The Strange Story of Quillmores

CHATTERTON ·

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THE NIGHT RIDE TO THE RESCUE, BY PRIEST AND PROTESTANT.

(*Frontispiece.*)

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The Strange Story of The Quillmores

BY

A. L. CHATTERTON

NEW YORK
STITT PUBLISHING COMPANY
1905

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"In putting together this fragment of *historie* I have been greatly aided by my friend and counselor, Dr. Frank Kraft, and I wish to here express my gratitude for courtesies vouchsafed and for assistance rendered."

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CHARACTERS ESSENTIAL TO THE QUILLMORE MYSTERY

DR. AUGUSTUS WINSTON, "Doc Gus"
COLONEL QUILLMORE, President of the Bank
MRS. QUILLMORE
LANNY, afterwards Dr. Leander Quillmore
IRENÆUS S. THATCH, "Uncle I', the Coffin Grocer"
FATHER LESSING, a Catholic Priest
and
M. L'OISEAU, Cashier of the Bank

CHARACTERS INCIDENTAL

MAT TREEGOOD, the Village Philosopher
MOTHER TREEGOOD
GEORGE, ORY, AND ABE, Treegood Children
THE LAROUTELLES
MRS. THATCH AND DAUGHTER CHRISSY

CHARACTERS ESSENTIAL TO THE STORY OF HERO HELD

(To be separately published)

DR. AUGUSTUS WINSTON
FATHER LESSING
M. L'OISEAU
PHILIP THATCH
LEANDER QUILLMORE
M. BRISSON
and
HERO HELD

CHARACTERS INCIDENTAL

THE LAROUTELLES
MLLE. HORTENSE L'IGGINS
MRS. QUILLMORE
MR. THATCH
ORY TREEGOOD
BALTIMORE, ETC.

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A TELEGRAM

NEW YORK, April 26, 1884.

CENTRAL HOUSE, INDIATOLE, IND.

Lamo tragedy prominent personages involved suspend political inquiry hang Lamo.

Subscribed to the message which was addressed to me, was the name of the Managing Editor of a New York daily newspaper. I was of the paper's staff, acting under instructions which, on the date noted in the telegram, took me to Indiatole. My commission, which need not be dwelt upon here, was something of a political nature, and my special work could evidently be deferred. The latter part of the message, interpreted, meant that I was to give undivided attention to "Lamo," whatever that might prove to be. The word "hang" from the private code of the office was both a command and an implied compliment:—It was authority from the management to use at discretion, and unrestrictedly, time or funds in the pursuance of an object.

It was eight o'clock, and I was dressing when the message was brought to my room. I had arrived late the night before, my first visit, it so chanced, to Indiatole.

"'Lamo.' Know of someone hereabouts of that name?"

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The colored boy was instantly alert. "There is a town south from here called Lamo, and there was trouble there last night." Something as to the nature of the "trouble" was also spoken.

"When does the next train leave for this place, Lamo?"

"Depot stage should be leaving now."

I glanced from the window which commanded a view of the street. The stage *was* leaving. I secured from my pocket a bill and tore it through the middle. "Here is half of a dollar. Get it to the driver, and tell him I will follow with the other half, if he will wait, and there will be a coin for you."

Breakfast? An unconsidered trifle, in a reporter's life.

As I stepped upon the already moving train, I glanced back. The driver of the stage was matching together the torn fragments of the bill.

At Miles Crossing, where I alighted, I saw Mr. Blank. This gentleman represented a not-over-well-thought-of journalistic contemporary,—one whose methods in this instance fed disastrous fuel to the flame of misadventure.

Nor was anyone then to unravel, in its entirety, the mystery for which solution was sought, and as there is much of earlier and contemporaneous interest bearing upon this particular episode, it is necessary for a clear understanding to revert to a time two or more years earlier.

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THE QUILLMORES

CHAPTER I

CONCERNS UNCLE I' AND HIS STORE

LAMO in the year 1882 was a small settlement of less than four hundred souls,—everybody included, men, women, and children,—counted as a census report. It was without apparent reasonable cause of existence, except for a grist-mill—one of the oldest in this middle-south county of the State of Indiana, with a prosperous farming community adjoining and tributary. The village was three miles from Miles Crossing on the Big Four Railway, and about ten miles from Indiatole (when the roads were passable, and double or treble that distance when they were not—which latter was the normal condition a great many times in the twelvemonth).

It was a place rather more widely known than is usual with villages, because of the two great houses which were so long unoccupied, and the mystery of their presence there. These mansions, placed each upon the summit of elevations or hills, Twin Hill and Bellspree, as they were called, were distant from Uncle I's store—then the only store

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of the village—about two miles, and in the direction of Indiatole.

