



### *village on the shell rock*

The days at Mason City High School following the banquet were soon over. There was the hilarious reading of the class wills and prophecies one evening in the assembly room. Hilarious, that is, for everyone but me. For in some unaccountable fashion the committee in charge of the affair had left me out. It was just one of those things, and it had to happen to me. I was so

hungry for even the tiny bit of recognition in a class prophecy that I had counted on it for days before. When it seemed to me that I had been ignored, or worse still, completely forgotten, I escaped somehow from the crowded assembly room and stumbled through the darkness to the stable where Romeo consoled me with his soft nickering and a gentle rub with his muzzle as he waited for me to untie him. There were some pretty bitter tears shed on the way home that night, and more than once Romeo cocked a sympathetic ear back at me as we jogged along the lonely country road. The next morning the chairman apologized profusely, but it didn't help much.

There was the baccalaureate sermon one Sunday night in the Congregational Church, and then came the final event, graduation, with all of us seated in the old Wilson Theatre while Mr. Meade introduced the speakers and then handed us our diplomas. I wonder where mine is now; haven't seen it in years. Like all graduations it meant the breaking up of a class that had been together for a good while — a happy time and yet a sad one. As we shook hands with Mr. Meade and said bantering good-byes to our classmates to cover up the real emotion we felt, we knew it was the last time we'd ever all be together. I have seen only a few of those who sat on that stage since that lovely May night in 1911. To me the faces of those youngsters are still smooth and untroubled, and their eyes still shine with anticipation of the great adventure that lay ahead. For some, no doubt, the class prophecies came true. For others, per-

haps, only sorrow and disappointment has been the lot. And for a few, as it must always be, has come the journey to a far land eternal.

The next fifteen months, which I spent at home on the farm, were, I think, the most carefree of my life. I had no studies to be concerned about, no great amount of responsibility, I felt good, as indeed a fellow should feel at 18 and 19, and, to make things still more interesting, we had just bought our first automobile. This purchase was something that had come about only after long and extremely serious family discussions of the various makes of cars then popular. We considered whether we should buy a Lambert, such as the one owned by Uncle Rufus Pickford, but we were a little dubious about it for it had friction drive. Once when my uncle drove it into his garage the drive wouldn't release, and the front end of the car crashed right on through the end of the building in spite of Uncle Rufus' frantic cries of "Whoa!"

We talked of buying an Overland like Uncle Cal Bitterman's, but we had heard vaguely that these cars took a good mechanic to keep them running. That was all right of course for Uncle Cal who was an expert with a machine of any kind, but there had never been a Wilkinson, to our knowledge, who knew a spark plug from an exhaust pipe. We considered a Velie for a time because the manufacturer had quite a reputation as a builder of fine buggies and wagons. But we didn't like the looks of the Velie — it was too big and cumbersome. We thought the Franklin was nice. It was an air-cooled



job, and we wouldn't have to worry about a radiator freeze-up in the winter time — but everybody we asked about it said the thing wouldn't cool properly in the heat of summer. We liked the name of the Apperson Jack-Rabbit, which would, we thought, bounce us gaily and with a certain abandon over the rough and rutty roads. We were entranced with the glamorous appearance of the Locomobile, but when we cautiously asked the price of it, we backed away hurriedly.

However, we were presently to find just the car we were looking for, one that had a certain distinction about it for the reason that no one we knew had one like it, and for its unusual hyphenated name, the Abbott-Detroit, which gave it an air of, shall we say, auto aristocracy. My sister, Florence, and my brother, Roger, will well remember just how this car looked, with its shining black finish, its leather upholstery, its dashboard of varnished wood and its touring-car top with rakish brown-leather straps that ran from the front corners of the top down to metal rings on each side of the radiator. It cost \$1,450, a tremendous sum for those days, and it ran faithfully for I don't know how many years, until one day a wheel fell off due to old age.

I bought some black leather driving gloves with huge gauntlets that came halfway to my elbows in order to look the part of a real automobile driver. Nearly everyone wore gloves like these while at the wheels of their cars, and of course, they came in handy as there were often tires to change, adjustments to be made in the motor, or gas and oil to be added from one's

own supply barrels, for there were yet no filling stations.

It was a rare occasion when I was permitted to take the car out by myself of an evening. The thing was just too precious and had cost too many hogs, bushels of corn and gallons of cream to be driven about the countryside in a frolicsome spirit. A trip in the Abbott-Detroit had to be approached only after meditation and a certain amount of family consultation. Many years later when my own sons were using the family car a wee bit too much to suit me, I protested mildly, starting my remarks with the usual "Now when I was a boy." They only grinned at me with a rather pitying expression and winked at each other as if to say "Where does the old boy get that stuff!"

But now and then, if I could catch my father in the right mood, I did get permission to take the new automobile. When I did you could be fairly certain I would head for the Charles Kiser farm a few miles northwest of our own, where I would pick up Charlie's son and daughter, Roy and Elsie, as gay and blithesome a pair as I ever hope to meet. We would proceed then to Mason City to add Roy's current girl friend to the party, and after that we thought nothing of venturing as far as Clear Lake or Nora Springs, each fully ten miles away. A trip of this distance, with a stop for a soda and a bag of popcorn, was considered a large night indeed. We were especially hilarious one night in a drug store in Nora Springs, where we were observed by my cousin, Arlyn Pickford, who, it seemed to me, was a bit cool toward us. Later he told me that the drug store pro-

prietor had asked him who those noisy kids were. "I didn't tell him you were my cousin," said Arlyn.

