Gene Lees Ad Libitum

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SONG LAKE SUMMER

Chapter Ten

John was in the vault Monday morning when Peleg Hopkins came in grinning to tell him, "There's some folks out front wants to see you."

John, preoccupied with the books, said, "Really? Who are they?"

"The two Van Denberg gals."

"Thank you," John said, and wondered with amusement what Paula and her sister would feel if they knew they were designated the two "Van Denberg gals" by "village people" such as Peleg.

Paula was waiting near the cashier's counter with her sister, Cathy, to whom she introduced him. Cathy was fifteen or sixteen, as dark as Paula was fair but nowhere near the beauty, though the family resemblance was conspicuous.

"I came to thank you for bringing Kirby to Song Lake last night and tell you how sorry I am that we were not at home," Paula Van Denberg said.

John had had difficulty, after their first meeting, believing that she was as beautiful as she had seemed. She was. "The loss was mine," he said. And he had indeed been sharply disappointed. He had paid his respects to her mother and taken Kirby to the barn.

"Do you know the Bensons from Syracuse?" Paula said.

"I'm afraid not."

"Well they are extremely nice people — a little unorthodox, but nice. And Mrs. Benson is very musical. I believe that Mr. Benson is also musical, and in any event, they have with them for a few days a violinist, Fairman I think his name is, from Boston. And a pianist. What was his name, Cathy?"

"Schultz, I think," her sister said.

"Yes, that's it. They're coming to the house tomorrow night and we are going to have some music, in an informal way. We shall be glad to have you come, if you can."

"I shall be delighted. At what time?"

"Any time you like, but the Bensons will probably get there about half past eight or nine o'clock. There is one other thing."

John had a feeling of apprehension. "Yes?"

"You don't have to if you don't want to, but we would very much like you to play."

How did she know that he played? And if she knew that about him, what else did she know? But perhaps it was nothing more than a matter of General Woolsey mentioning his music in his letter, with Mr. Hannum saying something about it to Aunt Polly, who had perhaps in turn spoken of it to Paula. He hesitated to ask her who had told her about his playing. He had managed to put music pretty well out of his mind in recent weeks, and in the process had achieved a certain inner quiescence that he did not want to disrupt.

"I'm afraid I haven't felt like playing in some time," he said. "My hands aren't in shape, and I would hate to embarrass you." He gave her a deliberately disarming grin. "And of course myself! If you don't mind, I'd rather not."

"Well, then," she said, "do come in any case, and if you should change your mind, we would be delighted." She smiled, a bright and captivating smile. "I'm sure your taste is of a higher order than ours, but the decision of course is yours. Tomorrow at eight-thirty, then?"

"Eight-thirty. And I thank you."

David entered the bank. "How d'y' do, Miss Van Denberg?" he said to the younger sister. "And how are you, Miss Paula?" He took off his straw hat and mopped his face and head with a handkerchief. "How's the old hoss now that you got him agin?"

"Better than ever, thanks to you and Mr. Lenox. I swear, Kirby seems to grow younger every year."

"Come now," David said, "that ain't a-goin' t'do. I calculated to sell you another hoss this summer, if you'd come home when you was s'posed to. Been dependin' on it, in fact, to pay a dividend. The bankin' business has been so neglected since this feller come that it don't amount to much any more."

"Yes," Paula said, "I can see what a low opinion you have of him. Well, Mr. Lenox, we shall see you tomorrow."

"I hope you understand . . . "

"Of course," she said. "And now I must be going. Give Aunt Polly my love, Mr. Hannum, and tell her I shall be by for a longer visit later this week."

When the girls had gone, David went behind the counter and perched himself on the teller's stool, as he often did when he was in a mood to talk and John was not busy — and sometimes even when John was busy. "Somethin' wrong there?" he asked.

"No," John said, "nothing wrong. May I ask you a question?"

"Fire away."

"Did you or Mrs. Bixbee tell Miss Van Denberg that I play the piano?"

"Do you?" David said with amazement.

"Well, yes, I do," John said, his question answered but the mystery deepened.

"With both hands?"

John could not help smiling. "Yes."

"An' without lookin'?"

"Yes," John said, and began to laugh. "How did she know, then?" he said, and wondered who else she knew that he also knew.

"Your fam'ly's in the New York social reg'ster, ain't it?"

