
DAVID GRAHAM PHILLIPS
THE PLUM TREE

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HOW IT ALL BEGAN

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"We can hold out six months longer,—at least six months." My mother's tone made the six months stretch encouragingly into six long years.

I see her now, vividly as if it were only yesterday. We were at our scant breakfast, I as blue as was ever even twenty-five, she brave and confident. And hers was no mere pretense to reassure me, no cheerless optimism of ignorance, but the through-and-through courage and strength of those who flinch for no bogey that life or death can conjure. Her tone lifted me; I glanced at her, and what shone from her eyes set me on my feet, face to the foe. The table-cloth was darned in many places, but so skilfully that you could have looked closely without detecting it. Not a lump of sugar, not a slice of bread, went to waste in that house; yet even I had to think twice to realize that we were poor, desperately poor. She did not hide our poverty; she beautified it, she dignified it into Spartan simplicity. I know it is not the glamour over the past that makes me believe there are no women now like those of the race to which she belonged. The world, to-day, yields comfort too easily to the capable; hardship is the only mould for such character, and in those days, in this middle-western country, even the capable were not strangers to hardship.

"When I was young," she went on, "and things looked black, as they have a habit of looking to the young and inexperienced,"—that put in with a teasing smile for me,—"I used to say to myself, 'Well, anyhow, they can't *kill* me.' And the thought used to cheer me up wonderfully. In fact, it still does."

I no longer felt hopeless. I began to gnaw my troubles again—despair is still.

"Judge Granby is a dog," said I; "yes, a dog."

"Why 'dog'?" objected my mother. "Why not simply 'mean man'? I've never known a dog that could equal a man who set out to be 'ornery.'"

"When I think of all the work I've done for him in these three years—"

"For yourself," she interrupted. "Work you do for others doesn't amount to much unless it's been first and best for yourself."

"But he was benefited by it, too," I urged, "and has taken life easy, and has had more clients and bigger fees than he ever had before. I'd like to give him a jolt. I'd stop nagging him to put my name in a miserable corner of the glass in his door. I'd hang out a big sign of my own over my own office door."

My mother burst into a radiant smile. "I've been waiting a year to hear that," she said.

Thereupon I had a shock of fright—inside, for I'd never have dared to show fear before my mother. There's nothing else that makes you so brave as living with some one before whom you haven't the courage to let your cowardice show its feather. If we didn't keep each other up to the mark,

what a spectacle of fright and flight this world-drama would be! Vanity, the greatest of vices, is also the greatest of virtues, or the source of the greatest virtues—which comes to the same thing.

"When will you do it?" she went on, and then I knew I was in for it, and how well-founded was the suspicion that had been keeping my lips tight-shut upon my dream of independence.

"I'll—I'll think about it," was my answer, in a tone which I hoped she would see was not hesitating, but reflective; "I mustn't go too far,—or too fast."

"Better go too far and too fast than not go at all," retorted my wise mother. "Once a tortoise beat a hare,—*once*. It never happened again, yet the whole timid world has been talking about it ever since." And she fell into a study from which she roused herself to say, "You'd better let *me* bargain for the office and the furniture,—and the big sign." She knew—but could not or would not teach me—how to get a dollar's worth for a dollar; would not, I suspect, for she despised parsimony, declaring it to be another virtue which is becoming only in a woman.

"Of course,—when—" I began.

"We've got to do something in the next six months," she warned. And now she made the six months seem six minutes.

I had at my tongue's end something about the danger of dragging her down into misfortune; but before speaking I looked at her, and, looking, refrained. To say it to *her* would have been too absurd,—to her who had been left a widow with nothing at all, who had educated me for college, and

who had helped me through my first year there,—helped me with money, I mean. But for what she gave besides, more, immeasurably more,—but for her courage in me and round me and under me,—I'd never have got my degree or anything else, I fear. To call that courage help would be like saying the mainspring helps the watch to go. I looked at her. "They can't kill me, can they?" said I, with a laugh which sounded so brave that it straightway made me brave.

