HAROLD FREDERIC

THE COPPERHEAD

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CHAPTER I
ABNER BEECH

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It was on the night of my thirteenth birthday, I know, that the old farm-house was burned over our heads. By that reckoning I must have been six or seven when I went to live with Farmer Beech, because at the time he testified I had been with him half my life.

Abner Beech had often been supervisor for his town, and could have gone to the Assembly, it was said, had he chosen. He was a stalwart, thick-shouldered, big man, with shaggy dark eyebrows shading stern hazel eyes, and with a long, straight nose, and a broad, firmly shut mouth. His expansive upper lip was blue from many years of shaving; all the rest was bushing beard, mounting high upon the cheeks and rolling downward in iron-gray billows over his breast. That shaven upper lip, which still may be found among the farmers of the old blood in our district was, I dare say, a survival from the time of the Puritan protest against the mustaches of the Cavaliers. If Abner Beech, in the latter days, had been told that this shaving on Wednesday and Saturday nights was a New England rite, I feel sure he would never have touched razor again.

He was a well-to-do man in the earlier time—a tremendous worker, a “good provider,” a citizen of weight and substance in the community. In all large matters the neighborhood looked to him to take the lead. He was the first farmer roundabout to set a mowing-machine to work in his meadows, and to put up lightning-rods on his buildings.

At one period he was, too, the chief pillar in the church, but that was before the episode of the lightning-rods. Our little Union meeting-house was supplied in those days by an irregular procession of itinerant preachers, who came when the spirit moved and spoke with that entire frankness which is induced by knowledge that the night is to be spent somewhere else. One of these strolling ministers regarded all attempts to protect property from lightning as an insolent defiance of the Divine Will, and said so very pointedly in the pulpit, and the congregation sat still and listened and grinned. Farmer Beech never forgave them.

There came in good time other causes for ill-feeling. It is beyond the power of my memory to pick out and arrange in proper sequence the events which, in the final result, separated Abner Beech from his fellows. My own recollections go with distinctness back to the reception of the news that Virginia had hanged John Brown; in a vaguer way they cover the two or three preceding years. Very likely Farmer Beech had begun to fall out of touch with his neighbors even before that.

The circumstances of my adoption into his household—an orphan without relations or other friends—were not of the sort to serve this narrative. I was taken in to be raised as a farm-hand, and was no more expected to be grateful than as if I had been a young steer purchased to toil in the yoke. No suggestion was ever made that I had incurred any debt of obligation to the Beeches. In a little community where everyone worked as a matter of course till there was no more work to do, and all shared alike the simple food, the tired, heavy sleep, and the infrequent spells of recreation,

no one talked or thought of benefits conferred or received. My rights in the house and about the place were neither less nor more than those of Jeff Beech, the farmer's only son.

In the course of time I came, indeed, to be a more sympathetic unit in the household, so to speak, than poor Jeff himself. But that was only because he had been drawn off after strange gods.

At all times—even when nothing else good was said of him—Abner Beech was spoken of by the people of the district as a “great hand for reading.” His pre-eminence in this matter remained unquestioned to the end. No other farmer for miles owned half the number of books which he had on the shelves above his writing-desk. Still less was there anyone roundabout who could for a moment stand up with him in a discussion involving book-learning in general. This at first secured for him the respect of the whole country-side, and men were proud to be agreed with by such a scholar. But when affairs changed, this, oddly enough, became a formidable popular grievance against Abner Beech. They said then that his opinions were worthless because he got them from printed books, instead of from his heart.

What these opinions were may in some measure be guessed from the titles of the farmer's books. Perhaps there were some thirty of them behind the glass doors of the old mahogany bookcase. With one or two agricultural or veterinary exceptions, they related exclusively to American history and politics. There were, I recall, the first two volumes of Bancroft, and Lossing's “Lives of the Signers,” and “Field-Books” of the two wars with England; Thomas H.

Benton's “Thirty Years' View;” the four green-black volumes of Hammond's “Political History of the State of New York;” campaign lives of Lewis Cass and Franklin Pierce, and larger biographies of Jefferson and Jackson, and, most imposing of all, a whole long row of big calf-bound volumes of the *Congressional Globe*, which carried the minutiæ of politics at Washington back into the forties.