The answer to that question of course was that it no longer was, not his branch of it. But he did not want to open that avenue of conversation. "Nobody with any sense takes the social register seriously," John said in evasion.

"That ain't neither here nor there," David said. "She's in it. An' they stopped in New York on their way back from Californie. No tellin' who she run into."

And that, John thought, is just what concerns me.

"You goin' t' play the pianny for them?"

"No."

"Why ain't yeh?"

John tried to describe his feelings about music, but somehow they lost something in the telling. "I suppose I'm just afraid to play now," he concluded.

"Hmm," David mused. "Y'know, John, mebbe it's like the difference between joggin' along on the road an' drivin' a fust heat on the track. In one case, they ain't nothin' up, an' you don't care whether you git there a little more previously or a little less. An' in the other they's the crowd, an' the judges, an' the stakes, an' your record, an' mebbe the pool box into the bargain, that's all got t'be considered. Feller don't mind it so much after he gits fairly off, but thinkin' on't beforehand's fidgety business."

The insight was almost uncanny. One of John's problems had always been anxiety, a desperation to do well in a performance so deep that his playing was always careful, correct, and acceptable — never reckless and inspiring. That was the reason he had done so poorly in his last mandatory recital at the Conservatory. "Mr. Hannum," he said, "I'll play for Paula."

"Good. 'Cause you're goin' t' play for Polly'n me, sooner or later."

"I'm only concerned that I haven't played in five months, which is a long time to neglect your technique, particularly for someone like me who had to work so hard to build it."

"See?" David said. "You're anticipatin' already. Seems t' me the solution ain't hard: jes' play somethin' easy."

"My!" Mrs. Bixbee said when John came into the sitting room after dinner, dressed to go out. "Don't he look nice? I never see you in them clo'es before. Come here a minute." She picked a thread off his sleeve and made him turn around for inspection.

"That ain't what you say when you see me in my gold-plated harness," David said.

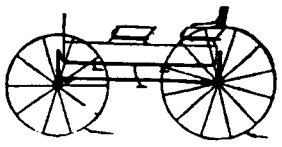
"Hmmph. I guess they's some difference," she said with scorn.

"Mike's got Jinny hitched up for you," David told John.

"I don't know when I shall be coming home," John said.

"Come back when you git good 'n' ready," David said.

The Van Denberg house, of old red brick, stood about a hundred feet back from the north side of the road on the south shore of the lake. Since its original construction a porte-cochere had been built on the front. A very broad hall,



from which rose the stairway with a double turn and landing, divided the main body of the house through the middle. On the left was a great drawing room; on the right, a parlor opened into a library; and beyond was the dining room, which looked out over the lake. The hall opened in the rear on a broad covered veranda that faced the water, and from this veranda a flight of steps descended to a lawn that sloped down to the lake shore, a distance of perhaps a hundred and fifty yards.

John passed through a flock of young people near and about the entrance to the drawing room, in the south end of which were some twenty people sitting and standing about, most of them the elders of the families who constituted society in Homer, some of whom he by now knew by sight and a few of whom he had met. On the edge of this group were Mrs. Van Denberg and Cathy, who greeted him cordially. Paula joined them, smiling. "Have you changed your mind?" she said.

"Yes," John replied, taking her proffered hand, "I have. Or rather, Mr. Hannum changed it for me."

"Wonderful. He certainly holds a high opinion of you."

"Come now, that ain't a-goin' t'do," John heard, startled. It was Mr. Hannum's voice! "I calculated to sell you another

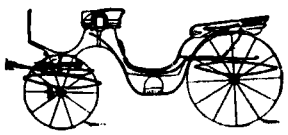
hoss this summer, if you'd come home when you was s'posed to." John turned. The voice was coming from Cathy Van Denberg. "Been dependin' on it, in fact, t' pay a dividend. The bankin' business has been so neglected since this feller come that it don't amount to much any more." Cathy Van Denberg looked at him with a mock gravity; behind the eyes, which were as brown as his own, there was a droll and mischievous gleam. She giggled at his thunderstruck expression and, putting her hand over her mouth, ran off.

"That is Cathy all over," Paula said. "Pranks! She is the funniest creature that ever lived, and she can mimic and imitate not only anyone's voice but any mortal creature. Oh, here come the Bensons and their musician friends." After the small talk, she advised the gathering that the musicale was about to begin.

