The Last Call

by Joseph Alexander Altsheler, 1862-1919

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Groveton was in festal garb, which is always more brilliant by night than by day; then the crudities and ugly spots are hid by the kindly dusk, and the buildings rise in the shadow—majestic like old castles; what is bad is covered by the dark, and what is good is shown by the clusters of electric lights.

Judge Braxton felt aglow. Both his heart and mind were touched. It was Home-Coming week for the first time in his state, which is of the west or south, whichever you choose to call it, and the sons and daughters of the old land had come in thousands from every point of the compass to feel once more the touch of the soil from which they sprang. This is a prolific state, and besides increasing its own numbers it had been helping for generations to populate other states: north, east, south, and west. Hence,when all its children were invited to come back and

sit for a day or two, welcome guests at the mother-hearth, they poured in in a flood, first upon the chief city, and, then, after the celebrations there, upon the numerous county-seats where the welcome was more intimate and more particular, because everybody not only knew everybody else, but also was more or less related to the whole county.

All day long the people had been pouring into Groveton, and Judge Braxton, who had taken a conspicuous part in the early ceremonies, now wandered away from his family and friends, and occupied a secluded place at a street-corner, choosing for a little while to be alone in a crowd. It was easy, even for a man so well-known and so striking in appearance as the Judge to hide himself, because the town was so densely packed that the multitude had no chance to observe one of its units.

Judge Braxton had borne a great part in the day‘s festivities, and now for a brief space he would be a looker-on, a careless member of the crowd, just as if his youth had come back again.

The little city was full of his kindred. Many old ties were pulling at him, and there was faint moisture in his eyes. It was not the great crowd, nor the parade passing through the streets, nor the continuous stream of blazing fireworks, but the thought of the old home that had seen his birth and the sixty years of his life, and the many old friends scattered now through other states whom he had met eye to eye once again.

In it all, there was, to him, a something apart from the crowd, the noise, and the lights; something finer, something intangible, and spiritual. Judge Braxton was neither excessively sentimental nor superstitious, but it seemed to him that the dear dead were close by.

An acquaintance touched him on the shoulder, and smiling, passed on. Another hailed him from the street, but he, too, passed on, and the Judge mechanically followed the crowd and the parade. Days in June have been called rare, but they are no better than the nights, and a glorious soft breeze swept over the hills. It touched Judge Braxton’s face and he felt like a boy again.

At the crossing of a street the crowd suddenly thickened, and pressed upon itself. An old man in front of Judge Braxton staggered and went down upon his knees. The Judge shot out a strong right arm and pulled him back to his feet.

„Thanks,“ said the old man in a thin voice, „I am not very strong, and I could not have recovered myself without you.“

The Judge did not notice until then how very old the man was, and how very weak. His face was withered like a dried apple, and his hands had the incessant trembling movement of an octogenarian. His years were many and he looked them. He was poorly dressed. But in his eyes shone the glitter of a youthful excitement.

„Won‘t you let me help you?“ said the Judge, touched with sudden sympathy. „This is a big crowd, and *united we stand, divided we fall*; that‘s the motto of our state, you know, and it‘s an especially good one for us, tonight.“

He concluded with a laugh, and not waiting for an answer, hooked his strong, muscular arm under the old man‘s thin, weak one. The stranger leaned heavily upon him, but seemed to be unconscious of the act.

„You like it, don‘t you,“ said the Judge. „We are trying to do the handsome thing for all the wanderers from the parent nest.“

The old man straightened up a little, and leaned less weight on Judge Braxton‘s arm.

„So you are glad to see us all,“ he said, turning his flashing eyes upon the Judge. His eyes were the only vital thing about him, and they were still glittering with excitement.

„Yes,“ replied Judge Braxton, „and I‘m glad you are here.“

„You‘ve always had a kind heart, Judge Braxton, kinder than most!“

It was uttered in a high, thin voice, a cry drawn from the depths, and the Judge not knowing what to say, was silent. But he held the thin, weak arm more firmly, and he was moved by a great sympathy. That the man should know him did not seem strange; often people whose faces he could not recall greeted him by name.

