Gene Lees Ad Libitum

Jazzletter

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SONG LAKE SUMMER

Continued

David entered and stood still for a moment. John realized he was waiting to be invited to sit down. John urged him to take the armchair near the writing table in the bay.

"I thought I'd come in an' see how Polly'd got you fixed — whether the casket was worthy o' the jew'l, as I heard a feller say in a theater once. I reckon 'tis a shade better'n the Eagle."

"I should say so. And I am more obliged than I can tell you."

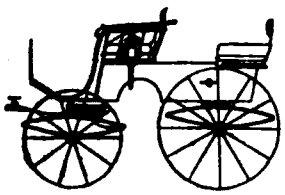
"All Polly's doin'." He reached into his coat. "Feel like a cigar, John?"

"Mr. Hannum," John said, "let me offer you a cigar." He opened one of his trunks and brought out two cigars. "I brought some Havanas from New York for a special occasion, in the event that one should occur, and I should say that one has."

David took the cigar, rolled it between his fingers, sniffed it appreciatively. "This is a trifle better article'n I'm in the habit o' smokin'," he said.

"It's my one occasional extravagance," John said with a hint of apology. Mr. Hannum knew his financial condition. "I don't smoke them exclusively. But I am fond of good tobacco."

"I understand," David said, striking a match on the underside of his chair and holding it out for John. "If I had my life to live over agin, knowin' what I do now, I'd do diff'rent in a number o' ways. I often think of what Andy Brown used to say." He lit his own cigar, puffed until it was well alight, then took it out of his mouth and studied its ember. "Andy was a curious kind of a customer 't I used know up to Syracuse. He liked good things, Andy did, an' didn't scrimp himself when they was to be had — that is, when he had the go-an'-fetch-it to git 'em with. He used to say, 'Boys, whenever you git holt of a ten-dollar note, you want to git it into you or onto you jest's quick's you can. We're here today an' gone tomorrer an' they ain't no pockets in a shroud.'" Mr. Hannum took a pull at the cigar and emitted the smoke with relish. "An' I'm damned if I don't think sometimes that Andy wa'n't very far off, neither. 'T any rate, 's I look back, it ain't the money 't I've spent for the good times that I've had t' regret. It's the good times 't I might's well've had an' didn't. I'm inclined to think that after Adam an' Eve got bounced out o' the garden they kicked themselves as much as anythin' for not havin' cleaned up the whole tree while they was about it."



John laughed, but he was listening with interest. He still felt a twinge of resentment over the incident of the counterfeit bills. But he considered his employer's background, remembering his being cheated on a kicking horse, and if that was the test he had to pass to gain his employer's confidence to this extent, then he was glad he had taken it. Never in the weeks he had been in Homer had David Hannum spoken openly about his feelings and philosophy as he had done in the days since the incident over conterfeits.

"Trouble with me was," Mr. Hannum continued, "that, till I was consid'able older'n you be, I had to scratch gravel like all possessed, an' it's hard work now sometimes to git the idea out of my head but what the money's wuth more'n the things, I guess." He looked at the ivory-backed brushes and the various toilet articles of cut glass and silver on John's bureau and, indicating them with a motion of his hand, said, "I guess that up to about now you been in the habit o' figurin' the other way."

"Too much so, perhaps," John said. "But yet, after all, I don't think I am sorry. I wouldn't spend the money for those things now, but I am glad I bought them when I did."

"Jes' so, jes' so," David said. He reached over to the writing table and laid his cigar on its edge and, dipping a hand into his hip pocket, produced a silver tobacco box, at which he looked contemplatively for a moment, opening and shutting the lid with a snap. "There," he said, holding it out on his palm. "I was twenty years makin' up my mind to buy that box, an' to this day I can't bring myself to carry it all the time. Yes sir, I wanted that box for twenty years. I don't mean to say that I didn't spend the wuth of it foolishly time over an' agin, but I couldn't never make up my mind to put that amount o' money into that partic'lar thing. I was always figurin' that some day I'd have a silver tobacco box, an' I sometimes

think the reason it seemed so extrav'gant, an' I put it off so long, was because I wanted it so much. Now I s'pose you couldn't understand that, could you?"

"Yes," John said, nodding thoughtfully. "I think I can understand it perfectly." And indeed it spoke pages, if not volumes, about David Hannum's unwritten biography. He remembered all that General Woolsey had told him about the man, and somehow Mr. Hannum's yearning for the tobacco box through all those years told John more about what it must be like to grow up in poverty than the Jacob Riis photos and writings about the tenements of New York.

"Yes sir," David said, "I never spent a small amount o' money but one other time an' got so much value, only I always been kickin' myself to think I didn't do it sooner."