But we had the world by the tail on those starlit nights as we cruised along at as much as thirty miles an hour, singing "On Moonlight Bay" or "Oh, You Beautiful Doll" at the top of our voices. Twenty years or so later my brother, Roger, came across an antiquated phonograph record that extolled scratchily the merits of "The Abbott-Detroit Car." We delighted in playing it, for it brought back the days of the linen dusters, the gloves and the goggles we wore as we toured the dusty roads of Cerro Gordo County.

There were other things to do too during that delightful year after high school was over. If you have ever been a farmer you will know without my telling you that the round of farm auction sales every winter in each neighborhood is almost like the social season in a city. Farmers, at least a large percentage of them, love to go to these sales, where they can stamp about in the snow, look over the stuff being put up at auction, perhaps bid on some of it, joke with their neighbors, eat a somewhat sketchy lunch — which they now have to pay for but which used to be advertised as a "big free lunch at noon," though it usually consisted only of a couple of doughnuts, a hamburger, a pickle, and coffee out of a ten-gallon milk can — and listen to the ribald repartee between auctioneer and bidders. As the auction progresses little groups of men gather here and there to nod in agreement that one of them bought something "worth the money," or that Bill over there "paid too



goddam much." It's an intense, rapid-fire business, where the slightest inclination of the head or a wink seen only by the auctioneer can mean that you've spent a dollar, or perhaps a couple of thousand.

I loved all this back in 1911 and 1912, and still do, though I don't get to go much any more. I'll not soon forget the wintry day I nodded at the auctioneer once too often and found that for the sum of \$185 I had become the owner of a second-hand four-cylinder King automobile. There's another old make that is as extinct as the dodo. Now I needed this car about as much as I needed two heads, though perhaps two heads would have been better than one in this instance. Neither did I have as much as \$185 in the bank, so I had to give a note for the thing. I still have the cancelled note and once in a while I get it out and look at it just to confirm my wife's frequent assertion that while I may be able to do some things reasonably well, dealing in second-hand cars is not one of them.

The King was a touring car model, and the top was neatly folded down in its imitation leather cover at the back of the rear seat when I bought it. After quite a struggle I got the automobile home through the snow drifts and parked it in a corner of the machine shed until spring. There would be time then to tune up the motor, wash the grime off the body and shine up the top with black polish. April came, and the roads firmed at last. The old King, upon being cranked, sputtered a few times and then purred steadily and smoothly. We were elated. Perhaps that \$185 hadn't been such

a bad investment after all. Someone suggested that we put the top up; there was always the chance of an April shower you know. After several moments my brother, Roger, who was inside the car to help get the top in place, suddenly said, "There's something wrong here. I could see the sun before we put the top up, and I can still see it." It was true enough. The top was so full of holes we sadly and hurriedly put the thing down again and covered it up, never to touch it thereafter. You might say we had a convertible that wouldn't convert, and ever afterward we had always to watch the weather carefully lest we get caught in the rain. Once or twice we did get caught and drenched, but when our friends warned us of an impending shower and suggested that we put the top up, we merely cocked a casual eye at the sky and said we guessed it would only be a little sprinkle, and proceeded to get under cover as fast as possible.

Most farmers who are selling out use display advertising in their local newspapers now, but 50 years ago an auction was commonly announced by sale bills posted in such likely spots as livery stables and on roadside trees or fenceposts about the countryside. But nearly every time the same opening phrase is still used, "Having decided to quit farming," an apologetic, sometimes almost tragic expression, for it may mean the owner's health is gone, his sons want to do some other kind of work, or he is just plain tired. Of course he may have made a potful of money, and wants to relax for the rest of his days. But those five words at the top



of the sale bill sound so final, as if the farmer was disgusted with the whole business and wanted to wash his hands of it once and for all. Why can't they say, "Having enjoyed this free and independent life on the old homestead for forty years I've decided to let my neighbors come for a holiday and divide up the equipment I have at their own price, and then I'm going to run down and soak up some Arizona sunshine for a while." I don't think this suggestion is going to accomplish anything, but I had to get it out of my system.

One of the best auctioneers in Cerro Gordo County was Jack Dorsey, of Plymouth. I liked to stand at the edge of the crowd and watch him work. He knew crowd psychology, and he talked the farmers' language and had the nimble mind that put bidders in good humor, which is essential for a successful auction. Once he was selling a harness, a heavy, strongly-built work harness with big, brass-mounted hames, wide reinforced breeching straps, and big, rugged tugs and trace chains. Jack played up all these desirable qualities at some length and sold the harness for a good big price. The next article was a light-weight driving harness, suitable for use with a span of trotters and a canopy top surrey. Jack reversed his selling arguments in a hurry. "Who wants a great, big, heavy, unhandy harness like that one I just sold. Here's what you really want, boys — who'll give me fifty bucks to start it?" A guffaw burst from the crowd, and this harness, too, sold for all it was worth. Another time Jack was selling a well-matched team of young horses. The bidding was slowing down at around three hundred

dollars for the pair, but the auctioneer's rhythmic sing-song call went on, "I've-got-three-hunderd, three-hunderd-who'll-make-it-a-quarter, gimme-a-quarter, I-want-a-quarter." Just then the owner of the team, thinking they were not selling high enough, interposed with "I was offered four hundred for 'em two weeks ago!" Without ever missing a breath or a beat, Jack went steadily on, "I've-got-three-hundred-who'll-make-it-a-quarter-why-in-hell-didn't-you-take-it, gimme-a-quarter, I-want-a-quarter!" Needless to say the crowd was delighted, and the bidding spurted at once.

