CHAPTER XV

THE WOODCHUCK SESSION

MR. AMOS CUTHBERT named it so — our old friend Amos who lives high up in the ether of Town's End ridge, and who now represents Coniston in the Legislature. He is the same silent, sallow person as when Jethro first took a mortgage on his farm, only his skin is beginning to resemble dried parchment, and he is a trifle more cantankerous. On the morning of that memorable day when "Uncle Tom's Cabin" came to the capital, Amos had entered the Throne Room and given vent to his feelings in regard to the gentleman in the back seat who had demanded an evening sitting on behalf of the farmers.

"Don't that beat all!" cried Amos. "Let them have their darned woodchuck session; there won't nobody go to it. For cussed, crisscross contrariness, give me a moss-back Democrat from a one-hoss, one-man town like Suffolk. I'm a-goin' to see the show."

"G-goin' to the show, be you, Amos?" said Jethro.

"Yes, I be," answered Amos, bitterly. "I hain't a-goin' nigh the house to-night." And with this declaration he departed.

"I wonder if he really is going?" queried Mr. Merrill, looking at the ceiling. And then he laughed.

"Why shouldn't he go?" asked William Wetherell.

Mr. Merrill's answer to this question was a wink, whereupon he, too, departed. And while Wetherell was pondering over the possible meaning of these words the Honorable Alva Hopkins entered, wreathed in smiles, and closed the door behind him.

"It's all fixed," he said, taking a seat near Jethro in the window.

"S-seen your gal — Alvy — seen your gal?"

Mr. Hopkins gave a glance at Wetherell.

"Will don't talk," said Jethro, and resumed his inspection through the lace curtains of what was going on in the street.

"Cassandry's got him to go," said Mr. Hopkins. "It's all fixed, as sure as Sunday. If it misses fire, then I'll never mention the governorship again. But if it don't miss fire," and the Honorable Alva leaned over and put his hand on Jethro's knee, "if it don't miss fire, I get the nomination. Is that right?"

"Y-you've guessed it, Alvy."

"That's all I want to know," declared the Honorable Alva; "when you say that much, you never go back on it. And you can go ahead and give the orders, Jethro. I have to see that the boys get the tickets. Cassandry's got a head on her shoulders, and she kind of wants to be governor, too." He got as far as the door, when he turned and bestowed upon Jethro a glance of undoubted tribute. "You've done a good many smart things," said he, "but I guess you never beat this, and never will."

"H-hain't done it yet, Alvy," answered Jethro, still looking out through the window curtains at the ever changing groups of gentlemen in the street. These groups had a never ceasing interest for Jethro Bass.

Mr. Wetherell didn't talk, but had he been the most incurable of gossips he felt that he could have done no damage to this mysterious affair, whatever it was. In a certain event, Mr. Hopkins was promised the governorship: so much was plain. And it was also evident that Miss Cassandra Hopkins was in some way to be instrumental. William Wetherell did not like to ask Jethro, but he thought a little of sounding Mr. Merrill, and then he came to the conclusion that it would be wiser for him not to know.

"Er — Will," said Jethro, presently, "you know Heth Sutton — Speaker Heth Sutton?"

"Yes."

"Er — wouldn't mind askin' him to step in and see me before the session — if he was comin' by — would you?"

"Certainly not."

"Er — if he was comin' by," said Jethro.

Mr. Wetherell found Mr. Speaker Sutton glued to a pillar in the rotunda below. He had some difficulty in breaking through the throng that pressed around him, and still more in attracting his attention, as Mr. Sutton took no manner of notice of the customary form of placing one's hand under his elbow and pressing gently up. Summoning up his courage, Mr. Wetherell tried the second method of seizing him by the buttonhole. He paused in his harangue, one hand uplifted, and turned and glanced at the storekeeper abstractedly.

"Mr. Bass asked me to tell you to drop into Number 7," said Wetherell, and added, remembering express instructions, "if you were going by."

Wetherell had not anticipated the magical effect this casual message would have on Mr. Sutton, nor had he thought that so large and dignified a body would move so rapidly. Before the astonished gentlemen who had penned him in could draw a breath, Mr. Sutton had reached the stairway and was mounting it with an agility that did him credit. Five minutes later Wetherell saw the Speaker descending again, the usually impressive quality of his face slightly modified by the twitching of a smile.

Thus the day passed, and the gentlemen of the Lovejoy and Duncan factions sat as tight as ever in their seats, and the Truro Franchise bill still slumbered undisturbed in Mr. Chauncey Weed's committee.