"Perhaps," John suggested, somehow wanting to make the years of waiting have value, "you enjoyed it all the more for waiting so long."

"No, it wa'n't that. I dunno. 'Twas the feeling that I'd got there at last, I guess. Far's waiting for things is concerned, they is such a thing as waitin' too long. Your appetite'll change, mebbe. I used to think, when I was a youngster, that if ever I got where I could have all the custard pie I could eat, that'd be all I'd ask for. I used to imagine bein' baked into one an' eatin' my way out. Now'days, they's a good many things I'd sooner have than custard pie. Though," he added with a wink, "I generally do eat two pieces jes' t'please Polly."

John laughed. "What was the other thing?" he asked, fascinated by these revelations. "You said there were two."

"Other thing I bought once? Oh yes. It was the fust hoss I ever owned. I give fifteen dollars for him, an' if he wa'n't a dandy, you needn't pay me a cent. Crowbait wa'n't no name for him. He was stone-blind on the off side, an' couldn't see anythin' in partic'lar on the nigh side, an' had 'most everythin' wrong with him that could ail a hoss. But I thought he was a thoroughbred. I was 'bout seventeen years old then, an' was a helpin' lock-tender on the Erie Canal, an' when the' wa'n't no boat goin' through I put in most o' my time cleaning that hoss. If he got through with less'n six times a day o' me groomin' him he got off cheap, an' I once got up an' give him a little attention at night. Yes sir, if I got big money's worth out o' that box it was mostly a matter o' feelin'. But far's that old plugamore of a hoss was concerned, I got it both ways, for I got my fust real start out of his old carcass."

John was by now sitting forward on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, motionless, the ash on his cigar grown long. He deliberately relaxed. If the intensity of his attention should come to Mr. Hannum's notice, the latter might become self-conscious and discontinue these revelations. When at last he did fall silent, John feared that this had in fact happened. "Well?" he said encouragingly.

It drew Mr. Hannum out of his reverie. "Well, I cleaned him up an' fed him up an' almost got 'im so't he could see enough out of his left eye to shy at a load of hay close by, an' fine'ly I traded him off for another record-breaker an' fifteen dollars to boot."

"Were you as enthusiastic about the next one?"

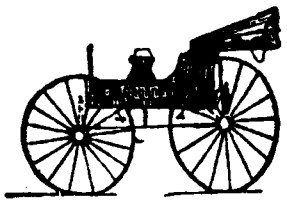
But David had discovered that his cigar had gone out. He lit a match. "Well," he said when its tip was again glowing, "he didn't lay holt on my affections to the same extent. I done my duty by him, but I didn't set up nights with him. You see," he continued, grinning, "I'd got some used to bein' a hoss-owner, an' the edge had wore off some." He smoked for a minute or two in silence.

"Aren't you going on?" John said at last.

"Well," David said, pleased with his audience, "I could go on, I s'pose, fast enough and far enough, but I don't want to tire you out. I reckon you never had much to do with canals?"

"No, I can't say that I have. And there is no danger of your tiring me out."

"All right," David resumed. "As I was sayin', I got another equine wonder an' fifteen dollars to boot for my ol' plug, an' it wa'n't a great while before I was in the hoss business to stay. After two or three years, I had fifty or sixty hosses an' mules, an' took all sorts of towin' jobs on the canal. Then a big towin' concern quit business, an' I bought their whole stock an' got my money back three four times over, an' by the time I was 'bout twenty-one, I had got ahead enough to quit the Canal an' all its works for good, an' go into other things."



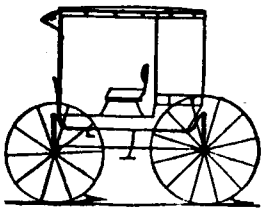
"It must have been a pretty hard life," John said.

David took out his penknife and proceeded to impale the stub of his cigar on its blade. John offered him a fresh cigar, but he said, "No, this'n'll last quite a spell yet. Well, viewing it all by itself, it was a hard life. A thing is hard, though, I reckon, because it's harder'n somethin' else, or you think so. Most things go by comparin'. They was hard things about it — tramping all night in the rain, sleepin' in barns at times, an' all that. An' once the cap'n of a boat got mad at somethin' an' pitched me head over heels into the canal. It was about the close of navigation, an' they was a scum of ice. I scrambled out somehow, but he wouldn't 'a' cared if I'd been drownded. He was an exception, though. The

canalers was a rough set in general, but they averaged for disposition 'bout like the ordinary run o' folks. They was mean ones an' clever ones. Them that would put upon you an' them that would treat you decent. The work was hard an' the grub wa'n't always much better'n you been gittin' at the Eagle."

