

## **ELDER BROWN'S BACKSLIDE**

By Harry Stillwell Edwards (1855- )

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Elder Brown told his wife good-by at the farmhouse door as mechanically as though his proposed trip to Macon, ten miles away, was an everyday affair, while, as a matter of fact, many years had elapsed since unaccompanied he set foot in the city. He did not kiss her. Many very good men never kiss their wives. But small blame attaches to the elder for his omission on this occasion, since his wife had long ago discouraged all amorous demonstrations on the part of her liege lord, and at this particular moment was filling the parting moments with a rattling list of directions concerning thread, buttons, hooks, needles, and all the many etceteras of an industrious housewife's basket. The elder was laboriously assorting these postscript commissions in his memory, well knowing that to return with any one of them neglected would cause trouble in the family circle.

Elder Brown mounted his patient steed that stood sleepily motionless in the warm sunlight, with his great pointed ears displayed to the right and left, as though their owner had grown tired of the life burden their weight inflicted upon him, and was, old soldier fashion, ready to forego the once rigid alertness of early training for the pleasures of frequent rest on arms.

"And, elder, don't you forgit them caliker scraps, or you'll be wantin' kiver soon an' no kiver will be a-comin'."

Elder Brown did not turn his head, but merely let the whip hand, which had been checked in its backward motion, fall as he answered

mechanically. The beast he bestrode responded with a rapid whisking of its tail and a great show of effort, as it ambled off down the sandy road, the rider's long legs seeming now and then to touch the ground.

But as the zigzag panels of the rail fence crept behind him, and he felt the freedom of the morning beginning to act upon his well-trained blood, the mechanical manner of the old man's mind gave place to a mild exuberance. A weight seemed to be lifting from it ounce by ounce as the fence panels, the weedy corners, the persimmon sprouts and sassafras bushes crept away behind him, so that by the time a mile lay between him and the life partner of his joys and sorrows he was in a reasonably contented frame of mind, and still improving.

It was a queer figure that crept along the road that cheery May morning. It was tall and gaunt, and had been for thirty years or more. The long head, bald on top, covered behind with iron-gray hair, and in front with a short tangled growth that curled and kinked in every direction, was surmounted by an old-fashioned stove-pipe hat, worn and stained, but eminently impressive. An old-fashioned Henry Clay cloth coat, stained and threadbare, divided itself impartially over the donkey's back and dangled on his sides. This was all that remained of the elder's wedding suit of forty years ago. Only constant care, and use of late years limited to extra occasions, had preserved it so long. The trousers had soon parted company with their friends. The substitutes were red jeans, which, while they did not well match his court costume, were better able to withstand the old man's abuse, for if, in addition to his frequent religious excursions astride his beast, there ever was a man who was fond of sitting down with his feet higher than his head, it was this selfsame Elder Brown.

The morning expanded, and the old man expanded with it; for while a vigorous leader in his church, the elder at home was, it must be admitted, an uncomplaining slave. To the intense astonishment of the beast he rode, there came new vigor into the whacks which fell upon his flanks; and the beast allowed astonishment to surprise him into

real life and decided motion. Somewhere in the elder's expanding soul a tune had begun to ring. Possibly he took up the far, faint tune that came from the straggling gang of negroes away off in the field, as they slowly chopped amid the threadlike rows of cotton plants which lined the level ground, for the melody he hummed softly and then sang strongly, in the quavering, catchy tones of a good old country churchman, was "I'm glad salvation's free."

It was during the singing of this hymn that Elder Brown's regular motion-inspiring strokes were for the first time varied. He began to hold his hickory up at certain pauses in the melody, and beat the changes upon the sides of his astonished steed. The chorus under this arrangement was:

*I'm glad salvation's free, I'm glad salvation's free, I'm glad salvation's free for all, I'm glad salvation's free.*

Wherever there is an italic, the hickory descended. It fell about as regularly and after the fashion of the stick beating upon the bass drum during a funeral march. But the beast, although convinced that something serious was impending, did not consider a funeral march appropriate for the occasion. He protested, at first, with vigorous whiskings of his tail and a rapid shifting of his ears. Finding these demonstrations unavailing, and convinced that some urgent cause for hurry had suddenly invaded the elder's serenity, as it had his own, he began to cover the ground with frantic leaps that would have surprised his owner could he have realized what was going on. But Elder Brown's eyes were half closed, and he was singing at the top of his voice. Lost in a trance of divine exaltation, for he felt the effects of the invigorating motion, bent only on making the air ring with the lines which he dimly imagined were drawing upon him the eyes of the whole female congregation, he was supremely unconscious that his beast was hurrying.

