

XXIII

Of the Bill for the Reformatory, and its Critical Situation; of West's Second Disappointment with the Rewards of Patriotism; of the Consolation he found in the most Charming Resolve in the World.

IN January the legislature met again. All autumn and early winter the *Post* had been pounding without surcease upon two great issues: first, the reform of the tax-laws, and, second, the establishment of a reformatory institution for women. It was palpably the resolve of the paper that the legislature should not overlook these two measures through lack of being shown where its duty lay.

To the assistant editor had been assigned both campaigns, and he had developed his argument with a deadly persistence. A legislature could no more ignore him than you could ignore a man who is pounding you over the head with a bed-slat. Queed had proved his cases in a dozen ways, historically and analogically, politically, morally, and scientifically, socially and sociologically. Then, for luck, he proceeded to run through the whole list again a time or two; and now faithful readers of the *Post* cried aloud for mercy, asking each other what under the sun had got into the paper that it thus massacred and mutilated the thrice-slain.

But the *Post*, aided by the press of the State which had been captivated by its ringing logic, continued its merciless fire, and, as it proved, not insanelly. For when the legislature came together, it turned out to be one of those "economy" sessions, periodically thrust down the throats of even the wiliest politicians. Not "progress" was its watchword, but "wise retrenchment." Every observer of events, especially in states where one party has been long in control, is familiar with these recurrent manifestations. There is a long

period of systematic reduplication of the offices, multiplying generosity to the faithful, and enormous geometrical progression of the public payroll. Some mishap, one day, focuses attention upon the princely totalities of the law-making spenders, and a howl goes up from the "sovereigns," who, as has been wisely observed, never have any power until they are mad. The party managers, always respectful to an angry electorate, thereupon announce that, owing to the wonderful period of progress and expansion brought about by their management, the State can afford to slow up for a brief period, hold down expenses and enjoy its (party-made) prosperity. This strikes the "keynote" for the next legislature, which pulls a long face, makes a tremendous noise about "economy," and possibly refrains from increasing expenses, or even shades them down about a dollar and a half. Flushed with their victory, the innocent sovereigns return, Cincinnati-wise, to their plows, and the next session of the legislature, relieved of that suspicious scrutiny so galling to men of spirit, proceeds to cut the purse-strings loose with a whoop.

Such a brief spasm had now seized the State. Expenses had doubled and redoubled with a velocity which caused even hardened prodigals to view with alarm. The number of commissions, boards, assistant inspectors, and third deputy clerks was enormous, far larger than anybody realized. If you could have taken a biological cross-section through the seat of State Government, you would doubtless have discovered a most amazing number of unobtrusive gentlemen with queer little titles and odd little duties, sitting silent and sleek under their cover; their hungry little mouths affixed last year to the public breast, or two years ago, or twenty, and ready to open in fearful wailing if anybody sought to pluck them off. In an aggregate way, attention had been called to them during the gubernatorial campaign of the summer. Attacks from the rival stump had, of course, been successfully "answered" by the loyal leaders and party press. But the bare statement of the annual expenditures, as compared with the annual expenditures of ten years ago, neces-

sarily stood, and in cold type it looked bad. Therefore the legislature met now for an "economy session." The public was given to understand that every penny would have to give a strict account of itself before it would receive a pass from the treasury, and that public institutions, asking for increased support, could consider themselves lucky if they did not find their appropriations scaled down by a fourth or so.

The *Post's* tax reform scheme went through with a bang. Out of loose odds and ends of vague discontent, Queed had succeeded in creating a body of public sentiment that became invincible. Moreover, this scheme cost nothing. On the contrary, by a rearrangement of items and a stricter system of assessment, it promised, as the *Post* frequently remarked, to put hundreds of thousands into the treasury. But the reformatory was a horse of a totally different color. Here was a proposal, for a mere supposititious moral gain, evanescent as air, to take a hundred thousand dollars of hard money out of the crib, and saddle the State with an annual obligation, to boot. An excellent thing in itself, but a most unreasonable request of an economy session, said the organization leaders. In fact, this hundred thousand dollars happened to be precisely the hundred thousand dollars they needed to lubricate "the organization," and discharge, by some choice new positions, a few honorable obligations incurred during the campaign.