"Well, frankly, Mr. Hannum, I have been eating much of the time at the Lake House."

They laughed together for a moment, and then David resumed. "The men I worked for was rough an' I got my share o' cusses an' cuffs an' once in a while a kick to keep up my spirit o' perseverance. Yes sir, but the ol' ditch was better to me than the place I was borned in, an' I wa'n't nobody's slave. An' as I growed up a little I was putty well able to look out for myself." He pulled out his watch. "Well, supper'll be ready soon. 'T any rate, I guess you must 'a' had enough o' my meemores for one sittin'."



"No, really, I haven't," John protested. "Don't go yet. I have a little proposal to make to you."

"Well fire it out," David said.

John delved into his trunk and found among his folded sweaters two more cigars and a bottle of sixteen-year-old Scottish whisky. "I propose that you take another cigar and a little of this," he said, holding up the bottle.

"Got any glasses?" asked David.

"Mrs. Bixbee left me a glass, and I have my tooth mug. Glass for you, mug for me. Tastes just as good out of a tooth-mug." He was falling into Mr. Hannum's habit of truncated utterance. Occasionally he caught himself talking like the local folk, perhaps because it facilitated communication with them, perhaps too because of his acute ear for language. The sound of the letter *r* was growing softer in his speech.

"Well," his employer said, leaning back in his chair and holding his hands in front of his face as if to ward off a blow, "under protes', strictly under protes', an' sooner'n have my clo'es tore. I shall tell Polly, if she happens to smell my breath, that you threatened with vi'lence." And he took the glass John poured for me. "Well, here's lookin' at you," he said. He drank his whisky "raw", as they put it in Cortland County.

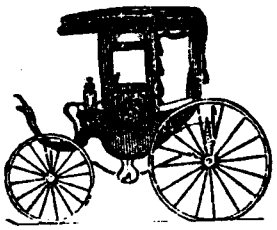
Sipping his own drink, John watched him over the rim of his glass with something bordering on awe. He had never met a man he respected so much.

Chapter Nine

The late days of August passed in a shimmering yellow heat. David urged John to work in shirtsleeves, but John insisted on wearing his dark jacket. On a humid afternoon, David came into the bank, using his hat as a fan, and said, "Ain't this a ring-tailed squealer?" He looked at his employee for a moment, shook his head, and said, "John, it makes me sweat a river jes' t'look at you. If you don't take that coat off, I allow to tie you to a hitchin' post and haul that harness off you myself."

"Well," John said in surrender, "maybe you're right." He removed the jacket and hung it on a coat tree. He was ill at ease at first, facing customers informally attired, but his comparative comfort compensated for the lingering sense of impropriety.

Sometimes after dinner on these hot nights, John would stroll down to the Eagle to sit on the veranda and await the cooler evening air, which sometimes did not come until ten o'clock and sometimes did not come at all. This caused Mrs. Bixbee an unexpressed dismay. It was unexpressed to John, at least; to David she said it was not right for a young man of John's upbringing to associate with those layabouts. But David merely chuckled, and allowed as how he thought John more likely to change them than they him. And John had begun to enjoy their company — the tall tales, the uncomplicated humor, the occasional keen perceptions, and their laughter. And he could not help comparing them to his false friends in New York, who had so politely but unmistakably put a distance between him and themselves when the notice of auction of his family's goods appeared in the newspapers. He liked these Homer people better, in spite of their unworldliness, and in some ways even because of it.



They had learned, no doubt from David, that John had studied in Paris, and they tried to pry out of him wicked tales of his romantic affairs among all the ma-de-moy-zels. He protested that he had had no such adventures. This very reticence convinced the men at the Eagle, who were more taken by John's courtly manners than any of them would have admitted, that he was a man who kept secrets. They became convinced that he was a devastating figure with the ladies, and this rumor, once begun, gained currency.

When Mrs. Bixbee finally expressed to John her reservations about his evening companions, he said, "Aunt Polly, they are mostly good fellows. There is no real harm in them."

Some evenings he would ride Deacon or Kirby, the one horse trailing the other, to a place he had found around the lake, where its waters touched the valley's eastern slope. A stand of birches stood by a large rock that rose out of the water and the land, the smooth trunks like strokes of white paint against the green. The rock was tinged with the green of lichens, and John thought it looked like the back of a brontosaur foraging at the lake edge. He would tie the horses to a tree, take off his clothes, and swim for an hour while the horses, as contented as he, sipped from the lake or pawed its clear pure waters. Cooled now, he would put on his clothes and ride home still damp. He was aware at such times of a serene contentment unlike any he had ever known.

