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# The Dead Line.

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## CHAPTER VI.

## OVERTON LEARNS SOMETHING AND HAS "A SPELL."

"Oh, this society is false. One day, and soon, the true society will come. Then there will be no more lords; there will be free, living men. There will be no more wealth; there will be abundance for the poor. There will be no more masters; but there will be brothers. They that toil shall have. This is the future. No more prostration, no more abasement, no more ignorance, no more wealth, no more beasts of burden, no more courtiers, no more kings—but light."—VICTOR HUGO.

About 5 o'clock John and his father pulled up at the barn on the Cotterell homestead.

The sound of the rumbling old wagon caused Kate to look out the door, and with the glad cry—"O, ma, here's John!" she rushed to the barn, with her mother a close second. The big, handsome blacksmith was kissed and hugged, and with Kate holding him by the hand, started for the house; Mrs. Cotterell remaining at the barn for a confidential talk with her husband while he unharnessed and fed his team. The subjects of discussion at this secret session were the how and the what of supper for the distinguished guest who had come with Kate, and Mrs. Cotterell's misgivings as to whether they had anything "fit to set afore city folks." Another difficulty which troubled Mrs. Cotterell was the lack of tone in the dining-room appointments, and especially, the dishes, which were, as Mrs. Cotterell put it, "so awful cheap an' old fashioned to set afore folks that's been used to high-toned table fixin's."

Overton had suspected that some such thoughts might trouble the head of his kind hostess, and Kate having returned to him while John had gone to the pump to wash his face and hands and to comb his hair on the back porch, Overton told her, in the confidence which had become habitual between them, to persuade her mother not to go to trouble for him; that he would feel hurt if he were not treated precisely as if he belonged there. The mode of bringing about this consummation was left entirely to Kate's own tact. She went to look for her mother and succeeded so well in her mission that, when the time came, they all sat down to a good farm-house supper, which to Overton, then convalescent, seemed a feast fit for the gods; and he said so with such honest emphasis that Mrs. Cotterell was thenceforth his friend.

John had waited outside for his father and mother, and both he and his father wishing to postpone as long as possible the ordeal of meeting their "cited" guest, went about over the place together, while Mrs. Cotterell and Kate went in to prepare supper, Kate now and then going into the parlor to chat a moment with Overton, who was aimlessly turning over the leaves of the album on the "center table;" and it was not till they met around the supper table that he was at last introduced to Cotterell and John. Sam Cotterell was trying to think what would be just the right thing to say under the circumstances, when from force of habit he said it unconsciously: "Well, pitch in and eat!" Mrs. Cotterell was "mortified to death" at this rude etiquette, but Overton said:

"I'm in the habit of obeying orders, Mr. Cotterell, and you are in command; so here goes. I'm hungry and can't wait for ceremony. Kate, you have been telling your mother how I like my coffee!"

"Was you in the army?" said Cotterell eagerly.

"I was in it from 1862 until the big muster at Washington in 1865," answered Overton.

"What regiment? Was you with Sherman?" inquired Cotterell.

"Yes, I went through with him," answered Overton, and thereupon ensued some of that "old soldier talk" which Kate had declared to Dr. Carlington she had "heard at home many a time."

This reply in kind to Cotterell's challenge to "pitch in and eat," followed by old soldier talk, had the effect of putting all at their ease, especially as Overton did "pitch in" with such vigor as to show he was in earnest when he said he enjoyed his supper. For a time, John was "distant," as Mrs. Cotterell would have observed, and had not yet made up his mind to like the stranger guest; but in a few minutes, Overton, leaving off the subject of war, addressed a remark or two to the blacksmith, and soon had him telling about the Labor day dispute with as much freedom as if he and the stranger had been friends for years.

Supper was over, Kate and her mother had "cleared off the table," and had washed the dishes and put them away. Cotterell had done his chores, and all were together in the parlor;—the family talking as freely as if they had been alone, so thoroughly had Overton become one of them. John having recurred to the Labor day dispute and thrown out the remark that socialism was the only sensible thing for working men to agitate, and that mere "old fashioned unionism" was "behind the times," Overton said:

"You will pardon my ignorance of these things, Mr. Cotterell. It is not because I am a capitalist, I assure you; for only a few months ago, I was so poor that I had to beat my way on the 'blind baggage'—if you have ever heard of that luxurious mode of transportation?"

