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The Crossroads

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

The Crossroads

IT was not like Eben Smith to resign himself to the fates and vagaries of an economic muddle he could not fathom, not even to the AAA or the HOLC or the FLC or the other various unsyllabic combinations which he regularly, each morning, collected in his RFD box.

“It ain’t right,” he said that dawn to Maria his wife and Lucy his horse. “I can grow crops and I know crops and there ain’t nobody in Jefferson County that can grow more corn per acre and what’s more better corn per stalk than me. And when it comes to turnips and squash and leaf lettuce I reckon I ain’t so far behind. And by cracky there must be some place where the stuff can be sold so folks can eat.”

“The guvvermint paid you right smart for all that plowing under you did, Eben,” cautioned his wife.

“Well I reckon I don’t give a spit how smart they paid me because it all went out in taxes so they could pay me agin. No sir, Maria,” and here he had to pause and grunt while he made Lucy take the bit, “it ain’t right. Them city papers when they ain’t atalking about some furriner fightin’ some other furriner is saying how people is starving in the streets. Well, I can’t figure it out. Here I’m the best corn raiser in Jefferson County and I got lots of corn . . . and squash and turnips and

leaf lettuce too, by gum . . . and still the guvvermunt says I got to stop raisin' what I planted and plow under what I was goin' to plant. It's like that guvvermunt man said yesterday when I asked him what the dingdong it was all about, the economic problems is acute. And by golly our economic problems is going to get even more acute if we don't get some hams and things for this winter. Like my grandfather Boswell that traded a spavined mare for the purtiest prize bull in Ohio used to say, 'Politics is a subjeck for men that's got full bellies . . . otherwise it ain't politics, it's war.' We ain't no paupers that we got to be supported by no charity and if they's folks starvin' in the city, why, I reckon they got somethin' or other to trade for turnips and truck."

"Now, Eben," said Maria, anxiously wiping her hands on her apron, "don't you go doin' nothin' to get the guvvermunt mad with you. Maybe this thing you're goin' to do ain't got any place in this here economic system acuteness."

"Never did hear anythin' wrong with a man fillin' his belly so long as he didn't have to steal to do it," said Eben, picking up the lines and trailing them to the box seat of the spring wagon.

"Mebbe them city folks'll trade you right out'n everything and you'll have to walk home," protested Maria as she worriedly swept an unruly strand of gray hair from her tired eyes.

"Listen at the woman!" said the offended Eben to Lucy the mare. "Maria, I reckon as how you're forgettin' that time I swapped a belt buckle for one of them newfangled double-action hand-lever self-draining washing machines for you. Giddap, Lucy."

The heavily sagging wagon finally decided to follow along on the hoofs of Lucy and while Maria held open the gate, creaked out into the ruts of the dirt road. Eben's hunting setter came leaping excitedly after, having been awakened in the nick of time by the noisy wheels.

"Git for home, Boozer!" said Eben severely.

Mystified, the dog stopped, took a few hesitant steps after the wagon and then, seeing Eben shake his whip as a warning, halted, one foot raised, eyes miserable, tail drooping, to stand there staring after, while the spring wagon's yellow dust got further and further away, smaller and smaller until it vanished over a slight roll in the limitless prairie.

Eben looked like a simile for determination. His lean, wind-burned, plow-hardened, tobacco-stained, overalled, shrewd-eyed self might have served as a model for a modern painter in the need of a typical New Englander type peculiar to the Middle West. But Eben was not quite as sure as he appeared. What Maria had said about the city folks had shaken him. Dagnab women anyhow. Always makin' a man feel uncertain of hisself! Wasn't he Vermont stock? Hadn't his folks, in Vermont, England, China and Iowa, to say nothing of the Fiji Isles and Ohio, bargained and businesssed everybody in sight out of their shirts? Yankee traders or the direct descendants of them were just plain impossible to trim unless it was by each other. Still . . . he'd never been away from this expanse of green and yellow prairie and, no matter his own folks, he wasn't sure. Things had changed out in the world. Mebbe them stores in the city wasn't as easy to deal with as Jeb Hawkins' down at Corn Center. He looked with

misgivings at his wagonload. Under the tarp were turnips and lettuce and corn and some early apples, making the canvas cover bulge. They were tangibles. With his own hands he had brought them into strength in this world and by golly there weren't turnips or lettuce or corn like that anywhere else in Jefferson County.

Plow them under?

If folks was starving then by golly they needed food. That was simple. And if they had anything at all Eben knew he could bring whatever it was back and trade it to Johnny Bach or Jim Johnson or George Thompson. They had all the lettuce and apples and corn and turnips they needed and they had hams and a lot of other truck Eben needed. And Jeb Hawkins' store would trade him whatever else . . . Surely it was a simple transaction.