These houses were a never-ending source of conversation with strangers, whose curiosity was naturally aroused; but it was not until after the tragic event in the year 1884, which robbed the town of its most influential resident, that the name Lamo became a notable one in history.

The calamity referred to—for in the nature of a calamity it was regarded by the community—was followed by tragic sequences, with surroundings of mystery, that stirred the blood of every individual thereabouts, and was potential of serious consequences to not a few.

Uncle I'—very short, and unduly familiar for Irenæus—full name, Irenæus Smithnight Thatch, of the old firm of Snackle & Thatch—Snackle retired—was the proprietor of the general store already mentioned. It was, too, the only place or residence at these crossroads corners having telephone connection with the county-seat, Indiatole, though the service was at this date of the very early and primitive order—ring on and ring off, turn switch, talk loud, and yet louder, then go outside to express yourself, for profanity was barred in the company's contract.

Uncle I' was really the index character of the village,—a short stout man, one of those who had grown tall sideways. He was of uncertain age, as are so many members of the opposite sex. It was a question if anyone knew just how old he was. He had reached that period in life when age

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seemed to have fixed its balancing foothold; when, thereafter, there would be no visible sign portraying the oncoming of the decrepitude usually incidental to the lapse of time. Those who lived in daily contact with him saw no change. And those who came and went only occasionally declared that he looked as always. This was, perhaps, in great part due to his unvarying habits of life and dress.

He had that fresh, rather ruddy face which goes so frequently with light hair; it was known that he was bald, though only a few people had ever seen him uncovered. He wore, summer and winter, an old Panama hat that had been originally varnished, and never since washed or cleansed except as an overtaking rain-storm or melting snows had fitfully and inartistically done that service. When—as in his side-line, undertaking, or at church—it became necessary to uncover, he was found wearing a silk cap. Though the most gallant of little men, he never removed his hat to the fair sex, merely touching the brim in military salute. At the temples there was nothing indicative of hair, but at the base of the brain, and above a hearty, thick, No. 18-collar neck, there grew a luxuriant crop of sandy, originally red, hair; and this, emulating a fashion of womankind, he always brushed upward, caught it somewhere on top of the bald crown and held it there in some mysterious way, divided in sections, carefully patted down on each side, with that peculiar obliviousness of bald-headed men to the ridiculous-

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ness of such pretense. This was his one and pervading vanity, and he was as sensitive to this arrangement of his hair as a woman—never passing a glass-fronted store, or mirror, without ogling himself, and pushing his rind of hair upward towards the encompassing hat.

He had always worn a Peter Cooper beard, his upper lip and chin cleanly shaven each morning. His mouth was large and mobile; his lips full of life and laughter, though usually tightly closed over the quill toothpick, through which he was humming some bars of music caught in an earlier time. He wore an upper plate of teeth, which gave him much trouble, and his audience a corresponding amount of amusement, because of a tendency to fall into his mouth at inopportune moments when Uncle was warmed up in speech. The plate was ill-fitting in the start, and, as the wearer grew older, and the " gooms " fell away, the teeth did not adapt themselves to the changed conditions.

His eyes were of that peculiar hazel-gray blue, so mild and gentle in repose, but so dangerous when roused; but they were failing, much to his sorrow and chagrin. He would not wear spectacles except upon compulsion, and so they were generally lying about in the wrong part of the store or house when wanted; it was because of this near-sightedness that he had been accused, in a spirit of levity, of once having blacked his boots with stove-polish.

His nose was large and suspiciously red. But

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Uncle I' was so strict an apostle of temperance that his teetotaling principles ruled even in the kitchen and pantry, despoiling the succulent mince pie and various sauces and puddings of much of their piquancy and tastiness by the absence of wines or brandies.

In dress he was severely simple and unvarying, and he wore the year round a composition-collar without neckerchief. His vest was buttoned only at the top and bottom, in evidence, as someone had said, that he really indulged in clean linen, since his long and scraggly, sandy beard covered his neck and chest.

He was currently assumed to be well-to-do; though there was naught in his store, in his house, or in his manner of living, that gave cause for much knowledge on that score; but his hand was open—not ostentatiously—to the poor. His store-books were in an inextricable tangle, and many a grocery bill was lost because of laxness in the collections. It was not, however, commercial laxness alone which caused so much confusion in the accounts. Many a poor widow, or poor family, could tell other stories.