„You are one of us,“ he said at length to the stranger. „I‘d know the accent of our state anywhere; we never lose it, no matter how far or long we may wander.“

„No,“ said the old man, „we don’t. I ought to know it.“

The Judge looked at him again and with renewed interest. His wrinkled, ancient face bore the marks of a sun hotter than that of this temperate state.

„You, I judge, have come far?“ said Judge Braxton.

„Yes,“ said the stranger, „I have. Nobody else knows how—well, it doesn‘t matter, but away out there in West Au—“

He stopped short, and looked suddenly and intently at the Judge.

„And you‘ve come all the way from West Australia,“ said the Judge with a good-humored laugh. „Why, that is just about as far as one can get from this state. Do you know there is a prize for the native who comes farthest. Why don‘t you report for it?“

„West Australia? West Australia!“ exclaimed the old man fretfully and angrily. „I haven‘t said anything about West Australia. Why do you put such words in my mouth? I was never within ten thousand miles of West Australia.“

„I beg your pardon,“ said the Judge, „I thought you were going to say West Australia, The fault was mine.“

Judge Braxton was not offended, nor did he suffer any loss of sympathy. The old man seemed as a child to him, to be treated as a child, to be humored as a child.

„Of course you are glad to be here,“ he said, by way of making conversation, rather than with any particular meaning.

The old man turned his eyes once more upon the Judge. The wild, peculiar glitter in them had deepened.

„Glad to be here!“ he exclaimed, as if his reserve of the previous moment had been utterly forgotten. „Oh, it‘s God‘s country! It‘s sweeter and dearer than any other! I love it all! Every inch of it! How I‘ve looked forward to it! How I‘ve dreamed of it! And once, I thought I should never see it again!“

His voice died away in the tremulous wail of old age. It was all inexpressibly pathetic, indescribably sad, and Judge Braxton felt the protecting thrill that strength has, alike for infancy and senility. It seemed to him that he could divine the history of the old man; someone who had gone long ago into a desert place of Arizona or Nevada, and now, after years of waste and loss, had crept back to the old home, which glowed for him with the beauty of fact, and all the added beauty of illusion. He would have asked him his name and something of his story, but

delicacy restrained him, because he saw that the ancient stranger was shaken by a great emotion.

„I‘ve seen it, I‘ve seen it all,“ he said, „and it isn‘t changed. There are new buildings, and more of them, but it‘s the same town, and the same state, and the same people, God bless ‘em! There‘s nobody like ‘em!“

Judge Braxton smiled.

„There‘s never anybody like our own,“ he said, „and I guess God was wise to make us all that way. But the parade is getting ahead of us. It ends down at the big hall, where there are to be speeches. I made mine today, and so they have let me off tonight. If you want to hear ‘em we‘ll go on together.“

„Of course I want to hear ‘em,“ replied the old man, „and I thank you for helping me. It‘s a bad thing to be as old and feeble as I am and—but I‘m here, though I had to come far, and I mean to see and hear everything. These are my own, and all the others are nothing.“

They walked on together, the Judge‘s strong arm still under that of the old man and supporting him. The stranger was as eager and excited as a child. He exclaimed upon everything, and Judge Braxton felt his arm trembling continually. He showed familiarity with the town despite the change of recent years, and called each landmark by name, as he came to it.

The parade ended at the public hall, according to plan, and the people poured into it in a torrent, to hear the conspicuous sons of the county speak to the home-comers. Judge Braxton was entitled, of course, to a seat on the stage, but the old stranger appealed so much to his sympathy that he resolved to protect and guide him. He helped him through the human flood and down the aisle to good chairs near the front, where they sat down together.

