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***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ANGEL OF LONESOME HILL *****

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THE ANGEL OF LONESOME HILL
A STORY OF A PRESIDENT

by Frederick Landis

Author of "The Glory of His Country"

1910

[Illustration: Those who passed by night were grateful for the lamp]

It was a handful of people in the country--a simple-hearted handful. There was no railroad--only a stage which creaked through the gullies and was late. Once it had a hot-box, and the place drifted through space, a vagrant atom.

Time swung on a lazy hinge. Children came; young folks married; old ones died; Indian Creek overflowed the bottom-land; crops failed; one by one the stage bore boys and girls away to seek their fortunes in the far-off world; at long intervals some tragedy streaked the yellow clay monotony with red; January blew petals from her silver garden; April poured her vase of life; August crawled her snail length; years passed, leaving rusty streaks back to a dull horizon.

The sky seemed higher than anywhere else; clouds hurried over this place called "Cold Friday."

A mile to the east was "Lonesome Hill." Indians once built signal fires upon it, and in this later time travellers alighted as their horses struggled up the steep approach. At the top was a cabin; it was whitewashed, and so were the apple-trees round it. A gourd vine clung to its chimney; pigeons fluttered upon its shingles, and June flung a crimson rose mantle over its side and half-way up the roof.

One wished to stop and rest beneath its weeping willow by the white stone milk house.

Those who passed by day were accustomed to a woman's face at the window--a calm face which looked on life as evening looks on day--such a face as one might use to decorate a fancy of the old frontier. Those who passed by night were grateful for the lamp which protested against Nature's apparent consecration of the place to solitude.

This home held aloof from "Cold Friday"; many times Curiosity went in, but Conjecture alone came out, for through the years the man and woman of this cabin merely said, "We came from back yonder." Nobody knew where "yonder" was.

But the law of compensation was in force--even in "Cold Friday." With acquaintanceships as with books, the ecstasy of cutting leaves is not always sustained in the reading, and the silence of this man and woman was the life of village wonder.

It gave "Friday's" chimney talk a spice it otherwise had never known; the back log seldom crumbled into ashes till the bones of these cabin dwellers lay bleaching on the plains of "Perhaps."

John Dale was seventy-five years or more, but worked his niggard hillside all the day, and seldom came to town. His aged wife was kind; the flowers of her life she gave away, but none could glance upon the garden. She seemed to know when neighbors were ill; hers was the dignity of being indispensable. Many the mother of that region who, standing beneath some cloud, thanked God as this slender, white-haired soul with star shine in her face, hurried over the fields with an old volume pasted full of quaint remedies.

She made a call of another kind--just once--when the "Hitchenses" brought the first organ to "Cold Friday."

She remained only long enough to go straight to the cabinet, which the assembled neighbors regarded with distant awe, and play several pieces "without the book." On her leaving with the same quiet indifference, Mrs. Ephraim Fivecoats peered owlshly toward Mrs. Rome Lukens and rendered the following upon her favorite instrument:

"Well! if that woman ever gits the fever an' gits deliriums, I want to be round, handy like. I'll swan there'll be more interestin' things told than we've heerd in our born days--that woman is allus thinkin'!"

In this final respect, the judgment of the Lady of the House of Fivecoats was sound.

How gallant the mind is! If the past be sad, it mingles with Diversion's multitude till Sadness is lost; if the present be unhappy, it has a magic thrift of joys, and Unhappiness is hushed by Memory's laughter; if both past and present have a grief, it seeks amid its scanty store for some event, for instance, whose recurrence brings some brightness; to greet this it sends affectionate anticipations--and were its quiver empty, it would battle still some way!

So the wife of Dale looked forward to Doctor Johnston's visits, yet there were so many doors between her silence and the world, she did not turn as he entered one eventful day.

Doctors are Nature's confessors, and down the memory of this one wandered a camel of sympathy upon which the sick had heaped their secret woes for years, though one added naught to the burden.

It was the tale he wished to hear, and when some fugitive phrase promised revelation, he folded the powders slowly; but when it ended in a sigh, he strapped up bottles and expectations and went away, reflecting how poor the world where one might hear all things save those which interested.

But Time is a patient locksmith to whom all doors swing open.

"I always sit by this window," she began as he removed the fever thermometer; "I've looked so long, I see nothing in a way--and at night I always put the light here. If he should come in the dark I want him to see--here is a letter."

The Doctor read and returned it with a look of infinite pity.

"I had a dream last night; I may be superstitious or it may be the fever--but it was so real. I saw it all; it was just like my prayer. I believe in God, you know." She smiled in half reproach. "Yes, in spite of all.