"I didn't promise you any joke," said Uncle I' one morning in his store, resuming a conversation with one of several bystanders. "Fact is, what one person considers a joke is stern reality to another. Shortly, Mother Treegood," speaking to a little German woman who was waiting to barter some butter and eggs for other produce, "just as soon as I can get through with Jim I'll

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be with you. Now, suppose that Bud Conquest, who has a baby a few months old, should ask Doc Gus as to the best way to raise children, and the doctor should say ' Why, the best way to raise children is by the hair,' *you* might think that a joke; but Bud would be all-fired mad, and even the youngster's feelings might be hurt. That's worth twelve-and-half cents a yard to-day, Mrs. W. Washes well, too. Now there's Tom over there by the cheese box ''—Tom was a long, lean, lanky youth of the village, not over-bright, whose main visible occupation, when not " doin' chores," was the solving of the 15-puzzle. " There's Tom, who never could see through a joke; why, when he was a kid, what's-his-name was a-courtin' his sister 'Fronie. I mean, he called one night to see 'Fronie, and leaving his overcoat in the hall thought to find the gal in the settin'-room; but she, with the family and others, too, were in the kitchen. The young feller had a bright idea, and not seeing Tom, who was playing behind the stove, he said: ' 'Fronie, I brought your brother a boat,' and he fussed and fumbled in his pants-pockets as if to find it. Then he said: ' I reckon as how I left it in my coat in the hall. Say, 'Fronie, come and see it,' and the gal, naturally curious, followed him out of the room; but Tom was awake, too, and just as he reached and opened the door, there was a ca-swashing sound in the hallway and her ' steady ' was heard to say ' It's a smack, 'Fronie, it's a smack; give it to Tommy.' And Tom, to this day, is asking for that boat.''

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There was generous laughter at Tom's expense, who, however, evidently quite unconcerned, continued to move the blocks of his puzzle.

The talk that morning among the country people was mainly concerning subjects of purely local and trivial interest, and did not attract general attention until some reference was made to the Quillmore bank at Indiatole, and its marked prosperity. Some word respecting the Institution's considerable profits of late was spoken.

"If that information be true, it must have come from the colonel," said Mat Treegood, the village philosopher. "Certainly not from the new cashier, that man L'Oiseau will never gab. Hardly speaks when he is spoken to."

"They do say that L'Oiseau never shakes hands, leastwise not with his right hand like other people," ventured the first speaker.

"So I have heerd, and so I believe," continued Treegood. "I was up to town last week and at the bank, and this L'Oiseau, slick as a pin, was standing behind the desk. I stepped quickly up, unobserved, and with a hearty 'Good-morning, cashier,' put out my hand. He responded civilly enough, pushing toward me a newspaper, saying, 'Will you read the *Times* this morning while you wait?'—I just wish I could meet him face to face once. I'd like to ask him some questions."

"Then, now is your opportunity," said someone near the door, "for here he is driving up."

"Gosh—coming here?" said Treegood, and over all there was an instant hush. "Sure, this is

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the first time he has ever shown himself hereabouts.''

A gentleman, if costume and demeanor can bear evidence, handsomely attired, contrasting strangely therefore with those about him, appeared a moment later in the doorway. He may have known every face within, but he gave no sign of recognition, except to Uncle I', whom he approached and to whom he spoke in a low voice.

'' I had occasion to drive this way and Colonel Quillmore asked that I call for some papers which he said you would have ready.'' Uncle I' responded cordially, spoke of the weather and of the bank, the meantime securing from a compartment in the safe a package, which he placed in the caller's hands. Receiving the parcel without further words than '' Thank you. Good-day, Mr. Thatch,'' Mr. L'Oiseau turned to go.

Treegood, however, intercepted, '' Haven't before had the pleasure of seeing you here, Mr. Cashier. Glad to offer you my hand.'' This was spoken in a good-natured and loud tone, but the one addressed was seemingly quite oblivious to the offered courtesy, for he held in his right hand the package which had just been given him, and took a cigar from his lips with the other. This seemingly unconsidered action was not without a purpose, and a time was to come when, after dire extremity, he would tell to one of the little assembly present the reason for the observed peculiarity.

'' Ah, Mr. Treegood, is it not? Extremely pleased to meet you. Pardon my haste,'' and bow-

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ing slightly, he brushed past his would-be interrogator and was gone.

There was a sigh of relief when the sound of the rapidly moving wheels of his carriage grew dim in the distance. No one seemed quite willing to refer to the incident just closed, except Treegood, who volubly expressed first his annoyance and then his satisfaction that his claim as to "hand-shaking" had been sustained, and again the process of dispensing nutmegs and narration was resumed in the store.

