The Unfamiliar

Richard Connell

Who he was and what he was and where he came from no one knew. How he came to be in Crosby Corners was a mystery, and at harvesttime Connecticut farmers are too busy to peer into mysteries. He could not speak much English beyond “Yes,” “No,” “Hungry,” and “Go Hell.” He could gesture, however. He could gesture with his hands, his elbows, his eyes, his feet. He appeared to be trying by pantomime to convey the idea that he had been forcibly seized in his native land, which was remote, had been pressed into service aboard a ship, had been very ill at sea, had escaped at a port, had fled on a train, and had dropped, or been dropped, at Crosby Corners. The farmers, however, had no time to interpret pantomime. Farm-hands were scarce, and if a man had two hands and at least one good eye, they did not delve into his past or his pedigree; they put him to work. It was thus that the small, scared man in the velvet trousers entered the employ of Ben Crosby, richest farmer in that region.

“I found the little rascal,” Ben Crosby told his wife, “squealing like a pig in a hornet’s nest, and frightened almost out of his wits, with Constable Pettit marching him along by the ear. ‘Constable,’ I says, ‘what is that and where did you get it?’ He says to me: ‘I dunno what it is, Ben, but it looks foreign. I found it down by the railroad tracks trying to eat a raw potato. When I asked it what its name was, it said: “See.”□ ’ I says to the constable, ‘He may be a Gipsy or he may be a Hindu, and he looks as if he suspected you of being a cannibal. But,’ I says, ‘he seems wiry and he didn’t get that lovely tobacco-brown finish of his at a pink tea or from working in an office. Now I need hands worse than ducks need ponds. So turn him over to me ’stead of sticking him in the calaboose, and I’ll give him a job.’ Pettit didn’t want to be bothered with him, so he turned him over to me, and there he is out at the pump washing the dirtiest pair of hands I ever did see, and now and then rubbing his belly to show how hungry he is. I’ll send him to the back door, Hannah; you give him a lining of ham and eggs and pie, and then send him down to me. I’ll be in the twenty-acre lot.”

Presently there came a knock on the back door of the Crosby house. It was not at all a robust knock; it was a tap as faint and timid as a butterfly’s kick. Mrs. Crosby opened the door, and saw a small man standing there; his face was a rich brown, his eyes were black and apprehensive; he appeared to be ready to flee if the occasion demanded it. When he saw Mrs. Crosby, however, he bowed deeply. Such a bow had never before been executed in Crosby Corners except in the moving pictures. It was a sweeping, courtly thing, that bow, in which the small man swept off his wide felt hat and dusted the steps with it. Then he smiled; it was a humble, ingratiating smile. He looked toward the stove, where the sizzling ham was sending its aroma heavenward, and sighed. Mrs. Crosby pointed to a chair at the kitchen table, and he, with another bow, took it, and presently he was eating hungrily and freely. Mrs. Crosby now and then lifted an eye from her canning to regard the exotic stranger; she had a doubt or two at first whether it was quite

safe for her to stay there. You never can tell what the foreigners may do, even if you are past forty and the mother of a grown daughter. She glanced into the dining-room, where, above the mantel, hung Grandpa Crosby's Civil-War sword, a long, heavy weapon, and its presence reassured her. As she studied the man, she decided that any fear of him was quite groundless; if anything, he was afraid of her. His hair, she observed, was blue-black and long, but arranged in a way that suggested that he was a bit of a dandy. The stranger's trousers surprised her greatly; they were of black velvet, really painfully tight, except at the bottom of each leg, where they flared out like bells. He had no belt, but instead a scarlet sash. His shirt, when new and clean, must have been a remarkable garment; it had been plaid silk, but it was now neither new nor clean. His boots were of patent leather and excessively pointed.

When he had eaten a very great deal he arose, bowed, smiled beatifically, and made gestures of gratitude. Mrs. Crosby pointed in the direction of the twenty-acre lot, and he understood. She saw him picking his way down the path; he was the first man she had ever seen whose gait at one and the same time included a mince and a swagger.

