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CHAPTER ONE

In response to his wife's uncertain inquiry about the political speaking, Colonel Miltiades Vaiden called back from his gate that he did not think there would be any ladies at the courthouse that evening.

By laying stress on the word "think" the Colonel not only forecasted a purely masculine attendance in Courthouse Square that summer evening in Florence, Alabama, but at the same time he subtly expressed his own personal disapproval of women appearing at political gatherings at any place or time whatsoever.

The heavy wife in the doorway hesitated at the Colonel's implication. She had wanted to go. She felt the gregarious impulse of fleshy persons to foregather with crowds, to laugh and fraternize with the audience, to propel her large body among her lighter fellows with the voluptuous and genial ruthlessness of a fat person. However, on the other hand, her feminine fear of being the only woman in the audience stood in her path.

But behind these two antagonistic impulses lay another cause of depression which the ponderous wife knew too well but which she never frankly had admitted even to herself. This was that her husband did not want her to go with him to this or to any other public gathering; it was . . . that he was ashamed of her.

This fact wavered in the woman's mind until she expelled it by calling out:

"Oh, Mr. Milt, there'll be a lot of leading men down there, I expect. Maybe some of 'em will offer you a—a better position. . . ."

At this mention of position a disagreeable tickle went

through the husband's chest, but he answered in an impassive, corrective tone:

"Not likely such a topic will come up at a political meeting, Ponny."

"Well . . . if it does . . . you . . . you mustn't repulse 'em, Mr. Milt."

"No, I won't, Ponny," he assured her with a solemn face.

He let himself into the street and closed the gate after him. As he did this, the looseness of the hinges, the broken palings, the gaunt outline of his rented house here on this back street in Florence, all combined to give him a twist of repulsion when connected with the thought of a "position."

Because, as a matter of fact, the Colonel had no position. Ever since the Civil War had lost him his place as an overseer on a cotton plantation, he had desired the post and circumstance of a country gentleman. Only nowadays there were no country gentlemen. Nowadays one reached gentility by other methods, but Colonel Vaiden, somehow, had not succeeded in fitting himself into those other methods.

For a long stretch the Colonel's failure had been a kind of standing riddle to persons who had known of his distinguished services during the war and his leadership of the Klan during the Reconstruction. But this riddle gradually lost point with time. So now, as the Colonel glanced back in the twilight and saw in the doorway the bulky outline of his wife, he knew that, besides himself, she was the only human being on earth who believed that upon him, eventually, would fall some great, noble, and extraordinary estate. She was constantly expecting it out of a persistent faith and admiration for her husband's ability.

As the Colonel stepped across a gully in the neglected street he rewarded her loyalty by thinking in a kind of annoyed fashion:

"I should have asked her to go with me . . . damn it . . . Ponny's a good girl. . . ."

Cherry Street, along which Colonel Vaiden moved, was bordered by bare weed-grown lots and an occasional stark

frame house with a chicken coop and a privy in the rear. Two or three squares farther on the pedestrian turned westward toward Market Street. Here the neighborhood began to improve: dark masses of magnolias and live oaks screened the houses. Opening on the sidewalks were double gates to admit a horse and carriage, or perhaps a milk cow of mornings and evenings.

These were still ordinary middle-class homes, but this evening they stiffened a determination in Miltiades to reach this stage of luxury. Yes, and, by gravy, he would do even better than that! These frame houses with magnolias and live oaks, he would have something better than that . . . he did not know just what that better ménage would be, but a quiver of impatience went through him to be at it. Whatever he did he must do quickly; whatever he gained he must gain with speed; . . . he was forty-eight years old.

When Miltiades reached Market Street and turned southward toward the courthouse he abandoned his thoughts of future wealth to decide whether or not he should stop by the boarding house and ask his brother, Augustus Vaiden, to go to the speaking with him.

He hesitated over this point, first because he did not approve of Augustus, who did nothing at all. Augustus' wife, Rose Vaiden, ran a boarding house and Augustus puttered about, helping with the cooking, talking to the boarders, walking downtown for letters, and that was all Augustus did. It annoyed Miltiades, such an ambitionless brother!