On the last Sunday of August, David asked if he was of a mind to go for a ride in the buggy. On their way out the East Road, David said, "Goin' over t'see a feller name o' 'Lizer Howe. He's got a hoss't I've some notion o' buyin'. He's one of those we call the narrer Baptists. Ever heard on 'em?"

"I can't say that I have."

"They've got the name because they're so narrer in their views that fourteen on 'em can sit side by side in a buggy." David chuckled. "Gittin' 'Lizer t'do business on the Sabbath ain't likely t' be easy. But I hear 't he hurt his foot an' prob'ly can't go t' meetin' today, so I'll give it a try."

Mr. Howe, a farmer in his forties with a deeply creased sun-reddened face, was sitting on his veranda. David introduced John, then said, "How be the folks, 'Lizer?"

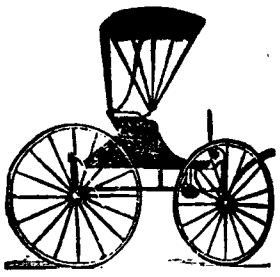
"Fine. An' how's Mis' Bixbee?"

"Fine, thank you. How's your foot gittin' along?"

"Doin' better."

"'Lizer, I see your boy drivin' a hoss the other day that looked a little as if he might match one I've got, an' I thought I'd drive up this mornin' an' see if we couldn't git up a dicker."

The farmer moved in his chair as if to relieve some sudden twinge of pain in his foot, wincing a little, then settling into apparently a more comfortable position. Then he said, "I guess I can't deal with you today. I don't never do no business on Sunday."



"I've heard you was putty partic'lar," David said. "But I'm putty busy about now, an' I thought that mebbe once in a way, an' seein' you couldn't go to meetin' anyway, an' that I've come quite a ways an' don't know when I can see you agin, an' so on, that mebbe you'd think, under all the circumstances, they wouldn't be no great harm in't — long's I don't pay over no money, et cetery."

"No," the farmer said, shaking his head almost mournfully. "I'm glad t'see you, Dave, an' I'm sorry you've took all the trouble for nothin' but my conscience won't allow me t'do no business on Sunday."

"Well," David said with a tone of great sincerity, "I don't ask no man to go agin his conscience, but it wouldn't be no very glarin' transgression on your part, would it, if I was to go up to the barn an' look at the hoss?"

'Lizer Howe hefted the moral weight of the question for some time. "Well," he said at last, "I don't want to lay down no law for you, an' if you don't see no harm in't, I guess they ain't nothin' t' prevent you."

Giving John a nod to follow, David got out of the buggy and walked up the slight slope toward the barn. 'Lizer Howe called after them, "He's in the end stall."

David inspected the horse carefully, feeling its forelegs, examining its teeth, patting its withers. He returned to the front of the house and got back into the buggy. John took his place in the seat beside him. "I suppose," David said to 'Lizer Howe, who had not moved during this time, "that you wouldn't want me to say anythin' more to you, an' I may's well jog along back."

"I can't very well help hearin' yeh, can I, if you got anythin' to say."

"Well," David said, "the hoss ain't exac'ly what I expected t' find, nor jes' what I'm lookin' for. But I don't say I wouldn't 'a' made a deal with you if the price had been right, an' it hadn't been Sunday." He turned to John and gave him a wink with the eye the farmer couldn't see. "I reckon I don't want you t' go agin your princ'ples nor the law an' gospel on my account, but they can't be no harm in s'posin' a case, can they?"

"No. I reckon s'posin' ain't the same as doin'."

"Well," David said, "now s'posin' I'd come up here yesterday an' looked your hoss over, an' said to you, 'What price do you put on him?' What do you s'pose you'd a' said?"

"Well," 'Lizer Howe said, wriggling in his chair, "puttin' it that way, I s'pose I'd a' said one-seventy."

"Yes, I s'pose you would. An' I'd a' said that he wa'n't wuth that money to me, not bein' jes' what I wanted. An' I s'pose I'd 'a' said after that that I'd give one-forty *cash*. Now what d' you s'pose you'd 'a' said?"

"I don't know just what I would 'a' said. But I *guess* I'd a' said, 'If you'll make it one-fifty you can have the hoss.'"

David nodded understandingly. Then he said, "Well now, s'posin' I was t' send Dick Larrabee up here in the mornin' with the one-fifty, what d'you s'pose you'd do then?"

"I spose I'd take yer money an' let the hoss go," ''Lizer Howe said.

