

"THE MIDLANDERS"

By Charles Tenney Jackson

(Continued From Last Week)

Harlan looked with friendly interest at the two urchins remaining. They were a fair, open breed of the North, tow-headed, sunned by wholesome summer. The editor smiled at them from his desk which he was locking. The Danish boys held his fancy; he was given to sentimentalizing over the race fusion of the West, and the editorializing of that sort when he ought to have been down meeting trains for the personals, or noting the fall millinery openings around the square.

"Well, Knute," he began, and the elder of the two found some awkward fearlessness to address him:

"We just thought you might know first," Knute said. "Just as soon as the jury gets in."

Curran glanced across at the court-house again. "Oh, yes. Your dad's case is on, isn't it? Hope he licks 'em, Knute!"

The boy flushed gratefully. "Mr. Mason said we'd win sure!" His young note of faith arose. "He said what's law and justice for if Old Thad don't have to dig up for having his crusher fixed so's paw'd get his arm cut off. Mason, he said what's law and justice for if a poor man can't win against a rich man."

The judge's son listened with a smile. Next to Wiley Curran, Lufe Mason, the lawyer, was the demagogic scalawag of Rome. Wiley reached a hand to pat Knute's head. "Little man! Hope you win—you ought to."

Knute's courage grew. "Well, here's Harlan, his dad's judge. And the whole county says Judge Van Hart's the finest man there is. He wouldn't let Old Thad Tanner get the best of dad in a suit, would he?"

A curious consciousness came to Harlan's face. He caught Wiley's pitying smile. "Lindstrom's suing Tanner for the loss of his arm at the quarry," the editor said. "Tanner offered two hundred as a settlement, but Mason persuaded John to sue. And I'm afraid—he checked his voice—"well, contributory negligence and all that. Lord, lord—two hundred for a man's right arm—a workman's arm!"

He looked on Knute's sturdy face. Peter, by his side, peered fearfully at Harlan. To the dusty lads from the Pocket quarry, Harlan was a young man! I hope you win—you ought to," clothes pressed at the Iowa Pressing Club, and bought front seats in the tin opera-house when a show came to town. The town kids in the "nigger heaven" could look down and see Harlan with some pretty girl. Also he went to the frat dances and treated damsels at the Palace of Sweets, and was a "Geek", whatever that was, and studied law back East, and was a notable person in Rome, Iowa. So, surely, to be the son of Judge Van Hart and live on High street and own one of the four automobiles in the county—all this went with law and order and righteousness, and one was deserving, without envy, of having one's pants pressed at the Iowa Pressing Club. If Knute could have apotheosized all that was best in America, next to Rube Van Hart, who could bat .400, he would have placed Harlan, the genial, kindly young man of High street and Harvard.

"Old Thad's a hard one," Knute added, but his voice rose to a triumphant faith. "But law and justice'll beat him! Maybe we'll get a thousand dollars! Aurelle said so. And if we get a thousand dollars, Aurelle's going to have a dress and go to the high-school party! Uncle Mich said so! And Uncle Mich won't peddle no more bootleg whisky if we get a thousand dollars! Then he and paw'll get along better when he don't peddle bootleg whisky. And—" his voice fell solemnly, "if we get the thousand dollars maybe Aurelle'd go to church!"

The editor laughed gracelessly. He could not see Harlan's face as the lads raced across the lawn to the court-house.

"When?" he said irrelevantly, "are you coming back to practice law and expedite the regime of justice, truth, benignity and the other virtues, Harlan?"

"Next year. Father wants me to begin with the old firm. Donley is a good deal of a hack. So there's a chance for me."

"Chance?" Curran sighed. "When, for a Van Hart, was there ever anything but a chance—the golden chance? I suppose everything will be cut out easy for you. You're a son of fortune, Harlan." He looked about his dingy shop, where his father's dreams and his own had ended. "Well, son, you

deserve it. All that's best in our best blood is in you. I'm glad you're going to settle down here. You can do so much—much that I couldn't reach. Your position—just see how these little Dane boys look at you—little Americans in the making, and you stand for all America to them—justice, law, order." He checked his rhapsodizing at Harlan's smile. "Old chap, I mean it!"

Between the two was a comradeship which their years belied. Many a night of the long quiet summer Harlan had lounged in Wiley's shop, and while the old job-press clanked they argued sophomorically of the day's questions. The West was astray with newer delineations of democracy, and Curran, the inutile Celtic poet and enthusiast, felt the pulsing. Socialism, the initiative and recall, direct election of senators, the checking of judicial tyranny; these, along with the little common issues of the county—municipal ownership of the water-works, road-building, drains to carry off Sinsinawa's overflow, inquiries into the Tanner Company's county contracts—all these Wiley had put before Harlan in his years of mental growth through high school.