Now it was written in the recesses of the assistant editor's being, those parts of him which he never thought of mentioning to anybody, that the reformatory bill must pass. Various feelings had gradually stiffened an early general approval into a rock-ribbed resolve. It was on a closely allied theme that he had first won his editorial spurs — the theme of Klinker's "blaggards," who made reformatories necessary. That was one thing: a kind of professional sentiment which the sternest scientist need not be ashamed to acknowledge. And then, beyond that, his many talks with Klinker had invested the campaign for the reformatory with a warmth of meaning which was without precedent in his experience.

This was, in fact, his first personal contact with the suffering and sin of the world, his first grapple with a social problem in the raw. Two years before, when he had offered to write an article on this topic for the Assistant Secretary of Charities, his interest in a reformatory had been only the scientific interest which the trained sociologist feels in all the enginery of social reform. But now this institution had become indissolubly connected in Queed's mind with the case of Eva Bernheimer, whom Buck Klinker knew, Eva Bernheimer who was "in trouble" at sixteen, and had now "dropped out." A reformatory had become in his thought a living instrument to catch the Eva Bernheimers of this world, and effectually prevent them from dropping out.

And apart from all this, here was the first chance he had ever had to do a service for Sharlee Weyland.

However, the bill stuck obstinately in committee. Now the session was more than half over, February was nearly gone, and there it still stuck. And when it finally came out, it was evidently going to be a toss of a coin whether it would be passed by half a dozen votes, or beaten by an equal number. But there was not the slightest doubt that the great majority of the voters, so far as they were interested in it at all, wanted it passed, and the tireless *Post* was prodding the committee every other day, observing that now was the time, etc., and demanding in a hundred forceful ways, how about it?

With cheerfulness and confidence had West intrusted these important matters to his young assistant. Not only was Queed an acknowledged authority on both taxation and penological science, but he had enjoyed the advantage of writing articles on both themes under Colonel Cowles's personal direction. The Colonel's bones were dust, his pen was rust, his soul was with the saints, we trust; but his gallant spirit went marching on. He towered out of memory a demigod, and what he said and did in his lifetime had become as the law of the Medes and Persians now.

But there was never any dispute about the division of editorial honors on the *Post*, anyway. The two young men, in

fact, were so different in every way that their relations were a model of mutual satisfaction. Never once did Queed's popular chief seek to ride over his valued helper, or deny him his full share of opportunity in the department. If anything, indeed, he leaned quite the other way. For West lacked the plodder's faculty for indefatigable application. Like some rare and splendid bird, if he was kept too closely in captivity, his spirit sickened and died.

It is time to admit frankly that West, upon closer contact with newspaper work, had been somewhat disillusioned, and who that knows will be surprised at that? To begin with, he had been used to much freedom, and his new duties were extremely confining. They began soon after breakfast, and no man could say at what hour they would end. The night work, in especial, he abhorred. It interfered with much more amusing things that had hitherto beguiled his evenings, and it also conflicted with sleep, of which he required a good deal. There was, too, a great amount of necessary but most irksome drudgery connected with his editorial labors. Because the *Post* was a leader of public thought in the State, and as such enjoyed a national standing, West found it necessary to read a vast number of papers, to keep up with what was going on. He was also forced to write many perfunctory articles on subjects which did not interest him in the least, and about which, to tell the truth, he knew very little. There were also a great many letters either to be answered, or to be prepared for publication in the People's Forum column, and these letters were commonly written by dull asses who had no idea what they were talking about. Prosy people were always coming in with requests or complaints, usually the latter. First and last there was a quantity of grinding detail which, like the embittered old fogeyism of the Blaines College trustees, had not appeared on his rosy prospect in the Maytime preceding.

