

"Never mind," said I. "I'm one of the 'curious'—one of the freaks. But now, I want to know one thing, if an old life-long friendship may put the question to ye, Mary. If Rob Hilton were proven to be free, would you marry him?"

"You seem to cast some reflection upon him," she answered; "and the question you ask me would be impertinent—did it come from anyone but you. But you seem to cast some reflection upon Rob," she said, very gently now. "Did you ever think, Jim, it is greater to win a battle over self and temptation than to sit at ease with those who have not been tempted?"

"I have thought—a good deal, Mary," I said.

"I know you have. But you seem not to have thought of that. No woman of character could despise Rob Hilton and his splendid fight."

"I believe that you would marry him," I murmured aloud, a sort of helpless incredulity in my tone.

"I do not know," she said. "This much is certain—she punished me with the new light that shone wide and soft in her glorious eyes—I do not believe that I could bear to marry anyone else."

So the die was cast—the song was sung, the word was said. I retreated, I do not know how, except that I stalked away automatically, as a man whose life-springs are dead.

Rob had finished his pipe, and left the scarecrow standing solitary. The gatepost was conveniently near. I leaned against it for support, and as I did so I could feel the rags of the crow-frightener's right arm fluttering caressingly against my cheek.

Some things rose very clearly before me then; how Mary had chosen Power Lot, God Help Us, up here with the wind for a watchdog, had accepted it deliberately, rather than a softer life, for Duty's sake. How barren a life it had been for her, into which Rob had come with his brightness and theatrical position of dependence, with his qualities of eternal youth and his spectacular fight against temptation.

"But she was all the world to me," I blurted out, clenching my hard fists in a kind of agony, being alone with the scarecrow. "Deep down in my heart I was always thinking that perhaps somehow, sometime—"

"But she loves him—she loves Rob Hilton," I brought myself up standing. "The story's told, the dream's over. There's nothing left but to 'Steer right on.' That is all the story now."

"There's a storm brewing in the east," shivered Scarecrow.

"The more storm the better," said I. "I like storms. When a poor devil's stripped of everything else in the world he's got the storms left, anyway. Give me a storm and a boat and I'm all right."

"Other folks? Other folks?" screeched Scarecrow, the wind wrenching the hat clean off his head.

"Oh, all right," said I, capping him again. "Yes, other folks. Well, I'll do my best. If that's the way to ride the gale out, I'll go that way." My own words came back to me, spoken though they had been with a gush of blood at the heart—"Mary, if I have not been all the friend I ought to be to you and Rob Hilton, why, I shall have a chance to make up for it later on." Aye, and so I will. I'll clear a way for them somehow. That's settled.

I saw old man Trawles coming home along the lane, driving his cow, and I, not being in the mood to be seen, or to chat with him, jumped over into the tall corn so that he might not discover me.

Jacob Trawles wore his tall hat, as usual, and swung his cane. The cow stopped and gazed fearfully at Scarecrow standing crazily bold in his rags by the gatepost.

"Sir," said Jacob Trawles in his best urban style to Scarecrow, whose features and tatters he discerned but vaguely from where he stood; "sir, will you kindly step aside till I have passed with my cow?"

Poor Scarecrow whistled through all his shackling constitution, and twirled his own rakish hat with his hooded brows in sniggering contempt of Jacob's supplication.

"Sir," said Jacob to Scarecrow with

severe dignity, "step aside at once, sir; you are frightening my cow."

I held my breath in a spasm of interest and attention, lest I should shriek aloud even as the gay wind shrieked. Scarecrow, rattled, waved, and whistled in jaunty defiance, and the cow turned and plunged in frenzied retreat.

"Sir," Jacob sternly accused the insensate tatterdemalion by the gatepost, "sir, I requested you, with courtesy to step aside. No gentleman, no decent person, sir, would conduct himself as you are doing."

Poor Scarecrow shook his hoe-handle right arm in a tiltish way, as full of glad menace and challenge to approach.

Now I saw that Jacob Trawles did not essentially lack for courage.

"D—n your impudence!" cried the insulted old man, advancing upon Scarecrow with upraised cane and whirling it over that unshrinking creature's hat, scathless, for he had no mind to commit murder. It was when he had cooled down enough to prod his unspeakable enemy persistently in the stomach with his cane that Scarecrow yielded up, unregretfully, his brief reign on earth, and fell in astonishing disintegration at his assailant's feet.

In the general collapse of material before him, the familiar aspect of old broom and rake handles, laths, straw, old garments, and a battered hat sped from a headless trunk, reassured him and advised him of the nature of the opponent whom he had so valiantly attacked.

"Now, who played that trick, I wonder," he commented aloud, with a bitter inflection of contempt for the wit of the perpetrator; "some lorn shif'less fool 't didn't know no more 'n to rig up a scarecrow right here where everybody's cows is passing. If I ketch him, I'll—"

He wiped his brow, looked long and cautiously about him to make sure that no one had witnessed the remarkable scene, and then started back down the lane in pursuit of his cow.

I collected the shattered framework and constitution of what had been so late my companion in misery, picked up his forlorn garments, transported him a piece, and set him up to what I trusted might be a long and useful existence in the center of the field. By chance, as I was making my exit from the tall and tangled corn, I came face to face with Jacob Trawles returning with his cow.

I was conscious on the instant that I colored high and leered guiltily in his face.

"Jim Turbine," said he, relapsing wholly into the vernacular, "ain't you gittin' to be purty old to be playin' that kind o' half-witted, dodderin', aimless, shif'less tricks on folks?"

I felt that I was leering only the more broadly into his questioning face.

"Wal, wal," said he, fixing me with his dun-brown eye, "you keep your mouth shet, Jim, and I'll keep mine. Ha, ha!" he laughed with an artificiality in which the effort involved was something painful to hear, "boys will be boys, Jim. Yes, boys will be boys. I ahen I shall invite you to my wedding, Jim."

I accepted his cajolery without resentment. "Aimless, shif'less," he had called me; and, faith, I had been hoeing out the corn of my enemy, for charity's sake, till every bone in my body ached.

Sure, a man gathers up sweet plums of appreciation and reward when he's running his little universe for the sake of other folks!

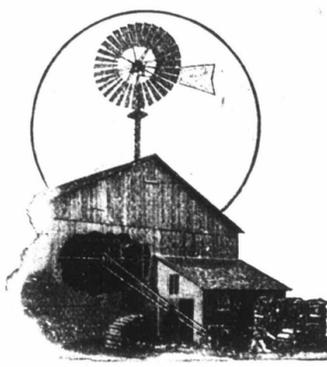
"Did ye hear, Jim? You keep your mouth shet, and I'll keep mine. I'm a goin' to invite ye to my weddin', Jim." Old man Trawles leaned on me.

"Thank ye, I'll come, sure, if I'm ashore, Jacob. I'm a master hand at going to other folks' weddings."

Maybe tomorrow, he said, and general cata-tropha was aforesaid with my appointed voyage, and I had no grief to stay in the neighborhood.

(To be continued)

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