Gene Lees Ad Libitum

Jazzletter

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SONG LAKE SUMMER

Continued

He sank now into a brown armchair in which he could remember reading the tales of Robin Hood when he was ten or so. He slouched low, his legs extended in front of him, his chin on his chest, and contemplated the drawing room. He sat like this for ten minutes or so, lost in his thoughts. Finally he rose and went to the library table near the front window, a window through which on many a rainy day he had gazed longingly. All the photos of his mother and the painting of her had been taken to his hotel room this morning, excepting one photo in a silver frame, which he had left until this final moment out of a reluctance to remove this last trace of her from a house in which she had known a brief happiness. He looked into her eyes, which looked out of the picture into his own. They were wise and loving, and they had a remarkable serenity. She stood in a long white dress, her hand resting on a furled parasol whose tip in turn rested on the floor near her feet, her long hair swept up around her head. The picture had been taken when she was twenty. *And you were beautiful*, he thought, and put the picture under his left arm.

John picked up his valise and left the house. He locked its door and descended its eight stone steps, knowing he would never set foot in it again.

David loaded an iron hobble and leather straps and several short lengths of rope into the buggy, got in, and switched the bay horse into motion. He drove from his house up Main Street and then out the north road toward Preble. After a time the horse halted. David got out of the buggy with an air of patience. He patted the horse's neck and said aloud, "It don't never pay to git mad with a hoss. The hoss don't care." And he bent and strapped the horse's front feet and then its back feet, and he attached the hobbles. When he was done the horse could move only its head and tail. David got back into the buggy and waited.

After ten minutes or so, the horse decided to move. It attempted to lift its feet but could not budge. The animal looked over its shoulder mournfully at David, then made several more efforts to move. At last it hung its head in puzzled defeat. David removed the hobbles, then clucked at the horse, which sprang into motion, its gait cheerful and bright.

Two miles later the horse balked again. And again David hobbled it, saying, "You an' me are gonna come to an understandin'. The idea you have to git into your head is that if you don't go when I want to go, you can't go when you want to go." When the animal tried to move, David waited until again it gave up the struggle, then released it.

This object lesson had to be repeated only twice more, and the horse ceased balking — at least with David. It was about then that David decided to sell the animal to Deacon Perkins.

A dragonfly proceeded on its unerring way over a meadow of blue lupine, stopping suddenly still in the air from time to time to devour the gnats, deerflies, and mosquitoes whose pursuit was its unflagging and only purpose. It would hover, eat, then move on, passing over yellow meadow buttercups and pink knotweed flowers and at last above a pond where the white blossoms of water lilies were closing in the late afternoon light. A green frog, which had been waiting on a lily pad for just such a wayfarer, flicked out his tongue, pulled in the dragonfly, held it for a moment in his mouth with its wings protruding, then swallowed it. He blinked his protruding eyes once, as if amazed at this accomplishment, then, hearing a strange sound, leaped in a long arc to disappear with a small plop into the dark water, which action prolonged its life: a great blue heron had been wading toward him, one long-legged silent step at a time, with its javelin bill slightly parted and ready. The bird stood motionless on one leg, looking at the place among the lily pads where the frog had vanished, and then threw itself into the air, the slender legs trailing gracefully behind it, the long neck curved in an S. The wooded hills fell away below. The horizon expanded. To the west, beyond parallel south-bound ridges of mountain, lay the long curves of the Finger Lakes, glinting in the afternoon light. The dark green Appalachians stretched beyond sight in the northeast to New Hampshire and Québec and the Gaspé Peninsula a thousand miles away. To the southeast lay the village of Homer, and beyond it the Tioughnioga River, a slim silver path across the valley's flat floor, slipping through groves of willow and cottonwood, flowing beyond the horizon to join the Otselic and the

Chenango and contribute their common waters to the Susquehanna and at last Chesapeake Bay.

Below the bird, a road emerged from a beech forest. A black buggy pulled by a bay horse came out of this woods. Its driver gave the horse a light clip on the right shoulder with his whip, to remind it who was in command.

David Hannum watched the heron's flight, unaware of course that the sound of his buggy had only a moment before cheated it of a small meal.

It had been, and still was, a magnificent summer day, and the heron's airy freedom gave David's heart a lift. His thoughts, however, were fixed on the character of the deacon. Deacon Perkins would have to be handled in exactly the right way. The deacon would have to talk himself into the purchase of the horse, and manipulating his mind into the state to do so would not be easy.

