

In the Face of His Constituents

Susan Glaspell

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SENATOR HARRISON concluded his argument and sat down. There was no applause, but he had expected none. Senator Dorman was already saying "Mr. President?" and there was a stir in the crowded galleries, and an anticipatory moving of chairs among the Senators. In the press gallery the reporters bunched together their scattered papers and inspected their pencil-points with earnestness. Dorman was the last speaker of the Senate, and he was on the popular side of it. It would be the great speech of the session, and the prospect was cheering after a deluge of railroad and insurance bills.

"I want to tell you," he began, "why I have worked for this resolution recommending the pardon of Alfred Williams. It is one of the great laws of the universe that every living thing be given a chance. In the case before us that law has been violated. This does not resolve itself into a question of second chances. The boy of whom we are speaking has never had his first."

Senator Harrison swung his chair half-way around and looked out at the green things which were again coming into their own on the State-house grounds. He knew — in substance — what Senator Dorman would say without hearing it, and he was a little tired of the whole affair. He hoped that one way or other they would finish it up that night, and go ahead with something else. He had done what he could, and now the responsibility was with the rest of them. He thought they were shouldering a great deal to advocate the pardon in the face of the united opposition of Johnson County, where the crime had been committed. It seemed a community should be the best judge of its own crimes, and that was what he, as the Senator from Johnson, had tried to impress upon them.

He knew that his argument against the boy had been a strong one. He rather liked the attitude in which he stood. It seemed as if he were the incarnation of outraged justice attempting to hold its own at the floodgates of emotion. He liked to think he was looking far beyond the present and the specific and acting as guardian of the future — and the whole. In summoning it up that night the reporters would tell in highly wrought fashion of the moving appeal made by Senator Dorman, and then they would speak dispassionately of the logical argument of the leader of the opposition. There was more satisfaction to self in logic than in mere eloquence. He was even a little proud of his unpopularity. It seemed sacrificial.

He wondered why it was Senator Dorman had thrown himself into it so whole-heartedly. All during the session the Senator from Maxwell had neglected personal interests in behalf of this boy, who was nothing to him in the world. He supposed it was as a sociological and psychological experiment. Senator Dorman had promised the Governor to assume guardianship of the boy if he was let out. The Senator from Johnson inferred that as a student of social science his eloquent colleague wanted to see what he could make of him. To suppose the interest merely personal and sympathetic would seem discreditable.

"I need not dwell upon the story," the Senator from Maxwell was saying, "for you are all familiar with it already. It is said to have been the most awful crime ever committed in the State. I grant you that it was, and then I ask you to look for a minute into the conditions leading up to it.

"When the boy was born, his mother was instituting divorce proceedings against his father. She obtained the divorce, and remarried when Alfred was three months old. From the time he was a mere baby she taught him to

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hate his father. Everything that went wrong with him she told him was his father's fault. His first vivid impression was that his father was responsible for all the wrong of the universe.

"For seven years that went on, and then his mother died. His stepfather did not want him. He was going to Missouri, and the boy would be a useless expense and a bother. He made no attempt to find a home for him; he did not even explain — he merely went away and left him. At the age of seven the boy was turned out on the world, after having been taught one thing — to hate his father. He stayed a few days in the barren house, and then new tenants came and closed the doors against him. It may have occurred to him as a little strange that he had been sent into a world where there was no place for him.

"When he asked the neighbors for shelter, they told him to go to his own father and not bother strangers. He said he did not know where his father was. They told him, and he started to walk — a distance of fifty miles. I ask you to bear in mind, gentlemen, that he was only seven years of age. It is the age when the average boy is beginning the third reader, and when he is shooting marbles and spinning tops.

"When he reached his father's house he was told at once that he was not wanted there. The man had remarried, there were other children, and he had no place for Alfred. He turned him away; but the neighbors protested, and he was compelled to take him back. For four years he lived in this home, to which he had come unbidden, and where he was never made welcome.

"The whole family rebelled against him. The father satisfied his resentment against the boy's dead mother by beating her son, by encouraging his wife to abuse him, and inspiring the other children to despise him. It seems impossible such conditions should exist. The only proof of their possibility lies in the fact of their existence.

"I need not go into the details of the crime. He had been beaten by his father that evening after a quarrel with his stepmother about spilling the milk. He went, as usual, to his bed in the barn; but the hay was suffocating, his head ached, and he could not sleep. He arose in the middle of the night, went to the house, and killed both his father and stepmother.

"I shall not pretend to say what thoughts surged through the boy's brain as he lay there in the stifling hay with the hot blood pounding against his temples. I shall not pretend to say whether he was sane or insane as he walked to the house for the perpetration of the awful crime. I do not even affirm it would not have happened if there had been some human being there to lay a cooling hand on his hot forehead, and say a few soothing, loving words to take the sting from the loneliness, and ease the suffering. I ask you to consider only one thing: he was eleven years old at the time, and he had no friend in all the world. He knew nothing of sympathy; he knew only injustice."