The hall blazed with many lights, but all the rough places were covered with flowers and flags and banners. The town is noted for beautiful women, and they were all there in beautiful toilets. The Judge beheld around them a panorama of shifting and vivid colors, above which rose a mass of eager faces. He felt a thrill, intense and deep. It was his own whom he beheld, gathered to do honor to those who had come back once more to the native earth, and he enjoyed the fact that he had already done his part, and could now be a spectator, just „one of the boys.“

He looked down at the old man, who lay rather than sat in his seat, limp and crushed by the color, the light, and the shifting emotions on the many faces. „Poor old fellow,“ thought the Judge, „I don‘t know that it‘s so well to come back at eighty.“

It seemed obvious to Judge Braxton that the stranger was alone in the town. Perhaps all the relatives for whom he had cared were dead, and his acquaintances may have traveled the same road; if so, he must have left the state a long time ago, fifty years maybe. „A half century,“ thought the Judge „blots out many human things.“

The crowd was slowly hushed into silence, and then, when a band began to play, thousand of voices took up the tune of an old song, the song of this state. Its words are simple, but its fame is world-wide, it is hackneyed, time-worn, played and sung well and ill, but no son of this state can ever hear it without a thrill, and the thrill grows deeper if he is far away in some strange land.

Now something of this feeling stirred Judge Braxton, as the mighty chorus swelled and filled the hall. He had a singular sense of aloofness, of detachment, of being far away, as he sat there with the ancient stranger whose name even he did not know.

Presently he heard a sound beside him, under, rather than over, the note of the song, and he looked around. The old man had sunk farther down in his seat, and he was crying, not easily nor gently, but with deep sobs that were torn up from his chest. It was something more than the pathos of age or the sadness of coming back to find all one's comrades gone, and the Judge was too moved to speak. He put one hand on the old man's shoulder and let it rest there protectingly, as a father soothes his frightened child.

„It does move one," he said, after a while, „especially one who has been away a long time."

Others may have noticed, but in the surcharged atmosphere and excitement of that moment they said nothing. The song died and the famous sons of the county, both those who yet lived in it and those who lived elsewhere, began to speak. Now the old man raised up, and his living eyes, in which the vital spark glowed so deeply, began to sparkle.

He knew all the middle-aged and older men on the stage, and he ran over their names gleefully, like a child.

„There is Carter, who was state senator," he said, „a great speaker and an able man. His hair's whiter than—and Powell who was lieutenant-governor, and Bright who was circuit-judge, and Barton, who beat McLeod for the legislature in '82, and Wilson who was in congress. I didn't think they'd bear their years so well! And how glad the people are to see them! My God! My God!"

He suddenly put his face in his hands and crouched down in his chair again. Judge Braxton, in his time, had heard many cries of grief and pain, but never one like the „My God!" that was wrenched now from the throat of this little withered old man. Unconsciously he put his hand back on the stranger's shoulder, and kept it there.

„Listen to Senator Carter," he said with an attempt to cheer, „that was a good joke he got off. Hear the people laugh!"

In fact, Senator Carter, a broad-faced, smiling man of sixty, was making a brilliant, humorous speech that kept the audience in a joyous mood. Judge Braxton, despite the man beside him, was forced to smile.

„Ah, yes," said the stranger, „it's Carter. I should have known him anywhere; he hasn't changed at all. When he first came to the legislature in '74 he was just the same, ready to crack a joke at anything, always in for any fun that might come his way."

Judge Braxton sat up a little straighter and gazed curiously at his companion, but he could make nothing of him. The old man's fit of garrulity was succeeded by a spell of silence. Sometimes he closed his eyes and seemed to be oblivious of all that was passing round him. The Judge surmised that he was busy with memories, and he did not interrupt him. The evening moved on; speaker followed speaker, the band played now and then, and more songs were sung. There was laughter, cheers, and the varying gleam of bright faces and brilliant dresses. The

air grew warm, and painted fans, shaken out of their folds, waved back and forth, adding to the shifting colors.

Judge Braxton returned, after a while, to his own people; but just before the exercises were over he came back to the little old man in the chair. The people were rising to go and he looked down at the huddled figure.

„Wake up! Wake up!“ he said with a cheerful pretense of believing that the man was asleep; „it‘s time to go home. It‘s ended for tonight, but we‘ll do it all over again tomorrow.“

The old man roused himself, as if he had, in truth, been asleep, and stood up.

„Yes! Yes!“ he said. „Oh, it‘s been a great night to me—a great night! And I thank you, Judge Braxton, for your kindness to a poor old stranger.“

„That‘s all right,“ replied the Judge cheerfully, „but we‘re not through the woods yet. There‘s a great crush around the doors and you‘d better let me see you safely outside.“

He hooked his arm under the old man‘s, and presently they were in the street, where a large part of the crowd yet lingered, and where the sound of many voices arose.