And thus the excursion proceeded, until suddenly a shote, surprised in his calm search for roots in a fence corner, darted into the road, and stood for an instant gazing upon the newcomers with that idiotic stare which only a pig can imitate. The sudden appearance of this unlooked-for apparition acted strongly upon the donkey. With one supreme effort he collected himself into a motionless mass of matter, bracing his front legs wide apart; that is to say, he stopped short. There he stood, returning the pig's idiotic stare with an interest which must have led to the presumption that never before in all his varied life had he seen such a singular little creature. End over end went the man of prayer, finally bringing up full length in the sand, striking just as he should have shouted "free" for the fourth time in his glorious chorus.

Fully convinced that his alarm had been well founded, the shote sped out from under the gigantic missile hurled at him by the donkey, and scampered down the road, turning first one ear and then the other to detect any sounds of pursuit. The donkey, also convinced that the object before which he had halted was supernatural, started back violently upon seeing it apparently turn to a man. But seeing that it had turned to nothing but a man, he wandered up into the deserted fence corner, and began to nibble refreshment from a scrub oak.

For a moment the elder gazed up into the sky, half impressed with the idea that the camp-meeting platform had given way. But the truth forced its way to the front in his disordered understanding at last, and with painful dignity he staggered into an upright position, and regained his beaver. He was shocked again. Never before in all the long years it had served him had he seen it in such shape. The truth is, Elder Brown had never before tried to stand on his head in it. As calmly as possible he began to straighten it out, caring but little for the dust upon his garments. The beaver was his special crown of dignity. To lose it was to be reduced to a level with the common woolhat herd. He did his best, pulling, pressing, and pushing, but the hat did not look natural when he had finished. It seemed to have been laid off into

counties, sections, and town lots. Like a well-cut jewel, it had a face for him, view it from whatever point he chose, a quality which so impressed him that a lump gathered in his throat, and his eyes winked vigorously.

Elder Brown was not, however, a man for tears. He was a man of action. The sudden vision which met his wandering gaze, the donkey calmly chewing scrub buds, with the green juice already oozing from the corners of his frothy mouth, acted upon him like magic. He was, after all, only human, and when he got hands upon a piece of brush he thrashed the poor beast until it seemed as though even its already half-tanned hide would be eternally ruined. Thoroughly exhausted at last, he wearily straddled his saddle, and with his chin upon his breast resumed the early morning tenor of his way.

## II

"Good-mornin', sir."

Elder Brown leaned over the little pine picket which divided the bookkeepers' department of a Macon warehouse from the room in general, and surveyed the well-dressed back of a gentleman who was busily figuring at a desk within. The apartment was carpetless, and the dust of a decade lay deep on the old books, shelves, and the familiar advertisements of guano and fertilizers which decorated the room. An old stove, rusty with the nicotine contributed by farmers during the previous season while waiting by its glowing sides for their cotton to be sold, stood straight up in a bed of sand, and festoons of cobwebs clung to the upper sashes of the murky windows. The lower sash of one window had been raised, and in the yard without, nearly an acre in extent, lay a few bales of cotton, with jagged holes in their ends, just as the sampler had left them. Elder Brown had time to notice all these familiar points, for the figure at the desk kept serenely at its task, and deigned no reply.

"Good-mornin', sir," said Elder Brown again, in his most dignified tones. "Is Mr. Thomas in?"

"Good-morning, sir," said the figure. "I'll wait on you in a minute." The minute passed, and four more joined it. Then the desk man turned.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?"

The elder was not in the best of humor when he arrived, and his state of mind had not improved. He waited full a minute as he surveyed the man of business.

"I thought I mout be able to make some arrangements with you to git some money, but I reckon I was mistaken." The warehouse man came nearer.

"This is Mr. Brown, I believe. I did not recognize you at once. You are not in often to see us."

"No; my wife usually 'tends to the town bizness, while I run the church and farm. Got a fall from my donkey this morning," he said, noticing a quizzical, interrogating look upon the face before him, "and fell squar' on the hat." He made a pretense of smoothing it. The man of business had already lost interest.

"How much money will you want, Mr. Brown?"

