

The Idyll of Staff Bickerston

By Tom Sheehan

This is such an old story with me, about Staff and his rules in life, how they were never formed but came of themselves, like up out of the ground along the lake, perhaps like frost heaves, not belonging but suddenly there. I am compelled to tell you about him.

Once there was a man, his name was Staff, and I came upon him one day, fully live, marveling at the lot given him in this life. It was a tall, sunny day in Spofford, New Hampshire, a breeze off the Northeast, the few clouds in the sky moving like boats out on a vast ocean. Porched, comfortable, knowing the breeze as fresh as a sassy child as it punched through the screen, Staff Bickerston watched his seven-year old son Marco fire pellets of some sort from a crude slingshot at the last few panes of glass in an old hen house. Like an after-thought the hen house sat out alongside the house, and back from the road, eyesore of eyesores to many but tolerable to Staff. It had been, when he was Marco's age, his clubhouse, rendezvous, lair, and "trysting place with the angels," as he had once told his own father. That clutch of wood, he currently assessed, leaning now, awry, its right angles at elsewhere, would soon be a pile of dust and debris heading back into the earth again, going as it always had at its own speed, first gear, down low, birth to oblivion. He could nearly measure the pace of that journey.

There were readable parallels, or contrasts. Now, too, the grip on his own home was threatened, with a near unbreakable string tied to the local bank and its chief administrator and old acquaintance, Lowell Stratton. Lowell was long-faced and Yankee, cut out of an old black-and-white picture of early America, Colonial early; Staff was somewhat of a redhead, blue-eyed, medium height, medium weight, but broad-smiled. Somewhere along the line he was an import. One shake of his head and the quiet but consistent threat that was Lowell puffed away, and Lowell's long Yankee face disappeared.

Oh, he could always drink like that. Oh, that he could!

Earlier in the week Staff had examined a pellet of Marco's ammunition, then also attracted by its sheen in flight. Bringing the sun over his left shoulder, he spoke aloud, nobody around him, his voice steady but quizzical; "Here I am. I'm peering at it, shining it up on my pants, holding it up at the perfect angle to catch the sunlight glint of its polish, but boring through

that rich exterior for the core, the stone's essence, the beauty of its exterior aside. Where is it from? What has it to tell us? What has Marco taken from it? What has it given to him?" Pausing, the small stone still aloft, blessing all that had come unto him, he added, "Have another drink, son."

Staff marveled at his son's skill, for the shiny pellets hit with unerring accuracy some of the remaining panes. Marco was both an impish and inventive child having, Staff much earlier had determined, much of his father's graces for entertainment. As the pellets flew in their near flat trajectory, they gave off a shine or quick luster. Staff wondered what the material was. Enriched mica, he said to himself, fully satisfied with that assumption, and felt again the near-potable breath of breeze on his face. I could get soon inebriated on that stuff, he thought. Not a whiff of preservative or toxic crap in it. Just a drink off the top layer of the lake.

To all but a few people in Spofford, plunked precariously around a small New England lake, Minot "Staff" Bickerston was a loser in more ways than one. The first thing, they would say, was the little grasp he had on the art of maintenance, the art that most Europeans brought with them when they came here across the span of nearly four centuries. Give a structure a good footing, take care of it by some rules of order, and it might last unto eternity. Much of Europe still stood tall, though its roots had traversed more than twice as many centuries, but Staff Bickerston had neither the sense of planning, nor the energy or aptitude, others would say, to preserve what had become his, the big house on the lake, with a goodly spread of ground about it. That he was an idler or a loafer from his earliest days had earned him the nickname of Staff, always at hand to lean on.

Acquaintances said he was lazy, an out-and-out idler, a leaner in life. His best friend, Nathan Hawkinns only nodded and said, "Staff's a dreamer. We all dream, but he goes places the rest of us can't get to. Or don't dare." Nate's insider's smile used to drive people crazy when he'd say things like, "Staff pays more attention to a sawbuck in his wallet than a hundred bucks in the bank, because the sawbuck has presence."

