

"THE MIDLANDERS"

By Charles Tenney Jackson

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Synopsis of Preceding 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 sends her picture to the beauty contest in a Chicago paper, and to everyone's surprise, she wins it. Such publicity and vulgarity shocks the people of Rome. Harlan is incensed, and their love affair is broken off. Receiving offers from the theatrical managers Aurelie here upon the stage, horrifying the town the more, and after a season of barnstorming is starred in musical comedy.

In the meantime Wiley, more to please his old sweetheart, Janet Vance, now superintendent of schools, than anything else, runs for congress. Curran is popular with the progressive people of the community, so in order to prevent him from getting the election his opponents circulate tales of his wild youth, even using his friendship for Aurelie as a basis for some. Meeting a man who had known Curran in his youth they discover that he had secretly married a creole girl in New Orleans. Sending him there they obtain proof that he has a daughter, no other than Aurelie. Being confronted with this the day before election he withdraws from the race in order to protect Aurelie—his child—whose existence he did not know of.

Janet and Harlan discover what has been done before the withdrawal has been made public. They confront Curran's opponents with papers which would do them great harm if made public and so get possession of the withdrawal.

The excitement of the election is overshadowed by the news that Lindstrom, who has been living the life of an outlaw, allowing no one to enter his land, has fired on some of the quartermen, killing the foreman. Curran attempts to talk to the crazed fanatic who has held against the crowd trying to take him all night, but in vain. Aurelie returns, hastens to him across the field, exposed to the firing and is wounded by the volley which kills him.

Rushed to the Van Hart home by Harlan and Curran, both crazed by grief, it is found that she is not severely wounded. Judge and Mrs. Van Hart, who have been opposed to the love between Harlan and Aurelie, consent to the marriage and Aurelie is made happy too by the knowledge that Curran is her father.

To his surprise Curran is elected to congress and realizing at last that Janet is his guardian angel and that he cannot do without her, their love affair is consummated, too, and he takes Janet, who has always been faithful to him, to Washington.

(Continued From Last Week)

"No, I don't. But I want to be loved by somebody just like I am—a sort of wandery person who'd be willing to go off on adventures. And not have any people or careers. Just be brave and foolish, like you."

Mr. Curran contemplated her quite calmly. "Aurelie," he demanded, "are you going ever to marry Harlan?"

"Never, never—never! It was only because I was lonely, and a sentimentalist—is that it? It was such a great thing that summer. But now? Why, I have theatre managers come and help me roll stockings and stick 'em in my trunk! Mr. Feldman just did!"

"Aurelie," went on Mr. Curran steadily and sternly, "about Harlan—you're making a great mistake if you throw him off!"

She regarded him demurely through half-closed limpid eyes.

"Some people I know wouldn't be sorry if I did!"

Aurelie was plainly playing with poor Mr. Curran. He felt it and was enraged. "If you weren't so grown up, I'd spank you! You—a young lady!"

"I'm not. Ask Harlan's mother or some of the Shakespeare club. I'm vulgar and nobody—just Old Michigan's girl!"

Mr. Curran sat despairingly down. Never to him had she been so beautifully buoyant, so arch with joy, so infinite with possibilities, so gay with blithe courage. Love Harlan? Surely not! This was life she was loving—smiles and tears and triumphs—she was enraptured with it all, and she would love no one now! She was finding herself; she was unfolding splendidly, dangerously, out of the

hard and meager years she had served.

"John says the reason he won't let the family have your presents is because you're a contrivance of the devil!"

"But you like the devil's contrivances, don't you, Mr. Curran?"

"I expect I do, Aurelie."

"And you don't care a hang what congress thinks!"

"I'm afraid not, Aurelie."

She came with laughter to him—and kissed him. "Nobody can see us: What's the use of hating anybody? Or being sorry? Or pining because they don't love you? Oh, let's just go on and be fine with every one! I'm trying to be religious. I say prayers when I ain't too sleepy. And I'm collecting Madonna heads, and I give dimes to all the beggars. Ada says it's silly to cross the street to give dimes to people, but I tell her it's religious!"

"Somehow," he muttered, "I have to forgive you. Do you know you are living, Aurelie, every day? That's what it means—to be gay and happy and kind, and not bother too much about other things." He took her hands: "Dear girl, life isn't so much winning anything as always trying. It's better to travel than to arrive, as some one said. And oh, so many years I stood still—until you came, Aurelie! I can't exactly explain it—you can't imagine how you helped me!"

She looked at him wide-eyed. "Helped you?"

"I knew you wouldn't," he went on despairingly.

