

HIS RISE TO POWER

By Henry Russell Miller,
Author of
"The Man Higher Up"

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CHAPTER XX.
The Big Life.

ONE day John Dunmeade stood before the people of his state a lonely figure, almost forgotten amid the tumult of discussion that raged over the respective merits of Sherrod and Jenkins. On the next a few heads turned questioning toward him, a few newspapers began darkly to hint that his candidacy might be more formidable than had been supposed. The exigencies of the party case, it seemed, demanded that Jerry Brent be met with a candidate of equal or greater fitness, and neither Jenkins nor Sherrod was entirely palatable to the people. Other members of opinion followed suit. Soon a small host of them were shrieking that John Dunmeade must be nominated. The times required it, the people demanded it, no one else could best Jerry Brent. In short, if these members of the press were to be believed, and had experienced a timely conviction of sin. Within a few days half the newspapers of the state were loudly trumpeting that Dunmeade's services to his party must be rewarded, the other half laboriously denying that service had been rendered and sneeringly pointing to the late primaries in Benton county as evidence of his popular weakness.

No one suspected a prompter. The people, so insistently told that they demanded the choice of the young reformer, began to believe it. A surprising number suddenly discovered that they had always been for Dunmeade anyway, they were exceedingly proud of the fact. The thing was contagious. Gradual, but swift as the rising "Chick" it swept over the state, a flood of enthusiasm. Part of it was genuine. Far down in their hearts, beneath the calloused crust, the moral sluggishness that hated change, lay a germinating civic consciousness implanted by the very man who had become a hero overnight. The politicians—all but a few—were astounded. Supporters of Jenkins and Sherrod alike were profoundly alarmed.

Two days before the convention the Hon. G. Washington Jenkins bowed to the storm.

"I yield," he said, "to a spontaneous demand of the people."

"Sentiment," declared Murchell solemnly, "has crystallized. Dunmeade's the man." He explained that this decision had been reached by him in view of the evident wish of the people, and he added truthfully that he had not seen nor discussed the approaching convention with John Dunmeade. The Murchell men in the organization whooped with delight.

The day before the convention the delegates began to gather at the capital. In parlor A of the State hotel at Murchell and in parlor B of the Loch-livar sat Sherrod, playing against each other for votes. Between them fluttered the delegates and those who had delegates to sell, like hungry summer flies. But they found—the little fellows at least—no honey pot at Murchell's end; no scandal must mar the nomination of Dunmeade. (As for the captains of tens and captains of hundreds, that is another matter, into which we may not intrude.)

In crowded streets and sweltering, smoke clouded lobbies excitement ran high. The Dunmeade rallying ground, the only quiet spot in the capital, contrasted significantly with the nervous atmosphere of the Sherrod headquarters. Such contentment with the situation could not be feigned! It was infectious. It spread out among the delegates who had pledged themselves to vote for Dunmeade and nullified the frantic efforts of Parrott (nominally managing Sherrod's campaign) to start a stampede; it kept the neutrals wavering.

And over the scene of conflict hovered a formless one, unseen, unheard, unfelt, as spirits always are, waiting for the crucial moment to swoop down and decide the issue.

Came a lull in the battle, an hour toward morning, when the delegates had retired to allotted cots or halves of beds or, more often, to woe fortune over some table of chance, when the reeking lobbies were depopulated and the headquarters of the generals were deserted by all but their respective staffs and the yawning reporters.

There was a knock on Murchell's door and Greene, leader in Plumville, admitted a messenger, him who once before had ired Murchell from his retreat on an errand, if not of mercy, at least of salvation. Paine went to him and whispered his message. Murchell shook his head.

"Tell him," he said aloud, "if he wants to see me he'll have to come here."

Paine whispered a protest. "Tell him," Murchell cut him short. "John Heath will meet him here."

The messenger started, looked hastily

around at the others and grinned in sickly fashion. But he departed immediately, leaving the men in the room to wonder what charm lay in the unfamiliar name of John Heath.

In less than five minutes, rumor out-running the fact, the hotel was alive. Sherrod had asked for a conference with Murchell.

Murchell men smiled triumphantly when they saw Parrott and Sherrod, wearing an air of confidence not wholly convincing, emerge from the elevator and make their way along the corridor to parlor A.

Sherrod and Parrott entered, carefully closing the door behind them to the intense disappointment of the delegates outside. Parrott went jauntily up to Murchell and shook hands.

"Well," he grinned, "we've been having a fine little shindy, eh?" This for the reporters.

"Glad," granted Murchell, "you're enjoying it." There was a laugh, in which Parrott did not join.