Herr Schultz seated himself at the piano. The instrument was a six-foot Mason and Hamlin from Boston. He pushed back his hair a little, drew it forward again, looked under the keyboard at the pedals, wiped his face and hands with a white handkerchief, and launched into a Chopin waltz, Opus 34 Number 1, a favorite of John's. The man played very well indeed, which made John wish that he had not agreed to play.

The violinist, Mr. Fairman, came forward. He played something that John did not recognize, accompanied by Mr. Schultz. Then, encouraged by the applause, he performed a minuet of Boccherini's, unaccompanied. After that, John had to sit, drawing long breaths and sweating a little, through a Liszt fantasy on themes from Faust. He was not partial to Liszt. Then Mrs. Benson played piano, rather well in an amateur's earnest way. As she retired, Paula said, "Will you play now, Mr. Lenox?"

John went to the piano and sat down. He had never played a Mason and Hamlin before. The company had been founded as an organ-making concern, but in the last ten or fifteen years had been making a piano noted for improvements in resonance that gave it an individual singing tone. Herr Schultz's performance had tended to verify this, although he played with that rather hard curled-finger German technique. John wanted to get the feel of the instrument before playing, and he ran through a number of scales in octaves and then contrary motion, and finally some arpeggios in thirds and sixths. His hands felt better than he had any right to expect.



He decided to perform pieces he knew well by physical memory, pieces in which he could not possibly become lost. He began, with what he thought of as true cowardice, with the Chopin *E-minor prelude*, which he had been playing since he was a child, though it did require careful attention to the even flow of the eighth-note chords. He liked the piano, its tone and its action. After the Chopin he played Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, another piece from his childhood. After that he threw caution to the winds and played a Scarlatti sonata he was not sure he would remember. The applause was enthusiastic, but John was only faintly aware of it. His playing, to his amazement, seemed to have gained something from these months of neglect, and he decided to play the very piece that had contributed to his downfall at the Conservatory recital, Chabrier's *Gigue*. He was very partial to French music, particularly Couperin, and now, as he played, memories floated through the edges of his thought. The Paris years, after all, had been good years.

His right hand floated effortlessly through the scalar passages. He played with his eyes shut, deriving from the act of music a perfect joy so private that he could not have described it had he been offered a fortune to do so. He opened them as he came into the witty, drily staccato passages: his forearms were growing tired, and he knew that his playing would soon deteriorate. He pressed on, and when the little finger of his left hand came down on the final D, he sighed with an immeasurable relief, as if he had just outrun a pack of wolves.

"Encore!" someone called amid the applause. But he rose from the piano, taking a deep but mocking bow, making fun of himself and laughing, and when Paula took his hand and squeezed it and whispered, with an odd excitement, "Play something else for me," he whispered back, "Have you ever heard the expression 'Quit while you're ahead?' Well that's what I am going to do."

He was surrounded by people, including men who patted him on the back, Mrs. Benson, deeply smiling, Mr. Fairman the violinist, and the plump German pianist Herr Schultz, who said, "You play very goot. You have a bee-oodiful tone." Even the young people had slipped into the room to listen, and throughout his performance he had been vaguely aware of Cathy Van Denberg sitting on the floor, her elbows upon her clasped hands, her strangely dusky eyes fixed on his face.

Mrs. Van Denberg called out to the crowd, "All right, everyone. The supper is ready!" And to John she said, "Would you escort Mrs. Benson? There is a special table for you musical people at the east end of the veranda."

John whispered to Mrs. Benson, a handsome blonde woman in her late forties, "Is that a segregation or a distinction?"

Mrs. Benson laughed. "Well at least we've made some

progress, Mr. Lenox. Until Mozart's time, we had to eat in the kitchen."

"Where is Mr. Benson?" John asked.

Mrs. Benson gave a short laugh. "He is probably nine fathoms in a flirtation with Sue Tenaker."

"Who?"

"Paula and Cathy's young cousin." And observing John's bemusement, she added, "Mr. Benson shares the tastes of Artemus Ward who said, you may remember, that he liked little girls — big ones too."

A maid appeared with a tray of edibles, and presently another with a tray on which were glasses and a bottle of Pommery *sec*. "Miss Paula's compliments," she said.

"What do you think now?" Mrs. Benson said, putting her hand on his and giving him a long warm look.

"Distinctly a distinction, I should say." He smiled, a little uneasily, pretending not to notice her hand on his.