„I‘ll leave you here,“ said the stranger, „and again I thank you, for your kindness to me.“

„You must come out to the big picnic tomorrow,“ said Judge Braxton, „I‘ll expect to see you there.“

The old fellow released himself from the protecting arm, and slipped away in the crowd. The Judge watched him a little, noticed his uncertain steps, the signs of weakness or excitement, and thought once of following him to protect him further, but decided not to do so, and a moment later the stranger was out of sight.

Then he walked slowly home, where his old friend, Senator Carter, who was his guest for the night, received him with reproof and upbraiding.

„Where have you been?“ asked the senator, „You were not on the stage at all tonight.“

„I was better employed,“ replied the Judge. „I was taking care of an old gentleman, a friend of mine.“

„Who was he?“

„I don‘t know.“

„What! you don‘t know?“

„No, I don‘t. I never met him before this evening, and he didn‘t tell his name. But he was a home-comer, all right. I don‘t think I ever before saw anybody so deeply moved.“

Then he told Carter of the old man, and described his appearance, but the senator shook his head.

„I think you‘d better stick to your original guess of somebody returning from Arizona or Nevada,“ he said, „only you put the date of his emigration too far back. I guess he lived up there somewhere about the capital, and became used to public men.“

The next day a huge picnic, or what is known in the language of this state as a barbecue, was given on the grounds just outside Groveton. Oxen and pigs were roasted whole, and ten thousand people were scattered through the fields and meadows. The morning was glorious, a brilliant June sunlight deepening the green

grass and foliage. It was all cheerful and intimate, and in the Judge‘s mind the sense of kinship to everybody was strong. He roamed about from group to group, always welcome and always helping in the fun. He came presently to a magnificent grove of oak and maple, and there, standing where the trees grew thickest, he beheld his companion of the night before, looking yet older, weaker, and thinner in the disclosing sunlight.

The Judge saw the stranger before the latter noticed him, and he stood for a while, watching his ancient face and figure. The sunken eyes were filled with longing, and now and then the tremulous hands were outstretched, as if they would grasp at something, Judge Braxton felt again the desire to cheer, to give him companionship, and he walked briskly to the old man, who was half-hidden by the tree-trunks and clustering bushes.

„I‘m glad to find you once more,“ he said cheerfully. „Why don‘t you come out into the open and get something to eat? Join the crowd. Everybody will welcome you. We‘re all native sons together.“

The old man‘s eyes brightened at the meeting, and he put out a tremulous hand.

„Thank you.“ he said, „but, I think I‘d rather stand here and look on. I‘m too old to share in lively doings, but it‘s good to see ‘em all again. How happy they look! So free! so fearless!“

„They are certainly free and they have nothing to fear,“ said Judge Braxton.

It was again on the tip of his tongue to ask the old man his name and whence he came, but, as before, the sense of delicacy restrained him. Since the stranger had volunteered neither, it would not become him to be inquisitive, and he remained with him a while, pointing out well-known men, and gossiping lightly of the subjects, which were common to the county.

„I‘m content just to stand here and watch ‘em,“ said the old man.

Judge Braxton left him, but after a while he returned, bringing him something to eat, and found him yet standing in the covert, his position unchanged, his eager, longing eyes still on the multitude. He pecked like a bird at the food that the Judge brought him, and it was obvious to the Judge that his mind was on other things.

Judge Braxton, actuated by the double motives of curiosity and sympathy, unconscious perhaps in the first case, remained by the old man and took up the thread of light and cheerful talk. The other was silent, but the Judge, as on the night before, noticed that the thin, age-old hands never ceased to tremble.

Many people passed near them, saluting the Judge as they went on, and presently when one came, a tall man of seventy with a massive figure and a face yet ruddy and youthful, Judge Braxton had an idea.

„Do you see the big man near us?“ he asked. „That‘s Mr. Wharton; he was governor of the state in the early eighties and a good governor he was. I know him well, and I should like to introduce you to him. I think you‘ve come very far and you‘re very—Oh, well, he‘d certainly be interested in you. Just wait a minute, won‘t you, and I‘ll bring him?“

The old man uttered a cry, and, with a vigor he had not shown before, suddenly clasped his two tremulous hands around Judge Braxton‘s.