He knew of the judge's conservatism, of all the influence of birth, breeding, association which were about the younger man, and he felt a master's pride, a jealous triumph, that he was forming Harlan's deeper ideals. The Van Hart's had a tradition formed by Harvard, the Atlantic Monthly, a New England ancestry and generations of thrifty but not burdensome wealth. A tempered blood, a certain coldness in looking on the larger aspect of affairs, all this went with the judge's calm, kindly, imperturbable example. The West had not broken the sense of their culture. They were the cautious, genial Americans of the constitution whom one means by "the best people."

Except Rube. He was extra-constitutional and a reversion. Even Harlan could sympathetically understand why Rube's hands felt too big at his mother's dinner-table.

They walked out through the warm scented night. Wiley sighed. "Old boy, I suppose this is about the last. You'll be gone now for a year. And Arne Vance is going back to Wisconsin to finish up his agricultural course; and Janet'll be too busy with school affairs to find time for our meets in the old shop. When we talked most of the night—us four. You've meant so much to me. Janet says we ought to get out the July number of The Inland Empire for Christmas."

Then they both shouted irrepressibly. The Inland Empire was a puling monthly the quartet had started a year ago with some vast hope of harboring therein the genius of the Midlands. It was always in the Earlville printshops, waiting for the editors to pay the printers' bills, four months behind its date-line of issue. Janet Vance's salary usually went to helping on the hamstrung magazine. Wiley Curran never had any money, and the Van Hart's did not take kindly to Harlan's connection with the project.

As the two stood chuckling on the corner, from the court-house windows there came the bellow of a man's voice. It jarred and reverberated far down High street with its sleepy homes tucked in the dusk, a red lamp here and there, fanned by the air of the odoriferous country. Then came a silence. It was as if the entire town, the sober, decent community, stopped, shocked by some blasphemy. But what the two men on the corner heard now was the voice of Harlan's father, quiet, sure, insistent with authority against the hoarse passion of the other: "The court can not—" they could only catch a word here and there—"intolerable . . . the law . . . Mr. Bailiff . . . John Lindstrom. Contempt!"

Then a lower bull-like answer dying away; and the shuffle of feet.

Harlan ran across the lawn with Wiley following. As they entered the basement by the jail door a little procession came down; a big rough man, and by his side, Marryat, the sheriff. The prisoner looked ahead, his blue eyes dulled, the week's growth of beard on his face twisted into ugly lines. His right sleeve swung empty from the elbow. Behind him was Lufe Mason, his attorney, perplexed, whispering to Jewett, the pot-bellied district attorney who listened apathetically.

The big man went down. At the jail door he stopped and raised his huge fist to shake it up the stairs. Harlan saw there his father who had just come out of his chambers and was watching Lindstrom, his face a

study in control, in breeding, against the other's primal anger.

"Damn the law!" Lindstrom strode on. "Damn the court!" He turned with Marryat's hand on his shoulder. The jurors, loitering, whispering, putting on their coats, were silent. The judge looked steadfast at the prisoner as if in himself was the spiritual inviolability of the law which could listen and endure; which had pronounced and could be patient. Harlan was at his side, and now his firm lips moved. "Lindstrom lost his case. He had none—I directed against him. The law is clear"—he stopped, and for an instant Harlan had a glimpse of the outrage and horror in his father's soul—"he cursed the law. I sent him down for contempt." The judge shivered though the air was warm. "Come on—let us get the fruit for your mother."

The young man did not follow at once. He, too, seemed dazed, but more at his father's suffering than at Lindstrom's crime. And as he watched the jailer search Lindstrom, taking from his pockets a knife, a bit of string, a nickel and a piece of tobacco, all pitiful and futile, this pocket of a poor man—Harlan saw a group on the court-house lawn outside. Two bare-legged and terrified boys and a girl who seemed mothering them against this great fear. Lindstrom saw them also. His one fist shot up over the heads of the jailers. "Ay, home with you, lads! Knute and Peter! There'll be no more school now. "Damn their law, their taxes and their schools! I'll have no more of it for me or mine!"

The girl under the arc light looked back silently. "And you, too, Aurelle!" the big man roared. "I've fed you in my house, but there'll be no more school for you!"

Wiley Curran had started forward with a cry. The judge's son was mute. But it seemed that there was graven on his soul more than the picture there. As if on the velvet lawn, against the peace and order of the town, the rich fat land attentive, a life had been taken in shame; or more than a life, for on the souls of the workman's children there was wrought a hate for all time. He was conscious now that Curran was angrily shouting wild words; that the two lads had fled, and that the slender girl, with a last look as if her bitterness were too large to hurl at them, was following.

The young man felt an intolerable revulsion. He suddenly ran to the corner, staring after her and then dashed on along a street leading to the bluff. When he reached it he saw the girl on the trail among the rocks, running with the lithe swiftness of a doe. He shouted after her:

"Aurelle! Aurelle!"