In a few minutes David came to a white and somewhat austere two-story clapboard house with a gray and unpainted rail fence. Deacon Perkins was puttering on the porch; David could not quite see what he was doing. He gave the horse another flick of the whip and it picked up its gait. David waved pleasantly to the deacon as he went kiting past the house. When he was out of sight around a low grassy hill, he slowed the horse to a walk and continued at this pace. He chuckled as he pictured the look on the deacon's face on seeing the bay. The greed that a man could have for a horse was a wondrous thing.

When enough time had elapsed, David turned the horse and headed back toward Homer, then urged it into a jog as he neared the deacon's house. The deacon was leaning on the fence.

"Afternoon, Mr. Hannum," he said.

"How be yeh, deacon?" David asked, reining up. The deacon was a lank man with a sharp, thin, hollow-cheeked face who looked as if he had not had a square meal in years, though he was prosperous enough. David was what his sister Polly called "a good feeder" and he held a certain distrust for a man who could afford to be but wasn't. "And how's Mis' Perkins these days?"

"I'm fair. Fair to middlin'. Mis' Perkins is ailin' some — as usual."

David mused that it was said in the town that Mrs. Perkins did not have much of a time for herself. "Sorry to hear that," David said. "Been a nice day, ain't it?"

"Well now, I guess it has," the deacon said. A man who did not like a good meal would not notice a nice day.

"Yep," David said, "one o' those days that sort of liberal up your mind. Well, I guess I'll be gettin' home for supper." He straightened the reins, then said, "Oh, by the way, deacon. I just thought on it. I heard Dominie White was lookin' for a horse that'd suit him."

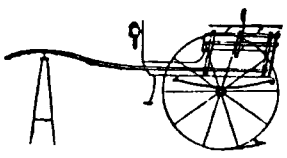
"I hain't heard," the deacon said, though he no doubt had.

David said, "I've got a roan colt risin' five that I took on a debt a spell ago. I'll sell reasonable, and it's as likely an' nice a young hoss as ever I owned. I don't need him, an' I didn't want to take him, but it was that or nothin' at the time. Now what I want to say to you, deacon, is this. That hoss'd suit the dominie to a T, in my opinion, but the dominie won't come to me. Now if you was to say to him — bein' in his church an' all that — that you could git him the right kind of a hoss, he'd believe you, an' you an' me'd be doin' a little stroke o' business, an' a favor to the dominie into the bargain." He paused. "The dominie's well off an' can afford to drive a good horse."

The deacon said nothing for a moment. He was looking over the bay horse. At last he said, "Now I 'member hearin' somethin' 'bout Mr. White's lookin' for a hoss. It had slipped my mind. Of course, they ain't no real reason Mr. White shouldn't deal with you direct. An' yet mebbe I could do more with him 'n you could. But I sent my hired man off with my drivin' hoss, an' I wa'n't calculatin' to go t'the village today. Mebbe I'll drop round in a day or two an' look at the roan."

"You mightn't catch me," David said, "an' I want to show him to yeh myself. An' more'n that, Doug Robinson's after the dominie. I'll tell you, you jus' git in with me an' go down an' look at him, an' I'll send yeh back or drive yeh back an' you needn't be gone three quarters of an hour."

The deacon demonstrated a seemly resistance to temptation but in the end got into the buggy, as David had known he would. David set the bay in motion, then urged it onward until the deacon had to hold his broadbrim hat on his head with his hand. The deacon, as David observed with an inward chuckle, was suffering from love at first sight over the bay. When they reached David's barn, David told his hired hand, Mike, an old man with a stiff arm, to unhitch the bay and fetch the roan. The deacon could not take his eyes off the bay.



David talked about horses until Mike had hitched up the roan. "Well, what do you think of him?" he said.

"He seems to be a likely enough critter," the deacon said. "But I don't believe he'd suit Mr. White. What you askin' for him?"

"One-fifty," David said. "An' he's a cheap hoss at the money."

"I guess you ought to git that much for him," the deacon said. "But I'm afraid he ain't what Mr. White wants." He waited, then said, "That's quite a hoss we come down with. Had him long?"

"Jus' long enough to git acquainted with him. Don't you want the roan for your own hoss? Mebbe we could shade the price a little."

