NECK OR NOTHING.

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CHAPTER I.

Commencement day is, so to speak, resurrection day in the good old college town of Shingleton, set among the red clay hills and the sweet smelling pines that belong to one of the oldest counties in the state of Mississippi.

On commencement day there is a general uprising of the population, sparse and scattered as it is, to see that Shingleton does credit to itself and honor to the college.

Poor and rich, humble and haughty, from the baker's baby burdened wife up to the president's childless "lady," every one makes common cause of the annual and stirring climax to a year of somewhat languid intellectual exertion.

Local pride and feminine ingenuity are evoked confidently and exercised without stint. It is only once a year that Shingleton challenges public attention, and it strenuously endeavors to pose respectably on that one important date, putting out of sight, as far as possible, every indication of its ordinary out at heelness.

Shingleton frankly admits that its everyday methods may be open to criticism and is mildly convinced that in a hand to hand contest for municipal laurels with any one of the half dozen plebeian little towns that have sprung up since it reached its majority it would very likely come off second if not third best.

But the staid old college town does not medtate any such unseemly contest with the villages whose mushroom activities are an offense in its nostrils. Shingleton stands upon its dignity in an attitude of perpetual aloofness from its neighbors.

Marks of age and of pinching poverty pit its venerable face deeply. Its paintless fences, its crumbling brick houses, its weather stained frame buildings, its patched and peeling stucco facades, are drearily suggestive of a badly pock-marked old face.

If it were not for the college, Shingleton might have dropped out of the memory of every one but the mapmakers long ago. But the college is, has been and will be a thing of today, yesterday and tomorrow, linking Shingleton's pathetic present with a splendid past and a problematical future.

Local pride clusters with considerable confidence about the two solemn eyed dingy red brick houses that are set squarely in the middle of vast acres of untilled and untillable ground in the suburbs of the town. These houses are brick and mortar twins. The same number of broad, squat windows in each, duplicate front doors, clumsy and ponderous, gloomy suggestions of jail facilities. The same number of blunt topped chimneys, whose growth might have been arrested by cyclones, or whose stunted proportions might have been the exponents of the mason's groveling spirit. The same description of low ceiled, white finished, rectangular apartments in each.

One of these time defying creations is the college proper, the other shelters the professors' families and the boarding students. No ornamental vine or officious fig tree flings superfluous protection over the stern fronts of the two college houses. They rise superior to all such effete requirements, and all day long the squat, square window panes, with their heavy green blinds plastered against the brick walls, stare unblinking at the sun.

Equidistant between these two self sufficient structures is a small oval inclosure known as "the garden." The gate to it is always locked and the whereabouts of the key always an inscrutable mystery. The designer of this solitary decorative touch evidently had leanings toward the enduring.

Some unperishing box trees, a few long lived arbor vitæs, a large laurø mundi or two, a tangle of pink and white azaleas, long since grown to the dimensions of trees, all clustered irregularly about the stem of a century plant whose blossom tide had occurred but once within the memory of Shingleton, but furnished then a sort of floral calendar back to which any event of local importance might be referred as having happened before or after the college century plant had blossomed.

Occasionally gardeners who have been hired to nip any desultory tendencies on the part of the rigid shrubs and bushes within this rigid inclosure have brought to light specimens of petrified wood, which seem, curiously enough, to be the most natural product of the petrified garden.

These specimens, duly classified and labeled, have been honored with conspicuous places in the rather meager geological collection which finds ample accommodation in a small showcase purchased at a milliner's bankrupt sale. This collection of minerals in the showcase is called the college museum and is an object of respectful awe to the village urchins.

Nothing but a barbed wire fence is between this arid nursery of learning and nature in her sweetest, wildest, most riotous mood. Close about the college grounds great forest trees crowd and fling soft, thick, soothing shadows far out over the bare, hot sod of the college inclosure. Wild grapevines and flaming "trumpeters" clamber tumultuously over the sharp barbs of the fence, adorning the rain washed gullies about them with a delicate, lacelike tracery of green. Into the very presence of the pundits the laughter of a babbling creek intrudes. It leaps untrammeled over its bed of shining pebbles in gleeful mockery of man's laborious efforts to master nature's well kept secrets. The creek knows them all by heart, at least all that it concerns it to know. As for the rest—poof! That for it! It lets them all alone. Wise babbler!

