Gene Lees Ad Libitum

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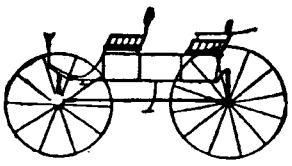
SONG LAKE SUMMER

Chapter Seventeen

And the seasons passed with astonishing swiftness. John established for himself a custom of taking a week's vacation in the fall and another in the spring. In each of the two seasons, he would go to New York or, occasionally, Boston, and immerse himself in concerts, recitals, whatever good drama he could find, and *haute cuisine*. He never left Homer in summer. Indeed, he could not imagine why anyone would abandon the hills and glorious surrounding countryside during that season. Though the humid heat could be suffocating, there was always the lake to cool one off. To be sure, he spent weekends now and then in the Finger Lakes country, and often he went to Syracuse on bank business, and now and then to Rochester and Albany. But he liked Homer and Cortland and looked forward to his vacations in New York, where he would gather up scores and books, like a squirrel collecting nuts in the autumn, buy his clothes, and shop for presents for David and Aunt Polly.

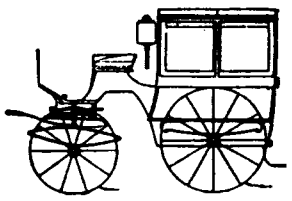
The Eagle stood empty for a time, then was sold to an Englishman named Harrop who renamed it the Windsor. Somehow it didn't seem the same. The building next to it was razed and replaced by a block of offices and shops. The new building was constructed of red brick, with limestone sills and lintels. It was attractive enough, but John could not get used to it. It seemed like an intrusion in the town, a stranger, and he missed the Eagle.

In this third year in Homer, he at last asked Aunt Polly if he could commandeer part of her parlor for the grand piano he had so long and sorely wanted, and of course she gave her consent. On his next trip to New York, he went to the Steinway factory and spent a day searching for one whose tone and action would suit him. He had played one instrument for only a minute or so when he said, "This is the one." It arrived in Homer two weeks later.



He kept the upright Mason and Hamlin in his room to practice, but when he wanted to play seriously, he went to the parlor and closed the sliding doors. The audience invited to the Sunday evening musicales gradually grew larger, but always consisted of private friends. Dick Larrabee proved, surprisingly, to have a taste for serious music, now that he had been exposed to it. But his eight-year-old son, Jason, always called Jase, had such a passion for it that John began instructing him. Jase was allowed to practice at noon on John's Mason and Hamlin. In very short order John had him playing some of the simpler Mozart pieces, and not much later some of the more complex ones.

General Woolsey died in John's fourth year in Homer. David and John went to New York for the funeral. Neither mentioned that but for the general, they would never have met and their lives would have been the less, but both were thinking it at the grave side.



John experimented, as every man must, with growing a beard. Aunt Polly said it made him look old, so he shaved it off. Later he grew a thin pointed mustache, according to the fashion. She would never, of course, overtly criticize him, as she did David, but her "very nice" was so cool that he shaved that off, too. Finally, he grew a full mustache, somewhat like General Wolsey's, but more disciplined, and she said, "Now that's better," and so it stayed. In time he even got used to it and stopped smoothing it with his thumb and forefinger.

During a few of his trips to New York, John met several young women who, while attractive on the surface, were just not quite what he wanted in a woman. Unfortunately he had no clear idea what he did want. As he observed the early scarrings of debauchery on some of his more rakish friends, he was all the more certain that theirs was not a life he envied. If he were to embark on an intimate relationship at all, it would have to be permanent one. As time passed, however, marriage removed from the ranks of the eligible more and more of the women he might have found desirable. John was manifesting signs of being a permanent bachelor. He was fussy about his clothes, his room, and even the arrangement of his socks in the drawer. Polly told David, "It ain't right," and urged that he have a talk with John.

On their next Sunday ride, David made up his mind to do so. He worked up his courage to speak, then faltered, saying, "Take the lines a minute," as he brought the horses to a halt. "The nigh one's picked up a stone, I guess." He got out to investigate, then climbed back into the buggy, saying, "The river road is about the puttiest road round here, but I don't drive oftener just on account of them dum'd loose stones." And then, abruptly, he said, "John, did you ever think again 'bout gettin' married?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you?"

"I haven't met anyone I wanted to marry since . . . since Paula."

"Never met *nobody* else?"

