

A.)

ZEKE HAMBLETT

When Syd Benton was twelve he had as best friend a harelipped boy by the name of Zeke Hamblett. The two boys went everywhere and did everything together. Zeke was absolutely the toughest boy Syd had ever known. He wasn't afraid of anything at all. He ran out on the highest diving limb and sprang free without a moment's hesitation, and no tree was too high for him to climb for a clump of mistletoe or a crow's nest. And he could take a rawhiding from Professor Cannon, the school principal, that would have sent any other boy whimpering to his seat and not even flinch. He could also stand up in class when called upon and read a creditable composition from a perfectly blank page.

But Zeke was stubborn, too. If someone wanted him to do something and he didn't want to do it, nothing could make him.

Every year on Frances Willard's birthday the Picket Rock school put on a temperance program. The students from all four rooms would crowd together into one room, and Miss Rhinerson, the grammar room teacher, who was a strong prohibition advocate, would give a talk about the evils of drink. Her own

father had been a drunkard, and she was very earnest about it. As she talked she would take off her glasses and wipe away the moisture; and sometimes she would get excited and pound the desk.

The year the Hamblettts came to Picket Rock to live, the Frances Willard program material that was sent out from WCTU headquarters, included pledge cards for the male students to sign. Any school that signed 100 per cent of its boys and sent in the cards would receive a large picture of Frances Willard, Miss Rhinerson explained, "suitable for hanging."

Syd signed a card, as did all of the other boys in school except Zeke. Miss Rhinerson worked on him all afternoon, but he still refused to sign. He didn't say anything. He just sat still in his seat, and when she laid the card in front of him he wouldn't even look at it. She kept him in at last recess, but he still wouldn't sign. Her face was splotched with red and as she talked to him she kept raising her voice. The boys took turns climbing on the fire escape to look through the window and see how things were going.

I'll bet a nickel he won't ever sign," Gus Ellis said. "He won't ever do anything he don't want to do."

"He's keeping the whole school from having the picture," Irma Steffen said. "He's just doing it to be mean."

"This is a free country," Syd said. "You don't have to sign anything you don't want to sign." He couldn't help admiring Zeke a little.

"Why didn't the girls have to sign?" Gus asked.

"Girls don't drink silly," Irma said.

"Made of sugar and spice and everything nice," Gus said.

I'll bet my father could get him to sign," Irma said. She went off with her arm around Jennie Summers.

When the students marched back into the building Zeke still sat in his seat. Miss Rhinerson's mouth was a thin line. She tapped the bell for the students to be seated and got out her grade book.

"There'll be an oral exam in geography," she said. "Your answers will count 50 per cent of your month's grade." She tapped her pencil on the desk to silence the collective groan.

She fairly snapped out the questions. When she came to Zeke her eyes would move down the list until she came to a hard one. But he always came up with the right answer; and that made her even madder. It was as though his knowing the answers and giving them with that grin on his face infuriated her. But Zeke wasn't really grinning and Syd knew that. His eyes were perfectly sober and a little like the eyes of a whipped dog. It was only that his harelip always made him look like he was laughing.

The following Sunday, Asa Steffen, who was superintendent that year, brought a packet of the pledge cards

to Sunday school. It wasn't really Temperance Sunday, but he talked about what a fine woman Frances Willard was. His daughter Irma sang, "Father, Dear Father, Come Home with Me Now," and Asa read off the names of the boys who had signed at school and got the signatures of all the men in the Bible Class. Then he, too, started to work on Zeke.

But he didn't get anywhere either. Zeke sat in his seat and stared straight ahead and his face got red. When Asa laid the card in his lap and held the pencil out, Zeke pretended he didn't see them. Asa's face got as red as a watermelon.

As soon as Sunday school was dismissed, Zeke walked out without waiting for Syd. Syd yelled at him, but Zeke turned into the alley behind the livery stable and walked fast. When Syd tried to catch up with him he started to run.... The next Sunday he didn't show up at Sunday school. He never came back again, not even to get the treat at Christmas time.