When Ben Crosby came in to his late supper that evening he announced:

"I was wrong about that new little fellow. He doesn't seem to have done farm work. He's willing enough, but he handles a hay-fork as dainty as if it was a toothpick. And, say, he certainly is the most scary human being I ever set eyes on. You should have seen him when the tractor came into the field with the mowing-machine. He gave a yelp and jumped on the stone wall, and if there'd been a tree handy, I guess he'd have climbed it. He looked as if he was afraid the machine would eat him. Pete High, who was driving it, said, 'I guess it ain't only his skin that's yellow.' I hope Pete isn't right. I hate a coward."

"Don't you let Pete High pick on him," admonished Mrs. Crosby. "Perhaps the man never saw a mowing-machine before. I remember how scared I was when I saw the first automobile come roaring and snorting along the road. And so were you, Ben Crosby."

"Well, I didn't let on I was," replied her husband, harpooning a potato.

"No, you old hypocrite, maybe you didn't; but I saw you looking around for a tree."

He laughed, and was on the point of sending a potato to its final resting-place, when they both heard a cry—a high, terrified cry that came through the dusk. He started up.

"That's not Janey?" he asked.

"No; she's still in town taking her music lesson."

"Who is it, then?" he asked quickly.

They heard the patter of running feet on the path outside; they heard the sound of feet landing after a leap to the porch; they heard someone banging frantically on the front door. Ben Crosby called out:

“What’s the matter?”

A flood of words in a strange tongue answered him.

“It’s Velvet Pants,” he exclaimed, and flung open the door. The small man, breathless, tumbled in.

“What in the name of thunderation?” demanded Ben Crosby. The small man pointed through the open door with quivering fingers.

“I don’t see anything out there but the evening,” said Ben Crosby.

“Ice!” cried the man, very agitated. “Ice!”

“What do you want ice for?” asked Ben Crosby.

The man made eloquent gestures; first he pointed at his own face, then he pointed outside; his index finger stabbed at the gloom once, twice, a dozen quick times.

“Ice! ice! ice! ice! ice! ice!” he said.

“Why, Ben, he means ‘eyes,’□ ” exclaimed Mrs. Crosby.

“Eyes? What eyes, Hannah? I don’t see any eyes. There’s nothing out there but lightning-bugs.”

One of the circling fireflies flew quite near the open door. The small man saw it coming, and made an earnest, but only partly successful, attempt to climb into the grandfather’s clock that stood in the corner of the hall.

Ben Crosby threw back his head and laughed.

“Why, dog my cats! if the little cuss ain’t afraid of lightning-bugs!” he said. “Hey, Velvet Pants, look here.”

He plucked the man out of the clock with one big hand, and with the other captured the firefly, and held it near the stranger’s wide eyes.

“Look,” said Ben Crosby in the loud tone that is supposed to make the American language intelligible to those who do not understand it when it is spoken in an ordinary tone of voice. “Bug! Bug! No hurt! Lightning-bug. LIGHTNING-BUG!”

The small man pulled away from the insect.

“Not know lightning-boogs,” he said.

Ben released his hold on the small man, and pointed up-stairs; then Ben gave a highly realistic imitation of a snore. The man comprehended, and his velvet-clad legs twinkled up-stairs toward his bedroom. Ben Crosby returned to his supper, shaking his head.

“It beats me,” he remarked to his wife. “He’s afraid of mowing-machines and he’s afraid of lightning-bugs. I wonder if he’s afraid of the dark. I need farm-hands, but may I be fried like a smelt if I’ll tell ’em bedtime stories or sing ’em to sleep. What’s the world coming to, anyhow? Can you imagine a real, honest-to-goodness farm-hand like Pete High being afraid of lightning-bugs?”

“Boneheads are seldom afraid of anything,” remarked Mrs. Crosby, pouring buttermilk.

They heard the front door open.

“There’s Janey,” said Mrs. Crosby. “Hello, dear. Come right to the table. I’ve made ice-cream —coffee, the kind you like.”

Janey, daughter of the household, came in, bearing her guitar. She kissed both her parents. Janey was nearly eighteen, a pretty, elf-like girl. All the masculine hearts in Crosby Corners beat a little faster when she went down the village street; her blue eyes had been the cause of many black eyes. Her father told her of the new man, of his extraordinary velvet trousers, and of his still more extraordinary fears.

“Poor little fellow!” she said.

