The World Against Him

By WILL N. HARBEN.

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pride, but the next moment he had another glimpse of her inmost soul. "Remember, Ronald," she said, "that I shall never kneel down without praying for you. Remember that I shall never love another man as long as I live!"

He bowed low; he tried to say something, but the ball in his throat rose and choked him. He heard the door close and knew she was gone.



"THEY CONCERN ONLY MYSELF," SAID RONALD.

Like an automaton, Hasbrooke moved forward and laid his two hands on the shoulders of the crushed young man.

"It has ended better than I could have hoped," he declared. "Bear up. Many things are within your grasp, but my child was not for you. She's not for me, either, Fanshaw" (sighing) "she'll never be the same again—never!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

The next month was December. Christmas day was made known to the Fanshaws chiefly by the fireworks which were discharged by the negroes on the Hasbrooke estate. The dawn came in with a great tooting of horns, beating of old pans, the discharge of guns, the bursting of inflated hog bladders. There was to be a cake-walk in the barn, a dance, a barbecued ox, a glorious feast, a Christmas tree.

The Fanshaws were not going to indulge even in an extra dinner. Ronald had remembered his hands by presents of money, but they were going to spend it in town. Something, however, did happen to mark the day as an eventful one. Old Jade Fanshaw was brought home in Bud Tarbell's dump cart, on a pile of wheat straw, covered by an old quilt. This occurred about 12 o'clock in the day. Ronald remembered that it took place just as the dinner bell rang at Carnleigh. Bud Tarbell told the little troop in the front yard that Jade "wasn't dead an' they needn't be skeerd." He explained that he was driving along a mountain road looking for sticks of lightwood when he saw Fanshaw walking ahead of him as fast as a dollar as far as he was able to see. He looked away for a minute and then he saw Fanshaw down on his all-fours, crawling along with head down like a grazing cow.

"At fust I was afeerd of 'im, fur he was actin' mighty curis," observed Tarbell, "but terrectly his knee jints seemed to flicker an' he come down kerplunk in the mud on his stomach. Then I drive up an' put 'im in my cart."

Mrs. Fanshaw was always a calm woman; she went out at the gate, waddled up to the cart, and shook the human heap on the straw.

"Looky heer, what's a-ailin' of you, Jade?" she asked, seeing his eyes open.

Fanshaw sat up slowly, but he looked like a man with only a shadow of a soul in him; his eyes glared in ghastly sockets and their whites had turned red. As he looked round at the group he seemed to recognize them, but a shifting look of terror was in his glance. He began to work his lips, to the edge of which his stubbly beard grew, but only unintelligible sounds issued.

"His tongue is paralyzed," commented his wife; "look how that side is drawed down to his neck. I declare he's got a wad o' tobacco between his jaws clamped thar as tight as a cider press. Jade, spit that thar truck out! Spit it out, I tell you!" And as he paid no heed to her commands, she thrust her forefinger between his almost toothless gums as if he were a child and pried out the brown mass. "Well!" she said, resignedly, "we'll have to git 'im in the house, Bud will want his cart. Come, you boys" (to Ronald and David) "help lift 'im out."

Dave sprang into the cart, and Ronald was about to do the same, when Fanshaw's distended eyes fell on him. The old man raised his hands as if to ward off a blow and cried in words now easily understood: "Take 'im away; he wants to kill me!"

Ronald paused, but Fanshaw's terror did not abate. He got to his feet quickly and springing from the cart he ran his knees knocking together, across the road towards the woods. "Stop 'im, he's tryin' to kill me! He wants me to tell 'im who he is, an' whar t'other is buried!"

A remarkable change came over Mrs. Fanshaw; she turned quickly to Ronald, and with an uneasy smirk, said: "Don't you go nigh 'im, Ron; he's clean out'n his senses, an' thar ain't no tellin' what quar notion might strike 'im."

Ronald stood wondering, as Tarbell and Dave ran after the old man. They caught him by his arms and began to half carry, half drag him towards the house. But Fanshaw's distended eyes were still fixed on Ronald in affright and he struggled and fought his captors like a wild man.

"I'm not agoin' to have 'im put me in jail," he snorted. "He's done reported it to Reddin', an' together they are agoin' to have me swing for what I never done!"

Again Mrs. Fanshaw faced Ronald; this time she stood between him and his father. A frightened look of cunning lay in her heavy-browed eyes. "If I was you, Ron," she said, hurriedly, "I'd go upstairs; he's tuck a quar notion somehow that you are agin 'im, an' I wouldn't aggravate 'im."