So it was settled.

But that was the first step in a fight I can't remember even now without a sinking at the heart. The farmers of Jackson County, of which Pulaski was the county seat, found in litigation their chief distraction from the stupefying dullness of farm life in those days of pause, after the Indian and nature had been conquered and before the big world's arteries of thought and action had penetrated. The farmers took eagerly to litigation to save themselves from stagnation. Still, a new lawyer, especially if he was young, had an agonizing time of it convincing their slow, stiff, suspicious natures that he could be trusted in such a crisis as "going to law."

To make matters worse I fell in love.

Once—it was years afterward, though not many years ago—Burbank, at the time governor, was with me, and we were going over the main points for his annual message. One of my suggestions—my orders to all my agents, high and low, have always been sugar-coated as "suggestions"—started a new train of thought in him, and he took pen and paper to fix it before it had a chance to escape. As he wrote,

my glance wandered along the shelves of the book-cases. It paused on the farthest and lowest shelf. I rose and went there, and found my old school-books, those I used when I was in Public School Number Three, too near thirty years ago!

In the shelf one book stood higher than the others—tall and thin and ragged, its covers torn, its pages scribbled, stained and dog-eared. Looking through that old physical geography was like a first talk with a long-lost friend. It had, indeed, been my old friend. Behind its broad back I had eaten forbidden apples, I had aimed and discharged the blow-gun, I had reveled in blood-and-thunder tales that made the drowsy schoolroom fade before the vast wilderness, the scene of breathless struggles between Indian and settler, or open into the high seas where pirate, or worse-than-pirate Britisher, struck flag to American privateer or man-o'-war.

On an impulse shot up from the dustiest depths of memory, I turned the old geography sidewise and examined the edges of the cover. Yes, there was the *cache* I had made by splitting the pasteboard with my jack-knife. I thrust in my fingernail; out came a slip of paper. I glanced at Burbank—he was still busy. I, somewhat stealthily, you may imagine, opened the paper and—well, my heart beat much more rapidly as I saw in a school-girl scrawl:

I was no longer master of a state; I was a boy in school again. I could see her laboring over this game of "friendship,

love, indifference, hate." I could see "Redney" Griggs, who sat between her and me, in the row of desks between and parallel to my row and hers,—could see him swoop and snatch the paper from her, look at it, grin maliciously, and toss it over to me. I was in grade A, was sixteen, and was beginning to take myself seriously. She was in grade D, was little more than half my age, but looked older,—and how sweet and pretty she was! She had black hair, thick and wavy, with little tresses escaping from plaits and ribbons to float about her forehead, ears, and neck. Her skin was darker then, I think, than it is now, but it had the same smoothness and glow,—certainly, it could not have had more.

I think the dart must have struck that day,—why else did I keep the bit of paper? But it did not trouble me until the first winter of my launching forth as "Harvey Sayler, Attorney and Counselor at Law." She was the daughter of the Episcopal preacher; and, as every one thought well of the prospects of my mother's son, our courtship was undisturbed. Then, in the spring, when fortune was at its coldest and love at its most feverish, her father accepted a call to a church in Boston, eight hundred miles away.

To go to see her was impossible; how could the money be spared,—fifty dollars, at the least? Once—when they had been gone about four months—my mother insisted that I must. But I refused, and I do not know whether it is to my credit or not, for my refusal gave her only pain, whereas the sacrifices she would have had to make, had I gone, would have given her only pleasure. I had no fear that Betty would

change in our separation. There are some people you hope are stanch, and some people you think will be stanch, if—, and then there are those, many women and a few men, whom it is impossible to think of as false or even faltering. I did not fully appreciate that quality then, for my memory was not then dotted with the graves of false friendships and littered with the rubbish of broken promises; but I did appreciate it enough to build securely upon it.

