

The Gentleman From Indiana

By BOOTH TARKINGTON

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CHAPTER XIII.

VERY early in the morning a messenger boy stumbled up the front steps of Meredith's house and handed the colored servant four yellow envelopes, night messages. The man carried them upstairs, left three with his master's guest, then knocked on the door of the occupant who assured him that the fourth envelope was under the door. Meredith lay quite motionless for several minutes, sleepily watching the yellow rhomboid in the crevice. It was a hateful looking thing to mix itself in with a pleasant dream and insist on being read, but after a while he climbed groaningly out of bed and perused the message with heavy eyes, still half asleep. He read it twice before it penetrated.

Suppress all newspapers today. Convention meets at 11. If we succeed, a delegation will come to Roven this afternoon. They will come. HELEN.

Tom rubbed his sticky eyelids and shook his head violently in a Spartan effort to rouse himself, but what more effectively performed the task for him were certain sounds that issued from Harkless' room across the hall. For some minutes Meredith had been dully conscious of a rustle and stir in the invalid's chamber, and he began to realize that no mere tossing upon a bed would account for a noise that reached him across a wide hall and through two closed doors of thick walnut. Suddenly he heard a quick, heavy tread, shod in Harkless' room, and a resounding bang as some heavy object struck the floor. The doctor was not to come till evening. The servant had gone downstairs. Who in the sick man's room wore shoes? He rushed across the hall in his pajamas and threw open the unlocked door.

The bed was disarranged and vacant. Harkless, fully dressed, was standing in the middle of the floor, his hands on his hips, looking at the door with a speechless stare. The doctor had just entered the room and seized him with both hands.

"Mad, by heaven! Mad!"
"Let go of me, Tom!"
"Lunatic! Lunatic!"
"Don't stop me one instant!"
Meredith tried to force him toward the bed. "No; get back to bed. You're delirious, boy!"
"Delirious nothing! I'm a well man!"

"Go to bed! Go to bed!"
Harkless set him out of the way with some arm. "To be," he cried. "Fighting to Plattsville!"
Meredith wrung his hands. "The doctor!"

"Doctor be hanged!"
"What in the name of all that's terrible is the matter, John?"
His companion slung a light overcoat, unfolded, on the overflowing, misshapen bundle of clothes that lay in the trunk, then he jumped on the bed with both feet and kicked the rasp into the lock, while a very elegantly buttoned cuff and shirt sleeve dangled out from under the fastened lid. "I haven't one second to talk, Tom; I have eighteen minutes to catch the express. It's more than a mile to the station, and the train leaves here at 9:02. I get there at 10:47. Telephone a cab for me, please, or tell me the number. I don't want to stop to hunt it up."

Meredith looked him in the eyes. In the pupils of Harkless flared a fierce light. His cheeks were reddened with an angry, healthy glow, and his teeth were clenched till the line of his jaw stood out like that of an embattled soldier. His brow was dark, his chest was thrown out, and he took deep, quick breaths. His shoulders were squared, and in spite of his thinness he looked massive. Lethargy or malady, or both—whatever his ailment—was gone. He was six feet of hot steam and cold resolution.

"You are going?"
"Yes," he answered quietly, "I am going to go with you."
"You are going to go with you?"
"Yes, Tom," said Harkless.

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from the cart, bore down upon the ticket office, stormed at the agent and ran madly at the gates, flourishing their passports. The official on duty eyed them wearily. "Been gone two minutes," he remarked with a peaceable yawn.

Harkless stamped his foot on the cement flags; then he stood stock still, gazing at the empty tracks, but Meredith turned to him, smiling. "Won't it keep?" he asked.

"Yes, it will keep," John answered. "Part of it may have to keep till election day, but some of it I will settle before night. And that," he cried between his teeth, "and that is the part of it in regard to young Fisbee!"

"Oh, it's about H. Fisbee, is it?"
"Yes, it's H. Fisbee."

"Well, we might as well go up and see what the doctor thinks of you; there's no train."

"I don't want to see a doctor again ever—as long as I live. I'm as well as anybody."

Tom burst out laughing and clapped his companion lightly on the shoulder, his eyes dancing with pleasure. "Upon my soul," he cried, "I believe you are. A miracle wrought by the witch wand of indignation! That's rather against tradition, isn't it? Well, let's take a drive."

"Meredith," said the other, turning to him gravely, "you may think me a fool if you will, and it's likely I am, but I don't leave this station except by train. I've only two days to work in."

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would have had it, as in former days, their sentence had been to the ball and chain.

"Sit down, boy, sit down," said Meredith, and his friend obeyed.