On commencement day this creek is an important factor in the general festivities. All the day long vehicles of all sorts and condition toil collegeward over hot and dusty clay roads, depositing a mixed cargo of anxious matrons, bright eyed girls, wondering infants and well stuffed hampers for the commencement collation.

At the open door of Shingleton's one church the cargoes are deposited with a minimum of consideration for the children and a maximum for the hampers, after which the straining beasts and the dust laden vehicles are driven into the creek for the rest and refreshment. Far across its dimpling waters the switch willows stretch their slender green wands, to the infinite content of the hot and panting brutes.

Commencement day partakes of the character of a rite; hence the entire propriety of holding the exercises in the town's one consecrated building. The church, red, rectangular, respectable, environed by dark browed cedars and whispering pines, opens its doors and its windows hospitably wide on these occasions.

Feminine ingenuity always exhausts itself upon the church decorations for commencement day. Conspicuous talent is displayed in the immense wooden arch that spans the brand new plank rostrum, which has for its underpinning the pulpit and the chancel rail. The startling crudeness of this material rainbow is softened to the eye by a wrapping of gray Spanish moss, into which is stuck, with happy irrelevance, hydrangeas, sunflowers, roses and gladioluses.

From the keystone of this gorgeous arch springs always the symbol of aspiration, as interpreted by the lady decorators of Shingleton, a ladder made of cedar wisps, more or less successfully hiding from view an intrusive groundwork of white pasteboard. It is under this work of art that the pallid and quaking orators of the day take their stand, to make targets of themselves for countless bright eyes and for the crueler darts of rival criticism.

Girls are always out in force on commencement day, not that they take any abiding interest in the educational aspect of the occasion, but the brass band which occupies the choir loft and dispenses the most depressingly solemn music during the exercises is engaged to officiate at the dance in which commencement always culminates.

Shingleton has just cause for pride on these occasions, and some orator is sure to assert from the rostrum, without fear of contradiction, that so much of beauty and talent and grace could not possibly be gathered together in any other known spot on the earth.

After the declaiming is all safely through with there will be a dinner out under the cedar trees in the old churchyard. No one objects to the somber presence of the occasional tombstones that crop above the tall weeds in the churchyard. They come rather handy, in fact, the tall and conical ones as hatracks, the flat ones as receptacles for the ice cream freezers and the lemonade buckets. The sunken and effaced inscriptions appeal to no unhealed griefs. They are at once too obscure and too familiar to flutter the faintest pulses. Shingleton's resurrection day is for the quick, not for its dead.

Every housekeeper within a radius of ten miles stands sponsor to the dinner spread that day on the long, precarious plank tables under the cedar trees, through whose breeze stirred branches the sunshine falls upon the white tablecloths in dots and checks.

Enforced attention for several hours to declamations, sometimes trite, always crude, is productive of ravening hunger. From the inevitable roast pig, with the red apple clinched in its fixed jaws, down to the lightest salads, everything is provided on a colossal scale by the experienced housewives of Shingleton, who for weeks past have merged private interests, personal dislikes, moldy disputes and inherited feuds in the one cause for which Shingleton moves and has its being.

Commencement day of 1859 was no exception to its predecessors. It came in June, as it always did. It was hot and dusty, as it always was. Everything and everybody who shared the social responsibilities of the occasion were in a state of smiling readiness, as they always were. If now the boys would only "quit themselves like men," Shingleton's proud record would remain unbroken.

To the usual interest of this particular commencement at the eleventh hour was added an element of painful surprise. An ominous whisper was afloat. A foreshadowed disgrace threatened Shingleton. An illusive veil of mystery dropped like a pall over the familiar scene of the decorated church with its beflowered rainbow and the precarious tables with their load of comestibles.

A robbery had been committed at the college, not only at the college, but in the college. Cash and valuables belonging to the professors and students had disappeared under circumstances compelling the conviction that some one of the students was the culprit.

Shingleton accepted the possibility of crime in connection with its college slowly and incredulously. In view of the fact that nearly all of the boys came from well known families of high social position, it was almost beyond conception that any one of them should stoop to the plebeian offense of stealing.

To a man they belonged to the slave-holding aristocracy. They were the sons of planters, doctors, lawyers. The offspring of senators and congressmen had drunk at the Shingleton fountain of learning, and, crowning boast, the grandson of a bishop was among the declaimers booked for that identical mystery shadowed commencement day.

