

"THE MIDLANDERS"

By Charles Tenney Jackson

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Synopsis of Preeeding Chapters.

Uncle Michigan, an after the war rebel soldier living with another old Confederate captain in the Louisiana swamps picks up Aurelie, a baby girl, astray from an orphan asylum, on the streets of New Orleans, mistaking her for a boy. The old soldiers have been looking for a boy to bring up and educate that he may revive and lead their lost cause. They bring her up to young girlhood and Uncle Michigan and Aurelie find themselves settled near the Iowa river town of Rome with John Lindstrom, a quarry hand, who becomes soured and turns against the world because he is unjustly sentenced to a day in jail for contempt of the court of Judge Van Hart. Harlan's father—Harlan loves Aurelie and meets her outside the village in the evening and induces her to go with him to his mother to confess their attachment.

Wiley Curran, the town printer, helps Aurelie win the beauty prize offered by a metropolitan paper.

(Continued From Last Week)

His grimace deepened. Through the weeks Janet had watched his progress. He had astonished every one as a campaigner; "tricky," his opponents said, but winning by his likableness. He had been filled with a boy's delight to discover that he could really speak in public—that his old nervous hesitance had gone like a mist before his new ardors, his mercurial enthusiasms. Out in the other counties he had won dashing; but among his home people, he confided to Janet, he was a "lame duck."

He could not explain that. She knew it was because here they had seen his purpose, his hope, his imaginative life come to nothing. He was of that type of which the towns and provincial cities have many—a person whose chaste tastes, intellectual aspirations and social qualities had starved under the stress of making a livelihood. Ideas, finer achievement, all bartered for the standards fixed by a vulgar need. Janet herself had felt the impact; she knew his battle. And so long he had given up! And so late had arisen! He seemed to have forgot his useless years, his defeats, he had gone out among men, and they had honored him.

Today he was in one of his "slumps." Janet went on with her ingenious encouragement. "I wish you knew what a rare mystery you are to the country people. And how splendidly they believe in you! You're a new sort of politician. And I'm very proud, Wiley!"

He still looked ruefully at her. "The fool editor," he mourned—"I wonder if I spoke here—as I must sometime—who'd turn out to listen? You and Aunt Abby, and my printer, and doubtless the undertaker." He sighed, and waved his hand out to the town. "Sometimes the old feeling comes back. I don't belong here, I'm the misfit, Janet. The dreamer—he let his eyes go off to the summer land. It was too rich; never had it hungered, and never from it could arise his epic song—never from this would come the watchers of dawn. I think, sometimes, even now, that I ought to be a starving poet in a garret. Eh, then, Janet! I'd do something!" He came to Harlan with his direct affection and put a hand upon the shoulder of the younger man. "I'd like to be back where you are, boy! And start anew—the slate clean!" He smiled sadly. "What absurdity—me a politician!"

He could run on thus with these two—Janet, with whom he had been schoolmate, and Harlan, whom he had loved after his return. These two had made life livable in his shabby years—they had understood. They had made him keep faith with himself. "I need you two," he murmured; "oh, I need you!"

They saw his eyes, the fondness in them, watching out the door. Then he cried out.

Carmichael's bus was at his platform. Two women were getting out. One was a stout light-haired person. The other was Aurelie Lindstrom. She dropped her suitcase, and lifting her veil, ran forward to Mr. Curran. And she kissed him!

Mr. Curran colored. He was dumfounded. He gasped. This Aurelie! This being, so mischievous with laughter, so rippling with life, so complete with happiness and confident with saucy tricks and clothes and personality!

"Glad to see me, mon ami! Yes—no." She was laughing on, chattering

her barbarous French. "Me—the little savage! Aurelie! Am I changed?"

She turned with an odd foreignness and shrugged, displaying herself for him. And then she saw Miss Vance, and checked herself. Then Harlan, and gasped. But she came to him with the most natural grace and held out a hand.

"And Harlan—glad to see me, are you?" Then to Janet, "And you? I reckon this old town won't know me!" She turned with a little flutter of happiness. Janet decided that Aurelie had discovered herself, a rare trick of making the most of whatever came her way, with a natural player's perception of values. It all enhanced her blithe drollery, this bit of the manners of the world, and she had the wit to utilize it. In no other way could Janet account for the amazingly changed Aurelie. Her lonely pride, her defeated pathos were gone.

She introduced the stranger with a jubilant confidence. "This is Ada Norman, and she was our heavy woman." She sank into Mr. Curran's chair with an air of having done the situation carelessly well. Then she raised her big black eyes limpidly to young Mr. Van Hart, with that belying spiritual pensiveness which must once have so ensnared him. "She knows how to be the coquette," mused Miss Vance—and glanced keenly at Mr. Curran.

