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THE CONSCIENCE

OF

ALDERMAN M'GINNESS.

BY OCTAVE THANET.

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Billy Hunter came back from the meeting at almost 12 o'clock dead tired. His wife had the coffee hot for him and brought him in a steaming cup without asking a question. Judith Hunter had been out at service before she married Billy, and she had learned a good many things besides cooking beef to a turn.

Billy sat with his legs out and his head sagging on his breast. It was a spring day, but Iowa springs have chilly nights following sunny days, and the warmth of the fire in the airtight stove was grateful to him. To another observer it might seem a plain, little parlor, and he might smile over the ministrations of the gorgeous chromos that came with their garden seeds (heavy framed in brown paper) and two or three photographs of famous pictures, but to Billy the fresh paint and bright paper, the ribbon and lace tidies, the one plush easy chair and the glistening cabinet organ made it a dream of luxury. They had eight rooms in the house, if you include the "lean to," which was such a comfortable laundry and summer kitchen for Judith. It was a very good house indeed, and the garden was so large that Judith kept a tiny poultry yard. In the summer it was beautiful to sit on their own piazza, and shaded by their tree, really a tree large enough to shade, and to look at the honeysuckle and geraniums and the green rows of onions and parsley.

No landowner in town could be prouder yesterday than Billy had been of his little domain. Now his handsome brow wrinkled sullenly above his black eyes, and he gazed about him in a dreary stare, seeing and not seeing, like a man taking farewell. He sighed before he drank the coffee. His wife, still saying no word, smoothed the short curls which his hat had matted on his forehead. He patted her hand. She was a tall woman, as tall as he, and of a fine, supple figure. Her eyes were very bright and her skin very clear, and she had delicate, irregular features, which changed so prettily when she talked that no one ever found fault with their irregularity.

"It's you that I'm thinking about, Judith, you and the kid," said Hunter. He nodded his head toward the open door, through which one could see a cradle rocker.

"We'll do, Billy," said Judith. "Come, now. You eat a piece of pie—it'll do you more good now than for breakfast—and I'll get your pipe. Are they going to strike, then?"

"Well, as bad. They voted to send a committee to Hollister and ask him to submit their differences to an arbitration committee or they'll strike Monday. Hollister won't listen to them, not to anybody, I guess, and not to Robb and Luke Wigger anyhow. He sent Luke off a week ago, and the other man is Johnny Mellin, who's mild as skim milk and was put on to represent us. He'll set there and get red in the face and say 'That's right' to whoever speaks last."

"But did you speak to them, Billy? Did you say the things you were going to?"

Billy's face grew red. "Yes, I did, and I wish I hadn't. I never made a speech before, but I felt so worked up about this I thought I could talk to the boys, just give 'em plain sense—how this here strike ain't got a show on God's earth of succeeding—but you'll say you got a fool for a husband, Judy. I got up on my legs, and I got scared. I was just as scared as I used to be when I'd play hooky when I was a kid and met Father Mahan, and he'd be saying, 'Is your mother sick, Billy Hunter, that you're out of school?' I could feel my voice wabbling under me, and all I could get out was some fool things about a strike that failed worse than no strike, and then Robb—he got up, so slick and with such a lot of fine, big words about organized labor and the great union behind us, and capital already on the run, and he worked 'em up about those new fellers (and they are a disgrace; they can't manage their blast now, and they may be killing somebody any day), and he got the boys fighting mad, and he called me his cautious friend, like I was a coward! And then such a way he hollered, 'You see he's got such a way with him, a little, smiling, white toothed feller and smart as a steel trap, and there ain't anything on earth we workmen like like a feller who can talk.'"

"Can't he see himself it's crazy?"

"He sees we've got \$2,000 in the treasury and how we've been cut down and cut down this winter, and he sees Hollister's got some big orders on now, and that's all he does see. If you tell him Hollister's obstinate's the devil, he jest laughs and says he's heard folks threaten to bite off their noses to spite their faces before, but they don't do it, all the same, and Hollister can't bluff him. I don't think Hollister's so bad as they make him out, but he's got the devil's own temper when you get his mad up. They'd have struck this very same night if it hadn't been for young Fitzmaurice."