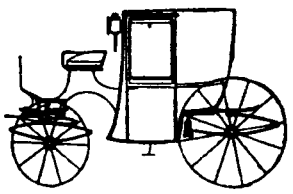
"Nobody I would want to spend my life with."

"None o' the Cortland County girls 'peal to you?"

"David," John's said, smiling and putting his hand on his friend's arm, "if I ever do meet the right girl, I'll be the first to know, she'll be the second, and you'll be the third."

And that closed off that subject of conversation. David told Polly irritably that if she wanted to know anything else about John's personal business, she could ask him herself.

On a Saturday later that summer, a stranger came to the Hannum door just after the noon meal. He was a thin man with whiskers, who gave his name as Smith. He said he had come on a matter concerning 'Lish Hannum. David's face went white. John almost cringed at the sound of the name. If there was a man on earth who had David's undying hatred, John knew by now, it was 'Lish Hannum. "Show Mr. Smith to the settin' room," David said darkly, then called, "Polly! You better come in here!" and he went in search of her.



John took Mr. Smith to the sitting room. The man sat down and David returned with Polly. Both of them sat down gravely, and John started for the door. "Better stay here, John," David said. "Now, what about 'Lish Hannum, Mr. Smith?"

"We understand he's your brother."

"*Half* brother," David said emphatically.

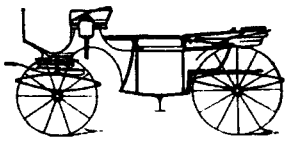
"I come over from Whitcom," the man said.

"An' what about 'Lish?"

"Well," Mr. Smith said, "he's alone in the world, you know."

"It figured to be, some day," David said.

"He's got no money, and he's been going downhill every day, health and all, till he got onto the town. There ain't nothin' for it but to send him to the county house, unless somebody's willing to support him. He told the committee you're his brother."



"Half brother," David repeated ominously.

"Half brother," Mr. Smith conceded. "Well, the committee sent me to see if you'd come forward and help out." Smith clawed at his whiskers with his fingers. "'Lish said you was well off, an' hadn't out to let him go t' the poorhouse."

John had never seen David's face like this. Its color was pale, but it gave the strangest impression of deep overcast gray. He almost trembled with rage, but he took control of himself, as John had seen him do in many business dealings, and when he spoke, his tone was almost amiable.

"He said that, did he?"

"Amountin' to that," Mr. Smith said.

"Well," David said, "it's a good many years since I see 'Lish, an' mebbe you know him better 'n I do. You know him some time, eh?"

"Quite a number o' years."

"What sort o' feller was he, when he was somebody? Putty good feller? Good citizen? Good neighbor? Lib'ral? Kind to his fam'ly? Everybody like him? Gen'rally popular an' all that?"

"Well," Smith said, squirming a little in his chair and pulling at his whiskers, "I guess he come short of all that."

David gave a low and irritable grump of assent. "I guess he did! Now honest, *is* the' a man, woman, or child in Whitcom that knows 'Lish Hannum that's got a good word for him? Or ever knowed of his doin' or sayin' anythin' that hadn't got a mean side to it some way? Didn't he drive his wife off, out an' out? An' didn't his two boys have to quit him soon's they could travel? An' if anyone was to ask you to figure out a pattern o' the meanest skunk you was capable of, wouldn't it — honest now! — wouldn't it be as like 'Lish Hannum as one buckshot's like another?"

Mr. Smith sat silent for a time, then stood up.

"You ain't goin', are you?" David said.

"Well," Mr. Smith said, "feelin's you do, I guess my errand here ain't goin' to amount to nothin' and I may's well go."

"No, you set still a minute. If you'll answer my question honest an' square, I've got sunthin' more to say to you. Come now."

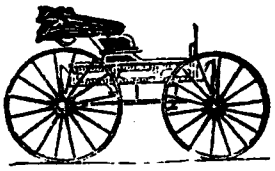
"Well," Mr. Smith said, with a sort of awkward grin, "I guess you sized him up about right. I didn't come to see you on 'Lish Hannum's account. I come for the town o'

Whitcom." Taking courage from the hopelessness of his mission, he said, "I don't give a darn what comes of 'Lish, an' I don't know nobody as does, far's he's personally concerned. But he's got to be a town charge less'n you take him off our hands."

David turned to Mrs. Bixbee. "How'd you like to have him here with us, Polly?"

