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The Gentleman From Indiana

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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As the voice grew clearer the sheriff stepped forward, but Tom Meredith, with a loud cry of grief, threw himself on his knees beside the cot and seized the wandering fingers in his own. "John!" he cried. "John, is it you?"

The voice went on rapidly, not heeding him. "Ah, you needn't howl! Well, laugh away, you Indians! If it hadn't been for this ankle—but it seems to be my chest that's hurt—and side—not that it matters, you know. The sophomore's just as good or better. It's only my egotism. Yes, it must be the side—and chest—and head—all over, I believe. I'll try again next year—next year I'll make it a dally. Helen said, not that I should call you Helen—I mean Miss—Miss—Fisbee—no, Sherwood—but I've always thought Helen was the prettiest name in the world—you'll forgive me?—and please tell Parker there's no more copy and won't be—I wouldn't grind out another stick to save his immortal—she said—ah, I never made a good trade—no—unless—they can't come seven miles—but I'll finish you, Skillet, first; I know you! I know nearly all of you. Now let's sing 'Annie Lisle'!"—He lifted his hand as if to beat the time for a chorus.

"Oh, John, John!" cried Tom Meredith, and sobbed outright. "My boy, my boy—old friend!" The cry of the classmate was like that of a mother, for it was his old idol and hero who lay helpless and broken before him.

Two pairs of carriage lamps sparkled in front of the hospital in the earliest of the small hours, these unjoined to two deep hooded phaetons, from each of which quickly descended a gentleman with a beard, an air of eminence and a small, ominous black box, and the air of eminence was justified by the haste with which Meredith had sent for them and by their wide repute. They arrived almost simultaneously and hastily shook hands as they made their way to the ward down the long hall and up the narrow corridor. They had a short conversation with the surgeon and a word with the nurse, then turned the others out of the room by a practiced innuendo of manner. They stayed a long time in the room without opening the door.

Meredith went out on the steps and breathed the cool night air. A slender taint of drugs hung everywhere about the building, and the almost imperceptible permeation sickened him. It was deadly, he thought. To him it was imbued with a hideous portent of suffering. The lights in the little ward were turned up, and they seemed to shine from a chamber of horrors, while he waited as a brother might have waited outside the inquisition, if indeed a brother would have been allowed to wait outside the inquisition.

Alas, he had found John Harkless. He had lost track of him as men sometimes do lose track of their best beloved, but it had always been a comfort to know that Harkless was somewhere, a comfort without which he could hardly have got along. Like others, he had been waiting for John to turn up—on top, of course—he had such ability, ability for anything, and people would always care for him and believe in him so that he would be shoved ahead no matter how much he hung back himself; but Meredith had not expected him to turn up in Indiana.

He remembered now hearing a man who had spent the day in Plattville on business speak of him: "They've got a young fellow down there they'll be governor in a few years. He's a sort of dictator. Runs the party all over that part of the state to suit his own sweet will just by sheer personality. And there isn't a man in the district who wouldn't cheerfully lie down in the mud to let him pass over dry. It's that young Harkless, you know. Owns the Herald, the paper that downed McCune and smashed those imitation 'White Caps' in Carlow county." He had been struck by the coincidence of the name, but he had not dreamed that the Carlow Harkless was his friend until Helen's telegram had reached him that evening.

He shivered. His name was spoken from within, and Horner came out on the steps with the two eminent surgeons, and the latter favored him with a few words which he did not understand. He did understand, however, what Horner told him. Somehow the look of the sheriff's Sunday coat, wrinking furiously from his broad, bent shoulders, was both touching and solemn. He said simply: "He's conscious and not out of his head. They're gone in to get his antemortem statement." And they re-entered the ward.

Harkless' eyes were bandaged. The lawyer was speaking to him, and as Horner went awkwardly forward the cot Warren said something indicative of the sheriff's presence, and the hand on the sheet made a formless motion which Horner understood, and he took the pale fingers in his own very gently and then set them back. Smith turned toward Meredith, but the latter made a gesture which forbade the attorney to speak to him and went to a corner and sat down, with his head in his hands.