Countless times, though not at harangue, neighbors had heard Staff's wife Mathis say, "The grass needs cutting, Staff. It's getting to be too seedy. And the porch needs painting."

"You're apt to be right on both accounts, Mathy," he'd say, a chuckle evident in his voice, "and one of these days I might accord some attention to your observations, though I possess serious reconsideration on the matter."

The neighbors would smile, as they knew Mathis smiled, for Staff Bickerston was, as Nate had said, more dreamer than doer. It was his cut in life, and he paid it a due course of honor. It was pointed out that Staff didn't paint much or well, nor handle wood's qualities or potentials any better. "Grass," he might have said, "as well as bush and brush, has as much right to grow as the trees in the forest. We keep trimming and cutting back and what we really achieve is the reduction of oxygen production in this world floating through the stars." Long before the Rain Forest perils had come upon us with the huge slashing of South American forests, Staff had blown the whistle on loggers. "Our last gasp at air might be from the last leaf left, the final pittance of osmosis. God forbid you have to live on the air your lawn gives off. Talk about troubles at your own due."

Most people didn't listen to a Staff Bickerston. It would admit too much for both sides of the equation.

From the eighth grade on he had worked in Leon Culbertson's grocery store, never going any place else in the intervening years, never hoping to go, missing one day in all the time for a funeral. The pace of groceries was his speed, braced to fit merely three meals in a day, and never a continuous onslaught. People seemed to tolerate him at times, as if it were a sly brand of pity; a few loved him, none disliked him with any fervor or vengeance.

But the bank had come at him. The bank had ceased to listen to him, as he fell behind in partial or total payments, rushing at the last minute to save his equity, to buy a purchase of time. "Oh, Mathy," he'd say, "one day it'll be over. It will be ours again, to give to the boy, to give him a start."

"You know what he will do with it, Staff," Mathis countered, the smile at her mouth even as she spoke. "That's the only thing stops me from going out of my mind... he'll own up to it just as you do."

"You love us both?"

For a moment she mused, a piece of sunlight falling across her face, giving her eyes a touch of shadow, and a sense of the old beauty he had always seen in her: cheekbones shiny as new coins, one small scar over her left eye granting perpetual youth of accident. Staff saw the moonlight, like a blade of light, falling across her face out on the lake years ago, the night he knew he was in love with her. He could feel the sense of water drifting through her fingers the way it did that night, the wind with jasmine in it coming to him through her hair as dark as the

night sky, the way her skirt rode lightly and daringly on her thighs.

“Where did you go just then,” she said, “back to the lake? Oh, Staff, you’re such a beautiful dreamer and I love you for it, but sometimes...” and she closed her eyes and saw the look on his face that same night when her heart beat faster than it ever had and she knew he was in love with her. They had celebrated that moment all their married life. The moment, for a moment, was real. It warmed her.

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Lowell Stratton saw Mathis across the diminutive Spofford rotary traffic circle and hailed her. His long legs took him quickly to her side. His hair, she noticed, was thinning, a small breath of air parting it in more than one place, and long hours of work sat in his eyes. Lowell, it was known, never went home early to Lila Theis, his wife. She suspected no one would.

Those thoughts were on her mind as she said, looking up into his face, “I know what you’re going to say, Lowell, that we’re late again, but Staff will get something done again. He always does.” Never cute, hardly ever precious, Lowell seemed a bit softer, the breeze at his hair making him vulnerable, susceptible, and, even for a banker, somewhat tolerable.

Once they had dated, seemed a century ago, but Staff Bickerston had ended that promptly. Long ago Lowell had admitted that Staff for once knew what he wanted and took care of the situation.

Lowell noticed her smile was still the loveliest smile around the whole lake, realizing once more she could charm him at a moment’s notice. For twenty years she had had that power. All her cares, all Staff’s shortcomings, had not creased that lovely skin; and her eyes were yet the softest blue he had ever known. There had been times when he thought he could see the back of her mind. “I know what the old skinflint pays him, Mathis. I do his taxes, and I don’t know how Staff will get by this time. Things are really serious. It’s rolling all around us, cutting corners, tightening the belt. Even old Culbertson’s getting to feel it. He’s been the Rock of Gibraltar forever it seems. I just don’t know how Staff’ll do it this time. It might be the last leg.”

