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The Touch of Abner

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To the Various Tribes of Zeb And The Wandering Spirits of Abner This Book is Affectionately Dedicated.

"Dear Sir—Your letter come to han',
Requestin' me to please be funny;
But I ain't made upon a plan
That knows wut's comin', gall or honey."
THE BIGLOW PAPERS, No. X

CHAPTER IV UNDER-PINNIN'

Reform work at home began sooner than Abner expected, and in a manner not altogether to his liking. When Jess announced that Isabel Rivers, her special friend at the Seminary, was to pay her a visit, Mrs. Andrews at once decided that the house must be thoroughly cleaned. Abner groaned inwardly as he listened to what would have to be done the next few days.

"We must have everything spotless," his wife declared. "It would not do for Belle Rivers to see a speck of dust around the house. I can hardly believe it true that she is coming, and her the daughter of Andrew Rivers, the famous, what do they call him, Jess?"

"Attorney General," was the reply.

"Strange she'd want to come here," Abner mused, as he puffed at his after-dinner pipe. "She's society bred, like Lost Tribes' pig, an' I guess she'll find it mighty dull. She won't have much chance to put on airs at Ash Pint."

"Belle's not that kind," Jess explained, "as I have told you in my letters. She is fond of quiet life and country ways. We are both greatly interested in Social Service work, and we have planned to continue our studies while she is with me. You will both like her, I am sure."

"It's a wonder her parents don't want her, Joss."

"She has only her father now, and he will be away from home for several weeks this summer. Belle is all he has, and she is the apple of his eye. Mrs. Rivers died last year, and poor Belle misses her so much. She was so grateful when I asked her to visit us."

"Well, I s'pose we kin stand her fer a while," and Abner gave a sigh of resignation. "But, remember, ye mustn't expect me to be harnessed up in Sunday duds an' white collar every day. An' I don't want Social Service flung at my head every time I turn around."

Actual work began upon the parlor the very next day, and by noon the room had the appearance of having been struck by a cyclone. Blinds, curtains, and pictures were taken down; chairs and tables were piled out upon the verandah; mats were spread upon the grass, and the carpet hung upon the clothes-line. The old-fashioned piano, on account of its size, was the only thing left, and stood forlornly in its place, thickly covered with old copies of *The Family Herald and Weekly Star*.

"That sartinly is a great paper," Abner mused, as he stood in the middle of the room viewing the effect. "It's useful fer most anythin', as I told Sam Dobbins only yesterday, when he was yangin' about *The Live Wire*."

"What was he saying about it?" Mrs. Andrews unexpectedly asked.

"Oh, nuthin', nuthin' perticular, except that once it a fine account of his great-grandmother's funeral, that's all.

Anythin' else ye want me to do, Tildy?"

"Certainly. You might as well beat that carpet. It's just full of dust."

For over half an hour Abner whacked away at the carpet, pausing occasionally to sneeze and to wipe his perspiring face.

"Ugh!" he groaned, during one of these resting spells. "If this is Social Service work, then may the Lord help us!"

"You wanted to begin at home, though, didn't you, daddy?" Jess laughingly asked, as she paused in the act of shaking a rug.

"I know I did; fool that I was. But, look here, when anythin' has been dead, laid out, an' buried as long as that parlor has, it's a darn mistake to bring it to life agin."

"But think how clean, fresh and sweet the room will be when we get done," Jess reminded.

"Umph! De ye think I kin ever git this thing clean, fresh an' sweet?" and Abner gave the wobbly carpet a savage bang. "Look at that dust, now. The more I thump the thicker it gits. What's the use of carpets, anyway, I'd like to know?"

After dinner Abner lighted his pipe, and picked up his old straw hat.

"Guess I'll work at them pertaters this afternoon, Tildy," he announced. "They're mighty weedy an' need hoein'. I s'pose you an' Jess kin finish that room, eh?"

"Indeed we can't," his wife replied. "The ceiling has to be whitened, and that is a man's job. I've got to wash those curtains, and do a hundred other things. The potatoes have gone so long already that I guess another day won't do them any harm. You'll find the whitening in a bag on the woodhouse shelf, and the brush is hanging on the wall."

