Gene Lees Ad Libitum

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SONG LAKE SUMMER

Continued

"Could I have some more, please?" Mrs. Randall said, extending her glass. David poured for her. And by way of changing the conversation, she said, "Did you go to the theater while you were in New York, Mr. Lenox?"

"No," John said. "I heard some music, but there was nothing playing in the theater that appealed to me."

"I'm surprised. My husband and I used to see some very good plays in New York."

David immediately moved to divert the conversation from such sober considerations. "Ask Polly," he said. "She can tell you all about the theater, Polly can." And he chuckled. Mrs. Bixbee's face immediately became pink. "Tell 'em," David said. "Or I'll tell it."

"David Hannum!" she protested, but he proceeded as if he had not heard her.

"Polly an' me," he said, "went down to New York one spring some years ago. Her nerves was some wore out 'long of differences with Sairy about clearin' up the woodshed, an' bread risin's, an' not bein' able to suit herself up to Perce's in the quality o' silk velvet she wanted for a Sunday-go-to-meetin' gown, an' I thought a spell off'd do her good. I had some business down there with a fella from Syracuse name o' Amos Westcott, who's in a way my brother-in-law." The phrase caught John's ear. It suggested that David had once been married; he had never thought about it before, assuming his employer to be a lifelong bachelor.

"I presume," John said, chuckling, "that you and Mr. Westcott were there to exhibit the Cardiff giant."

It was the nearest to absolute speechless astonishment John had ever seen on David's face.

"Who tol' you about that?"

John laughed. "Never mind! You're not the only one with sources of information. You were going to tell us about taking Aunt Polly to the theater."

David recovered himself, and found his way back to the story. "Well, let's jes' say I had some business in New York an' the day after we got there, while we was havin' breakfust — it was fried giraffe on toast, near's I can remember, wa'n't it, Polly?"

"That's as near the truth as most o' the rest on't, so far."

David continued, untouched by her scorn. "'Well,' I says to her, 'How'd you like to go t' the theater? You hain't never been,' I says, 'an' now you're down here, you may jest as well see somethin' while you got a chanst.' Up to that time, she'd been somewhat prejudiced agin theaters."

"Well," Mrs. Bixbee broke in, "I guess what we saw that night was calculated to . . . "

"You hold on. I'm tellin' this story. You had a chanst to an' wouldn't. Anyway, she allowed she'd try it once, an' we agreed we'd go that night. But somethin' happened to put it out o' my mind, an' I didn't think on't agin till I got back to the hotel for supper. So I went to the feller at the newsstand an' says, 'Got any more show tickets for tonight?'

"'Well," he says, 'I hain't got nothin' now but two seats for *Clyanthy*.'

"'Is it a good show?' I says. 'Moral an' so on? I'm goin' to take my sister, an' she's a little partic'lar about some things,' I says. He grinned, the feller did. 'I've took my wife twice, an' she's putty partic'lar herself,' he says, laughin'.

"She must 'a' been," Mrs. Bixbee said, with a sniff that spoke volumes of her opinion of "the feller's wife".

"Well," David said, chuckling, "I took the tickets on the feller's recommend, an' the fact of his wife's bein' so partic'lar, an' after supper we went. It was a mighty handsome place inside, gilded an' carved all over like the outside of a circus wagon, an' when we went in the orchestry was playin' an' the people was comin' in, an' after we'd set a few minutes I says, 'What do you think on't?' I says.

"'I don't see anythin' very unbecomin' so far, an' the people looks respectable enough,' she says.

"'No jailbirds in sight far's you can see so far, be they?' I says.

"You needn't make me out more of a gump 'n I was," Mrs. Bixbee protested. "An' you was jest as . . . "

David held up his finger at her. "Don't you spile the story by discountin' the sequel. Well, putty soon the band struck up some kind of a dancin' tune, an' the curtain went up, an' a girl come prancin' down to the footlights, an' begun singin' an' dancin', an' scat my — ! You could 'a' covered everythin' she had on with a postage stamp."

"I guess I wouldn't go very far into partic'lars," Mrs. Bixbee said in a warning tone, as Dick Larrabee shook with laughter.

"Well," David resumed eventually, "I heard Polly give a kind of a gasp an' a snort, 's if someone'd throwed water in her face. But she didn't say nothin', an' I swan, I didn't dast to look at her for a spell. An' putty soon in come a whole crowd more girls that had left their clo'es in their trunks or somewhere, singin' an' dancin' an' weavin' round on the stage, an' after a few minutes I turned an' looked at Polly." And he began to laugh again.