"You play beautifully," she said. "It thrilled me. Truly. I hope I shall have the opportunity to hear you . . . again."

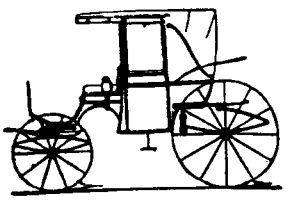
"Oh I'm sure that you will," John said. "May I pour you some wine?" And as gracefully as he could manage, he withdrew his hand from hers to reach for the bottle. Herr Schultz unwittingly had come to his rescue. He sat down, held out a glass to John and said, as John poured the wine, "Das is nicht so schlecht, bot I vould brefer beer."

The wine, apparently, was effective enough, for afterwards, accompanied by Mr. Fairman, he began playing sentimental German waltzes and, after the last of them, announced, "Now I zing you a zong," and in a tremendous bass voice he roared out "Im tiefen Keller sitz'ich hier, auf einem Fass voll Reben" which, if not wholly understood by the audience, communicated its essential import with the repetition of the word "trinke" at the end of each verse, in which everyone soon joined. Paula Van Denberg slipped through the crowd and took John's hand. She whispered, "Would you rather listen to this or see the garden?"

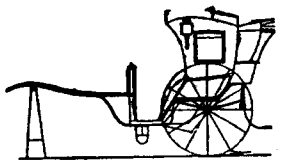
"The garden, assuredly!" When they were outside, he said, "Thank you. You've rescued me. I cannot endure those German drinking songs."

"I have the impression that you are rather more French in your sympathies," she said.

"I suppose I am." The fragrance of roses was all around them. John looked down the slope of smooth lawn to the lake, from whose shore a rippled silver path stretched out toward the bright half moon.



"You are a welcome addition to Homer society, Mr. Lenox," Paula said. "Everyone I know here knows what everyone else will say on any given subject and occasion. We all know each other a little too well, I'm afraid."



You do not know Dick Larrabee, John thought, amused. "This is a beautiful area of the country," he said.

"Oh but boring! You have no idea how boring! And here you are, an unexpected discovery. You can play the piano, you can ride like a champion. Oh I'm so glad you've come. Do you play tennis?"

"With consummate clumsiness."

"Do you sail?"

"I know enough to stay out of the way of the boom. Now I wish to ask you a question. Who told you that I played piano? Someone in New York?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

She took both his hands and stepped back as if to examine him at arms' length, like a picture. "I shall tell you tomorrow evening," she said, smiling mischievously, "on one condition."

"And what is that?"

"That you take me riding."

"Done. Therefore you can tell me now."

"No. I'll tell you tomorrow evening. Otherwise how can I be sure that you will come?"

"You need have no fear of that. You would have trouble keeping me away." And suddenly he found himself kissing her.

He was deeply moved by the kiss and so, it seemed, was she, for her voice was subdued and lacking its customary confident impertinence when she said, "I think we should go in. Wouldn't you like another glass of wine? I know I would."

They entered the house. John noticed Mrs. Benson, seated on the arm of a chair saying apparently amusing things to the young girl who occupied the chair. Pointing to her, John said to Paula, "Is that Sue Tenaker?"

"Yes. My cousin. Why?"

"No reason," John said, and thought, In Paris I would have expected this. But in Homer? He said, "It's just that I have evidently underestimated the sophistication of the hinterlands."

"I see," Paula said, and laughed.

Toward midnight the soirée began to disburse. John said his good-nights to all those he had met, accepted their compliments, and then stood near the front door in a flow of departing guests, among them the Bensons.

"Do you ever come to Syracuse, Mr. Lenox?" Mrs. Benson inquired.

"I have had no occasion to thus far."

"If you ever do," she said, "I hope that you'll call on me. And play." And with that she left.

"Well of all the nerve!" Paula said. "And right in front of me!" But then she laughed, kissed John on the cheek quickly, and said, "Until tomorrow."

John wore a satisfied and somnolent smile as old Jinny took him home through the moonlight. With every passing week he was feeling safer in Homer and in Cortland County. A night-bird whistled in the distance, and he wondered what it was.

Chapter Eleven

Mr. Hannum came to the bank in late afternoon, accompanied by two men in dark suits whose manner bespoke influence and importance. He escorted them directly to his office without introducing them to John, whose surprise was compounded when Mr. Hannum left his door ajar, which permitted his employer to view the bank and John to hear fragments of the conversation as he went about his work. "'The preliminary engineering survey . . . slope of the land at that point . . . best route for construction . . . the cost estimate . . . "

"Don't you worry none 'bout the prop'ty," Mr. Hannum said in a voice lacking its customary jocularity. "I can git control o' that."