"Dave Hannum!" she said. "What be you thinkin' of, seein' what he is, an' always was, an' how he always treated you? Lord sakes! You ain't thinkin' of it?"

"Not much," David said, with an ugly kind of smile such as John had never seen in his face before. "Not much! Not under this roof! Or any roof o' mine, if it wa'n't more'n my cow stable! Now, Mr. Smith, you've done all right. I hain't no fault to find with you. But I want you to go back an' say to 'Lish Hannum that you've seen me, and that I told you that not one cent o' my money nor one mossel o' my food would ever go to keep him alive one minute o' time; that if I had an empty hog-pen, I wouldn't let him sleep in't overnight, much less to bunk in with a decent hog. You tell him that I said the poorhouse was his proper dwellin', barrin' the jail, an' that it'd have to be a dum'd sight poorer house'n I ever heard of not to be a thousan' times too good for him."



Mr. Smith nodded glumly.

"Now," David said firmly, "you understand how I feel about the feller, an' I've got good reason for it. I want you to promise me that you'll say to him, word for word, jes' what I've said to you about him. An' if you do, I'll do this: You folks send him to the poorhouse, an' let him git jes' what the rest on 'em gits — no more an' no less — as long's he lives. When he dies you git him the tightes' coffin you can buy, to keep him from spoilin' the good earth as long as may be. An' you send a quarterly bill to Mr. Lenox here at my bank, an' then another for his coffin, an' I'll pay it. But this has got to be between you an' me only. You can tell the rest o' the committee what you like. But if you ever tell a living soul about this here understandin', an' I find out, I'll never pay one cent, an' you'll be to blame. 'm willin', on them terms, to stan' between the town o' Whitcom an' harm. But for 'Lish Hannum, not one sumarkee! Is it a bargain?"

"Yes sir," Mr. Smith said, rising and putting out his hand, "an' I guess from all I can gather that you're doin' all we could expect, and more too."

David shook the man's hand and led him to the door. John sank into a chair. He could hear David and Mr. Smith talking on the veranda.

"I've never seen David that way before," John said to Aunt Polly.

"You have to 'a' knowed 'Lish Hannum," Mrs. Bixbee said. "He wa'n't only half brother to David, but he was whole brother to me, an' a meaner boy, an' a meaner man, never walked the earth. He wa'n't satisfied to git the best piece an' the biggest piece, he hated to have anyone else git anythin' at all. I don't believe he ever laughed in his life, except over some kind o' suff'rin' — o' man or beast — an' what'd tickle him the most was to be the means on 't. He took partic'lar delight in abusin' an' tormentin' Dave, an' the poor little critter was jes' afraid to death of him, an' good reason. Father was awful hard, but he didn't go out of his way. But 'Lish never let no chance slip. Nobody knows how cruel mean 'Lish was, an' . . . "

But the front door closed at that moment, and she went silent. David returned, looking distracted. "Polly," David said, "do you know how many years now I been tryin' to find 'Lish's two boys?"

"Yes, David, I do."

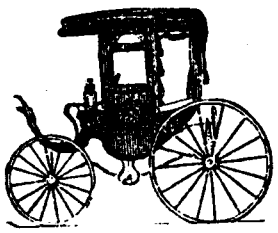
"John," David said, "you take care o' this. When they send the bills from Whitcom, you pay 'em, an' charge it to my pers'nal account. But don't you never mention 'Lish Hannum's name where I can hear it."

And he turned and left the room.

New Year's Eve passed quietly. Mrs. Bixbee, though she was determined to see the midnight, began to nod in her armchair about eleven o'clock, and at last John suggested gently that she retire.

"I'm afraid I'll have to," she said, and climbed the stairs.

The night seemed unnaturally still. David got out a bottle of whisky and a box of Havanas that John had given him for Christmas. Indeed, it was John's custom to buy David cigars, on any reasonable pretext, the gift being as much an act of self-defence as generosity. Each in an armchair on opposite sides of the sitting room, David and John smoked their cigars in silence.



"Yes sir," David said after a time, holding out his cigar to contemplate its ash, "I always write the wrong date for the fust two months o' the year."

The clock in the hall began to speak in stately bongs. Scattered yells and cheers came to them faintly from the town, then a loud report followed by a second. "Some damned fool with a shotgun," David said. The clock went on tolling. David rose and poured two glasses of whisky. The two men stood in

the center of the room with glasses raised.