She was still for a time. "I wish I could understand! It's fine to know you. I never used to feel so hopeless after I met you. You made me happy because you saw something in me—I wasn't just common to you." He looked up to see some grateful shining in her eyes—"And the funny old town—we were both rebels, weren't we? And just suppose you did go to congress, and I became a real actress!" She stood by the window and stared out across the busy street to where, even in Earlville, one saw the encircling hills.

"What then, Aurelie?"

"Why, we'd both remember how we helped each other!"

He went away with a surge of his heart he could not still. "Now write me every week," she had said. "Nice, friendly letters—and not fatherly-advice letters as if you were bald-headed, Mr. Curran!"

When he had gone home, he climbed Eagle Point trail before he could sleep. And he did a curious thing for a possible member of congress; he kissed his fingers toward the eastern hills and whispered:

"Because you're there, Aurelie—just because you're there!"

CHAPTER XIX.

The Way of His Castle.

The day after the autumn primaries, state politics was conscious of a distinct shock. The "Insurgent" governor had triumphed again, but that was expected. But what once was the sensation, attracting even national attention, was the defeat of James S. Hall, chairman of the most powerful committee in congress, confidant of the president—beaten in his home constituency, the sober, cautious counties of the Iowa Reserve, by an obscure country editor!

The press buzzed with explanations. It marked the temper of the rural west: it meant the downfall of traditional control; it was revolutionary, demagogic. Curran was a Socialist, anarchist, freethinker, what not! Nobody knew exactly. Down in his home county folk said: "Well, we always did sort of like Wiley Curran out our way." In the other precincts of the district they said: "That editor put up a slashing fight—he come over here and give us facts!"

Anyhow, Curran was the regular-party nominee. In Rome the best people could not have been more indignant if one of the billiard-hall idlers had gone into the First National bank and deliberately kicked Cal Rice on the shins. It was rumored that Thaddeus Tanner, county chairman, who had complacently promised his bailiwick against the governor's league, was enraged beyond reason. He swore he would not support Curran; the old-line men would vote for the Democratic candidate, whoever that spindling county organization put up, even if it was a yellow dog.

The county talked so much of Cur-

ran's spectacular victory that it forgot the local ticket. But all the old-line county officers were nominated—a Tanner slate clean. Young Mr. Van Hart, nominated without opposition, was the only new face to be in the Rome courthouse. Every one approved of young Mr. Van Hart, a quiet, reserved, altogether likable chap—he would have no opponent from the other party camp.

The Honorable Thaddeus Tanner met young Mr. Van Hart the day after the primary.

"Well, young man, what the devil did you mean by allowing this crazy anarchist to beat your father's old friend for congress?"

"I had nothing to do with Mr. Hall's fight, Mr. Tanner."

The county boss bared his yellow teeth and snorted. "That's what they all say. It's these young fellers did it—fellers like them cow-college students whom Jack Vance and Purcell sent into every district to work for Curran. And these damned labor people over in Earlville—but I notice they all voted for you, Harlan; this McBride, hey?—and his cattle!"

"Conditions are changing."

The boss eyed his nominee with a shrewd doubt. "Young man, did your father ever talk much to you?"

"Father has no use for politics. He'd hardly presume to influence me."

Thad snorted again. These Van Harts always did irritate him with their ideas of the proper thing. Still, they were useful, because their ideas of the proper thing did not allow them to oppose him, either.

"Well, Harlan, I hope you understand you didn't even have to make a fight. People knew your dad—and they could just figure on you. It's a good thing you're our man."

Mr. Van Hart smiled impersonally. "I am not your man."

The county boss stared at him. Then he bit the end off a cigar. Then he spat on the sidewalk against the ordinances made and provided. "Well, I'm a son-of-a-gun!" he murmured. "Curious I never stopped to talk with you before!" Then he rubbed his gold-headed cane against Harlan's sleeve. "Young man, you're mighty young—you'll get over this."

But the Honorable Thaddeus Tanner sidled into Judge Van Hart's chambers after court that day, and had a talk of a number of things, but mostly of Harlan and what a brilliant career he had opened for Harlan. And the next day the Earlville Mercury-Journal—controlled through the stock which Cal Rice's wife owned in it—came out with a fulsome forecast of young Mr. Van Hart's career.

Harlan met Arne Vance reading that column to his sister when he left the office that night. The farmer-student fixed his black eyes on the nominee. "Trying to rope and brand you, eh? See here—Mike McBride and I supposed we had something to do with your big vote."

Harlan smiled. "I think so, Arne. You surely put Wiley over!"