He began to maunder on what things he might get for his produce and how he would convert them and how he would go about trading for them or something else and so passed the hours of the morning.

Because he lived down at the south end of Jefferson County and had always traveled north to Corn Center, he was not sure of his road nor, indeed, sure of his destination. People spoke of the city and pointed south and that was little enough to go upon. Twice he paused and asked directions, getting vague replies, and drove on until noon. Lucy nuzzled her feed bag and Eben ate the lunch Maria had prepared and then sat half an hour under a tree beside a brook wondering indistinctly on his project.

Through the better portion of the afternoon he continued on southward. The country became more level and less inhabited and he began to be homesick. His eyes did not like looking for ten miles to a flat horizon without so much as a poplar, a ditch or a rolling hill to ease the sameness. He was even less sure of himself than he had been at noon. He'd spend the night beside the road, a fact which did not worry him, and he couldn't starve with a load of vegetables. But if this city was many days away, why, Lucy would run plumb out of grain and he didn't like to think of how she'd begin to look at him if she had to eat nothing but dusty grass.

Dusk came and then darkness and Eben, disliking to stop because he might yet see the city in the distance, continued onward, wrapping a sheepskin around his feet to keep them warm.

When the stars said it was about eight and when Eben was about to give up for the night, he came to a crossroads.

"Whoa," he said to Lucy. And then looked about him.

Here four roads made an intersection and so irregular was their departure from this spot and so widely different was their quality that Eben was very perplexed. One road was concrete or at least white and hard like that one the WPA had put down through Corn Center. The road to the right of that, going away from Eben, was full of large green-gray boulders and seemed nearly impassable to anything except foot traffic. The next was hard and shiny and metallic and threw back the stars so that, at first, Eben thought it was wet. Then, of course, there was his own, a double rut worn

into twin prisons for narrow wheels and baked there by the September sun.

Eben got down and felt of each one, appreciative of the quality of the shiny metal one except that a horse would probably fall down on it the first rain. The white, hard one wasn't quite like that road in Corn Center because it was dusty, besides it showed the tracks of horses but no wheels and that one in Corn Center showed nothing. Although he had been certain that the country was all flat, the boulder-strewn way came down a hill to this place and, crossing it, ran up a hill and vanished.

Then an oddity struck Eben. For the past few minutes that he had been on this intersection the sun had been at high noon! He put his thumb in his eye and peered at it accusingly and then because it was quite definitely the sun and obviously there, he shook his head and muttered:

“Never can tell what the goldurned guvvermunt is going to do next!”

Lucy was eyeing him forlornly and he forgot about the sun to remember that she was probably hungry and that he was nearly starved himself. He hung the feedbag on her nose and, making her move the wagon so that it was not on any of the right of ways, took out the remains of the lunch Maria had fixed and munched philosophically with the warm sun on his back. He felt drowsy after that and, stretching out, slept.

He did not know how long he had been lying there for when he awoke the sun was still at high noon.

“Wilt the whole lot!” he grumbled, spreading the canvas

more tightly and thoroughly over his load. He hunted around until he found a spring among the boulders and, after watering Lucy, sluiced the canvas.

Methodically, then, he took up the problem of the roads. One of these must lead to the city but with four from which to choose he rapidly became groggy with indecision. He sat down in the wagon's shadow and waited for somebody to come along with information.

The hours drifted by though the sun did not move and Eben was nearly upon the point of continuing along his own dirt track when he saw something moving among the rocks up the hill. He got up and hailed and the something moved cautiously down toward him, from boulder to boulder.

The newcomer was a bearded old fellow in a greasy brown robe which was his only covering. Bits of tallow and sod clung in his gray whiskers and a hunted look lurked in his watery eyes.

"Long live the Messiah!" said the old man.

"What Messiah?" said Eben, offended at the vigor if the old man meant what he thought he meant.

"Long live Byles the Messiah!" said the old man.

"Never heard of him," said Eben.

The old man stared in amazement and then slowly began to examine Eben from toe to straw hat, shaking his head doubtfully.

"You aren't like anyone I ever saw before," said the old man. "From whence dost thou come?"

"Jefferson County," said Eben.

“It must be far, far away,” said the old man. “I have never heard of it. Are you telling the truth when you say you have never heard of Byles, the Messiah?”

“Yep,” said Eben. “And what’s more I don’t reckon I care whether I hear about him or not. I want to know which road to take to get to the city.”

The old man looked around. “I have never been along any of these roads. In fact, I don’t remember this crossroad at all no matter how many times I have come down this hill. And as for a city, why I know only of Gloryville and Halleluyah, one behind me and one before me on this road I travel.”