But no answer came down from the leafy cliff. And after a moment some guilty consciousness stilled his tongue. His class, his kind, his tradition, the blood behind him fought down his man's rebellion. He went back to the square where his father was waiting in the buggy. The men of the town had scattered from the place of justice.

CHAPTER III

The Discard.

They gave Lindstrom, the quarryman, his freedom at the end of the day. All that time he sat staring down the whitewashed corridor at the grimy window beyond which the reddening maples hung. The other prisoners swabbed the cement floor or played with greasy cards, but the one-armed man did not notice them. Marryat, the sheriff, had a real sympathy for him as he sat in the stink of the jail.

"Come, John, man—wash up and be leaving. It was only a day the judge sent ye down for—for cursing the law, John, and that's wrong. But that ye lost the case, that's bad, too, what with the wife and yer crippled arm and all. But Judge Van Hart's a good man, John—and I doubt if any man in all the county was sorer for ye than he—but it was law, John."

The quarry worker took his knife and soiled tobacco and bit of string and went away without word. When a man's fifty and on the ebb of strength, and has felt failure, and thinks of wife and children as he sits holding his empty sleeve, and knows he has lost against the face of a society organized ruthlessly to crush the lower, he has little heart for the comfortings of the jailer.

He went away a newborn criminal. Before, merely the discard of the cities, a mechanic, worker on the structural iron of great buildings until cast aside in this dangerous trade for younger men and more alert. Well, that was

right—the old worker faces that. But Lindstrom was burly and strong. Surely in the country, the fat land, there was place for a man stout of heart and willing, too old to work at his trade, but too young to lose hope. He would save himself from the slag heap of the cities, where in the blatant religion of success, he who fails is either vicious or lazy. So he came to the river bottoms where his wife had heard of an uncle squatted on unclaimed land and truck-raising for a livelihood. There, crowding into Uncle Michigan's house-boat, which had grown through the years by the addition of several crazy lean-tos until it was now a rambling cottage, the Lindstroms were one of the few very poor families of the rich county. They were big with the hope of the country five years ago. They did not know that, first of all, the farmer is a capitalist, and the city man turned adrift there, penniless and with mouths to feed, is helpless. John became a day worker in Tanner's quarries; his wife, a Tennessee woman, long expatriated from her hills, whining to be gone forever of Chicago, was now a querulous invalid, what with labor and child-bearing. There Lindstrom fought his inevitable losing fight; but with Old Michigan's truck-raising, which cloaked his whisky peddling, and John's wages they all got on until Tanner's quarry machine crushed the chief bread-winner's hand.

So it was damn the law! When one is old, bewildered, helpless before all these smooth phrases and precedents, all this fine talk of sleek men to the jury, and one hears the judge direct the verdict against one, does one mince words? Why, then, did the lawyers say one had a right if the judge knew so glibly different? A good workman, too, on the rock pile; quiet, steady, matching his strength against the young men, those terrible, merciless young men who fling the discard aside, take his job and go whistling down the road, pipe in mouth, when the day is done! And now broken crushed bewildered with the smooth talk of lawyers and knowing one has lost—does a man take it calmly when the judge sentences him and his children to beggary? No, he raises his fist—and damn the law!

Lindstrom came back the quarry road to his shanty. He sat across the table from his two freckled sons and the old one-legged soldier whisky-smuggler smoking his pipe by the wood-box. They feared to question the returned jailbird; when his wife whined some complaint, as she held the baby to her flat breast, stirring her pots over the stove, he growled a rough tenderness.

"There, woman. The jail—you can smell it on me, but no matter. And the work—we can do a bit yet with the gardens. It's here we'll stay, for I'll not lift my face in town again. They heaped the filth of the law on me, and my children's name. We'll have no more of their town and schools and all. If I'm no fit man for 'em, my lads are not—we'll take no more of their time and money."

She looked up in her slattern fright. He ruled them with his heavy Puritan's righteousness. Even Aurelle, Michigan's gipsy limb of a girl, under John's foster parenthood these five years since the Lindstroms came, had to be still before him.

"Ah, John!" the mother cried. "Take the children out of school? Knute ready for his seventh grade, and Aurelle in high school. And like to graduate if we can get the dress and all!" She rubbed her bony hand across her chin to ease the sting of the burning pork fat and muttered, "My man's crazy!"

"Damn their schools," he growled—"and courts. God will hold us safe, not man with his fine talk of justice. I'll have no more of it."

Old Michigan took out his pipe to murmur. "John, man—don't take it so bitter. There's enough know you're an honest man. A day in jail—who'll think worse of ye for that?"

The quarryman lopped his big frame over a chair at the table. Year by year he had come to extend his authority over Michigan's sorry house and patch of land snatched from the willow slough of the everchanging river bed. The old Confederate had taken himself to the woods when the Lindstroms overran him too much; Aurelle had been the bond that held him to his niece's family—it made something of a home for her, mean as it might be.

(To Be Continued)