a hurried leave-taking. She understood his

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manner, however, when his mood was revealed to her a little later.

At her grandfather's suggestion she walked down to the gate with him, to point out a short cut across the fields to Mrs. Powers's. Outside the gate he paused, hat in hand.

“Miss Polly,” he began, as if unconsciously taking her into his confidence, “old times never come back again. Seems as if the bottom had dropped out of everything. I've done my best to resurrect them, but I can't do it. I thought if I could once get back to the old place I could rest as I've not been able to rest for twenty years — that I'd have a month of perfect enjoyment. But something's the matter.

“Many a time when I've been off at some fashionable resort I've thought I'd give a fortune to be able to drop

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my hook in your grandfather's mill-stream, and feel the old thrill that I used to feel when I was a boy. I tried it the day I came — caught a little speckled trout, the kind that used to make me tingle to my finger ends, but somehow it didn't bring back the old sensation. I just looked at it a minute and put it back in the water, and threw my pole away.

“ Even the swimming-hole down by the mill didn't measure up to the way I had remembered it. I've fairly ached for a dip into it sometimes, in the years I've been gone. Seemed as if I could just get into it once, I could wash myself clear of all the cares and worries of business that pester a man so. That was a disappointment, too. The change is in me, I guess, but nothing seems the same.”

Polly knew the reason. He had

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tried so long to mould his habits to fit his wife's exacting tastes, that he had succeeded better than he realised. He could not analyse his feelings enough to know that it was the absence of long accustomed comforts that made him vaguely dissatisfied with his surroundings; his luxuriously appointed bathroom, for instance; the perfect service of his carefully trained footmen. Mrs. Powers's noisy table, where with great clatter she urged every one "to fall to and help himself," jarred on him, although he was unconscious of what caused the irritation. As for the rank tobacco Bowser furnished him when he had exhausted his own special brand of cigars with which he had stocked his satchel, it was more than flesh and blood could endure. That is, flesh and blood that had acquired the pampered taste of a millionaire whose wife

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is fastidious, and only allows first-class aromas in the way of the weed.

But Polly knew another reason that his vacation had been a failure. She divined it as the little Yale pin, stuck jauntily into the front of her white dress, met the touch of her caressing fingers. The girl in the pink cotton gown was long dead, and the woman who had grown up in her stead had no part in the old scenes that he still fondly clung to, with a sentiment she ridiculed because she could not understand. *There must always be two when you turn back searching for your lost Eldorado, and even the two cannot find it, unless they go hand in hand.*

Next day Bowser had another piece of news to impart. "Mr. Maxwell went home this morning. He told Mrs. Powers it was like taking a vacation

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in a graveyard, and he'd had enough. He'd have to get back to work again. So he paid her for the full month, and took the first train back to the city."

"Well, I'll be switched!" was Bud Hines's comment. "If I had as much money as he's got, I'd never bother my head about work. I'd sit down and take it easy all the rest of my born days."

"I don't know," answered Bowser, meditatively. "I reckon a man who's worked the way Mr. Maxwell has, gets such a big momentum on to himself that he can't stop, no matter how bad he wants a vacation."

"He's a fool for coming back here for it," said Bud Hines, looking out across the fields that stretched away on every side in unbroken monotony.

But miles away, in his city office, the busy millionaire was still haunted

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by an unsatisfied longing for those same level meadows. Glimpses of the old mill-stream and the willows still rose before him in tantalising freshness, and whenever he closed his tired eyes, down twilight paths, where tinkling cowbells called, there came again the glimmer of a little pink gown, to wait for him as it had waited through all the years, beside the pasture bars.

Chapter XI

THE seat was an empty starch-box on the Cross-Roads porch, its occupant a barefoot boy with a torn straw hat pulled far down over his eyes. To the casual observer one of the most ordinary of sights, but to one possessed of sympathetic powers of penetration into a boy's inner consciousness there was a suggestion of the tragic. Perkins's oldest had that afternoon in school been told to write a composition on September. It was to be handed in next morning. It was the hopelessness of accomplishing the fact even in æons, not to mention the limited time of a dozen short hours, that had bound him, a little Prometheus, to the starch-box, with the vulture of absolute despair tearing at his vitals.

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Two other boys had been assigned the same subject, and the three had kicked the dust up wrathfully all the way from the schoolhouse, echoing an old cry that had gone up ages before from the sons of Jacob, under the lash of the Egyptian, "How can we make bricks without straw?"

