



# THE ATAVISM OF ABIMELECH

AND HOW HE ROSE TO THE OCCASION WHEN THE LYNCHERS STORMED THE JAIL

BY FRANK N. STRATTON

**A**BIMELECH CRUMMITT, preacher of the word, pushed back his broad-brimmed hat and turned in his wagon-seat to peer curiously through his shaggy gray eyebrows after the two horsemen who had galloped by him toward the town of Colomo. Abimelech, who knew every citizen of Howell County, knew not these men, and the horses they rode—lithe, powerful, and slender of limb—were of a breed strange to that region.

"Beauties," soliloquized Abimelech—not of the riders.

When the cavaliers had finally disappeared within the town, Abimelech clucked to his own round, sturdy steeds and jolted noisily on toward his little white farmhouse in the distance.

It was just as he reached the cross-roads that he heard the first shot; he had already halted, abruptly, when the fusillade began; he was hurrying back toward Colomo when his alert ears caught the final report—the sharp, spiteful voice of the muzzle-loading, epoch-making rifle of the predatory pioneer, whose convincing eloquence had persuaded the reluctant aborigine to "move on."

As he hastened toward the county-seat Abimelech was sore troubled of spirit. Next to the fair fame of his meek, Quaker-garbed spouse, Martha, he cherished the fair fame of Colomo. Almost a half century before, he had helped at the "raising" of the first house in the town; he had loyally rejoiced when the straggling village had been chosen as the county seat, and he had been one of the foremost to contribute his quota of hewn logs for the court-house. For more than fourteen years—ever since the extirpation of the lawless Rolihan gang—Colomo had been a model of peace and quietude, a city of law and order and brotherly love—a condition largely due to the insistent influence of Abimelech and his sect. Wherefore was Abimelech perplexed and much mortified by those ominous sounds that presaged the return of crime and lawlessness to Colomo.

He tied his panting and indignant horses to the ancient hitching rack that disfigured the public square, and proceeded slowly toward the gaping crowd that

surged about the entrance to Lumson's livery stable. Halfway across the street he met the county clerk, a hard, strange look on his usually jolly face.

"What was the shooting about, friend Hiram?" asked Abimelech.

The county clerk slackened his rapid pace.

"Daddy Dow's killed; shot down like a hog!"

Abimelech's grave eyes grew wonder-wide.

"Killed! Israel Dow—"

"Yes; two hoss-thieves. We had notice they was headed this way, an' we'd have got 'em, only Stone was too sudden—tried to arrest 'em before they was out of th' saddles. They whirled an' was off like two streaks, after firin' th' shot that killed poor ol' Daddy—an' him dozin' peaceful in his ol' chair."

"And they escaped, friend Hiram?"

The clerk's eyes flashed vindictively as he hurried on.

"We got one. Bill Seward dropped 'im on th' jump, with his old rifle, shot through th' hip. Stone hustled 'im down to jail—but he won't be there long."

Abimelech crossed the street and peered over the fast increasing assemblage of heads. An overturned chair and a little red pool marked the spot where old Israel Dow—"Daddy Dow," venerated pioneer and patriarch—had met death.

When Abimelech had listened to the muttering of those about him, when he had seen man after man leave the crowd and hurry toward the court-house, his long, clean-shaven face grew severely serious. He clasped his calloused hands behind his broad back and walked thoughtfully along the main street to the rickety jail on the riverside, climbed the creaking steps, and rapped softly upon the door. It slowly swung open and the sheriff stood on the threshold, barring Abimelech's entrance.

"What's your business, Ab?" asked the officer, brusquely. "I'm busy."

"I fear thee'll be much busier very soon, friend Stone," Abimelech observed. The sheriff eyed him sharply, and laughed faintly and uneasily.

"They'll find us ready," he answered. "I reckon me an' my dep'ty knows our business."

"Thee and thy deputy! Friend Stone, thee'll need twenty deputies!"

The sheriff frowned and his face flushed angrily; but there were many wearers of the broad brim in Howell County—a fact worthy of consideration by an officer asking a second term.

"Where'd I get 'em?" he growled. "I guess you ain't on to public sentiment in this matter, Ab."

Beyond the sheriff, astride a chair, his hat carelessly awry, the deputy removed the pipe from his lips and laughed sneeringly.

"Why don't ye swear Ab in, Tom?" he suggested. "They may not be afeared of us, but they'd never tackle sich a terror as Ab."

