

Democratic Watchman

Bellefonte, Pa., October 30, 1925.

HIS KINGDOM.

Beyond the yard he takes the cows,
Into a pasture red with clover,
He walks a king under the boughs
While birds are going gravely over.
He makes a whistle from a tree,
To match the matchless whippoorwill,
The cows stir small bells placidly,
An echo lunges from the hill.
Then, where the brook curves to the corn,
He sits beneath the willows green,
A king as sunny as the morn
Waiting to greet a freckled queen.
—By Harold Vinal, in Everybody's Magazine.

THREE OLD-TIMERS.

A Story of Loyalty.

Little Mrs. Gill was almost seventy, and yet, she told herself as bravely as she could, she had always been sharp and pert enough—until Candless came!

Candless! Dimly—for the big man's loud voice, his positive ways, his rapid words, tangled and portentous, seemed to have been the very origin of this confusion of her mind, this blurring of thought, as though he had created a mist about her brain—dimly she recalled his first coming.

It had been two years after Nort's death, when she had come into the property that lay between the two deep canyons, Fish Creek and Cascade River, with its four thousand acres of timber, its quarry site, its upland meadows, dotted with springs.

Candless had "dropped in." He had said that he had wanted to take care of her and her interests, for the sake of his old friendship with Nort. She had thought that strange; she had never remembered having heard her husband speak of him.

As for being taken care of, Nancy Gill had wondered then, and wondered uneasily now, if she needed taking care of. When the mist cleared a little from her brain she felt that she was amply able to take care of herself, as she had done before.

No; Candless had insisted. She was to go where she could be comfortable, waited on—seen to!

Her hands locked and unlocked themselves in her lap as she considered all of this.

Looking out from her bay window, where the winter sun shown brightly, Mrs. Gill saw Candless's big machine disappear over the Plumas road. She sighed. The tenth of May, he had said. There were some legal formalities to be seen to.

She had not understood. She did not understand now. She only thought that, if she could clear her brain, she might be able to think of some of Nort's old friends, and hers—some of those early Californians—to whom she could turn.

The Plumas County folks were neighborly and pleasant; but they were not the old friends, the old stock. Like that lawyer, Judge * * * Judge * * * or the little, twined, smiling old man who took things so quietly, as he drove his team and battered wagon up and down—and up and down. The thin fog rose across her mind, like breath on a mirror.

There was Candless * * * coming back * * * on the tenth of May.

Three diminutive burros, wearily dragging a rattlertrap of a wagon, with an old man hunched on the sagging seat, and with two buckets swinging from the rear axle, were turned from the highway at the summit and began to descend the steep grade leading into the gulch where lay Gold Bar.

Their driver was a small, bent, wiry old man, with thin shanks and arms, strong, bronzed hands, and gray eyes squinting a little from looking at the sun and facing rain and wind and snow.

The old man seemed to belong to his wagon, his wagon to the country, as indivisible parts. For thirty years he had been traveling thus, trading, peddling, carrying messages, doing errands, and acting as intermediary in a job-lot of deals for the isolated inhabitants of mountain, desert, and upland stretches that ran three hundred miles north and south, and extended from the Nevada line on the east to San Francisco on the west.

Upon his annual pilgrimage he made a circuit that, through the years, had become as fixed as an orbit; calendars could be corrected by Doc Winship's visits; some said that watches could be set by his infrequent but exact arrivals and departures.

It was precisely because of this latter fact that Judge Ezra Marker, seated on a low wall in the historic cemetery of Gold Bar, basking in the first warmth of the spring sun, doubted his eyes when they were caught by the flashing reflection of two buckets swinging back and forth from the rear axle of the equipage that came over the summit and began to descend the grade.

"Cherries in January next!" the judge exclaimed, aloud. "Now what can bring Doc Winship to Gold Bar in April?"

It was, of course, something extraordinary; the judge rearranged the bunch of half-wild pink roses he had gathered at the abandoned Wilkins place on the way up, touched the warm, moist mound gently, tenderly, laid the roses there, and stood up.

Tall, broad, and vigorous, despite his seventy-five years, he lingered for a moment, looking down at the headstone that bore the name of his wife. With a dignity that was beautiful, he took off his broad black hat.

Then, returning his hat to his head, at that slight angle—inimitable—at which he had always worn it, he walked down the cemetery road at a good pace, swinging his cane, to intercept the burro-drawn wagon of his old friend.

Doc Winship, squinting ahead, raised a cracked shout. "Come to fetch you, Judge!" he called. "Git, jackasses!"

They came up with a flourish, only old Pete, the offside, holding back a

little, as though protesting at this violence to their common custom.

"You old fraud, you!" the judge cried, reaching up for Winship's hand.

"What are you doing here in April? Have you come to draw your will?"

"Will?" Winship snorted. "You'll be under the sod a long time before I'm ready to make my will, Judge."

Climb up—and look out for Henry Grosbeck's silk funeral hat! Kick that durn blanket over—there!"