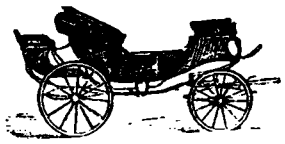
"Happy New Year," John said on the twelfth stroke.

"Same to you," David said, "an' I hope you live to see a lot of 'em."

They sipped the whisky solemnly, then sat down.

"You been here most five years," David said.

"I know. It's hard to realize at times that I haven't always lived in Homer. I remember my former life as if it were something I read in a book. There was a John Lenox in it, but he seems to me sometimes more like a character in a story than like myself."



"And yet, David said, "if you was to go back to that other life, this last five years'd git to be that way to you a good deal quicker. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps so. Yes, it's possible."

"I guess on the whole, though, you done better up here in the country'n you might some'ers else. "

"Oh yes. Thanks to you, I have indeed."

"Ne' mind about me. You got quite a little bunch o' money together now. I was thinkin' mebbe you might feel 't you needn't stay here no longer if you didn't want to."

John tensed a little. What was this leading up to?

"It wouldn't be no more'n natural," David went on, "an' mebbe it would be best for you. You're too good a man to spend all your days workin' for Dave Hannum, an' I've had it in my mind for some time — somethin' like the pork deal — to make you a little independent in case anythin' should happen to . . . "

And now John became disturbed. Was David ill, and preparing now to tell him so?

"I couldn't give you no money 'cause you wouldn't 'a' took it even if I'd wanted to, but with the pork deal and the other investments we've made since then, you're in putty good shape. What I was leadin' up to is this. I been thinkin' about it for some time, but I haven't wanted to speak to you about it before. In fact, I might 'a' put it off some longer if things wa'n't as they are, but the fact o' the matter is that I'm goin' to take down my sign. An' New Year's Eve's 'bout 's good a time 's any t' tell yeh."

John was filled with a sudden and crushing dismay. This meant the end of his life in Homer.

"Yes," David said, rolling the whisky around in his glass, "*David Hannum, Banker*, is goin' to come down at last. I'm gettin' to be an old man, an' what with the investments I've got, an' a hoss trade once in a while, an' now that I ain't worried about you, I guess I can manage to keep the fire goin' in the kitchen stove for Polly an' me, an' the' ain't no reason why I should keep my sign up much longer."

The silence that came now had an almost physical weight. John sipped his whisky gloomily.

"An' you ought anyway," David said, "to be doin' better for yourself than jes' drawin' pay in a country bank."

"Perhaps. Perhaps you're right," John said. "But this comes as a great surprise, not to say shock. I understand your reasoning but you'll forgive me if I say I'm not happy about it. Maybe I won't leave, at that. I have involvements here. Jason Larrabee, for example. Who'll teach him, if I go? And he is very talented." Again he became quiet, and finally he asked, "When are you going to take down your sign, as you put it?"

"Whenever you say," David said, and chuckled.

"What do you mean?" John said, now confused.

"Well," David said with another short laugh, "far's the sign's concerned, I s'pose we could stick a new one over it. But I guess it might's well come down. We'll settle that matter later on. Right now, all I need's your opinion."

"From time to time," John said, "you succeed in mystifying me thoroughly. My opinion about what?"

"My notion's this," David continued as if he had not heard him. "An' don't you say aye, yes, no, nor mebbe till I git through. The new sign'll read *Hannum and Company* or *Hannum and Lenox*, jest as you elect. You can put in what money you got an' I'll put in as much more, which'll make cap'tal enough in gen'ral, an' any extra money that's needed — well, up to a certain point, I guess I can manage. Now putty much all the new business has come through you, an' practic'ly you got the whole thing in your hands. You'll do the work about's you're doin' now, an' you'll draw the same salary. An' after that's paid we'll go snucks on anythin' that's left. That is, if you feel you can stan' it in Homer."

John shook his head in amazement, smiling slightly. Then he chuckled.

"Well," David said. "What d'you think?"

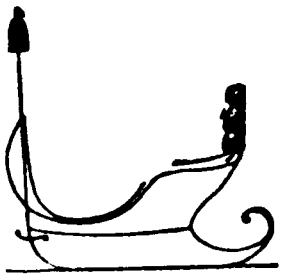
"I think that I wish I had a dollar for every time I've taken your bait. Now David, you know that I am not a violent man. In fact I would go so far as to say that I am a man of peace." He shook his head again, thinking back to the incident of the counterfeit bills, so long ago. "But if you ever do this to me again, and put me through such emotions, I think I will pick you up by main strength and throw you through the nearest window."