"David Hannum!" Mrs. Bixbee cried, "if you're goin' t' describe any more o' them scand'lous goin's on I shall leave. *I* didn't see no more of 'em," she assured Mrs. Randall, "after that fust trollop appeared."

"I don't believe she did," David said, "for when I turned she set there with her eyes shet tighter'n a drum, an' her mouth shet too, so's her nose an' chin most come together, an' her face was red enough so't a streak o' red paint'd 'a' made a white mark on it. 'Polly,' I says, 'I'm afraid you ain't gettin' the wuth o' the money.'

"'David Hannum,' she says, with her mouth shet all but a little in the corner nearest me, 'if you don't take me out o' this place, I'll go without you,' she says.

"'Don't you think you could stan' it a little longer?' I says. But with that she jes' give a hump to start, an' I see she meant business. When Polly Bixbee," David said impressively, "puts that foot o' hern down, somethin's got to skoosh, an' don't forgit it. So I says to her, 'All right. Don't make no disturbance more'n you can help, an' jes' put your handkerchief up to your nose's if you had the nosebleed.' An' we squeezed out o' the seats an' sneaked up the aisle, an' by the time we got out into the entry, I guess my face was as red as Polly's. I couldn't 'a' been no redder."

"You got a putty fair color as a gen'ral thing," Mrs. Bixbee remarked drily.

"Yes, ma'am, I expect that's so," he assented. "But I got an extry coat o' tan follerin' you out o' that theater. When we got out into the entry, one o' them fellers that stands 'round steps up to me an' says, 'Ain't your ma feelin' well?' he says. 'Her feelin's has been a trifle rumpled up,' I says, 'an' that generally brings on the nosebleed.' An' then," David said, looking over Mrs. Bixbee's head with an expression of conspicuous innocence, "the feller went an' leaned up agin the wall."

"David Hannum!" Mrs. Bixbee exclaimed. "That's a downright lie! You never spoke to a soul, an' . . . an' . . . an' everybody knows 't I ain't more'n four years older'n you be!"

"Well, you see, Polly," her brother replied in a smooth tone of measureless aggravation, "the feller wa'n't acquainted with us, an' he only went by appearances."

Mrs. Bixbee appealed to John: "Ain't he enough to . . . to make you do I don't know what!"

"I really don't know how you live with him," John said, laughing as hard as Dick Larrabee.

"I reckon you haven't followed theater-goin' much after that," Mrs. Larrabee said.

"No, ma'am," Mrs. Bixbee replied with emphasis. "You better believe I hain't. I believe that David'd 'a' stayed the thing out if it hadn't been for me. But as true's you live, I was so 'shamed at the little I did see that when I come to go to bed I took my clo'es off in the dark."

John had lived long enough with David and his sister now to know that they enjoyed these bantering exchanges, and that she in her way was making as much fun of her brother as he was of her. But he felt that the tweaking of Mrs. Bixbee had gone about as far as it should, and he stood up, glass in hand.

"Ladies and gentleman," he said, "if I might have the floor for a moment, I have something I would like to say. I would like to drink a toast to my two benefactors, Mr. Hannum and Mrs. Bixbee. I have never had such friends. And," he added, looking at Mrs. Randall, "I think it is fair to say that none of us has ever had such friends." He raised his glass. "To David and Polly."

"To David and Polly," Mrs. Randall and the Larrabees said, and for once Dick Larrabee was not grinning.

"And now I have two little gifts," John said, taking two small paper-wrapped packages from the pocket of his jacket.

"David," he said. "Aunt Polly." And he gave them the packages. David opened his to find an ostrich-skin pocketbook. He turned it over and over in his hands, moved but silent. Mrs. Bixbee opened the paper to find a small box containing a broach on which was mounted a single perfect diamond.

"Oh John," she said, "I'm ever so much obliged, but I don't want a di'mon' more'n a cat wants a flag."

"Well, Polly," David said, as an excuse to conceal his own feelings, "you ought to keep it. You can sell it an' keep out o' the poorhouse some day, mebbe."

Sarah entered the sitting room to announce that the dinner was ready. John and his guests repaired to the dining room, excepting David, who lingered behind to begin transferring papers from his old pocketbook to the new one, along with one blackened dime. David then joined them, saying, "I'm hungry enough t'eat a graven image."

Chapter Sixteen

David was in the habit of taking long drives in the country on Sunday mornings, alone or with John as his companion. Sometimes these drives were accomplished in pensive shared silence, other times they were occasions for long conversations. David would look at the lake and hills and trees with an expression which suggested to John that the journeys were David's own acts of reverence, when the town's Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and a few Irish Catholics newly arrived from the old country, were in church.