Abner made no reply but strolled off to the woodhouse softly humming, "When Bill Larkins made his money." Mrs. Andrews and Jess went on with their work, one washing the curtains; the other shaking mats and polishing the chairs upon the verandah. About an hour passed, and then from the parlor came a hair-raising yell, followed immediately by a thump. Jess and her mother nearly collided as they rushed into the room, where they saw Abner sitting upon the floor, his clothes covered with whitening.

"For pity sakes! what is the matter now?" his wife demanded. "Did you fall?"

"No, I didn't fall, as ye kin see," was the reply. "The darn old floor riz up an' hit me, that's all. Ugh!" he groaned.

"Where are you hurt, daddy?" Jess asked.

"Where am I hurt?" and Abner glared at his daughter.

"Where de ye think I'm hurt? Where do I look as if I'm hurt;
on me head?"

"I should say on your face, by the look of it," his wife retorted. "I thought you had more sense than to put that chair upon such a rickety box. You might have broken your neck. What were you doing up there, anyway?"

"Follerin' Social Service methods; that's all, Tildy."

"Social Service methods! Why, what do you mean?"

"Ask Jess; she understands. It's an elevatin' process, ye see. I was jist elevatin' myself to put some plaster on that hole in the ceilin', when me under-pinnin' gave way. Did ye learn anythin' about the under-pinnin' at the Seminary, Jess?"

"Not that I know of, daddy."

"Ye didn't! Well, that's queer. What was the use of ye'r studyin' Social Service if ye didn't learn nuthin' about underpinnin'."

"I don't know what it is, daddy."

"Ye don't! Why, I thought everybody knew that underpinnin' is what hold's things up."

"Oh, I see. You mean the foundation, or groundwork, so to speak."

"Well, them may be the highfalutin' names, but I'm used to under-pinnin'. It comes more natural."

"But what has that to do with Social Service?"

"A darn sight, I should say. Ye can't do nuthin' if the under-pinnin' ain't right, any more'n I could stand fer long on that chair with the rickety box underneath. Lost Tribes was right when he said ye can't elevate a pig into nuthin' more'n a hog. Ye'd better allus be sure of ye'r under-pinnin', Jess, before ye begin any elevatin' process. Now, there's Ikey Dimock, fer instance. If he hasn't a——"

"What's all this nonsense about, anyway?" Mrs. Andrews interrupted. "We'll never get through with this room if you two keep talking about 'Social Service' and 'Under-pinnin' all the time."

"Well, I'm through fer the present, Tildy," Abner declared. "Guess I'll go outside fer a while an' shake off this Social Service dose. Jist leave the ceilin'; I'll finish it later."

He shuffled stiffly out of the room, and made his way to a pile of wood a short distance from the house. He started to sit down upon a block but, suddenly changing his mind, he leaned against the clothes-line post instead. Pulling out a plug of tobacco and a knife, he had just whittled off several slices when an auto came in sight, and stopped in front of the house. A young man, neatly dressed, alighted and, walking briskly into the yard, came over to where Abner was standing.

"Is the boss in?" he enquired.

"Yes, she was a few minutes ago."

"Whew! Hen rule, eh?"

"Seems so. Like to see her?"

"Not on your life. I want to see the old man. Is he around?"

"Guess he'll be around soon. Met with an accident ye see."

"That's too bad. Serious?"

"Pretty bad. His under-pinnin' gave way. Total collapse."

"My, my! Sudden?"

"Very. Any message?"

"You work for him, I suppose?"

"I sartinly do."

"Is he a good boss?"

"Didn't ye ever meet him?"

"No, never saw him. But I believe he's fixed all right by the way he forked over for that Orphan Home Slapped down a cool thousand at the first bang. The firm sent me out to try to sell him an auto. Do you think he wants one?"

"Sure; he wants one bad."

"He does? When do you suppose I could see him? He's a queer one, I understand."

"Yes, a regular divil when he gits goin'. Shoots at sight."