This store building was of the traditional Noah's Ark order; a long, narrow structure of frame, with front-porch, and a story above used by the village for various public purposes, and regularly occupied by the Masonic fraternity.

The structure was of great age, time-stained, and sadly in need of a coat of "Fool-The-Sun" paint, so lavishly advertised in and about the place. The lower front, right and left of the central door of entrance, and between the show windows, was covered with advertising signs of tobacco, baking powders (without alum), soaps, flavoring extracts, patent-medicines, vinegar bitters, fire-insurance, harness-oil, axle-grease, farming implements, newspapers, and the like; while the remaining reachable and uncovered space had been, as always in such cases, from time immemorial, mutilated by the knife of the lounger, or defaced with the vandal lead-pencil. Over the store door, in large flaring letters, originally in several colors and many flourishes, the work and pride of

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a wagon-painter, was still to be seen the old firm name, " Snackle & Thatch, Groceries, Dry Goods and Hardware."

The length of this store building was divided near the rear end by a wooden partition, which on the store side was papered with pictures cut from publications dating back into war-times.

This wooden wall between the two sections was complete, as was the division of commercial interests—the one for life, the other for death.

For Uncle I', in addition to his general store, had in an accidental way become possessed of a stock of coffins which he had arranged in the rear room, where formerly, and for a time so long ago that no one now remembered to the contrary, there had been found only boxes, and barrels, and crates, and caddies, and paper, and gunny sacks; the jackets, in short, in which the goods for the store had been received from the wholesale houses.

So that the rear room was an absolute antithesis to the front part. For on the one side were sunlight, and bright, if irrelevant, pictures; grocery and drug-store smells; bustle and chaffing, dickering and beating down a few pennies on the pound or on the yard, laughter and motion, and in this apartment on the other side somber darkness and gloom.

The occupation of an undertaker was unquestionably the last Uncle I' would have selected, and even at this time he had not yet become a " Funeral Director." A son, Nehemiah by name, after leading a wandersome sort of life, spending his

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means lavishly, both financially and physically, causing his parents many wakeful hours and heart-pangs, eventually returned to the village and to the astonishment, nay the horror of his parents and acquaintances, rented a little "shack" of a store at the other end of the main street and stocked it with coffins.

At the first he dealt only in the very plainest; padding, dressing, and trimming them himself in the simple, inexpensive way suited to the means of the poorer class of farmers, but in time Neemy was enabled to purchase better goods and also a large, old-fashioned, heavy, out-of-date hearse, with four gilded angels, one at each corner, blowing trumpets.

But alas, his previous life, and a possible heredity, was upon him. Neemy wasn't strong of the lungs and when he died, being unmarried, the stock in trade was turned over to Uncle I', who locked up the little store and stabled the hearse, until such time as he might induce the wholesale house at Cincinnati to relieve him of what was now an incumbrance.

After the Probate Court had settled the estate, and Uncle I' had waited unavailingly a long, long while for the Cincinnati people, having an opportunity to rent the little store to a wandering barber, he transferred the grewsome merchandise to the back room of his general store, where it was heaped up in a confused state.

One morning, however, he was called on by some strangers from a nearby village and asked if he

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could supply their needs from the stock they heard he had.

This was the beginning of Uncle I's village undertakership, and as he had been, theretofore, chief grocer, hardware man, postmaster, and general Poohbah of the village, his added avocation grew upon him and in time fitted him as if to the manner born. Little by little he began to put his stock in display order—the horror of the trade vanishing with use and profit.

CHAPTER II

THE VILLAGE PHILOSOPHER

THE village and those parts immediately tributary—and, indeed, the whole county—was mainly Republican, although an exception was to be noted in the case of one at least of the residents, Mat Treegood, who prided himself upon his inalienable right to be contrary to the established order, whether in politics, science, or religion.

No one ever knew him to do an overt act, or one prejudicial to the Union cause; though at the beginning, and for a time later, he was classed with the "copperheads," because he was a reader of "Brick" *Pomeroy's Democrat*.

Having once read *The Age of Reason* he had thereafter believed himself to be an atheist. In

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short, that which he had heard or read last was most likely to influence him in his talk—it seldom extended to action.

He had married a buxom, hardy German girl from the next county, one who was intensely practical,—the usual sterling attribute of that nationality,—and with her invaluable discretion in matters of household economics and finance he had prospered; though her villainous rendering of English caused him much confusion.

He had had the good fortune of being early apprenticed to honest labor and thus learned to deal with the work-a-day world direct, and not through the letter-perfect theories of book-writers and political economists, and then, learning to read late in his youth, he had amassed a fund of information, useless for the most part because usually ill-directed and impracticable. Like an American Boffin he had adopted one book—Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*,—in which he was well-read, and failed but rarely of bringing it into scrap-talks at the store and elsewhere.

