

The Candidate's Coattails · *John Leggett*

THE HANDS OF NED HOLCOMB'S WATCH stood at twelve-forty-five and he rose from his chair. Stepping to the podium, he smiled confidently to his right, then to his left along the speakers' table, then out into this great hangar of a room. His prefatory act was silencing the clatter of tableware and sending the waitresses toward the doors to the kitchen.

Seated at thirty tables, Cedar Rapids' principal citizens were breaking off their conversations and turning their attention to the dais. They were members of The Rapids Civic Association and as its vice-president he knew these people well and felt he could earn their further respect in the next few moments.

Glancing from face to face, he saw men he admired, able professionals and merchants who were modest about their accomplishments, the kind of men who patronized his lumber yard and paid a little more for first quality.

The making of such judgments was an involuntary reflex with Ned. He had a sharp eye and ear for the phonies. Those reliable organs had been a big asset in surviving the Cashway and Supersaver competition.

But as the ballroom became wholly still for him, he realized that his anxiousness had not yet become the edge, the headiness, which he counted on in these occasional moments of opportunity. He felt something was awry.

He took a deep breath. "Well, good afternoon," he said, listening critically to the amplification of his voice, raising his eyebrows, then nodding his relief at finding the sound system in order.

"This is certainly a great day, having with us for luncheon a man of such promise, not just for the—may I say the progressives among us—but for the Republican party as a whole, and certainly for our great state which now, more than ever, wants courage at the top."

He was distracted by the arrival of hippopotamus-like Hugh Mitten-dorf. Coming through the main door, Hugh was making a stir, pausing to shake hands with friends as he made his way toward a vacant seat at table twelve.

Ned's automatic response to self-importance went off, a faint dinging at the sight and sound of ostentation, causing him to marvel once again at

this man's rise, on a column of his own hot air, to the vice-presidency of the Rapids Bank.

“. . . and for me,” Ned continued, “it is particularly a pleasure because some thirty years ago, I was at school with this man.” Turning, Ned extended arm and hand toward the guest of honor seated at his right. He was a handsome man with a full head of carefully combed, graying hair, a smart white collar to his blue shirt, and the sight triggered in Ned a startling illusion of time reversal.

The fifty-year-old candidate, forging his way along the campaign trail, was once again a fellow undergraduate, and a conspicuous one. Certainly by local standards he had been a natty dresser. He wore neckties, scarves, a peculiar green hat. He was what a later generation would have described as cool or laid-back but what at the time had seemed to Ned arrogant. He spoke with an adenoidal drawl that had struck Ned as eastern and affected. His vowels puffed up and his “g’s” rang like the strings of a guitar.

He had an air of privilege about him, of being able to get away with behavior that others were denied. There was self-importance in the way he strode the campus. He exuded an air of having been to some prep school in Connecticut and, were it not for some carelessness in his father's investments, he would be at Dartmouth.

Ned had felt, no *smelt*, the pretense of it. This was the heart of the country. This was Iowa. Where did he think he was? Yet in the spring he got elected to the big jobs, slighting the work of course, but turning up in the center of the group picture, always captain, president, editor-in-chief, which was why he, Ned, had blackballed him.

He had a fleeting, thirty-year-old recollection of that judgment-passing moment. It had taken place in the council chamber, the garret under the eaves of the Zeta Psi house where fourteen of the brothers had gathered to decide on their successors.

Ned had spoken his mind. His antipathy was as surprising to him as to his fellow Zetes. He had condemned him with a smile and shake of his head. “Wearing that dumb Alpine hat to the rush party,” he had said, “so he can tell about going to Germany and all over . . . God. You just listen to that whipped-cream voice and you know he thinks he's hot stuff. I really can't see him fitting in here.”

Charlie Bean had protested, “OK—he shows off like that at first, Ned, but it's just that he doesn't want you to miss him. He's out to make some

kind of mark for himself—but he’s no mad egotist. Actually, I think he’d give you the shirt off his back.”

“I’d have to know,” Ned had replied, “what size he wears.”

The laughter had burst forth, confirming Ned’s role as delegated jester. On the strength of that there was no possibility of altering his intent. The receptacle was shaped like a birdhouse with a hole in its front, its little porch full of white marbles and black ones. Choosing a black ball he dropped it through the hole. In the room the sound of that ball resonated.

With a flush of humiliation Ned now understood how wrong he had been and that it would be wise to forget that incident as best he could.

“I don’t want to encroach on our distinguished speaker’s time, but I must tell you that since he and I were last together, he has proven his political courage and his concern for all Iowans in a great many ways.”