The second reason Miltiades had for not stopping by was that Rose Vaiden did not like him. He liked Rose all right in an unenthusiastic sort of way, but Rose did not like him in any way whatsoever.

These pros and cons moved through the Colonel's mind with more irony than definition, and now, after he, apparently, had raked together two good reasons for not stopping, the Colonel mentally determined to drop in at the boarding house and take Augustus with him to the speaking.

When this plan developed out of Colonel Vaiden's musings,

he had come in sight of the two-storied Vaiden boarding house standing darkly against the sky. A light in the kitchen window reminded Miltiades that Rose and Augustus kept a servant, while his own wife, Ponny, always had had to do her own work. This seemed incongruous. He, Colonel Miltiades Vaiden, without a cook, while Augustus, his younger brother, who had no more ambition than a cotton-field negro, should have one . . .

At this point a movement of surprise, almost of shock, went through the Colonel. In front of the boarding house stood a carriage and horses. For a fantastic moment Miltiades thought that somehow or other Rose had bought them and there they were. Then he knew this could not be.

He walked on curiously, when from inside the half-seen vehicle a man's voice said impersonally:

"Good-evening, Colonel Vaiden. My wife and I stopped by to take Miss Rose and her husband to the speaking. Will you ride down with us?"

Miltiades took off his hat to the woman he could not see in the carriage.

"Thank you, Judge, but the air is so fine tonight I believe I'll continue my walk, if you don't mind?"

The voice in the carriage completely acceded to this request.

"It is a very fine night, Colonel."

And Miltiades went on alone with a vague relief that someone else was taking his brother to the speaking.

Half an hour later, as Colonel Vaiden approached Courthouse Square, a distant burst of cheering told him that the speaking already had begun. As he drew nearer the lilt of the voice of an orator came to his ears. Then he could see the speaker, elevated on the portico of the courthouse in the light of four oil lamps. The man on the platform was Governor Terry O'Shawn, a lawyer of Florence, who had risen to the Governorship of Alabama. That was why Florence had turned out en masse to honor the Governor. He was one of their own townsmen.

Governor O'Shawn stood in the midst of the four lamps shaking a fist over the heads of his audience. He was demanding to know upon whose bosom battened the blood-sucking harpies of Yankee manufacturers!

"Look you, my fellow citizens," he inveighed, "Yankees buy up your cotton at five cents a pound; they manufacture it into shirts, sheets, socks, and what not, and send it back to you.

"But do you get it at five cents a pound? Not by a long chalk! No, they begin with a manufacturer's charge of six cents a yard on calico. The Yankee wholesaler adds two cents more; the Yankee jobber another cent. Yankee railroads tax the South one tenth of a cent per yard. All this is understandable. I agree to it. A manufacturer, even a Yankee manufacturer, must live, although God alone knows what for!"

Here laughter and cheers interrupted the orator. Dignitaries sitting in the shadow on the platform behind the Governor looked at one another in amusement. O'Shawn took a sip of water and then went on full tilt:

"But, ladies and gentlemen, that is not the damnable phase of this premeditated murder of the South. In addition to these onerous and excessive charges of manufacture and transportation, a Republican Congress, sired by Wall Street and dammed by the Yankee manufacturers, has placed a protective tariff of three cents a yard on calico; and today, every time your daughter buys a new dress or your boy gets the goods to make a shirt, some Northern octopus reaches his slimy tentacle into your pocket, Mr. Taxpayer, and mulcts you out of three cents a yard on everything you buy. That's what they call governmental protection!

"But is our raw cotton protected three cents a yard, or a mill a pound, or anything at all? It is not! Our raw products don't need protection! The South, that lovely vestal, whose form was bayoneted by war and ravished by Reconstruction —she doesn't require protection! Such is the even-handed ustice of our Republican high protective tariff. What is

sauce for the goose is apparently not sauce for the wounded Bird of Paradise. The plight of the South, thrust into the undesired company of the other states of this Union, recalls to my mind, ladies and gentlemen, that apt and searching parable spoken by our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, when He described the fate of that traveler who fell among thieves!"