Senator Harrison was still looking out at the budding things on the State-house grounds, but in a vague way he was following the story. He knew when the Senator from Maxwell completed the recital of facts and entered upon his plea. He was conscious that it was stronger than he had anticipated — more logic and less empty exhortation. He was telling of the boy's life in the penitentiary and in the reformatory since the commission of the crime, — of how he had expanded under kindness, of his wonderful mental attainments, the letters he could write, the books he had read, the hopes he had cherished. In the twelve years he had spent there he had been known to do no unkind or mean thing; he responded to affection, — craved it even. It was not the record of a degenerate, the Senator from Maxwell was saying.

A great many things were passing through the mind of the Senator from Johnson. He was trying to think who it was that wrote that book *Put Yourself in his Place*. He had read it once, and it bothered him to forget names. Then he was wondering why it was the philosophers had not more to say about the incongruity of people, who had never had any trouble of their own, sitting in judgment upon people who had known nothing but trouble. He was thinking also that abstract rules did not always fit smoothly over concrete cases, and that it was hard to make life a

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matter of rules, anyway.

Next he was wondering how it would have been with the boy Alfred Williams if he had been born in Charles Harrison's place; and then he was working it out the other way, and wondering how it would have been with Charles Harrison if he had been born in Alfred Williams's place. He wondered whether the idea of murder would have grown in Alfred Williams's heart had he been born to the things to which Charles Harrison was born, and whether it would have come within the range of possibility for Charles Harrison to murder his father had he been born to Alfred Williams's lot. Putting it that way, it was hard to estimate how much of it was the boy himself, and how much the place the world had prepared for him. And if it was the place prepared for him more than the boy, why was the fault not more with the preparers of the place than with the occupant of it? The whole thing was very confusing.

"This page," the Senator from Maxwell was saying, lifting the little fellow to the desk, "is just eleven years of age, and he is within three pounds of Alfred Williams's size when he committed the murder. I ask you, gentlemen, if this little fellow should be guilty of a like crime to-night, to what extent would you, in reading of it in the morning, charge him with the moral discernment which is the first condition of moral responsibility? If Alfred Williams's story were this boy's story, would you deplore that there had been no one to check the childish passion, or would you say it was the in-born instinct of the murderer? And suppose again this were Alfred Williams at the age of eleven, would you not be willing to look into the future and say if he spent twelve years in both penitentiary and reformatory, in which time he developed the qualities of useful and honorable citizenship, that the ends of justice would then have been met, and the time at hand for the world to begin the payment of her debt?"

Senator Harrison's eyes were fixed upon the page standing on the opposite desk. Eleven was a younger age than he had supposed. As he looked back upon it and recalled himself when eleven years of age — his irresponsibility, his dependence — he was unwilling to say what would have happened if the world had turned upon him as it had upon Alfred Williams. At eleven his greatest grievance was that the boys at school called him "yellow-top." He remembered throwing a rock at one of them for doing it. He wondered if it was criminal instinct prompted the throwing of the rock. He wondered how high the percentage of children's crimes would go were it not for countermanding influences. It seemed the great difference between Alfred Williams and a number of other children of eleven had been the absence of the countermanding influence.

There came to him of a sudden a new and moving thought. Alfred Williams had been cheated of his boyhood. The chances were he had never gone swimming, or to a ball game, or maybe never to a circus. He might never have owned a dog. The Senator from Maxwell was right when he said the boy had never been given his chance, had been defrauded of that which has been a boy's heritage since the world itself was young.

And the later years — how were they making it up to him? He recalled the reformatory — and also what to him was the most awful thing he had ever heard about the State penitentiary — they never saw the sun rise down there, and they never saw it set. They saw it at its meridian, when it climbed above the stockade, but as it rose into the day, and as it sank into the night, it was denied them. And there, at the penitentiary, they could not even look up at the stars. It had been years since Alfred Williams raised his face to God's heaven and knew he was part of it all. The voices of the night could not penetrate the little cell in the heart of the mammoth stone building where he spent his evenings over those masterpieces with which, they said, he was more familiar than the average member of the Senate. When he read those things Victor Hugo said of the vastness of the night, he could only look around at the walls that enclosed him and try to think back over the twelve years for some satisfying conception of what night really was.

The Senator from Johnson shuddered: they had taken from one of God's creatures the things that were God-given, and all because in the crucial hour there had been no one to say a staying word. The world had cheated him of the things that were the world's, and now it was trying to cheat him of the things that were God's. They had made for

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him a life barren of compensations.

There swept over the Senator a great feeling of self-pity. As representative of Johnson County, it was he who must deny this boy the whole great world without, the people who wanted to help him, and what the Senator from Maxwell called "his chance." If Johnson County carried the day, there would be something unpleasant for him to consider all the remainder of his life. As he grew to be an older man he would think of it more and more — what the boy would have done for himself in the world if the Senator from Johnson had not been more logical and more powerful than the Senator from Maxwell.

