

A Short Story by Joseph A. Altsheler

The Governor's Choice

Richard M. Woodward, Publisher

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The Governor had the faculty of discharging all expression from his face, an unusual gift and valuable upon occasion. Now he was silent, while the men talked, gazing through the window of his office at the grand circle of hills that curved about the little capital. This had always been his favorite view, and to-day it was especially so, with the slopes glowing in all the intense reds, yellows, and browns of Indian summer's foliage, and the deep, beautiful river flowing through the cut there that looked like a great sabre slash.

But the Governor, despite his look of inattention, was paying close heed to every word, and his soul was full of indignant rebellion. He was very young—in fact, many people thought him too young when, at thirty-two, he became the Governor of a great State with more than two million inhabitants. But he had done well; his own conscience told him so, and, moreover, he

had public approval. He felt so strong that he was a candidate for reelection, and he had hoped to secure an easy nomination in the approaching convention of his party.

His first nomination was a lucky chance. The strong candidates had worn each other out in the convention, and, his name being offered by his friends at an opportune moment, he was accepted as a sort of compromise and relief from the others. Now he had hoped to be renominated on his merits, and there was every prospect of it until this troublesome affair came up.

He had known Bill Curtis well, and he knew too that the man thoroughly deserved his fate. Yet here were Curtis's friends pleading in the most plausible manner for his pardon, and under everything that they said was a threat too. He saw the threat as well as if it had been spoken in plain words, and they knew that he saw it; they intended that he should.

But the Governor, while the men talked, silently reviewed Curtis's whole story, his wealth, his influence as a politician, his powerful connections throughout the western part of the

State, the killing, and the expectation of his friends through these agencies to secure his acquittal. But the tide of public indignation was too strong, and then followed his sentence to imprisonment for life, a verdict reduced from hanging through the obstinacy of one jurymen, who was moved by the tears of his wife and children in the court-room.

Yes, Bill Curtis was a man who deserved his fate and more—he should have been hanged. He had now served four years of his term and had been a good, tractable prisoner. His friends were making the most of this, as they pleaded to the Governor for his pardon. Price, the State Senator, Curtis's brother-in-law, was the chief spokesman of the party, but Bush, who was Judge of White County, and Hart, the Representative in the Legislature from Wolf County, also took an active part. All the men were prominent politicians, some in office and some out, except the Reverend Mr. Littlebury, the pastor of the leading church in Breckfield, whom they had induced to come with them by pointing out the complete reformation in Curtis's character and

the beauty of forgiveness.

“I ask you, Mr. Governor, to think of poor Curtis’s wife and children,” said Senator Price. “They sit there in their desolated home mourning night and day for their natural protector, wrenched from them by a cruel law, and forced to pass his life in that awful place.”

They could just see over the roofs of some low houses the dark stone walls of the penitentiary.

“Why did not Curtis think of these things when he killed Adair?” asked the Governor.

“Curtis sinned, and his friends know it now—he knows it himself,” said the Reverend Mr. Littlebury in a high, sing-song voice, “but he has repented—aye, he has repented in sackcloth and ashes. The William Curtis who went through that awful gate is not the William Curtis whom we seek to bring forth. No, he is a redeemed man now. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and we ask you to give him back to his wife and children that by a life of good deeds he may expiate the great fault he has committed.”

The Governor made an impatient little

movement. He had much knowledge of men, and he had gone through the penitentiary two weeks before. He saw Curtis then, and he read at once his sly, sanctimonious look. Moreover, the recklessness of his State in regard to human life always weighed upon him, and it would ill become a Governor to encourage this feeling. Curtis should have been hanged, and nothing could change the fact.

“You ought to do this for us, Governor,” said Judge Bush; “and, besides, a man should not be above thinking of his own interest when it goes with the right. Such a noble act of mercy would help you greatly in the convention, Mr. Hastings.”

The significance of this speech was plain—they were not dealing in veiled hints now—but the Governor seemed to take no notice. He was looking through the window at the splendid curve of hills, glowing in the deep dyes of Indian summer and the blue ribbon of the peaceful river.