As the harvest days hurried along, Velvet Pants atoned somewhat for his lack of expertness as a farmer by his unfailing good nature. He even learned to speak a little English of a certain hesitant species, but he had little opportunity to talk with his fellow-workers. Mostly they ignored him, or, if they addressed him at all, did so loftily and with contempt; a man who paled at the sight of mowing-machines and lightning-bugs was not of their stout-hearted kind.

The incident at the swimming-hole added little to Velvet Pants’ reputation for bravery. The

swimming-hole was Sandy Bottom, where all the workers, hot from their day in the fields, went for a cool plunge after work. They noticed that Velvet Pants never went with them.

“How does he keep so neat and clean?” they asked. It was Pete High who solved this mystery.

“Yesterday morning,” said Pete, “I woke up earlier than usual, and what do you suppose I see? Well, I hear a tap, tap, tap, like somebody was stealing down-stairs on his tiptoes. I peek out o’ the door, and it’s Velvet Pants. Just for fun, I follow him. He goes down to the creek, not to Sandy Bottom, but a couple of rods down-stream, where the water ain’t more than ankle-deep. He strips, and takes a stick about the size of a cane and goes like this, ‘Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah,’ and pokes at the bushes each time he says ‘ah.’ Then he gives one big loud ‘Ahhhhhhh,’ and lunges with his stick at the bushes; then he bows low, like he was an actor in a show. He takes a bath, then, dabbing a little water on himself like a cat does; but he doesn’t go in above his ankles. I guess he’s afraid of the water.”

“Mebbe he ain’t much on swimming,” said one of the other hands, “but he sure can twang a mean guitar. He’s giving Janey Crosby lessons.”

Pete High scowled.

“He is, is he? First I heard about it. Well, the first thing he knows he won’t know nothing. I’m not going to have any wop——”

“She likes him,” teased the other man. “Says he’s got such lovely manners; just like what you ain’t, Pete.”

“She don’t know how yella he is,” Pete High growled, “but she will.”

On Saturday afternoons most of Crosby Corners, men, women, and children, comes to Sandy Bottom, bringing bathing-suits. It is not a very big pool; at its deepest part it is not much over six feet deep.

How it happened that the small man with the velvet trousers should be passing Sandy Bottom that Saturday noon at the precise moment when freckled Johnny Nelson was floundering in the water and calling loudly for help does not matter. Why Johnny Nelson should be drowning at all is something of a puzzle, for he was the best swimmer in the county. It also happened that just as Johnny was going down for the ninth or tenth time and was calling piteously for Velvet Pants to dive in and save him, Janey Crosby and a party of girl friends came down to the pool.

They saw Velvet Pants, his dark face ivory colored, trying to reach Johnny with a young tree

wrenched from the bank. The small man was a picture of frantic helplessness.

“Save me, Velvet Pants! Save me!” bawled Johnny, submerging, and coming up for the fourteenth time.

“Not know how,” screamed Velvet Pants in agony. “Not know how.”

Janey Crosby and her companions grew mildly hysterical; Johnny Nelson went down for the seventeenth and eighteenth time, respectively. Velvet Pants, finding that he could not reach Johnny with the tree, had fallen on his knees, and with clasped hands was praying aloud in his own tongue. Then, it also happened, that Pete High came racing through the bushes.

“I’ll save you, Johnny,” he cried dramatically. Overalls and all, he plunged in and brought the dripping Johnny to the bank. The prayers of Velvet Pants became prayers of thanksgiving. Pete High stood regarding him with disgust.

“Oh, Velvet Pants,” said Janey Crosby, “why didn’t you jump in and save him?”

Slowly, sadly the small man shrugged his shoulders.

“Not know water,” he said; “not know sweem.”

He did not seem nearly so abashed as he said this as he might very well have been in the circumstances; he said it very much as if he were stating a fact, a lamentable fact the truth of which he regretted, but a fact, nevertheless. He looked dismayed and surprised when Janey Crosby and the others turned away from him.

After that Velvet Pants was an outcast. The men spoke to him only when it was necessary to do so, and then briefly and even harshly. He did not seem to understand; he would try to tell them things, making many gestures; but he had not the words to make himself clear, nor had they the inclination to listen to him.