"In that dream something touched my hand and a voice whispered the word, 'Now.' Oh, how anxious it was! I awoke, sitting up; the lamp had gone out, yet it was not empty--and there was no wind."

John Dale stumbled into the room, his arms full of wood, and an old dog, lying before the fireplace, thumped his tail against the floor with diminishing vigor.

She arose. "I'll get you a bite to eat, Doctor."

"Never mind! I must be going." He made a sign to Dale, who followed to the gate.

"John, I've been calling here a long time--"

"I know I ought to pay somethin'," Dale started to say.

"It isn't that--I've just diagnosed the case; only one man can cure it."

"Would he--on credit?" Dale anxiously inquired.

"He never charges." Johnston smiled sorrowfully at the old man's despair.

"Who is he?"

"The President; the President of the United States," he added as Dale's eyes filled with questions. "I came out of college a sceptic, John, and I'd be an infidel outright but for that wife of yours--she's nearer the sky, somehow, than any other mortal I've seen. I don't believe in anything, of course--but that dream--if I were you I'd trust it--I'd follow where it led."

With his foot on the hub, the farmer slowly whetted his knife on his boot. "I'll go with you, Doctor."

* * * * *

"I called at the office, but it was locked, and so I'm here," apologized Dale as Judge Long opened the door of his old-fashioned stone house in Point Elizabeth, the county seat.

"Glad to see you--had your supper?"

Hearing voices in the dining-room, he answered in the affirmative.

"Then have a cigar and wait in the library; the folks are having a

little company."

The old man surveyed the room; the books alone were worth more than his earthly possessions. From a desk loomed a bust of Webster. Shadows seemed to leap from it; the sombre lips bespoke the futility of striving against stern realities.

There was gayety in the dining-room; Judge Long was a fountain of mirth, a favorite at taverns, while riding the circuit--before juries--wherever people gathered.

A gale of laughter greeted his last anecdote and the diners protested as he arose.

Dale told his story excitedly, and at the conclusion Judge Long slowly brushed away the tobacco smoke.

"I'm sorry, John, but we did all we could last month--and we failed; there's just one thing to do--face the matter. It's hard, but this world is chiefly water, and what isn't water is largely rock--it's for fish and fossils, I suppose."

"But we will win now!" The old man's hand fell with decision.

"Why do you say that?"

"Mother had another dream last night."

"But, you know, she had one a month ago," quietly protested Long.

"Yes--and it came true--we didn't do our part just right. We can't fail this time; there must be a day of justice!"

"Well, as to that, John, this game of life is strange; we bring nothing with us, so how can we lose? We take nothing away, so how can we win? We think; we plan; we stack these plans with precision, but Chance always sits at our right, waiting to cut the cards. You speak of 'justice.' It's a myth. The statue above the court-house stands first on one foot, then on the other, tired of waiting, tired of the sharp rocks of technicality, tired of the pompous farce. Why, Dale," he waved a hand toward an opposite corner, "if old Daniel Webster were here he couldn't do anything!"

When an American lawyer cites that mighty shade it is conclusive, but the effect was lost on Dale. He was not a lawyer, neither had he read the "Dartmouth College Case" nor the "Reply to Hayne." In fact his relations with the "Sage of Marshfield" were so formal he believed his fame to rest chiefly on having left behind a multitude of busts. Besides, he was impatient; the Judge's peroration having lifted his head so suddenly that cigar ashes fell upon the deep rug at his feet.

"You won't go again, Judge?" He leaned forward perplexed.

"It's no use."

"Well, mebbe you can't do anything--mebbe Dan'l Webster couldn't--but John Dale can!"

Long arose, astonished. "How foolish! Reason for a moment--any presentation of this matter calls for the highest ability; it involves sifting of evidence; symmetry of arrangement; cohesiveness of method, logic of argument, persuasiveness of advocacy, subtleties of acumen, charms of eloquence--all the elements of the greatest profession among men!"

Dale leaned heavily against the table, his eyes following the Judge as he walked back and forth.

"Well, I've got 'em--I can't call 'em by name, but I've got the whole damned list--and I'm goin'!"

Long stood at bay, his hand on the door, his face glowing with animation.

"Dale, you're old enough to be my father, but you shall listen. You'd fail before a justice of the peace, and before the President of the United States--it's absurd. You'd go down there, get mad, probably be arrested and kill any hope we might have; why, you're guilty of contempt of court right now. I had a strong influence, yet I failed."

The old farmer of "Lonesome Hill" would listen no more.

"Then wait, John. This letter may at least save you from jail--and you haven't any money; will this do?"