"But he don't belong to the union," said Judith, who was now seated by her husband, listening with absorbing interest. "How'd he get in?"

"Well, we've had him for a lawyer, 'cause he worked for nothing, and he was a poor boy that's worked up, and he certainly has done well by us. Well,

he came in in time to see me on the floor with me, and he made a speech; said he just got back to town this afternoon with Alderman McGinnis, and he wasn't prepared to speak, but he hoped they would give themselves time to see things clear. Two things was necessary—to have a good cause and a fighting chance to win; so he got them to appoint the committee. That was the best he could do. Fitz is a good man, but he can't stop the boys. They've got a head of steam on, and they're bound to let her whiz. It's a kind of crazy fever. They're mad at me, boys I helped many a time. Now they're mad."

His wife looked at him wistfully. "If they strike, will it be a long strike, Bill?"

"God knows! I went to see Harry Lossing, and says he: 'Don't you let the hot heads fool you. Hollister's got his mad up. He's going to run his business or quit. He knows where he can get some new men, and if you strike he'll get them. You boys will maybe fight a week, a month, two months, and then you will have to go back on his terms, or you won't have the chance to go back at all.'"

Judith clasped her hands together involuntarily. "But if you strike how will we pay for the house?"

"We can't pay for the house, not unless—"

He hesitated, and she completed the word for him. "Not unless my brother could pay you back what you lent him. But he'll be out of a job too."

"That's it, and we got to live, too, and if the stores turn us they'll have to be paid. Mr. Lossing, he was awful kind and said, 'You tell Judy not to worry; she shan't lose her house,' but we can't lay right down on him. I don't see how a man, jest to git himself talked about, jest to make a name in the newspapers and have folks say what a big man he is—I don't see how he can be bringing other men to ruin that way. Josh felt awful 'bout it. He got up and said how he was situated and how after being sick so much and his family sick he was jest getting on his feet and this would knock him flat again. He 'most cried, he felt so bad, but it didn't do no good. They're crazy."

Judith found no word of cheer, but she did not ask him whether he could not keep at work whatever the others did. The workingman's wife recognizes the workingman's code of honor as well as he.

"There's only one man," said Billy. "who can do anything. That's Alderman McGinnis."

"Oh, Billy, won't he? But they say he's a bad man, and you got some of the boys to vote against him."

"I don't know. That's what Mr. Lossing said and young Harry, and you living so long in their family and they giving us such nice presents of course I wanted to work, like he asked, and I didn't think it was right spending so much money on the streets, though I may be glad enough to come to a street job myself, little as I ever thought it," he added, with a groan. "I wish I had not gone against him now, for I got to go to see him with Fitzmaurice and young Lossing tomorrow."

"Will he help you, do you think, Billy?"

"I ain't much hope. You see, he's after an oil or lard or some kind of inspectorship, good pay and awful little work, and Timberly can git it for him, and Timberly's for the strike, and I bet he won't mad Timberly and the boys too."

"But why is Mr. Timberly for striking? Don't he know?"

"He don't care, Judy. He's running for the legislature, and he wants the labor vote, so he's making a big splurge."

"How smart you are, Bill, about such things," said the wife proudly, but the unfeigned praise only brought a dark cloud to the man's brow. "I was forgetting another bad thing," said he. "Morris, the foreman, he is going to Illinois to his wife's folks. He's got a job there, and he told me to-day he recommended me to the boss, and he as much as said he'd speak about me to Hollister."

"Oh, Bill, do you call that bad news? It would be \$15 a month more. It would pay the payments on the house."

"And do you think," said Bill bitterly, "do you think that they'll be making a striker a foreman? No; they'll

bring a strange feller and put him over us."

He got up. He began to walk the floor in strong agitation. "Then it ain't all that. It's more. I've worked at the Hollister, man and boy, for almost 15 years. Well I remember my poor mother fetching me to Moore, who was foreman then, and his promising me a job. I began at \$1.50 a week, and I was that proud. Oh, Judy, I'll be lost without the shop! One day Hollister, the old man himself, went through and seen me at a casting. 'That's a good job you're making, Hunter,' says he. He remembered my name. He knows a good job when he sees one. There's good things about the old man if he is pig-headed."