David's ethics were, as much as he seemed to enjoy hiding them, of a higher order than those of any other man John had known, possibly because he was answerable not to some incorporeal deity at some far-off judgment day, but to himself, and immediately. David's morality, now that John had learned to trace it through Byzantine mazes to its secret temple, seemed severe and uncompromising. His stated philosophy — "Do unto the other feller the way he'd like to do unto you, an' do it fust" — was to an extent an element of disguise, although, as John had learned, he did not hesitate to apply it when he was confronted by men of mean spirit, such as Zeke Swinney. David did not believe in eventual redress of wrongs but in balancing the scales *now*, and he was not above the uses of indirection in accomplishing this.

On the September Sunday morning following John's little celebration, he was in his room, studying the Chopin Second Sonata and deriving great pleasure from his assault on its difficulties, when David knocked, poked his head in the door shyly — he was always hesitant to intrude when John was playing — and asked if he felt like going for a drive. Something in David's tone intimated that he had a need to talk, and so John said, "Yes."

They traveled along for some time in silence. The horses slackened their gait to a slow head-bobbing walk as they began the ascent of a long hill. Presently the quiet was broken by a strange sound, at whose commencement John turned his head with a start. David was singing! The tune, if it could be called that, had no detectable scale or tonal center, and the intonation would have hurt John's ears had he not been so enormously amused.

Monday morning I married me a wife,
thinkin' to lead a more contented life.
Fiddlin' an' dancin', they was played,
to see how unhappy poor I was made.

Tuesday mornin', 'bout break o' day,
while my head on the piller did lay,
she tuned up her clack,
an' scolded more
than I ever heard before.

"Never heard me sing before, did you?" David said, looking with a grin at John, who was still in shock.

"I've never had the pleasure," John said, smiling.

"Wallll," David said, "that's all I remember on 't. I dunno's I've thought about it in thirty year. The' was a number o' verses which carried 'em through the rest o' the week, an' ended up in a case of assault an' battery, as I rec'lect, but I don't remember jest how."

"I'd love to hear the rest of it. Perhaps I could work out an accompaniment for you and we could give up banking and go into the show business."

"Well," David said, "I don't know's I'm cut out for carryin' on in front of a crowd. But if the bankin' business does take a turn for the wuss, I'll give it a second thought." He paused. "Mebbe Polly's tol' you that I'm a wid'wer."

John said nothing, knowing that this conversation was the purpose of today's outing.

"She mentioned it once, yes."

"I hain't never cared to say much about it to Polly, though for that matter Jim Bixbee, from all accounts, was about as poor a shack as ever was turned out. Polly never had no children. She tol' me once Jim Bixbee was 'bout all the child she could handle." A silence descended, and John got the feeling that David needed some encouragement to continue.

"How old were you when you married?" he asked.

"'Bout your age, I guess. An' a putty green colt too in some ways." He handed the reins to John while he drew out a cigar and lit it. Then he took back the reins. "Fact o' the matter is that I been married twice. My first wife was named Lois Babcock, and we had a little girl, an' she died, an' then my wife died too. Amos Westcott up t' Syracuse married her sister, which is how come I still call him my brother-in-law. Young Ed Westcott, he knows the Van Denberg girls an' all that crowd, he's m' nephew. You met him yet?"

"No, I can't say that I have," John said.

"Walll, after that I figured never t' git married agin," David resumed. "As I look back on it now, it kinda seems as if it must 'a' been some other feller. An' yet I remember it all putty well too — all but one thing, an' that the biggest part on 't, an' that is how I ever come to git married agin. She was a widow at the time, an' kep' the boardin' house up to Syracuse. I was better-lookin' them days 'n I be now. Had more hair, at any rate, though," he said with a grin, "I was always a better goer than I was a looker. I was doin' fairly well at the time, but mebbe not so well as was thought by

some.

"She was a good-lookin' woman, some older'n I was. She seemed to take some shine to me. I wa'n't feelin' like much, losin' my first wife an' all that, and I'd roughed it putty much always, an' I moved into her boardin' house. She was clever to me. She was a good talker, liked a joke an' a laugh, an' had some education, an' it came about that I got to beauin' her 'round quite consid'ble, an' used to go an' set in her room or the parlor with her sometimes evenin's an' all that, an' I wouldn't deny that I liked it putty well."

He mused quietly for a while. The reins were sagging over the dashboard, held loosely between the first two fingers and thumb of one hand, while with the other he had been making abstracted cuts at the thistles and other likely marks along the roadside. He put the whip back in its holder and took his cigar from his mouth.