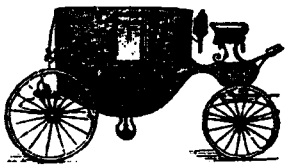
"No. I guess not. I don't need another hoss jus' now. Now mebbe the bay hoss'd come nearer the mark for Mr. White, if he's all right. Just as soon I'd look at him?"

"Well, I hain't got no objections, but I guess he's more of a hoss than the dominie'd care for. But I'll go fetch him out."

He brought the bay out again and the deacon examined the animal closely. "Looks all right," he said after a time.

"I'll tell you what the feller I bought him off told me. He said to me, 'That hoss hain't got a scratch nor a pimple on him. He's sound an' kind and he'll stand without hitchin' an' a lady can drive him as well's a man.' An' it's every word true. You've seen whether or not he can travel, an' so far's I've seen, he hain't 'fraid o' nothin'."

"D'you want to sell him?"



"Well," David said, "I ain't offerin' him for sale. O' course I never had anythin' in the hoss line I wouldn't sell at some price."

"What d'you ask for him?"

"Well," David said, "if my own brother was to ask me that question I'd say to him two hunderd dollars, cash down, and I wouldn't hold the offer open an hour."

"Don't you trust me for the money?"

"Well, deacon, it ain't that I don't trust you. But they's a number o' holes in a ten-foot ladder."

"That's more'n I give for a hoss in a good while," the deacon said, shaking his head, "an' more'n I can afford."

"All right," David said. "I can afford to keep him. Mike," he said to his hired hand, "the deacon wants to be took home."

"Is that your last word?" the deacon said.

"That's what it is. Two hunderd, cash down." He could see that the deacon wanted the horse more than a cow wanted a calf.

The deacon squirmed. At last he took out his wallet and silently, grudgingly, counted out the money. When he was done, he left with Mike in the buggy, drawn by the roan. The bay trailed behind them. It would not, David knew, balk when it was being led. And he was certain that it would balk for anyone but himself. He wished he could see the deacon's face when it did, which thought sent him into a fit of laughter.

He walked through the rose-colored evening, laughing all the way to the house, and he declined to tell Polly why he was amused. He did not tell her until two weeks later, when she came to him in alarm with a report that the deacon intended to put the law on him. That made him laugh even harder.

Chapter Three

John felt engulfed by the city. It had changed so while he had been abroad, and the process of change seemed to be accelerating. The new buildings called skyscrapers were rising everywhere, and a great cluster of them stood at the lower end of the island. Some buildings now exceeded twenty floors. The population of Manhattan had passed a million and vast crowds poured into the island every morning to work, leaving again in the evening on trains and ferries that took them back to towns that were swelling in size, some of which had not even been there a few years before — back to homes in the farthest ends of Brooklyn, Jersey City, Newark, Weehawken, Montclair, Morristown, Englewood, Tenafly, Yonkers, White Plains, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle.

The few jobs offered him paid less than he could live on, even if he practiced stringent economies. For the first time, he wondered how the poor managed to survive in this teeming city. As his money dwindled and he moved into an older and cheaper hotel, he felt as if he were hanging over an abyss. Except for music, he was trained for nothing, and every interview for a job made him the more aware of his inadequacies.

He emerged from yet another of these futile meetings, and drew his watch from the pocket of his vest. He opened its gold cover and gave a soft whistle of dismay as he snapped it shut. It was ten minutes to twelve. He hurried to the next corner and, hesitating a moment over the extravagance, waved down a cabby, asking to be taken to the Union Club.

At the front desk of the club, he gave his name and said that he was the guest of General Woolsey.

"Yes sir, he's arrived," the captain said and escorted John among tables covered with white linens and shining with bright glass and silverware, to a corner table where the general was sipping a drink.

"Ah, John, glad to see you," the general said, standing and shaking John's hand.

"I'm sorry I'm late, General."

"Not at all. I arrived only a few minutes ago myself."

The captain pulled out a chair for John as a waiter arrived. The captain left them and the waiter asked John if he would like a drink.

"Yes I would," John said. "Scotch whisky with seltzer water, please."

"Well, John, how is it going with you?"

"Shall I lie to you?" John said.

"Not necessary," the general said with a smile.

"I have been exploring the joys of a genteel penury," John said. "They are few and small. And I find myself very much alone. It seems that you're my last friend, General."

