

The Years of the Wicked

By Hopkins Moorhouse

Continued from Last Week

DAN LARCOMBE, then, all around good for nothing, convicted of embezzlement and other things, preserved silence for some time. Dan Larcombe, wanted for jailbreaking, was thinking—thinking so hard that his small, crafty eyes were almost entirely out of sight beneath the fleshy folds of his eyelids while his heavy mouth was drawn to one side in a smirk of contempt that bared his yellow teeth. The contempt was largely for his own physical cowardice—for the inherent terror of dogs—that enabled a thin old woman to tie up a big hulk of a man like a trussed pig and take him back to the jail from which he had escaped nearly a year before. It was his hoodoo, that terror with which he had been born. If he had had a weapon of any kind—If he had left, his gun—

Larcombe cursed to himself as emphatically as was possible on his back without unduly agitating his diaphragm. Even so, the pastime provoked a warning growl from the ugly passenger who rode the swell of it—a growl which presented Mr. Larcombe with the unusual and altogether unpleasant sensation of a pipe organ thundering bass to a congregation composed of a liver, a spleen and sundry giddy nerve-centres. "Aint this joke gone far 'nough, Aunt Zib? Y' aint really meanin' to hand me over to them fellers yonder?" he ventured at length in such a subdued, meek voice that Miss Peters glanced at him sharply.

"Do it look as if we be a goin' into town to do shoppin'?" she demanded scornfully.

"Have you clean forgot as I'm your own nephew, Aunt Zib?"

"As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is a man that wandereth from his place," quoted Miss Hepzibah, compressing her lips grimly. "The merciful man doeth good to his own soul; but he that is cruel troubleth his own flesh."

"Aw, cut it!"

"He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind."

"Guess that's right, Aunt Zib—if you hand me over. You used to tell me you loved me," he attempted wistfully. "Them was the days when you made me wear a pink sash. Member the time, Aunt Zib, when I run away an' got the sash all spoiled tryin' to tie it 'round the ol' pig's neck? It was on my—my birthday, Aunt Zib, an' you was goin' to give me a party. Member?"

"It—it was on your birthday," nodded Miss Hepzibah sadly.

"Seems like that was a mighty long time back, Aunt Zib."

"You was six then. You'll be 34 come next Friday."

"See? I'd forgot the dates. It aint goin' to be what you might call a happy birthday, is it, Aunt Zib? '88 my unlucky day, I guess."

"It aint a goin' to be no happy birthday, Danny," agreed Miss Hepzibah tremulously.

"You—forgive me fer spoilin' the sash that time, Aunt Zib," he suggested diffidently.

"I hev forgave you wunst, Danny Larcombe," sobbed Miss Hepzibah, unable longer to restrain her tears. "I hev forgave you a hundred times! An' how hev you repaid that forgiveness?—by comin' back to steal from the hand as helped you an' breakin' the heart as loved you! Oh how could you do it? How could you do it?"

"Listen, Aunt Zib," he broke out hopefully. "I didn't mean to— Say, Aunt Zib, I'm sorry fer it. Honest to Gawd, I'm sorry fer it! I didn't intend to take the coin. I—"

"The hearin' ear an' the seein' eye, the Lord hath made even both of 'em!"

"Won't you give a feller another chance, Aunt Zib?"

"Chasten thy son while there is hope, an' let not thy soul spare for his crying."

"Don't you think I'm handin' it to you straight now?"

"The righteousness of the upright shall deliver them; but transgressors shall be taken in their own naughtiness."

"I say, don't you think I'm on the level 'bout bein' sorry, Aunt Zib?"

"When he speaketh fair, believe him not; for there be seven abominations in his heart."

"They'll give me ten years, Aunt Zib. They will, fer a fact! Wouldn't be much good when I got out, would it?"

"The fear o' the Lord prolongeth days; but the years o' the wicked shall be shortened."

"Bahl! What's eatin' you, now, ways?"

"Correction is grievous unto him that forsaketh the way."

"Aw, h—!"

"Brer r-r-r!" growled the dog.