Mis' Allis came into the bank to make her weekly withdrawal and, seeing her, David shut his office door. His two visitors left about a half hour after that and David, to John's further surprise, shut the door again and remained sequestered in his office until closing time, when John entered to lock the vault. David followed him out of his office and seated himself on the teller's stool, heels hitched on a cross-spindle, leaning against the counter.

"John," he said, "did you hear any o' that conversation?"

"A little."

"'Nough for you t'conclude anythin'?"

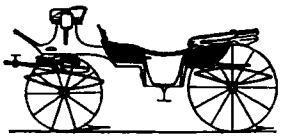
"Enough to know someone is preparing to build something."

"That's right. Sooner or later, you'll be involved in't, but right now it's a mite more private than most o' our business."

"I understand. You can count on my discretion."

"I knowed that, or I'd 'a' shut the door." Mr. Hannum's manner was unusually serious. "Now," he said, "d'you know the Widow Randall?"

"No, but I know who she is. A tall thin woman who walks with a slight limp. I noticed her and asked Dick Larrabee her name. There was something about her look that attracted my attention — as though she had seen better days."



"That's the party," David said, nodding. "She *has* seen better days, but she's eat an' drunk sorrow mostly for these last years, and darned little else a good share o' the time, I reckon."

"She has that appearance, certainly."

"Yes sir," Mr. Hannum said with a sad pensiveness, "she's had a putty tough time, the widow has. An' yet, they was a time when the Randalls was some o' the kingpins o' this whole region. They used to own a quarter o' the county, an' they lived in the big house up on the hill where Doc Hayes lives now. That was considered to be the finest place anywheres 'round here in them days. I used t'think the Capitol to Washington must be somethin' like the Randall house, an' that Billy P. Randall — folks used to call him Billy P. 'cause his father's name was William an' his was William Parker Randall — must be like the president." He chuckled and gave John one of his ironic looks from beneath lowered brows. "I've changed my mind some on the subject o' presidents since I was a boy." He took out one of his cigars and bit off its end.

"How does it happen, then," John enquired, "that Mrs. Randall is in such circumstances? Has the family died out?"

"They're most of 'em dead — all on 'em, in fact, except the widow's son Charlie." He fixed John with a penetrating stare. "An' the likes o' Mrs. Randall don't take no charity. Well, I'm keepin' you. You said at breakfast you was goin' ridin' with Miss Paula, an' the rest o' the story'll keep. Mis' Randall lives about four mile out the road to Cincinnatus. That's t' the northeast o' here, if you don't know. I want you t' ride out there 'n' tell Mis' Randall that I'd 'preciate it if she'd see me here day after tomorrow."

"I'll be glad to," John said, speculating that there might be a connection between the visit of the two men and Mrs. Randall's problems.

"One more thing. D'you know how t'do a title search?"

"No sir, I'm afraid not."

"Don't matter. It ain't complicated. I'll explain it in the mornin'. I want you t'go down tomorrow t' the county seat in Cortland an' get a description o' the Randall prop'ty. I want t'know what encumbrance they is on't. I think I know," he said with a peculiar grimness, "but I aim t'be sure. Well. You go along an' see Miss Randall."

John turned off the road into a lane sentried by poplars. Whoever planted them, he reflected as he rode up their dim serene corridor, must have known France. The lane emerged into a field whose weeds and wild grasses had turned an end-of-sum-

mer yellow, then slanted up a gentle incline to a small farmhouse half hidden among apple trees. To one side of the house, he saw as he drew near it, was a neat vegetable garden. Across the front of the house, set off by a wall of yellow-brown field stones, lay a flower garden. Weathered white paint was flaking off the house, but the windows contained crisp flowered curtains. As he tethered the horse, John felt that he was intruding on a sorrow, and when he mounted the wooden porch the sound of his riding boots on its floor seemed arrogant. His knock was therefore only the more deferential. He was pulling off his riding gloves, one finger at a time, when it opened.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Randall, I believe?"

"Yes."

"My name is John Lenox. I am David Hannum's cashier."

"Oh yes," she said. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you, but this will take only a moment."