"I can't but think it'll come right," urged Judith. She comforted him, unreasonably, but just as efficiently as wives do comfort their husbands, whatever their class, I may say whatever their intellect. Insensibly, under the spell of her pretended hopefulness and her real tenderness, his heavy heart lightened, and his sore vanity was soothed, but it was late in the morning before he fell asleep. Perhaps it was later before the wife, who had seemed so peacefully slumbering, drifted beyond the reach of her own forebodings.

Alderman McGinnis was popularly supposed to hold the Eighth ward in the hollow of his hand. Rumor wagged her tongue and shook her head over the alderman's paving contracts. His own private avocation was that of a contractor. She whispered how he led junketing parties of aldermen on visits to other cities at the expense of rival railroads, hoping to haul rival brickmakers' brick, and how they partook freely of hospitality, both solid and liquid, furnished them—somehow. She declared aloud that he was in every job ever passed by the city council. But the Eighth ward, after every explosion of virtue on the part of his fellow citizens, grinned and re-elected Alderman McGinnis.

It was in the latest unsuccessful assault that he had the Eighth ward locked horns with the popular alderman and been defeated. Harry at this time had just been taken into business with his father. He was just beginning to feel the exhilarating pressure of large affairs on shoulders so young and strong that they welcomed rather than flinched from burdens, and he was in the first blaze of a young man's enthusiasm for municipal reform. He had spent days running about the town marshaling the languid and reluctant forces of the "decent citizens" against a certain paving contract of the alderman's, and when the alderman was too strong for him in the council had defied him in his own ward.

Therefore McGinnis had been elected by rather more than the usual majority, and that was how it came to pass that poor Billy Hunter all night was haunted by snatches of his own speeches against the arbiter of the Eighth ward and tortured his brain trying, in the clumsy fashion of a man used to express himself by action only, to explain those fatal jokes and criticisms.

Before Harry had finished his breakfast next morning the workingman was at the house, and the young reformer did not keep him waiting. It was barely half past 8 that Sunday morning when Harry was seen by the neighbors driving his father's light surrey and the fast gray horses, with Billy Hunter on the back seat, at a rattling pace down the hill.

They went first to Tommy Fitzmaurice's. Tommy at the period of which I am writing was a ward politician and, in spite of Harry's fiery eloquence and his own affection for Harry, quite content with his moral lot. Now, although he joined the two at once, he gave Harry the corner of a wet blanket in his greeting.

"I'll tell you," said he, with a rather shamefaced expression, "I don't know which way Mac is going. I hope he looks at the strike the way I do, and that's the way you do, but I'm under too big obligations to Mac to fight him in this and risk his job, and that's the truth."

"But have you considered what mischief a hopeless strike like this will work?" began Harry eagerly.

"I haven't slept two winks this night considering nothing else," growled Tommy, "but I ain't fixed to fight Mac, and I don't want to either."

"And what will Mac do?" said Harry, biting off a useless argument at his cigar end, biting it hard.

"That I can't say," Tommy answered. "I was there right after the meeting last night. He wasn't home. I left word that I'd be over this morning, but when I went over before breakfast he was gone. Left word he would see me this afternoon. I sat down and wrote him all about the thing and told him I was on the chase after him and if I didn't catch him would be come over to pa's for a talk. I guess he will, but we'll try running him down first, because the committee may do more mischief than even Mac can undo if we wait. They said he had gone to Meyer's. The son was after him with a story of his mother being dead."

The Meyers were not Meyers really, but some unpronounceable Russian name of which the first two syllables ran into some similitude to Meyer, and Meyers they had been christened by their gentle acquaintances. The father was very old, and the family was supported by a son who dealt in junk and rags. They were not popular in the Eighth ward because they were dirty. If one considered, there was no especial reason why they should be clean—a feeble, old woman, deformed by rheumatism, the only person to care for an old, old man, and a son who lived by collecting and sorting rubbish. But no one did consider.

"And I guess," said Tommy meditatively, "that the alderman is about the only person in the world who ever gives them a civil word, and he does it from habit, without knowing."