His had been a pleasant life in the capital. He loved the picturesque little city. He had come to it in the flush of youth, with his young wife, then a

bride, the Governor and the first lady of the State. He had tried to do well, and the press and the people said he had succeeded. He had been happy there, and his wife too. He wanted to stay another four years; he was ambitious—very ambitious; he did not conceal from himself that fact, nor did he wish to do so; he believed ambition legitimate; if he made a good Governor for another four years, he might have a chance later on for a seat in the United States Senate.

Now everything was ruined by the wretched Curtis case. Why did not his friends leave the man to the punishment that he so richly deserved? But they would not, and among them they would control the entire delegation from the western part of the State to the convention. And if he did not pardon Bill Curtis, they would cast all that vote against him, thus insuring the nomination of Westcott, his opponent, and the nomination of his party was equivalent to election.

The Governor saw in a glance his future, his removal from the stage of real affairs, the dull little country town, where he must hang out his

sign and practise law again for a thousand dollars a year or less, waiting through weary years for the something to turn up that would never turn up. No, he could not go back to such a life as that, nor could he drive Lucy to it, used now as she was to this much greater and brighter sphere.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “this is a matter of importance, and I wish that you would give me a little longer time to think about it. Suppose you meet me here at the same hour to-morrow afternoon and I will tell you my decision.”

An almost imperceptible smile of triumph appeared on the face of Senator Price, but he was too keen to indulge in any effusive words. The minister began again on his favorite theme of “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,” but the others checked him, and with a few words of thanks they went out.

The young Governor sat for a long time in his lonely office, thinking. It was the first time that he had been consciously untrue to himself, and the feeling of it was even more unpleasant than he had expected. But there was the other side, glory, a brilliant career, the Governorship again,

and then the United States Senate—in short, a life among great men and in the midst of great affairs. How dull now seemed that little country town from which he came, with its petty gossip and narrow existence!

The twilight was falling, and the river and gleaming hills were sinking away in the darkness, when he was roused from his abstraction by the colored doorkeeper.

“Miss Lucy done comin’ for you, Mr. Hastings,” he said; “she wonderin’, I guess, why you stayin’ so late.”

He put on his light overcoat and hurried out to meet his wife. She was coming across the Capitol yard, a hood over her head and a shawl about her shoulders to protect her from the late autumn breeze, which was full of chill.

The Governor’s face lighted up with deep tenderness. He was a young man, but he was ten years older than his wife. She was a mere girl when he brought her there to be the first lady of the State, and she had enjoyed it with the pure, innocent joy of a girl. And she had brought to her

high station a grace and dignity which with her youth had endeared her to all the people. How could he take her back to that dull life in the hills? He had shared with her too that dream of the United States Senate, and she had found it hard to hide her enthusiasm.

Now she came to meet him, a wisp of her brown hair falling from her hood across her face.

“Why do you stay so late, Paul?” she asked. “Don’t you know that it is night, and dinner is waiting?”

They had just begun to light the gas-lamps on the lawn.

“Affairs of state, mighty cares, Lucy,” he replied, smiling.

“Oh, yes, I know,” she said, returning his smile, “the delegation of politicians that came this morning. You’ve been sitting up there all day with them, smoking and telling each other bad political jokes. See, everybody else has gone home. There are no lights in the Auditor’s office. I met the Commissioner of Agriculture going down the street, and the Treasurer went ”home an

hour ago.”

She had always been a tonic to him after the work and worries of the day. It was only a few steps from the Capitol across the lawn and down the street to the old-fashioned house which the State had built for its Governors three generations ago. There he was in another atmosphere, one of youth and gayety.

He put her arm in his and they walked on together. Two “trusties” in their striped convict suits at work about the Capitol grounds bowed respectfully to the Governor and his wife. In the street they met other people, and everybody had the same bow and smile of genuine warmth.

