

"Mine Own America"

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(Special for The United American)

WHEN I graduated from college, my father bought a newspaper plant in the town and turned it over to me. Evidently he assumed from bits of college news which I sent to the home papers from time to time that I had the newspaper instinct. Possibly, too, he did not care to have a dependent B. A. on his hands. Also, he was wedded to politics.

While no longer an office-seeker, he loved to have his say, and a newspaper in the family afforded an excellent mouth-piece. He had held almost every county office, and naturally he had made enemies in the perennial give and take. But I'm sure that any desire to hold them level was entirely outweighed by his love for certain principles. For father's record was as clean as a bright, new chisel and his intellect was as keen as its edge. Not that he was quick at repartee—he was not at home in a rough and tumble argument—but when he would compose his thoughts on paper, his power of expression was amazing.

However, I would not unduly intrude myself and my family into this narrative. For it is mainly about Stoltz—old Stoltz everybody called him. He was old Stoltz when he chased me out of his garden years ago. I will never forget the wild flight and pursuit that sent me into father's presence, with Stoltz exploding denunciation of my predatory ways. Had I clutched in my hand a ten thousand dollar bond, I could not have felt a weightier guilt.

"I'll attend to him, Herman," father assured him. And he did. A willow stick, ceremoniously withdrawn from behind the kitchen stove, was vigorously applied. Yet the pain of chastisement was nothing compared with the effect of the shock waves of father's disapprobation. I had disgraced the family. The applications of the stick actually brought relief.

Many things passed through my mind as I sobbed myself to sleep that night. I even wondered if father stole when he was a boy, and at once dismissed the blasphemous thought, and resolved to pull the weeds behind the barn in the morning, in hopes that I might win my way back into his good graces. As a reward, I had a beautiful, satisfying dream of old Stoltz expiring amid the flames of his burning home.

For a long time I gave old Stoltz a wide berth, although his boy Fred and I were chums and fought each other's battles at school. But on the way home from school when we reached the Stoltz place I would shun the board walk and take to the middle of the road. Sometimes I would glimpse him in the yard—a squat statue, his bare, shaggy head tilted back, gloating over a pair of fine ash trees that interlocked branches across a cinder path running up to the square, white cottage. Occasionally, he would catch sight of me. Squinting an eye, he would watch as if I were a mis-

creant plotting some terrible mischief.

Once Fred was kept in after school all because a caricature which he drew on a fly-leaf of his grammar was recognized by the teacher as a personal allusion to herself. I sorrowed outside until his outcries came to my ears; then hurried home to get the agate shooter I had won from him that noon. I had hidden it in the hay-mow, lest father's penetrating gaze might locate it in my trouser's pocket. Fred's mortification was healed when I restored to him this treasure.

Not until later did I know that he often confided in his father. Late one evening in early June, mother hurried me off to the postoffice with a letter. Returning I made every minute count because it was getting dark—even braving the Stoltz terror and keeping to the walk. Suddenly a great hand reached out from a bush bordering the walk and dangled a luscious strawberry before my eyes. Suspecting a trap, I gathered my energies for flight. Another ponderous hand came out and clutched my shoulder. Squirming, I looked up into the full-bearded countenance of Stoltz—now a new Stoltz to me; for his blue eyes twinkled beneath tangled brow thickets and his features were twisted into a ludicrous expression of amusement.

"Thank you sir," I stammered, seizing the strawberry.

"Goot!" was his rumbling approval.

After that I had a liking for old Stoltz, and it grew with the knowledge of how consistently he had been a friend to father through the years. They were early settlers in the west end of the county and had adjoining farms. Father had studied law, but enlisted in the civil war before he had finished his course. After the war, he homesteaded in a community which was mainly German. There he became acquainted with Stoltz and mastered his mother tongue. In later years, when father was admitted to the bar and established a practice in town, Stoltz and his countrymen brought all their legal business to him. "Whatever Judge White says is right," was their unqualified expression of confidence. And at certain election times father prided himself upon the solid German vote for him, especially when he was elected County Judge after a bitter campaign.

I can see the old fellow now, after he had moved to town, toiling up the stairs to father's office, his stocky form bent almost double, while he puffed from his exertions. "Ach!" was his exhaust upon reaching the head of the stairs. For hours he and father would sit conversing in German. It was amazing how Stoltz, whose English speech was halting, would roll out such an eloquent Germanic torrent, while father would nod gravely, then reply with studied effort.

Even in college, I never lost touch with old Stoltz. Many a time when I was stuck for a theme for a character sketch, he would come storming and gesticulating into my fancy. During my Junior

year I was saddened to read in the home paper that his wife had died. She was a gentle, most loveable woman. How she would come in at times with a sack of eggs or a bunch of rhubarb for mother—her hands rough and seamed and her back bent with the toil of years. And sometimes she would come over with no further evident purpose than just to make sure that mother was there. Around the corner she would intrude her kindly, wizened features while mother was busy on the back porch.

"Goot morning," she would say and smile.

"Good morning," mother would reply.

"Gootbye," and without further ado she would vanish to return the way she came.

Old Stoltz cried like a baby at the funeral. Many trips he made to her grave with flowers, the dew drying upon them, from the neat little garden she had tended so lovingly. Father was his chief comforter, although he never knew how to gush. Often Stoltz would stop short in a conversation about the crops or the weather and cry out: "Dorothea, mine Dorothea!" Father's rush to the rescue would consist in looking gravely sympathetic and a few exclamations of regret. Presently Stoltz would pull out his red bandana handkerchief, swab at the tears and murmur: "Mine goot friend, you comfort me so much."

When I graduated and came home to take charge of the newspaper I found that my predecessor had a wonderful lack of system. Many subscriptions were in arrears, and one statement which I made out from the records alleged that H. Stoltz was one year in arrears. I mailed it to him, and left Uncle Sam to do the rest. Next day, I heard a slow, heavy thump-thump up the stairs. A moment later I was dominated by a glaring, bristling monster of wrath. It was old Stoltz!

His heavy fist fanned the tip of my nose. "You say old Stoltz ain't honest?" he thundered. "You go off to college and get your head full up with foolishness, then you come home and say old Stoltz don't pay his bills. Ach! All night long I have such a pain in mine heart! Young man you get smart—you lie—you ask your father if old Stoltz ain't honest. Ask him if he don't pay his bills!"

"Why—Mr. Stoltz!" I floundered. "Doubtless, there's some mistake."

"Mistake! Old Stoltz make no mistake. Here!" He jerked forth a faded wallet from an inner pocket and clawed out a packet of receipts. "You look!"

The receipts were in exact order from eighteen years back, and showed that he was paid not only to date but a year in advance. I apologized, explained and protested, but suspicion still lingered in his eyes as he turned to thump away. In the next issue, I invented occasion to refer to him as a highly respected citizen. He came up and bought an extra copy, apparently much mollified.

When it was evident that war would