Still he was, as usual with self-made men, inconsistent, as was shown in the management of one of his own children, for in place of giving him the much-talked-of best fortune—a kick at fourteen—instead of following out his own rules of hard knocks as the best educator, and his preachments concerning the "laborer"—he brought much derision upon himself by sending his son Abe to an agricultural college.

The only daughter which came to this queerly

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mated couple, was handicapped with the odd name of Oryntha; but she, like her little mother, was a hard worker, and the two together kept the house tidy, scrubbing the kitchen table and chairs until the grain of the wood stood out most palpably.

Mat and the usual complement of traders and hangers-on had assembled early one morning at the village store, when Uncle I', attending to the wants of a recently bereaved young woman, hunted up and mounted an empty cheese box, which he placed before the telephone instrument, for in those days this modern convenience was always positioned at an altitude suited to the telephonic Abraham Lincolns.

"Hello!

"Hello, Central!

"I say, Kate, give me the Indiatole Casket Company.

"What's that? Oh! I don't know the number, Kate.

"Number eight? No! I tell you I don't know the number, but I want the Indiatole Casket Company.

"Basket Company? Sakes alive! No, Casket, Coffins. Don't you know——

"Coffee? No, no; Casket! C-a-s-k-e-t. Certainly. That's what,—and right considerably quick, too.

"Golly! Moses—folks," said Uncle, addressing those in the store, "do stop that noise over there! I cain't hear what she's a-sayin'." Then again to the 'phone, "What? No, wa'n't talkin'

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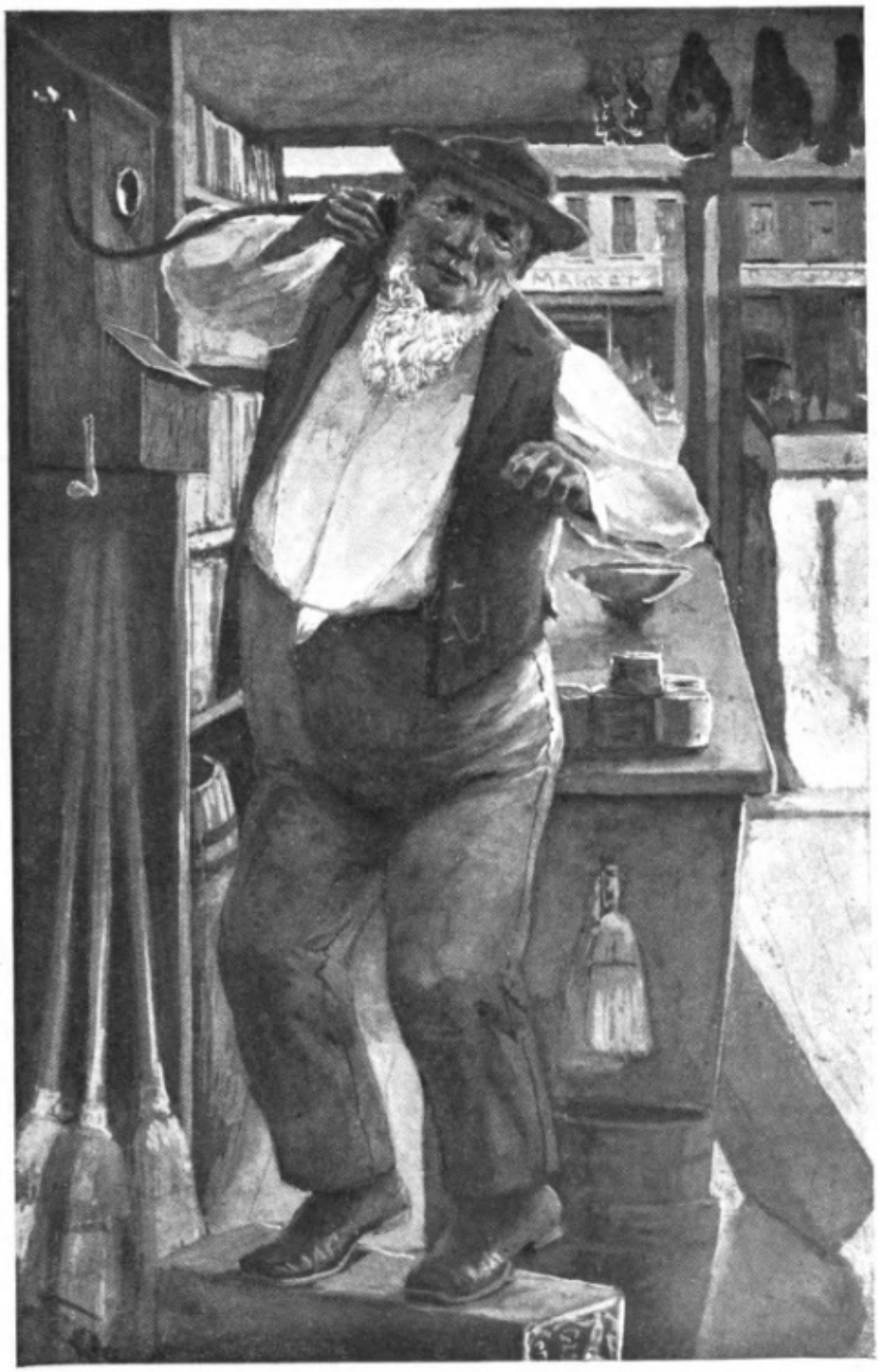