“How nice it is,” said Mrs. Hastings, “and how pleasant the people are, and, oh, to think, Paul, that we shall have four years more of it! Mr. Guthrie, of the *Herald-Record*, paid his party call to-day, and he said you were sure to be renominated. He said you were much stronger in the mountains and the central part of the State than Mr. Westcott, and the votes you would draw from the west would be sure to give you the nomination. He regarded it as all settled, he said,

and I was so glad to hear him say so, because I do want so much to stay here. Don't you, Paul?"

"Oh, yes." he replied, "I'm as anxious as you are to stay, and I hope that Guthrie is right in his prophecy."

"Why, you haven't any doubt of it, have you, Paul? Mr. Guthrie is in a position to know. He goes all over the State, and he sees all the politicians."

"Of course he knows, if anybody does," replied the Governor hastily, "and I haven't any doubt, Lucy, that you and I will be walking across this lawn just as we are this evening a year from now and two years from now and three years from now, still the Governor and his wife."

They reached their home, the Governor's mansion, a low, weather-stained building, of which the State sometimes complained as inadequate to its dignity, but which every Governor who had lived in it—there had been more than twenty of them—loved. One found so much comfort in its large rooms, wide halls, and ancient ease.

They passed into the sitting-room, where a great fire of crackling hickory logs was blazing in the wide fireplace, and warmed their fingers before it, just as the twenty Governors before them and their wives had warmed their fingers at similar fires in that very fireplace.

The Governor thought again how comfortable and cheerful it was. He had never realized until this moment how thoroughly he was permeated by this life and how he loved it. And Lucy too! It was the very air to her! He looked around at the wide, low-ceilinged room, the wood, polished by age, the quiet repose and dignity of everything, and then he reflected that Paul Hastings was Governor of that State and should be so again.

At dinner Lucy was in her gayest mood. She was looking forward to a brilliant winter. Three of her girl friends were to be much in the house, and she and the wife of the Secretary of State and the wife of the Chief Justice of the Court of Appeals, acting as a committee, had arranged in perfect harmony a long series of official balls, receptions, card parties, and other entertainments. The Legislature too was to meet for its biennial

session, and all things promised the gayest season the little capital had ever known.

She was so full of these plans and their promise that she did not notice for a long time her husband's absent and depressed mood.

A peculiar feature of this dining-room is the portraits of its Governors arranged in rows around the walls, making a goodly array, with several faces of marked character in the number. The State pays for them. Each Governor as he goes out is painted by a good artist and the picture is put in its proper place.

The Governor glanced occasionally at the stern faces. This State is proud of its Governors; it has never yet failed to elect a man of distinction and character to the place, and the Governor fancied that all of these men, some of them running back into the eighteenth century, were looking at him with reproach. He knew it was only an idle fancy, but it weighed upon him, and by and by his wife noticed his depression.

“What is the matter, Paul?” she asked. “Have you got the headache?”

“A little, Lucy,” he replied, with a faint smile. “It’s been a hard day at the office—I’ve really been working—but it will pass away presently.”

His depression did not depart, however, as he would glance up, despite himself, at the rows of grave, steadfast faces on the wall, and he always saw on every one the same look of reproach. His wife’s eyes followed his own and she smiled.

“It will be nice to see your picture there, Paul, five years from now,” she said.

“I would much rather see it there five years from now than one year from now,” he replied.

“Why, we can’t think of such a thing as having it there only a year from now,” she said brightly. “Why, you’d be much too young then, Paul, for such grave, elderly company.”

“That is a good reason for us,” he said, laughing a little, “but I’m afraid it wouldn’t count much with the delegates to the convention.”

They went back presently to the sitting-room, where the fire in the wide fireplace was bigger and more cheerful than ever. The hickory logs crackled under its blaze with a sound like

subdued pistol-shots. It was dark and cold outside, and a rising wind whistled around the old house, making it all the more cosy inside.

They seldom passed an evening without visitors, as there was no gayer house in the little capital with its young host and hostess, who stood so high both officially and personally.

Mrs. Hastings gazed out of the window into the cold dark, and then she turned back to the bright fire.

“I’ve grown to like this old house, Paul,” she said.