John laughed, and nodded assent. Overton continued:

"But I have been unable to find out anything definite about these new ideas. Do you mind giving me an explanation of socialism—what it is, and what it proposes to do?"

Nothing could have been more to John's liking than such an opportunity as this to expound his favorite philosophy, in which, indeed, he was thoroughly versed. So he began, and for half an hour entertained Overton with an exposition of the socialist's creed.

"Well," said Overton, when John had concluded, "it is worth any good man's thorough study. What a happy world this would be if such a state of society should ever be brought about! No poverty, no prisons, no scaffolds; not even a soldier nor policeman. Delightful! And it does look practicable, as you explain it."

"Policemen?" said John as he frowned indignantly. "What servile tyrants they are! They're ready to lick the rich man's boots—the toadies! but have no mercy on the poor devils who are in their power. If there were any policemen on earth before the flood, I'll bet Jehovah never let a pair of 'em go into the ark. Just read over the names of the cusses when the newspapers tell of their supposed bravery during a strike in clubbing a lot of unarmed workingmen. Yet these same curs whine about oppression in Europe."

It were useless to attempt to repeat all that was said on this theme. Suffice it to say that it was a favorite topic with each of the speakers, and that they simply exhausted it. Here was, indeed, a bond of fellowship, and Overton and John went to occupy the same bed like old friends, and talked till they slept.

During the process of getting supper and of "clearing off" afterwards, Kate had found opportunity to tell her mother what Overton had proposed to do; and that night Mrs. Cotterell told her husband of their daughter's good fortune. Sam Cotterell was suspicious at first, because "folks don't do such things without some axe to grind;" but Mrs. Cotterell had more than half persuaded him before he went to sleep. Early next morning Overton and John took a walk about the place, and the former told of his acquaintance with Kate, his proposal to educate her, her

objections, and the legal-agreement scheme which he had finally hit upon with success; and he urged John to aid in getting the consent of the old folks to the arrangement. To his great delight, John, now thoroughly his friend, entered into the project with a will; and they were talking in flattering terms of Kate's possibilities when she joined them and put an end to their panegyrics.

"So you're going to college, at last, Kate? It's a great piece of luck, and I'm glad. You're deserving of the best there is," said John.

"Oh, has he—has Mr. Overton told you?" asked Kate. "And you are willing? Oh, I'm so glad! But what will pa say?"

"Pa has got to say 'yes,'" said John. "Do you suppose he'd stand in the way when you've such a chance? Of course not. You're all right, Kate. Don't you fear. I'll talk with father right now."

"You relieve me of a very embarrassing duty, Mr. Cotterell," said Overton; "and I can't be thankful enough. To tell the truth, I have rather dreaded to mention the matter, lest your father should have 'scruples', like Kate had."

"Well, I was right; now don't you think so?" asked Kate.

"Of course, Kate. I can't think of you as doing anything that is not right," said Overton.

Overton and Kate went back to the house, while John went to the barn where his father was feeding his horses. What John really wished was to impress upon the elder Cotterell the importance of treating very seriously Kate's agreement to repay the money to be advanced her; for he knew that if she should once come to think the written agreement a mere sham, she would forego her prospects rather than have anything to do with the scheme.

By this time, Cotterell had been completely won over by his wife, and viewed the proposal with favor, and John succeeded so well that when they had all come together in the parlor and Overton had stated the proposal, Cotterell assented, but made grave objections on the ground that this particular kind of an agreement—being in waiting, too—might cause Kate serious trouble if she should not see fit to repay the money. Of course, she could pay it, easily enough, once she got through college and got to be a typewriter or something, but she might not wish to give up her earnings, and this agreement would be too binding to break. He acted his part so well that John became afraid he might overdo it, and frighten Kate out of signing the paper. But it was all arranged at last, and Overton produced the legal document he had prepared and put into his pocket before leaving Cobden. It was an imposingly formal paper, but, having been carefully read by her, Kate signed it, and Mr. and Mrs. Cotterell witnessed it, whereupon Overton paid to Kate the first installment of \$250, and took her receipt.

It was arranged that when John returned to work Kate should accompany him to Graham, and be fitted out there by a *modiste*; for it would have excited remark had Sam Cotterell's daughter ought such an amount of goods at a Cobden store, especially for cash down.