"Well," he said at last, "we was married, an' our wheels tracked putty well for quite a consid'ble spell. I got to thinkin' more of her all the time, an' she me, seemin'ly. We took a few days off together two three times that summer, t' go to Niag'ry, an' Saratogy, an' 'round, an' had real good times. I got to thinkin' that mebbe the state of matrimony was a putty good institution after all. When it come along fall I was doin' well enough so't she could give up business, an' I hired a house an' we set up housekeepin'. It was really more on my account than hern, for I got to kind o' feelin' that when the meat was tough or the pie wa'n't done on the bottom that I was 'sociated with it. An' gen'ally, I wanted a place of my own. But I guess it was a mistake, far's she was concerned."

"Why?"

"I reckon 't she kind o' missed the comp'ny an' the talk at the table, an' the goin's on gen'ally, an' mebbe the work o' runnin' the place. She was a great worker. Anyway, it got to be some diff'rent, I s'pose, after a spell, settin' down to three meals a day with jest only me 'stead of a tableful, to say nothin' of the evenin's. I hadn't been used to settin' round with nothin' partic'lar to do or say, with somebody else that hadn't neither, an' I wa'n't then nor ain't now, for that matter, any great hand for readin'. Then, too, we'd moved into a diff'rent part o' the town where my wife wa'n't acquainted. Well, anyway, fust things begun to drag some — she begun to have spells o' not speakin' to me, an' then she begun to git notions about me. Once in a while I'd have to go downtown on some business in the evenin'. An' she didn't seem to mind at fust, but by 'm' by, she got it into her head that the' wa'n't so much business goin' on as I made out. She'd set sometimes mebbe the whole evenin' without sayin' anythin' more'n yes or no. An' putty often not that. Yet if I went out there'd be a flare-up, an' as things went on the'd be spells for a fortnight together when I couldn't any time of day git a word out of her hardly, unless it was to go for me 'bout somethin' which mebbe I'd done an' mebbe I hadn't — it didn't make no diff'rence. An' when them spells was on, what she didn't take out o' me she did out o' the house — diggin' an' scrubbin' an' takin' up carpets, layin' down carpets, shiftin' the furniture, eatin' one day in the kitchen an' another in the settin' room, an' sleepin' most anywhere. She wa'n't real well after a while, an' the wuss she seemed to feel, the fiercer she was for scrubbin' an' diggin' an' upsettin' things in gen'ral, an' she got so she couldn't keep a hired girl in the house more'n a day or two. She either wouldn't have 'em or they wouldn't stay, an' more'n half the time we was without one. This can't interest you much, can it?" And for once, John sensed, the question was not a rhetorical device.

"Yes," John said, "it does. More than you know."

"Well," David said, "her health wa'n't jes' right, an' she showed it in her looks. I noticed that she pined an' pindled some, but I thought the' was some natural criss-crossedness mixed up into it too. But I tried to make allowances an' the best o' things, an' git along's well's I could. But things kind o' got wuss an' wuss. I told you that she begun to have notions about me, an' it ain't hardly neces'ry to say what shape they took, an' after a while, mebbe a year'n a half, she got so't she wa'n't satisfied to know where I was nights, she wanted to know where I was daytimes. Kind o' makes me laugh now. It seems so ridic'lous. But it wa'n't no laughin' matter then. If I looked out a winder, she'd hint it up to me that I was watchin' some woman. She grudged me even to look at a picture paper. An' one day when we happened to be walkin' together she showed feelin' about one o' them Injun women outside a cigar store."

John burst out laughing, and the more he thought about this image, the more he laughed. When his laughter had subsided, David gave him a sly grin and said, "Well, mebbe I did stretch that a little. But as I told you, she wanted to know where I was daytimes well as nights, an' every once in a while she'd turn up at my business place, an' if I wa'n't there she'd set an' wait for me, an' I'd either have to go home with her or have it out right there. I don't mean to say that all the sort of things I'm tellin' you kep' up all the time. It kind o' run in streaks. But the streaks kep' comin' oftener an' oftener. An' you couldn't never tell when they was goin' to appear. Matters'd go along putty well for a while, an' then, all of a sudden, an' for nothin', the'd come on a thunder shower 'fore you could git in out o' the wet.

"Well, it come along to the second spring, 'bout the first

day o' May. She'd been more like folks for about a week mebbe, an' I begun to chirk up some. I don't remember jes' how I got the idee, but from somethin' she let drop I gathered that she was thinkin' of havin' a new bonnet. She was an economical woman, an' never spent no money jes' for the sake o' spendin' it. Well, we'd come along so nice for a while that I felt more'n usual like pleasin' her, an' I allowed to myself that if she wanted a new bonnet, money shouldn't stand in the way, an' I set out to give her a surprise."