“All the Governors’ wives do,” he replied.

She sat down before the fire and, leaning her chin on her hand, was silent, gazing into the coals. The Governor watched her. The wilful brown curl which would steal from under her red hood when she crossed the Capitol lawn still fell across her face. There was a spiritual note in Lucy’s beauty, something childlike that appealed to all that was deepest and best in him. He not only loved her, but he felt that he must be her shield too from the rough world. But a girl when

she came here, she was now both girl and woman, and this new life had been good for her. He might endure again that dull world of the little town in the hills, but not she. He was sure that even now she was building air-castles in the coals, and her beauty seemed to him more appealing than ever as the red flame of the fire fell across her cheek.

Her abstraction ceased after a while and she turned and gazed at her husband, who now had fallen into a reverie, though his thoughts were moody.

“Paul,” she said, “you are ill. I know that you are. You have been working too hard. It was only a jest of mine about your smoking and joking with those politicians.”

“Didn’t I know it was only a jest of yours, Lucy, dear?” he said, putting his hand on her shoulder with a caressing motion. “But I have had a pretty hard strain for the last month. There’s all the regular work, and I’ve got to get ready for the Legislature. I have to write too my annual message, and that’s no light task. And then I must look after my interests in the

convention also—Carter's to be my leader there, but, of course, I should help him."

He turned his face aside, as if he would avoid her gaze, something that he had never done before. The action struck her, and she was silent for a little while. Then she said:

"Paul, there is something else on your mind. You have worked hard before, but it never worried you in this way. What is it, Paul?"

"There is nothing else, Lucy," he replied.

Then he walked uneasily to the window and gazed out into the darkness.

She watched him keenly and with growing uneasiness. She had all a woman's intuition and a most delicate sensitiveness to her husband's moods. She rose presently and joined him at the window. Then she put her arm in his and she said again:

"What is it, Paul? Won't you tell me? I know that you are troubled. Something disagreeable has happened to-day. It must have been those politicians."

She waited, obviously for an answer, but he

hesitated. She said nothing, but increased the gentle pressure upon his arm.

“Yes, there is something,” he confessed at length.

She still waited.

“Come back to the fire,” he said after a pause.

He put her in the easiest chair before the coals and stood beside her, still hesitating. He thought how well she looked, sitting there in the Governor’s mansion, the first lady of the State. She too said nothing, merely waited.

“You are right, it was those politicians from the western part of the State,” he said at last; “they wanted something from me and they wanted it very much. They were relatives and friends of Bill Curtis.”

“The man who committed that murder and who was sent to the penitentiary for life?”

A shudder shook her delicate frame.

“Yes, the same, and they want me to pardon him.”

“Why, Paul, you wouldn’t think of such a

thing!”

“They tell of his wife and children left desolate. They say he is a changed man now and would lead a good life. They had with them too a minister who pleaded for him. He spoke of rejoicing over the sinner who was forgiven. He quoted to me the text, ‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.’”

Her lips set firmly.

“I feel very sorry for his wife and children, Paul,” she said, “but the man committed a murder, and he was tried before a judge and jury. The jury, not you, put him in the penitentiary, and that minister had no right to come to you with such texts. If you were to pardon him, you would be only undoing what the law has justly done.”

“But think of his chance to lead a better life, Lucy. They say that he is a reformed man.”

“I don’t believe it, Paul. Their friends say it about all of them. And we have too many killings in this State, you know that as well as I do, Paul, and you must not pardon Curtis.”

He made no reply just then and she waited.

“But that is not all, Lucy,” he said after a while. “Curtis was an influential man, and related to nearly everybody of prominence in his part of the State. Well, they threatened me to-day.”

“Threatened you, Paul? How could they do that?”

“It’s just this, Lucy. They will control the delegation in the convention from their end of the State, and if I don’t pardon Curtis we won’t be here for a second term.”

“They will defeat your renomination?”

“Yes.”

Her face blanched, and he saw her lips quivering.

“Do you mean, Paul, that those men will beat you in the convention if you refuse to pardon Curtis?”