With everything else favorable, West would cheerfully have accepted these things, as being inextricably embedded in the nature of the work. But unfortunately, everything else

was not favorable. Deeper than the grind of the routine detail, was the constant opposition and adverse criticism to which his newspaper, like every other one, was incessantly subjected. It has long been a trite observation that no reader of any newspaper is so humble as not to be outspokenly confident that he could run that paper a great deal better than those who actually are running it. Every upstanding man who pays a cent for a daily journal considers that he buys the right to abuse it, nay incurs the manly duty of abusing it. Every editor knows that the highest praise he can expect is silence. If his readers are pleased with his remarks, they nobly refrain from comment. But if they disagree with one jot or tittle of his high-speed dissertations, he must be prepared to have quarts of ink squirted at him forthwith.

Now this was exactly the reverse of Editor West's preferences. He liked criticism of him to be silent, and praise of him to be shouted in the market-place. For all his good-humor and poise, the steady fire of hostile criticism fretted him intensely. He did not like to run through his exchanges and find his esteemed contemporaries combatting his positions, sometimes bitterly or contemptuously, and always, so it seemed to him, unreasonably and unfairly. He did not like to have friends stop him on the street to ask why in the name of so-and-so he had said such-and-such; or, more trying still, have them pass him with an icy nod, simply because he, in some defense of truth and exploitation of the uplift, had fearlessly trod upon their precious little toes. He did not like to have his telephone ring with an angry protest, or to get a curt letter from a railroad president (supposedly a good friend of the paper's) desiring to know by return mail whether the clipping therewith inclosed represented the *Post's* attitude toward the railroads. A steady procession of things like these wears on the nerves of a sensitive man, and West, for all his confident exterior, was a sensitive man. A heavy offset in the form of large and constant public eulogies was needed to balance these annoyances, and such an offset was not forthcoming.

West was older now, a little less ready in his enthusiasms, a shade less pleased with the world, a thought less sure of the eternal merits of the life of uplift. In fact he was thirty-three years old, and he had moments, now and then, when he wondered if he were going forward as rapidly and surely as he had a right to expect. This was the third position he had had since he left college, and it was his general expectation to graduate into a fourth before a great while. Semple frequently urged him to return to the brokerage business; he had made an unquestioned success there at any rate. As to Blaines College, he could not be so confident. The college had opened this year with an increased enrollment of twenty-five; and though West privately felt certain that his successor was only reaping where he himself had sown, you could not be certain that the low world would so see it. As for the *Post*, it was a mere stop-gap, a momentary halting-place where he preened for a far higher flight. There were many times that winter when West wondered if Plonny Neal, whom he rarely or never saw, could possibly have failed to notice how prominently he was in line.

But these doubts and dissatisfactions left little mark upon the handsome face and buoyant manner. Changes in West, if there were any, were of the slightest. Certainly his best friends, like those two charming young women, Miss Weyland and Miss Avery, found him as delightful as ever.

In these days, West's mother desired him to marry. After the cunning habit of women, she put the thought before him daily, under many an alluring guise, by a thousand engaging approaches. West himself warmed to the idea. He had drunk freely of the pleasures of single blessedness, under the most favorable conditions; was now becoming somewhat jaded with them; and looked with approval upon the prospect of a little nest, or indeed one not so little, duly equipped with the usual faithful helpmeet who should share his sorrows, joys, etc. The nest he could feather decently enough himself; the sole problem, a critical one in its way,

was to decide upon the helpmeet. West was neither college boy nor sailor. His heart was no harem of beautiful faces. Long since, he had faced the knowledge that there were but two girls in the world for him. Since, however, the church and the law allowed him but one, he must more drastically monogamize his heart; and this he found enormously difficult. It was the poet's triangle with the two dear charmers over again.