"What about your friend, Miss . . . Miss . . . "

"Miss Woodford?"

"Yes. You're quite good friends, are you not?"

"I was under that impression," John said, with an ironic smile. "But when the auction was announced, her father sent for me and questioned me in some detail about my financial condition. I told him honestly what it was, and after a certain amount of uncomfortable evasion he told me that it was no longer 'appropriate' — an interesting choice of word, I thought, very polite — for me to see his daughter." He paused, then said, "People behave as if failure, bad fortune, whatever one chooses to call it, were a contagious disease."

"You're too young to be talking of failure, John. You have hardly begun your life." At this moment John's drink arrived. The general waited until he had taken a sip, then said, "Well. I may have something for you, if you are interested. I received this yesterday." He produced a letter from his pocket. "It is from an old friend of mine who lives in a small town up in Cortland County. Have you ever been through the north central region of this state?"

"No sir."

"I come from Ithaca myself. Lovely country. David Hannum is the man's name. He is a banker there. I know him through Andrew Dickson White. Hannum has written to ask whether I could recommend someone to take the place of his manager or cashier or whatever it is. It's a rather queer move, but then Hannum is a queer customer, in some ways. Read the letter."

The letter began with an inquiry about the general's health, then said the writer had unspecified problems with his present cashier. It continued:

I would prefer someone from out of the village who wouldn't know every man, woman and child in the whole region, and blab everything right and left. I should want to have the young man know something about bookkeeping and so on, but I should not insist upon his having been through a trainer's hands. In fact, I would rather break him in myself, and if he's willing and sound and no vice, I can get him into shape. I will pay a thousand to start on, and if he draws and travels all right, maybe better in the long run.

"The diction is a little peculiar," John said.

"It's horse talk. He made his first money as a horse trader. You can see that he writes pretty fair English, and he can on occasion, if it so suits him, talk as he writes. But usually, either from habit or choice, he uses the most unmitigated dialect. Hannum's a shrewd old bird, but I have always found him honest enough. I only ever heard of him being involved in one shady deal, and I suspect he got skunked on it himself."

"What kind of deal?" John asked.

The general chuckled and shook his head. "Ever hear of the Cardiff giant?"

"The great American hoax? I've heard of it, but I don't know much about it."

"Well Hannum was involved in it. The whole thing was planned by a fellow from Binghamton named George Hull. He got a huge block of Iowa gypsum and hauled it to Chicago, and got some sculptor to carve it into the shape of a dead giant. As I understand it, he soaked it in acid and did all manner of things to make it look thousands of years old. Now Hull hauled this thing back to Binghamton and moved it in the dead of night up to Cardiff, which is just a few miles north of Homer and not far south of Syracuse. It weighed a ton-and-a-half and it was ten-foot long. He buried this thing on the farm of his brother-in-law, a man named George Newell, and left it there for a year. Then Newell arranged for well-diggers to find it by 'accident' back about '69. Rumors that the body of a petrified giant had been discovered got around. Newell raised a tent over the grave and sold tickets of admission for fifty cents a person. Business was pretty brisk, and grew more so as the Syracuse newspapers spread the story of the discovery. As I heard it, the road south to Cardiff was jammed with farm wagons, stage coaches, and buggies, and restaurants were sprouting all over the place to feed the crowds.

"The scientists, of course, were skeptical of the so-called giant. For one thing, there was absolutely no reason to believe that flesh could petrify. The doubting voices got louder, and Newell and Hull decided to get as much money as they could from it while the getting was good. They sold three quarters of their rights in the Giant to a syndicate of businessmen. One of them was a dentist, a prominent man named Amos Westcott who was mayor of Syracuse during the war. And Westcott got his brother-in-law, Dave Hannum, to come in on the deal. They were both married to Babcock girls. Dave always told me he thought the thing really was a petrified giant.

"Westcott and Hannum and their partners paid Newell and Hull $30,000 for their share in the giant. And no sooner did they buy the thing than P.T. Barnum offered the syndicate $60,000 to lease it for display in his New York exhibit of freakish things. They turned him down, and they put it on display in New York themselves. Barnum countered by having some fellow sneak a plaster cast of the giant and he put it on display in New York. Barnum's fake fake" — and the general chuckled — "outdrew the real fake. So Westcott and Hannum took the real fake to Boston, where it did a pretty good business too. I remember reading that Ralph Waldo Emerson went to see it and said something about it being very wonderful and undoubtedly very ancient.