"Well, about seven hundred dollars," said the elder, replacing his hat, and turning a furtive look upon the warehouse man. The other was tapping with his pencil upon the little shelf lying across the rail.

"I can get you five hundred."

"But I oughter have seven."

"Can't arrange for that amount. Wait till later in the season, and come again. Money is very tight now. How much cotton will you raise?"

"Well, I count on a hundr'd bales. An' you can't git the sev'n hundr'd dollars?"

"Like to oblige you, but can't right now; will fix it for you later on."

"Well," said the elder, slowly, "fix up the papers for five, an' I'll make it go as far as possible."

The papers were drawn. A note was made out for \$552.50, for the interest was at one and a half per cent. for seven months, and a mortgage on ten mules belonging to the elder was drawn and signed. The elder then promised to send his cotton to the warehouse to be sold in the fall, and with a curt "Anything else?" and a "Thankee, that's all," the two parted.

Elder Brown now made an effort to recall the supplemental commissions shouted to him upon his departure, intending to execute them first, and then take his written list item by item. His mental resolves had just reached this point when a new thought made itself known. Passersby were puzzled to see the old man suddenly snatch his headpiece off and peer with an intent and awestruck air into its irregular caverns. Some of them were shocked when he suddenly and vigorously ejaculated:

"Hannah-Maria-Jemimy! goldarn an' blue blazes!"

He had suddenly remembered having placed his memoranda in that hat, and as he studied its empty depths his mind pictured the important scrap fluttering along the sandy scene of his early-morning tumble. It was this that caused him to graze an oath with less margin than he had allowed himself in twenty years. What would the old lady say?

Alas! Elder Brown knew too well. What she would not say was what puzzled him. But as he stood bareheaded in the sunlight a sense of utter desolation came and dwelt with him. His eye rested upon sleeping Balaam anchored to a post in the street, and so as he recalled the treachery that lay at the base of all his affliction, gloom was added to the desolation.

To turn back and search for the lost paper would have been worse than useless. Only one course was open to him, and at it went the leader of his people. He called at the grocery; he invaded the recesses of the dry-goods establishments; he ransacked the hardware stores; and wherever he went he made life a burden for the clerks, overhauling show-cases and pulling down whole shelves of stock. Occasionally an item of his memoranda would come to light, and thrusting his hand into his capacious pocket, where lay the proceeds of his check, he would pay for it upon the spot, and insist upon having it rolled up. To the suggestion of the slave whom he had in charge for the time being that the articles be laid aside until he had finished, he would not listen.

"Now you look here, sonny," he said, in the dry-goods store, "I'm conducting this revival, an' I don't need no help in my line. Just you tie them stockin's up an' lemme have 'em. Then I *know* I've *got* 'em." As each purchase was promptly paid for, and change had to be secured, the clerk earned his salary for that day at least.

So it was when, near the heat of the day, the good man arrived at the drugstore, the last and only unvisited division of trade, he made his appearance equipped with half a hundred packages, which nestled in his arms and bulged out about the sections of his clothing that boasted of pockets. As he deposited his deck-load upon the counter, great drops of perspiration rolled down his face and over his waterlogged collar to the floor.



There was something exquisitely refreshing in the great glasses of foaming soda that a spruce young man was drawing from a marble fountain, above which half a dozen polar bears in an ambitious print were disporting themselves. There came a break in the run of customers, and the spruce young man, having swept the foam from the marble, dexterously lifted a glass from the revolving rack which had rinsed it with a fierce little stream of water, and asked mechanically, as he caught the intense look of the perspiring elder, "What syrup, sir?"

Now it had not occurred to the elder to drink soda, but the suggestion, coming as it did in his exhausted state, was overpowering. He drew near awkwardly, put on his glasses, and examined the list of syrups with great care. The young man, being for the moment at leisure, surveyed critically the gaunt figure, the faded bandanna, the antique clawhammer coat, and the battered stove-pipe hat, with a gradually relaxing countenance. He even called the prescription clerk's attention by a cough and a quick jerk of the thumb. The prescription clerk smiled freely, and continued his assaults upon a piece of blue mass.

"I reckon," said the elder, resting his hands upon his knees and bending down to the list, "you may gimme sassprilla an' a little strawberry. Sassprilla's good for the blood this time er year, an' strawberry's good any time."