The burros started again, old Pete switching his tail vigorously. The rickety wagon creaked, swayed, jolted. Judge Marker clung to the top rod.

"If it isn't your will, Doc, what is it?"

Winship shook his head.

"Wait till we get set in the office, Judge. What's the news here in Gold Bar?"

The town, the shell of a town, into which they were descending, had once boasted a population of twenty thousand; but that had been in the days when the hydraulics were tearing the vitals from the Rincon and the Phillips-Garrity hills back of Main Street, for gold; now it claimed a hundred souls, and was falling to pieces block by block, wall by wall.

Gold Bar had once known life at flood, when romance tintured every simple fact and occurrence; now, it marked dull time, housing only such as were too poor or too indolent to move, or else, like Judge Marker, were rooted to the spot by sentiment, living in the past.

The Judge's law office was Gold Bar in miniature. It was furnished in the garnishments of the Sixties—faded, worn and dilapidated, though neatly kept; its most prized and eloquent decoration was a lithograph, framed in gilt, of "Lincoln—Our Candidate."

Its law books were of a still earlier period, but sufficient for the old man's needs and references.

Once in the Judge's office, with the burros tied to the old rack by the Bonanza House and contemplatively munching straw, Doc Winship filled and lighted his pipe, puffed a few minutes to order his thoughts, then said, in his cracked voice:

"There's a heap of law in Californy, ain't there, Judge?"

"Yes."

"New laws all the time, eh?"

"New provisions. About the same old law, Doc."

"New ways to get around it, too?"

"Yes. But old ways to prevent getting around it, if you know where to look for them."

"That's correct, is it?" Doc Winship's face brightened. "Reckon there is some lawin'll have to be done!"

"For yourself, Doc?"

"Winship snorted.

"Huh! No." He puffed a moment.

"The Judge's changed, Judge, since our day. The smart alecks run things now. Ain't such a power of us old fellows left?" He ruminated. The judge waited, puzzling. "There's Piney Johnson," Winship concluded, and smoked on.

"Piney Johnson?" The judge looked out of the window for a moment without speaking. The name carried a faint clue. Yes, there were three, at any rate, who had been Californians a long, long time; a long enough time, so that they had forgotten the happenings of the last quarter century, but remembered vividly the smallest details of those before. "Piney Johnson? Yes. What's up, Doc?"

The little man burnished his pipe bowl in his knee.

"There was Norton Gill, Judge," he said.

The judge looked at him sharply at the mention of this fourth name.

"And his wife, Nancy," he added gently.

"You and I met the stage with Nort when she came in from Indiana to marry him," Winship remarked.

"In sixty-nine."

"Seventy-one." The little old man chuckled. "Your mind's failin' a leetle, Judge. But not much. Nort died a while back."

"I know, Doc. It's fifteen years, at least, since I've seen them. They moved up into Plumas County before that, and I can't be sure."

"You know Nort did himself good up there? Land, and timber, and so on."

"Yes. He must have been well off when he died."

"He was. And left it all to Nance."

Doc Winship smoked a moment, in a silence that began to be troubled.

"All to Nance. She was always trusting—easy put under. Remember?"

The judge leaned forward.

"Then there's something wrong, Doc?" he asked.

"That's what I've drove two hundred miles out of my time to see you about, Judge." He drew from an inner pocket a long envelope, and took from it a newspaper clipping. "I got to San Francisco on the first as usual. Second day I went into a library I know, to look up the county papers. This was in the Plumas 'Register.' Marked 'Legal Advertisin', Judge."

He laid the clipping down; leaned back to look at the Lincoln lithograph, but not seeing it.

The judge read slowly, his large ruddy face intent—coloring a little—under its crown of white hair. When he had finished he was quiet a moment, drumming a slow measure on the desk with his finger tips. Then he asked, thoughtfully:

"Do you know who this P. M. Candless is, Doc?"

"Not personal, I don't. But I've seen his tracks before. Varmint tracks!"

The judge considered.

"You mentioned Piney Johnson."

The doc spoke apologetically.

"Wasn't aimin' to belittle you, Judge—nor the law. But sometimes, as I reflect back, the law was a leetle slow!" He cleared his throat.

"It was. Perhaps even slower now, Doc. You're right. Go ahead for Piney, if you think you can make it. The drifts will be bad, and it's eighty miles, just about." He paused. "There aren't many men, Doc, who would try that journey in April—for the widow of an old friend."

Doc Winship rose, putting on his sorry old hat. Then he snorted scornfully.

"Not many o' the new Californians,

maybe—the smart alecks!" He crossed to the door. "I'll see you in Plumas County."

"I'll be there on May tenth, Doc!"

"I figured you would, Judge." A slow smile came on his face. "It's a hundred mile, and hard travelin'," he observed. "Not many men'd try that journey in May—for the widder of an old friend!"

The judge colored, then laughed resolutely.

"You go to blazes, Doc!" he cried, and blew his nose violently.