Well did Abimelech comprehend the irony of the suggestion. No man in Howell County was better fitted for personal combat than Abimelech. Standing flat-footed on his native soil, he could fold his massive arms on the top of a ten-rail fence. To vault lightly over the same fence, or with one blow to sink his axe to the helve in a standing poplar, were feats easy of accomplishment by Abimelech. But, true to the tenets of his sect, Abimelech, only begotten son of Elihu and Keturah, was a man of peace. He had seen his neighbors march, rifle on shoulder, to join Harrison at Tippecanoe; drafted during the dark days of the great rebellion, he had promptly furnished a substitute. With meekness and in silence he had many times heard his courage questioned—for he was a man of few words, save when the Spirit moved and the Friends' Meeting-house rang with Abimelech's fervent prayers and quavering exhortations.

And so, when the grinning sheriff commanded him to hold up his right hand, Abimelech only gazed at him in reproving mildness and answered: "Thee knows I can't fight, friend Stone."

"You're like th' rest of 'em," the sheriff declared, contemptuously; "only you can't an' they won't."

"Then, friend, I demand that thee immediately telegraph the Governor for the militia."

"Th' militia be d—d, an' you with it!" the sheriff snarled. "Howell County can manage its own affairs

without shootin' its citizens down to save th' neck of a murderin' hoss thief. An' don't you come nosin' around, tryin' to run my business, when ye're too big a coward to practice what you preach."

Abimelech calmly turned, passed down the steps and leaned against the dilapidated paling fence, his broad chin on his enormous chest. He was thinking of the Governor, whose half-section adjoined his own modest "forty"—the Governor, shrewd observer and reader of men, who had once said, humorously: "If Quaker Ab were to state that two and two made six, I should feel it my duty to cause the arithmetics of our schools to be altered accordingly." Whatever his personal courage, Abimelech's stern probity and calm, conservative judgment remained unchallenged and unquestioned.

Ten minutes later Abimelech stood in the little office of Colomo's solitary railroad, scribbling, erasing and re-writing, perplexedly—for the pen was a clumsy weapon in his untutored hand. At last he straightened up and regarded the agent dubiously.

"Friend," he asked, "can thee get this through at once?"

The man scanned the message, and looked up at Abimelech's grave, anxious face.

"This is th' sheriff's business; th' Governor can't—" "Friend," Abimelech interrupted, "James Wilson is not the man to quibble in such a case. He was raised in Colomo, and he loves it. I have given thee the message; if thee shirks thy duty thee will have to answer to James Wilson."

The agent seized the key of the instrument. "I'll try," he said, guardedly. "If they haven't cut th' wire I can get it through quick."

"I thank thee, friend," said Abimelech, fervently. "I'll wait for an answer."

Thirty long, anxious minutes ticked away. Then, with a sigh, Abimelech arose from his seat in the dim corner of the dingy room.

"I may as well go home," he said, in answer to the agent's questioning glance. "I've done all I can, and I don't want to be here when—"

"Answer's coming," the agent broke in as the little instrument suddenly set up an insistent clatter.

A moment of hasty scribbling, and he laid before Abimelech the little yellow sheet, yet uncopied.

"METROPOLIS, IND., July 10, 187—

"Abimelech Crummitt, Colomo, Ind.:

"Militia there by ten, special train. There must be no lynching in Colomo. Hold the jail. I rely on you, "JAMES WILSON."

Outside the office, the little slip of paper clutched in his hard hand, Abimelech, gazing helplessly down the street, saw that the stores were closed, the streets silent and deserted. Somewhere on that balmy summer evening the men of Colomo were gathering, organizing, planning deliberate murder, and Abimelech groaned as he thought of the Governor of a mighty State relying on one man to thwart that mob—and that man Abimelech Crummitt, preacher of the word, man of peace! If it were only either of those poor, misguided men of war, Captain Adonijah Crummitt who had stood with Stark at Bennington, or Seekpeace Crummitt who had charged with Cromwell at Naseby. Into Abimelech's mind flashed a damning doubt, a sinful suspicion that, perhaps, after all, there might be times when the sword rather than the word was necessary for the accomplishment of the Lord's work.

"Hold the jail. I rely on you!"

Mechanically Abimelech muttered those words as he moved dejectedly in the direction of his waiting team. The old clock in the court-house tower struck nine, slowly and solemnly. The moon began to peep timidly above the dim horizon. Glancing up, Abimelech saw that the windows of the court-house were ablaze with light. As he passed slowly under the old oak in the court-house lawn, something dangling from its branches swayed in the rising breeze before his face. Impulsively he seized the portentous noosed thing, tore it down, and hurled it far away. The doors of the court-house squeaked on their rusty hinges, and a grim, double column of men marched forth, turned toward the jail, and halted while the leaders called out sharp, stern instructions. Shuddering, Abimelech made three plunging strides toward his team, then stood still, gripping the Governor's message in his hands. "I rely on you!" The words burned in his brain. If he could gain a hearing from these men of Colomo before they began their murderous work, perhaps— "Is not my word like as fire? . . . and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" A great voice seemed to cry out the question, and to make of it a command.