An uproar of cheers stopped the speaker. Voices shouted:

"Go after 'em, Terry! Give 'em both barrels, Terry!"

Even Miltiades felt a grateful glow at this excoriation of the traditional enemies of his country.

Governor O'Shawn called the crowd to order with an uplifted hand. When the applause stopped, he began again in a soft, round tone:

"Gentlemen, ladies, I can carry the parable even further than that. There was, if I read my Bible aright, a Samaritan, a good Samaritan, who picked up the hapless traveler, poured oil on his wounds, placed him on his donkey, and bore him to an inn.

"I appear before you this evening, ladies and gentlemen, as a forerunner of that good Samaritan. I come as a herald of a great Democrat and a great friend to the South. In counsel he is a Solon; amid the corruptions of our national politics he is a Cato; as a leader of reform against the high tariff embattlements of the Northern plutocrats he is a Richard of the Lion Heart. I refer, ladies and gentlemen, to that peerless leader, that incorruptible patriot, that wise and sagacious statesman, our next President of the United States, Grover Cleveland!"

Shouts, cheers, pandemonium broke out in Courthouse Square. Hats boiled up between Miltiades and the light. Even the dignitaries on the portico clapped. Governor O'Shawn stood by his table mopping his flushed conical forehead. In the midst of the uproar a rustic voice shouted:

"Say, Terry, who is Grover Cleveland, anyway, an' whar does he come frum?"

This caused laughter, but it stilled the applause to await

the answer, because hardly a man had heard the name Cleveland before. The Governor smiled in sympathy with the general amusement.

"Mr. Cleveland is a member of the New York bar."

"Oh, jest another damned Yankee, is he?" drawled the voice.

"He's a nominee of the Democratic party for the Presidency of the United States!" snapped the Governor.

When the orator resumed his discourse, Miltiades Vaiden stopped listening with a restlessness that was natural to him. The Colonel did not enjoy listening to an effective speech from the crowd. If he had been on the platform with the dignitaries, if he were placed so that the speech would pick him out as a man worthy of consideration, a man of position and influence . . .

The mere suggestion of station and power set up a titillation along Miltiades' nerves. He drew a deep breath.

Here a hand touched his shoulder, and a voice behind him said:

"Hey-oh, Colonel, looks like you ort to be up on the stage with the rest of 'em."

Miltiades looked around, balanced between dislike of the hand on his shoulder and the slight gratification of being considered worthy to sit on the platform.

"I don't like to push myself forward," he said gravely.

"You haff to these days, Colonel. Honors used to seek men, but nowadays men seek honors."

"M-m . . . that's true." Then, after a moment, he added, "I was looking for Augustus and Rose, they're in a carriage, have you seen them?" With this Miltiades began moving slowly away from the hand on his shoulder so that its removal would appear unplanned.

The man took down his hand and began to look around.

"There's some buggies yander," he said in the flatted voice of a man whose friendly advances have been declined.

Miltiades walked away in the direction of the buggies on the opposite side of the Square. He was annoyed at himself

for treating the countryman in this fashion, but the hand on his shoulder had been even more annoying . . . he put the matter out of his thoughts.

The Colonel had no desire whatever to find Augustus and Rose, but what he had said to the countryman set him going on this errand with some vague idea of keeping his word good. As he drew near the line of shadowy vehicles he began looking for Judge Ashton's carriage, which would contain his brother and his sister-in-law.

The occupants of these carriages usually sat staring fixedly at the speaker. These carriage folk were, in the main, members of the very oldest families in Florence. In the dim illumination from the speaker's table across the Square, Miltiades caught, here and there, the outline of a woman's face. Even half seen, like this, some of them conveyed that odd quality of inherited sensitiveness which is what is meant by breeding.