Mr. Curran was staring at Aurelie with frank delight. Janet was swiftly aware that his despondency of the hour had vanished. He was in the clouds, his inescapable romance, the love of the bizarre and the daring, had seized him. "Aurelie, you incredible child!" he cried. "How—how—splendidly you look!"

Indeed she did. She knew it. She found happiness in it.

"Mr. Curran," she smiled; "you're the only person—except Uncle Mich—who ever understood me a bit!"

Harlan and Janet were silent. If Aurelie was the vulgarian, this was supposable in her world of vulgarians. Morris Feldman would assure you that the thing was to get the money and the press stuff. He was confident that Miss Lindstrom could do both. And wear clothes. What else was needful?

Wiley saw Harlan's eyes fastened on Aurelie's hand. He knew that Janet also was thinking of the story of Hen McFetridge's diamonds. But Aurelie wore only one little ring! Mr. Curran glanced defiantly at the others. Janet looked at him with a sudden sickness of heart. He was shining-eyed. It took this to delight his vagabond soul—a girl of fluffy clothes, the charm of adventure out in the world, airs and appealing graces, the typical feminine—and he had succumbed.

"Janet!" he cried. "Do you remember her? The little rabbit-hunting savage up in the hills, the defying school child with a heart none could ever find?"

"Nobody ever tried," said the savage with a smile. "Nobody!"

"Indeed not," drawled the languid Miss Norman, "unless it's all the babies and beggars. I wonder how many rehearsals she's been fined just for them!"

"It's fun!" burst out Aurelie. "To have some money and give it away. And to tickle babies—it makes 'em stare so! Miss Norman and I are going to New York and try to get on, but honest, I'd rather have a baby."

Young Mr. Van Hart looked at Mr. Curran. Mr. Curran laughed gracefully. Miss Vance was beginning to smile. She was concluding that Aurelie was comical. Slangy, droll, good-hearted, honest—but all that spiritual chasteness of her face—when she was not laughing—would be harmless after all!

"New York," went on Aurelie. "If one is going to really act, one must go there. And starve, maybe. But Ada says I won't. She knows we'll get on, and the managers will listen to me. You know they said in Denver it wasn't just my face. They said I was worth while—in the newspapers."

"She certainly is," put in Miss Norman. "I never saw any one work a part so hard—all the tricky bits. And it doesn't seem work with her. And she can wear clothes, and in the business that's everything!"

The "heavy woman" looked down at herself. She was quite forty and the stock companies had made her

feel it. "An old trouser like me," she went on, "watches a lot of these kids smoke up and go out. But Aurelie, here, is class. Where she got it, God knows!"

"When Hen and Ben make another fortune," pursued Aurelie, "they're going to buy the tin opera-house, and I'll come back a leading woman and show these old grannies something!"

Miss Norman laughed wearily. Plainly Hen and Ben were provocative of glee to professional people. "Angel Hen!" she murmured.

"Good old Hen!" said Aurelie. Then, quite innocently, "Mr. Curran, do you know Hen McFetridge wanted to marry me?"

"N-no—" Mr. Curran looked evasively at Harlan. Janet had an impression that Harlan was fighting down a blaze of anger.

"But then," went on Aurelie—"everybody was good to me."

"Wanting to marry you, Aurelie?" faltered Mr. Curran; "do you call that being good to you?"

"Of course," demurely, "at least it's interesting."

Harlan was on his feet. He attempted to pass her, and she looked up in wonder.

"You're not going, Harlan. Why, sit down. Tell me all about yourself. I thought"—she hesitated—"since you'd been east you'd be a great man by now!"

"I'm practicing law here," he answered quietly.

"Going to settle down here?"

"Yes."

She looked at him with a pity that stung him. She had grown so amazingly in the year. "I shouldn't think you could stand it. I couldn't. Oh, to be somebody! And do something! I remember the nights I used to climb the hills and stare off across the river and wonder and wonder! Out there was something and I wanted it. And if Mr. Curran hadn't sent my picture to the paper I'd have been there yet—climbing Eagle Point trail at sunset to watch the light go out—just as lonely as of old."

Some way or other they were still. "And dear old Mich!" she went on softly. "Done come up-river! Done goin' to occupy the land! That's what he'd say. Done goin' to find the land of joy!" She turned to Wiley suddenly. "And before I go, I'm going to climb the hills once more. And I'm going out to see 'em all, if Papa Lindstrom will let me on the place. I just want somebody whose eyes get brighter when I come among 'em. And Uncle Mich's will, Mr. Curran!"

"I know they will, Aurelie. And Knute's and Peter's and the baby's! And surely all of us! The land of joy? You'll bring it to them out there, Aurelie. You've sent them so much stuff and money—they'd have half-starved last winter, when Albert, the pedler, was sick, if you hadn't done that. John knew you were sending the money, too, but he pretended he did not. Why, we all like you, Aurelie."

"I'm glad," she answered, and stood in the doorway looking over the town with a forgiving and proud simplicity.