These books constituted the entire literary side of my boyish education. I have only the faintest and haziest recollections of what happened when I went during the winter months to the school-house at the Four Corners. But I can recall the very form of the type in the farmer's books. Everyone of those quaint, austere, and beardless faces, framed in high collars and stocks and waving hair—the Marcys, Calhouns, DeWitt Clintons, and Silas Wrights of the daguerreotype and Sartain's primitive graver—gives back to me now the lineaments of an old-time friend.

Whenever I could with decency escape from playing checkers with Jeff, and had no harness to grease or other indoor jobs, I spent the winter evenings in poring over some of these books—generally with Abner Beech at the opposite side of the table immersed in another. On some rare occasion one of the hired men would take down a volume and look through it—the farmer watching him covertly the while to see that he did not wet his big thumbs to turn over the leaves—but for the most part we two had the books to ourselves. The others would sit about till bedtime, amusing themselves as best they could, the women-folk knitting or mending, the men cracking butternuts, or dallying with cider and apples and fried-cakes, as they talked over the work

and gossip of the district and tempted the scorching impulses of the stovehearth with their stockinged feet.

This tacit separation of the farmer and myself from the rest of the household in the course of time begat confidences between us. He grew, from brief and casual beginnings, into a habit of speaking to me about the things we read. As it became apparent, year by year, that young Jeff was never going to read anything at all, Abner Beech more and more distinguished me with conversational favor. It cannot be said that the favoritism showed itself in other directions. I had to work as hard as ever, and got no more playtime than before. The master's eye was everywhere as keen, alert, and unsparing as if I had not known even my alphabet. But when there were breathing spells, we talked together—or rather he talked and I listened—as if we were folk quite apart from the rest.

Two fixed ideas thus arose in my boyish mind, and dominated all my little notions of the world. One was that Alexander Hamilton and John Marshall were among the most infamous characters in history. The other was that every true American ought to hold himself in daily readiness to fight with England. I gave a great deal of thought to both these matters. I had early convictions, too, I remember, with regard to Daniel Webster, who had been very bad, and then all at once became a very good man. For some obscure reason I always connected him in my imagination with Zaccheus up a tree, and clung to the queer association of images long after I learned that the Marshfield statesman had been physically a large man.

Gradually the old blood-feud with the Britisher became obscured by fresher antagonisms, and there sprouted up a crop of new sons of Belial who deserved to be hated more even than had Hamilton and Marshall. With me the two stages of indignation glided into one another so imperceptibly that I can now hardly distinguish between them. What I do recall is that the farmer came in time to neglect the hereditary enemy, England, and to seem to have quite forgotten our own historic foes to liberty, so enraged was he over the modern Abolitionists. He told me about them as we paced up the seed rows together in the spring, as we drove homeward on the hay-load in the cool of the summer evening, as we shovelled out a path for the women to the pumps in the farm-yard through December snows. It took me a long time to even approximately grasp the wickedness of these new men, who desired to establish negro sovereignty in the Republic, and to compel each white girl to marry a black man.

The fact that I had never seen any negro “close to,” and had indeed only caught passing glimpses of one or more of the colored race on the streets of our nearest big town, added, no doubt, to the mystified alarm with which I contemplated these monstrous proposals. When finally an old darky on his travels did stroll our way, and I beheld him, incredibly ragged, dirty, and light-hearted, shuffling through “Jump Jim Crow” down at the Four Corners, for the ribald delectation of the village loafers, the revelation fairly made me shudder. I marvelled that the others could laugh, with this unspeakable fate hanging over their silly heads.

At first the Abolitionists were to me a remote and intangible class, who lived and wrought their evil deeds in distant places—chiefly New England way. I rarely heard mention of any names of persons among them. They seemed to be an impersonal mass, like a herd of buffaloes or a swarm of hornets. The first individuality in their ranks which attracted my attention, I remember, was that of Theodore Parker. The farmer one day brought home with him from town a pamphlet composed of anti-slavery sermons or addresses by this person. In the evening he read it, or as far into it as his temper would permit, beating the table with his huge fist from time to time, and snorting with wrathful amazement. At last he sprang to his feet, marched over to the wood-stove, kicked the door open with his boot, and thrust the offending print into the blaze. It is vivid in my memory still—the way the red flame-light flared over his big burly front, and sparkled on his beard, and made his face to shine like that of Moses.