As Miltiades passed a small single buggy with a pretty bay mare between its shafts, he heard a lover's tiff going on in undertones. A girl's voice was saying tautly:

"Lucius, I—I'll get out!"

A youth's voice replied hastily:

"No, don't get out, Miss Sydna. . . ."

"Then sit on your side and listen to the Governor," advised the girl in annoyance.

"I was listening to him, too," teased her companion.

Colonel Vaiden caught a glimpse of the girl's face, a graceful face filled with the embarrassment of a young girl who had not yet learned to deal with the small improprieties of the admirers whom she attracted.

The Colonel would have walked on past in silence, but the expression of the girl aroused in him a sharp disapproval of the youth in the buggy. Without glancing around he said in a curt undertone:

"Young man, in a lady's presence you should imitate a gentleman, at least temporarily." And with that he walked on.

The faint noises in the runabout hushed. In the silence, Miltiades could hear Governor O'Shawn's peroration:

"And you ladies who have graced this occasion with the bouquet of your faces and the music of your laughter, while you may not sully your fair hands with the ballot, it is yours to see that your husbands and sweethearts march to the polls in November and cast their votes for a white man's party in a white man's land. No true Southern lady would do more; none can do less. I thank you for the inspiration of your presence here tonight."

Here the speaker bowed and turned to men on the platform behind him. This ended his oration.

The usual clapping of hands broke forth. The dignitaries on the portico arose and began congratulating the speaker. The line of carriages near Miltiades started to move. Out of one of the vehicles Miltiades heard the hearty voice of his brother Augustus:

"Milt, wasn't that a speech? Didn't the Governor wade into Wall Street?"

Rose's contralto added something about Marcia . . . Marcia's boy . . . Miltiades did not quite get it. The carriage rolled on out of hearing.

The Colonel moved aimlessly along the street, a little embarrassed to be seen walking in the midst of the moving vehicles. He turned out of their line toward the old Florence Hotel on the corner of the Square.

As he went he thought over the Governor's peroration to the ladies . . . the honor in which Southern men held their women . . . how true were O'Shawn's words. Take, for example, his own action in rebuking the youth in the little hug-me-tight buggy. A Northern man would perhaps have laughed, or have listened and said nothing, but he, a Southern man, had reproved the misdemeanant with a phrase. . . . He continued slowly and aimlessly across the Square with no particular end in view save that, subconsciously, he was putting off as long as possible his return to his fat wife, Ponny.

CHAPTER TWO

Now that the speaking was over, the crowd flowed away in all directions. The first to get in motion were a small group of negroes who had been listening afar off from the front of the old Florence Hotel. To these negroes the Democratic speaking had been a vague demonstration against their liberty. They had, only a score of years before, been set free from slavery by the Republicans. Now all the group were uneasy lest, if a Democratic President be elected, they should be returned to their bonds. One of their number mumbled:

"We ort to been ovah to Mistuh Landahs' meetin'. He stan' by us; we ort to stan' by he."

"Mistah Landahs is sich a dried-up man," complained a second.

"He is a cu'is man," put in a third.

"All Republicans is cu'is if they's white men," opined the first negro philosophically.

"Not in St. Louis," put in a bullet-headed negro who had worked as roustabout on the steamboats. "In St. Louis, Republicans wears high hats an' smokes big seegars jess lak dey wuz somebody."

"St. Louis ain't Flaunts," put in a cautionary negro.

"Hit sho ain't," agreed the third.

The little group fell silent again, watching the white gathering disperse into the dimly lighted streets. Presently a wizened oldish negro feigned a yawn and said he guessed he'd better be moving off home.

The first negro gave a snort of laughter.

"You do, an' Gracie'll have you movin' back quicker'n you moved off. . . . Dis is Sad'day night."

The smallish gray-wooled old negro turned on his companions and warned them that they had better remember how the she-bears had come and et up forty little children who had mocked Elijah, a servant of God.

At this the other negroes became silent, for the oldish black man was a preacher of sorts. Presently they began to drift away, but the wizened negro who had said he was going home remained where he was on the hotel corner.