There was nothing commonplace about Shingleton. Nothing shocking had ever happened there, and the possibility of disgrace overtaking it through the medium of any one of its young aristocrats shook the congregated housewives to the very center of their nervous systems.

Mrs. Fitzwilliams, absently dipping a long handled gourd in and out of the lemonade barrel, conveyed to Mrs. Maginnis, who was slicing cold tongue into newspapers spread on a neighboring tombstone, her conviction that "the thing was impossible. There was not a plebeian in the whole college, from President Hopkins down."

Mrs. Maginnis poised her carving knife reflectively. "Yes, one."

"You mean that young Martin?"

"Yes."

"Why, he is the valedictorian. They say he is dreadfully smart, studious and ambitious beyond everything; midnight oil sort of boy, you know."

"His father is old Colonel Strong's overseer," said Mrs. Maginnis, stabbing the cold tongue severely.

"Ye-s, that's true. But the boy came here with Adrien Strong. That ought to be indorsement enough. In fact, as I understand it, Colonel Strong sent him with his grandson because the boys had grown up together on the plantation and the overseer had named this boy for him, which inclined him to give him a better chance for an education than overseers' sons usually get."

"Or need. I think Colonel Strong is doing wrong, very wrong indeed, in breaking down the barriers in this way. What will that poor boy do with the education he has spent four year in acquiring when he goes back to the plantation?"

"He need not necessarily go back to the plantation. The world is not bounded by Colonel Strong's plantation fence. Let him strike out for himself."

Mrs. Maginnis fixed a troubled gaze on the heaped cold tongue on the tombstone. Mrs. Fitzwilliams' last remark struck her as revolutionary. She was sorry to hear such views advocated in Shingleton. It pained her doubly to hear them from the lips of her own sister-in-law.

"Well, if this theft is traced to the door of that overseer's son it will go a long way toward proving the folly of any attempt to educate the masses. Perhaps it may be as you say, the world is not bounded by Colonel Strong's plantation fence, but I still contend that it was a very uncalled for pulling down of social fences for him to have sent his own grandson and his overseer's son here on a footing of social equality that cannot possibly be maintained when they go home."

"The boys are devoted to each other."

"Now—yes, perhaps."

"Lawyer Seephar is to address the boys on the subject of those robberies when the exercises are over. I told Henriette to wave her handkerchief as soon as he took the stand. I don't care to go inside before."

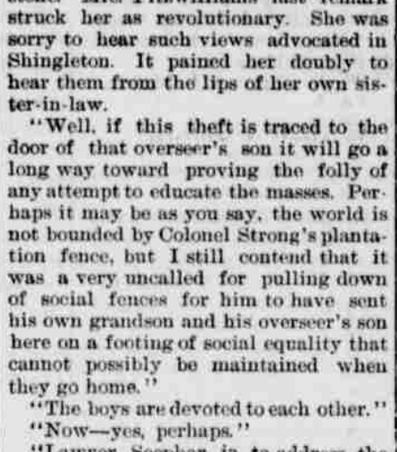
"Nor I. I confess one does tire of the dear boys when one has been listening to them straight along for 15 unchanging years."

In due season a white handkerchief fluttered briefly in one of the open windows. Mrs. Fitzwilliams spread a pink mosquito bar carefully over the lemonade barrel and Mrs. Maginnis secured the cold tongue against the possible depredations of flies and spiders. Then they were ready for the church.

"Keep your eye on that Martin boy, Nell, while old Seephar is scoring the boys, and I will too. We will compare notes afterward."

With this understanding the amateur detectives separated, each passing by a different aisle well up toward the hydrangeas and the sunflowers that were making a brilliant halo about Counselor Seephar's sternly intellectual face.

Each seated herself where she could get an unobstructed view of the valedictorian's face. He was seated on the front form, this overseer's son, who, by right of his plebeian extraction and social abasement must be the offender against all of Shingleton's proud traditions. He sat there with his arms quietly folded.



"Yes, one."

Lawyer Seephar was noted for his ferocious onslaughts upon wrongdoing in any shape. The line of argument he employed on this occasion for probing the college mystery to its core was the value of testimony.

The flimsy sentiment that honor demanded the sheltering of a culprit he pierced through and through with barbed arrows of scorn and denunciation.