No one knew exactly where the Hamblettts had come from into Picket Rock, nor why they had come there. Most new people came because they had relatives there, but the Hamblettts weren't related to anybody.

Charlie Hamblett, Zeke's father, a big rawboned man with a red and meaty look, simply got off the four-forty one afternoon and began to look around for a house and a place of business. He talked to Nate Alden, who ran the general store, and to Zack Kaufmann, who ran the livery stable, and finally

to Asa Steffen, who, had Picket Rock afforded a Chamber of Commerce, would certainly have been the president of that institution.

"What's your trade, Mr. Hamblett?" Asa asked Charlie.

"Well, I'm an embalmer by profession," Charlie said. "But I raise bees and ferrets to make a living. Lately, I've been thinking about laying in a stock of caskets and shrouds."

It didn't take long for that news to spread. Before night word had gone all over town that the new man was planning to do embalming, a practice some considered to be distinctly heathen.

"Well, here's one man he'll never get on his table," Abel Carter, the section boss, said. "Flesh was meant to decay, whether it's man or beast, and add to the soil, and I don't believe in anything that slows the process."

Will Bray, the butcher, concurred. "Suppose a man wasn't really dead," he said. Doctors make mistakes. It's happened before now that a man has come back to life while the womenfolk were getting him washed to lay out. Now if you pop him off to this Hamblett's place and he gets his blood all pumped out and his veins filled with formaldehyde, what chance would he have then? About as much chance as a snowball down in the hot place."

But there were those, too, who thought it was

all right. They were the progressives. The nearest undertaker lived in a town ten dirtroad miles away, and that was a long way to haul a body in a wagon box. It would be a fine thing to have a man right there in town who could take care of such matters. If Hamblett were to bring in a hearse later, as he had hinted he might, there wouldn't be any need to call in outside help at all. The progressives liked the thought of Picket Rock being entirely independent of the neighboring towns of Albion and Meade.

"I think it's a real forward step," Zack Kaufmann said. "Take where the kinfolks have to come from a ways off, there won't be any danger of the corpse not keeping, even in hot weather. Remember the buzzard that followed the procession to the cemetery when Old Man Ebright was buried?"

Everyone remembered the buzzard.

Unlike most boys, Zeke Hamblett never talked about the boys and the school from which he had come, and he brought no report card. On the first day of school he simply climbed the stairs to the grammar room and reported to Miss Rhinerson that he was in the seventh grade.

"What grade were you in last year?" she asked, beginning to look suspicious. Zeke wasn't much to look at. His face was fairly clean and his hair was combed after a fashion, but his blue shirt was far from tidy and his corduroy knee-pants had a button missing. And there was his harelip.

"I was promoted to the seventh last spring," he said.

"Maybe I should talk to your mother," Miss Rhinerson said. She looked a little beyond him in order to avoid looking at his harelip. "Ask her to come in and see me. Tell her to come tomorrow, so you can start where you belong."

"I was promoted to the seventh," he said.

Miss Rhinerson's long horse face turned a faint pink.

"Ask your mother to come in tomorrow," she said curtly.

"She's not here yet."

"Then you'll have to write for your report card; or take an examination."

"I'll take an examination," he said, leaving her no choice.

It was along toward spring before Mrs. Hamblett put in an appearance.

"My mother's coming tonight," Zeke told Syd one afternoon at last recess. "I can't come out for ball practice."

It was the first time Zeke had ever mentioned his mother. Syd had thought she must be dead. The bell tapped and they took their places in line and started marking time to the beating of the triangle.

"Zeke can't play tonight," Syd passed the word along to Gus Ellis. "His mother's coming."

"What'll we do for pitcher?" Gus asked. He looked sore. The team meant everything to Gus. It was his whole life.

