

[Dunnell #10]

Name: Robert Wilder

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: Northfield

Topic: The Hay, Grain, and Feed Man of Northfield

G.O. Dunnell Paper 10

Mr. Dunnell, with the aid of a helper, was replacing old ties on the spur railroad track that served his coal bunkers. "Yer see that place down there?" he asked, with an expansive wave of his hand in the direction of a gully that the railroad had partly filled. "Well, the first public water works that they was in this town stood there. Mass. 1938-9

"Though, I don't know as you'd exactly call them 'public.' They was built by Ira D. Sankey, the gospel singer, and they supplied him and some of his neighbors. But, I understand that he didn't give the 'water of life, freely, freely, freely,' as you might think from the song. The customers had to pay for having the water pumped, all right.

"Yer see, the side hill is all full of springs, They don't never dry up. I bet yer they's as much water comes out of those springs there as they does out of the Warwick brook. You can't see it, but it runs into a swamp on the medder. Anyway, Sankey got enough to run a great, big, wooden, overshot water wheel. And the wheel was hitched on to a pump that was the most awkward looking thing you ever see[.?] Seemed to be all knees. And that thing pumped water up to a reservoy in his attic. He lived in the house next the Unitarian church. So Sankey was the father of one set of water works, anyway. They was others. But near as I can find out, Sankey's was the first.

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“Guess it's goin' to rain. My left side is painin' me some. Let's go in the shanty and set down. Guess Theodore can finish this job. 't ain't more'n one man job anyway. My business ain't but a one man business any more. And I hope to L I have sense enough to keep it so!

“Oh, yes, I know all about the impawtence of givin' people work in private industry. But if they ain't anything private no more, with people coming around with [balnks?] [blanks?] and writing down anything you're a mind to tell 'em, by G-! and they ain't anybody got no industry no more, how the L are you going to do it?

“That's what I mean. They ain't no private industry. Take a feller on a farm. He could get a living if he would work at it. But no, he won't work no more from sunrise to milking time do he'd have to. He puts in a lesser number of hours each day, so's he can listen to the baseball games over the radio. That's the 'more abundant life,' that is. He don't need a radio any more than nothin' at all. But his neighbor's got one, so he has to have one, [too.?] The government and the State colleges oversell those fellers on machinery.

“Look a-here! I know a farm that a feller's grandfather had. His grandfather made a living on it, so did the feller's father. And both of 'em brought up families. It's got the same mortgage on it now that it had on it when his grandfather bought 3 it. But it's a 'one-[hoss?] farm.' The feller's grandfather had one horse, which could do all the work that was necessary. And he managed to keep the fences up, and the brush cleared. But one of the neighbors got two hosses. He got 'em because he could use 'em. He had a 'two hoss farm.'

“That riled the feller's father. And when he come into the property, about the first thing he did was to buy another horse. So there he was with two hosses on a one-horse farm.

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“The feller didn't stop with two hosses, I guess not. He's got a tractor, he has, and a hay loader, and a radio, and an electric ice box, a truck and an automobile to go to the moving pictures in. And he's got all kinds of loans from the government. And it's a godsend to him that he gets paid for not raising some of his crops. Otherwise he couldn't stan' it. 'Cause, all the while, you remember, all that feller's got is a one horse farm. He don't need all that stuff in order to get a living. And that's all you can get out of a one-hoss farm. You can get a darned good living, though. But you can't make enough to support all that machinery.

“That's what I meant when I said that I hoped I had sense enough to keep my business a one-man business. I sell less and less coal every year. Folks is going to oil. But that's all right. My son Myron has an oil business, which he started small, and that keeps growing. Most people when they give up buying 4 coal of me, buy oil of him so's Im I'm losing business for myself , so's I won't have to sponge on him. They'll be a living in this business as long as I can handle it, if I work it right. But I got to make up my mind that I've got a one-man business, and not get to liking to see my name printed on a lot of trucks that I can get on easy terms. If I do, the damned machinery will sink me.

“I'd probably get to fightin', too. After they bought the two hosses on that farm I was telling you about, they used to get to fightin' as to the best way of backing 'em out of the barn. You could hear 'em from all around. Don't seem to me that it make makes very much difference how you back a team. But it seemed important to them. I've often wished I had snuck in and backed 'em out while the fellers was fightin'. I bet that would have stopped them once and for all.

“I never did much fightin'. But one of those fellers had ruther fight than eat, I guess. I know that when we was kids, and a-going to that little school I've told you about, we started one day and tried to box each other's hats off. Not fightin', but just havin' fun-or so I thought. But somehow or other, when I went to box off his hat his nose got in the way of my hand, and he got an awful nosebleed. His nose must a-bled easy. For I didn't hit him hard. I

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wasn't aiming to hit his nose, nor I warn't mad, nor nothin'. We fixed him up as best 5 we could. And I forgot all about it.