The window was open beside the two young men, and the breeze that blew in soothed like a balm, yet held a tang and spice in it, a hint of walnuts and of coming frost. There was a newness in the atmosphere that day, a bright invigoration, that set the blood tingling. The hot months were done with; languor was routed. Autumn spoke to industry, told of the sowing of another harvest, of the tawny shock, of the purple grape, of the red apple, and called upon muscle and laughter, breathing gayety into men's hearts.

The little stations hummed with bustle and noise, big farm wagons rattled off up the village streets and raced with "cut under" or omnibus; people walked with quick steps; the baggagemasters called cheerily to the trainmen, and the brakemen laughed goodbys to rollicking girls. At times the train ran between shadowy groves, and delicate landscape vistas, framed in branches, opened, closed and succeeded each other, and then the travelers were carried beyond into the level open again and looked out to where the intensely blue September skies ran down to the low horizon, meeting the boundless aisles of corn. It takes a long time for the full beauty of the flat lands to reach a man's soul. Once there, nor hills, nor sea, nor growing fan leaves of palm shall suffice him. It is like the beauty in the word Indiana. It may be that there are people who do not consider Indiana a beautiful word, but let it ring true in your ears, and it has a richer sound than Vallombrosa.

All at once the anger ran out of John Harkless. He was a hard man for anger to tarry with. And in place of it a strong sense of home coming began to take possession of him. He was going home. "Back to Plattsville, where I belong," he said to himself without bitterness, and it was the truth. "Every man cometh to his own place in the end."

Yes, as one leaves a gay acquaintance of the playhouse lobby for some hard handed, tried old friend, so he would wave the outer world godspeed and come back to the old ways of Carlow. What though the years were dusty, he had his friends and his memories and his old black brier pipe. He had a girl's picture that he should carry in his heart till his last day, and if his life was sadder it was infinitely richer for it. His winter fireside would be no lonely for her sake, and, losing her, he lost not everything, for he had had the rare blessing of having known her. And what man could wish to be healed of such a hurt? Far better to have had it than to tort' smug pace unscathed. He had been a dullard, a sluggard, weary of himself, unfit to fight, a failure in life and a failure in love. That was ended. He was tired of failing, and it was time to succeed for awhile. To accept the worst that fate can deal and to wring courage from it instead of despair—that is success, and it was the success that he would have. He would take fate by the neck. But had it done him unkindness? He looked out over the beautiful, "monotonous" landscape, and he answered heartily, "No!" There was ignorance in man, but no unkindness. Were man utterly wise he were utterly kind. The Cross-roads had not known better, that was all.

The unfolding aisles of corn swam pleasantly before his eyes. The earth hearkened to man's wants and answered. The clement sun and summer rains hastened the fruition. Yonder stood the brown haystack, garnered to feed the industrious horse that had earned his feed. There was the straw thatched shelter for the cattle. How the orchard boughs bent with their burdens! The big red barns stood stored with the harvest, for this was Carlow county, and he was coming home.

They crossed a byroad. An old man with a streaky gray chin beard was sitting on a sack of oats in a seatless wagon waiting for the train to pass. Harkless seized his companion excitedly by the elbow. "Tommy," he cried, "is Kim Ferriss! Look! Did you see that old fellow?"

"I saw a particularly uninterested and uninteresting gentleman sitting on a bag," replied his friend.

"Why, that's old Kimball Ferriss. He's going to town. He lives on the edge of the county."

"Can this be true?" said Meredith gravely.

"I wonder," said Harkless thoughtfully a few moments later—"I wonder why he had them changed around."

"Who changed around?"
"The team. He always used to drive the bay on the near side and the sorrel on the off."

"And at present," rejoined Meredith, "I am to understand that he is driving the sorrel on the near side and the bay on the off?"

"That's it," returned the other. "He must have worked them like that for some time, because they didn't look uneasy. They're all right about the train, those two. I've seen them stand with their heads almost against a fast freight. See there." He pointed to a white frame farmhouse with green blinds. "That's Win Hibbard's. We're just outside of Beaver."

"Beaver? Elucidate Beaver, boy."
"Beaver? Meredith, your information ends at home. What do you know of your own state if you are ignorant of Beaver? Beaver is that city of Carlow county next in importance and population to Plattsville."

Tom put his head out of the window. "I fancy you are right," he said. "I already see five people there."