"Let's call it off until tomorrow," Syd said. "We can't play without Zeke, that's for sure."

"Can Zeke play then?"

"Sure," Syd said. "He's only got to meet his mother."

If it had been Gus's mother, Gus would have gone ahead and played. Since Gus's mother had got religion she wasn't all there in the head and Gus didn't spend much time around home.

When the four-forty came in that afternoon Syd was in front of Nate Alden's store. When he saw Zeke's mother get off the train and run along the platform and put her arms around Zeke and stand there rocking him back and forth, Syd looked the other way. He knew Zeke wouldn't want him watching. But Syd felt tears coming up in his eyes.

"Lord love her, she's no bigger than a pint of soap," Nate Alden said. "Imagine a big meaty man like Charlie Hamblett having a little woman like that. He could wrap her right around his little finger."

Nate stood beside Syd and they watched Charlie and Zeke load Mrs. Hamblett's luggage, and drive down the road in the direction of the Hamblett house.

Before that winter had come to a gusty end with

the passing of the spring equinox, Charlie Hamblett had become one of the most indispensable men in Picket Rock. There was only one thing wrong with him. He was a two-bottle man. His self-appointed ration was two pints a day and he took it neat. But people were wont to look upon this human failing with tolerance, for he never got obnoxious. And he never drank during office hours. "I'd take a few nips myself," Zack Kaufmann said, "if I had his job to do." Zack Kaufmann was a two-bottle man, also. The third two-bottle man in Picket Rock was Henry Boner, who kept the lumber yard.

That was a bad year for la grippe, and a good many old people and a few of the younger ones dropped off with it in one guise or another. Most of them died of "complications." With dirt roads almost bottomless from melting snows, grateful citizens found how handy it was to have an undertaker right at home in Picket Rock, and a stock of plushcovered caskets to choose from. And Charlie was honest; his prices were plainly marked.

It was true that he had several sets of printed price cards; and if the bereaved family were what was known as well-to-do, he would send Zeke around the back way to distribute the higher-bracket figures over the stock. But if the family were hard up he frequently marked the caskets below cost. This practice of Charlie's, while pretty well known, was not really resented; for customers had only to check the much higher prices charged for the shoddy stuff in city establishments to know

that Charlie wasn't taking, even from the well-to-do, any very great profit for his undertaking.

Prior to Charlie's coming, the poorer people of the community had frequently been forced to make do with strong boxes nailed up at Henry Boner's lumber yard; but now, thanks to Charlie, caskets were within reach of even the most humble corpse. Now there were both coffin and strong box. As soon as the grave was dug, by kindly neighbors of the deceased, Charlie and Henry, who had become great cronies, could be seen pulling up the hill to the cemetery in Henry's old Hanna wagon to set the strong box.

Sometimes the trip took a long while and the two friends were not so very steady on the spring seat when they came down again. But Charlie always managed to be as sober as a judge by service time, standing correct and funereal in his black coat and white gloves to direct the lowering of the coffin on its harness lines.

"It's a downright pleasure to go to a funeral since Mr. Hamblett came to town," Mrs. Tom Summers said warmly. "He conducts one so nice."

When a mix-up set a protracted meeting of the first M. E. church and a Picket Rock funeral service at the same hour, depriving the service of the usual mixed quartet, Charlie amazed the townsfolk by arising quietly and singing "Lead, Kindly Light" in a whiskey tenor.

"Wasn't he just marvelous?" Mrs. Summers remarked

to her husband. "Did you ever hear of an undertaker singing at a funeral?"

"Well, I don't know why he shouldn't be the one to sing," Tom retorted. "He's the only one who's getting anything out of it." But he said it kindly. He knew Charlie wasn't getting much.