"Ain't nothin' to say 'bout September," declared Riley Hines, gloomily, "and I'll be dogged if I say it. I'm goin' to get my sister to write mine fer me. She'll do it ef I tease long enough, and give her something to boot."

"I'll ask paw what to say," declared Tommy Bowser. "He won't write it for me, but he'll sort o' boost me along. Then if it ain't what she wants, I won't be to blame. I'll tell her paw said 'twas all right."

This shifting of responsibility to

Alsa Holmes

paternal shoulders restored the habitual expression of cheerfulness to Tommy's smudgy face, but there was no corresponding smile on Sammy's. There was no help to be had in the household of Perkins.

That was why he was waiting on the starch-box while Tommy was sent on an errand. It was in the vain hope that Tommy would return and apply for his "boost" and share it with him before darkness fell. He was a practical child, not given to whimsical reflections, but as he sat there in desperate silence, he began wondering what the different customers would have to say if they were suddenly called upon, as he had been that afternoon, to write about September.

Mrs. Powers, for instance, in her big crape bonnet, with its long wispy veil trailing down her back. He was

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almost startled, when, as if in answer to his thought, she uttered the word that was at the bottom of his present trouble, the subject assigned him for composition.

“Yes, Mr. Bowser, September is a month that I’m never sorry to say good-bye to. What with the onion pickle and peach preserves and the house-cleaning to tend to, I’m nearly broke down when it’s over. There’s so many odds and ends to see to on a farm this time of year, first in doors and then out. I tell Jane it’s like piecing a crazy quilt. You can’t never count on what a day’s going to bring forth in September. You may get a carpet up and beat, and have your stove settin’ out waiting to be put up, and your furniture in a heap in the yard, and the hired man will have to go off and leave it all while he takes the cider-mill to

Elsa Holmes

be mended. And you in a stew all day long for fear it'll rain before he gets things under shelter.

“Then it's a sad time to me, too,” she exclaimed with a mournful shake of the head in the black bonnet. “It was in September I lost my first and third husbands, two of the best that ever had tombstones raised to their memory, if I do say it as oughtn't. One died on the sixteenth, and his funeral was preached on the eighteenth, and the other died fifteen years later on the twenty-third, and we kept him three days, on account of waiting till his brother could get here from Missouri. So you see that makes nearly a week altogether of mournful anniversaries for me every September.”

Another breath and she had reached the three tombstones, and talking volubly on her favourite subject, she

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completed her purchases and went out. But her conversation had not lightened the woes of the little Prometheus on the starch-box. Despair still gnawed on. House-cleaning worries and onion pickle, and reminiscences of two out of three departed husbands, might furnish material for Mrs. Powers's composition, should the fates compel her to write one, but there was no straw of a suggestion for Sammy Perkins, and again he cried out inwardly as bitterly as the oppressed of old had cried out against Pharaoh.

A man in a long, sagging linen duster was the next comer. He squeaked back and forth in front of the counter in new high-heeled boots, and talked incessantly while he made his purchases, with a clumsy attempt at facetiousness.

"Put in a cake of shaving-soap, too, Jim," he called, passing his hand over

Isa Holmes

the black stubble on his chin. "County court begins to-morrer. Reckon the lawyers will shave everything in sight when it comes to their bills, but I want to be as slick as them. I'll be settin' on the jury all week. Did you ever think of it, Jim, that's a mighty interesting way to earn your salt? Jest set back and be entertained with the history of all the old feuds and fusses in the county, and collect your two bucks a day without ever turning your hand over. Good as a show, and dead easy.

"Only one thing, it sort o' spiles your faith in human nature. The court stenographer said last year that in the shorthand he writes, the same mark that stands for lawyer stands for liar, too. He! he! he! isn't that a good one? You can only tell which one is meant by what comes before it, and this fellow said he'd come to be-

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lieve that one always fit in the sentence as good as the other. Either word was generally appropriate. You miss a lot of fun, Jim, by not getting on the jury. I always look forrard to fall on that account."