“That’s it,” he replied, trying to laugh. “They have the power, and they will certainly use it. Mr. Westcott is an able and good man, and there is no reason why they shouldn’t vote for him if they want to.”

“But they would vote for you if you pardoned Curtis?”

“Yes,” he replied, and he was surprised to find that he was trying to be glib, “and I might pardon him after all. He has served five years already. Think what a punishment that is for a man in the position that he once held. I could say that he has reformed and needs a new chance. I could tell how the minister himself came to plead for him.”

He stopped, suddenly ashamed of himself, and the red flushed his face. But the color returned to her cheeks and her lips grew firm again.

“No, Paul,” she said steadily, “we must not deceive ourselves that way. If you pardoned Curtis, it would be because we want to come back here four years more.”

“But I may really be justified in pardoning him. Perhaps the minister is right. He may do more good for the world and himself outside the walls of the penitentiary than inside them. Think, Lucy, of what it all means! We can’t go back to that pinched little life in the hills.”

She rose now and, putting her arms around his

neck, lay her cheek against his.

“I know all that it means, Paul,” she said. “It is hard for me, as it is for you, to give up our life here. I will not make any secret of that I know too that it ruins your career, but I can go back to the hills and you can go with me. I would not have you, Paul, my husband, to buy even a governorship with any such sacrifice of the right. Are those men still here?”

“Yes, and I am to answer them to-morrow afternoon.”

“There is only one answer you can give them, Paul”

He pressed her cheek more closely to his.

When the Governor walked up the steps of the Capitol the next morning he met Guthrie, the correspondent of the *Herald-Record*, a young man with a grave, cool face. They were good friends: Guthrie had written very pleasant things about him in the *Herald-Record*, the State’s most powerful newspaper.

“I hear that a delegation of Bill Curtis’s friends are here seeking his pardon,” said Guthrie, after

the good-mornings.

“Yes, they came up yesterday, and I shall give them an answer at five o’clock this afternoon.”

“They are influential men, Governor,” said Guthrie significantly.

“So I know.”

“Would you mind intimating what your answer will be?”

“If you wish, you can be present in my office when I make it,” replied the Governor.

The delegation, led by Senator Price, came at the appointed time. All of them looked happy, as if they thought the victory already won.

“Well, Governor,” said Senator Price genially, “a night to think over a knotty problem usually puts a man in the right frame of mind, and we hope that you have good news for poor Bill Curtis and us.”

“I have thought long over the matter,” replied the Governor gravely, “and I have come to the conclusion that murder is murder and must be punished. Gentlemen, I cannot grant the pardon.”

The faces of the committee fell and then grew threatening.

“Of course, you understand, Governor,” said Senator Price in smooth, even tones, “that poor Bill Curtis’s friends are likely to feel a little hard about this.”

“Oh, I understand,” replied the Governor wearily, as he turned away.

The committee stalked out, their brows lowering, and the Governor was left alone with Guthrie.

“Governor,” said the correspondent warmly, “I honor you more than any other man I know.”

“Thank you, Billy,” replied the Governor sadly, “but I am beaten for the renomination, and you understand that as well as I do.”

He spoke the truth, although his friends made a great fight for him. The *Herald-Record* came down to the Capitol with a glowing account of his firmness, and the true state of the case was soon known all over the State. It drew additional votes for him from the centre and east, but the west, where the friends of Curtis had a powerful

organization, remained obdurate. The Governor's lieutenant, Carter, made a thrilling speech on the floor of the convention, appealing for fair play and justice to a man who had done right in the face of great temptation, the press was solidly his friend, but everything was unavailing, and Westcott was nominated by a majority of twenty votes, a narrow margin in a convention that contained nearly a thousand, but enough.

"I did my best, Governor," said Carter sadly, after the convention was over.

"I know you did, Tom," replied the Governor, "and I know too that my friends are left to me."

The year ended somewhat gloomily in the old house at the little capital. The Governor found his chief consolation then in Lucy. She sought to be cheerful and gay and she never complained of anything, but there were moments when depression overcame them both.