Glad of an excuse to get away from the harrowing scene our hero went up to his room. Presently he heard the clatter of hob-nailed boots on the porch. The old man, now pacified, was being led like a dumb animal to his room. Then all was quiet be[illegible] voices lasted till he hear[illegible] outside speaking th[illegible] pane to his mother.

"I'm a-goin' to ride fur a doctor," he was saying.

The floor complained of its burden as Mrs. Fanshaw went out on the porch. "Well," she replied, "you might as well, I reckon; but I wouldn't git Sloan; he'll charge two prices, an' dun us to death. It hain't nothin' but a stroke o'ahn, an' his drugs nur nobody else's can reach it. It's jest a question o' time. Dr. Wade will do as well as anybody."

Later in the afternoon Ronald had come down and was sitting before the fire in the living room. The wan had fallen asleep, watched by Bud Tarbell, who had sent his cart home and offered his services according to the custom among neighbors in that vicinity. Mrs. Fanshaw came in and began to look for a bottle of liniment on the mantelpiece.

"Dr. Wade's jest gone off," she told Ronald, "he says it's the second stroke he's had, an' that the next one will carry 'im off as sure as preachin'. If I was you I wouldn't go nigh 'im, Ron. It's best to humor pissons like he is."

Our hero made no reply. Dave came from the sick room and stood on the stone hearth warming his toes at the flames. Mrs. Fanshaw had found the bottle for which she was searching, and turned to go.

"He won't last long," she said to Dave; "seems to me I heerd yore pa say he left off payin' on his life insurance."

"Two yeer ago he did," said David, despondently. "I had put good money of my own into that, thinkin' if he died the insurance would help us buy a farm of our own out west, whar Uncle Joe says they are so cheap, but in that hard-time season when all the crops was burnt pa let it lapse, an' it's gone to the devil."

"It's jest our usual luck," grumbled the old woman; "some 'n would 'a' happened to a-kept all that money from reachin' us anyhow. We never was born under a good star."

Ronald looked up.

"You needn't let that bother you, mother," he said, softly. "The insurance policy is all right; I attended to it."

The sudden change in Mrs. Fanshaw was not alone due to gratified surprise. Ronald thought he had never seen her look at him quite so strangely. She started to say something, which seemed to have rushed impulsively to her tongue, and then she shook her shoulders, closed her lips tightly and left the room.

Dave laughed. "She certainly acts peculiar to-day," he said. "Dang it, pa does, too, as for that matter. I wish you could a heerd 'im rant about you jest now. He thinks you've got old Reddin' an' twenty other lawyers on his track about some'n."

To this observation our hero made no response.

CHAPTER XIX.

The next stroke, two days later, silenced Jade Fanshaw's tongue forever. It fell at dawn, just as a big red rooster under the house crowed and flapped his wings. Dave came upstairs and shook his brother, who had fallen asleep only about an hour before.

"Well," he said, "the old man has handed in his checks. Gerwhilikins, Ron, I'm beginnin' to think I've run my blasted head into a secret of ma an' pa's that they've kept from us fur over a quarter of a century. All night long, an' up to the time he tuck his last suck of air the old man talked of nothin' else but you—you—you, an' some dead soldier."

"He seems to imagine—" Ronald began, but Dave interrupted him.

"Imagine a dog's hind foot!" he blurted out. "That's some'n behind all them hints an' threats that have been passin' betwixt ma an' pa sence I was knee high to a bow-legged duck, an' I have, at this late day, got my fust whiff of a dead mouse. You don't have to knock me down with a load o' mill rocks as a general thing; I can see a inch 'fore my eyes, of I am cross-eyed. The old man kept runnin' on last night about a baby an' its dead daddy; an' ma kept tryin' to keep me from understandin' till she fell asleep out o' pure weariness of the brain an' then the truth begun to creep into my noggin, Ron, I never did think you was a bit like the rest of us, an' now I'm sure you don't belong to this litter."

Ronald sat up on the edge of his bed, as white as death could have made him.

"Are you in earnest, Dave?" he questioned.

"If ever I was in my life."

"Did you find out anything—positive?" the last word came out with a jerk.

"No, but you can, Ron; ma is all broke up. She knows you saved the insurance, an' she would answer any question you ask. I'd go to 'er, after the buryin', an' demand to know it all. She'll tell you."

At this juncture the voice of Mrs Fanshaw came up to them as she shook the latch of Ann Josephine's door: "Wake up, Josie," she said, "yore pa's been dead a good half hour, an' thar ain't nobody to cook breakfast!"

Ronald began to dress himself.

"Dave," he said, "your suspicion has taken me completely by surprise; I have suspected for a good many years that they did not feel towards me as they did to the rest, but I cannot yet believe I am not really—a Fanshaw."