Ned put on his glasses and frowned at his notes. He pulled the goose-neck microphone closer. “As attorney for the Office of Consumer Protection, he prosecuted the landmark rate case of 1978 against Iowa-Illinois Power and Light. In the following year he campaigned for the nomination to represent Black Hawk County and won out against the conservative incumbent in a district which, I need not remind you, is as traditionally Republican as a Cadillac salesroom.”

There was some laughter and Ned raised his eyes in welcome. As he did so, his eyes were caught by the red hair of one of the dozen or so women in the room. It was that of Helen Sprague, a realtor, and a close friend of Ned’s wife, Margot. The glimpse disconcerted him, penetrated his jovial authority to prick the faint uncertainty within, and to remind him that Margot, whom he had expected to be here on the platform, was still in Chicago.

“Darling,” she had told him over the phone not two hours earlier, “I’m so glad I caught you before you started for the airport. Don’t come out to meet that eleven-thirty flight. I don’t think I can make it. The judges disappeared into the bonsais for hours last night and they didn’t get to the rock gardens until this morning. Incidentally, I think they did like mine, but they’ve just put off the awards until ten.”

“You’re not missing the luncheon?” he had asked in dismay.

“I’m sorry, Ned, but I do have to hang around for the citations. I might even get one.”

“Margot, this is not any old luncheon. This guy’s got a straight shot at

the nomination now. If he gets elected, he could change the whole picture in this state. You know that.”

There was a silence before Margot sighed, “You mean his coattails?”

“OK, his coattails. They’ll make a big difference to the party here in town, maybe to you and me, my love. He’ll have twenty departments to staff. I could handle one of those appointments—maybe the trade commission, or transportation, even the Regents.”

“But you never liked him—and I don’t think he likes you either.”

As usual, Margot had got to the quick in one thrust, but he protested, “The Zeta thing? That was a million years ago. He’s forgotten if he ever knew. And I was wrong about him. I admit that. We all change.”

There was another silence before she said, “I have to go to the award thing now. It’s starting.”

Gloomily, he said, “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” she replied.

“I really need you here for this, Margot.”

“You don’t at all, Ned, and anyway I don’t think I could make the flight even if I left right now.”

“When’s the next one?”

“Not for hours. You can tell me all about it tonight. And you’re going to be wonderful, Ned. I know it.”

“Black Hawk County . . .” Ned said with a broad sweep of his arm summoning its vast squares of corn and beanfields, its blue silos and white villages. “When he took on Black Hawk County’s concerns, by golly they were his own. From the moment he walked into his office at the State House, the voters knew they had one of those rare men who keeps his word.”

Ned was about to say his name now. He had purposely avoided using it at the start of the introduction for he had seen an advantage in withholding it, letting his audience supply it. He would introduce it subtly now, and then strike it harder and harder during the last few minutes, rather like striking a cymbal or bass drum, so as to leave the name vividly in the consciousness of each listener.

However, to his surprise, the name, both first and last, of the candidate beside him, his old college mate, momentarily eluded him, rather like a fish which had been lying still in a pool and now, at the moment he grasped for it, slipped away.

Knowing it was some playfulness of his memory, Ned took a breath and proceeded, saying, "Within his first six months in office, he wrote and guided through the legislature two bills which brought aid to our farmers through price supports and a search for new markets . . ."

Ned examined his notes and found that next on the list of the man's accomplishments was a resolution against nuclear arms proliferation, but hopes that this would prompt his memory of the candidate's name were disappointed. He had neglected to put it down anywhere on the page.

"One of those bills . . ." Ned hesitated, hoping that its name, which was that of the candidate, would come to him. It didn't. ". . . has been copied in three of our neighboring states."

Now Ned looked at the candidate, whose mouth was widening in an acknowledging smile. The display of even, white teeth seemed a sign of the man's absolute self-confidence. He was already hitting a winner's stride, one quite capable of lifting him gracefully over the primary hurdles and even that last big one. He imagined that smile welcoming him into the governor's office for some glad tidings about the new broom of his administration.

Damn. The man's name was right here in the vault of his head, tucked into one of its myriad drawers which, for some maddening reason, was stuck. "What's important to all of us here today," Ned said, moving the microphone a little lower so as not to obstruct his view of the audience which was now holding onto every word he spoke, "is that he is a friend to all of us here in Iowa. He knows our problems whether they are on our farms or in our towns and cities. He will be thinking about our good farmers and hardworking businessmen because that's what his record shows. That's what his old friends know all about."

It came into sight, that silvery fish of a name, tantalizingly close this time, but just as Ned grasped for it, it was gone again, in a shower of bubbles.