No help for Perkins's oldest in *that* conversation. He waited awhile longer. Presently an old gentleman in a long-tailed, quaintly cut black coat, stepped up on the porch. He had a gold-headed cane under his arm, and the eyes behind the square-bowed spectacles beamed kindly on the little fellow. He stopped beside the starch-box a moment with a friendly question about school and the health of the Perkins household. The boy's heart gave a jump up into his throat. The old minister knew everything. The minister could even tell him what to write in his composition if he dared

Isa Holmes

but ask him. He opened his mouth to form the question, but his tongue seemed glued in its place, and the head under the torn hat drooped lower in embarrassed silence. His troubled face flushed to the roots of his tow hair, and he let the Angel of Opportunity pass him by unchallenged.

“Will you kindly give me one of those advertising almanacs, Mr. Bowser?” inquired the parson, when his packages of tea and sugar had been secured. “I’ve misplaced mine, and I want to ascertain at what hour tomorrow the moon changes.”

“Certainly, certainly!” responded the storekeeper with obliging alacrity, rubbing his hands together, and stepping up on a chair to reach the pile on a shelf overhead. “Help yourself, sir. I must answer the telephone.”

The parson, slowly studying the

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moon's phases as he stepped out of the store, did not notice that he had taken two almanacs until one fell at his feet. The boy sprang up to return it, but he waved it aside with a courtly sweep of his hand.

“No, my son, I intended to take but one. Keep it. They are for general distribution. You will find it full of useful information. Have you ever learned anything about the signs of the Zodiac? Here is Leo. I always take an especial interest in this sign, because I happened to be born under it. I'm the seventh son of a seventh son, born in the seventh month, and I always take it as a good omen, seven being the perfect number. You know the ancients believed a man's star largely affected his destiny. You will find some interesting historical events enumerated under each month. A good

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almanac is almost as interesting to study as a good dictionary, my boy. I would advise you to form a habit of referring to both of them frequently."

With one of his rare, childlike smiles the good man passed on, and Perkins's oldest was left with the almanac in his hands. For awhile he studied the signs of the Zodiac, in puzzled awe, trying to establish a relationship between them and the man they surrounded, whose vital organs were obligingly laid open to public inspection, regardless of any personal inconvenience the display might cause him.

Then he turned to the historical events. There was one for each day in the month. On Sunday, the first, eighteen hundred and ninety-nine, had occurred the Japanese typhoon. Friday, the sixth, sixteen hundred and

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twenty, the *Mayflower* had sailed. Mahomet's birth had set apart the eleventh in five hundred and seventy. The founding of Mormonism, Washington's Farewell, and the battle of Marathon were further down the list, but it was all Greek to Perkins's oldest. Any one of these items would have been straw for the parson. Out of the *Mayflower*, Mahomet, Mormonism, or Marathon, each one of them the outgrowth of some September, he could have pressed enough literary brick to build a fair sky-scraping structure that would have been the wonder of all who gazed upon it. This time the boy looked his Angel of Opportunity in the face and did not recognise it as such.

The gate clicked across the road and he turned his head. Miss Anastasia Dill was going up the path, her arms

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full of goldenrod and white and purple asters. September was a poem to Miss Anastasia, but the boy looked upon goldenrod and the starry asters simply as meadow weeds. The armful of bloom brought no suggestion to him. On the morrow Riley Hines would hand in two pages of allusions to them, beginning with a quotation from Whittier's "Autumn Thoughts," and ending with a couplet from Pope, carefully copied by Maria Hines from the "Exercises for Parsing" in the back of her grammar.

Somebody's supper-horn blew in the distance, and, grown desperate by Tommy's long absence and the lateness of the hour, he took his little cracked slate from the strap of books on the floor beside him, and laid it across his knees. Then with a stubby pencil that squeaked dismally in its

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passage across the slate, he began copying bodily from the almanac the list of historical events enumerated therein, just as they stood, beginning with the Japanese typhoon on the first, and ending “*Volunteer beat Thistle*” on the thirtieth, eighteen hundred and eighty-seven.

Then he began to copy a few agricultural notes, inserted as side remarks for those who relied on their almanacs as guide-posts to gardening. “Gather winter squashes now. They keep better when stored in a warm dry place. Harvest sugar beets when the leaves turn yellowish green, etc.”

He was bending painfully over this task when a shadow fell across his slate, and, looking up, he saw the old miller looking over his shoulder.

“Doing your sums?” he asked, with a friendly smile. “Let’s see if you do

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them the way I was taught when I was a lad." He held out his hand for the slate. There had been a bond of sympathy between the two ever since Christmas eve, when a certain pair of skates had changed owners, and now, although the boy's voice trembled almost out of his control, he managed to stammer out the reply that he was trying to write a composition.