The first duty devolving upon every student there, who was but a citizen in embryo, was his duty to his state. The obligation to deliver up the guilty party, to be whipped of justice, no matter how near or dear the culprit might be personally, was held up for grave consideration.

Pushing his iron gray locks impatiently back, that he might the better sweep that row of youthful upturned faces, the old lawyer exhorted them with impressive solemnity to perform their duty on this occasion, even though it demanded the iron resolution of a Brutus.

The sound of stertorous breathing from the front form caught Mrs. Fitzwilliams' alert attention. She telegraphed Mrs. Maginnis with her fan:

"Look at him!"

Mrs. Maginnis looked at Strong Martin. His aspect of composed attention had been tumultuously broken up. He had turned sidewise on the bench, and the fixed gaze which he had at first planted on Lawyer Seephar's face was now roving restlessly among the tops of the cedars that tapped the window frames with their dark fingers. From an ivory whiteness, that had lent a fine touch of intellectuality to his features, his complexion had turned to a crimson bordering on purplish. Occasional movements of a long, nervous hand to his necktie suggested physical discomfort in that region. His handkerchief went often to his brow. Mrs. Maginnis telegraphed Mrs. Fitzwilliams with her eyes:

"Did you ever see guilt more plainly revealed?"

But Lawyer Seephar's ringing voice imperatively demanded undivided attention:

"In conclusion, young gentlemen, I have this to say: I make no apology for addressing you on the law of testimony. You know well what directed my choice of subjects this morning. A crime has been committed, and some of you know by whom. If the knowledge could be traced home to you, you would, by the law of your state, be liable to imprisonment for failure to testify. As it is, I leave it to your own consciences. That you cannot elude. And if it succeeds in convincing you that it is your duty as men of honor to shield one guilty man and permit suspicion to rest on a score or two of innocent ones, all I have to say is that it is a miserable, paltry, lying conscience that will stand you in poor stead when you leave the sheltering arms of your alma mater and go out to an inevitable hand to hand struggle with the power of evil lying in wait for you in the world."

The like of it had never been seen or heard in the old red brick church before. The June zephyrs, astray from the fields of ripening corn, floated in at the open windows and lifted the old man's long hair from his heated brow, then wandered off to play at hide and seek in the artificial flowers of a girl's hat. The mocking birds were singing the very fullest throated sonatas out there in their cedar branch swings. With folded arms the college boys gazed unmoved at the old man eloquent.

Side by side Adrien Strong and Strong Martin sat on the front form. Adrien, aristocrat from the smallest wave of his light tawny hair to the tips of his faultless boots; Strong, broad shouldered, massive, suggestive of a fine piece of sculpture rather than a crude, struggling lad, bitterly conscious already that he was to run his race heavily handicapped.

Adrien's clear, frank eyes never left the lawyer's face once. In point of fact, not one of the students had followed the harangue with more pointed interest and unbroken composure. He never once unlocked his placidly folded arms. On either side the pink nails of his well kept hands were restfully planted against the blue serge sleeves of his coat. Occasionally, with a light toss of his head he threw back a wind blown wisp of fair hair.

When Strong Martin had shifted his position, he had turned his back partially on Adrien. They never once looked at or spoke to each other.

As through a veiling fog he saw the lawyer finally step backward to a table and lift a glass of water to his lips. The great speech was at an end. The plaintive band up in the choir loft struck into "Nearer, My God, to Thee." There was a rustle of women's garments and a movement of the crowd toward the door. Adrien Strong had risen with the crowd and stretched his long legs deliberately. Strong Martin alone remained seated.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The Local Flavor.

An American who had left his native country to travel in Europe with the maxim, "When in Rome do as the Romans do," well in mind, found himself in Marseilles. He wanted some ice cream and went into a restaurant and ordered it.

"What flavor will you have?" asked the waiter.

The American hesitated a moment and then remembered his maxim.

"Oh, garlic, I suppose," he answered.—Youth's Companion.

Rapid Change.

"My hair turned from raven black to snowy white in a single night."

"That's nothing. I went into a pawnbroker's shop once and stayed only 15 minutes. When I came out, my watch had turned from gold to silver."—London Tit-Bits.

Soap Bubble Hues.

beautiful colors seen in the soap arise from the fact that the bubble, very thin, reflects light from both er and inner surfaces of the film.