The spruce young man let the syrup stream into the glass as he smiled affably. Thinking, perhaps, to draw out the odd character, he ventured upon a jest himself, repeating a pun invented by the man who made the first soda fountain. With a sweep of his arm he cleared away the swarm of insects as he remarked, "People who like a fly in theirs are easily accommodated."

It was from sheer good-nature only that Elder Brown replied, with his usual broad, social smile, "Well, a fly now an' then don't hurt nobody."

Now if there is anybody in the world who prides himself on knowing a thing or two, it is the spruce young man who presides over a soda fountain. This particular young gentleman did not even deem a reply necessary. He vanished an instant, and when he returned a close observer might have seen that the mixture in the glass he bore had slightly changed color and increased in quantity. But the elder saw only the whizzing stream of water dart into its center, and the rosy foam rise and tremble on the glass's rim. The next instant he was holding his breath and sipping the cooling drink.

As Elder Brown paid his small score he was at peace with the world. I firmly believe that when he had finished his trading, and the little blue-stringed packages had been stored away, could the poor donkey have made his appearance at the door, and gazed with his meek, fawnlike eyes into his master's, he would have obtained full and free forgiveness.

Elder Brown paused at the door as he was about to leave. A rosy-cheeked school-girl was just lifting a creamy mixture to her lips before the fountain. It was a pretty picture, and he turned back, resolved to indulge in one more glass of the delightful beverage before beginning his long ride homeward.

"Fix it up again, sonny," he said, renewing his broad, confiding smile, as the spruce young man poised a glass inquiringly. The living automaton went through the same motions as before, and again Elder Brown quaffed the fatal mixture.

What a singular power is habit! Up to this time Elder Brown had been entirely innocent of transgression, but with the old alcoholic fire in his veins, twenty years dropped from his shoulders, and a feeling came over him familiar to every man who has been "in his cups." As a matter of fact, the elder would have been a confirmed drunkard twenty years before had his wife been less strong-minded. She took the reins

into her own hands when she found that his business and strong drink did not mix well, worked him into the church, sustained his resolutions by making it difficult and dangerous for him to get to his toddy. She became the business head of the family, and he the spiritual. Only at rare intervals did he ever "backslide" during the twenty years of the new era, and Mrs. Brown herself used to say that the "sugar in his'n turned to gall before the backslide ended." People who knew her never doubted it.

But Elder Brown's sin during the remainder of the day contained an element of responsibility. As he moved majestically down toward where Balaam slept in the sunlight, he felt no fatigue. There was a glow upon his cheek-bones, and a faint tinge upon his prominent nose. He nodded familiarly to people as he met them, and saw not the look of amusement which succeeded astonishment upon the various faces. When he reached the neighborhood of Balaam it suddenly occurred to him that he might have forgotten some one of his numerous commissions, and he paused to think. Then a brilliant idea rose in his mind. He would forestall blame and disarm anger with kindness--he would purchase Hannah a bonnet.

What woman's heart ever failed to soften at sight of a new bonnet?

As I have stated, the elder was a man of action. He entered a store near at hand.

"Good-morning," said an affable gentleman with a Hebrew countenance, approaching.

"Good-mornin', good-mornin'," said the elder, piling his bundles on the counter. "I hope you are well?" Elder Brown extended his hand fervidly.

"Quite well, I thank you. What--"

"And the little wife?" said Elder Brown, affectionately retaining the Jew's hand.

"Quite well, sir."

"And the little ones--quite well, I hope, too?"

"Yes, sir; all well, thank you. Something I can do for you?"

The affable merchant was trying to recall his customer's name.

"Not now, not now, thankee. If you please to let my bundles stay untell I come back--"

"Can't I show you something? Hat, coat--"

"Not now. Be back bimeby."

Was it chance or fate that brought Elder Brown in front of a bar? The glasses shone bright upon the shelves as the swinging door flapped back to let out a coatless clerk, who passed him with a rush, chewing upon a farewell mouthful of brown bread and bologna. Elder Brown beheld for an instant the familiar scene within. The screws of his resolution had been loosened. At sight of the glistening bar the whole moral structure of twenty years came tumbling down. Mechanically he entered the saloon, and laid a silver quarter upon the bar as he said:

"A little whiskey an' sugar." The arms of the bartender worked like a faker's in a side show as he set out the glass with its little quota of "short sweetening" and a cut-glass decanter, and sent a half-tumbler of water spinning along from the upper end of the bar with a dime in change.