"You don't say so! Now, come to think of it, I did hear that he's a little touched in the head. Has strange notions of living a long time ago. Is that so?"

"Guess ye'r right. The old feller's not altogether himself. He's lived so many lives that he often gits mixed up an' thinks he's old man Astor, Julius Cæsar, or some other notable. He's not too bad then, but when he imagines he's one of them old pirates, ye'd better watch out. He's a holy terror, an' nuthin' will stop him when he gits on the rampage."

"Did he ever hurt you?" the young man anxiously asked.

"Oh, no. Him an' me are great chums. He's never shot at me yit. We're too good friends fer that. I'm his keeper, ye see, an' so he looks up to me fer most everything."

"What! Is he as bad as all that? Does he really need a keeper?"

"Sure. Why, I'm the only one who kin manage him, next to his wife. He allus minds me no matter how bad he is. He ginerally does everythin' I say." "Well, that's interesting. I believe you're just the man I want. I suppose he'd buy a car if you advised him to do so?"
"Sure thing."

"That's great. Now, look here, if you'll speak a good word for me, I'll make it worth your while. And, say, here's something on account to prove that I mean business."

The young man thrust his hand into his pocket and brought forth a crisp bill, and handed it to Abner. "Don't say a word about this little transaction," he warned. "And you'll let me know when your boss is ready to buy, won't you?"

"Sure, sure; I'll let ye know. I'll put ye next to the old feller."

"That's good. Don't forget."

"Oh, I'll not fergit, not on ye'r life."

"Well, so long," and the salesman held out his hand. "It's a bargain, remember, and more to come when the car is bought."

As the young man started to leave, Jess came around the corner of the house carrying a rug, which she placed upon the clothes-line. At first she did not notice the two men, but stood for a few seconds looking down over the fields out upon the river. As she turned to re-enter the house by the back door, she espied the men, especially the stranger. In her brief glance she noted what a wretched object her father presented, with his old lime-bespattered clothes, by the side of the immaculately dressed young man. The latter noted the flush which mantled her face, and attributed it to shyness.

"Gee whiz!" he exclaimed, after Jess had entered the house. "Where did she drop from?"

"S-sh," Abner warned. "She's the old man's daughter; a chip of the same block."

"She is! Gad, she's a beaut."

"Yes, she's a trim craft, poor gal!" Here he heaved a deep sigh, which the stranger was not slow to notice.

"Why, what's wrong with her?" the young man enquired.

"Touched here, like her dad," and Abner placed the forefinger of his right hand to his head.

"You don't say so! My, my, that's too bad! Inherited, I suppose?"

"Partly. She's got Social Service on the brain, ye see. But, there, ye'd better go now. She was quite excited when she spotted you, an' if ye stay too long she might have a fit. Doesn't take much to set her off, poor thing."

Abner watched the salesman as he walked out of the yard, boarded his car, and set off down the road. Then his solemn face relaxed, and the sad expression fled from his eyes. The skin on his cheeks and under his eyes became suddenly corrugated, and his mouth expanded to a dangerous degree. His body shook, and he emitted a series of half-suppressed chuckles of merriment. He next unfolded the bill he was still holding in his hand, and looked at it.

"Whew! it's a ten-spot!" he exclaimed. "An' that guy thought he'd bribe me with this, did he? He wanted me to put him next to the old feller. So that's the way he works his game, eh? Heard I'm well fixed, too, an' was sent to sell me

a car. A 'queer one,' an' a 'little touched in the head,' ho, ho! But mebbe he'll find the old feller's not so daft after all, an' that Abner Andrews, of Ash Pint, is afflicted with a different kind of a touch. That's what he will learn, skiddy-me-shins, if he won't."

CHAPTER V PLAIN FACTS

The morning sun struggled through the dust-covered window, and fell aslant the pine board which Zebedee Burns was carefully planing. It was a small workroom, littered with boards, tools, and shavings. Adjoining was the blacksmith shop, for Zebedee was a handy man, and combined carpentering with the smith-trade, besides tending his garden. He was seldom rushed with business, and found time to do extra work, such as trading in "Society" pigs.