Meredith had observed the change in his companion's mood. He had watched him closely all day, looking for a return of his malady, but he came to the conclusion that in truth a miracle had been wrought, for the lethargy was gone and vigor seemed to increase in Harkless with every turn of the wheels that brought them nearer Plattsville,

and the nearer they drew to Plattsville the higher the spirits of both the young men rose. Meredith knew what was happening there, and he began to be a little excited. As he had said, there were five people visible at Beaver, and he wondered where they lived, as the only building in sight was the station, and to satisfy his curiosity he walked out to the vestibule. The little station stood in the woods, and brown leaves whirled along the platform. One of the five people was an old lady, and she entered a rear car. The other four were men. One of them handed the conductor a telegram. Meredith heard the official say: "All right. Decorate ahead. I'll hold it five minutes."

The man sprang up the steps of the smoker and looked in. He turned to Meredith. "Do you know if that gentleman in the gray coat is Mr. Harkless? He's got his back this way, and I don't want to go inside. The air in a smoker always gives me a spell."

"Yes, that's Mr. Harkless."
The man jumped to the platform. "All right, boys," he said. "Rip her out!"

The doors of the freight room were thrown open, and a big bundle of colored stuffs was dragged out and hastily unfolded. One of the men ran to the farther end of the car with a strip of red, white and blue bunting and tacked it securely, while another fastened the other extremity to the railing of the steps by Meredith. The two companions of this pair performed the same operation with another strip on the other side of the car. They ran similar lines of bunting near the roof from end to end, so that except for the windows the sides of the car were completely covered by the national colors. Then they draped the vestibules with flags. It was all done in a trice.

Meredith's heart was beating fast. "What's it all about?" he asked.

"Picnic down the line," answered the man in charge, removing a tack from his mouth. He motioned to the conductor, "Go ahead!"

The wheels began to move; the decorators remained on the station platform, letting the train pass them, but Meredith, craning his neck from the steps, saw that they jumped on the last car.

"What's the celebration?" asked Harkless when Meredith returned.

"Picnic down the line," said Meredith.

"Nipping weather for a picnic. A bit cool, don't you think? One of those fellows looked like a friend of mine. Homer Tibbs, or as Homer might look if he were in disgrace. He had his hat hung on his eyes, and he slouched like a thief in melodrama as he tacked up the bunting on this side of the car." He continued to point out various familiar places, finally breaking out enthusiastically as they drew nearer the town: "Hello! Look there—beyond the grove yonder! See that house?"

"Yes, John."
"That's the Bowlders! You've got to know the Bowlders."
"I'd like to."

"The kindest people in the world. The Briscoe house we can't see because it's so shut in by trees, and, besides, it's a mile or so ahead of us. We'll go out there for supper tonight. Don't you like Briscoe? He's the best they make. We'll go uptown with Judd Bennett in the omnibus, and you'll know how a rapid fire machine gun sounds. I want to go straight to the Herald office," he finished, with a suddenly darkening brow.

"After all, there may be some explanation," Meredith suggested with a little hesitancy. "H. Fisbee might turn out more honest than you think."

Harkless threw his head back and laughed. "Honest! A man in the pay of Rodney McCune! Well, we can let it wait till we get there. Listen! There's the whistle that means we're getting near home. Why, there's an oil well!"

"So it is."
"And another—three, five, seven—seven in sight at once! They tried it three miles south and failed, but you can't fool Eph Watts, bless him! I want you to know Watts."

They ran by the outlying houses of the town amid a thousand descriptive exclamations from Harkless, who wished Meredith to meet every one in Carlow. But he came to a pause in the middle of a word. "Do you hear music," he asked abruptly, "or is it only the rhythm of the ties?"

"It seems to me there's music in the air," answered his companion. "I've been fancying I heard it for a minute or so. There! No—yes. It's a band, isn't it?"

"No. What would a band—yes, it is."
The train slowed up and stopped at a water tank 200 yards east of the station, and their uncertainty was at an end. From somewhere down the track came the detonating boom of a cannon. There was a clash of brass, and the travelers became sure of a band playing "Marching Through Georgia." Meredith laid his hand on his companion's shoulder. "John," he said, "John!"

The cannon fired again, and there came a cheer from 3,000 throats, the shouters all unseen. The engine coughed and panted, the train rolled on, and in another moment it had stopped alongside the station in the midst of a riotous jam of happy people who were waving flags and banners and handkerchiefs and tossing their hats high in the air and shouting themselves hoarse. The band played in dumb show. It could not hear itself play. The people came at the smoker like a long wave, and Warren Smith, Briscoe, Keating and Mr. Bence of Gaines were swept ahead of it. Before the train stopped they had rushed eagerly up the steps and entered the car. Harkless was on his feet and started to meet them. He stopped.

"What does it mean?" he said and began to grow pale. "Is Halloway—did McCune—have you?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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