Build? No, that is not the word. There may be those who are stimulated to achievement by being in love, though I doubt it. At any rate, I was not one of them. My love for her absorbed my thoughts, and paralyzed my courage. Of the qualities that have contributed to what success I may have had, I put in the first rank a disposition to see the gloomiest side of the future. But it has not helped to make my life happier, invaluable though it has been in preventing misadventure from catching me napping.

So another year passed. Then came hard times,—*real* hard times. I had some clients—enough to insure mother and myself a living, with the interest on mortgage and note kept down. But my clients were poor, and poor pay, and slow pay. Nobody was doing well but the note-shavers. I—How mother fought to keep the front brave and bright!—not her front, for that was bright by nature, like the sky beyond the clouds; but our front, my front,—the front of our affairs. No one must see that we were pinching,—so I must be the most obviously prosperous young lawyer in Pulaski. What that struggle cost her I did not then realize; no, could not realize until I looked at her face for the last time, looked and turned away and thought on the meaning of the lines and

the hollows over which Death had spread his proclamation of eternal peace. I have heard it said of those markings in human faces, "How ugly!" But it seems to me that, to any one with eyes and imagination, line and wrinkle and hollow always have the somber grandeur of tragedy. I remember my mother when her face was smooth and had the shallow beauty that the shallow dote on. But her face whereon was written the story of fearlessness, sacrifice, and love,—that is the face beautiful of my mother for me.

In the midst of those times of trial, when she had ceased to smile,—for she had none of that hypocritical cheerfulness which depresses and is a mere vanity to make silly onlookers cry "Brave!" when there is no true bravery,—just when we were at our lowest ebb, came an offer from Bill Dominick to put me into politics.

I had been interested in politics ever since I was seven years old. I recall distinctly the beginning:—

On a November afternoon,—it must have been November, though I remember that it was summer-warm, with all the windows open and many men in the streets in shirt-sleeves,—at any rate, I was on my way home from school. As I neared the court-house I saw a crowd in the yard and was reminded that it was election day, and that my father was running for reëlection to the state senate; so, I bolted for his law office in the second story of the Masonic Temple, across the street from the court-house.

He was at the window and was looking at the polling place so intently that he took no notice of me as I stood beside him. I know now why he was absorbed and why his face was stern and sad. I can shut my eyes and see that

court-house yard, the long line of men going up to vote, single file, each man calling out his name as he handed in his ballot, and Tom Weedon—who shot an escaping prisoner when he was deputy sheriff—repeating the name in a loud voice. Each oncoming voter in that curiously regular and compact file was holding out his right arm stiff so that the hand was about a foot clear of the thigh; and in every one of those thus conspicuous hands was a conspicuous bit of white paper—a ballot. As each man reached the polling window and gave in his name, he swung that hand round with a stiff-armed, circular motion that kept it clear of the body and in full view until the bit of paper disappeared in the slit in the ballot box.

I wished to ask my father what this strange spectacle meant; but, as I glanced up at him to begin my question, I knew I must not, for I felt that I was seeing something which shocked him so profoundly that he would take me away if I reminded him of my presence. I know now that I was witnessing the crude beginnings of the money-machine in politics,—the beginnings of the downfall of parties,—the beginnings of the overthrow of the people as the political power. Those stiff-armed men were the "floating voters" of that ward of Pulaski. They had been bought up by a rich candidate of the opposition party, which was less scrupulous than our party, then in the flush of devotion to "principles" and led by such old-fashioned men as my father with old-fashioned notions of honor and honesty. Those "floaters" had to keep the ballot in full view from the time they got it of the agent of their purchaser until they had deposited it

beyond the possibility of substitution—he must see them "deliver the goods."

My father was defeated. He saw that, in politics, the day of the public servant of public interests was over, and that the night of the private servant of private interests had begun. He resigned the leadership into the dexterous hands of a politician. Soon afterward he died, muttering: "Prosperity has ruined my country!"

From that election day my interest in politics grew, and but for my mother's bitter prejudice I should have been an active politician, perhaps before I was out of college.