"Do come in," she said. "I get so little company."

John said, "Thank you," and entered the house.

"I was about have tea," she said. "Won't you join me?"

And again he found himself saying, "Thank you."

The room was a treasury of antique furniture so crowded together that it seemed obvious it had been brought from another house. He could neither count nor evaluate the objects of this distinguished clutter. A Chippendale table draped with Brussels lace was pushed into a corner where it could not be properly admired. Near it stood two Louis Quinze armchairs whose authenticity he did not doubt. Their silk bottoms and arms were covered with doilies intended to hide the shame of their worn silk, but the wood was in perfect condition and restoration would be relatively easy; it required only money. If Mrs. Randall so desperately needed it, why did she not sell at least some of these pieces? No doubt the market for antiques was poor in this part of the country. But no. It was virtually certain that these things were the gifts or purchases of Billy P., some of them perhaps wedding presents, and that she would cling to them until death.

She was gone from the room while he stood admiring its contents. She returned carrying a cheap tray on which rested a Wedgewood tea service. "Do sit down, Mr. Lenox," she said.

He took one of the Louis Quinze chairs as she set the tray on a small table. She was, he had noticed before, a tall woman who had trouble, perhaps arthritic, with her left leg. But what he had not seen before, having observed her only from a middle distance, was that she had once been a beauty. And indeed the gift of high cheekbones and a finely-cut, slightly long nose had kept her beauty from failing entirely, even now. It was enhanced by the dignity of her bearing. Her hair, while iron gray, was rich and thick. It was pulled back into a bun. "How do you take your tea?" she asked, filling two cups.

"Clear," he said. Heaven only knew how long it had been since she had seen a lemon.

She handed the cup to him and sat down. Her faded blue dress, like her white curtains, had been often and carefully mended.

"You have lovely things, Mrs. Randall," he said.

"Thank you," she said, looking about her and then back at him. She had blue eyes. "It's Mr. Lenox, I believe you said."

"Yes."

She was looking at this clothes, the boots, the breeches, the French gloves that lay in his lap. "Are you from New York?"

"Yes I am."

"Yale?"

"Princeton. Mrs. Randall, Mr. Hannum sent me to ask if you would do him the kindness of calling on him at the bank."

"To what purpose, do you know?"

"I'm afraid I do not."

"Well then, I shall have to come to find out, shan't I? Did he say when?"

"Mr. Hannum suggested Sunday, since you come into town for church service anyway and it would save you a special trip.

"Shall we say at noon or shortly thereafter?"

"I shall tell him."

She sipped her tea, studying him. "Mr. Lenox, may I ask you a question?"

He was almost certain what it would be. "Of course."

"How does a young man like you find himself a cashier in a provincial bank?"

He looked evenly into her eyes and said, "A change in family fortunes, Mrs. Randall."

She looked back at him. That will o' the wisp smile crossed her face. "Then we understand each other, Mr. Lenox. Well now. You do not have to finish your tea for the sake of keeping an old woman company. Run along with you," she said, rising. She showed him to the porch, which commanded to his left a pleasant descending view to a creek thick with willows.

"It's pretty here," he said. "A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Randall." He rode Deacon back to town, vaguely troubled.

His ride next day with Paula was pleasant — bantering, teasing, and flirtatious. But John was distracted. Why had Mr. Hannum sent for Mrs. Randall? Why did he want to know about encumbrances on the property? Was it possible that he would offer to buy her land and, if she accepted, he would later resell it to the men who had been in his office? He had heard often enough that David Hannum was capable of a sharp bargain, but it seemed to John that this was more for the pleasure of matching his wits against another man's than for the gain involved. Mr. Hannum was an experienced and expert horseman who delighted in nothing so much as trading horses, just as John had been told from the first. And apparently in the community of horse traders, to get the best of another by almost any means was considered merely a venial sin, if a sin at all, and the standards of ordinary business probity were not

expected to obtain.

David had said to him only the other day, "A hoss trade ain't like anythin' else. A feller may be straighter'n a string in everythin' else an' never tell the truth — that is, the whole truth — about a hoss. I trade hosses with hoss-traders. They all think they know as much as I do, an' I dunno but what they do. They hain't learned no different, anyway, an' they've had chances enough. If a feller comes to me that didn't think he knowed anythin' about a hoss, an' wanted to buy on the square, he'd get square treatment. At any rate I'd tell him all't I know. But when one o' them smart Alecs comes along and calculates to do up ol' Dave, why he's got to take his chances, that's all. An' mind you, it ain't only them fellers. I've been wuss stuck two or three times by church members in good standin' than anybody I ever dealed with." It was a curious, ambivalent morality, and John could not see how a man could keep it confined to only one area of his dealings.