"It's more than I need, Judge."

"No, keep it all--and keep your temper too."

As the Judge stood in the doorway, watching the venerable figure disappear in the drizzling night, a young woman from the dining-room stole to his side and heard him muse: "After all, who knows? A Briton clad in skins once humbled a Roman emperor."

"Is he in trouble?" she asked.

"Yes, great trouble, and it isn't his fault. Fate's a poor shot. She never strikes one who is guilty without wounding two who are innocent."

* * * * *

Dale was an admirable volunteer and strangely resourceful; he had something more than courage.

The train did not leave for two hours. He sat in the station till the clatter of the telegraph drove him out, when he walked toward the yards with their colored lights, and through his brain raced Speculation's myriad fiends, all brandishing lanterns like those before him. When,

at last, the train did start, it seemed to roll slowly, though it could suffer delay and reach the Capital by daybreak.

He read the letter of introduction several times, and wondered what kind of man the President was; he thought of what he would say--and how it would end.

At intervals a ghost would extend a long, bony hand and wring drops of blood from his heart; at such times the President was hostile--the trip very foolish--he regretted his anger at Judge Long's house; and once, had the engine been a horse, he might have turned back. At other times gleams of victory came from somewhere and yet from nowhere, and routed the gypsies from his brain, and the President stood before him, a sympathetic gentleman. Once he knew it, and through excess of spirits walked up and down the aisle, studying the sleeping passengers; for John Dale travelled in a common "day coach."

At last he yielded to fatigue, and far off on the horizon of consciousness dimly flashed the duel of his hopes and fears. Rest was impossible, and after a long time the dawn drifted between his half-closed lids; a glorious dome floated out of the sky and the porter shouted, "All out for Washington!"

The cabmen who besieged the well-dressed passengers paid scant homage to the old man, who walked uncertainly out of the smoky shed and stood for a moment in Pennsylvania Avenue--on one hand the Capitol, on the other the Treasury and White House. A great clock above him struck the hour of six; he hesitated, then went toward the scene of conflict.

The waking traffic, the great buildings, the pulse of this strange life filled him with depression. He came to a beautiful park and gazed upon Lafayette and Rochambeau, then the equestrian statue of Jackson. As he sat facing the snow-white building with columned portico, the magnolia blossoms were as incense. Then he could wait no longer and crossed to the President's office. A policeman stopped him at the steps. He explained that he had a letter from Judge Long. What! Did this policeman not know Judge Long?

He sat under a tree, and the policeman walked a few paces away to turn anon and survey the waiting pilgrim. When the doors opened he entered. The President would not come for another hour; he would be busy--possibly he might see him by noon--provided he had credentials.

With a sigh he sank into a chair and was soon asleep.

"Come--this is no cheap lodging house!" The greeting was shaken into him by a clerk with hair parted in the middle, who disdainfully surveyed the sleeper's attire.

He who has much on his mind little cares what he has on his back, and when the youth exploded, "Who are you?" the old fellow's self-reliance came forth.

Leading the way to the door Dale pointed a trembling finger. "See that buildin', 'Bub'--and that one yonder, and that patch over there with Andy Jackson in it? Well, I'm one of the folks that made it all--and paid for it; and you're one of my hired hands. I've got to keep so many of you down here I can't afford one on the farm. I want to see the President--give him this letter--it's from Judge Sylvester Long, of Point Elizabeth!"

The youth vanished and Dale resumed his chair.

He was looking across the lawn when a sudden alertness came into the scene; the silk-hatted line of callers stepped aside; those who were seated arose; newspaper correspondents turned with vigilant ears. A nervous voice inquired, "Where is Mr. John Dale?"

The President stood before him, dressed in white flannel, then smilingly grasped his hand with a blast of welcome: "I'm delighted to meet the friend of Judge Long!" Taking his arm the Executive escorted him through the Cabinet Room thronged with Senators, Representatives, and tourists. They entered the private office. "Take the sofa, Mr. Dale--it's the easiest thing in the place. I hope your business is such that you can excuse me for a little while."

A smile came over Dale's white face. Could the poorest farmer of the "Cold Friday" region wait for the most powerful character in the world? Nor was the old man in the linen duster the only one who smiled. A member of the Russian Embassy turned to his companion--a distinguished visitor from the Court of St. Petersburg: "What would a peasant say to the Czar?"