The senator waved his hand, and all but Greene left the room, reluctant, but obedient.

"See here," said Sherrod. "Can't we get together? You've got to admit that we've got you beaten."

"If you think the delegates you've been buying will stick you're mistaken, Sherrod. I've sold you more than fifty myself."

"I don't believe it," snapped Sherrod. "Quit bluffing and get down to cases. You know you can't beat us in the convention. You aren't trying to. You started all this racket over Dunmeade just to work up a sentiment that will make it harder for me to beat Brent. You're so anxious to get even," he exclaimed bitterly, "that you don't see you're in danger of stirring up a revolution. What will you take to quit?"

"The revolution has started, Sherrod. And you'll never beat Brent."

"Won't? We'll attend to that when the time comes."

"Because," Murchell continued calmly, "you won't be nominated." He turned to the governor. "Parrott, how much have you paid Sherrod to support you for senator?"

"Nothing," lied Parrott, albeit with evident uneasiness.

"Then you're lucky," Murchell commented. "Dan Hasland paid him \$200,000 for the same promise."

"That's a lie," Sherrod declared hotly.

"Greene," commanded Murchell, "call Hasland in, will you? He's in the room next to mine. That is, if Parrott and Sherrod think it necessary?" He turned inquiringly toward them.

"I guess," Sherrod growled, "Parrott knows I'll not go back on him."

"Does he?" Murchell inquired dryly. "Look at him!"

And, indeed, Parrott's face just then showed anything but implicit confidence in the good faith of his leader.

"You needn't go, Greene. And," Murchell added, "I may announce right here that Hasland will succeed me as senator."

"Doesn't that depend," sneered Sherrod, "on who controls the legislature?"

"We'll control it."

Greene could have hugged himself with delight as he saw Parrott visibly perturbed and Sherrod struggling to repress the rising, passionate hate and fear of the man before him. Greene had been a gambler and he felt a profound reverence for the man whose nerve in so big a game showed no tremor.

A long pause was broken by Parrott anxiously, "Senator, what have you got up your sleeve?"

"Sherrod's withdrawal."

"Who is going to make me withdraw?" Sherrod sneered again.

"Didn't Paine give you my message?"

"John Heath?"

"Who," demanded Parrott, "is John Heath?"

Murchell pointed to Sherrod's face, which had suddenly turned pale. "He is a gentleman of whom Sherrod is very much afraid. Parrott, did you ever hear why I came to the capital last March? I came because I heard Sherrod here was drunk and threatening to throw himself into the river. I found out why—he had embezzled \$300,000 of state moneys. We fixed the matter up temporarily."

He paused, straightened up in his chair, eyed Sherrod for a moment and went on quietly: "If your name goes before the convention, I will take the floor and tell all about that transaction. I don't think you will be nominated. And, if you are, I'm quite sure you won't be elected. Do you withdraw?"

"I do not!"

"Very well," Murchell rose to indicate that the conference was at an end.

"Come on, Parrott," Sherrod wheeled and marched toward the door. But Parrott did not follow. Instead, he dropped wearily into a chair, his glance shifting uncertainly from Murchell to the departing Sherrod and back again.

Sherrod's hand was already on the doorknob when he noticed Parrott's defection. He stopped, looking back.

"Come along," he repeated impatiently.

"I think," said Parrott slowly, "I'll stay here. I've had one gold brick too many."

"What?" Sherrod turned sharply and strode over to the vacillating governor. "You booby! Scared by a cheap bluff like that? Do you think he means it? He doesn't use it. Here, I'll prove it to you." He whirled to face Murchell, pointing. "There is the door. Bill Murchell, and on the other side of it a half dozen reporters. Don't wait for the convention. Call 'em in. Make good your bluff, if you dare!"

For a moment the senator looked intently at the ugly, passionate face.

"Call them in, Greene," he said quietly.

Greene went to the door, opened it and beckoned to the reporters. They

fled into the parlor promptly. Murchell turned to them.

"Gentlemen, I want to dictate a statement." Notebooks were flashed forth and pencils poised. But Murchell did not continue, and the reporters did not look at him. Their eyes were riveted on Sherrod, upon whose face had fallen a look of unbelieving wonderment. The



"Make good your bluff if you dare."

wonderment became fear. Heads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He shook visibly. The defiant attitude suddenly dissolved.

"Perhaps," said Murchell grimly, "Mr. Sherrod would prefer to make this statement himself."

There was an instant of painful silence. Sherrod's mouth worked as though he were trying to speak. But no sound fell.

Parrott came to his relief. "Gentlemen," he said solemnly, "Mr. Sherrod has withdrawn his candidacy."