POSITIONED AT AN ALTITUDE SUITED TO THE TELEPHONIC ABRAHAM LINCOLNS.

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to you, Kate. Jest tryin' to git the store quiet a bit.

"Line busy? Say, Katey, that's enough to make a fellow provoked." There was an interval, and Uncle caught the eye of a bystander.

"That ham's worth sixteen cents the pound if you take it—and that's the best I can do, Jim. If you was to take that whole lot of hams it won't make no difference in the price. There ain't no profit on hams nowadays, anyway.

"Certainly. Listening.

"Now, what's the matter of you folks?

"Sure. We got a reg'lar account with your company.

"What is it? Keep still, over there, Tom. Don't know me? Why, Ira Thatch of Lamo. That's who. Oh, for the land's sake don't talk ham, now, Jim, I've—Yes, yes, Lamo, L-A-M—oh, do shet up! No, not you, Katey; talking to the fellows here who are botherin' me."

There was another interval and Uncle again addressed himself to Jim. "If you don't like that brand, reckon you don't know what's good. That ain't no everyday Indiana ham. Them was Sunday pigs, acorn-fed, and lived high and healthy.

"Yes, yes, I hear you now. Let her come. What? Too early for the company. All right, have to make the best of it, I s'pose. I'll remember and wait for 'em to get in from their fork-breakfast as we say in Par-ree—I ain't paying no twenty cents for—All right. I'll be here or 'counted for when you call."

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And Uncle I' hung up the 'phone, turned the switch, rang off, replaced his quill toothpick—his inseparable companion—and stood a moment listening to the talk about him. Treegood was telling some story about trouble at the Quillmores'.

"Mat, that's all blue rot and fool-talk," petulantly interjected Uncle I', as he moved back to his work—he had a sugar scoop in his hand, which at intervals, as he proceeded, he waved for emphasis; "there wa'n't nothin' the matter of her—anyhow, not at first—whatever there may be now. You're all a-guessin' at somethin', and multiplyin' it by two to make it look big. I seen her before any of you, and I talked with her, and I know for a dead certainty that she was a pretty girl and as sweet a slip of womanhood as there ever was anywhere. You're always a-findin' wonderful mare's nests. It's like you people, who don't know any too much about anything, to guess at the rest and make it a heap. Better stop your yawping about things you don't understand, and get back to rock bottom," and the grocer walked around to the other side of a barrel, and prepared to remove some of its contents. He didn't want the Quillmore affairs aired in his store.

"Oh, that's just like you, Ira, to put in when you wa'n't invited. I wa'n't a-talkin' to you at all," answered Mat with a show of resentment. "You make a bald statement like that, you wave your hand, and that's the end of the whole thing. After you there ain't nothing but the flood. Everything good and sensible died with you, and

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the world will have to get along some other way. Sure! You ain't fair, and you know you ain't.''

Uncle I' was absorbed in his work, and, besides, in stooping over the barrel his set of teeth became displaced; this precluded articulate spech on his part.

Mat continued: '' I have hearn tell as how when the grand madam kem here,''—Uncle I' looked up sharply, and made a sign of dissent which Mat understood,—'' well, then, Mrs. Quillmore, if one's got to talk by book and candle—when she kem to these parts, she'd begun to hector the colonel before she'd got her weddin' bonnet off. Somethin'd went crosswise with her down the road a piece—anyways, she didn't like the settlement and the people, and she showed her spunk and said it, too.''

