

WHEN THE JUDGE STOOPED

By Edison Skehan

Illustrated by Ben Cohen.



THE biggest thing in Pleasantfield was the new First National Bank Building.

The most active was Tud Smith's store, and, by general opinion, the most impregnable the reputation of Judge Phineas Thatcher.

The law business of the town was unequally divided.

A man with an honest grievance walked boldly up three short steps, bent

witches, bogymen and the supernatural. stopped me. What in blazes are you staring at?"

There was a deep-seated misery in his face. Oblique lines that started from the quivering nostrils drew the corners of his mouth down in a perpetual scowl of pain.

The fleshless cheeks drooped, flopping, in tiny bags, and the skin sagged from his eyes.

He was harried and troubled, and his glance, when not intro-

Crewe's taut nerves thrummed in irritation.

"But Weeks wasn't killed; that is, nobody killed him but himself," retorted the judge, starting from his chair, but still retaining a grip on the handles.

"He was found Christmas night, and the next we knew you were gone. But it was suicide, all right, for he was still holdin' the gun in his hand, and on the floor beside him was a long,

Complete satisfaction now was expressed in the countenance of Emmet Crewe. The limp mouth went upward in a happy smirk, and the narrow eyes widened a bit.

He folded fat hands across his stomach and straightened up comfortably in his chair.

There was silence for a minute or two. It was evident that he was going to say nothing further in explanation.

Judge Thatcher, who was pacing the office in the solemn, contemplative manner he used when deep in thought, suddenly turned on him.

"It appears to me, Crewe, that you ain't playing fair. You come here tor-



A corner of the paper stole over the heat, remained there a second, curled upward, and then burst into flame.

to avoid the low entrance, and was in the judge's office.

If his intentions were otherwise, he walked furtively into the quarters of Ed Sloat across the street, who was a lawyer of another kind.

The judge had stormed his way righteously through thirty years of practice. It is a tribute to the commercial integrity of Pleasantfield that he got most of its legal business.

He was of the Puritanical, sternly upright type, with the compound attributes of Abe Lincoln and Daniel Webster; though his resemblance to Lincoln was chiefly physical, and he was, perhaps, homelier. His face intuitively suggested hands that were big and calloused and muscular, and feet that were large and bunioned.

The judge had both. Also his legal ability kept him the judgeship at the county seat and increased his clientele.

Into the musty office one day walked a figure that was distantly familiar.

Thatcher, who had been blowing his nose with an efflorescent red handkerchief, suddenly stopped and stared at his visitor.

"Hello, Crewe!" he said, with the dry inflection of one not intensely pleased. "What are you doing here? I thought you had made up your mind to stay in foreign parts."

Crewe looked about him with a gaze that rested on everything and noted nothing. His eyes bore that look of intensive brooding that has such a lively fascination for street urchins and connects the juvenile mind with the thought of

spectively quiet, had the nervous suspicion of a caged animal.

At last it rested on the neutral point of the judge's brace of squat inkwells, and he began to talk.

"Yes, I thought I would stay abroad," he returned in a voice which was weak and husky, as though it had never been used; "but that was two years ago. I simply could not do it."

"Not that I was in hidin'," he flared; "I traveled around quite free, almost hop-in' that they would ketch me, but they never did. It was too much, though. I kept seein' things—long, awful nights of thinkin' and wonderin' and dreamin' about it. Then it was up again the next morning, and chasin' away to somewhere else to try and forget; but the damned thing never left me. God, it was awful!"

"Now I've come back to give myself up. I knowed you was his friend, and a judge, too, and I come right here. Those two years have been a livin' torture."

Judge Thatcher, resting one booted leg on an opened desk drawer and still holding his handkerchief suspended, dropped both suddenly and sat up in his chair.

"Great Jehoshaphat!" he exclaimed. "Man, what are you talking about? Do you hold yourself responsible in any way for the death of Gideon Weeks? Is that what you're drivin' at?"

"Sure! Didn't I kill him, and didn't I get away with it? I've been chasin' around ever since, and nobody ever

scrawled-out note sayin' good-by to his son and a partin' word to all his friends. It was a genuine document, for there isn't a soul could imitate his writin'."

The flaccid countenance of Crewe grew vivid in astonishment, and he sank into a chair. His eyes were closed.

When he opened them their dullness was gone and they shone with feverish brilliancy. His lips muttered incoherent words, and he started up, but slumped back again in an exhaustion of relief.

For him the judge's words had been the trumpets of paradise. To have lived under the tyranny of a gnawing conscience for two years, and then to find fears and terror-quakings groundless, is to open Elysium.

Compared with this, the ordinary troubles of mankind are as the infinitesimal mustard seed.

But there might be some mistake. His face sharpened in anxious inquiry.

"Did you say it was a gun he held in his hand, judge? Was it a gun? Where was he when they found him?"

"He was found in the north room by Sam Weeks' little boy," the judge returned. "You know, the little feller was the only one of 'em that old Gideon would abide in his later days. And when Sam sent his son up toward dusk o' Christmas with a little basket o' puddin' and a pie, and some turkey and sich, the kid came back screamin' murder. You was having dinner with the Beasleys at the time, I believe."

tured by guilt, and I set about and take a hull lot of worriment off your conscience. Now you've got to

tell me all the story, from first to last. "In the first place, why did you try to kill him—what was the reason?"

The judge, as an afterthought, led the way into a smaller room which he used as a consulting office and closed the door.

His visitor flopped sullenly into a chair.

"There's nothing much to tell," he began complainingly. "I simply poured a few drops of hydrocyanic into his coffee at luncheon and then beat it. I slipped the bottle holding the rest of the stuff into his jacket, so as to make it seem as though he had taken it on a sudden impulse."

"But why?" reiterated the judge. "Why were you fixin' to kill him?"

"He made a will—"

Crewe paused, and his eyes widened as he stared at the entirely conventional pattern of the judge's wall paper with an unseeing eye.

Upon his mind came the breaking light of a new discovery which the lightning shift of circumstances had not permitted him to notice before. He saw it now, and it was a veritable golden aura.

"For heaven's sake!" he gasped, rising from his seat. "Did they find it—the will?"

"What will?" he asked stupidly.

Crewe immediately showed every evidence of happy lunacy, and clumped up and down the room in a crescendo of heavy footfalls that made the office shake. He puffed outrageously, and dove his