Pulaski, indeed all that section of my state, was strongly of my party. Therefore Dominick, its local boss, was absolute. At the last county election, four years before the time of which I am writing, there had been a spasmodic attempt to oust him. He had grown so insolent, and had put his prices for political and political-commercial "favors" to our leading citizens so high, that the "best element" in our party reluctantly broke from its allegiance. To save himself he had been forced to order flagrant cheating on the tally sheets; his ally and fellow conspirator, M'Coskrey, the opposition boss, was caught and was indicted by the grand jury. The Reformers made such a stir that Ben Cass, the county prosecutor, though a Dominick man, disobeyed his master and tried and convicted M'Coskrey. Of course, following the custom in cases of yielding to pressure from public sentiment, he made the trial-errors necessary to insure reversal in the higher court; and he finally gave Dominick's judge the opportunity to quash the indictment. But the boss was relentless,—Cass had been disobedient,

and had put upon "my friend M'Coskrey" the disgrace of making a sorry figure in court. "Ben can look to his swell reform friends for a renomination," said he; "he'll not get it from me."

Thus it came to pass that Dominick's lieutenant, Buck Fessenden, appeared in my office one afternoon in July, and, after a brief parley, asked me how I'd like to be prosecuting attorney of Jackson County. Four thousand a year for four years, and a reëlection if I should give satisfaction; and afterward, the bench or a seat in Congress! I could pay off everything; I could marry!

It was my first distinct vision of the plum tree. To how many thousands of our brightest, most promising young Americans it is shown each year in just such circumstances!

II

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AT THE COURT OF A SOVEREIGN

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That evening after supper I went to see Dominick.

In the lower end of Pulaski there was a large beer-garden, known as Dominick's headquarters. He received half the profits in return for making it his loafing-place, the seat of the source of all political honor, preferment and privilege in the third, sixth and seventh congressional districts. I found him enthroned at the end of a long table in the farthest corner of the garden. On one side of him sat James Spencer, judge of the circuit court,—"Dominick's judge"; on the other

side Henry De Forest, principal owner of the Pulaski Gas and Street Railway Company. There were several minor celebrities in politics, the law, and business down either side of the table, then Fessenden, talking with Cowley, our lieutenant governor. As soon as I appeared Fessenden nodded to me, rose, and said to the others generally: "Come on, boys, let's adjourn to the next table. Mr. Dominick wants to talk to this young fellow."

I knew something of politics, but I was not prepared to see that distinguished company rise and, with not a shadow of resentment on any man's face, with only a respectful, envious glance at me, who was to deprive them of sunshine for a few minutes, remove themselves and their glasses to another table. When I knew Dominick better, and other bosses in this republic of ours, I knew that the boss is never above the weaknesses of the monarch class for a rigid and servile court etiquette. My own lack of this weakness has been a mistake which might have been serious had my political power been based upon men. It is a blunder to treat men without self-respect as if they were your equals. They expect to cringe; if they are not compelled to do so, they are very likely to forget their place. At the court of a boss are seen only those who have lost self-respect and those who never had it. The first are the lower though they rank themselves, and are ranked, above the "just naturally low."

But—Dominick was alone, his eternal glass of sarsaparilla before him. He used the left corner of his mouth both for his cigar and for speech. To bid me draw near and seat myself, he had to shift his cigar. When the few words necessary were half-spoken, half-grunted, he rolled his cigar back to

the corner which it rarely left. He nodded condescendingly, and, as I took the indicated chair at his right, gave me a hand that was fat and firm, not unlike the flabby yet tenacious sucker of a moist sea-creature.

He was a huge, tall man, enormously muscular, with a high head like a block, straight in front, behind and on either side; keen, shifty, pig eyes, pompous cheeks, a raw, wide mouth; slovenly dress, with a big diamond as a collar button and another on his puffy little finger. He was about forty years old, had graduated from blacksmith too lazy to work into prize-fighter, thence into saloon-keeper. It was as a saloon-keeper that he founded and built his power, made himself the local middleman between our two great political factors, those who buy and break laws and those who aid and abet the lawlessness by selling themselves as voters or as office-holders.