"Whiskey is higher'n used to be," said Elder Brown; but the bartender was taking another order, and did not hear him. Elder Brown stirred

away the sugar, and let a steady stream of red liquid flow into the glass. He swallowed the drink as unconcernedly as though his morning tod had never been suspended, and pocketed the change. "But it ain't any better than it was," he concluded, as he passed out. He did not even seem to realize that he had done anything extraordinary.

There was a millinery store up the street, and thither with uncertain step he wended his way, feeling a little more elate, and altogether sociable. A pretty, black-eyed girl, struggling to keep down her mirth, came forward and faced him behind the counter. Elder Brown lifted his faded hat with the politeness, if not the grace, of a Castilian, and made a sweeping bow. Again he was in his element. But he did not speak. A shower of odds and ends, small packages, thread, needles, and buttons, released from their prison, rattled down about him.

The girl laughed. She could not help it. And the elder, leaning his hand on the counter, laughed, too, until several other girls came half-way to the front. Then they, hiding behind counters and suspended cloaks, laughed and snickered until they reconvulsed the elder's vis-à-vis, who had been making desperate efforts to resume her demure appearance.

"Let me help you, sir," she said, coming from behind the counter, upon seeing Elder Brown beginning to adjust his spectacles for a search. He waved her back majestically. "No, my dear, no; can't allow it. You mout sile them purty fingers. No, ma'am. No gen'l'man'll 'lower lady to do such a thing." The elder was gently forcing the girl back to her place. "Leave it to me. I've picked up bigger things 'n them. Picked myself up this mornin'. Balaam--you don't know Balaam; he's my donkey--he tumbled me over his head in the sand this mornin'." And Elder Brown had to resume an upright position until his paroxysm of laughter had passed. "You see this old hat?" extending it, half full of packages; "I fell clear inter it; jes' as clean inter it as them things thar fell out'n it." He laughed again, and so did the girls. "But, my dear, I whaled half the hide off'n him for it."

"Oh, sir! how could you? Indeed, sir. I think you did wrong. The poor brute did not know what he was doing, I dare say, and probably he has been a faithful friend." The girl cast her mischievous eyes towards her companions, who snickered again. The old man was not conscious of the sarcasm. He only saw reproach. His face straightened, and he regarded the girl soberly.

"Mebbe you're right, my dear; mebbe I oughtn't."

"I am sure of it," said the girl. "But now don't you want to buy a bonnet or a cloak to carry home to your wife?"

"Well, you're whistlin' now, birdie; that's my intention; set 'em all out." Again the elder's face shone with delight. "An' I don't want no one-hoss bonnet neither."

"Of course not. Now here is one; pink silk, with delicate pale blue feathers. Just the thing for the season. We have nothing more elegant in stock." Elder Brown held it out, upside down, at arm's-length.

"Well, now, that's suthin' like. Will it soot a sorter redheaded 'ooman?"

A perfectly sober man would have said the girl's corsets must have undergone a terrible strain, but the elder did not notice her dumb convulsion. She answered, heroically:

"Perfectly, sir. It is an exquisite match."

"I think you're whistlin' again. Nancy's head's red, red as a woodpeck's. Sorrel's only half-way to the color of her top-knot, an' it do seem like red oughter to soot red. Nancy's red an' the hat's red; like goes with like, an' birds of a feather flock together." The old man laughed until his cheeks were wet.

The girl, beginning to feel a little uneasy, and seeing a customer entering, rapidly fixed up the bonnet, took fifteen dollars out of a twenty-dollar bill, and calmly asked the elder if he wanted anything else. He thrust his change somewhere into his clothes, and beat a retreat. It had occurred to him that he was nearly drunk.

Elder Brown's step began to lose its buoyancy. He found himself utterly unable to walk straight. There was an uncertain straddle in his gait that carried him from one side of the walk to the other, and caused people whom he met to cheerfully yield him plenty of room.

Balaam saw him coming. Poor Balaam. He had made an early start that day, and for hours he stood in the sun awaiting relief. When he opened his sleepy eyes and raised his expressive ears to a position of attention, the old familiar coat and battered hat of the elder were before him. He lifted up his honest voice and cried aloud for joy.

The effect was electrical for one instant. Elder Brown surveyed the beast with horror, but again in his understanding there rang out the trumpet words.

"Drunk, drunk, drunk, drer-unc, -er-unc, -unc, -unc."