David and he nodded understanding at each other, and David supposed that Dick might come by about noon the next day, and 'Lizer Howe supposed that, with his bad leg, he'd be sitting here on the porch just about then. He and David wished each other good day and David clucked his horse into motion. As he drove back to town, he said to John, "That conscience o' 'Lizer's is wuth its weight in gold, *jest about.*" They rode along in the rustle of the horse's leather harness and the unhurried clop of its feet in the road's pale dust, the river's calm green waters sliding by them on their left. Then David said, "John, I almost forgot to tell you, havin' 'Lizer Howe's hoss on my mind. The Van Denbergs is comin' back this comin' week. I got a letter from Theodore Van Denberg on Friday. So I reckon Miss Paula will be wantin' Kirby. Seems they spent the summer in Californie. I been expectin' 'em since June. Soon's they arrive, the Van Denbergs always makes a substantial deposit t' cover their expenses while they're here."

"Then perhaps I should know something about them."

"Well," David said, "they have a big house up at Song Lake."

"What a lovely name," John said. "Where is that?"

"A mile or two north o' Preble, right in the afternoon shadow o' Song Mountain. Preble's seven, eight mile north o' here. I grew up near Preble. Anyways, the original Van Denberg come an' settled here sometime back in the thirties. He was some kind of a Dutchman, I guess." The name suggested that the family descended from some of the first Dutch settlers, though John had learned by now that "Dutchman" was Mr. Hannum's generic name for anyone native of the continent of Europe. "He had some money, an' bought land an' mortgages an' so on, an' havin' money — money was awful scurce in them early days — made more. Never spent anythin' t' speak of an' died pinchin' the original cent he started in with."

"He was the father of Theodore Van Denberg?"

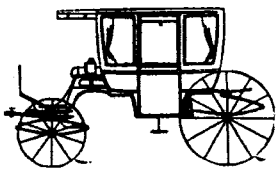
"Yes. They was two boys an' a sister. The oldest son, Alferd, went into the law an' done business in Albany, an' afterwards moved to New York. But he's kept up the old place here. The old man left what was a good deal of property for them days, an' Alf kept his share an' made more. He was in the Assembly three terms an' afterwards member of Congress. An' they do say," he added with a wink, "that he never lost money by his politics. On the other hand, Theodore made more or less of a muddle on't, an' amongst 'em they set him up in business o' some sort in New York, an' he sorter plays at it. I say 'them' because the Van Denbergs an' the Rogerses and the Swaynes an' a lot more of 'em is all more or less related to each other. But Alf's really the one at the bottom on't. I don't know what would happen t' Theodore without Alferd."

"And what sort of man is Theodore to deal with?"

"You could drive him with a tow-string. He puts on t' bein' important an' he talks like this," David said, lowering his voice to affect pomposity. "He's a stiff sort o' feller, an' he's got a smile like a wrinkle on a boot. He an' his wife — he married one o' the Tenakers — has lived right here for the Lord knows how long. Born an' brought up here, an' spend most every summer here, an' somehow we're the 'village people' an' they ain't."

"I've noticed this rather fine distinction myself," John said, "ever since you first mentioned it."

David turned a shrewd smile on him. "I'll bet you two dollars to a last year's bird's nest they don't know what t' make o' you, the way you talk an' dress an' carry yourself an' all. Yes sir. Now, there's old maid Allis, relative o' the Rogerses, who lives all alone down on Clark Street in an old house that hain't had a coat o' paint nor a new shingle since the three Thayers was hung, an' she talks about the folks next door that she's knowed always as 'village people'. An' I don't believe she was ever away from Homer in the whole course o' her life. She's a putty decent sort of woman, too."



"The distinctions people draw are very strange," John said, thinking of his father's family's discrimination against his mother. "Well, they say it takes all sorts."

"I think I heard a rumor to that effect," David said. "I guess they's about as much human nature in some folks as they is in others, if not more."

"I fancy it doesn't make much difference to you whether they call you 'village people' or not."

"Don't cut no figure at all. Polly 'n' I are too old to set up for shapes even if we wanted to. A good fair road gait's enough for me, three square meals, a small portion o' the filthy weed, as it's called in po'try, a ten-dollar note where you can lay your hand on't, an' once in a while, when your conscience pricks you, a little somethin' t' promote the cause o' temperance an' make the inward monitor quit jerkin' the reins. I guess I can get along, hey?"

"If one has all one needs, it is enough," John said. "I've learned that here."

"Well, yes," David said. That's so, as you might say, up to a certain *point*. But at the same time I've noticed that,

generally speaking, a little too big's about the right size. Well, anyway, Miss Paula'll be comin' for Kirby. I tol' you I sold her that hoss in the fust place, didn't I?"