For a time they rolled on in silence through the still summer night. The moon floated in the sky like a silver chalice, spilling its pallor upon the fat back of the old gray horse, on the oval of the woman's face, on the white dog; it covered the dust behind them into drifting vapor. Occasionally the click of a wheel against a stone obtruded on the chirring monotony of crickets in the dried grasses of the wayside.

The man's face was tense with impotent anger. His bushy brows were drawn in a scowl. For Dan Larcombe knew now that she would keep her word—that she would take him straight to the prison gates. He tried a new tack.

"Spoutin' scriptur'—You spoutin' scriptur'!" He laughed huskily. "Aw, you make me weary! What 'bout poor Uncle Ed, eh? Kin you spout it to fit his case, aunt o' mine? Nice fine Christian sperrit you showed him, aight, a-right!" He laughed again, contemptuously. "Why, I wouldn't 've treated a dumb ass nymal the way you went an' treated your own brother an' I aint perterdin' to be no church artist, believe me!"

"We won't be discussin' things as aint none o' your business, Danny Larcombe," said Miss Hepzibah severely, a quick look of pain in her eyes.

"Oh, alright. On'y I thought mebbe you'd like to hear how he croaked—died, y' understand."

"Died!" It was a whisper rather than an exclamation. The lines sagged to the base of the dashboard; the muzzle-loader slid with a clatter to the bottom of the rig. "Edward Peters—dead! I can't be a believin' that!" She shook her head emphatically.

"Fat lot o' difference it makes whether you do or whether you don't. That aint going to fetch him back. What 'd you think he was—'nother Methosduh? Expecting him to live forever, was you? I didn't tell you before 'cause I didn't want to hurt your feelins, Aunt Zib. He—shot himself!"

She was hanging over the seat, staring down at him with agonized eyes, her worn face wan in the moonlight. He saw that her fingers gripped the back of the seat as if she was on the verge of a collapse and the knowledge that he had found the weapon to wound brought great satisfaction to Dan Larcombe. He gloated evilly the while he tried to conceal the fact.

"Edward Peters couldn't be a doin' a thing like that," she objected faintly. "He couldn't be a doin' a thing like that."

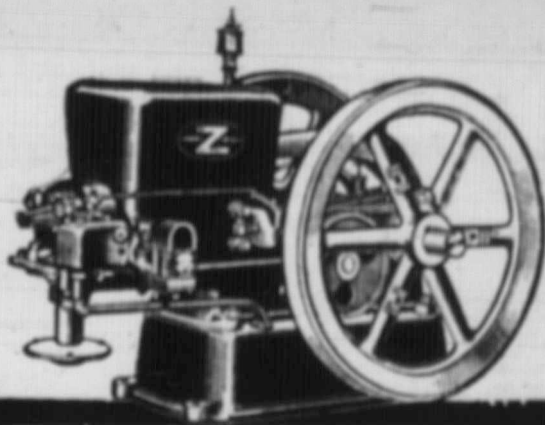
"He mumbled it over and over. 'Whatcha talkin' 'bout? He couldn't do 't if he put a pistol to his head an' pulled the trigger, couldn't he! Was you thinkin' a pistol wouldn't go off fer Uncle Ed same as other folks?'"

"The likes o' Edward Peters beant a committin' suicide!" she persisted passionately.

"Well anyway, he done it, I tell you, fer I seen him!" She flinched as if he had struck her. "What's more, he told me just why he was doin' it. He done it 'count o' the way you treated him!" He laughed brutally.

"Listen to me, Aunt Zib. I wasn't goin' to tell you all this, but I guess

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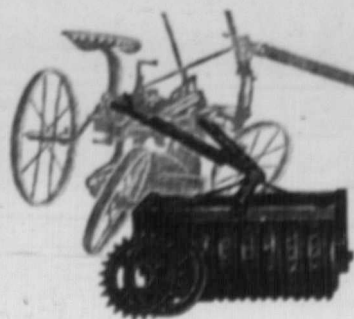
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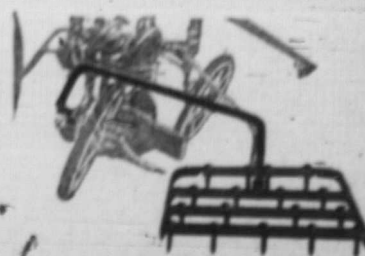


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