"Wait till you talk to ma," counseled David. "Be shore you come at 'er exactly right. Make 'er feel shore you won't give 'er a speck o' trouble an' she'll let the cat out the bag."

The next day when Jade Fanshaw's unpainted box was lowered into the grave near the meeting house, half a mile over the hills, the straw was falling so fast that the faces of the few mourners and neighbors who stood around could hardly be recognized. The mound had scarcely received its shape when it was raked in white. It was as if Nature had spread an emblem of forgiveness over Jade Fanshaw's last resting place.

Ronald rode home in the wagon containing Mrs. Fanshaw, Dave, the two girls and Bud Tarbell. Arriving at home the girls went into the house and Mrs. Fanshaw bustled about on the backporch, opening the window blinds which she had closed that no one might gain access to her house during the absence of the family. There Ronald found her, still in her bonnet and heavy shawl. Her eyes fell before the hungry stare of his own.

"I want to see you in private," he said, excited in spite of a strong effort at calmness. She moved as if to pass him and go [illegible] paused before him, a dogged expression in her unsteady glance.

"Dave's been blabbin' to you, Ron," she said; "I wouldn't pay no attention to that boy."

"You've been keeping something from me—something concerning myself, all my life," he heard himself saying in deliberate tones.

She caught her breath, and then looked through the hall at Bud Tarbell, who was turning his wagon away from the gate.

"Dave tol' me back thar at the grave jest now," she faltered, "that you said you never would give 'me no trouble about anything. If I knowed that you would not bring me to court, an' that you would let us have the insurance money to buy land in Texas, Ron, I'd not keep back a thing."

"Your name shall never be mentioned," he promised, now chilled to the center of his heart by what might be revealed. "I have a right to know it, if I am not your son, and not his. You know you are welcome to the insurance money."

"Can't you put it off till after supper, when all the rest is asleep? I am so excited—"

"No, I'd rather know now," he said.

The wind blew the fine flakes of snow under the roof of the porch, and they fell and melted on her iron-gray locks. He did not look at him when she began, nor did she give him her eyes steadily once through the whole recital.

"You've heerd 'bout yore pa's bushwhackin' days up in Tennessee et durin' of the war," she began. "He was a sort of a head man against 'em all. He made a good deal by it, fust an' last. He used to tell me all about it 'fore we got married an' I was sech a foolish young thing that I thought his conduct was smart, an' that Jade Fanshaw was about the finest ketch in them mountains. They did their biggest business an' made their biggest hauls by capturin' folks that was travelin' heer an' yan through the mountains to git away from the war, as most of sech folks had an' up to the time he tuck his last suck of air the old man talked of nothin' else but you—you—you, an' some dead soldier."

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"Well, they say he had no sooner put foot to the ground 'fore the nigger driver whipped up the hosses like mad an' managed to dodge the shots an' git away. The tale Jake always told me was that the officer started off at full speed after the carriage an' got shot accidentally, fallin' with you in his arms. The most part of it fur the gang was that the man had no money about him, an' they had a live squallin' baby on hands. Then they drawed lots as to who was to put the baby out o' pain, an' it fell to Jade, an' he fetched you to put the job off on me. I'd been married two yeer an' never had no child, an' as I was by myself in a lone cabin from morning till night an' often all night I begged Jade to let me have you fur company an' as he didn't seem to want to bother more about it, he give in. Nobody but the gang ever knowed you wasn't my child an' they scattered to all parts of the world after the surrender. After that Dave an' the gals was born an' nobody ever suspicioned that you wasn't a Fanshaw."

Ronald, pale and excited, leaned against the water-shelf.

"Do you know the name of the officer?" he asked.

"Thar wasn't a thing to show who he was," answered Mrs. Fanshaw. "He didn't have a thing in his pockets except a silver tobacco box. You've seed it a hunderd times; all the children cut their teeth on it; it's in the front room with matches in it."

She went into the house and brought it back.

"I've told many a lie about this little trick," she admitted, with a shrug and a little smile as she gave it to him.

He had seen the box often before, and remembered that words were engraved on it. He held it to the light, making out the following: "From Elizabeth to—"

"This does not help me much," he said, "but I shall not rest till I know who I am. Is any of the old band living now?"



MRS. CECELIA STOWE, Orator, Entre Nous Club.

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Cecelia Stowe

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CHAPTER XX.

Another summer had come. Ronald was now Redding's law partner, and lived in town. He had put up no sign, having told his partner that he would not do so till he had found out his rightful name. Dave and his mother and sisters had moved to Texas and purchased a good farm from the sale of their own place and the insurance money.