"After a while people lost interest. It went on tour through New England and Pennsylvania, and I guess Westcott and Hannum made their money back, though I remember Westcott was very upset when he began to believe it really was a fraud. I don't know where the thing is now. But getting back to Hannum's letter, what do you think of the proposal?"

"As an opportunity for me?"

"I thought of you at once."

"Well, a thousand a year is more than anyone else has offered. And he certainly sounds like an interesting man. What would be your idea?"

"I rarely give personal advice, John. If it turns out to be wrong, one feels responsible for the other person's misfortune. But in this case, I have a feeling about it. I like David Hannum. I like him a great deal. And I am inclined to think that I should write to him, recommending you, if you wish me to do so. After that, you should write to him on your own."

"I know nothing of bookkeeping, General."

"I seem to recall that you're quick with figures."

"I think so. Music is the mathematical art."

"I doubt that Hannum's books and accounts are very complicated. I am sure you could learn the work quickly. Of course, it will be a great change from almost everything you have been used to, and I dare say that you may find the life, at first in any event, pretty dull and irksome. The stipend is not large, but it is large for the country, where your expenses would be much lighter than in New York. In fact, I'm rather surprised at his offering so much. At any rate, it is a living for the present, and may lead to something better. That area is growing, and more than that, Hannum is well off, and he keeps more irons in the fire than one, and if you get on with him, you may do well."

John was pensive for a time. "It would be quite a change," he said at last. "The only two places I have ever lived are Paris and New York. I think what bothers me more is the feeling that I would be burning my bridges behind me."

"Not necessarily. If the experiment should turn out a failure, you won't be much more at a loss than at present. And of course, if you should wish me to keep on the lookout for you here, I will do everything I can."

"At the risk of being repetitious, General, I must say that you are very kind." He sat in silent thought, staring into his drink, then looked up and smiled. "All right, General. I will make the venture. Thank you very much."

"Good. Now, shall we have the lamb chops? I can recommend them."

"So the deacon's planning to have the law on me, is he?" David said, and took a sip of tea from a saucer. He and Polly were seated at the supper table. He had just finished telling her the story of the balky horse. "Next to his religious experience, them of lawin' an' hoss-tradin' are the deacon's strongest points. An' he works the hell out of 'em sometimes."

"David!" Mrs. Bixbee protested. Mrs. Polly Bixbee, a widow who had lived with her brother these many years now, was universally known in Cortland County as Aunt Polly. A slim woman with a sweet face, some years older than David, who was her half brother, she objected to strong language.

"Why did you do it, Dave?" she said, resuming work on her needlepoint. She and David were accustomed to spending the quiet time of evening together. A light wind moved the sheers in the dining room window.

"Well now," David said, "when you got a balker to dispose of, you can't always pick an' choose. Fust come, fust served. Quite a while ago — in fact, not long after I come to enjoy the priv'lege o' the deacon's acquaintance — we had a deal. I wa'n't jest on my guard, knowin' him to be a deacon an' all that, an' he lied to me so splendid that I was took in, clean over my head. He done me so brown I was burnt in places, an' you could smell smoke 'round me for some time."

"Was it a hoss?"

"Well, mebbe it had been at some time, but at that partic'lar time the only thing to determine that fact was that it wa'n't nothin' else."

"Well I declare!" exclaimed Mrs. Bixbee in amazement, whether at the deacon's perfidy or this failure of her brother's acuity, for which she had an immense respect.

"I got rid o' the thing for what it was wuth for hide and tallow, an' instead of squealin' 'round the way the deacon's doin', I kep' my tongue between my teeth and laid to git even. I figured to git the laugh on the deacon, an' I did, an' we're putty well settled now in full."

"David," she said. "There's more to the story. I can tell."