That summer after Mrs. Hamblett came home, Syd Benton spent a good deal of time at the Hamblett house. Charlie and Mattie Hamblett treated him like a grownup, and he liked that. And he liked the pale clear squares of honey that came from Charlie's beehive supers, and Mrs. Hamblett's bright quince preserves and her big brown sugar cookies. And the embalming equipment, installed in the driveway of Charlie's spacious haybarn, filled Syd with a morbid fascination.

The barn was airy and clean, and the driveway, that was protected overhead, made a fine place for Charlie to work. There were bins for grain storage on either side, and a tall stationary ladder led to the hayloft. At either end of the driveway large square doors hung on rollers that moved smoothly along a track, so that the place could be closed off overnight in case it were necessary to keep a body there. In cold weather these doors, that were fitted with windows for light, could be rolled shut and in summer they could be left open, creating a pleasant, well ventilated breezeway where there was always enough breeze to keep flies to a minimum.

Syd had never seen Charlie at work at his embalming, for he forbade the boys to watch. But when Charlie was away, Syd and Zeke often played in the breezeway; and Zeke had explained to Syd in detail the embalming process. It seemed very simple, as Zeke told it, and the furnishings were plain and functional.

Frequently, when there was to be a funeral, Syd went with Zeke to the church to help with the tolling of the bell, one tap, at minute intervals, for each year of the deceased's age. The tolling of the bell was a service Charlie Hamblett supplied to his customers free of charge and he made it plain to Zeke that the tolling and the counting were a grave responsibility and that he must make no mistake. Sometimes Syd did the tolling and Zeke the marking off of the number of tolls and sometimes Syd did the marking and Zeke the ringing. They did it solemnly and carefully, acutely conscious of a vast counting audience on the outside.

It was not until after Syd had been going to the Hamblett's for some time that he began to notice that there was something queer about Mattie Hamblett. Not always, but sometimes. She was a small woman, "wiry," people called her, and filled with energy. It was she who tended the ferrets and the bees while Charlie was away; and her courage in the midst of angry swarms of bees filled Syd with the same kind of admiration he had for Zeke's fearlessness. Syd saw Mrs. Hamblett

scoop masses of roaring bees into the bare cupped palms of her hands and deposit them in the hives, the way you would dip into beans or raisins. He never saw her stung.

"It's because she's not afraid," Zeke explained. "The bees know that, the way dogs know when you're afraid. If you're afraid the bees can smell the fraid on you and they sting you because they don't have any respect for afraid people."

But sometimes when Syd went to Hamblett's, Mrs. Hamblett wouldn't be doing anything at all. Her face would have a funny mottled look and her voice would be thick and her words come out more garbled than Zeke's did with his harelip. She would look at Syd as though she did not see him at all and smile and go on mumbling to herself. Zeke would pay no attention to her; but go to the big red Tiger tobacco can and take out a handful of cookies for Syd and another for himself and the two boys would go on out to play.

The first time that happened Syd asked Zeke, "Is your mother sick?"

"No she's not sick," Zeke said. He turned a flip and hung by his toes over an apple limb. "I'll bet I can eat a cookie and swallow it uphill faster than you can."

Well, maybe it was fits, Syd thought. One of Gus Ellis' sisters had fits. But she always screamed and wet her pants and then turned as gray as wood ashes and passed out. Whereas Mrs. Hamblett was red and all she did was to mutter to herself.

It was not until late that spring that Syd found out that when Mrs. Hamblett acted that way she was drunk.

Zeke and Syd were hanging around Alden's store one day when Henry Boner came waddling across from the lumber yard.

"I've got that deal we spoke of all arranged, Charlie," he said. "You can get it by the hogshead for less than half, and it's good strong stuff." He grinned at the two boys. "Got a kick like Kernoodle's mule."

Charlie leaned back in his swivel chair. "I can't," he said. "I just can't. I'm sure much obliged to you for your trouble, Henry. But it's like I told you. I just don't dare place temptation in her path. She's been at the cure three times now, and me and Zeke need her here at home. I'm a big man. I can soak it up like a sponge and never feel it. But she's too little a woman to take it. And she can't leave it be."