A sleepy young man had been brought in, and he opened a notebook and shook a stylographic pen so that the ink might flow freely. The lawyer, briefly and with unlegal agitation, administered an oath, and then there was silence.

"Now, Mr. Harkless, if you please," said Barrett insinuatingly, "if you feel like telling us as much as you can about it."

He answered in a low, rather indistinct voice very deliberately, pausing before almost every word. It was easy work for the sleepy stenographer.

"I understand. I don't want to go off my head again before I finish. If it were only for myself I should tell you nothing, because if I am to leave I should like it better if no one were punished. But that's a bad community over there. They are everlastingly worrying our people. They've always been a bother to us, and it's time it was stopped for good. I don't believe very much in punishment, but you can't do a great deal of reforming with the Crossroads unless you catch them young, before they're weaned. They wean them on whisky, you know. I realize you needn't have sworn me for me to tell you this."

Horner and Smith had started at the mention of the Crossroads, but they subdued their ejaculations, while Mr. Barrett looked as if he had known it of course. The room was still, save for the dim voice and the soft transcriptions of the stylographic pen.

"I left Judge Briscoe's and went west on the pike to a big tree. It rained, and I stepped under the tree for shelter. There was a man on the other side of the fence—Bob Skillet. He was carrying his gown and hood—I suppose it was that—on his arm. Then



"John, is it you?"

I saw two others a little farther east in the middle of the road. I think they had followed me from the Briscoes' or near there. They had their foolish regalia on, as all the others had. There was plenty of lightning to see. The two in the road were simply standing there in the rain looking at me through the eyeholes in their masks. I knew there were others—plenty—but I thought they were coming from behind me—the west.

"I wanted to get home—the courthouse yard was good enough for me—so I started east toward town. I passed the two gentlemen, and one fell down as I went by him, but the other fired a shot as a signal, and I got his hood off his face for it. I stopped long enough, and it was Force Johnson. I know him well. Then I ran, and they followed. A little ahead of me I saw six or eight of them spread across the road. I knew I'd have a time getting through, so I jumped the fence to cut across the fields. I lit in a swarm of them. It had rained them just where I jumped. I set my back to the fence, but one of the fellows in the road leaned over and smashed my head in, rather—with the butt of a gun, I believe. I came out from the fence, and they made a little circle around me. No one said anything. I saw they had ropes and saplings, and I didn't want that exactly, so I went in to them. I got a good many masks off before it was over, and I can swear to quite a number besides those I told you."

He named the men slowly and carefully. Then he went on: "I think they gave up the notion of whipping. We all got into a bunch, and they couldn't

get clear to shoot without hitting some of their own, and there was a lot of gouging and kicking. One fellow nearly got my left eye, and I tried to tear him apart, and he screamed a good deal. Once or twice I thought I might get away, but somebody hammered me over the head and face again, and I got dizzy, and then they all jumped away from me suddenly, and Bob Skillet stepped up and—and shot me. He waited for a flurry of lightning, and I was slow tumbling down. Some one else fired a shotgun, I think, I can't be sure, about the same time from the side. I tried to get up, but I couldn't, and then they got together for a consultation. The man I had hurt—I didn't recognize him—came and looked at me. He was nursing himself all over and groaned, and I laughed, I think; at any rate my arm was lying stretched out on the grass, and he stamped his heel into my hand, and after a little of that I quit feeling.

"I'm not quite clear about what happened afterward. They went away—not far, I think. There's an old shed, a cattle shelter, near there, and I think the storm drove them under it to wait for a slack. It seemed a long time. Sometimes I was conscious, sometimes I wasn't. I thought I might be drowned, but I suppose the rain was good for me. Then I remember being in

motion, being dragged and carried a long way. They carried me up a steep, short slope and set me down near the top. I knew that was the railroad embankment, and I thought they meant to lay me across the track, but it didn't occur to them—they are not familiar with melodrama—and a long time after that I felt and heard a great banging and rattling under me and all about me, and it came to me that they had disposed of me by hoisting me into an empty freight car. The odd part of it was that the car wasn't empty, for there were two men already in it, and I knew them by what they said to me.