A personage nearly as important as the auctioneer at a farm sale was the clerk, whose job it was to see that the buyers' names were all listed correctly, with the amounts they had paid for each item. Nine times out of ten the clerk was Carl Parker of the First National Bank. A genial, alert, clean-looking man, he was immensely popular with the farmers. In winter cap, high overshoes and a big coonskin coat he looked a bit different than he did seated at the cashier's desk at the bank, but he seemed to enjoy the cold winter days and engaged in lively banter with his many acquaintances as the sale went on. On one occasion he was not so cordial. A certain young farmer in the crowd whom we all knew did not enjoy too good a reputation persisted in bidding rather recklessly on a good many articles, several of which were knocked down to him. Mr. Parker observed this and figured, quite correctly, that the fellow was bidding with little intention of ever paying for the stuff. Mr. Parker didn't hesitate. He marched quickly

over to the irresponsible bidder and told him in no uncertain terms to keep his mouth shut. "You've bought enough," said Mr. Parker, and that was the end of it.

I think it was a year or so before the acquisition of the car with the too well ventilated top that I made up my mind I was going to have to consult with Mr. Parker regarding my need for approximately \$150. I've forgotten what I wanted the money for. Perhaps it was to buy a Holstein cow, or it may have been the time when I had a chance to trade my stripped-down Ford with the bucket seats for a light delivery truck that fascinated me. This, however, was a serious undertaking, one to be approached with caution and after great deliberation. Mr. Parker, I was quite sure, did not know me from a bale of hay. What if he asked me a lot of embarrassing questions, or demanded a chattel mortgage on everything else I owned, or, worse still, what if he simply turned his back on me and told me his bank did not fool with little deals? I walked back and forth before the entrance of the First National several times before I worked up courage to go inside. Mr. Parker sat as usual at his desk just inside the rail, working at some papers which seemed to absorb his entire attention. I approached him cautiously, for it was best, I thought, not to upset a busy bank official with a too sudden proposal of the kind I had in mind. Upon my arrival at his side he looked up and with one glance seemed to take in my entire general appearance. I cleared my throat with some difficulty and told him my name, adding the



information that W. W. Wilkinson was my father, and that I wished to borrow \$150. Mr. Parker smiled briefly and said just two words, "How long?" I told him, though the length of time for which I wanted the money escapes me now. He reached for a note and filled it out and I signed it, took my deposit slip and walked out, a bit dizzy from the speed of the transaction. These big financial deals were not so difficult after all, I told myself, and resolved at once that henceforth the First National should be favored with all my business. Mr. Parker, I am sure, promptly forgot the episode as he turned back to his papers, but I remember it well.

You may have noticed, perhaps, that every now and then the name of the little town of Rock Falls has crept into this narrative. I should like to tell you something more about the place, a quiet, unhurried village that rests contentedly on the steep north bank of the Shell Rock River not far from the northeast corner of Cerro Gordo County. Not quite all of the town has withdrawn to the north bank, for there are scattered dwellings on the other side, and off to the south nearly a quarter of a mile are the lumberyard and the depot. If you were approaching the town from a southerly direction, you might wonder why the railroad and the main part of the village didn't get together in more cooperative fashion, but it was, after all, a matter of topography — the railroad builders laid out their right-of-way on fairly high, level ground well back from the river, and the stores, the hotel, the mill and the cooper shop were well

satisfied, after what happened before dawn on the terrifying day of April 18, 1888, to remain where they were. I'll come back to that presently.

You may wonder why I speak especially of Rock Falls, rather than of Plymouth or of Burchinal, or of Manly, just over the line in Worth County. Well, it's kind of a personal matter. To me, Rock Falls has always been pretty important for the simple reason that a good many persons who have lived there at some time — or still do today — are pretty important people so far as I am concerned. You will remember that Grandmother Wilkinson went to live there when her days were over on the little farm she had selected at the edge of the timber. With her came Aunt Jessie and Uncle Thee. And a few steps away, across the garden with its brilliant borders of pinks, lived Aunt Mabel and Uncle Leonard Bliem. Their daughters, Mary Jane and Jessie, now young women, knew that garden far better than I, when as little girls, they played about the lovely shaded yard. And down close to the river bank only a few steps from where the gentle ripples of the Shell Rock play their quiet, never-ending song stands the snug bungalow of Uncle Rufus and Aunt Edith Wilkinson, where their children, my cousins, Jerome, John and Carolyn, grew up and have long since left for homes of their own.