„Don‘t! For God‘s sake, don‘t!“ he cried. „I won‘t see that man! I won‘t speak to him! I won‘t let him see me! I won‘t let him come near me! I entreat you not to bring him!“

Judge Braxton was never more surprised in his life, and he had never before seen so complete a picture of terror. The figure of the old man shrank and cowered, but he clung to the Judge’s arm with the strength and tenacity of despair. The Judge was conscious that some underlying, but deep, motive stirred him to such a frenzy, and he could not continue in the face of so strong a protest.

„Oh, certainly, if you don‘t wish it,“ he said, „but Mr. Wharton is a fine man. I should have been glad for you to meet him.“

The massive figure of the former governor passed on and was lost in the crowd. The terror in the stranger‘s eyes seemed to die a little, but he became weak and sank to the ground. A sudden shock had overpowered him, and he was relaxed and all but lifeless. Judge Braxton hastily brought him a stimulant and also Bob Ryan, the editor of the *Groveton Record*.

„Something is the matter with this old man, a comrade of mine, of last night, Bob,“ he said. „I wish you‘d help me, I‘ve taken an interest in him, because he‘s been watching everything so intently, and because he‘s been acting queerly. I confess I can‘t make him out.“

The stranger now sat on the grass with his back against a tree. His whole figure drooped and his eyes were dim. Mr. Ryan looked closely at him, and then shook his head.

„I don‘t make him out, either,“ he said, „but he‘ll have to be sent somewhere and that pretty quick. I‘m thinking his race is nearly run.“

Judge Braxton felt a sense of comradeship. He and the old man had been together and he did not mean to desert him now. The truth of Mr. Ryan‘s words was obvious and he asked the stranger his address. After many attempts he obtained it—an obscure street in an obscure part of the town. Then he called a carriage and put the stranger in it.

„I‘m going with him.“ he said.

„I think I‘ll go, too,“ said Mr. Ryan.

The stranger collapsed on the carriage-seat, and, as they drove swiftly, he babbled vaguely of many lands.

„He‘s had a shock of some kind—a great shock,“ said the editor, „and it‘s shattered a frame as old and feeble as his.“

Judge Braxton said nothing.

They reached the place, a plain, cheap house. It‘s owner knew nothing of his tenant, except that he had paid in advance and was very quiet. They carried the old man to his room and put him in his bed. Then a doctor came, prescribed a soothing medicine, and went away.

„All I can do is to make his going as easy as possible,“ he said as he left.

Judge Braxton sat by the bedside a part of the afternoon, and Mr. Ryan came in twice.

But Judge Braxton was thinking. His mind had traveled far back to his first term in the house of representatives, thirty years before. As a young man, he had gone to the state capital, full of zeal, and in those eager days all impressions bit deep. Wharton was the governor, James the lieutenant-governor, Mapleson the

secretary of state from the same county as himself, and Honest Tom Todd the treasurer. Honest Tom Todd! The treasurer‘s office was always his for the asking. No man more open and frank of face and manner than he! He was like a rock on the hills, they said, and that was why they called him Honest Tom Todd. How clearly he remembered the shock and the tragedy! Honest Tom Todd a defaulter! The money of the state, a vast sum, lost in wild speculation. It was Wharton, the stern governor, who had discovered and exposed it, but Honest Tom Todd fled between two suns, and had never been heard of again.

It was all clear. There are things that solve themselves when a hint is given. Full cause had the stranger for his terror at the sight, of Wharton. Judge Braxton looked at the shrunken form on the bed, and remembered, despite the changes. His feeling, then was only pity.

„God, what a punishment!“ he thought, „for an old man to be wandering thirty years and alone, about the world—and always afraid!“

When Bob Ryan came in the second time Judge Braxton raised his hand.

„Quiet, Bob,“ he said, „Honest Tom Todd is dying.“

Mr. Ryan started, but saying nothing sat down by the bed, and waited with Judge Braxton. Just before the end the old man revived a little.

„I came, too, to the call,“ he said.

Then Honest Tom Todd passed on to a world where only the infallible sit in judgment.