"You mentioned it, but only briefly."

"Polly 'n' I've knowed the Van Denberg girls since they was little. Paula's about five years older'n Cathy. They sent her off to school in Europe somewhere for a while . . . ."

"Switzerland?"

"I think it was. Anyway, I didn't see her for a few years, an' one mornin' I was up t' the barn when this yeller-haired girl comes up on a hossback. 'Mr. Hannum.' she says, an' I says, 'Hannum's the name 't I use when I appear in public.' 'I take it you don't know me.' she says, an' I admit I don't. She says, 'I'm Paula.' An' so she was, all growed up. She must 'a' been seventeen then. This was about five years ago. Well, I hollered for Polly, an' she come runnin', an' they was huggin' an' laughin' an' Polly was cryin' about how quick she'd growed up, an' after a while Paula says, 'I hear you have a hoss 't I could ride.'

"'Well.' I says, lookin' at her hoss, an' he was a good one, 'I shouldn't think you was entirely out o' hosses long's you got that one.' 'Oh.' she says, 'this is my sister's. Mine has hurt his leg so badly that I am afraid I sha'n't be able to ride him this summer.' That's the way she talks. 'Well,' I says, 'I've got a black that's been rode, so I was told, but I don't know of my own knowin'.'

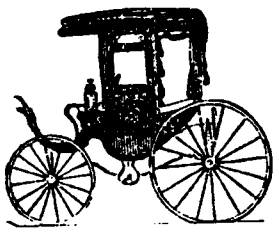
"'Don't you ride?' she says, an' of course you know my feelin's on that subject. 'Hossback?' I says. 'No, ma'am, not when I can raise the money t' pay my fine.' She give me a kind of quiet laugh an' says, 'Can I see him?' 'Cert'nly.' I says, an' brought him out. 'Oh.' she says, 'he's a beauty. May I try him?' 'Well,' I says, 'I guess I can risk it if you can, but I didn't buy him for a saddle hoss, an' if I'm to own him for any length o' time, I'd ruther he'd forget the saddle business. An' I wouldn't like him to get a sore back, an' in any case I hain't got no saddle.'

"'Well,' she says, givin' her head a toss, 'if I couldn't sit straight I'd never ride agin. I never made a hoss's back sore in my life. An' we can use my saddle.' An' off she jumps, an' scat my — !" David laughed at the memory. "The way she knowed about gettin' that saddle fixed, pads, straps, girts, an' the whole business, an' put her foot for me to give her a lift, an' wheeled that hoss an' went out o' the yard a-kitin', was as slick a piece o' hoss business as ever I see. It took fust money. In a few minutes she come back lickety-cut, an' pulled up in front o' me. 'Can you send my sister's hoss home?' she says, 'Then I shan't have to change agin. I'll stay on *my* hoss.' An' laughin' fit to kill, for I stood there with my mouth open clear to my back teeth, she says, 'Papa'll come to see you this afternoon or t'morro'.' I says, 'Mebbe he won't agree to my price.' 'Oh yes he will.' she says, an' off she went, leavin' me there like a stick in the mud."

"Did Mr. Van Denberg meet your price?"

"He did," David said, slapping the reins lightly on the back of their horse and clucking at it. "An' I've sold that crowd a good many hosses since then, an' laughed a thousan' times over that partic'lar trade. Me an' Miss Paula has always been good friends, an' she an' Polly are reg'lar neetups."

"She sounds like a high-spirited girl," John said.



"Some folks says that she's a little wild an' her father can't git a rein on her." David chuckled to himself. "But I've always liked her, mebbe jes' because she's got so much spirit. Anyways, you can see for yourself in a few days. I'm glad you've got Kirby in good shape, or I'd catch it from her."

The following Saturday afternoon, John was returning from his ride, mounted on Deacon and leading the black. He was wearing beige jodhpurs, polished brown boots, and a white shirt open at the neck. He was passing the town square when he heard a young woman cry, "Kirby!" He knew before he halted and turned in the saddle whose voice this must be. A young woman climbed hastily out of a carriage and ran toward him. She wore a light brown dress and a hat of matching color. It had a brim and a rounded crown, rather like a small bowler, and instead of a hatband a ribbon, which trailed down her back. The hat was perched forward on her blond head, and her hair was pulled back and tied so that yellow curls bounced behind her as she approached. She was a striking beauty. This, surely, was Paula Van Denberg.

She put her arms around the horse's black neck, then rubbed his nose, saying, "Oh Kirby, I've missed you." She stepped back to admire the animal and said, "Look at you! Look at your coat! How magnificent you look!" And then she turned her face up to John, smiling him and fixing him in a gaze of utter assurance. "And you must be Mr. Lenox. I'm Paula Van Denberg."