"You are not with me," Paula said. They were sitting still on their horses on a grassy shoulder of the valley's eastern slope, watching the sunset.

"I am," he said, smiling. "My mind is not."

"Well bring it back," she said. "Because I want it." She reached out and took his hand.

John found the records David wanted in the county seat in the center of Cortland, a domed granite building of conventional court-house architecture, and got back in time for supper. He made his report: that one Ezekiel Swinney held a mortgage for a thousand dollars on the Randall property. "Jes' what I thought," David said, and sat through the rest of the meal in a brown study.

When Sarah had cleaned off the table and Mrs. Bixbee was out of the room for a moment, David whispered, "How's the whisky holdin' out, John?"

"There's half a bottle left," John said in the same conspiratorial manner.

"I'll come up an' j'ine you in a minute," David said.

John went up to his room and opened its window, knowing the first thing David would do was to light one of those ghastly cigars. David entered and took a chair. John poured the drinks.

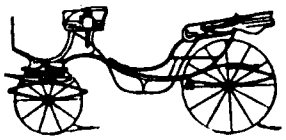
"What kind of man was Billy P. Randall?" John asked.

"I was gittin' around t'that," David said, and went silent. "It's all part on't," he said after a time, and once more fell into musing. Finally, evidently having resolved something in his mind, he said:

"Y'see, Old Billy, Billy P. Randall's father, inherited all that prop'ty. Never done a stroke o' work in his life. He had a college education, went to Europe an' all that, an' after he growed up he hardly ever come here. The land was all farmed out on shares, an' his farmers mostly bamboozled him. He got considerable income, o' course, but as things went along an' they found out how slack he was, they kept bitin' off bigger chunks all the time, an' sometimes he didn't git even the core. When Old Billy wanted money — and he wanted it putty often, I can tell you — the easiest way was to stick on a mortgage. An' after a spell it got so't he'd have to give a mortgage to pay the interest on the other mortgage."

"Was there nothing to the estate but land?"

"Oh yes," David said. "Old Billy's father left him consid'ble personals, but after that was gone he went into the mortgage business, as I tell you. He lived mostly up to Syracuse an' around, an' when he got married he bought a place in Syracuse an' lived there till Billy P. was about twelve or thirteen years old an' he was about fifty. By that time he'd got to the end of his rope, an' they wa'n't nothin' for it but to come back to Homer an' make the most o' what they was left. Mis' Randall, his wife, that's Billy P.'s mother, wa'n't no help to him. She was a city woman an' didn't take to the country no way, but when she died it broke Old Billy up wuss'n ever. Billy P. was about fifteen. Well, Billy P. an' the old man wrastled along somehow, an' the boy went to college for a year or so. How they ever got along's they did I dunno. They was a story that some far-off relation left Old Billy some money, an' I guess that an' what they got off'n what farms was left carried 'em along till Billy P. was twenty-five or so, an' then he up an' got married. That was the crownin' stroke." David took a long pull on his cigar and then a sip of the whisky. "Y'see, she was one o' the village girls. Respectable folks, more'n ordinary good-lookin', an' high-steppin' an' had some schoolin'."



"And Billy P.'s father objected to her?"

"She was village people," David repeated. "John, you got a kind of agitated look. Somethin' 'bout this botherin' yeh?"

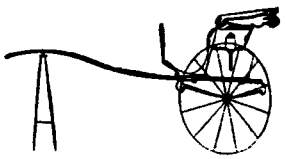
"No," John said, shaking his head. "I was remembering a similar incident. This kind of social discrimination seems to exist everywhere — even in little towns like Homer."

"'*Specially* in little towns like Homer," David said. "There ain't no escapin' it. Well, the old man was prouder'n a cock-turkey, an' thought nobody wa'n't good enough for Billy P. an' all along kind o' reckoned that he'd marry some money an' git a new start. But when he got married — on the quiet, y'know, 'cause he knowed the old man would kick — well, that killed the trick. Old Billy didn't live a year. Well sir, it was curious, but as I was told, putty much the whole village sided with the old man."