"Puttin' that aside," David said with mock gravity, "is it a deal?"

"It's a deal," John said, and the two men, grinning, shook hands.

A telephone was installed in the bank toward the end of January. Two days later, the new sign, inscribed *Hannum and Company* went up, but the pleasure of the event was compromised for John by a ripping cough that had persisted since the early part of the month. Excepting the whooping cough and measles of childhood, he could not recall a single day's illness in his life.

One morning in February, he did not appear for breakfast. He spent the next day in bed, and at the end of that time, when he did get up and move about, it was in a languid and spiritless fashion. The season was and had been unusually inclement, even for this climate, and there was a period of temperature changes between thawing and zero. Dr. Hayes prescribed the inevitable quinine, iron, cough mixtures, and tonics, but in vain. Mrs. Bixbee pressed bottles of sovereign decoctions and infusions upon him which John received with thanks and then neglected — and she exhausted not only the markets of Homer but her own and Sarah's considerable culinary resources to tempt an appetite that would not respond. One week followed another without improvement in his condition, and indeed as time went on, John fell into an irritable listlessness that filled the senior partner with concern.

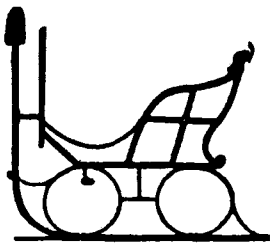


"What's the matter with him, Doc?" David asked. "He don't seem to take no more interes' than a founderin' hoss. Can't you do nothin' for him?"

"Not much use dosin' him," the doctor said. "He'll be all right, maybe, come warm weather. He's a fine strong young man, but this cussed influenza sometimes hits them hardest."

Chapter Eighteen

John left Homer February 27. He took the morning train to Syracuse and the New York Central to Buffalo and then to Chicago. He spent the night at one of the new hotels, which rose with a certain self-proclaiming majesty twelve floors above the streets. His room was on the tenth, but as he stood at its window, he could see nothing; the city was hidden by a gray darkness of swirling snow. It was in this city and in such a storm, he reflected, that David had received word of his boy's illness. If life has miracles, he thought, David Hannum is one of them. That a man of his background could have achieved so much, should have endured such pain to emerge with humor, a homely grace, and compassion for his fellows, rather than a crabbed and bitter avarice, was beyond understanding.



John slept fitfully that night, awakened periodically by his cough, which seemed to be growing worse, and the next morning wearily boarded a train of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe. He had a private compartment, reserved at David's insistence, and he remained there throughout the journey, except when he went to the dining car for meals that he left, usually, half eaten. From his window he watched the panorama of America wheel by. That it was large, every schoolboy knew. But its true immensity could not be apprehended by anyone who had not crossed it. Scenically, however, it was not at its best at this time of year. A monotonous gray sky was broken occasionally by lonely homesteads and barns and now and then a horse exhaling vapor, and when the snow flew again, even these small distractions were blotted out. It snowed in the Rocky Mountains, so that he saw little even of them. Once the train was halted for four hours while a plow cleared the track ahead.

John felt too weary to open any of the books he had brought with him, and at Albuquerque, New Mexico, when the other passengers left the train to buy artifacts offered by Indian women in the station, he lacked the energy even for this interlude.

And then he discovered another miracle, the California spring. After Arizona, the train descended from the high cold plains into the Mojave desert, and he saw cactus flowers for the first time in his life. Then came the little city of San Bernardino, a wanton garden of countless colors. At last the train reached Los Angeles, which impressed him from the window as a drab sort of place. But its air, when he left the train and then the station, was warm, and soft, and scented with flowers, and as he walked about the streets during the two hours he had to wait for his next train, he began to perceive a certain charm about the city. He liked the Spanish names of the streets and the traces of Spanish mission architecture, and the neat and unique California bungalows, built of wood, with wide eaves for shelter from the sun, elaborately shingled, and painted white. There were other, bigger houses, two and three stories high, built in a sort of California version of carpenter Gothic, that he found curiously impressive. There was an element of fantasy about them. And the sunlight was brighter than he had ever seen it. It hurt the eyes at first. He began to view California as a very different place, almost a different country.