They had reached the level at the top of the long hill and the horses broke into a trot. At that moment they were set upon by a shrill, active, and conscientious dog of the yellow variety, which barked and sprang about in front of the mares with such frantic assiduity that they bolted as they passed their tormentor, which, with the facility of long practice, dodged the cut that David made with his whip. After some struggle, David subdued the mares and brought them back to a sober pace, the dog's barking growing fainter behind them.

David looked back at the dog. "I'd give a five-dollar note," he said, "to git one good lick at him. I'd make him holler 'pen an' ink' once! Why anybody's willin' to have such a wuthless, pestiferous varmint as that 'round's more'n I can understand. I'll bet that the days they churn, that critter, unless they catch him an' tie him up the night before, 'll be loafin' under the barn all day, an' he's jes' blowed off enough steam barkin' at us to run a dog churn the whole dum'd afternoon."

The dog's intrusion apparently had diverted David's thoughts from their channel, for he fell silent. At last John said, "You were saying something about the surprise for your wife."

"That's so," David said. "Yes, well, when I went home that night, I stopped into a mil'nery store, an' after I'd stood round a minute, a girl come up an' ast if she could show me anythin'.

"'I want to buy a bonnet,' I says. An' she kind o' laughed. 'No,' I says, 'it ain't for me. It's for a lady,' an' we laughed.

"'What sort of a bonnet do you want'?' she says.

"'Well, I dunno,' I says. 'This is the fust time I ever done anythin' in the bonnet line.' So she went over to a glass case an' took out one an' held it up, turnin' it round on her hand.

"'Well,' I says, 'I guess it's putty enough. But the' don't seem to be much of anythin' to it. Hain't you got somethin' a little bigger an' . . . '

"'Showier?' she says. 'How's this?' she says, doin' the same trick with another.

"'Well,' I says, 'that looks more like it, but I had an idee that the A-one triple extry fine article had more traps on it. Most anyone might have on either one of 'em that you've showed me an' not attrac' no attention at all. You needn't mind expense,' I says.

"'Very well,' she says. 'I guess I know what you want,' an' goes over to another case an' fetches out another bonnet twice as big as either o' the others, an' with more notions on't than you could shake a stick at — flowers an' garden stuff an' fruit an' glass beads an' feathers, an' all that, till you couldn't see what they was fixed on to. She took holt on 't with both hands, the girl did, an' put it onto her head, an' kind o' smiled an' turned around slow so't I could git a gen'ral view on't.

"'Style all right?' I says.

"'The very best of its kind,' she says.

"'How 'bout the kind?" I says.

"'The very best of its style,' she says.

John laughed. David gave him a grin. "She was a slick one, wa'n't she?" he said. "What a hoss trader she would 'a' made! I didn't catch on at the time, but I rec'lected afterward. 'Well,' I says, 'how much is it?'

"'Fifteen dollars,' she says.

"'What?' says I. 'Scat my — ! I could buy head riggin' enough to last me ten years for that!'

"'We couldn't sell it for less,' she says.

"'Sposin' the lady I'm buyin' it for don't jes' like it,' I says. 'Can you alter it or swap somethin' else for it?'

"'Cert'nly, within a reasonable time,' she says.

"'Well, all right,' I says, 'do her up.' An' so she wrapped the thing 'round with soft paper an' put it in a box, an' I paid for 't an' moseyed along up home, feeling that every man, woman, an' child had their eyes on my parcel, but thinkin' how tickled my wife would be."

They reached a point in the road where, by unspoken mutual assent, they always paused to look back on the vast landscape below them. To the east, amid farm fields now beige and yellow with autumn, lay the village, and the lake, blue like the sky above it. The river traced a path as it flowed bright as mercury into the distance in the south. After a time David straightened the reins with a "c'lk" to the horses, and they drove on in silence. John knew that David did not usually abandon a topic until he had "had his say out," as he put it, but in time he felt compelled to ask, "Was your wife pleased?"

"Where was I?" David said.

"On your way home with your purchase."

"Oh yes. Well, it was a little after tea time when I got to the house, an' I thought prob'ly I'd find her in the settin' room waitin' for me. But she wa'n't, an' I went up to the bedroom to find her, feelin' a little less sure o' things. She

was settin' lookin' out a winder when I come in, an' when I spoke to her she didn't give me no answer except to say, lookin' up at the clock, 'What's kep' you like this?'

"'Little matter o' business,' I says, lookin' as smilin' as I knew how, an' holdin' the box behind me.

"'What you got there?' she says, sluin' her head round to git a sight at it.

"I brought the box to the front o' me, feelin' my face straighten out's if you'd run a flat-iron over it. She seen the name on the paper.

