

your old shop! Then you'd make a living. If she'd married me, I'd been batting .400. Now, see I'm a busher and going down."

Wiley sat listening. "I suppose," he murmured, like a man who relishes his anticipation but draws back from its ends. He had swung the circle of the West like most of the Midland young men. Homesteading in Dakota, mining, timber cruising, selling real estate, running country papers, leading forlorn hopes of impossible reforms in the wide-open camps of Nevada and Montana, fruit raising on the Matagorda coast of Texas, exploiting reclamation projects in Louisiana—always the enthusiast, the dreamer, gaining, for himself nothing at all except the ardor of the game—the mighty and expiring drama of the old West in the nineties he had seen and lived and exulted in; free-footed and shiftless for sixteen years he had missed nothing of the last of the great days. He had written once of the final round-up in the southwestern cattle country and its epic note had aroused the magazine makers for its brilliance and its pathos. A dying flame with the life it celebrated. He had done nothing more; he was back in the old town, and merely Curran of the News.

He looked from Janet Vance's office window to his shop, a long one-story building, unpainted, gray, like a worm that had crawled hungrily down from the bluff to High street, to stare at the court-house from its two grimy windows. You would never have thought that out of this lethargic monster came more contraband opinions, and into it more unpaid bills than any print-shop in Iowa.

Over the lawn from the basement jail came a man who smelled of carbolic acid. The town kids knew he was a "trusty" and that some of the prisoners came every day to get the exchanges from the News office. The fumigated one spoke pleasantly to the editor and went in for the papers. He rummaged the editor's desk, opened a drawer and filled his pipe from the editor's tobacco, and came out. In the drawer were two dollars of the editor's money but the jail-bird did not touch them—that wouldn't have been playing square with "Wiley".

Rube watched him go back to the court-house jail. Around the square lights were coming now and then; from Dickinson's grocery, the Hub Clothing House with its Isenbaum & Kickenheimer clothes from New York; the Palace of Sweets, with a departing group of high-school girls, and a countryman gazing in the window millpond at the gold fish; the First National Bank with the gilt legend, "Van Hart & Donley", above the cornice, and before it the historic hitching-post with the lead bullet implanted in the copperhead riot of '63—prosy and commonplace it might be, but how dear and familiar was it all!

Even Wiley T. Curran, the town's insurgent, knew it, now that he was back, a bit gray about the temples after years on the great highway beyond the everlasting hills.

Rube voiced the curious call of home-coming: "It's funny how sometimes we all want to get back. There was the two Schnitzler boys and Morrison—ain't he in the bank, now? And you and me—once Hen McPettridge baited a fly clean up in the court-house clock and stopped it for six months—remember? And the night we was stealing Tanner's grapes, and you fell through the arbor on the old woman, and they pinched you—remember? What's Thad Tanner doing now?"

"Still running the county board—making us on bridge contracts."

"Same little old boss, eh? And Boydston and Curry—still on the board and putting Tanner's work through?"

"Sure."

"And Old Mowry, the undertaker, still living across from the Widow Eteger's and watching for the old lady to die, eh?"

"Yes—still buying his groceries of Dickinson, the old lady's nephew, though he hates him worse'n poison, because he figures on getting the case when she passes. Yes, sir—seven years now Mowry has traded at Dickinson's waiting for the widow to pass, and every week they expect her to go, and she hangs on."

Rube looked across at the widow's garden, its canas and fire-bush brilliant in the dusk. "Suffering Johnson, don't anybody ever die here, Wiley?"

"No. If they did the News would have a linotype, Rube, and be a daily; and the old town would have street lights and sidewalks. Look at Earlville with its factories springing up, and the way they're opening up the soft coal streaks on the upper creek! Why we could have had all that if people here had allowed the railroad to come in! They chased away a fifty-thousand-dollar canning plant last spring because they didn't want a factory class in Rome. I came pretty near suspending publication when I heard that."

"What Rome needs is a few first-

class funerals, Wiley."

"You bet!" prayed the editor fervently.

"Wiley," murmured Rube, "you get out the rottenest paper in Iowa, and the old town it has no manner of use for you, but I like you. You ain't batting anywhere near .300, but you can carry bats. I'm coming up to supper tonight."