"Well, I've got a plan," Henry said. "It came to me last night in bed. Mrs. Hamblett's a small woman, I told myself, and not so very stout."

"For her size," Charlie broke in, "Mattie's the stoutest little woman you ever saw."

"Sure she is," Henry agreed. "She sure is. For her size. And fine goods always comes in small packages as the saying goes.... But there you have it. If you were to hang this hogshead from a rope over a pulley out in your embalm-

ing place, nobody would be stout enough to let it down and hoist it up but you and me."

Charlie was silent.

"If Nellie wasn't so simon-pure," Henry said, "I'd keep it down to my place. But she's a regular Carrie Nation when it comes to booze. I can keep a demijohn hid out all right, but not a whole barrel."

Charlie gazed thoughtfully down the quiet dusty street.

"She hardly ever goes there," he said. "She don't like the place."

"It's not likely she'd ever see it," Henry said. "If she did, she'd likely think it was some of your pickling rig. And if she were to untie the rope, which she wouldn't, she'd be took up to the rafters like a kite in high wind. She wouldn't risk that."

"No, she'd know better than to try that," Charlie agreed. "It would seem like a kind of dirty trick, though. Putting it up high so we could have it all to ourselves."

"You could let her have a little," Henry said. "Portion it out to her from time to time. Whatever you thought she ought to have."

"It's what I do," Charlie said. "I guess it wouldn't do any harm to try it once. I hate paying what the Green Front asks. Mattie's taking the eggs into town Saturday. If I were to drive around by, you reckon we could get the hogs-

head in the hearse?"

It was Syd and Zeke who found her. Obviously she had been in search of a hidden nest and had climbed onto the embalming table and over into the bin. Her market basket, half filled with brown eggs, had been left outside in the breeze-way and her gingham sunbonnet had fallen to the ground. The hogshead was still snugged tight against the rafters, the way Charlie and Henry had left it, the rope wrapped tight around a beam and the bung driven fast into the bunghole. But Charlie's squirrel rifle lay on the floor, and beside the bunghole in the hogshead another hole had been drilled, through which the contents had drained and filled to overflowing the galvanized washing tub that had been set on the floor especially to receive it.

Mrs. Hamblett sat on a pile of oats bags, her pale brown hair disheveled and her apron damp.

When she saw the boys she began to smile foolishly and to mutter to herself.

Zeke picked up the gun and looked to see whether it were loaded, and then set it carefully in a corner.

"Give me a hand with the tub, will you, Syd?" he requested. "She'll keep after it if I leave it here."

The two boys dragged the tub to the edge of the bin and dumped the contents through the grain door. A strong smell of whiskey arose and made Syd cough. Mrs. Hamblett began

to cry softly.

"Let's go to the house and scramble some eggs," Zeke said. He climbed out of the oats bin and picked up the egg basket, skirted the embalming table, and set off up the path.

"Aren't you going to do anything about your mother?" Syd called after him. Syd remembered all of the times he had seen her smiling and muttering and knew now that she had been drunk. But he had never seen her cry.

"No," Zeke said. "She'll be all right."

Syd followed Zeke into the neat kitchen. Four fresh loaves of bread stood on the table, and the Tiger tobacco can was filled with big round sugar cookies. Zeke washed his hands and dried them on the roller towel. He did not act as though anything had happened. He lit a gas jet and took the spider from its nail on the wall and adjusted the flame underneath. Then he started breaking eggs into a bowl, cracking them on the edge of the zinc-topped table.

"Look," Syd said. "Why don't you come home with me for supper, Zeke?" He thought uneasily of Charlie's return and the discovery of the loss of his whiskey. And he thought of Mrs. Hamblett crying on the oats bags.

"No," Zeke said. "I'd better stay." He broke the yolks with a spoon and ladled a scoopful of soft lard into the smoking spider and poured in the eggs.