One blowy night in late February, West passed by the brown stone palace which Miss Avery's open-handed papa, from Mauch Chunk, occupied on a three years' lease with privilege of buying; and repaired to the more modest establishment where dwelt Miss Weyland and her mother. The reformatory issue was then at the touch. The bill had come out of committee with a six-and-six vote; rumor had it that it would be called up in the House within the week; and it now appeared as though a push of a feather's weight might settle its fate either way. Sharlee and West spoke first of this. She was eagerly interested, and praised him warmly for the interest and valuable help of the *Post*. Her confidence was unshaken that the bill would go through, though by a narrow margin.

"The opposition is of the deadliest sort," she admitted, "because it is silent. It is silent because it knows that its only argument — all this economy talk — is utterly insincere. But Mr. Dayne knows where the opposition is — and the way he goes after it! Never believe any more that ministers can't lobby!"

"Probably the root of the whole matter," offered West, easing himself back into his chair, "is that the machine fellows want this particular hundred thousand dollars in their business."

"Is n't it horrid that men can be so utterly selfish? You don't think they will really venture to do that?"

"I honestly don't know. You see I have turned it all over to Queed, and I confess I have n't studied it with anything like the care he has."

Sharlee, who was never too engrossed in mere subjects to notice people's tones, said at once: "Oh, I am sure they won't dare do it," and immediately changed the subject. "You are going to the German, of course?"

"Oh, surely, unless the office pinches me."

"You must n't let it pinch you — the last of the year, heigho! Did you hear about Robert Byrd and Miss — no, I won't give you her name — and the visiting girl?"

"Never a word."

"She's a thoroughly nice girl, but — well, not pretty, I should say, and I don't think she has had much fun here. Beverley and Robert Byrd were here the other night. Why *will* they hunt in pairs, do you know? I told Beverley that he positively must take this girl to the German. He quarreled and complained a good deal at first, but finally yielded like a dear boy. Then he seemed to enter in the nicest way into the spirit of our altruistic design. He said that after he had asked the girl, it would be very nice if Robert should ask her too. He would be refused, of course, but the girl would have the pleasant feeling of getting a rush, and Robert would boost his standing as a philanthropist, all without cost to anybody. Robert was good-natured, and fell in with the plan. Three days later he telephoned me, simply furious. He had asked the girl — you know he has n't been to a German for five years — and she accepted at once with tears of gratitude."

"But how —?"

"Of course Beverley never asked her. He simply trapped Robert, which he would rather do than anything else in the world."

West shouted. "Speaking of Germans," he said presently, "I am making up my list for next year — the early bird, you know. How many will you give me?"

"Six."

"Will you kindly sign up the papers to-night?"

"No — my mother won't let me. I might sign up for one if you want me to."

"What possible use has your mother for the other five that is better than giving them all to me?"

"Perhaps she does n't want to spoil other men for me."

West leaned forward, interest fully awakened on his charming face, and Sharlee watched him, pleased with herself.

It had occurred to her, in fact, that Mr. West was tired; and this was the solemn truth. He was a man of large responsibilities, with a day's work behind him and a night's work ahead of him. His personal conception of the way to occupy the precious interval did not include the conscientious talking of shop. Jaded and brain-fagged, what he desired was to be amused, beguiled, soothed, fascinated, even flattered a bit, mayhap. Sharlee's theory of hospitality was that a guest was entitled to any type of conversation he had a mind to. Having dismissed her own troubles, she now proceeded to make herself as agreeable as she knew how; and he has read these pages to little purpose who does not know that that was very agreeable indeed.

West, at least, appeared to think so. He lingered, charmed, until quarter past eleven o'clock, at which hour Mrs. Weyland, in the room above, began to let the tongs and poker fall about with unmistakable significance; and went out into the starlit night radiant with the certainty that his heart, after long wandering, had found its true mate at last.