He had just finished planing the board, and was measuring it with his two-foot rule when a form darkened the doorway.

"Mornin', Zeb," was the cheery greeting.

"Mornin', Abner," was the laconic reply.

"Busy, I see. Makin' a cage fer ye'r society pig, I s'pose," Abner bantered, as he sat down upon the tool-chest.

Zebedee deigned no reply, but went on with his work. He sawed a few inches off the planed board, laid it carefully aside and picked up another. Abner was surprised at his unusual manner, and studied his face most intently.

"What's wrong, Zeb?" he at length enquired. "Ye look as if ye'd been to a funeral. Haven't lost one of the Chosen Tribes, have ye?"

"Quit ye'r foolin', Abner," was the chiding reply. "I haven't been to any funeral, though I expect to be at one to-morrow."

"Ye do!" and Abner's eyes grew suddenly big. "Who's dead?"

"Widder Denton's little boy."

"Whew! Ye don't tell! Never heard a word about it. When did he die?"

"Yesterday. I'm makin' his coffin now."

"Ye are, eh? Somewhat out of ye'r line, isn't it? I thought the undertaker in town allus attended to sich affairs."

"He does if there's any money in it. But this is a different case. Widder Denton's too poor to buy a casket, so that's why I've tackled the job. Guess there'll be more to make fer the same family belong long, if I'm not mistaken."

"What! Diphtheria?"

"No; starvation."

"Holy smoke! Ye don't say so! Didn't know it's as bad as that."

"Well, it is. That poor widder has been workin' so hard to keep her family that she's gone under. I wouldn't be surprised if it's her coffin I'll have to make next." "Ye don't tell! Why, I thought she got money from the company when her husband was killed."

"H'm, Lawyer Rackshaw got most of it, accordin' to what she told me only yesterday."

"He did! The skunk! An' him smokin' half a dozen tencent cigars every day. It's a wonder she never squealed on him."

"Oh, that's jist like her. She wouldn't have told me yesterday if I hadn't pumped it out of her. She's a game one, all right. But I do pity the poor little kids. I don't know what's to become of them."

"How many are there?"

"Five, I guess. The little chap who died was the youngest, an' he was only three."

"My, my!" Abner sighed, while an expression of sincere sympathy came into his eyes. "What de ye s'pose kin be done fer 'em?"

"Don't know, unless we kin git them into that Orphan Home."

"What Home?" Abner asked in surprise.

"Why, you ought to know," and Zeb looked up from his work. "You gave a thousand dollars to it, didn't ye?"

"A thousand be hanged! I didn't give a red cent."

"So I thought. Jist hold these boards together, will ye?"

Abner at once obeyed, and after Zeb had driven in two nails, he straightened himself up, and looked at his companion. "You never intended to give a thousand to that Home, did ye?" he asked.

"Sure. What de ye think I am? A fool?"

"Not altogether, but next door to one, I should say."

"Ye've got a darn lot of gall," Abner retorted. "Ye must have inherited it from one of the Lost Tribes, didn't ye?"

"Never mind the Lost Tribes now, Abner. You know what I say is true. You're no more able to give a thousand dollars to that Home than I am to buy out the whole of Glucom. How in the world de ye expect to git out of the scrape, anyway? Ye'll be the laughin'-stock of everyone."

"Never you mind, Zeb, how I'll git out of it. I'll square up all right, so ye needn't bust any button off about it. I know a wrinkle or two."

"Ye'll have to git a hustle on, then, if them Denton kids are to be helped."

Abner took three or four steps across the room, and then stopped and looked out of the door. Presently he turned and watched Zebedee for a few seconds.

"How much de ye expect to git fer that job?" he suddenly asked.

"Jist as much as you'd expect, an' that's nuthin'," was the quick reply.

Abner's right hand was now in his trousers pocket, firmly gripping the ten dollar bill which had been given to him by the agent. Then he drew it forth, and flung it upon the workbench.