"They were the two shell men that cheated Hartley Bowler, and they weren't vindictive. They even seemed to be trying to help me a little, though perhaps they were only stealing my clothes, and maybe they thought for them to do anything unpleasant would be superfluous. I could see that they thought I was done for and that they had been hiding in the car when I was put there. I asked them to try to call the trainmen for me, but they wouldn't listen or else I couldn't make myself understood. That's all. The rest is a blur. I haven't known anything more until those surgeons were here. Please tell me how long ago it happened. I shall not die, I think. There are a good many things I want to know about." He moved restlessly, and the nurse soothed him.

Meredith rose and left the room with a noiseless step. He went out to the stars again and looked to them to check the storm of rage and sorrow that buffeted his bosom. He understood lynching, now the thing was home to him, and his feeling was no inspiration of a fear lest the law miscarry. It was the itch to get his own hand on the rope. Horner came out presently and whispered a long, broad, profound curse upon the men of the Crossroads, and Meredith's gratitude to him was keen. Barrett went away soon after, and Meredith had a strange, unreasonable desire to kick Barrett, possibly for his sergeant's sake. Warren Smith sat in the ward with the nurse and Gay, and the room was very quiet. It was a long vigil. They were only waiting.

At 5 o'clock he was still alive—just that, Smith came out to say. Meredith sent a telegram to Helen which would give Plattville the news that Harkless was found and was not yet gone from them. Horner left for the station to catch a train. There were things for him to do in Carlow. At noon Meredith sent a second telegram to Helen as barren of detail as the first. He was alive; was a little improved. But this telegram did not reach her, for she was on the way to Rouen, and half of the population of Carlow—at least so it seemed to the unhappy conductor of the accommodation—was with her.

They seemed to feel that they could camp in the hospital halls and corridors, and they were an incalculable worry to the authorities. More came on every train, and nearly all brought flowers and jelly and chickens for pre-



"I set my back to the fence."

paring broth, and they insisted that the two latter delicacies be fed to the patient at once. They were still in ignorance of the truth about the Crossroads and spent the day (it was Sunday) partly in getting in the way of the attendants and partly in planning an assault upon the Rouen jail for the purpose of lynching Slattery in case Harkless' condition did not improve at once. Those who had heard his statement kept close mouths until the story appeared in full in the Rouen papers on Monday morning. But by that time

every member of the Crossroads White Caps was lodged in the Rouen jail with Slattery. Horner and a heavily armed posse rode over to the muddy corners on Sunday night, and the sheriff discovered that he might have taken the Skilletts and Johnsons single handed and unarmed. Their nerve was gone. They were shaken and afraid, and, to employ a figure somewhat inappropriate to their sullen, glad surrender, they fell upon his neck in their relief at finding the law touching them. They had no wish to hear "John Brown's Body" again. They wanted to get inside of a strong jail and to throw themselves on the mercy of the court as soon as possible. And those whom Harkless had not recognized made no delay in giving themselves up. They did not wish to remain in Six Crossroads. Bob Skillet, Force Johnson and one or two others needed the care of a physician badly, and one man was suffering from a severely wrenched back. Horner had a train stopped at a crossing so that his prisoners need not be taken through Plattville, and he brought them all safely to Rouen.

It took nearly a week to persuade the people of Plattville that it was better

for them to go home, and it was only the confidence inspired by the manner of the two eminent surgeons (they lay in wait at all hours to interview these gentlemen) that did persuade them to return—this and the promise of two daily bulletins.

As many of them said on their return, Plattville didn't "feel like the same place," and a strange thing had happened—for the first time in five years the Carlow County Herald missed fire altogether. Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday passed. Mr. Fisbee only sat staring out of the dingy office windows with Parker in a demented silence. There was no Herald; there was no one to get it out.