In the evening, when the men were sitting about the porch, competing for Janey Crosby’s smiles, there was no place for him there. He had tried to join in their talk and play, to be friendly, to be one of them; they froze him out, and still he did not seem to understand that they did it because he was so flagrant a coward. At last he seemed to accept his status as a pariah without really understanding it, for he would take his guitar, which he had constructed from the ruin of an old one, and go alone into the woods. It was said that he sang there to himself, sad songs in his native tongue.

Janey Crosby’s birthday came toward the end of the harvest season, and it was the most important social event of the year in Crosby Corners. All the village was invited, and all the

village came, the girls in their fresh dimities, the men, soaped and collared and uncomfortable, but happy. They brought presents, as if they were bringing tribute to a queen, and Janey, as graciously as a reigning sovereign, took them all, and smiled.

The party was held in the masonic hall, and it was an affair of considerable tone, with dancing, two helpings of ice-cream all around, and a three-piece orchestra.

The dancing was half over. Janey and Pete High, her current partner, had gone out on the porch; a harvest moon silvered the village streets.

“Look,” exclaimed Pete, “what’s that sitting down there on the horseblock?”

“It’s a man,” said Janey, her eyes following his pointing finger.

“But who can it be?”

The girl looked again, and made out a small, bent figure sitting there, chin on hands, eyes turned toward the lighted hall, ears toward the music and the buzz and laughter of the guests.

“Why, it’s Velvet Pants!” she exclaimed.

“Shall I chase him away?” asked Pete, swelling out his chest and looking belligerent. Janey laid a restraining hand on his arm.

“No; don’t chase him, Pete. Let him stay. The poor fellow’s probably lonesome. Everybody is here but him.”

“He deserves to be lonesome,” said Pete; “he’s yella.”

“Would you jump in to save a person from drowning if you didn’t know how to swim?” asked Janey.

“Of course I would,” replied Pete, promptly. “Now, see here, Janey Crosby, don’t you go sticking up for that wop. He’s not fit to associate with white men.”

She sat gazing at the small, miserable figure; then she made a sudden resolution.

“I’m going to ask him to come up to the party,” she said.

“No, you ain’t.”

“Whose birthday is this, Pete High? I guess it won’t do any harm to give him a dish of ice-cream. You don’t have to associate with him. Run down and tell him I’d like to see him, Pete.”

Pete mumbled protests, but he went. Very diffidently, as if he momentarily expected to be kicked, Velvet Pants approached the porch. Janey Crosby saw that he was wearing a new, clean shirt, that his black locks had been parted and buttered, and that his shoes had been rigorously shined. Over his shoulder was slung his wreck of a guitar.

“This is my birthday, Velvet Pants,” said the girl. “I want you to help me celebrate it. Pete, will you get another plate of ice-cream?”

The small man seemed overcome; he bowed twice very low. Then he spoke. He spoke mechanically, as if the words had been often rehearsed.

“I haf no gif’ for you on your birthday, Mees Crosby, but I haf learn a song American to seeng for you. I hear heem on funnygraf. I hope you like.”

He said it humbly, but not without a certain pride that attends the accomplishment of a difficult feat.

Janey laughed delightedly.

“So you learned an American song just for my birthday? Well, now, wasn’t that a sweet idea! Wait! I’ll call the others; no, better still, you come in the hall and sing, so they can all hear.”

Velvet Pants looked horrified at this suggestion.

“But, no,” he protested. “I do not seeng good.”

“That’s all right. They won’t know the difference,” said Janey, laughingly. “Come along.”

She pushed him through the open doorway. The guests looked up; what would Janey Crosby do next?

“Folks,” announced Janey Crosby, “Mr. Velvet Pants is going to sing for us. He learned a little American song just for my birthday. Wasn’t that nice of him?”

It was evident from the face of Pete High, who stood in the doorway, that he did not think it was particularly nice.

The small brown man glanced uncertainly about the hall; then he began to play chords on his guitar. Some of the girls tittered. In a round, clear tenor Velvet Pants began to sing:

“Kees me hagain, kees me hagain,

Kees me hagain, and hagain.”

His memory seemed to go back on him at this point; he groped for a moment for the words, then plunged on:

“Kees me hagain, kees me hagain,

Kees me hagain, and hagain.