"Take that, Zeb, an' give it to Widder Denton," he ordered. "It's been burnin' me pocket until me skin is scorched. There, don't ask me where I got it," he added, as Zeb started to speak. "I've got enough lies scratched down aginst me already. But I do feel like havin' a good fight."

"Fight! What de ye want to fight fer?" Zeb asked in astonishment.

"'Cause I'm ugly, that's why. The sight of that ten-spot makes me want to hit somebody."

"Well, ye'd better git out of this if that's the way ye feel. I've no inclination or time to fight to-day."

"An' ye don't want a scrap over the Ten Lost Tribes? I've given ye plenty of chances. Now, look, Zeb, who was the great-great-great-grandfather of the man who lost the Ten Tribes in the first place? Kin ye tell me that?"

Such a question in the past had always stirred Zebedee to his inmost depths. But now, instead of launching forth in defence of his pet theory, he leaned against the workbench, folded his arms, and faced his visitor.

"Abner," he began, "I've been thinkin'."

"Well, that's encouragin'," was the reply. "A bit out of the ordinary, eh? I thought there was somethin' wrong with ye."

"Yes, I've been thinkin'," Zeb repeated, "an' if you'd do the same occasionally, Abner, it might do ye a world of good."

"H'm, ye needn't judge all ye'r neighbors' pigs by ye'r own," was the retort.

"I'm not, Abner. I'm only judgin' by solid facts. Now, see here. You an' me have been makin' fools of ourselves by always squabblin' over things of little real value. I yanged about the Lost Tribes, an' you yanged about how many lives you've lived."

"They're mighty interestin', though," Abner remarked.

"I know they are, an' there's no harm in discussin' them once in a while. But it don't seem altogether right fer two men like you an' me to spend so much time over sich things, an' pay little or no heed to what takes place right under our noses."

"Guess there's not much that escapes us, Zeb, is there?"

"What about that Denton family, then?"

"But we thought they was well fixed."

"Did we ever think much about them, anyway, Abner?"

"Guess ye'r right, Zeb. We didn't."

"We certainly didn't, an' that's what's worrin' me. Why, when I looked at that poor little dead boy last night, an' talked to the widder, an' saw the pinched faces of her children, I felt small enough to crawl through a knot-hole."

"Sure, ye did," Abner agreed. "I've felt that way meself, 'specially when Tildy was after me. It's a mighty creepy feelin', isn't it?"

"Indeed it is, an' more so when ye'r conscience is lashin' ye like a thousand divils. I had a hard time to git to sleep last night, fer the picture of the Great Judgment riz right up before me. I heard the Lord a-sayin', 'Zeb Burns, them Denton kids was hungry an' ye gave them nuthin' to eat;

they was thirsty an' ye never gave them any fresh milk; they was almost naked an' ye didn't give them any clothes. If ye had done them things that little Denton boy wouldn't have died.' That's what I thought He said, an' when I went to sleep I dreamed that I was bein' sent to the left hand right into hell fire. It gave me sich a scare that I jumped out of bed with a yell, an' my wife thought I was crazy. I tell ye it was an awful experience."

Zebedee pulled out a big red handkerchief, and mopped his brow.

"My! I git all het up when I think of it," he panted.

Abner made no immediate reply, but stood very still with his eyes fixed intently upon the floor.

"Guess I'll go now," he at length announced.

"What are ye workin' at these days?" Zeb asked.

"Pertaters; an' a mighty pesky job it is. Full of weeds."

"Why, I thought ye had them all done."

"So I would if it hadn't been fer house-cleanin'."

"House-cleanin'!"

"Sure. House so spick an' span that I kin hardly step or set anywheres, so I generally roost on the wood-box. Well, s'long. I must be off."

CHAPTER VI A FLEA IN THE EAR

Abner was unusually silent at dinner and did not seem to notice the neatly set table, nor the fresh wild flowers artistically arranged in the little vase in the centre. He glanced occasionally at his daughter who was sitting opposite, and his eyes shone with pride. He would have been less than human had his heart not thrilled at the vision before him. Jess was in her brightest mood. Her face glowed with abounding health, and her dark eyes beamed with animation as she talked with her mother about her plans for the future, and of the approaching visit of Isabel Rivers. Mrs. Andrews, too, was in excellent spirits, for the finishing touches had been given to the house that morning, and everything was in readiness for the visitor. She nevertheless noted her husband's preoccupied air, and wondered what was troubling him.