"'You been spendin' your time there, have you?' she says, settin' up in her chair an' pointin' with her finger at the box. 'That's where you been the last half hour, hangin' 'round them minxes in Mis' Schoolbred's! What's in that box?' she says, with her face a-blazin'.

"'Now, Lizy,' I says, 'I wa'n't there ten minutes if I was that, an' I been buyin' you a bonnet.'

"'You . . . been . . . buyin' . . . me . . . a bonnet?' she says, stiff'nin' up stiffer'n a stake.

"'Yes,' I says, 'I heard you say somethin' about a spring bonnet, an' I thought, seein' how economical you was, that I'd buy you a nicer one'n mebbe you'd feel like yourself. I thought it would please you,' I says, tryin' to rub her the right way.

"'Let me see it,' she says, in a voice dryer'n a lime-burner's hat, pressin' her lips together an' reachin' out for the box. Well, sir, she snapped the string with a jerk an' sent the cover skimmin' across the room, an' then, as she hauled the parcel out of the box, she got up onto her feet. Then she tore the paper on 't an' looked at it a minute, an' then took it between her thumb an' finger, like you hold up a dead rat by the tail, with her face gettin' even redder, if it could. Finally she says, in a voice between a whisper an' a choke, 'What'd you pay for the thing?'

"'Fifteen dollars,' I says.

"'Fifteen *dollars*?' she says.

"'Yes,' I says. 'Don't you like it?'

"Well, she never said a word. She drawed in her arm an' took holt of the bonnet with her left hand, an' fust she pulled off one thing an' dropped it on the floor, far off as she could reach, an' then another, an' then another, an' then, by gum, she went at it with both hands jest as fast as she could work 'em, an' in less time'n I'm tellin' it to you she picked the thing cleaner'n any chicken you ever see, an' when she got down to the carcass she squeezed it up between her two hands, give it a wring an' a twist like it was a wet dish-towel, an' flung it in my face. Then she made a half turn, throwin' back her head an' grabbin' into her hair, an' give the awfullest screechin' laugh — one screech after another that you coulda heard a mile — an' then throwed herself face down on the bed, screamin' an' kickin'. Well, sir, if I wa'n't at my wits' end, you can have my watch an' chain.

"She wouldn't let me touch her no way, but, as luck had it, it was one o' the times when we had a hired girl, an' hearin' the noise, she come gallopin' up the stairs. She wa'n't a young girl, an' she had a face humbly 'nough to keep her awake nights, but she had sense. 'You'd better run for the doctor,' she says, when she saw the state my wife was in. You better believe I done the heat o' my life. An', more luck, the doctor was home an' jes' finishin' his tea. His house an' office wa'n't but two three blocks off, an' in about a few minutes me an' him an' his bag was leggin' it back for my house, though I noticed he didn't seem to be in as much of a twitter's I was. He ast me more or less questions, an' jes' as we got to the house, he says, 'Has your wife had anythin' to alarm or shock her this evenin'?'

"'Nothin' I know on, 'cept I bought her a new bonnet that didn't seem to come quite up to her idees,' I says. At that he give me a funny look, an' then we went in an' upstairs.

"The hired girl had got her quieted down some, but when we went in she looked up, an' seein' me, set up her screech, an' the doctor told me to go downstairs an' he'd come down putty soon, an' after a while he did.

"'She's quiet for the present,' he says, takin' a pad o' paper out o' his pocket an' writin' on it. 'Do you know Mis' Jones, your next door neighbor?' he says.

"I allowed I had a speakin' acquaintance with her.

"'Well,' he says, 'fust, you step in an' tell her I'm here an' want to see her, an' ast her if she won't come right along. An' then you go down to my office an' have these things sent up, an' then you go downtown an' send this' — handin' me a note that he'd wrote an' put in an envelope — 'up to the hospital. Better send it with a hack, or, better yet, go yourself,' he says, 'an' hurry. You can't be no use here,' he says. 'I'll stay, but I want a nurse here in an hour, an' less if possible.' I was putty scared by all that, an' I says, 'Lord,' I says, 'is she as bad off as that? What is it ails her?'

"'Don't you *know*, Mr. Hannum?' he says, givin' me a queer look.

"'No,' I says, 'she hain't been fust rate for a spell back, but I couldn't git nothin' out o' her what was the matter, an' don't know what partic'lar thing ails her now, unless it's that dum'd bonnet,' I says.

"At that the doctor laughed a little, kind of as if he couldn't help it.

"'I don't think that was wholly to blame,' he says. 'It may have hurried matters up a little — somethin' that was liable to happen in the next two months.'

"'You don't mean it?' I says.

"'Yes,' he says, 'I do mean it. Now you git out as fast as you can.' Then he says, 'Wait a minute, Mr. Hannum. How old is your wife?'

