

The Storyteller

THE VACANT LOT

Clanlpin had only one serious drawback to its urbane loveliness. It had a vacant lot. A vacant lot right in the heart of the town.

Nature had done lavishly for Clanlpin ere the name was known or its first shingle had been placed. A panorama of billowy hills had been set about the spot. A dark sea of undulating forests cinctured it round and stretched away into the mists out of which peered the cones and curves of the mountains. A noble river coiled snake-like, with silver scales, through the woods and meadows above and below, and sent its surplus waters flying in a lacework cascade down a deep verdure-edged ravine a little below the plateau on which the first settlers had pitched to perpetuate in civic form the name and fame of Clanlpin. No town between the St. Lawrence and the Rio Grande, in short, had a handsomer location. So Clanlpin grew up and flourished, and was happy as any town could be, save for the one drawback already specified. Its repose was broken and its beauty marred by that ugly blemish—that scar or mole upon its fair countenance, the vacant lot.

The time had been when Clanlpin had many other vacant spaces, and then its mind was tranquil. But that period was long ago. When the railway came to the town, every old person remembered, it was settled in a rush. In a few months every piece of land in and about the spot was bought up and built on—all but this one square. It stood, too, in the handsomest part of the town, where the best sort of people had gathered to gether and conspired, as it were, to keep it an exclusive aristocratic place, free from the abomination of stores and the banal blight of the street car and the engine whistle. There it stood like the ancient Anarchy amid the beauty of Eden, a constant source of misery and a reproach to Clanlpin.

A blessed haven for travelling tinkers was this vacant lot. In the summer season they came along with their wives and their children, their budgets and their soldering irons, and hammered away with a horrible clangor on damaged kettles and saucepans all day long, and when the peaceful shades of eve descended they yielded themselves up to the gentle pleasures of Clanlpin whisky and settled marital disputes, in nomad fashion, with the implements of their trade. The collective police force of Clanlpin was usually employed on these festive occasions in maintaining the guarantees of the American Constitution in regard to life, liberty, and happiness in and around the vicinity of the vacant lot.

Circuses, too, came along in due course, and then the aristocratic denizens about the lot had a glorious time. The masses came in might and majesty to their quarter, and the din of diseased and dinged brass instruments and the yelling of the touts and the uproar of the struggling crowds imparted variety to the scene while the equestrian visitation lasted.

Twice within a decade had the vacant lot been taken possession of by a band of gypsies. Whilst their queens were revealing the secrets of the stars to fair furtive visitors, their male members made some interesting experiments in horse and poultry raising on a non-commercial system. The memory of these things embittered the Clanlpin mind. The dogged owner of the vacant lot was regarded as a sort of public enemy.

A descendant of one of the original Scotch settlers, he, Malcolm Macalpin, had inherited all the religious fervor of his Covenanting ancestry. Two members of the family had sealed their devotion to the principles of the Covenant on the bloody field of Killcrankie with their life blood. This circumstance was regarded as a sort of family possession—a memory to be lived up to until the day of Armageddon. And it was this memory which caused all the trouble in Clanlpin, for this was what perpetuated the vacancy of the disreputable unkempt, and disorderly vacant lot.

'The Jesuits hae their een upon that lot, Malcolm,' old Macalpin often said to his son during the illness which preceded his dissolution. 'They will try mony a shift and skirl, mony a tune to get around ye, but haud them a' at arm's length and gie no ear to any offer for the place. Ye hae plenty to live on without that.'

These injunctions of Malcolm the elder were always kept in mind by Malcolm the younger when the patriarch lay under his brown stone mausoleum, with all his virtues and none of his failings inscribed on it, in the cemetery where all the rude forefathers of Clanlpin ceased to take snuff.

Still, the whirligig of time softens rigid memories and dulls the edge of acerbity. The growth of business connections has a liberalising tendency and keeps bigotry in the background. Malcolm Macalpin was largely in business, for, although fairly wealthy when his father died, he could not resist the commercial instincts of his race or lead an idle life. Hence he was soon mixed up in the chief industrial enterprises of the place, and became in due course a leading personage in all the affairs of Clanlpin.

It is the fate of leading men to be seized upon by men who do not lead, but are content to follow in politics. Malcolm Macalpin did not escape. The fires of ambition in him were fanned by those who professed to be skilled in the devious ways of politics. The trouble with Mr. Macalpin was that he had no very clear ideas on political matters himself. He never could make up his mind to join either the Republican or the Democratic camp, and the only thing definite about politics in his mind was a hatred of Populism. This he regarded as only another name for Socialism and Socialism as only another name for diabolism. 'I would rather have a Jesuit than a Populist any day,' he warmly explained once when discussing politics with a legal friend, who was trying to get him to declare himself definitely on one side or the other, with a view to some good electioneering business in the next political campaign.

'That may be quite right and a first-class principle to act on in politics,' rejoined the friend, 'but it would not be wise to put it in that way if you intend ever to enter politics. The Roman Catholics are a powerful element in this constituency, you know, and if you want their vote you must take care not to offend their sensibilities by any reference to the Jesuits, or the monks, or persons of that kind, you know.'

An esteemed and eminently respectable citizen of Clanlpin, who held the important post of city treasurer, was missing from his office one morning. A suit of summer clothes which he had worn the previous day, a new straw hat, and a pair of russet shoes were found by the riverside a little outside the town, and it was charitably supposed that he had gone in to take a swim and swum farther than he had intended—swam over the river Styx, in fact. But his body was never recovered; neither was the sum of 25,000 dollars which it was supposed the city of Clanlpin had to its credit in the bank. His loss was deeply felt by the church-going community, for he had been a most zealous promoter of every movement for the benefit of religion and the reclamation of the unregenerate.

This event made things hum in Macalpin. A meeting of indignant citizens was held and a committee of investigation into everything was at once appointed. It was suddenly discovered that many things were not as they should be.

The absence of a high public spirit amongst the police and the department of street cleaning was a fact which all at once became painfully apparent. It was suspected that these bodies exercised a sinister influence over all public departments, and that the judges and magistrates were in guilty collusion with the common enemy. Then a cry for reform, loud and deep, arose. Mr. Macalpin's friends immediately perceived their opportunity. A man of rigid and unblemished civic virtue, they felt, was what was wanted, and not a politician. Mr. Macalpin was just that sort of man.

Yielding to the solicitations of his many friends, though not without some unaccountable misgivings, Mr. Macalpin allowed himself to be nominated for Congress. He stood unpledged to anything but good government and civic reform. In the interests of great communities, he declared, all other considerations were matters of minor import. The Monroe doctrine, protection or free trade, free silver or monometallism were all mere shibboleths as long as the great municipal system of the country was rotten at the core. When you have set your own house in order, you may begin to look around you for other fields of progress, he said. The sanitary condition of the Macedonian cities was doubtless piling up doctors' bills all the time Alexander was conquering the whole world and blubbering for more.

Were the issue to be now decided a straight and simple one, Mr. Macalpin's chances of success would have been slender. There was a pretty even muster-roll of Democrats and Republicans in Clanlpin; while the class who belong to neither category were ordinarily small in number. Now, however, their ranks were swelled by large accessions from both the other camps, and the whole constituted a third party, priding in the name of Reformers. One of the first questions which presented itself to the new party was the need of a town hall. The building which up to this point had been used for the purpose was found to be entirely in-