Kees me hagain, kees me hagain,

Kees me hagain and hagain,

Kees me hagain, kees me hagain,

Kees me, kees me, hagain!”

When he had finished, Velvet Pants bowed deeply first to Janey, then to the rest. There was a slight, dubious ripple of applause that was checked suddenly. Pete High had strode up to Velvet Pants and was facing him.

“Just a minute there,” said Pete. “You and me has got a little bone to pick. Wadda you mean by singing a song like that to Miss Crosby?”

The small man looked puzzled.

“It ees only song American I know,” he said.

“Yeah? Well, I’m goin’ to teach you to sing it out of the other side of your mouth. Come outside with me.”

“Pete High,” broke in Janey, “don’t you go fighting with him. He didn’t mean any harm; he probably doesn’t know what the words mean.”

“I told him never to say anything to you whether he understood it or not,” stormed Pete. “Come on, you.”

Velvet Pants made an attempt to steal away, but Pete blocked his path.

“You’re going out on the lawn with me,” said Pete.

“And seeng?” asked the little man, who seemed somewhat dazed by what was happening.

“No; fight.”

“Fight?”

“Yes; fight.”

“But I do not hate you, Meester Pete.”

“Well, I hate you. Come on.”

“But how we fight?” inquired the small man; he was pale beneath his tan, and trembling. For answer Pete thrust a clenched fist under the man’s nose. The man drew his head back and shivered.

“No!” he said, shaking his head; “no! no! no! no! no!”

“You won’t fight?”

“No.”

“You’re a coward,” declared Pete.

Velvet Pants shrugged his shoulders.

“Not know hand-fights,” he said.

Pete slapped him across the face with his open hand.

“Now will you fight?”

“Not know hand-fights,” said the man, drawing away. Pete, contempt on his face, gave him a push into the night. They heard the sound of feet on the path; Velvet Pants was running.

“Not know hand-fights,” Pete mimicked. “Did you ever in your life see such a rat?”

Next day excitement swept Crosby Corners. Defender Monarch had gone crazy, and when that news spread, they forgot all about the conduct of Velvet Pants on the night before. As for him, he went about his work with a puzzled and hurt look on his brown face; he seemed still uncertain why the others did not respond to his smiles and attempts at friendliness.

Defender Monarch was the pride, and the terror, of the county. His owner, Ben Crosby, had raised him from a gawky calf, wobbly on his legs, into a massive ton-and-a-half bull, with a chest like a haystack, a voice of thunder, and the temper of a gouty demon. Ben Crosby had not dehorned him, because in cattle shows a good pair of horns is considered a point of merit in judging bulls, and the giant bull had won many blue ribbons. On this day Ben Crosby wished most earnestly that he had foregone the blue ribbons and taken off those horns. A savage bull without horns is bad enough, but a savage bull with a pair of sharp, wicked horns is just about the most dangerous animal that walks.

Perhaps on that morning Defender Monarch had realized that he had reached the end of his usefulness, and that before very long he was doomed to end a proud career, ingloriously, as steak, roast, and stew. He stood in his pasture, roaring a challenge to the world that he would die fighting. By blind luck Ben Crosby was able to trick him into entering the big pen, but in the process Defender Monarch had given a sample of his viciousness by ripping Johnny Nelson’s arm from elbow to shoulder and had failed by a hair’s-breadth in a sincere attempt to crush the life out of Ben Crosby himself. Once confined in the pen, Defender Monarch’s rage knew no bounds. He hurled himself against the thick board sides so furiously that they creaked and trembled, and the crowd that had gathered to see him darted back to places of greater safety.

Luckily, the pen was a stoutly built affair; it was not really a pen at all, but a small corral, perhaps fifty feet square. About it moved Defender Monarch, his small eyes blazing, alert. And, perched on boxes and ladders, Crosby Corners, fascinated as all men are by dangerous things, watched the mad king of the herd.

“Isn’t he just too terrible,” said Janey Crosby to Pete High.

“Oh, I don’t know,” answered Pete, airily. “I’ve worked round him often.”

“But not since he went crazy, Pete.”

“No,” admitted Pete, “mebbe not. I’m used to cattle of all kinds, but I never saw one that acted this way. Just plain bulls I’m none too fond of fooling with, but a crazy one! Excuse me.”

