Old Joe's Apostasy

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THE town of Atonville was divided against itself. The question of license or no-license had passed beyond the stage of dispassionate consideration. It was discussed in homes and on street corners, and in the saloons where the lights burned high, and talk went on unchecked till long after the hour for closing. Every school boy had his convictions as to whether the town would go "wet" or "dry," and was ready to give his reasons for the faith that was in him. But as election day drew near, the women who were praying for the safety of their homes began to look worn and anxious. Down in Perkins' saloon there was an atmosphere of hilarious congratulation.

"I guess you can sleep easy, Joe," somebody said to old Joe Pratt. "You won't have to walk ten miles for a drink. The temperance cranks are beaten, and they know it."

Old Joe only smiled inscrutably. Out of the town drunkards he was the one most often held up as a warning. When old Joe was young Joe, a brilliant future was prophesied for him. The fates had been lavish at his birth. Family and wealth and influence, gifts of mind and person, all gave promise that he would go far. The highest things to which American youth may aspire seemed within his reach.

That was so long ago that the younger generation would have laughed to hear such a thing suggested. In their recollection he had never been anything but old Joe Pratt, shabby and out-at-the-elbow, blear-eyed and shambling. Even the older ones who had known him in the promise of his youth found it hard to reconcile their memories with the visible presence of the town drunkard, the pathetic old creature who had sacrificed his all at the altar of his merciless divinity.

One woman remembered — the woman who might have been his wife. She never passed him on the street without a shuddering sense of escape. But beneath her instinctive gratitude was the pitying remembrance of what he had been when she had been ready to trust her future in his hands, and that recollection made her eyes gentle and her voice pitying. Old Joe was never too drunk to snatch off his shabby hat when she passed him. He had his own reasons for thanksgiving. In the regrets that crowded thick upon his sober thoughts and made remembrance an agony, he had been spared the bitterest pain of all. He had wrecked his own life, but not the life of the woman he had loved. She was a happy wife and mother. She had found him out in time, and for this, after his own fashion, old Joe thanked God.

Election day was at hand. The temperance workers were straining every nerve. The liquor men were working less openly but quite as diligently, and with more confidence. Old Joe, sitting silent and inscrutable in Perkins' saloon, heard boasts of victory repeated again and again, and came in for his share of the congratulations. "The rest of us could stand it if the town went dry," one of the men said, "but old Joe would have to move or cut his throat." And old Joe listened without protest.

It was late that night when the door swung open to admit a little group of boys. At a glance it was plain that no one of them was twenty-one, but their orders were filled without hesitancy. One of them, a fair, fresh-faced lad, with a restless color like a girl's, hung back.

"What'll you have, Mark?"

"I guess" — the boy's voice was painfully uncertain — "I guess I don't want anything."

"Oh, yes, you do!" "Be a sport!" These and similar injunctions nerved the hesitating boy to the point of approaching the bar. But in the rear of the room old Joe Pratt had turned lead color.

He passed his hand across his eyes. They had played him false many a time before. Perhaps again they were tricking him.

"Who's the boy?" he demanded of the man nearest him. "The one with the light hair and the pink cheeks?"

"That's McGruder's boy." The man grinned. "His dad would have a fit, I reckon, if he knew what the youngster was up to. And his mother's one of the white ribbon women." He laughed and slapped his knee. From his standpoint it was an excellent joke.

Old Joe sat staring before him. It was no trick of diseased nerves, then. It was Mattie's boy at the bar, Mattie's boy starting on the way he himself had traveled. She had been saved from heartbreak in her girlhood only for this.

Old Joe left his glass unfinished, and turned toward the door, his eyes glassy, his face set. "Fixing for the D. T.'s, I reckon," one of his late companions remarked affably to another. "From the way he looked, I'm pretty sure he was beginning to see things." But he little guessed how hideous a vision had thrilled the old drunkard with horror — the picture of a boy debased and ruined, the face of a woman whose heart was broken.

Sunrise on election day illumined a strange figure. Old Joe Pratt was astir early. In his shabby clothing, with his long, unkempt beard, he was too familiar an object to attract much attention on a day when big issues were at stake. But around his neck was suspended a big placard, lettered in black so distinctly that it could be seen across the street:

It's Too Late for Me.
But Save the Boys.

There had been some good work done for temperance in Atonville that campaign. Speakers famous the country over had pleaded for the home and for childhood. But the eloquence of the most fervid of them did not stir the townspeople like this appeal coming from old Joe. Nor had the denunciations which had been uttered appalled the liquor men like this on the part of one of their trusted allies.

Perkins himself, white with rage, came out to remonstrate, after half a dozen of his patrons had done their best and failed. And when bribes and threats alike proved unavailing, he fell back on sneers. "They must have paid you pretty well before you'd make such a fool of yourself — enough to keep you in drink a good six months, I reckon."

Old Joe answered with a dignity that silenced the crowd's ready laugh:

"I've fallen pretty low, Perkins. For years I've associated with you and your kind. But I've never got so far down yet that anybody could buy me."

"He's drunk," sneered Perkins, turning away, but this time the laughter of the crowd was against him.

"Guess again, Perky," cried an insolent voice. "He's a good sight soberer than you are."

All day old Joe walked the streets, the centre of wondering eyes. Farmers driving in from the country pulled up their horses to stare at the strange, tragic figure, the strange, tragic announcement:

It's Too Late for Me.
But Save the Boys.

Many a father woke suddenly to a new sense of responsibility.

The older men were discussing the Joe Pratt they had known in their youth. "As promising a young fellow as there was in the State. Some folks thought he'd be President. Smart wasn't any name for it, and he was the kind to make friends easy." On every corner such reminiscences were heard, and many a young voter looked grave as he contrasted this verbal picture with the shabby old man who paced the street acknowledging that it was too late for him.

Old Joe had turned the tide. The men who had left home resolved — some of them against the protests of their wives — to vote for license, changed their minds before they got to the polls. The saloon in Atonville was voted out by a majority that made the earlier alarm of the temperance people seem almost unreasonable. And while the ringing of the church bells voiced the rejoicing over the victory, the mother of Mark McGruder sought old Joe and gave him her hand.

"You've helped us nobly today, Joe." The tears ran from the eyes that for years had never looked on him except with pitying kindness. "You ve saved the day. You've done more than any of us. And O Joe, I can't bear to think that it's too late for you! It's never too late."

He shook his head. He looked old, and worn, and pathetic. The fight was over, the victory was won, and his fictitious strength had left him.

"You're a good woman, Mattie," he said, smilingly. "And I hope you'll be a happy one as long as you live."

He turned from her and went toward his cheerless home. The saloon was voted out of Atonville. He had done it. The companions of years were alienated, and it was too late for him to make new friends. What had he been thinking of?

Then, suddenly, he remembered the boy who had stood at the bar — the boy whose eyes were like his mother's, and who blushed like a girl. And for the moment all else was lost sight of in an irresistible gratitude.

"Anyhow he's safe!" cried old Joe. "Her boy's safe."

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