HIS RISE TO POWER

By Henry Russell Miller,

Author of
"The Man Higher Up"

PROLOGUE.

Reader, here is a live, gripping, absorbing romance of politics—not the politics of a decade ago, but the politics of today. A young American of good fighting blood and hard, fixed ideals sets out to smash the political machine of his state without compromise with evil. The great moment of his life comes when he must sacrifice his clean hands or ruin the father of the girl he loves. The creative genius and large power of the author are even more notable than in "The Man Higher Up," Mr. Miller's preceding novel.

CHAPTER I.

Mists of the Morning.

IT was twilight still in the valley, but over the hills to the east the sky was whitening. A young man sitting by his window turned to see the birth of another day. Throughout the night he had been staring at a vision. But weariness had set no mark upon him. His vision he did not understand, save that for him it spelled opportunity—a chance to put into a drifting, rather ordinary existence, purposeful action, to stretch his muscles, rack his brain and tear his soul in the struggle that is the life of men.

He caught up a rough towel and, stealing quietly out of the house, walked rapidly down the street. When the straggling town lay behind him he broke into a slow trot. At a place where many feet had worn a path across a clover meadow he turned from the road. The path ended at a clump of bushes on the river bank.

Hastily undressing, he plunged into the green depths, from which June had not quite taken the chill of spring. His lithe, strong body responded to the shock. The nerves, harried by the long night watch, relaxed. He shouted lustily. For a few minutes he swam vigorously. Then, reaching the shore, he took the towel and rubbed himself into a glow. He tingled with a sense of well being.

When he was dressed again, refreshed and eager for his day, he took the path back to the highway. The sun was climbing over the hills. He stopped and watched it while it swung clear in the sky, gleaming a fiery red through the mists of the valley. The glory of the morning was complete.

He was about to resume his tramp homeward when he beheld a strange procession advancing along the road, a young woman leading a limping horse. As she came nearer he chuckled aloud. The handsome pigskin saddle, the ivory handled crop, the modish riding suit and boots were not the equipment with which young ladies of New Chelsea were wont to ride.

She heard him and looked up coldly. The chuckle died instantly.

"Good morning," he said. "What's the matter with your horse? Can I help you?"

She stopped. "He has picked up a stone," she answered, "and I can't get it out. If you will be so good"—

He vaulted lightly over the fence that bounded the meadow and removed the offending stone.

"Thank you," the young woman said.

"You're quite welcome," he answered. "I'm always glad to help beauty in distress. He is a beautiful animal, isn't he?" he added hastily.

"Are you chaffing me?" she asked coldly.

He repressed a smile. "By no means. Better not ride him for a little bit, until we see how he walks. You ride early," he ventured.

"No earlier than you—swim," she replied briefly, glancing at his wet hair and towel. He at once became uncomfortably conscious of his rather unkempt appearance.

"Are you staying in New Chelsea?"

"Yes."

"Shall you stay long?"

"Are you in the habit of cross examining strangers on the road?" she inquired frigidly.

He reddened. "I beg your pardon," he said and slackened his pace to let her draw ahead.

"I think I'll ride now," she said, "if you will help me up. Crusader has stopped limping."

He held out his hand, she placed a foot in it and was lifted to the saddle. She murmured her thanks. But, although she gathered in the reins, she did not start away. For a moment she sat looking at the hills, apparently oblivious of the young man's presence He wondered who she was and ventured again. "Why do you call him Crusader?"

She looked down at him. "Another question? You are incorrigible."

"I beg your pardon," he said again stiffly and marched up the road.

"I have named him that," she called after him, "because he has plenty of fire and spirit, but at critical times seems to lack common sense." She laughed, a free, musical laugh that somehow recalled the blood to his cheeks. He made no reply.

She watched him as he swung along, frankly admiring the tall, cleanly built figure whose lines the loose coat he wore did not conceal. She remembered the end of the big game eight years before, when a laughing, mud stained young athlete tore himself away from his idolatrous companions to lay his triumph at the feet of the day's sweetheart. She remembered also, with a smile, the stabbing childish jealousy with which a freckle faced, short skirted girl had witnessed his devotion.

"And you're still here, buried alive in this out of the way corner of the world," she said softly. "Oh, John Dunmeade! John Dunmeade!"

Suddenly she touched her horse with the crop. He bounded forward and clattered along until the young man was overtaken. She pulled Crusader down to a walk, at which the young man looked up astonished. Curious as to her identity, but fearing another reproof, he cautiously refrained from further speech.

They went along in silence until they reached a point where the undulating road rose to command a view of the valley to the south and the town to the north. She reined in her horse.

"What a pity one can't find words for such a morning! And the wonder of it is that it has recurred, we don't know how many millions of times, always glorious."

"It makes one feel a bit—reverent"—

"It makes one feel as helpless as"—She paused for lack of a comparison.