He stood for twenty or thirty minutes, then presently sat down on the iron grating which screened the kitchen window of the hotel in the basement. Then he lay down on the grating like a bundle of rags, pillowing his head on his arms. A faint warmth drifted up from the kitchen, alleviating the chill of the summer night. After a while he fell asleep.

Among the vehicles that rattled away from Courthouse Square a large family carriage went north up Market Street, and a block to the west a little runabout turned northward up Pine Street.

In the large carriage Judge Ashton was saying to his guest, Augustus Vaiden:

"Cleveland is a strong man, Augustus, he will carry New York, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Ohio, and, of course, the South."

Augustus, who never gave politics a thought, agreed to this and then added:

"Riding away from the speaking like this reminds me of fox-hunting. It would be almost cold enough to fox-hunt to-night. I wish I was out listening to the old Dalrymple pack."

Judge Ashton laughed a metallic, ringing laugh that was very friendly and pleasant.

"Miss Rose, when your husband gets to heaven, the first thing he's going to inquire about is the fox-hunting."

The two women in the carriage acknowledged this masculine interruption by laughing and reproaching the speaker for impiety; then Mrs. Rose picked up her conversation with Mrs. Polly Ashton where she had left off:

"I don't know whether Marcia will come or not. . . . I hope so."

"I do hope she will. . . . She was such a pretty girl."

"She looks just as she always did," assured Rose; "her eyes are just what they were when she was a girl."

"When is her boy to come down?" inquired Mrs. Ashton.

"In time to start to college this fall."

"What's his name?"

"Jerry. He's named for his father. He calls himself, Jerry Catlin the second."

The elders smiled at this.

"Marcia's boy would be original," opined the Judge, drawing down his horses near the Rose Vaiden boarding house to let his guests out.

"Send young Jerry over to see my Jefferson when he comes," invited the Judge.

"I will," assured Rose. "I've been thinking about some nice boys for him to associate with."

Mrs. Polly Ashton said she knew the boys would have a good time together, and then, as she drove away from the boarding house, she made a mental note that she would keep her son Jeff away from Jerry Catlin the second until she had time to see what sort of a boy *he* was. The amount of time this required was apparently only a few minutes, for presently she decided that Jerry Catlin the second was not the sort of boy she could let her son Jefferson associate with—and that was settled.

In the second buggy, the small rubber-tired runabout which moved up Pine Street, another conversation was struggling along with considerable bitterness.

"I suppose," said the young man driving the bay mare, "the reason the old codger 'tends to everybody else's business is because he hasn't got any of his own to attend to."

The girl compressed into the seat beside him retorted warmly:

"It was his business."

"Was his business?"

To this repetition the girl replied nothing.

The youth went on:

"If he wasn't such an old man I'd show him how to insult me before you, Sydna."

"Yes, I imagine you would, Lucius Handback!" satirized the girl in an access of distaste.

"I would!" declared the youth hotly. "I'd call him to account!"

"Did you know that Colonel Milt Vaiden was the man who led the Klan when they wiped out the Leatherwood gang?" inquired the girl drily.

"What of that? He had men behind him, ready to help him."

The girl pondered a moment and then said in quite a different voice:

"Besides that, Lucius, he had to correct you when you were bothering me back yonder."

The driver turned in the darkness.

"Had to correct me! What's old man Milt Vaiden got to do with me?"

"It isn't with you; it's with me," said the girl in a far-away voice.

"Why, Sydna—what in the world . . . ?" He paused a moment and became jealously speculative. "He—he's not in love with you, Sydna?"

"The idea! Colonel Milt is old enough to be my father . . . and he's a married man. . . . Lucius, you're the awfulest person!" She tried to pull herself away from him in the constricted space.

"Well, you won't tell anything! I ask you a question, and you won't tell me a thing!"

"No, I won't!"

"Then I have to guess," declared Mr. Handback doggedly, "and if you get mad at my guesses I can't help it."

"At least guess something respectable, if you're guessing about me," admonished the girl.