"Against one of their own?" John said.

"Well, y'see," David said, "the Randalls was kind o' kings

in them days, an' folks wa'n't so one-man's-good's-anotherish as they be now. They thought Billy P. done wrong, though they didn't have nothin' to say agin the girl, neither. She's very much respected, Mis' Randall is. An' as far's I'm concerned, I've always guessed she kept Billy P. goin' full as long's anyone could. But twa'n't no use. The sure thing come to pass. Billy P. had a nom'nal title to a good deal of prop'ty, but the equity in most on't, if it had to be put up, wa'n't enough to pay for the papers. You see, they ain't never been no real cash value in farm prop'ty in these parts. They ain't hardly been a dozen changes in farm titles, 'cept for inheritance or foreclosure, in thirty years. So Billy P. didn't make no effort, an' interest's one o' them things that keeps right on, nights an' Sundays. He jest had the deeds made out an' handed 'em over when the time came to settle. They was some village lots, though, that was clear, that fetched in some money from time to time until they was all gone, an' they was one piece of prop'ty out o' the village, an' that's the one Mis' Randall lives on now. It's a putty sizeable piece o' land, as you saw from the title description."



"How is it that he never sold that one?" John asked.

"Mis' Randall. She took a crotchit in her head and wouldn't sign no papers for it, an' lucky for him too. She hung onto that prop'ty like a pup to a root. They was a house on it, an' when they had t' sell the old Randall place, they had someplace to go."

"That little house is filled with furniture."

"I reckon it is. You can imagine how much it'd take to fill Doc Hayes' house, an' that's what it come out of. At least Billy P. had a roof over his head, thanks to her, when he died, six or seven years after they married, an' left her with a boy to raise. How she got along all them years till Charlie got big enough to help, I swan! I don't know. She took in sewin' an' washin' an' mendin' an' went out t'cook an' nurse an' all that, but I reckon they was times when they didn't overload their stomachs much, nor have to open the winders to cool off."

"And where is Charlie now?"

"Out west."

"And can't he help her?"

"I figure t'find out more 'bout Charlie tomorrow," David said.

"And who is this Ezekiel Swinney?"

"A usurer. A speculator an' a usurer that I'd like t'see run out o' Cortland County, an' if I ever git the chance to accommodate him in that direction, I ain't likely to hesitate."

David and John went to the bank shortly before noon Sunday. A few minutes later, Mrs. Randall knocked on its door. John admitted her and locked the door. David escorted her into his office, inquiring after her health and that of her son Charlie, and seated her in one of the two guest chairs. John took the other chair in David's office. Mrs. Randall's old dress had been carefully ironed, and John was again impressed by her dignity.

"Mis' Randall, I hain't of a mind to pry into your business," David said, "but it's a matter o' record that Zeke Swinney holds a mortgage on your prop'ty."

"That's correct, David," she said. John made note that she called him David. She was at least ten years Mr. Hannum's senior.

"You borrowed a thousan' dollars agin the prop'ty seven years ago. That was jest before Charlie went out west."

"Yes."

"You borrowed it for Charlie?"

"Yes, I did."

"Mis' Randall, why didn't you come t'me?"

She smiled that slight smile of hers. "Charles believed you wouldn't lend the money. He said you would try to talk him out of going."

David chuckled. "He wa'n't wrong about that. I see too many fellers git their hearts broke out west. Farmin' ain't no easier out there'n 'tis here." He laughed again. "But at least I feel better in my mind. I thought you had somethin' agin me."

"David!" she reproached. "You should know better than that."

"Mis' Randall," David continued with a solicitous tone, "are you in default to Zeke Swinney?"

"Yes."

"An' is the old skinflint threatenin' to foreclose you?"

"Yes, he is."

"Well now, you jes' put your mind at rest, Mis' Randall. I ain't goin' t'let it happen."

Whatever tension Mrs. Randall had been feeling had not been conspicuous, except for the way she held her hands clasped in her lap. Now they came apart, and she rested her arms on the wooden arms of the chair, and her body sagged ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly. David stood up, running his hand across the bare crown of his head. "Now Mis' Randall, you don't have t'tell me, if you ain't of a mind to, but I admit t'bein' mighty curious about the his'try o' this mortgage."

There was a silence as Mrs. Randall decided what she would say. "Very well," she said at last. "There is no good reason not to tell you."

To be continued