"Well, then, if you will have the whole of it, all right. Now like I tol' you, I didn't sell that hoss to the deacon. He sold himself ol' Stickin' Plaster. Well, the day after that, I had an errand three four mile or so up past his place. When I was comin' back, along about four, it come on to rain like all possessed. I had my old umbrel' — though it didn't hinder me from gettin' more or less wet — an' I sent the mare along for all she knew. As I come along to within a mile from the deacon's house I seen somebody in the road, and when I come up closer I see it was the deacon himself, in trouble, an' I kind o' slowed up to see what was goin' on. There he was, settin' all humped up with his ol' broad-brim hat slopin' down his back, a-sheddin' water like a roof. Then I seen him lean over and larrup the hoss with the ends of the lines for all he was wuth. Well sir, I jes' pulled up to watch him. He'd larrup a spell, and then he'd set back. An' then he'd lean over an' try it agin. Scat my dogs! I thought I'd die laughing'." And David laughed again at the memory until he had to dry his eyes with his red handkerchief. At last he continued:

"'Hello, deacon,'" I says. 'What's the matter?'

"He looked up at me, an' I won't say he was the maddest man I ever see, but he was the maddest-lookin', an' he shook his fist at me jes' like one o' the unregenerate."

"'Consarn yeh, Dave Hannum!' he says. 'I'll have the law on yeh for this.'

"'What fur?' I says. 'I didn't make it come on to rain, did I?'

"'You sold me this damned beast,' he says, 'an' I . . .'"

"David!" Polly interrupted. "Did the deacon really say — that word?"

"He did," David said with mock gravity, raising his right hand as if taking an oath. "Well now, to make a long story longer, he said the hoss balked on him nine times that afternoon. An' he kep' sayin' he'd have the law on me.

"'Well, deacon, I says, 'I'm 'fraid the squire's office'll be shut up 'fore you get there, but I'll take any word you'd like t' send. You know I tol' yeh that that hoss'd stand without hitchin', and it appears to me he's doin' it.'

"Well, the deacon jes' kind o' sputtered, an' on I drove. An' when I got about forty rod or so, I looked back, an' there was the deacon a-comin' along with as much of his shoulders as he could get under his hat, an' leadin' his new hoss. Oh Polly, I'll tell yeh, my stars and garters, it paid me for bein' born into this vale o' tears."

"David," Polly said firmly — she always called him David when she disapproved of something he had done — "don't you think it mean to badger the deacon till he swore, an' then laugh about it? And I s'pose you've told the story all over."

"Mis' Bixbee," he addressed her, in response to being called David, "if I'd paid good money to see a funny show, I'd be a blamed fool if I didn't laugh, wouldn't I? An' jes' to set your fears to rest, I'll tell yeh that the deacon ain't gonna sue, 'cause he no longer owns that hoss."

She looked over her eye-glasses at him.

"Well," he said, in response to her unspoken question, "three or four days after the shower, an' the story'd got aroun' some — as you say, the deacon is consid'ble of a talker — I got holt o' Dick Larrabee. I've done Dick some favors and naturally he expects more. I give Dick a hunderd an' ten dollars an' told him the deacon might have a hoss for sale, an' if Dick could buy it for less, the balance was his."

He left the story suspended. Polly said, "Well?"

"Well," David said, "Dick made ten dollars on the deal, I got a hoss for sixty dollars, and the deacon's out a hunderd dollars, which is what he skunked me out of in the fust deal."

"And where is the hoss now?" Polly asked.

"Out in the barn," David, "an' as fine a young bay as I've seen in many a year." And he began laughing yet again. In time the laughter trailed away and he finished his tea and lit one of his cigars. Polly allowed him to smoke this one cigar a day in the house. She said that it produced all the smell she could tolerate. David's body shook a little with laughter, and then he took to studying his cigar ash. "Polly," he said, "I done that thing I was tellin' yeh of."

"Done what thing?"

"I telegraphed t'New York for that young feller General Woolsey wrote me about. I got a letter from him today, an' I made up my mind: the sooner the quicker. An' I telegraphed him to come's soon as he could."

"I forgit what you said his name was."

"There's his letter," David said, handing it to her. She took the letter from him and read:

Dear Sir: I take the liberty of addressing you at the instance of General Woolsey, who was kind enough to say that he would write to you in my behalf. My acquaintance with the general has been in the nature of a social rather than a business one, and I fancy that he can recommend me only on general grounds. I will say therefore that my experience with business is limited. Nevertheless, unless the work is of an intricate nature, I think I shall be able to accomplish it. General Woolsey told me that you wanted someone as soon as

possible. I can start at once if you desire to have me. A telegram addressed to me at the general's office will reach me promptly. Yours very truly, John Lenox.

"Well," David said, "what d'you think on 't?"

"They ain't much brag in it," Polly responded.