He returned to the station, boarded a Southern Pacific train bound for San Francisco, and reached San Luis Obispo that evening, optimistic, as he looked up at its surrounding rounded hills dappled with oak trees, that its mineral springs and climate

would indeed improve his health.

The change, however, was not immediate. For the first two days, he felt, if possible, worse. And then, gradually, the symptoms of his unidentified malaise were moderated. The warmth of the waters, which he took every morning, penetrated his very bones. He was told that Jesse James had come to this part of California to die from a bullet wound in the lung and had recovered instead. Walking in the gardens of the hotel, admiring the strange succulent plants whose names he did not know, the graceful fan palms, and thousands of flowers already in bloom in the importunate California spring, he found his spirits rising. He had always intended to read Lord Macauley's *Essays*, and now at last, under a eucalyptus tree, he began. The next morning he awoke voraciously hungry — hungry enough, as he had heard David say, to eat a raw dog. From then on, his improvement was steady, and two weeks after his arrival, he sent a telegram to David:

FEELING MUCH BETTER STOP RETURNING SOON JOHN

The next day he received a reply:

STAY THERE STOP BANK BURNED DOWN STOP HOMER WASHED AWAY IN FLOOD STOP DON'T NEED YOU STOP YOURE FIRED TILL FURTHER NOTICE DAVE

John laughed, shook his head, and decided that he would stay a while longer and see the country. There was no saying when, or even if, he would ever make this long journey again, and he thought that he might as well take advantage of the present opportunity. He entrained south to Santa Barbara, drawn by a deep urge to look at the sea. He booked lodgings for a week in a charming hotel called the Pleya del Mar, which had yellow-brown walls plastered in the Mexican fashion and a roof of red tiles, like those one saw in the south of France and in Italy and Spain. He walked by the Pacific all afternoon on his first day, solitary and pensive as he threw stones into the water. On the second day he bought a little handbook of the local flora, rented a buggy and horse at the livery stable, and set off into the foothills of the magnificent Santa Ynez Mountains that overlooked the town and the ocean. He wound his way along dirt roads through thick foliage, and with the help of his book, was able to name some of it: the spike-leaved agave Americana of a striking gray-bluish coloration, the agave marginata of identical shape but green in color with each leaf bordered in yellow, the soft-leaved agave attenuata, the jade plant, the eucalyptus trees that the book said had been brought here from Australia as fuel for trains, the pepper trees as graceful as willows but with small and delicate leaves, whose true home was Brazil, the Monterey pines unlike any in the east — a fantastic botanical treasure that he felt must be unequaled anywhere on earth. He liked to watch the great flocks of pelicans as they skimmed the ocean, always hunting for fish, and the sleek seals. One afternoon, as he leaned on the railing of the wooden pier that reached out into the sea, he was astonished by several vast shapes like moving gray hills on the silver waters. He knew without ever having seen one before what these magnificent creatures were: migrating whales. He was falling in love with California.

Late of another afternoon, after a long ride in the hills, he drove back down into town, pausing occasionally on the slope to admire the sea. As he neared the hotel, he passed a carriage going in the opposite direction which was driven by an older man. Beside him was a girl who seemed familiar, like the girl in a boy's dream of the one he will someday find. Perhaps in fact he had met her somewhere. Was it in New York? He had almost forgotten most of his old acquaintances there. It would not be surprising, after all, since Santa Barbara was a favorite resort of the eastern wealthy, if the girl should be someone he had met in passing. But no, he decided; she was the girl in the dream.

After lunch the next day, he went up the slope of the town to look at Mission Santa Barbara, the best preserved, it was said, of all the Spanish missions established by padres along the Camino Real that ran from Mexico to San Francisco. It was impressive, with its twin towers and adobe walls and red-tiled steps, and its front terrace commanded a fine view of the sea. He admired its old wooden beams and sat for a time in its chapel, at peace with himself. Then he went out into its walled garden, in the center of which was a huge tree with a fantastic trunk like twisted ropes.

A voice broke in on his thoughts. "Ain't this a strange place to find a good-lookin' feller like you wearin' them New York clo'es? How be you, John Lenox?"

He whirled around, trying to find the source of the voice, but there seemed to be no one in the garden but himself. The voice was unbelievably like David's, except that it was high — a girl's voice. The accent, however, was perfect.

"Are you cal'latin' t' stay a long time in Californie?" the voice said. And John remembered, and laughed.

"I don't believe it!" he said. "It's not possible! All right, come out, come out, I know who it is."