The old man looked from the straggling lines on the slate, then at the open almanac, then down at the boy's troubled face, and understood. Drawing a chair across the porch he sat down beside him, and, catching the furtive, scared side-glance cast in his direction, he plunged at once into a story.

It was about a shepherd boy who went out to fight a giant, and the king insisted on lending him his armour.

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But he couldn't fight in the heavy helmet and the coat of mail. The shield was in his way, and the spear more than he could lift. So he threw it aside, and going down to a little brook, chose five small pebbles, worn smooth by the running water. And with these in his hand, and only the simple sling he was accustomed to use every day, he went out against the Philistine giant, and slew him in the first round.

Perkins's oldest wondered what the story had to do with his composition. He wasn't looking for a personal application. He had not been brought up at Sunday schools and kindergartens. But all of a sudden he realised that the miller meant him; that his depending on Tommy, or the customers, or the almanac, to furnish him ideas, was like going out in Saul's armour, and that he could only come to failure in that,

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because it wouldn't fit him; that he could hit the mark the little school-mistress had in mind for him, only with the familiar sling-shot of his own common every-day personal experiences.

Maybe the old miller recognised that it was a crisis in the little fellow's life, for he stayed beside him with helpful hints and questions, until the slate was full. When he carried it home in the gloaming it no longer bore the items from the almanac. There were other remarks straggling across it, not so well expressed, perhaps, but plainly original. They were to the effect that September is the month you've got to go back to school when you don't want to, 'cos it's the nicest time of all to stay out-doors, neither too hot nor too cold. There's lots of apples then, and it's the minister's birthday. He's the seventh son of

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a seventh son, and Dick Wiggins says if you're that you can pick Wahoo berries in the dark of the moon and make med'cine out of them, that will cure the bone-break fever every time, when nothing else in the world will. Then followed several items of information that he had discovered for himself, in his prowls through the September woods, about snakes and tree-toads, as to their habits at that season of the year. It closed with a suggestive allusion to the delights of sucking cider from the bung of a barrel through a straw.

Next day the little schoolmistress shook her head over the composition that Riley Hines handed in, and laid it aside with a hopeless sigh. She recognised too plainly the hand of Maria in its construction. The sentiments expressed therein were as foreign

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to Riley's nature as they would have been to a woodchuck's. She took up Tommy Bowser's. Alas, four-syllabled words were not in Tommy's daily vocabulary, nor were the elegant sentences under his name within the power of his composition. Plainly it was the work of a plagiarist.

She went through the pile slowly, and then wrote on the blackboard as she had promised, the names of the ten whose work was the best and most original. It was then that Perkins's oldest had the surprise of his life, for lo! his name, like Abou-ben-Adhem's, "led all the rest."

Again the Cross-Roads had taught him more than the school, — to depend on the resources to which nature had adapted him, and never again to attempt to sally forth in borrowed armour, even though it be a king's.

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Chapter XIII

IT was Cy Akers who carried the news to the schoolhouse, galloping his old sorrel up to the open door just before the bell tapped for afternoon dismissal. He did not dismount, but drawing rein, leaned forward in his saddle, waiting for the little schoolmistress to step down from the desk to the doorstep. The rows of waiting children craned their necks anxiously, but only those nearest the door heard his message.

“Mr. Asa Holmes died this morning,” he said. “The funeral is set for to-morrow afternoon at four, and you can announce to the children that there won’t be any school. The trustees thought it would be only proper to close out of respect for him, as he was

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on the school board over thirty years, and has done so much for the community. He's one of the old landmarks, you might say, about the last of the old pioneers, and everybody will want to go."

Before she could recover from the suddenness of the announcement the rider was gone, and she was left looking out across the October fields with a lonely sense of personal loss, although her acquaintance with the old miller had extended over only two short school terms.

A few minutes later the measured tramp of feet over the worn door-sill began, and forty children passed out into the mellow sunshine of the late autumn afternoon. They went quietly at first, awed by the tender, reverent words in which the little schoolmistress had given them the message to carry

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home. But once outside, the pent-up enthusiasm over their unexpected holiday, and the mere joy of being alive and free on such a day sent them rushing down the road pell-mell, shouting and swinging their dinner-pails as they ran.