“One day, years later, I see him coming up the road. He drove a blind hoss anyway. And to add to that he had been drinking hard cider 'til 't was runnin' out his mouth, by G-, he was that full. It was getting along towards dark. And with him, probably seeing two of everything-or nothin' at all when his head dipped forward on his chest, I figgered he and the blind hoss was bound to meet up with trouble.

“I goes out and stops the hoss, and tells him to come in my yard and sit for awhile, that he warn't in no condition to go driving a blind hoss around a dark road. ‘Who sez so?’ he wanted to know. ‘Why, d-n you,’ he says, ‘You made my nose bleed once. And I'll fix you yet!’

“It all come back to me in a flash, the school house yard and us boxing off hats. It hurt me, too, to think that he'd bore me a grudge all them years. It made me mad, too, to think of how he'd never come out with it when he was sober. But had kept it down inside him rotting away. I thought that maybe when he'd sobered up and understood how I'd helped him from getting himself and his rig smashed up that he'd think better of me, so I talked to him calm. Finally, he said he would come in my yard, after I'd talked away about how dangerous it was for him to try to drive home up that dark road, on the bank of the 6 river. I got him so he didn't dast even try to drive into my yard. So I got in and took the lines from him, and drove him in. When I'd done that, he took hold of my hand, and told me how he'd misjudged me. His words warn't very plain, but I understood, and how he knew now that I was the best friend he'd ever had. He asked my pardon for having misjudged me. I felt a lot better when I heard that. But as he kinder gulped and hicked, I figured that his stummick might be a mite unsettled by all that cider. And I thought I might fix that up. And, maybe, sober him off. I was feeling what the wimmen call ‘weepy.’

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“What I use to settle my stummick is sal'ratus. So I got a little, put it in a glass and mixed it with warm water and took it out to the feller. He didn't want to drink it. Said he didn't know nothing about it. I said, ‘You don't think I would try to poison you, do you?’ ‘No,’ he said, ‘You're the besh frien' I ever had. Gimme the glass.’ I give it to him. And he drank it-tossed it off all in one gulp-and they was a glassful, too.

“Then he turned redder in the face. His eyes bugged. His mouth opened and I got out of the way just in time. I hadn't figgered what sal'ratus would do with all that cider. Cider is [an?] acid, you know, and when it's mixed with sal'ratus it fizzes. I might just as well have fed my friend a sedlitz powder one mixture at a time. I didn't see no fizz come out his ears.

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But it might have. It come out everywheres else. And the words he used in between. And what he called me, would a-hurt my feelings if I hadn't been so interested in what the sal'ratus was goin' to do next. Finally, he quit fizzin' and says good and calm and sober, ‘All right, Dunnell, I'll not forget this. Although I s'pose it serves me right for thinking that any such low-lived skunk as you are had any good in him at all. Get up Bessie.’ And he drove out of the yard and up the road. And those were the last words that feller would ever speak to me.

“Funny what kids will do. I got to thinking of that school just now - the place where we boxed hats. I was just a little shaver when I first went there. And I guess I was preety cute. My mother always kept me dressed neat. And I had brown curls.

“A lot of the girls who went there were women grown. Great big girls that would be ashamed to be seen in a school now. But then it was all right, ‘cause they all [want?]. Those girls used to tease me somethin' awful before school, or recess, when they was time. They'd hug me and kiss me. And the boys would laugh. And I didn't like it.

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“We had a teacher. A good teacher she was, too. She was awful strict. And she had bright, brown eyes behind her glasses that just stuck out at you when you was doing something that you shouldn't. If you warn't looking at her you could feel her eyes 8 on you - or thought you could. She had a sharp tongue, too. But she used to smile when she saw the girls a-teasing of me - seemed to think that was all right.

“I wanted to quit school. I didn't want to go where I had to be hugged and kissed and everybody laughed. It got preety well round how I felt. But that didn't make no difference.

“One day I was riding to school with a feller that was taking a load to town, and going right by the school. He got to teasing me about how the girls kissed me. And I told him I didn't like it.

“ ‘ Why don't you make ‘em stop?’ he wanted to know. I said I couldn't. And he said, ‘Yes, you can, too.’ ‘How?’ I wanted to know. Well, he told me what to do. He said he had a charm, a sort of mystic spell. That all I had to do, when they begun to hug and tease me, was to say certain words right out good and loud. And that they'd stop. ‘Course, I was anxious to find out what the words were. And after I'd promised to use ‘em, he told me. They warn't but a few. And while I understood some, they was others that I didn't and as I'd never heard ‘em before I figgered they was the magic words. The feller practiced me up so's I could say ‘em just right. And when we reached the schoolhouse I was just dying to try ‘em. Sure enough, the girls was there in the schoolhouse with the teacher. The boys was mostly outside. But I went right in.