“I never heard of either of them,” said Eben. “But I got to find out which one goes to the city because I’ve got a load of vegetables here that I aim to trade to the city folk.”

“Vegetables! At this season of the year?”

“Why not? It’s September, ain’t it?”

“September! Why thou must be mad. This is January!”

Eben shrugged. “That ain’t finding the way to the city.”

“Wait,” said the old man. “See here. You say you have vegetables. Let me see them.”

Eben lifted the edge of the canvas and the old man began to gloat and his jaws to slaver. He picked up a turnip and marveled over it. He caressed a leaf of lettuce. He stroked the rosy skin of an apple. And when he picked up a beautiful ear of corn he cooed.

Eben was a trader. His eye became shrewd and his pose indolent. “I reckon the wagon’s pretty heavy anyway. If maybe you got something or other to trade I might let you

have somethin'. 'Course vegetables—in January—is pretty scarce and the city folks will be willin' to pay a right smart amount. But maybe now you got somethin' valuable that might persuade me to trade. I ain't asayin' I will but I ain't asayin' I won't."

"Wait here!" cried the old man and bounded up the hill as though mounted on springs.

Eben waited for an hour with patience, pondering what article the old man might produce for trade. It was certain he couldn't have much for he seemed very thin and poor.

There was a tinkling of donkey bells and, in a moment, half a dozen men leading beasts of burden came into sight and down the hill. Eben had misgivings. He was sure he had not any use whatever for six donkeys. But the donkeys were not the articles of trade. The men brought the animals to a halt and unloaded from them with ceremony two big jugs a beast.

"Now!" said the old man. "These for your wagonload of vegetables."

Eben looked dubious. He plucked a shoot of grass and chewed it. "Can't say as I'm much enthused."

"Not . . . not enthused! Why, by the saints! My good fellow, these jars be full of the famous Glory Monastery Brandy!"

"Reckon I ain't got no license to sell liquor," said Eben.

"But it's all we have!" cried the old man. "And we are starved for good food! The peasants have to spend so much time praying during the summer that they hardly get a chance to plant and so we have to make them fast all winter. Only

this brandy, made from grapes grown on our slopes, is in abundance.” He stepped nearer Eben, whispering. “It’s Byles’ favorite brandy and that’s why we make so much of it.”

“Nope,” said Eben.

“But just taste it!” cried the old man.

“Don’t drink,” said Eben. “I reckon I better be getting on to the city.”

“Please don’t leave!” begged the old man. “Carlos! Run back and bring up *twelve* donkey loads of brandy.”

Carlos and the others hurried away and Eben philosophically chewed his shoot of grass until they came back and the additional twenty-four jars were unloaded.

“Now,” begged the old man. “Will you trade?”

It came to Eben that many of his vegetables might possibly spoil if he kept them until he reached the city and of course he might be able to do something about the brandy.

“Well . . .” said Eben. “I might give you a few things. This brandy is pretty cheap in the city.”

“How much will you give us?”

“Well . . . mebbe a quarter of the load. After all you only got thirty-six jars here and they hold maybe not more than five gallons apiece and . . .” he scratched with his toe in the dirt, “. . . that’s only about a hundred and eighty gallons of brandy. Yep, I can let you have a quarter of the load—providing you let me do the selecting.”

They agreed and presently the mules were laden with turnips and corn and leaf lettuce and apples and the wagon was lighter by a quarter.

Eben watched them pick their way among the rocks, up

the hill and out of sight until their voices, badly mixed in a dolorous hymn about one Byles, faded to nothing.

He then began to lift the brandy off the road and into the wagon. But he very soon found, to the tune of a snapping spring, that he had made far too good a trade. Not only was he unable to transport this stuff but unless he lightened his vegetable load he could not go on with this injured wagon. Scowling he started to walk up the hill to see if he could find a sapling with which to mend his wagon. But he did not get far from the wagon before the thump of marching feet brought him hurrying back.

Sixteen soldiers, with an officer, were coming along the dusty white road. They formed two files between which marched five men whose heads were bowed and whose hands were tied. Eben was not familiar with the dull-gray of their uniforms but he suspected that maybe the guvvermunt had changed the color since he'd last seen army men. Soldiers, officer and prisoners paid him no attention but marched on along the white road and around the edge of a chalky cliff and out of sight. Shortly after there was a blast of firing followed by four more blasts and the soldiers with their officer came marching back.

Business concluded, the officer saw Eben. At the leader's signal the column of men stopped and their dust behind them settled. The officer stared at Eben, then at the wagon, then at Lucy and back to the wagon. Finally his eye lingered upon the jars.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" demanded the officer.