For more than 50 years this little town, originally called Shell Rock Falls by Elijah Wiltfong who arrived there with two ox teams in August, 1853, has been a fascinating place for me to visit. During that carefree year after high school, as well as for many years be-

fore and after that time, I managed, sometimes by horseback, sometimes by cutter, bobsled or surrey, and later by automobile, to see the Rock Falls people and places I knew so well. You might have hardly noticed the village had you dashed through in your car, intent on going somewhere else, but when I had an uncle running the lumberyard, another one managing the bank, still another operating the general store for more years than even he could remember, and a grandmother and aunts there who were all good cooks, you can see, I am sure, why Rock Falls was the end of the line for me and the other little towns around were mere far-away places.

When I was quite young my father often took me on trips "over to the Falls," as we called it. There was a load of oats, perhaps, to be delivered to the elevator, with a supply of firewood to be brought back from the timber on the return trip. Or a few head of cattle to be driven to the stock-yards along the tracks of the Rock Island railroad, known for some years as the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern after it first came through in 1871. We seldom failed to stop for a while, after the business of the day was well in hand, at Bliem's general store which was run by my Uncle Leonard and his brother, Val. Here, gathered around the high, round-bellied stove we were almost sure to find such happy spirits as George Duff, Oscar Morse, Tim Maher and Tom Perrett.

Of George Duff I have already told you something, that he was an expert stone mason and plasterer. But



I have not told you that in addition to those most useful talents, he ran a barber-shop, played the fiddle and called for square dances, and for several years was section-boss for the railroad. An agile mind and a gift for saying the unexpected endeared him to one and all.

Oscar Morse had been "out West," and liked nothing better than to regale the rest of us with tales, embellished a bit perhaps by his own imagination, of prospectin', herdin' sheep, ridin' th' rods and Indian tradin'. I didn't see this happen, but they told me of the time Oscar, newly returned from the West, was going to show the rest of the boys how to ride the rods when the B.C.R. and N. pulled away from the depot. Something went wrong — Oscar's timing was off or the train moved too quickly, and he landed on the right-of-way with a dislocated shoulder and had to be carted off to the doctor. Of Oscar's Indian trading I heard only that at one time there was a little matter of some whisky involved, which somewhat irritated the United States government. They tell, too, of the time he missed the bridge on the way home from the depot after a convivial session with some of the boys, and forded the Shell Rock on his hands and knees, scar-ing the wits out of Tim Maher, who rushed up to the store to tell the boys "There's a man down in the river trying to drowned hisself!"

If Tim Maher was not at Bliem's store when we arrived we knew he soon would be for he carried the mail on his back from the depot to the post office in

the front part of the store. A cheerful Irishman indeed, he invariably greeted you no matter what the weather with "It's a foine day, sir!" And if you chanced to meet him on the sidewalk as he toted the mail, you had to give him the entire walk for he was employed by Uncle Sam himself, and there could be no interference by the common ordinary pedestrian. A great-uncle of mine, Silas S. Lewis, a delightful raconteur, a rotund man with a laugh that seemed to bubble up from somewhere way down in his ample insides, ran a drug-store for a few years in Rock Falls. He used to tell his favorite story about Tim Maher. It seems that the mailman and his wife, Nora, once lived in a tiny house that was little more than a shack. Tim thought they could do better for themselves on a piece of land in Daugherty Township, twenty miles away, which he had bargained for without taking the trouble to see. All land in Iowa was good land he figured. There was no house on the new place so he had his own little shanty transported overland to the spot where he and Nora expected to spend the rest of their days. But the land he had so blithely and trustingly bought turned out to be nothing more nor less than a frog pond, a place of reeds, rushes and lily pads instead of the deep, black corn ground he expected to find. This was something more than even a cheerful Irishman could face. Saddened and chagrined he had his house brought back to Rock Falls again and set down some two feet away from where it had rested before. Ever

after Nora used to say in recounting the episode, "Oh, it's a smart man I have for a husband. Carted 'is house forty miles to move it two feet!"

If my father and I had driven cattle to the stockyards, we found Tom Perrett there waiting for us, for he bought livestock in the surrounding country for years. Many were the verbal sparring matches he and my father had when he drove in our farmyard to see what we had for sale. They never agreed at once on the price of anything but nearly always got together eventually. If we had come to Rock Falls with grain and Tom was not down at the yards we could find him, as I have said, near the stove at Bliem's store. He had a vigorous, staccato-like manner of talking that used to frighten me. This, together with his usual bulk of about three hundred pounds, was impressive indeed, though he was a kindly man. He never failed to bark at me, "How are you, boy?" as we came upon him in the store, and then he would turn on my father with "Wendell, when you gonna sell me them damn cattle?" My Dad would come back with "Haven't got a thing I'd sell *you*," and the bristling badinage was on, though Dad, with his slower and more deliberate mind, was scarcely a match for Tom.

It was some years after I had left Cerro Gordo County that I was stunned and greatly saddened to learn that my old friend, Tom, the big, genial, rapid-fire talking man whom I so greatly admired had taken his own life one quiet July afternoon. And to this day no one can tell you exactly why he did. A summer



or two ago I asked Charlie Calvert, the sexton, as we strolled about the well-kept paths of the little burying ground north of the village, if he could tell me what had happened. He put it this way, "All I know is that Tom was always a great feller to whistle. One day he stopped whistling, and in a few weeks he was dead." It will be a long time before another such as Tom Perrett comes along to take his place in the hearts of those who knew him.