When dinner was over Abner pushed back his chair, and gave a deep sigh.

"You don't seem to be yourself to-day. You're not sick, I hope."

"Do I look sick, Tildy?"

"Well, no, judging by the dinner you ate. But you act like a sick man for all that. Maybe it's your liver."

"No, it ain't me liver; it's me heart. That's what's the matter."

"Your heart!" Jess exclaimed. "Why, daddy, I didn't know you had heart trouble."

"Ye didn't, eh? Well, I had it once, jist about the time I asked ye'r mother to marry me. It was a mighty bad dose."

"H'm, you soon got over it," Mrs. Andrews retorted.

"I sure did, Tildy. Ye'r right there. It didn't take long after we got hitched, an' I thought I'd never have another attack."

"What brought it on now, for pity sakes, Abner? It can't be a woman this time."

"It sartinly is."

"A woman!"

"Yes, a woman; a livin' female woman, an' a widder at that."

"Good gracious, Abner! A widow! What do you mean, anyway?"

"Jist what I said; a widder, an' she's the one who's given me the heart kink this time."

At these words a startled look came into Jess's eyes, and her face grew suddenly pale. But Mrs. Andrews showed no signs of uneasiness. She knew her husband too well to be shocked at anything he might say or do.

"Well," she remarked, "whoever that widow is, she's welcome to all the heart you've got, Abner. If she can find it, then it's more than I can."

"Yes, it's a widder," Abner continued, unheeding his wife's sarcasm, "an' she's got five kids, an' they're worrin' me a lot."

"I should say they would, Abner. You'll have more than one kink in your heart if you undertake to handle such a brood. When do you expect to take charge of your new family?"

"Take charge! Did I say anything about takin' charge?" and Abner glared at his wife. "I only said me heart aches fer 'em, an' it sartinly does, fer they're starvin'."

"Starving!" Jess exclaimed. "Who are they, anyway?"

"Widder Denton an' her brood; that's who they are. Her little boy died yesterday, an' Lost Tribes is makin' a coffin fer him."

"Oh, daddy, I hadn't any idea there was such need so near home, did you?"

"I sure didn't. But it's Gospel truth. Widder's sick, an' kids starvin'."

"Isn't it awful!" and Jess clasped her hands before her. "Can't anything be done for them? The children should be looked after at once, and someone should stay with Mrs. Denton."

"Oh, I guess the neighbors'll attend to that fer a while. Zeb'll find out, no doubt."

"Isn't the Orphan Home ready yet, daddy?"

"What Orphan Home?" and Abner looked keenly into his daughter's face. "What have ye heard about it?"

"Nothing much, only I thought they were building one at Glucom. There was some talk about it, wasn't there?"

"Talk! Sure there was talk. They've been talkin' about it fer years, but I guess that's as fer as it'll go. But there, I must git at them pertaters." Abner gave a fleeting glance at his wife, picked up his hat and left the room.

"What is the matter with, daddy?" Jess asked, after her father had gone.

"In what way?" Mrs. Andrews enquired.

"I hardly know, except that he seems strange at times. The day I came home he got so excited when I picked up a copy of *The Live Wire* which had dropped from his pocket."

"He did! What did he say?"

"He shouted at me and made me give it back to him at once. He said it was dangerous, and that if I looked at it there would be a terrible explosion. I told him there must be something in it that he did not want me to see, and he did not deny it. Have you seen it, mother?"

"No, he didn't say anything to me about it. I never knew that he brought the paper home. I wonder where he put it."

Mrs. Andrews believed that she knew the cause of her husband's excitement over *The Live Wire*, and what it contained. But she felt annoyed that he had not shown it to her. Was there something in it that he did not wish her to see? she asked herself. The more she thought about it the more determined she became to find out where Abner had hidden the paper. She said nothing, however, to Jess about it, but discreetly changed the subject, and began to talk about Widow Denton and her troubles.