A shade of annoyance crossed the teacher's face as she stood watching from the doorstep. She wished she had cautioned them not to be so noisy, for she knew that their shouts could be plainly heard in the old house whose gables she could see through a clump of cedars, farther down the road. It was standing with closed blinds now, and she had a feeling that the laughing voices floating across to it must strike harshly across its profound silence.

But presently her face brightened as she watched the children running on

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in the sunshine, in the joy of their emancipation. Part of a poem she had read that morning came to her. She had thought when she read it that it was a beautiful way to look upon death, and now it bore a new significance, and she whispered it to herself:

“‘Why should it be a wrench to leave this wooden bench?

Why not with happy shout, run home when school is out?’

“That’s the way the old miller has gone,” she said, softly. “His lessons all learned and his tasks all done — so well done, too, that he has nothing to regret. I’m glad that I didn’t stop the children. I am sure that’s the way he would want them to go. Dear old man! He was always a boy at heart.”

She turned the key in the door behind her presently, and started down

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the road to Mrs. Powers's, where she boarded. In every fence corner the sumachs flamed blood-red, and across the fields, where purple shadows trailed their royal lengths behind every shock of corn, the autumn woodlands massed their gold and crimson against the sunset sky. She walked slowly, loath to reach the place where she must go indoors.

The Perkins home lay in her way, and as she passed, Mrs. Perkins with a baby on her hip, and a child clinging to her skirts, leaned over the gate to speak to her.

“Isn't it sad,” the woman exclaimed, grasping eagerly at this chance to discuss every incident of the death and illness, with that love for detail always to be found in country districts where happenings are few and interests are strong.

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“They sent for the family Tuesday when he had the stroke, but he couldn’t speak to them when they got here. They said he seemed to recognise Miss Polly, and smiled when she took his hand. She seemed to be his favourite, and they say she’s taking it mighty hard — harder than any of the rest. It’s a pity he couldn’t have left ’em all some last message. I think it’s always a comfort to remember one’s dying words when as good a person as Mr. Holmes goes. And it’s always so nice when they happen to be appropriate, so’s they can be put on the tombstone afterward. I remember my Aunt Maria worked my grandfather’s last words into a sampler, with an urn and weeping-willow-tree. She had it framed in black and hung in the parlour, and everybody who came to the house admired it. It’s a pity that the miller

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couldn't have left some last word to each of 'em."

"I don't think it was necessary," said the girl, turning away with a choke in her voice, as the eloquent face of the old man seemed to rise up before her. "His whole life speaks for him."

Mrs. Perkins looked after the retreating figure regretfully, as the jaunty sailor hat disappeared behind a tall hedge. "I wish she hadn't been in such a hurry," she sighed, shifting the baby to the other hip. "I would have liked to ask her if she's heard who the pall-bearers are to be."

At the turn in the road the little schoolmistress looked up to see Miss Anastasia Dill leaning over her gate. She had just heard the news, and there were tears in her pale blue eyes.

"And Polly's wedding cards were

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to have been sent out this next week !” she exclaimed after their first words of greeting. “The poor child told me so herself when she was here in August on a visit. ‘Miss Anastasia,’ she said to me, ‘I’m not going abroad for my honeymoon, as all my family want me to do. I’m going to bring Jack back here to the old homestead where grandfather’s married life began. Somehow it was so ideal, so nearly perfect, that I have a feeling that maybe the mantle of that old romance will fall on our shoulders. Besides, Jack has never seen grandfather, and I tell him it’s as much of an education to know such a grand old man as it is to go through Yale. So we’re coming in October. The woods will have on all their gala colours then, and I’ll be the happiest bride the sun ever shone on, unless it was my grandmother Polly.’ And now

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to think," added Miss Anastasia, tearfully, "none of those plans can come to pass. It's bad luck to put off a wedding. Oh, I feel so sorry for her!"

There is an undefined note of pathos in a country funeral that is never reached in any other. The little school-mistress felt it as she walked up the path to the old house behind the cedars. The front porch was full of men, who, dressed in their unaccustomed best, had the uneasy appearance of having come upon a Sunday in the middle of the week. Their heavy boots tiptoed clumsily through the hall, with a painful effort to go silently, as one by one the neighbours passed into the old sitting-room and out again. The room across the hall had been filled with rows of chairs, and the women who

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came first were sitting there in a deep silence, broken only by a cough now and then, a hoarse whisper or a rustle, as some one moved to make room for a newcomer.