Piney Johnson, a long, thin, dark man on whom Time had tried vainly to leave his marks—an indomitable old man whose spirit and strength denied the passing of years—stood in the doorway of his crude cabin in a lost valley in the heart of the deep mountains, looking across the wastes of snow to observe the slow approach of a traveler driving a packed burro.

The sight was unusual; perhaps three times in a winter—when Johnson hibernated like a bear, trapping, mending gear, cleaning his guns—some telephone company lineman, a trapper, or one of his far-scattered neighbors would drop in for an hour or a night. Therefore the old man watched the approaching visitor keenly, gazing over the glare with unwinking eyes. Piney he granted and turned into his cabin again, where he shook up his fire, added wood, and set forward his coffee pot and a mess of beans, already steaming and fragrant.

So much done in preparation, he sat down at his bench and took up again the dressing of the pelt of a silvery-bellied fisher. The coffee was boiling and the beans simmering when Doc Winship stood in the door.

"Well, Piney, you old wart-hog!" he cried.

Johnson, scraping the inside of a leg skin, did not look around.

"Lo, Doc," he replied quietly.

"Where'd you drop from?"

"Cisco. Um-m! Beans an' coffee, eh? That's prime! Any dry feed for the burrow?"

"Lean-to." Johnson jerked a thumb.

"Dry your blankets in here."

"Ain't figgerin' to unpack, Piney. Got to be goin' soon's I've et."

"Suit yourself, Doc."

When Winship returned, the beans and coffee were on the table, flanking hunks of Dutch-oven bread, and Piney was opening one of his hoarded cans of peaches. He did not turn his head.

"Slip up an' get Doc," he suggested. "Basin's under the bench."

Winship used the basin, soaping himself generously, flinging drops of water. When they were seated at the table, neat and inviting with its spotless red cloth, Piney Johnson folded his hands before him, glanced at his guest, then bowed his head.

"We're giving thanks, Lord, for your lovin' kindness and bountiful goodness. Amen. * * * Lift yourself some beans, Doc."

"You exchanged fragmentary bits of news for a time. Doc Winship hungry, Piney Johnson incurious, patient. Reaching for a second helping of the gleaming yellow hemispheres of fruit in their thick, clear sirup, Doc asked, offhandedly:

"D'ye reclect my mentionin' that I'd cut Perry Candless's trail up north, couple o' years back?"

"Johnson flashed a look at him.

"Yes."

"You ain't seen him since—your dealin' with him?"

"Ain't wanted to!"

"Never got anything more out of him, did you?"

"No."

The old wagoner shook his head. Artlessly he asked:

"Remember Nort Gill, Piney?"

Johnson nodded, rolling a cigarette smoothly. "Died up in Plumas County I heard."

"Yes. He was real, old Norton Gill was."

"Certain!" Piney Johnson said, roundly.

Doc Winship withdrew from his coat pocket the envelope and newspaper clipping, handing the latter across the red tablecloth. He poured himself a third cup of coffee and began to drink it, without looking up. Doc Winship spoke casually:

"I come by Gold Bar on the way in. Judge Marker's goin' to look after the lawin'."

Johnson spoke sharply for the first time.

"Can't law a cantamount like Candless!" he snapped.

The old doc wagged his head.

"That's what I figgered," he said. "It's why I'm here."

Johnson rose. He crossed to the stove, removed the coffee pot, and set it aside. He closed the drafts of the stove carefully, pulled to and latched his windows, tacked his fisher skin to a board, and began rubbing it with a compound of salt and tannic acid. Doc Winship, finishing the peaches, got up also, and readied up the dishes.

Before he was through, Piney Johnson had pulled on a heavy mackinaw coat and a skin cap. Then he reached for his snowshoes.

"Stay's long's you like, Doc," he said, stooping to the things.

Doc Winship looked at him.

"Ain't you goin' back with me?"

"Nope. Goin' down the river and out Sacramento way."

"But that's sixty mile fa'ther!"

Johnson straightened, stamping his feet to fit them to the clumsy webbed shoes.

"My best shootin' gun is loaned out," he explained. "I'm goin' by for it." He rose and shuffled across to the door.

"Tenth of May, he said?"

"That's what's in the paper."

"The Judge and I'll be mighty obliged to you, Piney," Doc Winship observed.

"You go to hell!" Johnson replied, and turned westward down the little valley, lifting his feet with a drag and slide—pulling up his collar.

The big automobile seemed to leap over the hill summit like some great beast of prey, and its roar, coming faintly to Nancy Gill's ears, heightened the similarity. As the machine approached she could see the breath coming from the driver's lips like steam, and a smoky black plume extended itself from the rear of the car.

Encased in glass, heavily overcoated and muffled, and now leaning down to speak to a small companion,

was the man she dreaded. Her mind, that had been almost orderly for a few moments, became a whirling jumble, clouded—fogged. Little old Mrs. Gill raised her hands nervously to her head, patting her smooth white hair. Was she ready? Candless had warned her that she must be.

(Concluded next week.)

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