“See how he’s looking right at us with those mean little eyes of his,” said Janey. “It’s just as if he were saying, ‘If I only had you down here for a minute!’ I’m scared, Pete.”

“I’m here,” said Pete High, reassuringly. “Look, Janey, he’s getting another fit; he’s going to try to buck that opposite wall.”

Janey Crosby, to get a better view, climbed to the very top of the stepladder that leaned against the wall of the corral. There was a sharp crack as the top rail gave way, then horrified cries. She had fallen into the pen, and lay unconscious almost at the feet of the mad bull.

The women screamed, the men ran about aimlessly, wildly, shouting orders at one another.

“Help! Janey’s fallen into the pen!”

“Oh, he’ll kill her! he’ll kill her! he’ll kill her!”

“Get pitchforks!”

“Get a gun!”

“No use; we’ve only got bird-shot. It would just make him madder to hit him with that.”

“Someone will have to jump in.”

“Where are you running to, Pete High?”

“To get a rope or something.”

“You’ll be too late.”

Defender Monarch looked down at the girl, and his eyes were evil. Then he looked at the ring of white faces that lined the top of the corral. He seemed to understand the situation; he seemed to know that he had plenty of time, and he gloated. He turned away from Janey, trotted to the farther end of the corral, wheeled about, and surveyed the distance between himself and the girl’s body; then he lowered his head with his gleaming prongs, and gathered his body for a charge.

The aghast onlookers became aware that something was in the corral besides the girl and the bull. A figure had come through the gate of the inclosure, silently and swiftly. It was a

small man in velvet trousers and he was strolling toward Defender Monarch as casually and placidly as if the bull were a rose-bush. On the brown face of Velvet Pants there was not the slightest trace of fear; indeed, he was smiling, a slight, amused smile. Otherwise he was as matter of fact as if he were about to sit down to his breakfast. A brown-paper cigaret hung limp from one corner of his lips; with the mincing strut they had noticed and made fun of, he walked slowly quite near to Defender Monarch. The animal, distracted, stood blinking at the little man. Within a few feet of the bull, Velvet Pants halted; with magnificent nonchalance he blew a cloud of smoke into the bull's face, and then they saw a flash of something red. It was Ben Crosby's red flannel undershirt that a few moments before had been drying on the line. The small man had flicked it across the bull's face. Defender Monarch forgot for the moment his plan for smashing Janey Crosby; he saw the red, and he plunged toward it. The women turned their heads away, the men clenched their teeth. They saw Velvet Pants slip aside with the quickness of a jungle cat, and the bull, unable to check himself, jolt his head against one of the sides of the corral. Velvet Pants turned round, smiled pleasantly, and bowed very low to the spectators. They saw that he had in his right hand something long and bright that caught the rays of the sun; they realized that it was Grandpa Crosby's old Civil-War sword that had hung in the dining-room. He was holding it as lightly and as easily as if it were a butter-knife.

Defender Monarch, recovering from his fruitless charge against the wall, spun about; once more the red shirt was deftly flapped before his bright, mad eyes. Once more, with a roar of wrath, he launched his bulk straight at Velvet Pants. Then something happened to Defender Monarch. It happened with such speed that all the onlookers saw was a flash; then they saw the huge frame of the bull totter, crumple, and sink down. Sticking from the left shoulder of the bull they saw the hilt of Grandpa Crosby's sword; they saw the hilt only, for Velvet Pants had driven the point into Defender Monarch's heart.

The people of Crosby Corners allege that Ben Crosby kissed the little tanned man on both cheeks, but this he denies; he admits, however, that he hugged him and patted him, and said many husky words of gratitude and admiration to Velvet Pants, who seemed abashed and quite unable to understand why everyone was making so much of a fuss about him.

"And I called you a coward," Ben Crosby kept saying. "I called you a coward, and you went in and faced a mad bull without batting an eyelash."

"It was nuzzing," murmured the small brown man.

"Nothing to face a mad bull?"

Velvet Pants shrugged his shoulders.

"But I am a toreador," he said. "In my country, Andalusia, I keel one, two, t'ree bull every

Sunday for fun. Why should I fear bulls? I know bulls."