In the Rouen hospital John Harkless feebly moved on his bed of pain. His constant delusion was that the universe was a vast, white heated brass bell and he a point at the center of it, listening, listening for years, to the brazen hum it gave off and burning in hot waves of sound.

Finally he came to what he would have considered a lucid interval had it not appeared that Helen Sherwood was whispering to Tom Meredith at the foot of his bed. This he knew to be a fictitious presentation of his fever, for was she not by this time away and away for foreign lands? And also Tom Meredith was a slim young thing and not a middle aged youth with an undeniable stomach and a baldish head who by the preposterous necromancy of fever assumed a grotesque likeness of his old friend. He waved his hand to the figures, and they vanished like figments of a dream; but, all the same, the vision had been realistic enough for the lady to look exquisitely pretty. No one could help wishing to stay in a world which contained as charming a picture as that.

But the next night Meredith waited near his bedside, haggard and disheveled. Harkless had been lying in a long stupor. Suddenly he spoke, quite loudly, and the young surgeon, Gay, who leaned over him, remembered the words and the tone all his life.

"Away—and away—across the waters," said John Harkless. "She was here—once—in June."

"What is it, John?" whispered Meredith huskily. "You're feeling easier, aren't you?"

And John smiled a little, as if, for the moment, he saw and knew his old friend again.

That same night a friend of Rodney McCune's sent a telegram from Rouen: "He is dying. His paper is dead. Your name goes before convention in September."

CHAPTER XI.

MR. ROSS SCHOFIELD was engaged in decorating the battered chairs in the Herald editorial room with blue satin ribbon, the purchase of which at the Dry Goods Emporium had been directed by a sudden inspiration of his superior, Mr. Parker of the composing force. It was Ross' intention to garish each chair with an elaborately tied bow, but as he was no sailor and understood only the intricacies of a hard knot he confined himself to that species of ornamentation, leaving, however, very long ends of ribbon hanging down after the manner of the pendants of rosettes. Mr. Schofield was alone at his labor, his two confreres having betaken themselves to the station to meet the train from Rouen.

It was a wet, gray day. The wide country lay dripping under formless wraps of thin mist, and the warm, drizzling rain blackened the weather beaten shingles of the station, made clear reflecting puddles on the unevenly worn planks of the platform and dampened the packing cases too thoroughly for occupation by the station lounge. The bus driver, Mr. Bennett, and the proprietors of two attendant "cut under" and three or four other worthless whom business or the lack of it called to that locality availed themselves of the shelter of the waiting room, but the gentlemen of the Herald were too agitated to be confined save by the limits of the horizon.

They had reached the station half an hour before train time and consumed the interval in pacing the platform under a big cotton umbrella, addressing each other only in monosyllables. Those in the waiting room gossiped eagerly and for the thousandth time about the late events and particularly about the tremendous news of Fisbee. Judd Bennett looked out through the rainy doorway at the latter with reverence and a fine pride of townsmanship. He declared it to be his belief that Fisbee and Parker were waiting for her now.

For all Carlow knew why Fisbee had gone to meet the strange lady at the station when she had come to visit the Briscoes, why he had come with her to the lecture, why he had taken supper at the Briscoes' three times and dinner twice when she was there, Fisbee had told the story to Parker on a melancholy afternoon as they sat together in the Herald office, and Parker had told the town. It was simple enough indeed, and Fisbee's past was a mystery no longer. It might have been revealed years before had there been anything in particular to reveal and if it had ever occurred to Fisbee to talk of himself and his affairs. Things had a habit of not occurring to Fisbee.

Mr. Parker, very nervous himself, felt his companion's elbow trembling against his own as the great engine, reeking in the mist and sending great clouds of white vapor up to the sky, swooped down the track, rushed by them and came to a standstill beyond the platform. Fisbee and the foreman made haste to the nearest vestibule and were gazing blankly at its barred approaches when they heard a silvery laugh behind them and an exclamation.

(Continued Next Sunday.)