Down the dark side of the street Abimelech, half-crouching, sped to the jail, sprang up the steps, and beat upon the door.

"Git away from there," the sheriff called. "Th' shootin' will begin in a minnit."

"No!" cried Abimelech. "I can help thee. I'll take the affirmation if necessary."

"I'd let him in, Tom"—the rasping voice of the deputy penetrated through the thin door; "it'll help us in case th' Gov'ner gits inquisitive—an' he'll git on to our game out there."

The sheriff mumbled over the affirmation as he hastily rebolted the door behind his recruit.

"There need be no bloodshed, friend Stone," Abimelech exclaimed; "I'll speak to those erring—"

"Do yer talkin' at the other door—through yonder," interjected the sheriff, thrusting a revolver into Abimelech's hand. "Jap an' me stays here."

Mechanically grasping the unfamiliar weapon, Abimelech hurried through the inner door of the office and into the corridor that circled the cage of grated cells. A dozen jailbirds, grimy and unkempt, leered out at him between the iron bars. He slipped the solitary bolt of the pine door and peered out. The head of the grim column was filing through the gate of the dilapidated fence. Abimelech dropped the revolver into his pocket, removed his broad-brimmed hat, and stepped out into the moonlight. The white hair that the

breeze tossed about his head was little whiter than his face. Abimelech lifted up his hands.

"Halt, friends!" he cried, in deep, sonorous tones. The column halted, as if in surprise. "It's Quaker Ab," a dozen voices muttered. The leaders whispered together; then one called out:

"Go home, Ab—get out of the way. We don't want to hurt you."

"It is thee, friends, who should go home," returned Abimelech; "thee, who are about to commit murder, and bring disgrace upon our town of Colomo. Friends, listen to me—"

"Forward!" growled a score of voices. "We didn't come here for a sermon. Forward!" The column pressed against its leaders, who held it back.

"Crummitt," called one, "we don't particular want this fellow if he'll tell who his partner was, and where he's headed for. 'Twas his partner that shot Daddy."

Abimelech's face shone. "Friends, I'll ask him—if thee'll promise me to make no attack before I report."

"Sure! We'll wait. Won't we, boys?"

Subdued laughter ran down the column as a hundred voices gave assent. Honest Abimelech re-entered the jail and hastened around the corridor, peering into each cell. From the floor of the furthest one a man with



Abimelech reeled, shifted his burden, and faced the mob

pallid, pain-distorted face looked up through half-closed eyes and spoke convulsively between clinched teeth:

"It's me you're—lookin' for. An' you can—go back an'—tell that mob—to go to—"

Abimelech covered his ears to shut out that last word.

"Friend," he said, earnestly, "if thee refuses, only a miracle can save thee."

The man on the floor held out a hand. "Give me that gun—in your pocket," he gasped.

"I'll have—company—on th' way over."

"Blank cartridges, friend—like the others," answered Abimelech, with a significant gesture toward the sheriff's office. "Thy only chance is to—"

A volley of shots from the office drowned his voice.

A chorus of fierce cheers arose from the column he had just left, as it swept through the open door and into the jail.

Over the solemn face of Abimelech flashed a look of indignant amazement; his long, heavy jaw shut with a click. He seized the rusted bar that fastened the prisoner's door, and in his immense hands it snapped like a pipe stem. He lifted the groaning prisoner in his arms and sped to the flimsy stairway that led to the upper story. As he sprang upon the lowest step an axe hurled from the oncoming mob glanced from his white head. Abimelech reeled, took one more upward, staggering step, shifted his burden to his left arm and faced the mob. Blood streamed over his face—not the blood of Abimelech, man of peace, expounder of the word; it was the blood of that Captain Adonijah who had stood with Stark at Bennington, of Seekpeace Crummitt who had charged with Cromwell at Naseby! From behind the shaggy eyebrows his eyes shot forth blue fire; his teeth gleamed, white and set, between the snarling lips. A ponderous arm swung in darting, catapultic circles against the foremost pursuers, hurling them back disabled. Then, with three springs, Abimelech reached the upper floor and laid his burden down. Stooping, he wrenched the flimsy stairway

from its upper fastenings and it fell, crashing, with its load of panting, scrambling men.

"By the gods, old boy, you're a brick!" the wounded man moaned.

Two men in the cell at Abimelech's back pressed their hard faces against the bars.