The President now entered the Cabinet Room, shaking hands with the many, guiding a few into his private office. Dale listened; now it was an introduction and a message to an old friend in the West. Then a decisive "No" dashed some hope of patronage; again, it was a discussion of poetry, aerial navigation, or the relics of the Aztecs. It was a long stride from "Lonesome Hill," and for the time Dale was novelty's captive. He glanced round the room. It was not as fine as the director's office of the Point Elizabeth Bank! Above the mantel--the place of honor--was the painting of a martyr. He wondered whether another stroke of the brush would have brought a smile to the face, or an expression of sadness. The hands were very large--they had once broken iron bands.

In one corner was a shot-gun; tennis rackets in another; on a chair were snow-shoes and on the desk a sheaf of roses.

Those whom the President had sifted into his office from the crowd outside engaged in conversation. A Senator discussed the ball game with a Supreme Court Justice; a General advised an Author to try deep breathing.

The President returned more animated than before. He placed a hand on Dale's shoulder: "Be comfortable--and stay for lunch; nobody but us."

The crowd paid sudden respect to the homespun citizen of an older day, and a great happiness came into his heart--it was like the unfolding of one of the roses. Not that he was to lunch with the President, though Dale's was the village estimate of human greatness. A vaster issue was before him, and this was a token of success--a success which would bind up his remaining years with peace, and give glorious recompense to the companion of his few joys and many griefs.

The President hurriedly signed his name to parchments.

"I'm making a few postmasters." He smiled toward the sofa. "It's no trouble here--that's all at the other end of the line."

Without stopping the pen, he discussed matters with one statesman after another, his lips snapping with metallic positiveness.

A member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations protested against the course pursued in Santo Domingo.

"If I were making a world, Senator, I'd try to get along without putting in any Santo Domingos, but as things stand, we must make her be decent or let somebody else do it."

Another brings up the question of taxing incomes and inheritances.

"I favor them both," declared the President. "They are taxes on good luck; bad luck is its own tax."

A statesman from the Pacific slope protests against Federal interference in the school question.

"It is a local matter as you say, Senator, and yours is a 'Sovereign State'--they all are till they get into trouble. If we should have war with Japan, your State would speedily become an integral part of the Union."

A group of gentlemen now object to an aspirant for a Federal judgeship on the ground that he has not a "judicial temperament."

"As I understand it," the President begins, "judicial temperament is largely a fragrance rising from the recollection of corporate employment; it is the ability to throw a comma under the wheels of progress and upset public welfare; I am glad to learn that Mr. L---- has not a 'judicial temperament'; I shall send his name to the Senate to-day."

The gentlemen retired. "Come, Mr. Dale, let us go."

This President had been accused of a lack of dignity. Is it a less valuable trait which puts the John Dales of our land at instant ease in the "State Dining-Room" of the White House?

"Well, sir, no man ever had a better friend than Judge Long," said the President when they were seated. "'Ves' Long, I mean," he added

with a smile.

"I met him in the West; he had a ranch; mine was near it. We saw much of each other; we hunted together--and that's where you learn a man's mettle. He never complained of dogs, luck, or weather. We saw rough times; it was glorious. We'd wake up with snow on the bed, and when 'Ves' introduced me at Point Elizabeth in my first campaign he said we often found rabbit tracks on the quilts--but then 'Ves' had a remarkable eye.

"Some say, 'blood is thicker than water.' That depends somewhat on the quality of the water; I like him; there's nothing I wouldn't do for him!"

Dale grew suddenly sick at heart. If Long had only come! Recalling his discouraging words, a shadow crept over the old man's mind. Could it be possible he had not tried the month before?

Such misgivings soon vanished. "This is a trying office, Mr. Dale. With all my feelings I had to hold in abeyance the only favor he ever asked; it was about a pardon in a murder case over thirty-five years ago. He said it was the most cruel case of circumstantial evidence in the books--possibly you may know about the case."

The old man struggled back in his chair, then arose, his rough hand brushing thin locks back from a temple where the veins seemed swelling to the danger point. He was unable to summon more than a whisper from his shrunken throat.

"Yes, Mr. President, I do--he's my boy!"

"Your--boy! Yes--that's the name--how stupid of me--I beg your pardon, Mr. Dale--a thousand times."

They stared a long while at each other and Dale felt the fears which had fled before his gracious reception returning to grip him by the heart; the speech he had prepared had fled; it had all happened so differently.

At last the President spoke: "Congress is just going out; it's the busy season, but I'll go through the papers to-night myself."

Dale walked to the window; perspiration was on his face, but he was very cold. He stood with locked brain, and into his eyes came filmy clouds; then through these he saw, with sudden strangeness, a cabin far away, and a woman with pallid cheeks looked straight at him.

The President gazed intently as the old man wiped the window pane, nodded his head, and turned to face the table.

He cleared his throat, then opened a flannel collar, already loose, and his eyes glistened.