But soon I learned that there were Abolitionists everywhere—Abolitionists right here in our own little farmland township of northern New York! The impression which this discovery made upon me was not unlike that produced on Robinson Crusoe by the immortal footprint. I could think of nothing else. Great events, which really covered a space of years, came and went as in a bunch together, while I was still pondering upon this. John Brown was hanged, Lincoln was elected, Sumter was fired on, the first regiment was raised and despatched from our rustic end of Dearborn County—and all the time it seems now as if

my mind was concentrated upon the amazing fact that some of our neighbors were Abolitionists.

There was a certain dreamlike tricksiness of transformation in it all. At first there was only one Abolitionist, old “Jee” Hagadorn. Then, somehow, there came to be a number of them—and then, all at once, lo! everybody was an Abolitionist—that is to say, everybody but Abner Beech. The more general and enthusiastic the conversion of the others became, the more resolutely and doggedly he dug his heels into the ground, and braced his broad shoulders, and pulled in the opposite direction. The skies darkened, the wind rose, the storm of angry popular feeling burst swooping over the country-side, but Beech only stiffened his back and never budged an inch.

At some early stage of this great change, we ceased going to church at all. The pulpit of our rustic meeting-house had become a platform from which the farmer found himself denounced with hopeless regularity on every recurring Sabbath, and that, too, without any chance whatever of talking back. This in itself was hardly to be borne. But when others, mere laymen of the church, took up the theme, and began in class-meetings and the Sunday-school to talk about Antichrist and the Beast with Ten Horns and Seven Heads, in obvious connection with Southern sympathizers, it became frankly insufferable. The farmer did not give in without a fierce resistance. He collected all the texts he could find in the Bible, such as “Servants obey your masters,” “Cursed be Canaan,” and the like, and hurled them vehemently, with strong, deep voice, and sternly glowing eyes, full at their heads. But the others had many

more texts—we learned afterwards that old “Jee” Hagadorn enjoyed the unfair advantage of a Cruden's Concordance—and their tongues were as forty to one, so we left off going to church altogether.

Not long after this, I should think, came the miserable affair of the cheese-factory.

The idea of doing all the dairy work of a neighborhood under a common roof, which originated not many miles from us, was now nearly ten years old. In those days it was regarded as having in it possibilities of vastly greater things than mere cheese-making. Its success among us had stirred up in men's minds big sanguine notions of co-operation as the answer to all American farm problems—as the gateway through which we were to march into the rural millennium. These high hopes one recalls now with a smile and a sigh. Farmers' wives continued to break down and die under the strain, or to be drafted off to the lunatic asylums; the farmers kept on hanging themselves in their barns, or flying westward before the locustlike cloud of mortgages; the boys and girls turned their steps townward in an ever-increasing host. The millennium never came at all.

But at that time—in the late fifties and early sixties—the cheese-factory was the centre of an impressive constellation of dreams and roseate promises. Its managers were the very elect of the district; their disfavor was more to be dreaded than any condemnation of a town-meeting; their chief officers were even more important personages than the supervisor and assessor.

Abner Beech had literally been the founder of our cheese-factory. I fancy he gave the very land on which it

was built, and where you will see it still, under the willows by the upper-creek bridge. He sent to it in those days the milk of the biggest herd owned by any farmer for miles around, reaching at seasons nearly one hundred cows. His voice, too, outweighed all others in its co-operative councils.

But when our church-going community had reached the conclusion that a man couldn't be a Christian and hold such views on the slave question as Beech held, it was only a very short step to the conviction that such a man would water his milk. In some parts of the world the theft of a horse is the most heinous of conceivable crimes; other sections exalt to this pinnacle of sacredness in property a sheep or a pheasant or a woman. Among our dairymen the thing of special sanctity was milk. A man in our neighborhood might almost better be accused of forgery or bigamy outright, than to fall under the dreadful suspicion of putting water into his cans.

Whether it was mere stupid prejudice or malignant invention I know not—who started the story was never to be learned—but of a sudden everybody seemed to have heard that Abner Beech's milk had been refused at the cheese-factory. This was not true, any more than it was true that there could possibly have been warrant for such a proceeding. But what did happen was that the cheese-maker took elaborate pains each morning to test our cans with such primitive appliances as preceded the lactometer, and sniffed suspiciously as he entered our figures in a separate book, and behaved generally so that our hired man knocked him head over heels into one of his whey vats. Then the managers complained to the farmer. He went