He stooped instinctively for a missile with which to smite his accuser, but brought up suddenly with a jerk and a handful of sand. Straightening himself up with a majestic dignity, he extended his right hand impressively.

"You're a goldarn liar, Balaam, and, blast your old buttons, you kin walk home by yourself, for I'm danged if you sh'll ride me er step."

Surely Coriolanus never turned his back upon Rome with a grander dignity than sat upon the old man's form as he faced about and left the brute to survey with anxious eyes the new departure of his master.

He saw the elder zigzag along the street, and beheld him about to turn a friendly corner. Once more he lifted up his mighty voice:

"Drunk, drunk, drunk, drer-unc, drer-unc, -erunc, -unc, -unc."

Once more the elder turned with lifted hand and shouted back:

"You're a liar, Balaam, goldarn you! You're er iffamous liar." Then he passed from view.

### III

Mrs. Brown stood upon the steps anxiously awaiting the return of her liege lord. She knew he had with him a large sum of money, or should have, and she knew also that he was a man without business methods. She had long since repented of the decision which sent him to town. When the old battered hat and flour-covered coat loomed up in the gloaming and confronted her, she stared with terror. The next instant she had seized him.

"For the Lord sakes, Elder Brown, what ails you? As I live, if the man ain't drunk! Elder Brown! Elder Brown! for the life of me can't I make you hear? You crazy old hypocrite! you desavin' old sinner! you black-hearted wretch! where have you ben?"

The elder made an effort to wave her off.

"Woman," he said, with grand dignity, "you forgit yus-sef; shu know ware I've ben 'swell's I do. Ben to town, wife, an' see yer wat I've brought--the fines' hat, ole woman, I could git. Look't the color. Like goes 'ith like; it's red an' you're red, an' it's a dead match. What yer mean? Hey! hole on! ole woman!--you! Hannah!--you." She literally shook him into silence.



"You miserable wretch! you low-down drunken sot! what do you mean by coming home and insulting your wife?" Hannah ceased shaking him from pure exhaustion.

"Where is it, I say? where is it?"

By this time she was turning his pockets wrong side out. From one she got pills, from another change, from another packages.

"The Lord be praised, and this is better luck than I hoped! Oh, elder! elder! elder! what did you do it for? Why, man, where is Balaam?"

Thought of the beast choked off the threatened hysterics.

"Balaam? Balaam?" said the elder, groggily. "He's in town. The infernal ole fool 'sulted me, an' I lef' him to walk home."

His wife surveyed him. Really at that moment she did think his mind was gone; but the leer upon the old man's face enraged her beyond endurance.

"You did, did you? Well, now, I reckon you'll laugh for some cause, you will. Back you go, sir--straight back; an' don't you come home 'thout that donkey, or you'll rue it, sure as my name is Hannah Brown. Aleck!--you Aleck-k-k!"

A black boy darted round the corner, from behind which, with several others, he had beheld the brief but stirring scene.

"Put a saddle on er mule. The elder's gwine back to town. And don't you be long about it neither."

"Yessum." Aleck's ivories gleamed in the darkness as he disappeared.

Elder Brown was soberer at that moment than he had been for hours.

"Hannah, you don't mean it?"

"Yes, sir, I do. Back you go to town as sure as my name is Hannah Brown."

The elder was silent. He had never known his wife to relent on any occasion after she had affirmed her intention, supplemented with "as sure as my name is Hannah Brown." It was her way of swearing. No affidavit would have had half the claim upon her as that simple enunciation.

So back to town went Elder Brown, not in the order of the early morn, but silently, moodily, despairingly, surrounded by mental and actual gloom.

The old man had turned a last appealing glance upon the angry woman, as he mounted with Aleck's assistance, and sat in the light that streamed from out the kitchen window. She met the glance without a waver.

"She means it, as sure as my name is Elder Brown," he said, thickly. Then he rode on.

#### IV

To say that Elder Brown suffered on this long journey back to Macon would only mildly outline his experience. His early morning's fall had begun to make itself felt. He was sore and uncomfortable. Besides, his stomach was empty, and called for two meals it had missed for the first time in years.