Sometimes if the banter and gossip at the store didn't seem to hold as much promise as usual I wandered up the street to DeLos Stickney's little shop, where he fixed watches and bicycles and most anything else. Here there was the strong smell of the glue-like cement he used for sticking the old-fashioned bicycle tires to the wheel rims. Here also could be seen the knick-knacks he displayed in their dusty showcases, the little stock of groceries he carried for a time, and the littered counter where he bent over the tiny wheels and springs of the watches that folks brought to him from miles around. Sometimes Mr. Stickney was not at the shop, and on such days you could be quite sure he was in the country somewhere struggling with his automobile, the first one in the neighborhood. No one seems able to recall what make it was, but like all the early cars, it ran only when it felt like it. Often Mr. Stickney was found on some country road, lying on his back under the vehicle, with gears, pins and bits of chain strewn about on the grass. One night his car stalled on the bridge in Rock

Falls, and Uncle Thee helped push it off so frightened teams could go through. It was no wonder the boys used to call Mr. Stickney "Barney Oldfield."

If Mr. Stickney was not at the shop, I liked to go on farther north to walk about the quiet churchyard where the old vine-covered stone house of worship had stood against the winter storms and the jagged wrath of lightning since 1867. Always more impressive, I thought, than even the famed Little Brown Church in the Vale, it had been built of gray native stone quarried near by, and when Mr. B. A. Brown, who laid the foundation and the walls, received a quarter section of land for his work it was not enough to pay the total cost of the labor. This 160-acre farm had been a donation from Mr. N. W. Culter, a United States Congressman in faraway Constitution, Ohio, and nobody could tell me how it came about that he helped finance the building that took so much hard work, self-denial, prayer and supplication.

I was to learn in later years from my aunts something of the Ladies Sociable of Shell Rock Falls which had been organized on the fifth day of August, 1869, to "aid in furnishing the Congregational Church of this place." The ladies proceeded immediately to raise money by serving suppers, holding sales and even by taking in sewing as proved by a record in 1870 which stated "Took order for two pairs of trousers and 2 fine shirts for B. A. Brown and a pair of overalls for Martin Ericksen." When the ladies had finished the work and had received the sum of fifty cents for

each pair of trousers, a dollar and a half for the two shirts and twenty-five cents for the overalls, they viewed the needs of the church with practical eyes and bought first "One broom, one oil can, one pound calico, one-half gallon oil and six lamp wicks."

Nor was there to be any idle chatter, frills or foolishness when they were in meeting assembled, for with these by-laws they set forth certain rules of conduct for themselves:

*"Article first:* It shall be the duty of the society to transact all of the business of the day as soon as practicable after the officers are present.

*"Article second:* No slanderous, immoral or unchaste conversation will for a moment be tolerated in the society.

*"Article third:* The refreshments must be simple and plain; consisting of bread or biscuit, butter, one kind of cake or pie, sauce, cold meat, pickles or cheese if convenient. A fine of one dollar will be imposed if this rule is violated.

*"Article fourth:* There should be prayer offered before tea at each meeting.

*"Article fifth:* When tea is announced there is to be no hanging back, but whoever is invited to be seated at the table will be expected to move forward immediately."

We may smile a bit now at some of these rules, but those good women, as was right and proper, took the work of the Lord seriously.

On other trips to the Falls, especially in the sum-



mertime, and if there was no great hurry about getting home, I liked to go down to the steel arch bridge over the Shell Rock and lean on the rail where I could look off to the west and the southwest and try to imagine what a scene of destruction there must have been on that fateful morning of April 18, 1888. On that morning the sudden rush of a heavy rain-storm in the night had broken a tremendous ice jam on the millpond a quarter of a mile up the river and swept down the valley and over the low south bank, crashing into several houses and barns in the darkness, and even carrying far downriver the steel bridge that had preceded the one where I stood. My father and my uncles had told me of the gigantic blocks of ice that came along like battering rams, snapping off trees and posts like mere splinters and finally, as the water receded, blocking the road west from the village for days. It was no wonder the town clung more determinedly than ever to the safety of the north bank.

From the rail of the bridge it was pleasant to speculate too on how the town must have looked in those lively years from 1856 until the early eighties. Only a few feet off to my right and rising abruptly from the river's edge stood, in the days long since gone by, the great three-storied, gray-stone flour mill of R. M. Todd, a rugged Scotsman who had settled on Rock Falls as the best place in the state for the industry he was to develop and manage for many years. Here, he had found, was a never failing water supply, timber for the manufacture of flour barrels, and some of the best farm land available

for wheat raising. One could not lose, he figured, with such a perfect combination of resources.

From the millpond upstream, formed by adding a dam of logs, earth and planking to the natural rock formation over which the river water poured, ran a flume six or seven feet in diameter built of two-inch plank held in place by iron hoops about three feet apart. Here was power to spare, as the rushing water came down to activate the giant mill machinery. I tried to picture again the busy scene on a day in the early seventies as the wheat harvest reached its golden climax and the wagons of grain rolled in from the farms for miles around, and waited their turn to unload at the crowded platform alongside the dusty, humming mill. Meanwhile beyond the towering stone structure, from the cooper shop to the west, came the whine of saws and the ring of hammers making new, clean flour barrels. Before me, along a sloping runway at the side of the bridge, rumbled the heavy barrels of flour crossing the river to a platform on the south bank where railroad cars waited on either side of the platform to be loaded with "Todd's High Toned" and then moved off over the spur to the main line of the B. C. R. and N., whence they went sometimes as far away as Boston and the other great cities of the East.