“Lowell,” she said, her hand touching lightly the sleeve of his suit coat, “you are a very honorable man. Staff has always said you were a most honorable man. Your father was hard but fair, and you are a cut of the same cloth. We know you are patient. Whatever comes to pass will come to pass. Staff’s family has had that house for almost a century now. I don’t think he will let it go without some rather amazing effort at retention. He knows he will owe forever, or almost

ever. But the dreams keep him going. It's what he does best, and there's something to be said for that. He will never die from stress or a heart attack. It's simply not in his make-up."

"Oh, Lord, Mathy, how well I know that. There are moments, I'll frankly admit, when the tonnage comes down on top of me and I wonder what Staff would do in the same circumstance. I swear there are times, right smack in the middle of my day, when I can hear him talking me out of a blue funk or a frazzle. Sometimes I hear him say, sort of an aside, 'Go fishing, Lowell. The trout are biting at flies,' or 'the bass are looking for silver lures,' or 'go put your skates on, Lowell, and make a little breeze of your own.'"

"Come see us, Lowell. You're always welcome. The porch is made for conversation. Staff says that all the time. Come by for coffee some night, when the breeze talks itself across the lake. Those nights are magic for the soul he says. I might tell you about his putting some old glass panes in the old chicken coop, just so Marco can break them with his slingshot. They are cuts of the same cloth, those two."

"God, Mathy, only Staff would do something like that. Only he would think of it in the first place. Yes, I'll try to make it purely social, but I can never promise in this business. Some hard things get hammered home every day. Last week we had to foreclose on Jed Akins at last. Nearly broke both our hearts, but had to be done."

"What's he going to do now, Lowell?"

"It's probably going to beat him into the ground, but I think he's going to live in a spare room at son Ethan's, over in Coldwell, by the river." There was no pain in Lowell's eyes that Mathis could see, but she knew it was there. "At least he'll have a view of the river. Staff would say that is important, wouldn't he?"

"You pick things up quickly, Lowell. Come see us, an evening or a night when the breeze is right." She walked off on her errands.

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Marco never mentioned the sudden appearance of glass panes in the old chicken coop. He just assumed that his father had replaced the glass for his entertainment. Vaguely he could remember his father saying he saved the glass from the old greenhouse that had long ago ceased to be. Staff had stacked the glass in a corner of the cellar. "We'll have need of it someday." There was no way of accounting for it, but that someday was here.

The lure of the hill out back pulled at him again. Where the chicken coop had been his

father's "place," Marco had a spot of his own, and he slipped into the brush and climbed the small rise behind the house. His own place was a cave so small and so slight that only he could get into it, perhaps seven or eight feet deep and four feet high. The cave actually had been formed by three huge stones, which had been brought against each other long ago. Time had set a mound of vegetation growing over the stones, and hiding the cave. In his mind he called it "His Columbus Place," being the first one, he believed, to find it. One wall was always damp, but the air had a magic touch to it, and the same silence he found in church he found in the cave, an awed and overpowering silence, as if a huge hand had transferred it. It was here that he found his ammunition, some of it in small round stones on the floor of the cave or chipping it off the top of the wall where its deep-seated shine attracted him on his first visit. An old cobbler's hammer he'd found in the cellar sat in a small box with some other tools, and with it Marco chipped away enough ammunition to fill his leather pouch. A few stones, too large for ammo pellets, he left in the box in the cave, thinking about making hatchets out of them later on. The old Indian exhibit of arrowheads and spearheads and hatchets at the library had intrigued him from the first moment he had seen them.

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A week later Lowell Stratton showed up at the porch, Staff and Mathis enjoying the breeze, the hum of the crickets and frogs coming uphill from the edges of the lake. Out over the lake the evening star was a night light in a spacious room, and slightly downhill clusters of fireflies danced their crazy dance at the edge of Staff's field.