"'From what she told me 'fore we was married,' I says, 'she's thirty-one.'

"'Oh,' he says, kind o' soft, an' raisin' his eyebrows 's if he didn't believe it. 'Well, all right, you hurry along now.'

"I dusted around putty lively, an' inside of an hour was back with the nurse, an'. . . " David paused thoughtfully and then continued in a lower tone. "Jest as we got inside the front door, a door upstairs opened an' I heard a little 'Waa waa!' like it was the littlest kind of a new lamb. An' I tell you," David said, with a little quaver in his voice, and looking straight over the off horse's ears, "nothin' I ever heard before nor since ever fetched me, right where I *lived*, as that did. The nurse she made a dive for the stairs, wavin' me back with her hand, an' I . . . Well, I went into the settin' room, an', well, never mind.

"I dunno how long I set there list'nin' to 'em movin' 'round overhead, an' wonderin' what was goin' on, but finally I heard a step on the stairs an' I went out into the entry, an' it was Mis' Jones from next door. 'How be they?' I says.

"'We don't quite know yet,' she says. 'The little boy is a nice formed little feller,' she says, 'an' them children very often grow up, but he is *very* little,' she says.

"'An' how 'bout my wife?' I says.

"'Well,' she says, 'we don't know jes' yet. But she is quiet now, an' we'll hope for the best. If you want me,' she says, 'I'll come any time, night or day, but I must go now. The doctor will stay all night, an' the nurse will stay till you can git someone to take her place,' an' then she went home. You've heard tell of the 'salt of the earth,' an' if that woman wa'n't more on 't than a hoss can draw downhill, the' ain't no such thing."

David fell silent again, remembering.

"Well," John said, desperately, "did they live?"

"The child did," David said. "Not to grow up, but till he was 'twixt six an' seven. But my wife never left her bed, though she lived three, four weeks. She never seemed to take no interest in the little feller, nor nothin' else much. But one day — it was Sunday, along to the last — she seemed a little more chipper 'n usual. I was settin' with her, an' I said to her how much better she seemed to be, tryin' to chirk her up.

"'No,' she says, 'I ain't goin' to live.'

"'Don't you say that,' I says.

"'No,' she says, 'I ain't. An' I don't care.'

"I didn't know jes' what to say, an' she spoke agin: 'I want to tell you, Dave,' she says, 'that you've been good an' kind to me.'

"'I've tried to,' I says, 'an' 'Lizy,' I says, 'I'll never forgive myself about that bonnet, long's I live.'

"'That hadn't really nothin' to do with it,' she says, 'an' you meant all right. Though,' she says, almost in a whisper, an' the' come across her face not a smile exac'ly, but somethin' like a little riffle on a piece o' still water, 'that bonnet *was* enough to kill most anybody.'"

John leaned out of the buggy and looked back along the road, as if deeply interested in something that had caught his attention. David turned the buggy about and began the journey home. They descended the long hill into the valley and David, careful of loose stones, gave all his attention to his driving. When they reached level ground, John said, "You never married again, then."

"No," David said. "My two matrymonial experiences was brief an' to the point, as the sayin' is."

"But you were still a young man."

"Well," David said with his low chuckle, "I allow 't mebbe I sometimes thought on 't, an' once, about ten year later, I putty much made up my mind to try another hitch-up. The' was a woman that I seen quite a good deal of, an' liked putty well, an' I had some grounds for thinkin' she wouldn't show me the door if I was to ast her. In fact, I made up my mind I would take the chance, an' one night I put on my best bib 'n' tucker an' started for her house. I had to go 'cross the town to where she lived, an' the farther I walked, the fiercer I got — havin' made up my mind — so 't putty soon I was travelin' like I was 'fraid some other feller'd git there 'head o' me. Well, it was Sat'day night, an' the stores was all open, an' the streets was full o' people, an' I had to pull up in the crowd a little, an' I don't know how it happened in partic'lar, but fust thing I knew I run slap into a woman with a band-box, an' when I looked round, there was a mil'nery store in full blast with the winders full o' bonnets. Well, sir, do you know what I done? Well, the' was a hoss-car passin' that run three mile out in the country in a diff'rent direction from where I started for, an' I got up an' got onto that car, an' rode the length o' that road, an' got off an' *walked* back! An' I never went near her house from that day to this. An' that," David said, "was the nearest I ever come to havin' another pardner to my joys an' sorro's."

"That was pretty near, though," David said.

"Well, mebbe Prov'dence mighta had some other plan for stoppin' me 'fore I smashed the whole rig, if I hadn't run into the mil'nery shop, but as it was, that fetched me to a stand-still. An' I never started to run agin."