At supper there was a decided festal air about the dining room of the Pelican House, the little band of agricultural gentlemen who wished to have a session not being patrons of that exclusive hotel. Many of the Solons had sent home for their wives, that they might do the utmost justice to the Honorable Alva's hospitality. Even Jethro, as he ate his crackers and milk, had a new coat with bright brass buttons, and Cynthia, who wore a fresh gingham

which Miss Sukey Kittredge of Coniston had helped to design, so far relented in deference to Jethro's taste as to tie a red bow at her throat.

The middle table under the chandelier was the immediate firmament of Miss Cassandra Hopkins. And there, beside the future governor, sat the president of the "Northwestern" Railroad, Mr. Lovejoy, as the chief of the revolving satellites. People began to say that Mr. Lovejoy was hooked at last, now that he had lost his head in such an unaccountable fashion as to pay his court in public; and it was very generally known that he was to make one of the Honorable Alva's immediate party at the performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Mr. Speaker Sutton, of course, would have to forego the pleasure of the theatre as a penalty of his high position. Mr. Merrill, who sat at Jethro's table next to Cynthia that evening, did a great deal of joking with the Honorable Heth about having to preside over a woodchuck session, which the Speaker, so Mr. Wetherell thought, took in astonishingly good part, and seemed very willing to make the great sacrifice which his duty required of him.

After supper Mr. Wetherell took a seat in the rotunda. As an observer of human nature, he had begun to find a fascination in watching the group of politicians there. First of all he encountered Mr. Amos Cuthbert, his little coal-black eyes burning brightly, and he was looking very irritable indeed.

"So you're going to the show, Amos?" remarked the storekeeper, with an attempt at cordiality.

To his bewilderment, Amos turned upon him fiercely.

"Who said I was going to the show?" he snapped.

"You yourself told me."

"You'd ought to know whether I'm a-goin' or not," said Amos, and walked away.

While Mr. Wetherell sat meditating upon this inexplicable retort, a retired, scholarly looking gentleman with a white beard, who wore spectacles, came out of the door leading from the barber shop and quietly took a seat beside him. The storekeeper's attention was next distracted

by the sight of one who wandered slowly but ceaselessly from group to group, kicking up his heels behind, and halting always in the rear of the speakers. Needless to say that this was our friend Mr. Bijah Bixby, who was following out his celebrated tactics of "going along by when they were talkin' sly." Suddenly Mr. Bixby's eye alighted on Mr. Wetherell, who by a stretch of imagination conceived that it expressed both astonishment and approval, although he was wholly at a loss to understand these sentiments. Mr. Bixby winked — Mr. Wetherell was sure of that. But to his surprise, Bijah did not pause in his rounds to greet him.

Mr. Wetherell was beginning to be decidedly uneasy, and was about to go upstairs, when Mr. Merrill came down the rotunda whistling, with his hands in his pockets. He stopped whistling when he spied the storekeeper, and approached him in his usual hearty manner.

"Well, well, this is fortunate," said Mr. Merrill; "how are you, Duncan? I want you to know Mr. Wetherell. Wetherell writes that weekly letter for the *Guardian* you were speaking to me about last year. Will, this is Mr. Alexander Duncan, president of the 'Central.'"

"How do you do, Mr. Wetherell?" said the scholarly gentleman with the spectacles, putting out his hand. "I'm glad to meet you, very glad, indeed. I read your letters with the greatest pleasure."

Mr. Wetherell, as he took Mr. Duncan's hand, had a variety of emotions which may be imagined, and need not be set down in particular.

"Funny thing," Mr. Merrill continued, "I was looking for you, Duncan. It occurred to me that you would like to meet Mr. Wetherell. I was afraid you were in Boston."

"I have just got back," said Mr. Duncan.

"I wanted Wetherell to see your library. I was telling him about it."

"I should be delighted to show it to him," answered Mr. Duncan. That library, as is well known, was a special weakness of Mr. Duncan's.

Poor William Wetherell, who was quite overwhelmed by the fact that the great Mr. Duncan had actually read his letters and liked them, could scarcely utter a sensible word. Almost before he realized what had happened he was following Mr. Duncan out of the Pelican House, when the storekeeper was mystified once more by a nudge and another wink from Mr. Bixby, conveying unbounded admiration.

"Why don't you write a book, Mr. Wetherell?" inquired the railroad president, when they were crossing the park.

"I don't think I could do it," said Mr. Wetherell, modestly. Such incense was overpowering, and he immediately forgot Mr. Bixby.