It was a sombre assembly, for every one wore whatever black her wardrobe afforded, and many funeral occasions had left an accumulation of mourning millinery in every house in the neighbourhood. But the limp crape veils and black gloves and pall-like cashmere shawls were all congregated in the dimly lighted parlour. In the old sitting-room it was as cheerful and homelike as ever, save for the still form in the centre.

Through an open window the western sun streamed into the big, hospitable room, across the bright home-made rag carpet. The old clock in the corner ticked with the placid, steady

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stroke that had never failed or faltered, in any vicissitude of the generations for which it had marked the changes. No fire blazed on the old hearthstone that had warmed the hearts as well as the hands of the whole countryside on many a cheerful occasion. But a great bough of dogwood, laid across the shining andirons, filled the space with coral berries that glowed like live embers as the sun stole athwart them.

“Oh, if the old room could only speak!” thought Miss Anastasia, when her turn came to pass reverently in for a last look at the peaceful face. “There would be no need of man’s eulogy.”

But man’s eulogy was added presently, when the old minister came in and took his place beside the coffin of his lifelong friend and neighbour. The men outside the porch closed in around the windows to listen. The

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women in the back rows of chairs in the adjoining room leaned forward eagerly. Those farthest away caught only a faltering sentence now and then.

“A hospitality as warm as his own hearthstone, as wide as his broad acres. . . . No man can point to him and say he ever knowingly hurt or hindered a fellow creature. . . . He never measured out to any man a scant bushel. Be it grain or good-will, it was ever an overflowing measure. . . .” But those who could not hear all that was said could make the silent places eloquent with their own recollections, for he had taken a father’s interest in them all, and manifested it by a score of kindly deeds, too kindly to ever be forgotten.

It was a perfect autumn day, sunny and golden and still, save for the patter

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of dropping nuts and the dry rustle of fallen leaves. A purple haze rested on the distant horizon like the bloom on a ripened grape. Down through the orchard, when the simple service was over, they carried their old friend to the family burying-ground, and, although voices had choked, and eyes overflowed before, there was neither sob nor tear, when the light of the sunset struck across the low mound, heaped with its covering of glowing autumn leaves. For if grief has no part in the sunset glory that ends the day, or in the perfect fulness of the autumn time, then it must indeed stand hushed, when a life comes both to its sunset and its harvest, in such royal fashion.

That evening at the Cross-Roads, Bowser lighted the first fire of the season in the rusty old stove, for the night

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was chilly. One by one the men accustomed to gather around it dropped in and took their usual places. The event of the day was all that was spoken of.

“Do you remember what he said last Thanksgiving, nearly a year ago?” asked Bowser. “It came back to me as I stood and looked at him to-day, and if I’d never believed in immortality before, I’d ’a’ had to have believed in it then. The words seemed to fairly shine out of his face. He said ‘*The best comes after the harvest, when the wheat goes to make up blood and muscle and brain; when it’s raised to a higher order of life in man. And it’s the same with me. At eighty-five, when it looks as if I’d about reached the end, I’ve come to believe that “the best is yet to be.”*’”

There was a long pause, and Cy Akers said, slowly, “Somehow I can’t

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feel that he is dead. Seems as if he'd just gone away a while. But Lord! how we're going to miss him here at the store."

"No, don't say that!" exclaimed Bud Hines, with more emotion than he had ever been known to show before. "Say, how we're going to feel him! I can't get him out of my mind. Every time I turn around, most, seems to me I can hear him laugh, and say, 'Don't cross your bridge till you come to it, Bud.' That saying of his rings in my ears every time I get in the dumps. Seems like he could set the calendar straight for us, all the year around. The winters wasn't so cold or the summers so hard to pull through, looking at life through his eyes."

Perkins's oldest crept up unnoticed. He added no word, but deep in his

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heart lay an impression that all the years to come could never erase; the remembrance of a kindly old man who had given him a new gospel, in that one phrase, "A brother to Santa Claus;" who had taught him to go out against his Philistines with simple directness of aim and whatever lay at hand; who had left behind him the philosophy of a cheerful optimist, and the example of a sweet simple life, unswerving in its loyalty to duty and to truth.