"As helpless as some chick will soon feel, unless the farmer's dog scares off that hawk," he completed the sentence for her, pointing. Over a barnyard in the valley the big bird was soaring in narrowing, lowering circles. From beneath came faintly the cries of frightened fowls. Suddenly the hawk swooped low to the earth. Scarcely pausing, it soared aloft once more, leaving panic in the barnyard and one chick the less.

The young woman laughed. "There's an illustration of one fundamental law."

"The supremacy of the strong? That's an old theory, I know. A very pretty one—from the point of view of the hawk. But how about the chick?"

"Oh, if one is born a chick"— She concluded the sentence with a shrug

Suddenly, With a Laugh, She Was Gone Amid a Clatter of Hoofs.

of her shoulders. "Strength is its own law. Hasn't the world always been conquered and ruled by its strong?"

"I'm afraid that is true," he said soberly.

"Afraid! I should think you would be glad, since—I have it from the New Chelsea Globe—you are a strong man."

He looked his astonishment. "You know who I am!"

"Of course! Did you think, Mr. Dunmeade," she laughed—"did you think your charms outweighed the conventions? I am not a barbarian in the habit of philosophizing with strange young men on the road before 7 o'clock in the morning."

"What did you read in the Globe?"

"The vanity of men! I read, 'Mr. Dunmeade will undoubtedly make a strong candidate. The entire county wants him. It will have him.' It reads like a patent medicine advertisement, doesn't it? How does it feel to be wanted by an entire county, Mr. Dunmeade?"

"It is," he confessed, "rather pleasant—if true. Who are you?"

And suddenly, with a laugh, she was gone, amid a clatter of hoofs.

Alone he addressed the morning. "She said I am strong. I wonder, am I strong—strong enough?" And, searching his soul for the answer, he heard no negative.

This chronicle, we neglected to state, begins at the beginning of the end of an epoch. The epoch has been variously styled a golden age, a period of prosperity, an era of expansion. It was all of that—to a few. For others, though they did not see it, it was a recession, a truce in the struggle, old as life itself, between the many and the strong.

William Murchell was a distinguished member of a class whose climbing proclivities are not subdued by the incident of a lowly start. He was born in the obscure hill town of New Chelsea soon after Andrew Jackson and his contemporaries promulgated and illustrated the immortal doctrine, "To the victor belong the spoils." In the fashion made popular by Abraham Lincoln and other great men he secured an education and on the day he attained his majority was admitted to the practice of law in Benton county.

About the same time he entered the broader profession of politics, being then a lukewarm Whig.

His military services are perhaps best dismissed with the mention of a certain gold medal struck in his honor, by special act of congress, for gallant conduct on the field of battle. The invidious have made much of this decoration. However, it probably required a finer courage to resign from the colonelcy of his home guard regiment on the eve of Gettysburg—this indeed was the fact—to accept the less exposed office of aid to the governor at the capital than to face the hail of rebel bullets. There are many ways of expressing one's patriotism. Later he served his country as prothonotary for Benton county. Afterward he passed through many gradations of political preferment, as representative in the general assembly of his state, as state senator, as state treasurer and finally as United States senator, which exalted office he held until—but we anticipate our history. He became in addition leader of his party organization, an euphemism employed by those who objected to the term "boss."

William Murchell's creed was that of a respectable but practical man. He was a teetotaler and a Presbyterian elder and believed in the doctrine of foreordination and in a literal scriptural hell for those not numbered among the elect. He believed devoutly in the avowed and tacit principles of his party, although he was not bigoted and would on occasion take a secret hand in the affairs of the opposition. He had more than once read out of the party foolhardy young men who ventured to oppose his leadership.

He lived during at least two months of every year in the town of his birth, either in the square, white frame house on Maple street or at the farm, three miles west, which he let "on shares." New Chelsea was a quaint, old fashioned town lying at the head of the Weehannock valley, quite content with its population of 5,000 and with the honor of being the county seat, which Murchell's influence had prevented from being moved to Plumville, that thriving little factory city fifteen miles away.

Down Main street one fine June afternoon he was walking with that air of abstraction which sits so well on the great.

"He has big possibilities." Unconsciously the senator spoke aloud.

His companion seemed to understand the reference. "He's all right," he answered. State Senator Jim Sheehan was a big, fat gentleman with furtive, twinkling eyes, a modicum of coarse good looks and a rolling, cock sure gait bred of no misfortune. He was a son of power. Fifteen years before he had gone to Plumville to work in the mills, an uncouth, unlettered Irishman, who could tell a good story, hold unlimited quantities of liquor and was not unwilling to work when money could not be had otherwise.

But not long for him had been the grime and roar and muscle racking of the mills. Money could be had more easily. Plumville was booming. There were streets to be graded and paved, public buildings to be constructed. Jim went into politics and because he was a good "vote getter" and had a certain rough talent for the game acquired power. He opened a saloon and acquired more power. He became a contractor and secured many contracts. One day the city awoke to the fact that Jim Sheehan owned its government. The citizens cried out in protest—and, with the habit of American cities, little and big, submitted. He became, by virtue of his alliance with Murchell, state senator from Benton county and leader—we cling to the euphemism—of the county organization.