John had little prospect of being at home again for months, and so was easily persuaded to stay another night, though at the risk of trouble with his boss. However, a neighboring farmer was going to town that afternoon, and by him John sent a message to be sent from the telegraph office at Cobden announcing that he would be absent another day.

That night after supper, all were in the parlor again; Kate and her mother in a corner discussing dry goods, millinery and the like; and Mr. Cotterell, John and Overton engaged in conversation concerning the new party. John was not an enthusiastic politician, and his father was laboring hard to convert him. Overton keenly enjoyed the debate, for he had heard little of the new political tenets, save from people who ridiculed them without knowing, or seeking to know, what they were; and he was learning a good deal. John's sole objection to the new party was that its platform did not go far enough to suit him.

"You can't patch up this old social system so as to do any permanent good," said he. "It's putting new cloth on an old garment. I've seen an old grist mill that was all awry—

twisted all out of shape every which-way—but every part of it shared in the twist and was adjusted to the general snarled condition. Now, if some man had come in and said, 'This beam, or this upright, or this something or other is crooked, is out of plumb,' and had fixed that particular part of the old mill just right, the old thing would have been thrown all out of gear and wouldn't have been fit to grind mud for a brick yard. Just so with the existing social system. It's all out of whack, so if you straighten up any particular part of it, the old thing will be all knocked out of gear, and we'll be worse off by and bye than we are now. You've got to overhaul the old mill all through, or you'd better let it be as it is. Patch work won't do any good. You've got to be satisfied with things as they are, or you've got to have socialism, one or the other. There's no middle ground—no room to tinker."

"Yes, but, John," said the father, "we dasen't get so blamed radical, or we couldn't accomplish *nothin'*. The people's homes are bein' taken away from 'em right now, and we have to do somethin' to stop it, without waitin' for the millennium. The people are conservative, specially farmers, and if we go too fast for 'em, they won't help us get what they've got to have right away."

"Now, Father," said John, "that's precisely where all you shrewd, practical folks make your great mistake. You think you different from the rest of the people, and imagine yourselves away ahead of the procession. You make a great mistake. The people must have some great end to accomplish, and their enthusiasm will be aroused. Mere patch-work notions can't arouse 'em. Right now, what is it that's given the new movement such a boom? Why, it's the scattering of thousands of "Looking Backwards" more than anything else. Yet you say socialism would scare these same people."

"Why, in course," said the father, "nobody'd get scared at the "Lookin' Backwards" scheme. I'm a nationalist myself. Lots of us are. But it would never do to talk your socialism to most of 'em."

John laughed. "And what is nationalism but another name for socialism?" said he. "Why, Bellamy's book works out the very same plan the state socialists have been writing about for years. Only a new name to dodge prejudice, nothing else."

"Is that so, John?" asked the farmer in surprise. "Is what "Lookin' Backwards" about socialism? Well, I vow! I didn't know that."

"It's a fact all the same," said John. "We socialists have been laughing in our sleeves to hear the same people denouncing socialism and declaring themselves nationalists. It's the same old thing, but it's bran new to them. They're like the man that got religion, and next day licked the first Jew he met. When the Jew asked him what he was licking him for, the new convert said it was because the Jews killed Christ. The Jew yelled: 'Why, that was 1,800 years ago.' 'The devil it was!' said the new convert. 'Well, I don't care when it was. I didn't hear of it till last night, and I'm going to lick you anyhow.'"

"Besides, you're not fooling anybody. Your whole platform's built on a socialistic foundation. You can't prove a single thing you demand ought to be done without proving socialism's right. Take your sub-treasury plan. Where's your principle to plant that on? What about the government owning and running the railroads? Where's your foundation for that? And your demand for the issue of more money? Don't you see that, when you come down to it, you're saying all the time the government oughtn't to be simply a policeman, but a great national, co-operative society?"

"Well, I vow!" exclaimed Cotterell the elder. "I hadn't seen it that way before. I'll be blamed if that aint a fact, though, John. I reckon I must have had hay seed in my eyes instead of my hair."

"If you haven't seen it," said John, "the people you're fighting have. Look here at a couple of pieces copied in a paper I picked up some time ago in the shops. Some cuss that takes all the republican papers say as gospel, had brought his dinner in it." And John pulled from his pocket a greasy and badly used fragment of a Public