Over in the old homestead, Polly, standing in the firelight, fair and slender in her black gown, looked up at the tall young fellow beside her, and placed two little books in his hands. The old house was not her only heritage. The little atlas of the heavens was hers also. Standing there in the room

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where the beloved presence seemed to have left its benediction, Polly told the story of the love that had outlived Death. Then across the yellowed page of the old grammar where the faded violets lay, two hands met in the same sure clasp that had joined the souls of those older lovers, who somewhere beyond the stars were still repeating the old conjugation — “we love — *for ever!*”

THE END.

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The story is laid in the mid-Georgian period. It is a dashing, sparkling, vivacious comedy, with a heroine as lovely and changeable as an April day, and a hero all ardor and daring.

The exquisite quality of Mr. Stephens's literary style clothes the story in a rich but delicate word-fabric; and never before have his setting and atmosphere been so perfect.

The Sorceress of Rome. By NATHAN GAL-
LIZIER, author of "Castel del Monte," etc.

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The love-story of Otto III., the boy emperor, and Stephania, wife of the Senator Crescentius of Rome, has already been made the basis of various German poems and plays.

Mr. Gallizier has used it for the main theme of "The Sorceress of Rome," the second book of his trilogy of romances on the mediæval life of Italy. In detail and finish the book is a brilliant piece of work, describing clearly an exciting and strenuous period. It possesses the same qualities as "Castel del Monte," of which the *Chicago Record Herald* said: "There is color, there is sumptuous word-painting in these pages; the action is terrific at times; vividness and life are in every part; brilliant descriptions entertain the reader; mystic scenes and prophecies give a singular fascination to the tale, which is strong and forceful in its portrayal."

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"Hester of the Hills" has a motif unusual in life, and new in fiction. Its hero, who has only acquired his own strength and resourcefulness by a lifelong struggle against constitutional frailty, has come to make the question of bodily soundness his dominant thought. He resolves to ensure strong constitutions to his children by marrying a physically perfect woman. After long search, he finds this ideal in Hester, the daughter of a "cracker squatter," of the Ozark Mountains of Missouri. But,—he forgot to take into consideration that very vital emotion, love, which played havoc with his well-laid plans.

It is an ingenious combination of practical realism and imaginative fiction worked out to a thoroughly delightful and satisfying climax.

Prisoners of Fortune. A TALE OF THE MASSACHUSETTS BAY COLONY. BY RUEL PERLEY SMITH, author of "The Rival Campers," etc.

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The period of Mr. Smith's story is the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the shores of the American colonies were harassed and the seas patrolled by pirates and buccaneers. These robbed and spoiled, and often seized and put to death, the sailors and fishers and other humbler folk, while their leaders claimed friendship alike with Southern planters and New England merchants, — with whom it is said they frequently divided their spoils.

The times were stern and the colonists were hardy, but they loved as truly and tenderly as in more peaceful days. Thus, while the hero's adventures with pirates and his search for their hidden treasure is a record of desperate encounters and daring deeds, his love-story and his winning of sweet Mary Vane is in delightful contrast.

The Rome Express. BY MAJOR ARTHUR GRIFFITHS, author of "The Passenger from Calais," etc.

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A mysterious murder on a flying express train, a wily Italian, a charming woman caught in the meshes of circumstantial evidence, a chivalrous Englishman, and a police force with a keen nose for the wrong clue, are the ingredients from which Major Griffiths has concocted a clever, up-to-date detective story. The book is bright and spirited, with rapid action, and consistent development which brings the story to a logical and dramatic ending.

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While there is much that is unusual in the plot and its development, Mr. Hurst has handled his subject with fine delicacy, and the tale of their love on the beautiful little island is told with deep sympathy and feeling.

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author of "The Promotion of the Admiral," "Rachel Marr," "The Idlers," etc.

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Mr. Roberts's new book is much more than a ripping good sea story such as might be expected from the author of "The Promotion of the Admiral." In "The Flying Cloud" the waters and the winds are gods personified. Their every mood and phase are described in words of telling force. There is no world but the waste of waters.

Mr. Roberts glories and exults in the mystery, the passion, the strength of the elements, as did the Viking chroniclers of old. He understands them and loves them and interprets them as no other writer has heretofore done. The book is too big for conventional phrases. It needs Mr. Roberts's own richness of imagery and masterly expression to describe adequately the word-pictures in this epic of wind and waves.

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