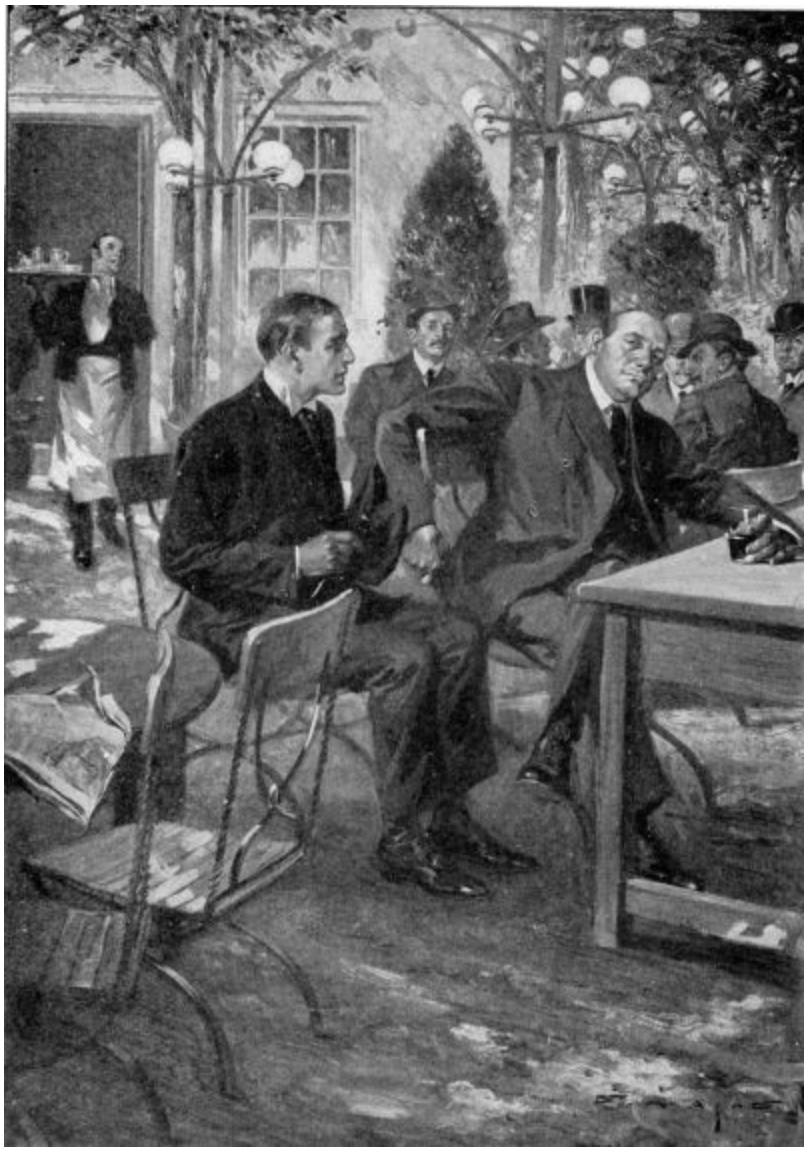
Dominick had fixed his eyes upon his sarsaparilla. He frowned savagely into its pale brown foam when he realized that I purposed to force him to speak first. His voice was ominously surly as he shifted his cigar to say: "Well, young fellow, what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Fessenden told me you wanted to see me," said I.

"He didn't say nothing of the sort," growled Dominick. "I've knowed Buck seventeen years, and he ain't no liar."

I flushed and glanced at the distinguished company silently waiting to return to the royal presence. Surely, if these eminent fellow citizens of mine endured this insulting monarch, I could,—I, the youthful, the obscure, the despondent. Said I: "Perhaps I did not express myself quite accurately. Fessenden told me you were considering making

me your candidate for county prosecutor, and suggested that I call and see you."



HE SHIFTED HIS CIGAR TO SAY: "WELL, YOUNG FELLOW, WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?" *p. 20*

Dominick gave a gleam and a grunt like a hog that has been flattered with a rough scratching of its hide. But he answered: "I don't give no nominations. That's the province of the party, young man."