One morning in July Redding hustled into the office as our hero sat reading at his desk. The old man wore a[illegible] expression and look, as [illegible] trying to have Ron think [illegible] what had happened. But our hero calmly gave him a hurried good morning and went on with his reading.

Redding sat down at his own desk and threw up the roller top with a great clatter. "Well," he began, "you don't have the least curiosity in the world about anything. Why haven't you asked a feller what he's been all mornin'?"

Ronald smiled as he looked up from his book. "I thought you might be ill. I was going to send round to see about you."

"You couldn't guess, to save yore life. The truth is, old Hasbrooke sent for me just as I was leaving the breakfast table, an' I went right out to the plantation. What he wanted, an' what I dropped on to while I was thar, would fill a wonder book. He's laid up with a sprained ankle, or he would have come in to talk over the matter with us."

The old lawyer pinched his nose several times and winked slyly into Ronald's expectant face. "You had a fool notion, young man, that I was doin' a sort of charity act in takin' you in with me, but I knowed which side my bread was buttered on. I knowed you'd draw business, and plenty of it. Well, the colonel opened up by sayin' that he'd always felt a big interest in you, an' sence you've made such a rep' with yore speech on the Lester robbery case he's made up his mind to he'p push you along."

Ronald's face had fallen. There was something in the idea of Col. Hasbrooke's patronage that offended his pride.

"I am sure I have never expected aid from him in any way, and it depends on the nature of his proposition as to whether I shall—"

"Don't fly off the handle," grinned Redding; "it's only business for the



HE CAME TO THE WALK TO MEET HIM.

firm. He said his affairs had never been in a mixed satisfactorily by Lee and West (it seems they got to thinkin' they owned about all the old man had). He said it had got so he had to go in to see 'em two or three times 'fore they would attend to what he wanted, an' they was paid a lump sum by the year. He has jest offered us the job, an' I accepted it before he could bat his eyes. I call it the fattest thing I ever run across, an' I owe you for my half of it."

"He is certainly very kind," answered Ronald, his brow ruffled with a frown; "for your sake, at any rate, I shall raise no objection, but he and I—"

"Ah!" broke in Redding, leaning forward in his chair, "I kinder thought he acted quar about it; he kept axin' ef I knowed for sure if you'd object, an' said maybe I ort to see you first before takin' up the proposition, but I knowed a good thing, an' didn't want no chance o' lettin' it go, so I tol' 'im you'd be tickled to death. Well, even ef you an' him have been at outs, he's showed a willingness to patch it up, an' you ought to let by-gones be by-gones."

"Oh, it will be all right," said our hero. "I shall write him a note of appreciation."

"But I hain't told you all yet," Redding's face took on a serious look, "an' I know you will want to kick me for meddlin' in yore private affairs, but the truth is, I got my foot in it before I thought. He was axin' about yore mother an' the childern—I mean the Fanshaws—an' somehow I felt so good over what he had done that I up an' let yore cat out o' the bag. I confided to him every blame thing you've told me about your family mystery, an' the search you'd made up in Tennessee for the grave. Well, sir, the old man looked like he was goin' to faint. I never seed nobody act like he did; he jumped up on his sore foot an' began to yell half the time in pain an' the other half to Miss Evelyn, who was in the j'inin' room with Mrs. Lancaster. She got heer yesterday. They come to the door just as he got thar, an' they all went into the room an' fell to jabberin' like rips. After awhile, I heerd 'im yell for camphor an' water, an' I 'lowed somebody was dead. It turned out that the old lady keeled over in a dead swoon. I set thar for half an hour wonderin' what on earth to do, till Hasbrooke finally come in lookin' as peculiar out o' the eyes as ef he'd been ketched stealin' a sheep. He apologized for keepin' me waitin', but said he stayed to have a talk with Mrs. Lancaster after she come to. He said he was sorry he didn't feel at liberty to make a full explanation, but that the old lady wanted me to ride to town an' send you out thar as fast as you could travel. He followed me to the front steps, an' then he said: 'Tell Mr. Fanshaw that she can tell him all about his parentage—tell him to make haste!'"

For a moment both men stared into each other's eyes.

"Perhaps Mrs. Lancaster knew my parents," Ronald said finally. "Tell Redding, you can understand that this is of the greatest importance to me. I shall go out at once."

"That's right," agreed Redding. "I left my hoss hitched at the door. G[illegible] head; I believe you are on the right track to a solution of that matter."

CHAPTER XXI.