"How did you get on after your wife died and left you with a little child?"

"That was where Mis' Jones come in," David said. "Of course I got the best nurse I could, an' Mis' Jones'd run in two three times every day to see 't things was goin' as right's they could. But it come on that I had to be away from home a good deal, an' finally, come fall, I got the Joneses to move into a bigger house, where I could have a room, an' fixed it up with Mis' Jones to take charge o' the little feller right along. She had a girl of about thirteen, an' had lost two little ones, an' so between her havin' took to my little mite of a thing from the fust, an' my makin' it wuth her while, she was willin'. When I was at home, I had him with me all the time I could manage. With good care he'd growed up nice an' bright, an' as big as the average an' smarter'n a steel trap. He liked bein' with me better'n anybody else, an' when I could manage to have him I couldn't bear to have him out o' my sight. Well, as I told you, he got to be 'most seven year old. I'd had to go out to Chicago, an' one day I got a telegraph sayin' he was putty sick, an' I took the fust train east. It was along in March, an' we had a breakdown, an' run into an awful snowstorm, an' one thing an' another, I lost twelve or fifteen hours. It seemed to me that them two days was longer'n my whole life. But I finally did git home about nine o'clock in the mornin'. When I got to the house, Mis' Jones was on the lookout for me, an' I see by her face that I was too late. 'Oh David, David!' she says — she'd never called me David before — an' put her hands on my shoulders.

"'When?' I says.

"''Bout midnight,' she says.

"'Did he suffer much?' I says.

"'No,' she says, 'I don't think so. But he was out of his head most o' the time after the fust day, an' I guess all the time the last twenty-four hours.'

"'Do you think he'd 'a' knowed me?' I says. 'Did he say anythin'?' An' she looked at me. She wa'n't cryin' when I come in, though she had been. But at that her face all broke up. 'I don't know,' she says. 'He kept sayin' things, but all we could understand was Daddy, Daddy, an' then she throwed her apron over her face an' . . . "

David tipped his hat a little farther over his eyes, though like many horsey men, he usually wore it rather far down. Leaning over, he twirled the whip in the socket between his two fingers and thumb. John studied the stitched ornamentation of the dashboard until the reins were thrust into his hands. But it was not for long. David straightened and, without turning his head, took back the reins.

"Day after the fun'ral," David said, "I says to Mis' Jones, 'I'm goin' back out west,' I says, 'an' I can't say how long I shall be gone. Long enough anyway,' I says, 'to git it into my head that when I come back the' won't be no little feller to jump up round my neck when I come into the house. But long or short, I'll come back some time, an' meanwhile, as far's the thing between you an' me's concerned, it's to go on jes' the same, an' more'n that. Do you think you'll remember him some?' I says.

"'As long as I live,' she says. 'Jes' like my own.'

"'Well,' I says, 'long's you remember him, he'll be, in a way, livin' to you, an' that's how long I allow to pay for his keep an' tendin', jes' the same as I have. An',' I says, 'if you don't let me do it you ain't no friend o' mine, an' you been a good one.' Well, she squimmidged some, but I wouldn't let her say No. 'I've arranged it all with my business partner,' I says, 'an' other ways, an' more 'n that, if you git into any kind of a scrape an' I don't happen to be where I can be got at, you go to him an' git what you want.'"

"I hope she lived and prospered," John said, almost inaudibly.

"She lived twenty years," David said, "an' I wish she was livin' now. I never drawed a check on her account without feelin' 't I was doin' somethin' for my little boy.

"The's a good many diff'rent sorts an' kinds o' sorro'," he said after a moment, "that's in some ways kind o' kin to each other, but I guess losin' a child's a specie unto itself. O' course I passed the achin' smartin' point years ago, but it's somethin' you can't forgit — that is, you can't help feelin' about it, because it ain't only what the child was to you, but what you keep thinkin' he'd 'a' been growin' more an' more to *be* to you. When I lost my little boy I didn't only lose him as he was, but I been losin' him over an' over agin all these years. What he'd 'a' been when he was so old, an' what when he'd got to be a big boy, an' what he'd 'a' been when he went mebbe to college, an' what he'd a been after that an' up to *now*."

John's face was turned away, and so he did not see the look that David gave him. John swallowed and clenched his teeth, his jaws aching.

"O' course," David said, "the times when a man stuffs his face down into the pillers nights passes after a while. But while the's some sorro's that the happenin' o' things helps you to forget, I guess the's some that the happenin' o' things keeps you rememberin', an' losin' a child's one on 'em."

John sensed that no one else in the world except Polly had ever heard this story, and he vowed silently that no one ever would. But he never forgot it, not one word of it, in the years afterwards.

To be continued