"You're sick!" exclaimed the President rising. "Waiter--some

brandy!"

"No--just a little dizzy.

"Mr. President," he slowly began, "this is a case that all the papers in the world can't tell--nor all the men--there's none just like it.

"It's not for the boy--it's not for me. I took her from her folks against their will, and I've not panned out lucky--but that's not to the point. She's sick; the doctor can't help her--nobody can but you--I wish you might have seen her from the window yonder."

The half-finished luncheon was disregarded; the President had sunk into his chair, and the keen discrimination of a king of affairs was struggling with a strange fascination.

"Long ago, Mr. President, I had an enemy--Bill Hartsell--we shot each other." He held up a withered hand. "It's been a feud ever since. His boy and mine went to war in the same company--both as brave as ever wore the blue. When they were waitin' to be mustered out Bill's boy was murdered in his tent--in his sleep. Bill was there and swore he saw my Richard do it.

"One night, a month ago, my woman--she's a great woman, Mr. President--the sick folks down in my country call her 'The Angel of Lonesome Hill'--well, she had a dream that Bill Hartsell wanted to see me. I hadn't laid eyes on him for years. I strapped on my six-shooter and she said, 'No--it isn't that kind of a trip--it's peace.'

"I put down the shootin' iron and went--it was a long way--two days on horseback. I got to Bill's cabin at night; I went in without a knock; I wasn't afraid. Bill's folks were round the bed. He arose and cried out: 'John, I sent for you; it was a damn lie I told--your boy didn't do it'--and then Bill died."

For the moment the old man's agitation mastered him.

"I remember, Mr. Dale. 'Ves' told me; he brought the statements of the family--and yours. I've been thinking of it ever since--and a great deal these last two days. Tell me, why did you happen to come?"

"Mother had a dream that said the time was up."

Dale spoke as calmly as though delivering a message from a neighbor.

Fear was not even a memory now. He stood erect; the stone he had slowly pushed up many steep years was near the summit--one mighty effort might hurl it down the past forever.

"Just a word about that boy, Mr. President. At Cold Harbor his regiment stood in hell all day; he was one of those who pinned his name to his coat so his body could be identified--after the charge. Well, in that charge the flag went down, and a man went out to get it--and he fell; then

another--and he fell; and then a thin, pale fellow that the doctors almost refused sprang forward like a panther--and he fell. They were askin' for a volunteer when a staff officer called out: 'Good God! He's alive! He's got it! He's crawlin' back!'

"They had to lift him off the colors; he didn't know anything, . . . and that was my boy, Mr. President--that was Dick!

"Funny how he enlisted," Dale resumed after a moment. "He'd been tryin' to get in, but I kept him out. One night his mother sent him for a dime's worth of clothes-line--and he never came back. He's not bad, Mr. President; he's good--he gets it from his mother."

Dale lifted his head with pride: "When I was on the jury I heard Judge Long say no one could be punished if their name wasn't written in the indictment. Now, they didn't only convict Dick--they convicted his mother--this whole world's her prison--and it's illegal, Mr. President--her name wasn't written in that indictment--and it's her pardon I want."

The President arose and walked the floor. "How could the man who saved those colors shoot a comrade in his sleep? Mr. Dale, my faith in human nature tells me that's a lie!"

He stood for an instant at the window, looking over the fountain, the river, the tall white Washington needle which pierced the sky, then quickly stepped to the table and lifted a glass:

"Mr. Dale, I propose a toast--'The Angel of Lonesome Hill' . . . her liberty!"

* * * * *

As they returned to the office there was nothing extraordinary in the President's vigorous step--that was known the world around. There was something most unusual, however, in the radiant soul--the splendid ancient youth of the quaint figure by his side.

At the door where the policeman had watched the waiting pilgrim the President shook the old man's hand.

"Come again, Mr. Dale, and tell 'Ves' Long I'll go hunting with him this fall and bring along a man he'll like--a man who catches wolves with his hands."

* * * * *

John Dale knew every fence corner in that region, but the night was so dark he stopped at times to "feel where he was."

The man with him could not aid him; he was a stranger--a strange stranger who spoke but once--"How far is it?"

Long habit had made him silent; he was in the upper fifties, but long absence from the sun had pinched his face into the white mask of great age.

At the village store the stranger entered, returning with a package.

When the road turned there was a light high ahead and a moment later the two men entered the cabin.

The stranger paused. "Mother, you sent me for a clothes-line--I've been delayed--but here it is."

Her hand trembled as she raised the lamp from the table.

"My boy--my dream--the President!"

* * * * *

When she lifted her face it was glorified.

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