"Sure thing, Rube!" The editor glanced to the back of his lot where the cottage light was glowing. His old housekeeper was always prepared for guests, for to Mr. Curran's table came every unknown itinerant of the road—shy farmers from the backwoods bottoms of the north side of the county, blacklisted railroad men from the Chicago strikes, any one, in fact, who had no welcome elsewhere.

The editor languidly snapped his watch. The pressmen had long finished with the paper; and although the pettifogger's pleading still came from the court room, the warm September dusk had fallen. Somewhere up the bluff a cow was bawling, and from the high school campus came the caroling of boys' voices.

"Court's late with that case," murmured Rube, "and ain't that the judge's son come to drive him home now?"

A young man was getting out of a rather smart rig at the court-house hitching-rail. He helped after him a girl in white, and though the evening hid their faces, the frank and easy banter of their parting made plain their camaraderie. The girl tripped on to a store, and the young man sauntered toward the News office. Half-way across, his careless hand came to Wiley Curran. Then his eye went to Rube. He leaped the tarweed gutter and grasped his uncle's hand.

"Why, Rube," he cried in his rare friendliness. "Put her there! Wiley and I saw in the Tribune about that triple you and Kelly and Schmitz put over in that last game with Peoria—some class, Rube!"

Rube grinned appreciation. "Flare-up, Harlan. My arm's all in." He held this good-humored, lithely-built nephew off and looked him over. His blonde hair curled in a likable way for women

and his smile had openness and serenity. Yet in his heartiness there was reserve. His clothes helped that indefinable impression of class and poise which was inherited; but above all significant distinctions there stood forth his blithe and common-sense democracy, that uneradicable quality of the best American.

"Harvard," went on Rube, "don't seem to have much on you."

Harlan laughed. He pounded Rube's dusty shoulder. "Come on up to dinner, Rube. Father and I want a line on the world's series!"

Rube hesitated. "I'm a-going with Wiley, son. Somehow, I couldn't talk baseball up at your house. The judge is all right, but somehow a man can't hang out at a livery-stable and feel at home with your mother. She always looks as if I smelled!"

Harlan smiled slowly. "Oh, come on!" But he was thinking. Everybody knew Rube would work all winter at Carmichael's stable and get drunk on bootleg whisky with printers and farmhands, and his mother—well, Rube finished the thought. "You see, Harlan, your mother's a mighty fine woman, but there's never much between us. Up at your table my hands and feet seem so blamed big—and once, Harlan, I busted right into a wimmen's club when I went there!"

Wiley and Harlan shouted. Rube, the black sheep, at Mrs. Van Hart's club meeting—they could imagine that!

Rube went on grinning: "When you and Elise Dickinson get married and have a home, I'll come up and tell you how to put 'em over the plate."

Harlan's reserve came back. "Rube, I'm not engaged to Elise. Every time I go back to school somebody starts that yarn."

Wiley watched him keenly. He could see the rich grocer's daughter down High street apparently waiting at the drug-store corner. Elise was going East to school this year—Bryn Mawr or Wellesley—Wiley recalled. He thought it was Mrs. Van Hart who prompted this rather than have Miss Dickinson "fish" at the Baptist Seminary in Rome. Mrs. Van Hart's word

was of weight on High street—and the grocer had more money than any one except Thaddeus Tanner.

But something in Harlan's straightforward declaration decided Wiley that the mother's grooming of a prospective daughter-in-law would be in vain. Elise was an extraordinarily "nice" girl. There was no doubt of that. But what attracted Curran the most was some potential rebellion in Harlan. Judge Van Hart's wife was not only the arbiter of High street, but it was said, with show of truth, that she ruled her family with something of the authority of a grand dame of the old school. Mr. Curran and the News were her pet aversions—as Mr. Curran mischievously knew, but nothing had ever withheld the affectionate friendship of Harlan and himself.

"Well, I didn't know," muttered Rube apologetically. "All the kids grow up and get married. Except Wiley and me—but then we never grew up!" And he and Wiley laughed wistfully together. "Well, I'm going down to the station and lug up my stuff," went on Rube. "Tell Aunt Abby to have hot biscuits, Wiley . . . and honey!"