And Cathy Van Denberg stepped out from behind the great tree. "Hello, John," she said with a glorious open-hearted smile.

"Cathy! What are you doing in Santa Barbara?" She held out her hands to him, and he grasped them eagerly.

"My Uncle George Tenaker has a ranch here. Don't you remember? We had just come back from California when I first met you."

"But how . . . how did you know . . . ?"

"Where to find you? Uncle George and I passed you on the street yesterday. We turned around and came after you, but you had disappeared. So this morning I enquired at the hotels and the clerk at the Pleya del Mar said you were registered, and he thought you had come up here to the mission. So I came here to look for you."

"Well," he said. "Well well well." And impulsively he

hugged her. "I am so pleased to see you! I don't know a soul here."

"You do now."

"Will you dine with me this evening?"

"With pleasure. In fact, I planned on it."

"Then let's go back to the hotel and have something cold to drink, and you can tell me where you have been all these years, and what you've been doing."

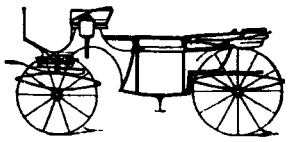
They dined early that evening at the hotel on shrimp from San Francisco and Pacific red snapper, a fish John had never tasted before and immediately loved. Cathy introduced him to a sweet-sour drink from Mexico made with tequila which he also loved.

The Van Denberg family had not been back to Homer these past several summers. They had spent them instead in Germany with Paula and her husband.

"He's a count, I heard," John said.

"Yes, he is."

"A fortune hunter?" John said with an ironic smile.



"Far from it! He's a doctor, in Munich, and I assure you, he has money of his own. I like him. He's very nice."

"I stand corrected," John said. "And what have you been doing?"

"Studying. Going to college. In Boston. I am proud to tell you that I have my Bachelor of Science degree."

"In what subject?"

"Astronomy."

"Isn't that an unlikely subject for a girl?"

"You are old-fashioned. There are many women in the field. Capable ones."

"Again I stand corrected. But why astronomy?"

"I wanted to know how our universe was made."

"And do you know?"

"No, and neither does anyone else." And with a lofty, mock-professional tone: "If you're really interested, I will condescend to dissertate on the subject for you."

And she did, at length, her conversation lighted by her effervescent humor, her irony, her wicked imitations of professors, her shrewd insights, and a curious self-mockery. She was extraordinarily pretty — not beautiful as her sister was, but piquantly pretty, with thick brown flowing hair and brown eyes almost as dark as his own, eyes that shone when she laughed, which she did constantly. She was wearing white that day.

"But tell me about you," she said. "Do you still play the piano?"

"Of course. It's my love. I've been teaching at the Cortland Conservatory — piano to the piano students and French to the voice students. I'm a member of a chamber music society in Syracuse. I play with two ladies, a violinist and a cellist, and very good they are. We do Mozart trios and that sort of thing. We did a small tour last fall, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Toronto. We were very well received."

"You're a musician, tell me something. This man Debussy. He puzzles me. Am I missing something?"

"Probably. It's marvelous music. Give it time and I think you'll come to like it." The waiter brought fresh drinks.

"And you've never married? In all these years?"

"No," he said.

"Why?"

"I get that question from Aunt Polly every six months," he said, smiling. "Am I going to get it from you too?"

"No."

"Good. Because I am by now a confirmed old bachelor."

She sipped her drink, her eyes fixed on him as he lighted one of his French cigarettes. Had he been able to read the expression in those eyes, an expression compounded of a mature self-awareness and that naive adoration with which she had watched him play piano that first night at the Van Denberg house, he would have been taken aback. She had already made up her mind, and John's bachelor days were numbered.

She met him for luncheon the next day. Afterwards they walked for hours on the beach, watching the seabirds, picking up shells, talking, talking, talking. By the end of the day, she knew almost as much about his life as he did, and all that she had set out to know. This only strengthened her determination.

She met him the next day, and the next. They went for long rides and picnics in the Santa Ynez Mountains. He made her laugh with stories about David, whose accent he could now imitate almost as well as she could. He was quite unaware of the care she took in preparing herself for their meetings. He knew only that she seemed to grow more beautiful every day. He came to believe she was more beautiful than her sister. And to believe as well that they would always be friends, though never more than that. He was quite satisfied with his future as a bachelor alone with his books and his music and his work. He would never change it now, of that he was sure. One night they built a bonfire on the beach and lay on a blanket, staring at the stars, so far away above the dark Pacific. It must be wonderful, he thought, to look at them like that and know all their names. Cathy was really quite wonderful, when you thought about it.