Arriving at Carnleigh half an hour later, for he had ridden hard, Ronald found the colonel hobbling about near the tennis court, a big stick in his hand. Seeing the new arrival, he came to the walk to meet him, his whole body working with agitation.

"Come right in," he said, giving Ronald his hand. "She's dying with impatience. She wanted to drive out to meet you on the road, but I made her wait. Did you ever hear of the like?"

Ronald wanted to say that he was off in the dark, but his host was loudly calling to a groom and waving his hand towards the horse. Just then our hero saw Mrs. Lancaster standing in the doorway and wildly motioning him to approach. Leaving the lame man to get up the steps as best he could, Ronald ascended to the woman, who stood both hands outstretched, her distended eyes boring into his own.

"Oh, don't you know yet?" she questioned, as she read his blank face, "can't you guess the truth?" She wrung his hand and stepped backward to the door of the drawing-room as if to draw him away from all eyes save her own.

"Mr. Redding told me," he began, "that you might be able to give me some information—"

"Don't you see," she broke in, with warm tenderness. "Don't you feel the truth? I am your mother!"

He found himself unable to articulate a word. Something seemed to bear down on his brain; for a moment there was a blur before his sight. As if in a dream he felt her leading him across the drawing-room to a sofa.

"I am your mother," she said, as she drew him down to a seat beside her, "and I thank God for allowing me to find it out before my death. I have loved you in a strange, unaccountable way ever since I met you. When I heard you were in prison it almost drove me wild. Evelyn wrote me about your arrest, and then it was a week before I learned of your release. My name is Elizabeth; I gave your father that silver tobacco-box; and, moreover, I lost you exactly where you were taken during the war. I am so happy! I am actually afraid my joy will kill me."

She began to cry silently, and in his desire to comfort her he found himself clasping her hand and stroking back the white hair from her brow.

"And I am glad you are my mother," he said, simply. "You have been my ideal woman ever since that day you came to see me."

They sat together for an hour, making plans for the future.

"Evelyn and I are going to spend next year abroad," she told him, "and you are going with us. Col. Hasbrooke says he is too old for the journey and we shall need a man."

His face clouded for the first time during the interview.

"But Col. Hasbrooke—"

"He is simply wild to call you son-in-law," Mrs. Lancaster broke in, with a laugh. "Evelyn has been almost dead with sorrow since he separated you. I really believe he was coming round anyway. Yesterday he said a great deal about your nobility of character and talent. He always listens to me, and I told him there was nothing to be done but to let you have her. But that reminds me; she is waiting to see you. Poor, dear child! I never was so selfish—so thoughtless. I'm going to send her to you."

She rose and he nervously held her hands, a fixed look on his face.

"Are you sure," he faltered, "that I have the right to?"

His mother drew herself up to her full height. "You are a Lancaster," she said, proudly.

When she had passed through the heavy curtains obscuring a room in the rear, he sat for several minutes fairly dazed by what had taken place. His reverie was disturbed by the coming of Evelyn. A flush was on her slightly attenuated face, and her eyes were red and sparkled as if she had been crying, but she came to him with a firm, confident step, and put both her hands in his.

"It is all so wonderful," she said, simply. "I am actually too choked up to speak. I've been laughing, crying, and doubting the truth of it by turns ever since Mr. Redding went away."

"It seems like a dream to me," he made answer. "I am afraid I shall wake and find myself back in my little room over there on the farm."

"Mrs. Lancaster told me just now," said Evelyn, "that she had forgotten to tell you your given name. She asked me to inform you, but I hate to pronounce it. I shall never call you anything but Ronald. Will that suit you, sir?"

They were seated side by side on the sofa.

"I shall never want you to call me anything else," he smiled; "but I must own up to a little curiosity as to what I am legally entitled to."

"Charles Fanshaw," answered Evelyn. "Mrs. Lancaster was a Miss Erskine. How do you like it?"

"It's not bad," he laughed; "perhaps I may grow up to it in time."

Just then Hasbrooke looked in at the door and limped towards them, an almost boyish look of embarrassment on his face.

"I am going to beg your forgiveness for what I said the last time you were here," he said.

"I did not blame you, Col. Hasbrooke," was the reply.

"But I blame you," Evelyn turned on Ronald, suddenly. "If I had known your stupid reasons for picking a fuss, I should never have consented, never! I thought it was because—because you thought me too great a responsibility and a burden."

"Well, settle it between you," smiled her father. And when he had quitted the room they did.

THE END.

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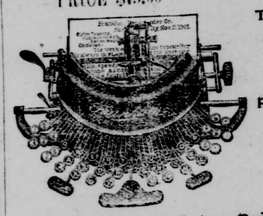
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