All this I tried to piece together, and sometimes my uncles stood beside me and pointed out a landmark here, a pile of stone there, or told me of the days when as barefoot boys they delighted in running along the top of the flume from the mill to the dam while the rushing

water spurted through the cracks in the planking and splashed them from head to foot.

But the day came when chinch bugs, rust and drouth combined to ruin the wheat crops in Falls Township and the surrounding country, and disaster stalked farms and mill alike. The daily production of flour dropped from as much as two hundred barrels to almost nothing. But Todd, a resourceful man, and not easily discouraged, built an elevator beside the spur on the south side of the river and shipped in wheat from Minnesota, and once again the millstones turned steadily. Todd must have been an ingenious man too, for the machinery in the elevator was run by a cable belt that ran from the mill clear across the Shell Rock, so that water power was extended far beyond its usual limits. And instead of the impatient line of waiting wagons from nearby farms there was then the steady rumble of the great horse-drawn contrivance that everyone called "the mill wagon," as it shuttled back and forth across the steel bridge moving the shipped-in wheat from the elevator to the bins in the flour mill. It had a spout in its side so the big box could be quickly unloaded, and after the days of shipping flour in barrels was over and the mill started putting its product in cloth sacks the mill wagon was loaded with these for the return trips across the river to the waiting freight cars.

Don't try to tell me it's not true that there was a telephone line running from the mill office to the depot back there in the days long before the end of the 19th century, for there is more than one old-timer who was



there when the thing was in use, and they'll tell you it worked too. As I said, Todd was an ingenious man.

It was not hard to picture again, as I stood watching the quiet pools of the Shell Rock far below, the bustle of activity that went on in those busy days up in the village only a few short steps away. On Mill Street, which bordered the flour mill on the north, there was the high, bald-faced hotel known as "The Massey House," and next to it the saloon where a weary teamster or a dry-throated mill-hand could tilt a sociable glass; and Uncle Sile's drug store where you could with almost no effort at all get the genial proprietor to tell you tall tales of the pioneer days; and the store of B. A. Brown, who had laid the walls of the old stone church; and next the Bliems' little store leaning a bit tiredly to the east, which was to outlast them all; and across the street the well-known "Morse House" with its huge wooden sign atop the highest ridge, where you could eat enormous meals at a trifling cost. There were people coming and going, and there was work for everyone. Saturday nights folks came to town in their lumber wagons and hitched their teams along Mill Street; the stores prospered and everyone said that Rock Falls was sure to be one of the biggest towns in Cerro Gordo County some day.

Then disaster struck. Even as the chinch bugs, the drouth and the rust were beginning to ruin the wheat crops and force the farmers to turn to milking cows and raising hogs, misfortune overtook the great mill itself. Some say it was in 1882, while others declare the year

was 1884 when fire raced through the dry framework of the mill as the village slept, and the angry flames burst out of the roof to throw a red glow in the sky that Uncle Thee watched fearfully from his bedroom window two miles away. Only parts of the heavy stone walls were left standing. It was a sad day for the town and the only cheerful note about the whole affair was the classic remark of Mr. Todd, which he is said to have made as he surveyed the ruins, and which has been gleefully handed down by word of mouth to this day, "Well, I have a dam left by a mill site, but no mill by a dam site!"

I wish I could tell you that the mill was quickly rebuilt, that the blue water from the sparkling millpond soon rushed again down the wooden flume to turn the giant wheels, and that, as in years long gone, the wheat grew rank and golden on the rich prairie lands near by. But for quite a while the blackened walls stood gauntly, and it was only after seven or eight long years that the fire damage was repaired and new machinery brought in, this time to be run by steam power, for the ice jam that had burst through the old log dam in April, 1888, had left only a quiet ripple that is still there today. The farmers around had turned to raising corn, oats and barley, and the waving wheat fields were no more. That left only prosaic oatmeal to be made, and it didn't sell like "Todd's High Toned."

Some say that the only reason the mill was ever rebuilt at all was because some eastern city slickers came along, saw a chance to revive for a time the good old days, got some hard-earned local capital to go in on the

thing, ran it for a couple of years and got out. Nobody knows just what went wrong — and it still looks like kind of a shady deal to those whose memories go back over sixty years — but the mill was closed down one day. Soon the machinery was dismantled and shipped away — no one knows just exactly where — “out west.” Gradually, after long neglect, the old stone walls fell into decay, and the winds sighed sadly through the deserted corridors of the place, until, at last, men gathered there with sledges and dynamite, and the mill, once so proud and sturdy, slipped slowly to the river’s edge.