Uncle I' now straightened up, postponing further attention to his work, for he saw that the discussion could not be avoided, and he said with much earnestness:

'' You be as near right about that as you be on anything else you hain't had no chance to see or hear the straight of. I was with the party that went to meet the bridal pair. The colonel had told me when to come, in a letter—hadn't no telegraph over hereabouts in them early days,—and the mail only kem about twice a week, or as often as Johnny Jackson was sent after it. And when I saw her,—Mrs. Quillmore,—there wa'n't a prettier bit of calico and bonnet ever stepped off that train at Miles Crossing that day, or any other day

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before or since. As I shook the colonel's hand, her pretty, rosy face, with sparkling black eyes, looked over at me archlike from near the colonel's side, and smilin' she said:

"'This must be Mr. Thatch, of who I have heerd tell so much, and of who I am so awful jealous'—and she looked over at the colonel, and then back at me, her face goin' red and white and red again, and awful confused and bashful-like. But there was the very jim-dickens in her pretty big eyes, as she handed me her little hand after trying to yank her kid glove off.

"'Yes, mem,' says I, and I reck'n I was about as fool-flustered as any green gawky of that day. 'I'm just the same identical old Sergeant Thatch who you 'tended and watered in that cellar o' yourn way down in Georgy durin' the war. But don't you ever dasst to Mister me, miss, please, or there'll sure be trouble.'

"The colonel laughed and said: 'Wifey don't know just what to call me either. She says "Mister" is so awful formal-like, and then it hain't good form; she don't like "colonel," 'cause that brings up some painful memories; and "Andy" —well, that's so awful common-like, she thinks. So we'll have to petition the Legislature next winter to give me some other real pretty name. Meantime it 'll have to be Andy, I expect.'

"The missus laughed and hid her face in the colonel's sleeve. And we all stood there and giggled and snickered like a passel of cemetery girls about nothin'—I was just as bad gone as the rest

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on 'em. That's been a good many years ago, Mat. When we got the saratogas and valises and things all aboard I took the lines and druv them through to Lamo. Well, dear me, suss, all along that road she saw and pointed out beauties, in trees, and brooks, and meadows, that we who always lived here, or been born here, had never thought on. I had to pull up and let her and the colonel get out to pick some wild flowers that she seen and knowed all about. She said she had seen their pictures and learned their names in the convent, and she told the colonel what this one and that one meant—in love. Then we all giggled again. Talk about her bein' cross or ugly! Not a bit of it. She was gay as a lark and hummed little tunes. That shows how little you know about it, Mat. You had ought ter inform yourself before you talk, or keep shet up."

"And that's another of your pet ways," said Mat, a little abashed by the smiles and ruder guffaws of the listeners, and the determined manner of the storekeeper. "Everybody hereabouts knows you'll stick up for a woman—any kind of a woman——"

"Say now, Mat, just hadn't you better pull outen that rut before you get hub-deep in the blue-clay, and cain't get out?" interrupted Uncle I'.

"If that's all your fool-study about Mexico and the Aztex Indians has did fer you—to speak disrespectsomely of women folks, I advise you to go home and have Ory learn you a little politeness and breeding. And then you better take some-

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thin' about three times a day in hot water to clear out your bile——"

"Well, I ain't sayin' it ain't right and square to stick up for the women," added Mat, considerably crestfallen by the unhappy turn which his arguments had taken, "my mother was a woman. But what I say is this, that you'd stick up for any woman, right or wrong; and that ain't fair. For when a woman puts herself down on a level with man, she must take her medicine like a man, and not whine about it and put up the cry-baby act. I'll do my all-firedest for a woman that's deserving; but, I say again, when she does wrong and pulls a good man down with her, then she ain't got no call for any more mercy than a man would be entitled to. And I stick to that——"

"'Tain't no sort o' use to go on with yer sermon, Mat," cut in Uncle I' rather tartly, "there hain't nothin' to your talk but talk. I'm goin' to let the colonel 'tend to his business and his wife, and you better agree to the same."

"But ain't she changed? I leave it to you, Ira, hain't she changed?" resentfully pleaded Mat, not willing to abandon the argument without some concessions from his tricky opponent—"ain't she changed?"