Arne grimaced, nodding his head toward Janet. "I know," continued Harlan. "Every one says she did it!" He put out his hand to Janet in the buggy. She appeared tired and distraught. "It has been a strain, hasn't it? But Wiley—it'll be the making of him, Janet."

She smiled a rare gratefulness. "He can't fail of election now. Only"—she paused and Harlan lifted his serious eyes to hers, "I have sort of a feeling, Harlan, he—he'll do some of the erratic, audacious things that have always wrecked him!"

"Like taking up the cause of these Pocket squatters whom the county is going to evict for the new creek dam—Lindstrom—" muttered Arne. "Did you see the News? He's already pleading some right of theirs."

Janet looked away. "Well, I hope—I trust—but it's like Wiley!" Then she smiled upon them. "Well, I am tired out. I'm going away."

"Away?" Harlan's tone lifted. "To rest?"

"To work. I feel as if—well, my work was done here, Harlan. And I have chances. To speak, to write—well, for all the fine things we used to discuss in the old News office, you remember. The child-labor laws—the women's movement—my old ambitions, Harlan."

He nodded sympathetically. Then muttered: "But your place here—it's hard to fill, Janet. The school system you've made a model for the state!"

Then he was silent. Janet was thinking of the long years' fight. And the best people had not been with her until of late. She was too practical, too busily efficient, to be about the Shakespeare club teas at Mrs. Van Hart's. Harlan sharply differentiated her from the tabby affairs of High street.

He told his mother that night that Janet Vance would resign her next term and go east. The lady elevated her brows wisely. The teas had heard something of the kind. "I suppose that will end the affair between her and Mr. Curran."

"The affair" was a matter of years' gossip. Harlan said nothing; he had never, after a man's fashion, bothered his head about it.

"I imagine it's true, then, that that Lindstrom girl has come between them."

He looked attentively at her with a trace of suspicion of her subtlety. Aurelie's name had never been mentioned between them except in the lady's amiable satire on her "career." But that was common to the town. And Harlan had never looked upon Aurelie's appeal to the erratic romanticism in Mr. Curran in that light. It seemed preposterous. Mrs. Van Hart went on with the cool impersonality, humanized by her sense of amusement, with which she looked on the affairs of her neighbors, even the ladies bemused in the Shakespeare afternoons: "I think it would be quite fit. Those two—Mr. Curran in congress!—and imagine a person who goes along High street whistling to all the dogs on his way to the postoffice, in his shirt-sleeves, in James Hall's seat!"

Harlan looked at her in imperturbable silence. The judge smoked his dinner cigar with his deprecating assent.

"His nomination, my dear, is more than amusing. He—and all the rabble of demagogism—take it as an endorsement by the people of the rant that is subverting our political theory. Our public men, our financiers, persistently yelped at by Curran's sheet, and our sober constituency applaud!" He looked mildly over his glasses. "My boy, I wish you had stayed out of it all!"

"I do not!" The mother was incisive. "It is time he was in the battle. It is the parting of the ways, and there is enough common sense in the county to make Harlan's career. It is the days of the young men."

And to Harlan's mind there came the memory of a phrase. A vision—Arne Vance and the tramp of his young men up the hill. He became conscious of a conflict within him here in the dear, familiar home. Here were his people—the best people, ever clinging to fixed forms, righteous, worthy, leisurely developing but needing inherent privilege—this was the good. But here was another good out in the world; a new, hungry, lustful good, eager to seize, to make place, to break down forms and privilege—this was the eternal battle. There was no ground under a man's feet—he was with one or with the other. And slowly it came to him that, in the eyes of his parents, the eyes of his world—a world rigid with caste, resistant with ideals, however much it might assent to the babble of democracy—Aurelie was the symbol of the lower standards. It was for him to choose, and his love was the crux of it all, a signpost at the parting of the ways. He might fight to win her, try to bear her from the vulgar and common mode, but his social sense told him exactly what that would mean to his people, the "best people," who, with a Nietzschean ruthlessness, must set their faces against the trampling onward marching forces that would level or destroy.

Even now his mother touched on the heart of it. "I see that Mr. Curran's News is insisting that the county, or the benefited landholders, should pay those squatters in the Pocket whose patches will be flooded by the new dam. He insists they have a moral title to that no-man's land."

"And acting on that anarchistic theory," went on the judge, amiably, "Lindstrom drove away the workmen whom the contractor sent there. I call that an excellent example—Curran does not hesitate to put the law aside in his cryings for what he terms justice. To announce outlawry."

"If Lindstrom is an outlaw, father," Harlan said quietly, "the law made him one."

(To Be Continued)