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“ ‘Oh, here's Georgie!’ says one of ‘em. I'm going to give him a kiss. ‘I am, too,’ says another. And they all started for me. But this time I didn't run, nor try to git away. I stood there, with my back to the teacher, and when they'd all gathered' round and put their arms around me, and begun to play with my curls, I got off my magic remark.

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“Just the minute I said it, I knew I'd said somethin' I hadn't orter. I looked [aro?] around at the teacher, and she was a-boring me with her eyes. But her cheeks were bright red. And she didn't say nothin'. I looked at the girls. And some of 'em was bent over with their hands across their mouths - laffing. But not makin' no noise. They was all beety red.

“I don't know what I did next. Or how I got out of there. But I did. And finally I found out what them magic words meant. But they was magic all right. They worked. The girls never teased me no more.

“And that teacher, I never knew what happened to her. She was an old maid then. And by rights she ought to be dead now. But she ain't. I met her on the street in Greenfield the other day. I rushed up to her to shake hands, and tell her how glad I was to see her. And what a good teacher she was, 'cause she really was the best I ever had. But when she [see?] me coming, what does she do but look at me with them eyes of hers, turn beety red, and walk right by me with her nose in the air!

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“No, I don't recollect any ghost stories. But, come to think of it, the house you live in is supposed to be haunted. Didn't yer ever hear anything peculiar? That house was built before the Revolution and a lot of strange things have happened there. One of them front rooms was a recruiting office for the 'sea Fencibles' during the War of 1812. But the haunted part didn't come then. Nor it didn't happen when the place was a stage coach tavern run by a man named Lord. It was when the Doolittles lived there.

“One night Mr. Doolittle was away and Mrs. Doolittle was there alone. It was preety late of a pitch dark night, and the rain spattered on the windows once in a while - way it does sometimes in March. Mrs. Doolittle sat by the fireplace readin', or knittin', or somethin', by the light of a kerosene lamp that went up and down the way they did when the wind blew and smoked up the chimney on one side - but maybe you don't remember.

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"All of a sudden she heard a gentle bump on the floor. It scared her a bit. She looked all around and couldn't see nothin'. It came again, a sort of hollow sound - seemed to be right under her feet. She let out a scream and rushed over to Joe Fields without a hat, or shawl, or nothin' and it was raining, too.

"Joe was home. He'd gone to bed but he heard her hammering and come down to see what the excitement was about. She told her story. And Joe figured that she'd been sitting there along and he got scared. And imagined that she'd heard the noises. 't seemed, though, that the only way to get rid of her was to get dressed and go over and see for himself, then talk her out of it, or hope that Doolittle would show up so he could get back home to bed. He couldn't figure no way out of it, so he told his wife what was in the wind, and dragged himself over there.

"He went in where Mrs. Doolittle had been settin'. He didn't hear nothin' and was about to say so, when somethin' went kinder, 'bong, bong' right under his feet. He says he yanked his feet off the floor so quick that he waved 'em right 'round his ears. He looked to see if Mrs. Doolittle saw him jump. He didn't want her to think that he warn't brave, so he said he'd go outside and walk around the house and see if a door or window was open where some prowler might a got in. He didn't have no light, nor nothin' but he used that as an excuse to get out of the house. When he got out it was still rainin' and he didn't like that either, so he crawled all the way 'round and found everything all tight. And while he was there he thought that there was one place he might look to see what was rapping on the floor, and that was in the cellar. Struck him funny that he hadn't thought of it before. But when he got in the house, he didn't like that job either. It occurred to him that if there was anybody there, and he went barging down sullen with a light that the feller could see him before he could see the feller. And that he might not get a chance to see the feller at all.

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But Mrs. Doolittle had fetched him a light, and they warn't nothin' he could do but start. She opened the sullen door for him, too. He started down the sullen stairs. And his light

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shone on somethin' that made him stop. The light was reflected from somethin' shiny, and he heard the 'bong, bong,' again. 'Cept that this time it was louder. However, he wasn't scared a bit, now. He was brave as anything. 'Mrs. Doolittle,' he hollered, 't ain't nothin' at all to be nervous about. Th' sullen's got filled up with water, somehow, and the noise you heard was Mr. Doolittle's empty cider bar'ls floatin' around and a bumping together and hittin' the floor joists!

"Yer see, they wasn't any spirits to it. What spirits they was had gone. Been drunk up by Mr. Doolittle. But still they was real spirits that had some connection with this ghost story."

"Well, I guess that's all I can tell you today. It's gettin' late. Come on, I'll drive you home before it rains. By G- this rheumatism 's gettin' worse."