All this time Billy was listening with a mind distraught, warily conning the ugly possibilities of the future, wishing that he had not been so fool hasty as to "mad Alderman McGinnis" and struggling after a way out of these troubles that should not be through favors asked. "I never asked anybody to give me nothing," he thought, "cept only Mr. Matthews, at the store, to wait a month for the grocery bill when ma was so sick." He looked at the two young fellows on the front seat, well dressed and prosperous. "Much they care," he groaned in his heart, and for the first time in all his hardworking, self denying life he was stung by the grudging envy of the poor against the rich and felt the desolateness of the humble man. Then he caught a turn of Harry Lossing's stern, young profile, and he remembered Fitzmaurice's wakeful night, and his honest conscience smote him. "I guess they ain't so easy about it, after all," thought he. "I do believe



"I was wanting to ask you, will they strike at the Hollister?"

the strike's beginning to make me go wrong already, suspecting everybody, even my friends."

It was a relief to be diverted by the Meyers house, the scolding stock of the ward, a lean and livid two story tenement, where, plainly, tenants did their own repairs and patched the rickety outside staircase and mended the crooked windows from the Meyers junk heap.

"Hello, Meyers!" hailed Tommy.

The father came out, hearing them, followed in a moment by the son. The old man had a patriarchal, white beard, a shining, bald head and a forehead scored by innumerable wrinkles. He fastened a dim eye on the visitors, the only sign of life that he gave. "He can't spik no English," explained the young man. He was short and bent and hollow cheeked. He coughed as he talked.

"You have a bad cold," said Harry, with ready interest.

"Oh, it not 'in, not 'in, only like it make me set down so often—when I git de bag full." He added: "Mr. Alderman McGinnis give me medicine, a full bottle; taked it out of his pocket. 'Isn't he here?"

"No; he gone to next street—Whinney's de name. Say, he's a good man." He spoke rapidly to his father in his own tongue, and as if in answer the old man nodded several times and lifted his trembling hands.

"He prays for him, he is so good," explained the son, with a reverent air. "He seen 'bout my mother's coffin, everyting. He lend me all de money, and he git a friend take my junk for so I can pay. He's good, you bet."

"If he is so good, he can't want the strike to go on," thought Billy as they drove on to the Whinneys'. Harry, in front, said not a word. What he thought of Alderman McGinnis' goodness he kept to himself. Neither did Fitzmaurice speak until they were reining up before the Whinneys' picket fence. "Here's the Whinneys'," said he; "largest family in the ward; four votes in it. Mrs. Whinney's a widow and an awful hard worker, but the boys are wild."

The Whinneys had a teaspoon of a garden and a small porch, on which sat three of the wild boys, smoking, in their Sunday clothes. They said that the alderman had gone to the Widow Hoffman's.

"You all well?" asked Tommy.

"Well, yes; but Jimmy's in trouble." This from the eldest, the others mutually assenting.

"What's the matter with Jimmy?"

"Fight. Tony Becker. He hit him harder'n he meant."

"Either of them drunk?"

"Both," said the brother sentimentally.

"Well, now, that's too bad," said Tommy sympathetically, as if he had been told that they were both cripples, and he clicked his tongue against his teeth.

"Ma's dreadful upset by it," said the youngest brother.

"Of course. Say, how about bail?"

"Oh, Mr. McGinnis seen about that. That'll be all right."

"Got into the papers?"

"No, sir. Mr. McGinnis, he seen a reporter. Maybe he can keep it out."

"There's a man to tie to," exclaimed Tommy warmly.

"That's right!" cried all the Whinney boys in concert.

Then Harry drove on to the Widow Hoffman's. The widow was slowly dying of an incurable disease. She had been a woman of mark in the ward, rearing five orphan children, with never a cent from her husband nor so much as a lump of coal from the poor overseer, and yet of no one in the ward was there recorded more acts of kindness, small and great. The widow's Sunday cap showed at the window. She was a large featured, gray haired woman, who smiled with her eyes oftener than with her lips, a woman that strangers called plain, but it wouldn't be well for one to use that word in speaking of her in the Eighth ward. No less than three nosebags and a loose bunch of hothouse roses brightened the table before her. She beckoned with her hand, and Tommy led the way into the house, the door of which was opened by her daughter. The alderman had