"Well, who hain't changed?" answered Uncle I'. "I kin remember yet how you looked the first time you kem over from the Poor Woods." Mat winced visibly. It was a sore spot. He couldn't catch this wily storekeeper, though he knew that Uncle I' was merely playing with him, following

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out Talleyrand's immortal dictum concerning the value of language. "Of course Mrs. Quillmore's changed. Why shouldn't she? Do you expect she's got some of that 'lixir-stuff you told us about the other day, that some old Spaniard tried to find in Florida? Hain't we all changed? But even to-day, with all her changes, that you're a-harpin' on, she's the same woman, stately and grand and dignified, that she had ought to be, to be a banker's wife—the richest man in the county. Did you, Mat Treegood, Philosopher and Expert Moralist of Lamo, ever know of a single, solitary thing that she done that was wrong? Spit it out! No, you cain't conjure up nothin'. You like to hash-up little plow-tail tattle, or store gossip. There's been enough fool-talk of your kind in the county about her, if it ever got to her ears, to make her old and changed for sure and ever. You folks don't like her 'cause she won't stand at the church door and swap cheap lies about your latest breed-sow, or the rise in wheat, or the potato-bugs, or the latest fashions in bonnets. You feel that she's a lady and above you, 'cause she chooses to dress in black, and plain, with no filderig watch-chain twice around her neck and down the middle, and no boughten frizzes. Now you'd like it if she'd spend her time in 'tending yer strawberry festivals, and your quilting bees, so you and your women folks could stand around and pick her to pieces, and jest 'cause she don't open her mouth and show her back teeth when she laughs, or 'cause she won't eat with her case-knife, or stick her nap-

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kin in her collar, or curl her little finger when she drinks tea, why, you've got no use for her. You're small potatoes to-day, Mat, and mighty blamed few in a hill."

Just now Uncle I', being called by the 'phone, went hurriedly to that part of the store, but not without seeing that his final shot had badly shattered Mat's philosophy.

Uncle sprang quickly on the box before the telephone, pushed back the switch, answered the ring, then snatching the receiver from the hook, shouted:

"Yes, Kate, I'm here, waiting.

"Oh! This is the Casket Company, and is it Mr. Day? All right, then. Say, I want you to send me by next—What?

"No, I'm right up to the 'phone—I cain't do it—I tell you I cain't talk no louder without breaking a blood-vein. They can hear me down to the old mill, now.

"I want you to send by next express, Big Four—a plain No. 10—Hello! What's the matter now?

"For the land's sake, do I have to go all over that again?

"Don't cut in now, Kate, I've got all the trouble I can bear—yes, yes—I want you to send me by train leaving at nine-forty-two—Send me a plain—what? Oh, you've got that, have you? Glad to hear it. Say, do please shet up, over there. Oh, of course, you heerd that, but you cain't seem to hear nothing else. I want a plain No. 10 six-

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feet-two. What's that? No, I don't want two—what would the poor fellow do with two?—I want one—who for? For me, Ira Thatch. Now, don't get funny over there. You know what I mean.

"Now send. To-day will you; yes, yes,—this morning.

"Eh? Thanks. No, I don't—but this kind of work would drive a man to—all right—good-by."

Hanging up the receiver, ringing off, carefully turning the switch, he walked over to a young woman, in compliance with whose wishes he had telephoned for a casket of special size, and said in his placid and most confidential voice:

"It will be here in time. Now, if you'll wait till I weigh out some starch for this lad, I'll ask him to stop at my house for my daughter to tend store, so's I can show you about the trimmings and things. S'pose you want the hearse?"

There seemed to be some doubt.

"Oh, yes, it could be placed in a spring-wagon and hauled away without prejudice to the departed. Some folks prefer one way and some another. Mere matter of choice."

A few hours had passed and Uncle I' had opened the second department of his store, the undertaking annex, and let in light and air, for both were needed.

Upon two wrapped and padded "horses" stood a large black-broadcloth-covered casket, of the severely plain order. Around this Uncle I' was moving in small steps, his mouth partly filled with

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tacks, the crooked fingers of his left hand, injured in the war, deftly holding the linen and silk, and padding with "excelsior," while with the hammer-hand the dressing was made permanent.

Meanwhile the grocery part of the store was emptying itself of its loungers and patrons into the rear portion, where they stood around for a bit of gossip, the novelty of the work having long since worn off with the villagers, who had been witnesses of this same grewsome process often enough, in good sooth, to have lost all horror of the occupation.

"Too bad, Uncle," said some one of the company, "on such a hot day, that you have to be kept indoors, and on the jump, too."

"Oh, I cain't complain of being too occupied," answered Uncle a little thickly through the tacks clinging to his lips, "rather like it, in fact. Blessed is the man who has found his work and can do it; but I happen to recall two stories——"

"Two stories at once," interrupted a listener, "let's have 'em both."

"One at a time, gentlemen, one at a time, and," —Uncle hesitated just a moment, and evidently reminded of something while arranging a puff in the lining, said,—"and that's another, and I'll give it first."

Before proceeding, however, as the tacks in his mouth gave his insecurely fitting plate some trouble, he slyly reset it, at the same time shifting the row of tacks.

"I remember a ticket-agent in the East, at a

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