"Yes, I know," he said.

"And how do you happen to know?"

"In the first place we've been expecting you. In the second place, the horse obviously knows you. And in the third place, Mr. Hannum vividly described you."

"Did he? And what did he say?"

John took on a little of David's manner of speech: "He

said you had yeller hair and that you were a great beauty. But I must say, he understated the case." John could not take his eyes off her. He felt a little weak, almost paralyzed, in her presence.

"Very pretty," she said, rubbing Kirby's nose. Do you say a good deal of that sort of thing?"

"I am out of practice," John said, smiling. "I haven't had much opportunity of late."

"I don't think you need feel discouraged," she said, looking him directly in the eyes and affecting gravity. "A good method is everything. I have no doubt you might soon be in form again. I have been hearing about you, too, from a friend of yours."

"And who might that be?"

"Aunt Polly. Isn't she an old dear?"

"I have reason to think so."

"I have just spent an hour with her. She talked a lot about you."

"Yes?"

"Yes, and if your ears weren't burning, you have no sense of gratitude. Isn't Mr. Hannum funny?"

"He certainly can be when he so chooses. He told me rather an amusing story about a young woman's running off with one of his horses."

"Mr. Hannum and I are great neetups, as he says. Is 'neetups' a nice word?"

"I believe it means 'cronies' in Mr. Hannum's lexicon."

"There he is!" Paula Van Denberg said, pointing.

David approached in his buggy, drew up, wound the reins about the whipstock, and pulled off his buckskin gloves. Then he got down.

"How are you, Mr. Hannum?" Paula said, putting her hand in his.

"Wallll," David said in a pained voice, "I'm settin' up a little every day an' takin' nourishment. You don't look as if you was off your feed much, eh?"

"No," she said, laughing. "I'm in what you call pretty fair condition, I think."

David looked her over with frankest admiration. "Guess you come out a little finer every season, don't you? Hard work to keep you out o' the free-for-all class, I guess. How's all the folks?"

"They're well, thank you."

"Glad t' hear it. Well, I guess you already see what bad shape Kirby's in. He's putty well wore out. Has to lean up agin the shed to whicker. Guess I'll have to sell you another putty soon now."

"The bay is beautiful," she said, patting Deacon.

"Guess he is. But that hoss ain't for sale."

She smiled teasingly. "You've always said that every horse you owned was for sale if the price was right."

"That's true enough, but you see, this one ain't my hoss. He belongs," John was startled to hear him say, "to Mr. Lenox here."

"I see," she said. "Well, we must go riding together some time, Mr. Lenox."

"How'd you catch him?" David said to her, nodding toward John. "Had to go after him with a four-quart measure, didn't you? Or did he let you corner him?"

Instead of blushing prettily, as another girl might have done, she said, "Oh, it was no problem. Kirby introduced us. Well, I must be getting home. It has been a great pleasure. I wonder if I might ask a favor of you, Mr. Lenox?"

"You have only to name it."

"Could you bring Kirby out to the house for me? We live at Song Lake. At your convenience, of course."

"I should be delighted." he said, and indeed he was delighted by the implied invitation.

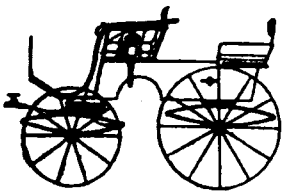
"Thank you," she said. "I shall look forward to it." She got into her carriage and sped away.

"Look at her get over the ground!" David said. "Ain't that a gait?"

"She's a charming girl," John said, still taken aback by the meeting and by David's unexpected gift of Deacon.

"Yes sir, that's the girl," David said. "Scat my — ! If I was thirty years younger she could run off with me just as easy. An' I dunno but what she could anyway."

"Charming girl," John repeated.



"Well," David said, "I don't know as much about girls as I do about some things. My experience hain't laid much in that line. But I wouldn't like to take a contract to match her on any limit." He got into his buggy. "Git up, old lady!" he called, and drew the whip along old Jinny's back like a caress. John mounted Deacon and followed David home and into the barn.

The following evening, John borrowed David's buggy, hitched up Jinny, and, trailing Kirby behind, left for Song Lake. David said he couldn't miss it: you drove out past the Randall place, and it was the big house on a low hill with a broad green lawn sloping down to the lake. John was wearing not his riding clothes but a dark blue suit with a white shirt and high white collar and a dark tie. Polly and David watched him from the back porch as he left the stable area. David lighted a cigar. Mrs. Bixbee had a copy of her

church paper on her lap.

"He looks so nice," Polly said when John had gone.