"Let us out, Goliath," said one. "We'll help ye keep 'em down."

"The law put thee in; the law must let thee out," laconically said Abimelech.

From below arose curses and epithets uncomplimentary to Abimelech. The shooting ceased, and more men poured into the corridor—from the sheriff's office. The top of a ladder shot upward through the opening at Abimelech's feet. The voice of the sheriff called from below:

"Abimelech Crummitt, as sheriff of Howell County I demand my prisoner that I may protect him."

"Come up and get him," growled Abimelech.

The officer's head reared itself above the upper floor.

A hairy hand twined like a rope of wire around the scrawny neck, shook the sheriff of Howell County rudely in mid-air, and dropped him to the floor below. Then Abimelech seized the ladder, drew it quickly upward, and waited.

Listening, hopefully, to catch the first sound of the special, he heard only the tramping of many feet, the confused babble of angry voices. Suddenly, with a rending crash, fragments of glass and sash sifted through the bars of the window at his right. He took the heavy revolver from his pocket and handed it to the man at his feet.

"Thee must try to guard this stairway," he said. "Hit every head. I must go to the window."

"They'll shoot you," the man warned. Abimelech drew himself up proudly.

"Shoot me? They daren't!"

He drew an arm across his eyes to wipe away the blood, leaped toward the window, then halted, perplexed. In the moonlight he saw two ladders thronged with men. To attempt to overthrow them—to thrust his arms between the bars—meant certain maiming by those battering hammers. He glanced about, despairingly. His blazing eyes discovered a dim and narrow cul-de-sac, formed by the wall of the building and a row of cells. He raised the helpless prisoner, carried him to the further end of the blind passage, and tenderly laid him down. He heard the bars of the window fall, clattering under the hammers. He heard cheers, fierce cries, the rush of many feet. And he heard the roar and rattle of a train speeding into town!

"By the mighty sword of Gideon," muttered Abimelech, "we'll save Colomo yet!"

The opening of the passage filled with dark, hesitating, peering forms. Abimelech took two strides forward; the lust of battle swelled his heart.

"Cowards!" he challenged, "come on! I bear no arms save those the Lord gave me!"

Then, down the passage they swept—men of Colomo—with angry faces and cruel eyes, and Abimelech struck—struck with bare hands as even he had never struck with axe and maul. Down went the foremost, man after man, but others pressed forward, climbed over prostrate forms, precipitated themselves upon the giant, forced him back inch by inch, while he fought as Adonijah and Seekpeace had never fought.

"Kill him! Kill the meddling Quaker!" they screamed, snarling like enraged beasts.

A demon leaped up within Abimelech's breast; the impulse to slay possessed his brain. His retreating foot struck the hammer-like weapon that had slipped from the nerveless hand of the fainting man upon the floor. He stooped, quickly, to seize it, his foes leaped upon him, and the struggling mass crashed to the floor. With a Titan's strength Abimelech rose to his knees and swung the weapon above his head. Then, as a column of blue coats and leveled bayonets came charging down the passage, something hard struck Abimelech between his swimming eyes, and he pitched forward, a quivering mass of mighty bone and muscle, muttering in triumphant delirium between clinched teeth: "I rely on you!"

When Abimelech opened his eyes they wandered painfully about a familiar room through whose little eastern window the sun was shining brightly. His buzzing ears caught the gruff tones of old Dr. Newland:

"Just keep him quiet, Mrs. Crummitt. We'll have him up in a day or two, and as good as new in a week. Good-day, ma'am."

"Then it wasn't a dream," groaned Abimelech. A Quaker-garbed, patient-faced little woman hurried to his side.

"Thee must not try to arise, Abimelech," she said with low and gentle voice.

"Martha, did I—was any one killed?" he whispered, hoarsely.

"No, Abimelech; praise the Lord. But thee has sinned—grievously sinned."

"And I deserve to be disciplined—severely and righteously disciplined, Martha." The little woman bowed her head. "Yes, Abimelech; already two of the brethren have called to express their opinion of thy amazing conduct."

Abimelech closed his eyes wearily and his lips tightly.

"Martha," he said, after a while, "bring me the Book—and a pen."

While the little woman held the ancient Bible before him he turned to the old family record, between the two Testaments, and drew two black, obliterating lines through the names of Captain Adonijah and Seekpeace Crummitt.

"Martha," he said, plaintively, "it was in the blood." The little woman sighed.

"Yes, Abimelech. But thee can live it down. I will help thee."

Abimelech raised one ponderous arm, drew the little woman to him, and kissed her.

"I rely on you," he whispered, an odd smile playing about his lips as he closed his aching eyes.