"But *you* are the party," was my reply. At the time I was not conscious that I had thus easily dropped down among

the hide-scratchers. I assured myself that I was simply stating the truth, and ignored the fact that telling the truth can be the most degrading sycophancy, and the subtlest and for that reason the most shameless, lying.

"Well, I guess I've got a little something to say about the party," he conceded. "Us young fellows that are active in politics like to see young fellows pushed to the front. A good many of the boys ain't stuck on Ben Cass,—he's too stuck on himself. He's getting out of touch with the common people, and is boot-licking in with the swells up town. So, when I heard you wanted the nomination for prosecutor, I told Buck to trot you round and let us look you over. Good party man?"

"Yes—and my father and grandfather before me."

"No reform germs in your system?"

I laughed—I was really amused, such a relief was it to see a gleam of pleasantry in that menacing mass. "I'm no better than my party," said I, "and I don't desert it just because it doesn't happen to do everything according to my notions."

"That's right," approved Dominick, falling naturally into the role of political schoolmaster. "There ain't no government without responsibility, and there ain't no responsibility without organization, and there ain't no organization without men willing to sink their differences." He paused.

I looked my admiration,—I was most grateful to him for this chance to think him an intellect. Who likes to admit that he bows before a mere brute? The compulsory courtiers of a despot may possibly and in part tell the truth about him, after they are safe; but was there ever a voluntary courtier

whose opinion of his monarch could be believed? The more distinguished the courtier the greater his necessity to exaggerate his royal master—or mistress—to others and to himself.

Dominick forged on: "Somebody's got to lead, and the leader's got to be obeyed. Otherwise what becomes of the party? Why, it goes to hell, and we've got anarchy."

This was terse, pointed, plausible—the stereotyped "machine" argument. I nodded emphatically.

"Ben Cass," he proceeded, "believes in discipline and organization and leadership only when they're to elect him to a fat job. He wants to use the party, but when the party wants service in return, up goes Mr. Cass' snout and tail, and off he lopes. He's what I call a cast iron—" I shall omit the vigorous phrase wherein he summarized Cass. His vocabulary was not large; he therefore frequently resorted to the garbage barrel and the muck heap for missiles.

I showed in my face my scorn for the Cass sort of selfishness and insubordination. "The leader has all the strings in his hand," said I. "He's the only one who can judge what must be done. He must be trusted and obeyed."

"I see you've got the right stuff in you, young man," said Dominick heartily. "So you want the job?"

I hesitated,—I was thinking of him, of his bestial tyranny, and of my self-respect, unsullied, but also untempted, theretofore.

He scowled. "Do you, or don't you?"

"Yes," said I,—I was thinking of the debts and mother and Betty. "Yes, indeed; I'd esteem it a great honor, and I'd be grateful to you." If I had thrust myself over-head into a

sewer I should have felt less vile than I did as my fears and longings uttered those degrading words.

He grunted. "Well, we'll see. Tell the boys at the other table to come back." He nodded a dismissal and gave me that moist, strong grip again.

As I went toward the other table each man there had a hand round his glass in readiness for the message of recall. I mentally called the roll—wealth, respectability, honor, all on their knees before Dominick, each with his eye upon the branch of the plum tree that bore the kind of fruit he fancied. And I wondered how they felt inside,—for I was then ignorant of the great foundation truth of practical ethics, that a man's conscience is not the producer but the product of his career.

Fessenden accompanied me to the door. "The old man's in a hell of a humor to-night," said he. "His wife's caught on to a little game he's been up to, and she's the only human being he's afraid of. She came in here, one night, and led him out by the ear. What a fool a man is to marry when there's a chance of running into a mess like that! But—you made a hit with him. Besides, he needs you. Your family—" Buck checked himself, feeling that drink was making him voluble.

"He's a strong man, isn't he?" said I; "a born leader."