The town kids straggled after Rube. "Nobody," sighed Mr. Curran, "wants to be an editor."

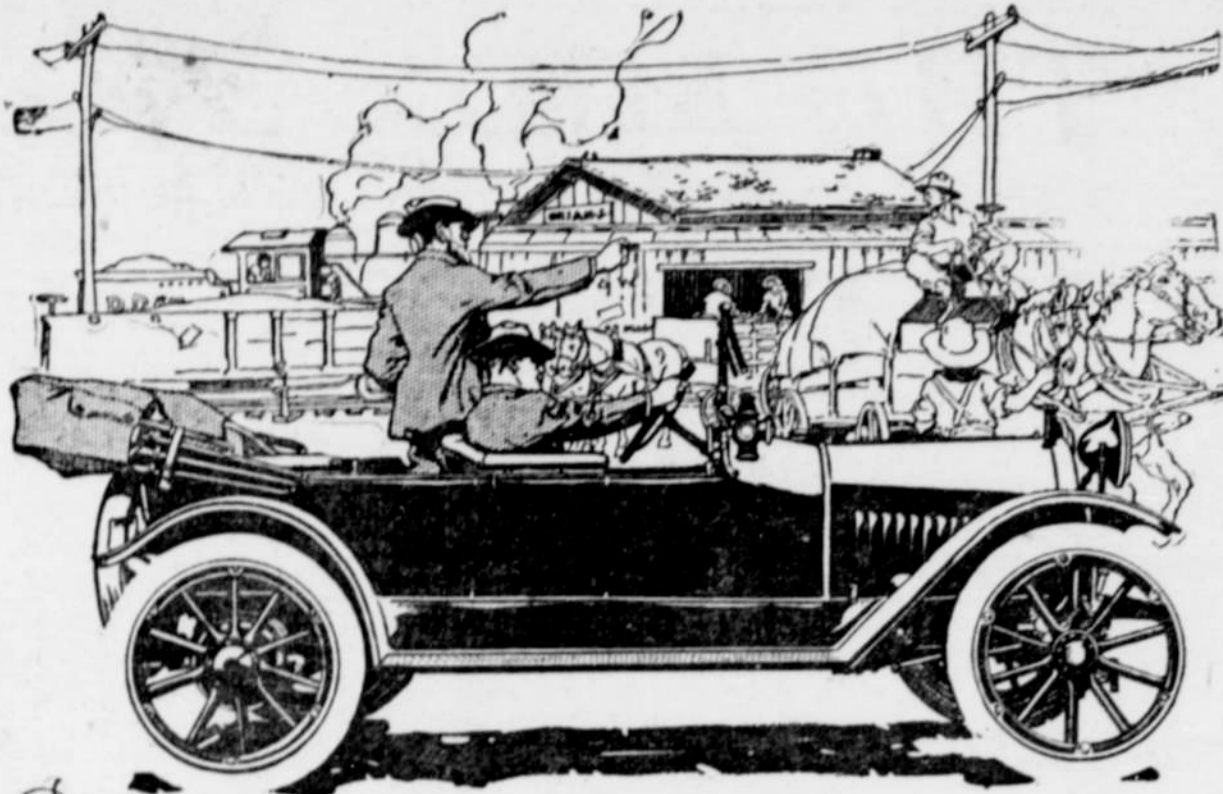
Nobody did. At least nobody in Rome. All the kids would rather grow up to be noble and handsome and great and able to bat .400 like Rube Van Hart. They would rather sneak into Carmichael's stable and help bed the horses than go fishing.

Only two of all the bare-legged crew remained. The yelps and kyoodles had wandered home or after Rube and his idolators—all except the Widow Steger's dog, a long, strange, German sort of dog with no legs to speak of, a lonesome boyless kyoodle that had to go home early and sleep under the geranium box.

(To Be Continued)

A Chink by the name of Ching Ling Fell off a street car—bing! ding!

The con turned his head,
To a passenger said,
"The car's lost a washer"—ding! ding!



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