Maybe you’ve never seen the village of Rock Falls and never expect to, but if you should some day find yourself near the place with an hour to spare, you might like to stop on the graceful concrete bridge that now spans the Shell Rock and lean for a bit on the rail as I did forty years ago. If you inquired around a bit, I wouldn’t be surprised if you’d soon find an uncle or two of mine to come lean on the rail beside you and tell again of the great days in the seventies and eighties. Perhaps these relatives of mine could be persuaded to drive with you along the quiet, shaded road that borders the old millpond and tell you of that winter some sixty years ago when an ice company from Cedar Rapids came and built a skidway from the pond to the railroad and loaded half a hundred cars a day with 500-pound cakes of ice to be shipped as far away as St. Louis.

They could show you, too, the spot which everyone says is the still unmarked grave of Mr. and Mrs. Rolf, on the Morse farm just west of town. And if you prod-



ded them a bit to tell you how that grave came to be there, they would relate the story of how in December, 1855, this almost forgotten couple were on their way home from Nora Springs where they had gone for a supply of provisions. They were riding in a sled drawn by two yokes of oxen, and the weather was fine and mild as they passed through Shell Rock Falls on their way home. Some of the old settlers had warned them that the warm sun and the melting snow were only weather breeders. But the Rolfs were young and confident, and they wanted to get on. Before nightfall the wind had shifted and the stinging, whirling snow was biting into their faces and making the oxen swing downwind. When, after many hours the storm eased and a yoke of the oxen appeared at a farmhouse with no sled, two men, William Redington and Charles Johnson, set out to hunt for the Rolfs. They finally found them, frozen to death, the man's body still in the sled and wrapped in his wife's shawl. Mrs. Rolf's body was found about three miles farther on. She had turned the oxen loose to drift with the storm, and started for help. She was without shoes, and had walked that distance in her stocking feet.

You would drive back to town then, past Mr. Todd's sturdy old home which has been remodeled now but which used to have wide, inviting porches and a many-sided tower room with high arched windows where the rugged mill owner who had left Perthshire, Scotland, in 1852, could sit and look contentedly out

over his domain. Even the flood of '88 had somehow left this house pretty much untouched.

As you crossed the river again my uncles might tell you, almost casually, how one of the earliest settlers of Shell Rock Falls, one George Daney, a soldier of fortune, once tried to enlist in the famed Light Brigade that was immortalized in the deathless poem about the charge at Balaklava. Daney, however, was just one-quarter inch too short or he might have been one of the "noble six hundred."

Then presently you will be back again on quiet Mill Street, where today the bank, the barber-shop, the garage and the general store look out placidly over the Shell Rock and the valley beyond. A bright new bungalow stands where the wagons used to unload endless sacks of wheat, and if you look for the Morse House you will have to peer around a modern filling station, and over DeLos Stickney's little shop is a sign that reads "U. S. Post-office." They'll be glad to have you stay awhile in the village, but if you have to get on they will smile, say good-bye, and wish you good luck.

Some pages back I spoke of the carefree months on the farm after the last exciting week of high school was over. It was during this time that my father and mother were again thinking about my future. My Dad's favorite time for discussing things with me was while we were milking. I could always tell when he had something on his mind. He would start to breathe rather heavily and somewhat faster than usual — a sort of warm-

ing-up process seemed to be going on inside him. Pretty soon he would begin to talk to me. One evening I was dawdling away at the job, not being much interested in this method of extracting milk from a cow that seemed possessed to switch her manure-laden tail into my eyes, ears and mouth, when my father said, "What do you think you want to do, now that high school is over?" I didn't have a satisfactory answer, being unsure on this subject myself. "Well," said Dad, "we've been hoping you would want to go on to college. We want you to *be somebody*."

Those words started me thinking more seriously. I had, indeed, been all enthused for a time over the possibilities of going to West Point, but this feeling, I knew, had come mostly from reading a thrilling serial in *The American Boy*, entitled "My Four Years at West Point," which had me doing the manual of arms with a pitchfork and herding the cattle before me while I pretended they were squads of infantrymen. It was probably time I got over this nonsense.

In the summer of 1912 I had, upon two or three occasions, as I waited for my father to transact some business at the First National Bank in Mason City, observed an extremely handsome and healthy-looking young man pull up to the curb before the bank in a long, rakish roadster, jump from his seat almost before the car stopped, and dash inside the bank building. Bare-headed, tanned, and dressed in striking sport clothes, he impressed me considerably. I wondered who he was. He appeared to be quite at home around the



bank. I asked my father about him. "Why, that's Hanford MacNider, Charlie MacNider's son," said Dad, "and Charlie was just telling me today that he's sending him to Harvard and it costs him a thousand dollars a year to do it." I was more impressed than ever. My father and the elder MacNider were old acquaintances and had, it seemed, often visited about many things, including what they thought their sons might eventually become.

Charles H. MacNider, I should like to observe here, looked exactly as I thought a bank president ought to look — neatly clipped short gray moustache, glasses, trim sturdy build, immaculate tailoring — with an air about him that made you feel instinctively that the financial foundation of the organization he headed was very, very solid. Some bank presidents do not look the part. Mr. MacNider did.