"No," David said. "They ain't no brag nor promises. He don't even say he'll do his best, like most feller would. He seems to have took it for granted that I'd take it for granted, an' that's what I like about it. An' he lets the general off the hook. I like that too. Well, it's done, an' I'll be looking' for him t'morro' or the next day."

"Was you calculatin' t' have him stay here with us?"

"That was my notion fust off, but when I come to think on it, I changed my mind. In the fust place, except that he's well recommended, I don't know nothin' about him, an' you an' I are putty well set in our ways an' git along jest as we be. I may want the young feller to stay, an' I may not, an' it's a good sight easier to git a fishhook in 'n 'tis to git it out. He can stay at the Eagle. I expect he'll find it putty tough at fust, but if he's a feller that can be drove out of business by a spell at the Eagle Tavern, he ain't the feller I'm looking' for. Though I will allow," he added with a grimace, "that it'll be a putty hard test."

He stood up. "Polly, I think I'll light the lamps an' go look at my bay hoss." And he began laughing again.

Chapter Four

Homer lay on the alluvial soil of the Tioughnioga Valley. The wide, flat, rich bottom land was scattered with cornfields and occasional orchards and meadowlands in which cattle stood motionless in the night. The eastern slope was precipitous enough in places to discourage farming and, therefore, still dark with conifers and hardwoods, but the western slope was more gradual and pasturelands and fields of oats lay in tidy rectangular patches cut from the woodlands. Homer was at the south end of a small lake on the railway line that connected Syracuse, twenty-eight miles to the the north, to Binghamton, forty-eight miles to the south. All of this seemed to be painted in shades of blue, ranging from a pale silvery tone to the almost black, by the light of a high gibbous moon. A train came out of the north and passed through Homer toward Cortland, immediately to the south. It stopped at the peak-roofed station long enough to discharge a single passenger, then resumed its journey. In the shadow of the station waited a long clumsy passenger wagon with a roof and open sides, hitched behind two patient half-asleep horses. There was no light in the station. Doug Robinson descended from the wagon. He was about two days in need of a shave. Somehow, mysteriously, he was almost always about two days in need of a shave.

He stood for a while by the wagon, watching the stranger, a young man with a bag and an umbrella, rolled and carried under his arm, and a trunk. "Goin' t' somewhere?" he called out eventually.

"Yes," said the young man. "I'm going to Homer. I understand I can get there by tramway. "

"Too late now. You missed the last one for the night." He waited a while. "Carry yeh over for ten cents," Robinson said. "Twenty cents with the trunk."

"I suppose I don't have much choice. "

"Not 'nless you want t'wait for the first one in the mornin'. "

Robinson approached the young man. Together they carried the trunk to the wagon, which had windows at each end and a door in the rear. The open sides were hung with rolled-up enamel-cloth fastened to a railed roof that extended forward over the driver's seat. The stranger took a seat by one of the front windows and Doug Robinson clucked the horses into action.

The animal moved forward in a walk, its shod feet clopping on the cobbled street, the wagon shaking slightly.

"Guess I never seen you before," Doug Robinson said.

"I'm sure that's true," John said, and no more.

Doug concluded that the stranger was stuck-up. This did not discourage him. "I heard Chet Timson tellin' that they was a feller comin' from N'York to work in Dave Hannum's bank. Guess you're him, ain't yeh?"

He received no answer; his theory was confirmed. "My name's Robinson," he said. "I run the principal livery in Homer. "

"I see."

"What'd you say your name was?"

"It's Lenox. But I don't remember mentioning it." There was no point in holding it back, but John resented having intimacy pressed upon him.

"Don't think I ever knowed anybody o' that name," Doug said, unperturbed. "Used to know some folks name o' Landon, but they wouldn't 'a' been no relations o' yourn, I guess." The passenger still did not reply, which annoyed him. "Git up, gol' darn yeh," he said, giving the horse on the right a sharp cut of the whip. "Bought that hoss off Dave Hannum — an' stuck I was, too. "

"You know Mr. Hannum, then. Does he still deal in horses?"

Well I got something out of him, Doug thought. "I guess

I make out t'know him. Dave Hannum'll git up in the middle o' the night t' git the best of a hoss trade. Be you goin' to work for him? Goin' t' take Timson's place?"