"Yes, you can," said Mr. Duncan, "only you don't know it. Take your letters for a beginning. You can draw people well enough, when you try. There was your description of the lonely hill-farm on the spur — I shall always remember that: the gaunt farmer, toiling every minute between sun and sun; the thin, patient woman bending to a task that never changed or lightened; the children growing up and leaving one by one, some to the cities, some to the West, until the old people are left alone in the evening of life — to the sunsets and the storms. Of course you must write a book."

Mr. Duncan quoted other letters, and William Wetherell thrilled. Poor man! he had had little enough incense in his time, and none at all from the great. They came to the big square house with the cornice which Cynthia had seen the day before, and walked across the lawn through the open door. William Wetherell had a glimpse of a great drawing-room with high windows, out of which was wafted the sound of a piano and of youthful voices and laughter, and then he was in the library. The thought of one man owning all those books overpowered him. There they were, in stately rows, from the floor to the high ceiling, and a portable ladder with which to reach them.

Mr. Duncan, understanding perhaps something of the storekeeper's embarrassment, proceeded to take down his

treasures: first editions from the shelves, and folios and missals from drawers in a great iron safe in one corner and laid them on the mahogany desk. It was the railroad president's hobby, and could he find an appreciative guest, he was happy. It need scarcely be said that he found William Wetherell appreciative, and possessed of a knowledge of Shaksperiana and other matters that astonished his host as well as pleased him. For Wetherell had found his tongue at last.

After a while Mr. Duncan drew out his watch and gave a start.

"By George!" he exclaimed, "it's after eight o'clock. I'll have to ask you to excuse me to-night, Mr. Wetherell. I'd like to show you the rest of them — can't you come around to-morrow afternoon?"

Mr. Wetherell, who had forgotten his own engagement and "Uncle Tom's Cabin," said he would be happy to come. And they went out together and began to walk toward the State House.

"It isn't often I find a man who knows anything at all about these things," continued Mr. Duncan, whose heart was quite won. "Why do you bury yourself in Coniston?"

"I went there from Boston for my health," said the storekeeper.

"Jethro Bass lives there, doesn't he?" said Mr. Duncan, with a laugh. "But I suppose you don't know anything about politics."

"I know nothing at all," said Mr. Wetherell, which was quite true. He had been in dreamland, but now the fact struck him again, with something of a shock, that this mild-mannered gentleman was one of those who had been paying certain legislators to remain in their seats. Wetherell thought of speaking to Mr. Duncan of his friendship with Jethro Bass, but the occasion passed.

"I wish to heaven I didn't have to know anything about politics," Mr. Duncan was saying; "they disgust me. There's a little matter on now, about an extension of the Truro Railroad to Harwich, which wouldn't interest

you, but you can't conceive what a nuisance it has been to watch that House day and night, as I've had to. It's no joke to have that townsman of yours, Jethro Bass, opposed to you. I won't say anything against him, for he may be a friend of yours, and I have to use him sometimes myself." Mr. Duncan sighed. "It's all very sordid and annoying. Now this evening, for instance, when we might have enjoyed ourselves with those books, I've got to go to the House, just because some backwoods farmers want to talk about woodchucks. I suppose it's foolish," said Mr. Duncan; "but Bass has tricked us so often that I've got into the habit of being watchful. I should have been here twenty minutes ago."

By this time they had come to the entrance of the State House, and Wetherell followed Mr. Duncan in, to have a look at the woodchuck session himself. Several members hurried by and up the stairs, some of them in their Sunday black; and the lobby above seemed, even to the storekeeper's unpractised eye, a trifle active for a woodchuck session. Mr. Duncan muttered something, and quickened his gait a little on the steps that led to the gallery. This place was almost empty. They went down to the rail, and the railroad president cast his eye over the House.

"Good God!" he said sharply, "there's almost a quorum here." He ran his eye over the members. "There *is* a quorum here."

Mr. Duncan stood drumming nervously with his fingers on the rail, scanning the heads below. The members were scattered far and wide through the seats, like an army in open order, listening in silence to the droning voice of the clerk. Moths burned in the gas flames, and June-bugs hummed in at the high windows and tilted against the walls. Then Mr. Duncan's finger nails whitened as his thin hands clutched the rail, and a sense of a pending event was upon Wetherell. Slowly he realized that he was listening to the Speaker's deep voice.

"'The Committee on Corporations, to whom was referred House Bill Number 109, entitled, *An Act to extend*