When, sore and weary, the elder entered the city, the electric lights shone above it like jewels in a crown. The city slept; that is, the better portion of it did. Here and there, however, the lower lights flashed out

into the night. Moodily the elder pursued his journey, and as he rode, far off in the night there rose and quivered a plaintive cry. Elder Brown smiled wearily: it was Balaam's appeal, and he recognized it. The animal he rode also recognized it, and replied, until the silence of the city was destroyed. The odd clamor and confusion drew from a saloon near by a group of noisy youngsters, who had been making a night of it. They surrounded Elder Brown as he began to transfer himself to the hungry beast to whose motion he was more accustomed, and in the "hail fellow well met" style of the day began to bandy jests upon his appearance. Now Elder Brown was not in a jesting humor. Positively he was in the worst humor possible. The result was that before many minutes passed the old man was swinging several of the crowd by their collars, and breaking the peace of the city. A policeman approached, and but for the good-humored party, upon whom the elder's pluck had made a favorable impression, would have run the old man into the barracks. The crowd, however, drew him laughingly into the saloon and to the bar. The reaction was too much for his half-rallied senses. He yielded again. The reviving liquor passed his lips. Gloom vanished. He became one of the boys.

The company into which Elder Brown had fallen was what is known as "first-class." To such nothing is so captivating as an adventure out of the common run of accidents. The gaunt countryman, with his battered hat and claw-hammer coat, was a prize of an extraordinary nature. They drew him into a rear room, whose gilded frames and polished tables betrayed the character and purpose of the place, and plied him with wine until ten thousand lights danced about him. The fun increased. One youngster made a political speech from the top of the table; another impersonated Hamlet; and finally Elder Brown was lifted into a chair, and sang a camp-meeting song. This was rendered by him with startling effect. He stood upright, with his hat jauntily knocked to one side, and his coat tails ornamented with a couple of show-bills, kindly pinned on by his admirers. In his left hand he waved the stub of a cigar, and on his back was an admirable

representation of Balaam's head, executed by some artist with billiard chalk.

As the elder sang his favorite hymn, "I'm glad salvation's free," his stentorian voice awoke the echoes. Most of the company rolled upon the floor in convulsions of laughter.

The exhibition came to a close by the chair overturning. Again Elder Brown fell into his beloved hat. He arose and shouted: "Whoa, Balaam!" Again he seized the nearest weapon, and sought satisfaction. The young gentleman with political sentiments was knocked under the table, and Hamlet only escaped injury by beating the infuriated elder into the street.

What next? Well, I hardly know. How the elder found Balaam is a mystery yet: not that Balaam was hard to find, but that the old man was in no condition to find anything. Still he did, and climbing laboriously into the saddle, he held on stupidly while the hungry beast struck out for home.

V

Hannah Brown did not sleep that night. Sleep would not come. Hour after hour passed, and her wrath refused to be quelled. She tried every conceivable method, but time hung heavily. It was not quite peep of day, however, when she laid her well-worn family Bible aside. It had been her mother's, and amid all the anxieties and tribulations incident to the life of a woman who had free negroes and a miserable husband to manage, it had been her mainstay and comfort. She had frequently read it in anger, page after page, without knowing what was contained in the lines. But eventually the words became intelligible and took meaning. She wrested consolation from it by mere force of will.

And so on this occasion when she closed the book the fierce anger was gone.

She was not a hard woman naturally. Fate had brought her conditions which covered up the woman heart within her, but though it lay deep, it was there still. As she sat with folded hands her eyes fell upon-- what?

The pink bonnet with the blue plume!

It may appear strange to those who do not understand such natures, but to me her next action was perfectly natural. She burst into a convulsive laugh; then, seizing the queer object, bent her face upon it and sobbed hysterically. When the storm was over, very tenderly she laid the gift aside, and bare-headed passed out into the night.

For a half-hour she stood at the end of the lane, and then hungry Balaam and his master hove in sight. Reaching out her hand, she checked the beast.

"William," said she, very gently, "where is the mule?"

The elder had been asleep. He woke and gazed upon her blankly.

"What mule, Hannah?"

"The mule you rode to town."

For one full minute the elder studied her face. Then it burst from his lips:

"Well, bless me! if I didn't bring Balaam and forgit the mule!"

The woman laughed till her eyes ran water.

"William," said she, "you're drunk."

"Hannah," said he, meekly, "I know it. The truth is, Hannah, I--"

"Never mind, now, William," she said, gently. "You are tired and hungry. Come into the house, husband."

Leading Balaam, she disappeared down the lane; and when, a few minutes later, Hannah Brown and her husband entered through the light that streamed out of the open door her arms were around him, and her face upturned to his.