While the women thus lingered at the table and talked, Abner was busy in his potato patch back of the barn. The weeds were thick and stubborn, but he seemed to take a special delight in tearing them out of the ground. "Give me somethin' to shake me timbers an' I kin work like the divil," he had often said. "I kin never accomplish as much in hayin' time as when a thunderstorm is racin' down the valley. I'm somethin' like me old Flyin' Scud. When it was calm she wasn't worth her salt, but let a gale hit her, an' my! how she'd gather her skirts an' run."

Seldom had Abner such thoughts to agitate his mind as on this fine warm afternoon. He was deeply concerned about the Denton affair, and this naturally turned his attention to the proposed Orphan Home. He was fully aware that this case of destitution would revive a greater interest in the building of the institution, and that he might be called upon at any moment for the thousand dollars he had offered. How he was to raise that amount he had not the slightest idea, and he realized that he had made a fool of himself. If he failed to make good, he would be the laughing-stock of all, and he would be ashamed to be seen again on the streets of Glucom.

Added to this worry was the thought of Jess leaving home. He recalled what she had said that morning on the way from the station, as well as her recent conversation at the dinner table. That she was determined to go in a few weeks seemed certain, and Abner groaned inwardly when he thought of the dreariness of the house without her exhilarating presence.

"Hang that Seminary!" he muttered. "I wish to goodness Jess had never seen the place. Social Service! Progress! Uplift! Umph! I wouldn't mind gals studyin' sich things if they'd use common sense. But to galivant off to elevate people in big cities instead of stayin' home where they kin be of some real use, is what makes me hot."

Abner had paused in his work and was leaning upon his hoe. He was gazing thoughtfully out over the field, toward the main highway. And, as he looked, a car containing one man came suddenly into sight, and drew up by the side of the road. Then a man alighted and walked briskly across the field.

"It's Ikey Dimock, skiddy-me-shins, if it ain't!" Abner exclaimed. "What in the world kin the critter want of me! I don't want to see him, nor anyone of his brood."

Isaac Dimock was a little man, but what he lacked in size he tried to make up in pompousness. "It seems to me," Abner once said, "that the Lord got somehow mixed up when he was makin' Ikey Dimock. It is sartin' sure, judgin' from Ikey's ears and brains, that he intended him to be a jackass. But He must have changed his mind, an' finished him up as a man, but a mighty poor job He made of it. It's quite clear that Ikey stopped growin' too soon. The only pity is that he ever grew at all."

Between these two men there had never been any love lost. Abner despised Isaac for his meanness, underhandedness, and pompousness, while Isaac hated Abner for his sharp tongue and biting sarcasm. They seldom met without a wordy battle of one kind or another. They never came to blows, as the hardware merchant had

considerable respect for the farmer's great strength and big fists, one of which, on a certain memorable occasion, had been doubled up dangerously near his stub of a nose.

But Isaac seemed to have forgotten and forgiven all animosities as he now drew near. His face was contorted with a smile, such as a wolf might assume when about to pounce upon a lamb.

"How are you, Abner?" he accosted. "Fine day this."

"Why, so it is," and Abner gazed around in apparent astonishment, "I hadn't thought about it before. It's good of ye to come an' tell me."

"You work too hard," the visitor replied, unheeding the sarcasm. "You don't take time to notice the beautiful things around you."

"H'm," Abner grunted. "It takes all my spare minutes tryin' to wring a livin' out of this darn place. Have to keep me nose to the ground most of the time."

"I should say so," and Isaac cast his eyes around until they rested upon the big gravel hill to his right. "Pretty light ground, eh?"

"Light! Should say it is. Why, it's so light I have to keep the place anchored or it 'ud go up like a balloon."

"Ha, ha, it certainly must be light. Rather dangerous, isn't it?"

"Oh, I'm not the least bit afraid of what old Mother Nature does. She's pretty reliable, an' doesn't do any kinky tricks. Ye kin ginerally depend upon her. But it's human nature on two legs that I'm suspicious of."