"But this is no man in blinders either. This is a man who can see the national, even the global picture, and how we in Iowa must fit into it. Now I know that a number of you have strong and differing opinions on this right-to-life issue, but we must acknowledge that this man has the courage to take a stand on it.

"If I'm not mistaken, it was at a meeting of the League of Women Voters in Sioux City that he showed us he was no man to play it safe or

talk out of both sides of his mouth. No, sir. He actually encouraged a question on abortion and then with all these passionate partisans listening—I mean you *knew* he couldn't say anything right—he came right out with it.

“‘I consider my body to be my own property,’ he told the ladies. ‘What I do with it is my business. What care I take of it is between me and my God. That’s what I consider my right and I don’t believe it should be denied any man or woman.’”

There was a flutter of applause. It sprang from the scattering of women in the audience and spread unevenly around the room. Ned smiled and turned the applause with a nod of his head to the candidate.

Across Ned’s mind flitted a vision of Margot, carrying her musette bag. Canvas, leather-bound, it bounced jauntily off her long, runner’s shank as she started home.

The thought that she was drawing closer heartened him. He visualized her in the Britt commuter as it gathered speed on the runway. In her lap lay a copy of *Horticulture*, open to an article on anemones. She was reading with an expression of serene absorption and its sweetness made him yearn for her with an adolescent poignance.

If she were only here beside him she would provide the damned name like an expert prompter in the wings. She was a marvel with details. She was forever amazing him with her storage of the day’s minutiae—even when she didn’t seem attentive to the particulars, the places and events, the terms for things, the gnarled oaks and red barns that marked turns to a destination. While he was puzzling, she would look up from her book to say, “It’s to the left, Ned, just short of the church.”

Then, when they got where they were going, it was Margot who would turn from examining a bed of delphinium to say, “The blonde one? That’s Harriet. She used to be his secretary.” Or “With the pot belly? That’s Maxwell isn’t it? I think he ran for county supervisor.”

For an instant he resented the show which had kept her in Chicago. He saw *her* as that slippery fish disappearing, just when he most needed her. Gone, with a flip of her tail into a cloud of bubbles. Immediately he knew that for an injustice. It was that very absorption in her own projects which was her essence and what he loved most about her.

Sometimes he suspected that Margot’s interest in lumber and politics was little more than tolerance, but if so, she never let on. When he asked

her about some concern of his own, a problem he guessed she had scarcely considered, she often came up with a penetrating perception about it.

Now it occurred to him that a virtue might be made of his lapse, that he might turn dramatically to his audience and ask them to name the next governor, as if it were all part of his plan to imprint the occasion and the candidate on the collective mind of his audience.

“You tell me,” he could say, “what is that man’s name whom we’ll all be voting for in November?” If he could just get that right, and do it in the next minute, while he closed out. It was time to do that now, just in time.

“So, in closing,” he said with a noticeable tremor, as if he were truly moved by this moment, “I know you share my feeling that this occasion will live long in our memories . . .”

Looking at the candidate, he found him wearing a peculiarly quizzical expression. Head cocked slightly, he was smiling and one eyebrow rose in amusement. Ned realized, with a burst of discomforting sweat in his armpits, that the man had guessed his predicament.

Indeed, the candidate was silently forming a word. Mouth working like a goldfish’s, the man was prompting him. What was he saying? Unable to make it out, Ned turned away, saying into the microphone, “. . . this day when we made a discovery that would change our lives here in Iowa.”

The door at the back of the ballroom opened with an odd, almost familiar certainty, and to Ned’s astonishment, Margot appeared. She carried a bouquet of roses and a folded newspaper. Seeing an empty seat, she made for it with her long, easy stride, smiling, waving to the *Gazette* reporter as she passed the press table, and in that instant, the elusive name, Tyler Hopwood, flashed across Ned’s mind in enormous, triumphant, scarlet letters.

“Tyler Hopwood!” Ned trumpeted into the microphone, “is the name of the man we have been looking for for so long a time, the name of the man we came to welcome today and the name of the man we are going to vote for and elect in the fall. Let’s listen to the next governor of our state.”

Later, as all three stood together awaiting the elevator, Margot was explaining, “I caught my original flight. Some catch on the luggage compartment door wouldn’t close and they fiddled with it for just the forty-five minutes I needed. The other passengers were furious, but I got to hear

the campaign speech . . .” She touched her husband’s rumpled sleeve.
“. . . and even the end of the introduction.”

“Too bad you missed the rest,” Tyler replied. “It was great. Full of suspense. I thought for a minute there . . .” he winked at Ned, “. . . you’d forgotten my name.”