"They do like her," drawled the tired blonde woman from her chair. "I've been in stock five years, and before that seven over the Beckmeyer & Grady circuit spot-lighting a song, and I've seen 'em all. When I tie to a kid, she's got to have it. Split-week vaudeville and cheap stock don't leave you no illusions. But Aurelie—I'm going to take this kid to New York and get her in right if I have to sell my shoes!"

"Are you going there to act?" inquired Mr. Curran innocently.

"Who? Me?" The spot-light artist sat up and turned her heavy, good-humored face to him. "Oh, Gawd—me on Broadway! Say, you're one of these jay humorists, ain't you? Cut out the funny stuff!"

"Now, Ada"—burst forth Aurelie—"you mustn't talk so! You're the best and kindest woman I ever knew!" She turned defiantly to the others: "Oh, the days and nights she coached me, and rehearsed me—and dressed me—and told me how to behave at hotel tables—and everything! Mon Dieu! Each night I say a little prayer for Ada Norman!" She finished softly and was staring out the window. "Maybe this town was right in laughing at me in the old days. I guess I was funny! And I felt so bitter when I went away. But sitting here in Mr. Curran's old shop, somehow, all that is dead. The birds singing up the cliff

and the smell of the corn and clover—it's all so peaceful. I guess I was wrong—everybody would have been my friend if I'd have let them. And now life is big and beautiful. I almost think people would be glad to see me—I could just love the old place!"

Miss Vance glanced out to where her brother was bringing the buggy across the street. Harlan, in the doorway, was listening. But only Mr. Curran looked at her. If Aurelie had breathed a prayer for forgiveness he could not have stood in more mute reverence. And suddenly Janet turned to see his eyes. Then she crossed to Aurelie and lifting the girl's face, kissed her cheek. She could not tell what compassion, what unutterable renunciation, moved her. Only she knew that to Curran Aurelie would ever be the princess whom he had released from the witches' spell. This was the secret of his kindling fires, his new and exultant life. For Janet there would be the steadfast work, the long road. She would still the faint dream of a man's love. The other sort of woman, the primal appeal, would win. Well, she did not need this love, then.

She left Aurelie in a shy surprise, and Wiley in wonder at this demonstration. Janet was not given to it. He watched her and Arne drive away, and Harlan cross to the courthouse. They were guessing at his madness, it seemed.

Aurelie decided that she and Miss Norman would put up at the Parsons House. She wanted to be seen by Miss Amelia and to order, with her new air of the world, the best room and to comment critically on the se-date Parsons House dinner. The Parsons family had kept the Parsons House and once had entertained Stephen A. Douglas. Miss Amelia kept the tradition as well as the hostility so that she had the eminent respect, if not the patronage, of the best people.

Harlan, from his office window, looking absently across the square, saw Miss Norman come out of the News door and go down the street toward the Parsons House presently. Then she paused at the corner of the courthouse park to glance up at the splendor of the August maples. The birds were singing, and the sunlight flickered through. She crossed the lawn to a seat and sat down. Harlan could see her looking about, drawing in the air perfumed with the bloom of the corn and the golden stubble up the hillsides. Her eyes closed, and after a while she slept—just a tired woman of 40 who had worked hard and had no illusions, who was just what the inevitability of work and life makes of all of us. But about the square, in 15 minutes, gossip ran. The bleached-haired lady who had come back with Aurelie Lindstrom from her triumphant \$100,000 prize beauty tour of the west wearing the ill-gotten McFetridge diamonds, was asleep in the park!

No other woman had ever slept in Rome's park. Nothing could have so jabbed convention, nothing so focused comment on Aurelie Lindstrom. All about the square, the stores, the billiard parlor, at Player's corner, at the bank and around the hitching-rails the buzz ran. Harlan heard talk of it from his window. Clerks stopped and told others; farmers stared. Some one asked where was old Marshal Bee; and others said the sheriff's office had jurisdiction as the park was county property.

Wiley Curran, talking to Aurelie in his shop, saw Miss Norman drowsily lurch back under all the mid-summer glory and sleep as a child sleeps.

"Poor Ad!" murmured Aurelie, "she's been tired for ten years and never had such peace and air as this. It's just fine to see her!"

And Aunt Abby, who had hurried down, wiping her floury hands to settle back her "specs" and kiss the wanderer, looked over in the park and said: "Poor dear—let her sleep till supper-time if she will. What else is the park good for except tired people, and maybe heart-sick, too."

But meantime Rome rocked with scandal. Old Marshal Bee was routed from his midday meal and told to do something, and he ambled into the sheriff's office and said they ought to do something. Old Deputy Amos pulled his whiskers and protested. The undertaker came in and denounced both of them, and the district attorney was appealed to, but he shook his head. Never would he wake anybody up just before the primaries!

(To Be Continued)