"Middle-weight champion in his day," replied Fessenden. "He can still knock out anybody in the organization in one round."

"Good night and thank you," said I. So I went my way, not elated but utterly depressed,—more depressed than when I won the first case in which I knew my client's opponent was

in the right and had lost only because I outgeneraled his stupid lawyer. I was, like most of the sons and daughters of the vigorous families of the earnest, deeply religious early-West, an idealist by inheritance and by training; but I suppose any young man, however practical, must feel a shock when he begins those compromises between theoretical and practical right which are part of the daily routine of active life, and without which active life is impossible.

I had said nothing to my mother, because I did not wish to raise her hopes—or her objections. I now decided to be silent until the matter should be settled. The next day but one Fessenden came, bad news in his face. "The old man liked you," he began, "but—"

I had not then learned to control my expression. I could not help showing what ruins of lofty castles that ominous "but" dropped upon my head.

"You'll soon be used to getting it in the neck if you stay in politics," said Fessenden. "There's not much else. But you ain't so bad off as you think. The old man has decided that he can afford to run one of his reliable hacks for the place. He's suddenly found a way of sinking his hooks in the head devil of the Reformers and Ben Cass' chief backer, Singer,—you know him,—the lawyer."

Singer was one of the leaders of the state bar and superintendent of our Sunday-school.

"Dominick has made De Forest give Singer the law business of the Gas and Street Railway Company, so Singer is coming over to us." Buck grinned. "He has found that

'local interests must be subordinated to the broader interests of the party in state and nation.'"

I had been reading in our party's morning paper what a wise and patriotic move Singer had made in advising the putting off of a Reform campaign,—and I had believed in the sincerity of his motive!

Fessenden echoed my sneer, and went on: "He's a rotten hypocrite; but then, we can always pull the bung out of these Reform movements that way."

"You said it isn't as bad for me as it seems," I interrupted.

"Oh, yes. You're to be on the ticket. The old man's going to send you to the legislature,—lower house, of course."

I did not cheer up. An assemblyman got only a thousand a year.

"The pay ain't much," confessed Buck, "but there ain't nothing to do except vote according to order. Then there's a great deal to be picked up on the side,—the old man understands that others have got to live besides him. Salaries in politics don't cut no figure nowadays, anyhow. It's the chance the place gives for pick-ups."

At first I flatly refused, but Buck pointed out that I was foolish to throw away the benefits sure to come through the "old man's" liking for me. "He'll take care of you," he assured me. "He's got you booked for a quick rise." My poverty was so pressing that I had not the courage to refuse,—the year and a half of ferocious struggle and the longing to marry Betty Crosby had combined to break my spirit. I believe it is Johnson who says the worst feature of genteel poverty is its power to make one ridiculous. I don't

think so. No; its worst feature is its power to make one afraid.

That night I told my mother of my impending "honors." We were in the dark on our little front porch. She was silent, and presently I thought I heard her suppressing a sigh. "You don't like it, mother?" said I.

"No, Harvey, but—I see no light ahead in any other direction, and I guess one should always steer toward what light there is." She stood behind my chair, put her hands on my shoulders, and rested her chin lightly on the top of my head. "Besides, I can trust you. Whatever direction you take, you're sure to win in the end."

I was glad it was dark. An hour after I went to bed I heard some one stirring in the house,—it seemed to me there was a voice, too. I rose and went into the hall, and so, softly to my mother's room. Her door was ajar. She was near the window, kneeling there in the moonlight, praying—for me.

I had not been long in the legislature before I saw that my position was even more contemptible than I anticipated. So contemptible, indeed, was it that, had I not been away from home and among those as basely situated as myself, it would have been intolerable,—a convict infinitely prefers the penitentiary to the chain gang. Then, too, there was consolation in the fact that the people, my fellow citizens, in their stupidity and ignorance about political conditions, did not realize what public office had come to mean. At home they believed what the machine-controlled newspapers said of me—that I was a "manly, independent young man," that I was "making a vigorous stand for what was honest in public