"He's all right," he repeated and chuckled.

"Eh?" said Murchell. "Who's all right?"

"Why, Johnny Dunmeade, of course! Didn't tell you how I happened to be goin' to see him 'stead of the other way round. It's a horse on me, all right." He threw back his head, and the chuckle became a loud guffaw. "Sent word for him to come to my office last Tuesday at 2 o'clock sharp. Guess he knew what for. He came, all right. I thought it'd do him good to cool his heels awhile—keep him from gettin' too chesty. Guess he waited about half an hour and then got up. 'Present my compliments to Senator Sheehan,' he says to the boy, 'and tell him to go to the devil and learn how to keep his appointments,' and left. 'Long about 3 o'clock I strolled out and gets his message." Sheehan paused long enough to slap his thigh resoundingly. "He's all right. Ain't any one told me to go to the devil for some time. He'll be worth 500 extra majority—to the whole ticket."

"If he'll take the nomination."

"Take it? Of course he'll take it. Ain't there $1,500 a year in it for him? And mebby when his term's ended he might go to the legislature as representative."

"Or state senator?"

Sheehan grinned. "Say, do I look like I was on my way to the boneyard?"

He became serious. "What's the matter with the people, anyhow? Raisin' Cain all over the state—just because," he added complainingly, "one trust company went up and the cashier shot itself. Ain't business good? Ain't the organization given them good government?" he demanded.

"It has." Senator Murchell spoke with conviction.

"What do they want, then?"

"I don't know. They don't know. And as long as they don't know," Murchell said dryly, "you and I, Jim, needn't be afraid."

They had reached and turned the corner of the street that bounds the courthouse square on the north. They stopped at a frame, two room shack by the door of which hung a battered tin sign, "John Dunmeade, Attorney at Law." Sheehan led the way inside. Through the door of the inner room came the muffled drone of voices. The two men seated themselves in the anteroom and waited. Ten minutes passed. Then the door opened and John Dunmeade emerged, ushering out a big, bearded farmer. When the client had left the young lawyer turned to his callers and shook hands, warmly with Murchell and hastily with Sheehan.

"Will you step inside, gentlemen?"

They took seats around the old, time stained mahogany table.

"Well?" Dunmeade's look addressed the remark to Senator Murchell.

The senator smiled slightly. "I'm here only as an honorary vice president. Ask Sheehan. He likes to talk."

"Sure," Sheehan grinned. "I ain't one of them that believes the feller that don't talk is deep and wise. He gener'ly ain't talkin' because he can't think of nothin to say." He paused and continued, "Well, Mr. District Attorney"—

"Isn't that a little premature?" John interrupted.

For answer the Honorable Jim drew forth from another pocket a folded newspaper, which he spread out on his knees. Solemnly he began to read: "We should not dignify the present rather unsettled political conditions with the name crisis. But it is unquestionably a time when our party must inspect its path carefully. At such a time it behooves it to choose as candidates only men whose fearlessness and honesty are not open to question. Benton county has this fall to fill the important office of district attorney. Of all those mentioned for this post we know of none who so well fills the bill as John Dunmeade, the popular and brilliant young lawyer of New Chelsea. His name"—Sheehan's voice rose to a triumphant climax—"his name has brought forth enthusiasm wherever mentioned. The entire county wants him. It will have him." He looked up. "What do you think of that, eh?"

"Which of you," John asked, "inspired that editorial?"

"I did," answered Sheehan. "I didn't write it, though," he confessed.

"Don't you think," John demanded, a little sharply, "you might have asked my consent before using my name as a candidate? Do I understand you've come here to—to give me your consent to run?"

"We came to say we'd support you."

"Then let me state the case to you as it is. The state is pretty much worked up over that trust company affair back east. I'm not sure it oughtn't to be worked up, either. The farmers in this county and a good many people in Plumville aren't very friendly to you personally at best. In short," he laughed, "you need some new timber to patch up the old ship of state. And you think I'll do."

Sheehan turned to Senator Murchell. "Senator, let's me and you go right out and resign and let Johnny here run things. Don't you want the job?" he demanded of John.

"I don't know yet. I'm thinking it over. But if I take it it will be on condition"—

"On condition!"

—"that there are no conditions. I'd want to run my campaign and the office according to my own notions. I'd run it straight."

"Sure!" agreed Sheehan.

"I really mean it, you know," John insisted. "I might even have to get after you, Sheehan."

This to Sheehan was humorous matter. "That's all right," he agreed again, grinning, "if you can catch me. You think it over, Johnny, and let me know tomorrow."

He rose. "Well, I guess I must be goin'. Are you comin' along, senator?"

"Not just now, Sheehan," Senator Murchell answered.

"I'll be sayin' good day, then." Sheehan shook hands with Senator Murchell and John and left.

(Continued in Next Friday's Issue.)