She was not thinking about the names and orbits of planets and the distances to galaxies. She was trying to decide whether she would marry John here or in Homer.

One morning John received a telegraph:

CASH FORTY SIXTY IN STOCK STOP STOCK GOOD DAVE

"God bless him!" John said excitedly. David had disposed of the Pennsylvania property and John was, if not rich, "wuth consid'ble," as David would say.

He passed the morning in a storm of impatience, wanting to tell Cathy. She arrived at their cafe at twelve-thirty. The avuncular Mexican waiter with dark skin and gray hair, about David's age, knew them well by now. "*Dos margaritas, señor*?" he said.

"*Si, por favor, Armando*. ," John said. The waiter left. "Cathy," John said, "there is something I want to tell you."

"Yes, John?" she said, encouragingly.

"I . . . " he began, looking into her eyes. He was having trouble concentrating. What was it he had wanted to tell her? Oh yes, about the sale of the Pennsylvania property. "I had this piece of land, you see, and, well . . . " But again he lost the train of his thought, and fell into a silent staring at her. He could not imagine how he had ever considered her sister more beautiful.

"You were about to tell me something," she said.

"Was I? Oh yes. I was going to say that . . . I love you."

"Oh," she sighed, her hand to her throat. "John," she said, "I don't know what to say. This is so unexpected. I just don't know what to say."

"I'll tell you what to say," he said. "Say that you love me."

"Walll, now, John," she said in David's voice, "a gal ought not to make decisions like that too quick, an' 's I see it . . . "

"Stop it!" John said, attempting severity but laughing in spite of himself, "Answer my question: Do you love me?"

"Oh Lord yes, John," she said, leaning across the table, seizing his hands, and staring intensely and seriously into his eyes. "I've loved you since I was sixteen."

David was working in his office. He was in an irritable mood, having discovered in these past weeks how completely he was dependent on John. David and Peleg and Chet Timson, now that John had rehired him, were everlastingly looking things up. John never had to look anything up. He always knew.

And then David heard John's voice.

"Good afternoon, Peleg."

"Mr. Lenox! Welcome home!"

"Mr. Timson. Good to see you."

David dashed out into the bank, then stopped in his tracks. There stood John, brown with sun, and he was with — my sakes! — Cathy Van Denberg, all growed up! There were suitcases on the floor around them.

David took control of himself, not wanting to make it too obvious how excited he was to see John, how much he hated to be without him. And how much he loved the boy, and how terrified he had been when John took ill and he felt as if he were about to lose his son for the second time.

"John," he acknowledged. "And Cathy Van Denberg! How are you?"

"I'm very well, Mr. Hannum, and how are you?"

"Well," David said, affecting an invalid's voice, "I'm gittin' so 't I can sit up an' take nourishment." Looking at the luggage, he said, "You two come in together on the two-fifteen?"

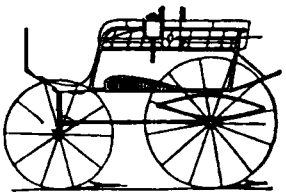
"Yes, we did," Cathy said innocently.

"Wait'll Polly hears you're back," David said. "Cathy Van Denberg. An' ain't you growed up putty!"

"Thank you, Mr. Hannum, but my name's no longer Van Denberg. I got married."

"Well, scat my — ! Well, well, then what's your married name?"

"Lenox," she said.



It was one of the few occasions when John saw David look nonplussed, unable to put up even a pretense of equanimity. He opened and closed his mouth."Well scat my —" he said, and repeated, "Scat my — " As he assimilated the information, he broke into a huge smile and without a further word left the bank at a fast walk. He passed the side window, almost jogging, muttering "Polly, Polly!" though he was too far from the house for her to hear.

John said to Cathy: "I daresay we'd better go too."

Peleg said, "Leave your valises, Mr. Lenox. I'll bring them along presently."

His voice was different. John took a long look at him. He seemed to have grown taller, and he stood straighter than on that morning when John first began to teach him to read. There was a certain slight confidence in him now.

And he came about as close to a smile as John had ever seen on his face, and possibly ever would. He said, "Welcome home, Mrs. Lenox."

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