"Really, I have never heard of Mr. Timson," the passenger said in an aloof tone that confirmed Doug Robinson's first impression. John's thoughts were far away. Vaguely he was thinking of his last conversation with one of his favorite teachers in France, Gabriel Fauré. M. Fauré tried to dissuade him from leaving the conservatory. A day or two later, the matter was rendered academic by a letter from New York: there was no more money for him to continue his studies anyway.

"He's the feller that Dave's lettin' go. He's been in the bank a matter o' five or six year, but Dave got down on him for some little thing an' gave him his walkin' papers. He says t' me jes' yesterday, he says, 'If any feller thinks he can come up from N'York an' do Dave Hannum's work to suit him, he'll find he's bit off more'n he can chaw. He'd better keep his gripsack packed,' Chet says." That ought to sock it to the cuss a little, Doug thought.

The passenger remained silent until, unable to endure it, Doug said, "Where you goin' t' put up?"

"Is there more than one hotel?"

"They's the Eagle, an' the Lake House, an' Smith's hotel."

"And which do you think is the best?"

"Walll, I don't gen'rally praise up one more'n another. I have more or less dealin's with all on 'em. "

"That's very diplomatic of you," the passenger said. The irony of the tone was not lost on Doug, who prided himself on his judgment of men. "I think I will try the Eagle," Landon or Lynx said. Doug regretted then that he had not recommended the Lake House, whose accommodations were the worst of the three. Try as he might, he could think of no further excuse for conversation, and the journey continued without talk.

Then, surprisingly, the stranger asked a question. "How far is it from Cortland to Homer?"

"Three miles," Doug said. By now he was unwilling to talk, and the rest of the trip passed in silence. At last the carryall drew up at the Eagle.

The hotel was a three-floor frame building on the main street of Homer, at a corner. Its ground floor was level with the flagstone sidewalk, and a covered veranda, whose roof, attached to the structure just above the second floor, was supported by square pillars. Its front door gave entrance to a shabby main hall, in the corner of which there was a registration desk. The room served as well as office and bar. Doug Robinson helped his passenger unload his trunk on the veranda, accepted his twenty-cent payment and a ten-cent tip not with gratitude but as proof of the newcomer's uppity ways, and drove off in the night, shaking his head and muttering that Landon or whatever his name was would get himself generally disliked, and quick.

The counter of the Eagle's office-and-bar faced the door to the street. At one end of it was a glass case, which contained several partly-filled boxes of sad-looking cigars. The hotel's owner, manager, and room clerk, Amos Slocum, was leaning on the counter, talking with two loungers who sat in chairs tipped back against the wall. Slocum was a man of dull coloring with a sprinkle of untidy hair and a dispirited, indolent expression. He wore an open-collared shirt that had needed washing for some time, and a frowzy cardigan of indeterminate hue. When the stranger entered, Slocum paid him no attention, and one of the loungers said, "'Y'know, Ame, I think they was more skunk cabbage 'n unusual in that last lot o' cigars o' yourn. "

"You wouldn't know the difference, Dick," Slocum said. He finally turned his eyes on the stranger but said nothing. The stranger at last, having been made as uncomfortable as Slocum intended him to be, said:

"Do you think I could get a room for the night?"

"Well, I guess you can," Slocum said, without taking his folded arms off the counter.

The stranger said, "Shall I register then?"

Slocum finally stood upright, as if this required an enormous and reluctant exertion, and said, "I guess so. Where is the dang thing? I saw it the other day. " He made a perfunctory search, then said, "It ain't necessary, though. You can go right up."

"I should like something to eat. I shall go to my room while you prepare it. Can you send my luggage up now?"

"Supper's been cleared off some time ago. "

"I don't want much — just a bit of steak and some stewed tomatoes and a couple of fried eggs, sunny side up, and some coffee. "

The two loungers laughed so hard that the chair of one of them slipped down the wall, spilling him to the floor. This only made him laugh harder and as he rose to his feet he said, "Say, Ame, why don't you cut him off a slice o' that pickled elephant you got in yesterday?" The second lounger started slapping his knee and then doubled up with laughter.

"Have I said something especially amusing?" the stranger said. He wore a dark suit.

"I'm 'fraid I can't accommodate yeh far's the steak an' things goes," Slocum said. "We don't do much cookin' after dinner an' I reckon the fire's out anyway. P'raps I can hunt yeh up a piece o' pie an' some doughnuts or somethin' like that."

To be continued