As Christmas approached the Governor feared that he would collapse through overwork and nervous strain, but pride and necessity did not permit him to relax. The Legislature would meet

on the last day of the year, and he must have his annual message ready. Besides, all bills passed by the Legislature must come to him for approval.

He was able to keep up with the work until his message was read to the Legislature, and then the collapse came. The doctors told him that he must go away from the capital, and the farther he could get from railroads, newspapers, Legislatures, and the affairs of men the better. A rest for a few weeks under such conditions would restore him completely, and then he might return and attend to the bills.

The whole eastern part of this State is a mass of wild and tangled mountains, almost a primitive wilderness, and there the Governor and Lucy went, Tom Carter having placed at their disposal his comfortable hunting-lodge on the side of the highest peak.

It was a wonderful world to them, this world of the mountains in its winter robe of white, and there in the keen, frosty air, aided by his youth and good constitution, the Governor's health and spirits returned rapidly. There was not much for them to do, but the log cabin with the great,

blazing fire and its two attendants was always cheerful. Tom Carter too had left plenty of books, and with them they whiled away part of the time. But they talked often of their prospects now, and their courage came back. They would return to the little town in the hills when his term expired, and no one should think that they were not content. He would work with all zeal, and perhaps he might come to the front again; it would be a long struggle, but it was worth trying, and at least they had each other.

When they were there about two weeks the snow melted, the earth was dried by a strong wind, and a day so beautiful came that they climbed to the very top of the mountain, the highest peak of the State, and looked far out over a range of seventy miles, embracing parts of four States, a view not to be surpassed east of the Mississippi.

“How near one feels to heaven here,” said Lucy.

“One surely feels above earth,” replied the Governor. She glanced down and along the path by which they had ascended. “Why, there’s a man

coming,” she said.

“A hunter, or maybe one of our own men from the house,” he replied.

“No, it is not,” she said; “he is not dressed like either; it’s somebody from the city, and I believe I know him. Why, it’s Mr. Guthrie, of the *Herald-Record*.”

“So it is,” said the Governor. “What on earth can he be doing here!”

It was Guthrie sure enough, and when he saw them he hastened his steps and gave a joyful halloo.

The Governor was standing then directly upon the crest of the highest peak, his tall, straight figure outlined black against the red gold of a brilliant sun.

Guthrie came up to them, stopped a moment to recover his breath, then bowed to the Governor’s wife, but spoke directly to the Governor.

“Mr. Senator,” he said, “I am happy to find you at last.”

“Why, what do you mean, Billy?” exclaimed

the Governor.

Guthrie took a copy of the *Herald-Record* from his overcoat pocket, held it up, and they read the flaming headlines on the first page:

**Still Lost in the Wilds.
No One Yet Able to Reach the
United States Senator-Elect.
Our Correspondent Hopes to
Get Through with the News
When the Snow Melts.**

“Why, what does this mean, Billy?” repeated the Governor.

“It means that you are the new United States Senator-elect from our State,” replied Guthrie jubilantly. “It was a surprise, but everybody says that it has come right. You know old Mr. Litchfield was so sure of renomination that nobody opposed him. Well, the old gentleman—he’s seventy-two next March—had a paralytic stroke, and the doctors told him he must retire. It was so unexpected that the Legislature was at a loss. A half dozen candidates, all weak, sprang up. Then Walker, of Fayette, proposed your name. It took like a house a-fire. Sort of poetic justice, everybody said: they knew why you had

lost the nomination for the Governorship. Besides, you were the real timber for the United States Senate, and the State couldn't do better. And I'm happy to be the first to reach you with the news. I offer my sincerest congratulations to you and to your wife."

Lucy put her hand softly upon her husband's arm.

"You have found repayment, Paul," she said.

The Governor took off his hat, and, standing there on the crest of the peak, he said humbly,—

"As God is my witness, I shall strive the best I may to be worthy of this great honor."



- **Credit**

“The Governor’s Choice” was published in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, August 1902.