"You shoulda seen him yesterday, that young feller of ourn an' Miss Paula. A putty slick pair they made. I couldn't help thinkin' what a nice hitch-up they'd make."

"Guess they ain't much chance o' that," she said.

"No, I guess not either."

"He hain't got anythin' t' speak of, I s'pose, an' though I reckon she'll have prop'ty some day, all that set o' folks seems to marry money, an' someone's always dyin' an' leavin' 'em some more. They ain't nothin' truer in the Bible 'n that sayin' that them that has, gits."

"That's seemin'ly about the way it runs," David said.

"It don't seem right," Polly continued. "Now there was all that money one o' Mis' Elbert Swayne's relations left her last year, an' Lucy Scramm, that's poorer 'n poverty's back kitchen, an' the same relation to him that Mis' Swayne was, only got a thousan' dollars, an' the Swaynes rich already. Not but what the thousan' was a Godsend to the Scramms, but he might jest as well 'a' left 'em comf'tably off as not, 'stead o' pilin' more onto the Swaynes that didn't need it."

"Does seem kind o' tough," David said, leaning forward to drop his cigar ash clear of the veranda floor, "but that's the way things goes. I've often had to notice that a man'll sometimes do the foolishest thing or the meanest thing in his whole life after he's dead."

Mrs. Bixbee mused for a minute or two, trying to read her church paper but unable to concentrate on it. "You never told me," she said at last, "much of anythin' about John's personal matters. Don't you want me to know? Didn't his father leave him anythin'?"

"They was a little money," her brother replied, blowing out a cloud of smoke, "an' a lot of unlikely chances, but nothin' to live on."

"An' they wa'n't nothin' for it but he had to come up here?"

"He'd 'a' had to work on a salary somewhere, I reckon." David paused for a time, then said, "They was one thing that'll mebbe come to somethin' sometime, but it may be a good while, an' don't you ever let on to him nor nobody else 't I ever said anythin' about it."

"I won't open my head to a livin' soul. What was it?"

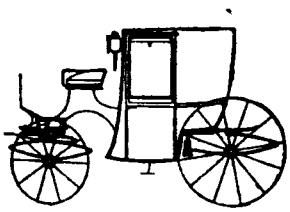
"Well, I don't know's I ever told you, but a good many years ago I took a little hand in the oil business, though I didn't git in as deep as I wish now 't I had. But I've always kept up a kind of interest in what goes on in that line."

"No, I guess you never told me," she said. "Where you goin'?" David had risen abruptly from his chair.

"Goin' to git my cap. Damn the damn things! I don't believe they's a fly in Cortland County that hain't danced the wild kachuky on my head since we set here. Be I much specked?" And he bent his pate down for her inspection.

"Oh, go 'long!" she said, laughing and giving him a push.

He returned wearing his cap, sat down, relighted his cigar, inspected its ember for a moment, then resumed. "'Mongst other things, they was a piece of about ten or twelve hunderd acres of land John's father left him, down in Pennsylvany. John said he understood they was some coal on it, but all the timber, ten inch an' over, 'd been sold off. He told me that his father's head clerk told him that the old gentleman had tried for a long time to dispose of it, but it called for too much to develop it, I guess. 'T any rate, he couldn't, an' John's got it to pay taxes on 't."



"I shouldn't think it was wuth anythin' to him but jest a bill of expense."

"'Tain't now, "David agreed. "An' mebbe it won't be for a good while. Still, it's wuth somethin', an' I advised him to hold onto it on general princ'ples. I don't know the partic'lar prop'ty, o' course, but I do know somethin' o' that section of country, for I done a little prospectin' 'round there myself once on a time. But it wa'n't in the oil territory in them days, or wa'n't known to be, anyway."

"But it's eatin' itself up with taxes, ain't it?"

"Well," David said, "it's free an' clear, an' the taxes ain't so very much — though they do stick it to an outside owner down there — an' the point is here: I've always thought they didn't drill deep enough in that section. They was some little traces of oil the time I told you of, an' I've heard lately that they's some talk of a move to test the territory agin. If anythin' was to be found, the young feller's prop'ty might be wuth something. But of course, they ain't no tellin'."

"Well," Polly said, "Whatever the reason, I'm glad he come."

"So'm I," David said. He fell into a long silence and then said, "He's jest about the age my boy'd be."

Polly's mouth opened and her eyes widened in a look of surprise that she immediately suppressed, keeping her peace for some time before saying, "You ain't mentioned him in a long time, Dave."

"No, I ain't. But I think about him from time to time. Yes'm, he'd be just about John's age. Only he had red hair, like me."

To be continued