Senator Dorman was nearing the close of his argument. "In spite of the undying prejudice of the people of Johnson County," he was saying, "I can stand before you today and say that after an unsparing investigation of this case I do not believe I am asking you to do anything in violation of justice when I beg of you to give this boy his chance."

It was going to a vote at once, and the Senator from Johnson County looked out at the budding things, and wondered whether the boy down at the penitentiary knew the Senate was considering his case that afternoon. It was without vanity he wondered whether an all-wise providence would not have preferred that Johnson County be represented that session by a less able man.

A great hush fell over the Chamber, for ayes and noes followed almost in alternation. After a long minute of waiting the secretary called, in a hollow voice,

"Ayes, 30; Noes, 32."

The Senator from Johnson had proven too faithful a servant of his constituents. The boy in the penitentiary was denied his chance.

The usual things happened: some women in the galleries who had boys at home cried aloud; the reporters were fighting for occupancy of the telephone booths, and most of the Senators began the perusal of the previous day's Journal with elaborate interest. Senator Dorman indulged in none of these feints. A full look at his face just then told how much of his soul had gone into the fight for the boy's chance, and the look about his eyes was a little hard on the theory of psychological experiment.

Senator Harrison was looking out at the budding trees, but his face too had grown strange, and he seemed to be looking miles beyond and years ahead. It seemed that he himself was surrendering the voices of the night, and the comings and the goings of the sun. He would never look at them — feel them — again without remembering he was keeping one of God's creatures away from them. He wondered at his own presumption in denying any living thing participation in the universe. He wondered what the great God behind it all must think of him. And all the while there were before him visions of the boy who sat in the cramped cell with the volume of Hugo before him, trying to think how it would seem to be out under the stars.

The stillness in the Senate Chamber was breaking; they were going ahead with something else. It seemed to the Senator from Johnson that sun, moon, and stars were wailing out protest for the boy who wanted to know them better. And yet it was not sun, moon, and stars so much as the unused swimming-hole, and the uncaught fish, the unattended ball game, the never-seen circus, and, above all, the unowned dog, that brought Senator Harrison to his feet.

They looked at him in astonishment, their faces saying plainly it would have been better taste for him to remain seated just then.

"Mr. President," he said, pulling at his collar and looking straight ahead, "I rise to move a reconsideration."

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There was a gasp, a deathlike moment of quiet, and then a mighty burst of applause. To men of all parties and factions there came a single thought. Johnson was the leading county of its Congressional district. There was an election that fall, and Harrison was in the race. Those eight words meant to a surety he would not go to Washington, for the Senator from Maxwell had chosen his word with nicety when he referred to the prejudice of Johnson County on the Williams case as "undying." The world throbs with such things at the moment of their doing — even though condemning them later, — and the part of the world then packed within the Senate-Chamber shared the universal disposition.

The noise astonished Senator Harrison, and he looked around with something like resentment. When the tumult at last subsided, and he saw that he was expected to make a speech, he grew very red, and grasped his chair desperately.

The reporters were back in their places, leaning nervously forward. This was Senator Harrison's chance to say something worth putting into a panel by itself with black lines around it — and they were sure he would do it.

But he did not. He stood there like a schoolboy who had forgotten his piece — growing more and more red. "I — I think," he finally jerked out, "that some of us have been mistaken. I'm in favor now of — of giving him his chance."

They waited for him to proceed, but after a helpless look around the Chamber he sat down. The president of the Senate waited several minutes for him to rise again, but he at last turned his chair around and looked out at the green things on the State-house grounds, and there was nothing to do but go ahead with the second calling of the roll. This time it stood 50 to 12 in favor of the boy.

A motion to adjourn immediately followed — it seemed no one wanted to do anything more that afternoon. They all wanted to say things to the Senator from Johnson; but his face had grown cold and unsympathetic, and as they were usually afraid of him, anyway, they kept away. All but Senator Dorman — it meant too much with him. "Do you mind my telling you," he said, tensely, "that it was as great a thing as I have ever known a man to do?"

The Senator from Johnson looked distinctly bored — he was so very tired of the whole affair. "You think it great," he asked, "to be a coward?"

"Coward!" cried Senator Dorman — "coward! That's hardly the word. It's heroic."

"Oh no," said Senator Harrison, with weary finality; "it was a clear case of cowardice. You see, I was afraid it might haunt me when I am seventy."

Senator Dorman started eagerly to speak, but the other man stopped him and passed on. He was seeing it as his constituency would see it, and it humiliated him. They would say he had not the courage of his convictions, that he was afraid of the unpopularity, that his judgment had fallen victim to the eloquence of the Senator from Maxwell.

But when he left the building and came out into the softness of the April afternoon, it was not he alone who leaned to the softer side. There were the trees — they were permitted another chance to bud; there were the birds — they were allowed another chance to sing; there was the earth — to it was given another chance to yield. There came to him then the calming consciousness that beyond the constituents was God. th him. "Do you mind my telling you," he said, tensely, "that it was as great a thing as I have ever known a man to do?"

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