Upon learning who the good-looking young man was — he became General MacNider after going through a couple of wars, but most people still call him Jack MacNider — I pondered the subject of college at some length. Harvard, I knew vaguely, was a long, long way somewhere back East and everybody who went there was supposed to despise another place they called Yale. As for a thousand dollars a year, well, I tried to figure about how many hogs or how many bushels of corn we would have to sell to acquire that much money. It didn't look too encouraging. I would probably have to settle for some school a little nearer home if I went away at all. It would be rather nice too if I could manage

somehow to whirl a roadster of my own around the park corner, though I should have to swing in to the curb down the street a piece rather than in front of the bank. The roadster did eventually materialize as a stripped-down Ford with bucket seats and a huge cowl behind which I crouched, gloved and goggled, as we shot over the dusty highways at forty-five miles an hour. If the General ever reads this it will be his first inkling, I am sure, that he had anything to do with my ultimate decision about college.

My cousin, Harold Pickford, had been a freshman that year at the college at Ames, which we now call Iowa State. He wrote me now and then about what a great school it was. When the spring term of 1912 was over he came, full of enthusiasm about the place, and told me what they did there and what he had been studying. I was still lukewarm. I was having a pretty good time at home on the farm; I had a girl friend; my folks had a new car. Why should I tie myself down to books and classwork?

But the college germ had been planted in me, and I sort of nursed it along all summer. September drew closer, but my folks said nothing more to me about school. Most of my friends were farm boys who had not even bothered much with high school — "What did you need more education for if you were going to farm?"

Suddenly my mind was made up. One evening I said to my father and mother, "I think I'll go to Ames." This was only a week before school would open there. The morning after I came to this decision I helped

Elmer Hersey thresh, for he had a setting or two of grain stacks that were ready. At breakfast that day it had been decided that in the afternoon my mother and I would go to Mason City to get me some clothes suitable for going away. At noon my father relieved me at Hersey's. I had hesitated to tell any member of the threshing crew what I proposed doing. I was almost ashamed to be leaving for college when none of the other boys was going, and at the last moment I found it hard to leave the gang around the threshing machine. I was a little sad, a little scared and a little homesick as I waved good-bye to the boys on the grain stacks and to Art Gildner on top of the separator. I wondered what they were thinking. I was going off to a brand new life, and I almost didn't want to go. If my father had said, "You might as well stay here, I'll go on back home," I would have given up the whole business. What a slender thread of decision it is that sometimes swings us down a road that we might have missed.

Mother and I went to town that afternoon, and I suppose I was fitted out with a new suit and the various other necessary things that went with it. I do remember the little trunk we bought. It was, of course, the first one I had ever owned, and it cost ten dollars. It couldn't have been much of a trunk at that price, but it lasted me all through four and a half years of college, surviving the not so gentle handling of the railway express people, the draymen at Ames, and clumsy storage in the basement of the fraternity house during the school year.

By the next evening I was ready to go. My mother,



always a swift and efficient housekeeper, had washed, ironed, mended and sewed on buttons here and there, and the little trunk bulged with just about all I had in the way of clothes. I had made the rounds of the old home place, given a last pat to the horses, Prince, Major, Romeo and Frisco, held a confidential conversation with the calves I had taught to drink from a bucket, and wandered out past the grove of willows, walnut trees and evergreens to look out over the long, pleasant fields I was going to leave for a while. I knew a solitary cottonwood, far off to the northwest, would stand guard for me over the slanting hills and the winding little creek in the pasture.

I was to leave at midnight on the old Iowa Central, which later became the Minneapolis and St. Louis railroad. Before taking me to the train my father had to drive to the little crossroads village of Freeman, six miles northwest of us, to attend a school meeting. It was a lousy night. Rain fell steadily and it was as dark as a stack of black cats. The roads were, as usual, atrocious. The car could not be used at all for it would have mired down before it reached our front gate. So Dad hitched a team of horses to the old surrey and left for Freeman soon after supper. My mother and I, especially mother, were in a fine state of anxiety all evening for fear he would not get back in time from that twelve-mile drive through the rain and mud to get me to the depot to catch my train. We spent most of the time wandering from window to window trying to see as far as the road through the blackness and the rain that slashed steadily against the panes.

About eleven o'clock he was back. My new trunk went quickly into the back seat of the surrey, and I embraced my mother and kissed her good-bye by the light of the old kerosene wall lamp in the kitchen. Tears filled her eyes as she told me, "Now be a good boy," and a great lump gathered in my throat as I dashed through the downpour for the surrey where my Dad sat ready to start on his second muddy trip of the night.

The tired horses had to be strongly urged to start out again. I glanced back at the kitchen, where, framed under the yellow glow of the lamp, I could see my mother peering out into the night, her fingers to her lips in an anxious gesture I knew so well. I waved as we splashed out of the gateway, but of course she could not see me. The home ties that had bound me so closely, so gently, for nearly twenty years were beginning to break.

My father and I had little to say to each other as the horses, forced now and then into a labored trot through the mud, plodded on toward the station. The rain fell constantly. Nobody else was out on such a night. The road was completely deserted. Everybody who had any sense was home snugly in bed. I wished I was there too, but there was no turning back now. I had a *trunk* and that meant I had to keep going. As we neared the depot my father said, "Well now, remember we're all at home working for you." Tears smarted in my eyes at this, but I fought them back. I had no answer.

In a few more minutes we were at the little station, where one dim light glowed in the ticket office. My trunk was unloaded and my ticket bought. Soon there

was a quick handshake as the train roared in, and my trunk and I were quickly aboard and southbound through the stormy night. The ties were broken now. It was the beginning of a new life for me.