"In favor of Dunmeade," supplemented Greene.

The reporters looked inquiringly at Senator Murchell.

He nodded. "That's the statement." Without a single backward glance he went out of the room. Greene and the reporters followed him, leaving Sherrod and Parrott alone to get what comfort they could out of their plight and to settle certain accounts, a scene upon which we considerably draw the curtain.

A man around whom a battle had been fought leaped on a rail fence, gazing off at the undulating line where the azure of sky curved down to meet the green of hills. He had been there most of the afternoon, in flight from the kindly but obtrusive interest of his neighbors.

A state was acclaiming him, and he was not uplifted. He had read the news of the morning and knew that at that very hour several hundred of his fellow citizens in convention assembled were naming him to a high honor, and he took no joy in it. For the acclamation was but the schooled chorus of a tractable stage mob. And the victory was not for him, nor for the principle he had served, but for a man whom he had condemned, for an institution he believed to be wrong. He was big enough—or small enough if you prefer—to resent being catapulted into power by the strength of another's arm, and he was honest enough to hate the means he knew must have been used. He could not exult. The advancement had come too late. The fiery eagerness of youth was gone.

He longed not for a sword, but for peace—the peace of the hills, of the growing things, of the commonplace from which once he had fled.

A sound, strange for that hour and place, slowly pierced his abstraction. He raised his head, started, listening. It was the courthouse bell. Another joined in, and another, until all the bells of the town were ringing. The iron choral was for him!

He walked slowly on. As he rounded the foot of the knob, he heard another sound rising to mingle with the clamor of the bells—cheering voices. He had a strong desire to turn back and flee to some hiding place in the hills, but he forced himself to march forward.

At the northernmost edge of the town he perceived a rapidly lumping figure. It was Jeremy Applegate.

"Heard you came out this way," Jeremy gasped, "an' I wanted to be first to tell you. Nominated by acclamation at 3:45 this afternoon! I hadn't felt so good since Appomattox." John, beholding the tears shining in honest Jeremy's eyes, felt the moisture rise to his own. His heart leaped sharply; it was something to receive, even if one has not earned, such loyalty!

Down Main street came a team drawing a double seated spring wagon. From the wagon descended a silent trio whose handclasp eloquently told what awkward lips could not phrase.

"Drove into town to get the news of the convention," Ri explained. "They said ye'd gone out the pike, so we drove out to fetch ye in. They're waitin' for ye, consider'ble excited."

"They've found out," said Dan Criswell dryly, "all at once that ye're a great man."

"Low I damned the Amurrican people a mite too soon," confessed Sykes, which caused Cranshaw and Criswell to laugh.

"Git in," commanded Ri. "Come

right along, Jeremy."

They all climbed into the wagon, John with lips compressed as if he faced an ordeal. And indeed he did. Ri was quick to perceive what Jeremy in the hysteria of his joy had overlooked. His great, hairy hand fell on John's knee in a tight grip.

"I want to say something while I got the chance. I guess there's more to this than appears to be. But I have faith in ye, John Dunmeade. I have faith that ye'll govern this state in the fear of God and the love of your fellow men."

"Whatever ye do," supplemented Sykes, "I'll believe that."

"An' so long as we got faith in ye ye needn't lose faith in yourself," Criswell concluded.

John did not answer. He was past speaking just then and later when his townfolk acclaimed him.

At home took place a wonder. Judge Dunmeade, almost forgetting the judicial dignity slipped John on the back and exclaimed: "My son, this is a happy hour. I always knew you would make your mark."

At which Miss Roberta sniffed. But when she tried to convey her felicitations her tongue refused the unaccustomed office, and she broke away to prepare a supper that should do justice to the occasion.

That evening Benton county made holiday, with torches and bonfires and fireworks. John made a speech at his home—not much of a speech, it is true, but his audience was not hypercritical. It lasted just three minutes. Then the band began to play "America." For a little a deep hush fell. Then some one—later identified as a one legged, hysterically happy old soldier—began to sing in a cracked, quavering voice. Something that passed beyond mere jubilation lifted up its voice and sang, "My country, 'tis of thee"—

The solemn, stately measures died away. A young woman under a tree at the edge of the crowd discovered an ashamed tears coursing down her cheeks. A last cheer was given, and the famous celebration passed into history.

At his window John Dunmeade looked with troubled eyes up into the silent, starry night. It was ungenerous perhaps, but he could not help thinking of the lean years of defeat and discouragement. And he wondered. Was the hymn still ringing in his ears the voice of an abiding passion—or hysteria?

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