"It's one of those nights, isn't it, Lowell?" Mathis said, as he came up the steps. "I trust it's social and not business."

"I won't mention any predicaments if you don't," countered Lowell. "Felt like a late coffee and Lila Theis wanted to get a good night's sleep for her big day tomorrow over at the Benton Festival. Course, I can't go. So I thought I'd pay my respects." He sat his long frame down easily into an old red Adirondack chair. The chair made a noise, as if a few nails had loosened up.

"You have a decent day, Lowell," Staff said? "Maybe an iced coffee might be the trick for you, if you didn't. Be right back." His footsteps sounded down the hallway.

Mathis said, "We still in trouble, Lowell?"

"Hasn't got any better, but I really wasn't going to mention it tonight. Just wanted to cool it a bit. Guess this place is about the best place in town for that. It's probably even better than

the lake. I would come by tomorrow, though, and say, if things got real bad - and they are about there now I swear - I can get a good man to give you a solid price for the place. He's from Alberton, done well for himself, and has asked a few times about this place."

Mathis' breath on the intake was clearly audible.

Lowell felt her anxiety. "There is no shame in selling, Mathis. You can pay off what you owe and get a smaller place. You don't need all these fields, either. They just sit fallow all the time anyway, as if they'll never grow another crop ever, or be used for anything else appropriate."

"That last part bothers me, Lowell. I know it'd bother Staff no end to see this place used appropriately, as you term it. We all know what that means, don't we?" Then her head cocked to attention.

Staff's footsteps came back down the hallway, the breeze humped its small back, the fireflies leaped into a cloud in the middle of a warm field. At one end of the porch, a trellis covered with roses, near the end of their short stay, made the slightest emanation on the breeze.

Mathis put her hand on Lowell's sleeve. "Not tonight, Lowell. It's just too beautiful. It has to be another time."

"Scout's honor," Lowell said, putting his hand up, the breeze touching his fingers, the essence of rose trying to carry something of Lila Theis in it. He could not find it.

Staff brought Lowell a tall glass of iced coffee. "Hell of a night, Lowell. Hell of a night. You two have a pitch at business while I was out of earshot?" He put the glass into Lowell's outstretched hand. "Tell you this, Lowell, I'd bet you'd be willing to swap places tonight, wouldn't you? It'd be a great trade-off, what I have for what you have, only I'd never make that trade in a thousand years, come I'd have to live in the gutter."

"I came because Mathy invited me again, and because you know I know you have something special and I don't. I know I couldn't even buy it, so no business tonight like I promised Mathy when she said come by for coffee."

Staff pointed off across the field. "See those fireflies out there, Lowell? Know what my father told me about them? Way back, I was younger than Marco, I think, we were sitting here and he said they were the Milky Way in another smaller and infinite universe in constant motion. He said they were stars in their own right, just the motion and speed different from our place

and time. Had me full convinced about it. Still think it's possible. Gets me wondering sometimes."

Lowell said, "I was thinking about the roses, Staff. How sweet they smell, and what a short time they're here with us. Beautiful and sweet as all hell and gone as quick as you turn around. Oh, Jeezus, it's hard to say, but Lila's like that, sometimes like it's not worth the damn bother." He raised his glass. "To the roses," he said, "while they last."

Later that night, after Lowell had walked down past the small field, past the clusters of fireflies, and off to town, Mathy and Staff agreed it had been one of the saddest nights they had ever known. From each side of the coin, they would agree.

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Two weeks later, just before Mathy was to set the table for the evening meal, Marco outside with his slingshot, Staff sitting on the porch knowing Marco had left two panes of glass untouched, Lowell Stratton came up the road in his car. A tall and heavy-set man in a yellow golf shirt climbed out of the passenger seat of Lowell's little sports car, as if he had been shoehorned out of the tight interior. The man nodded to Staff on the porch and looked at Marco adjusting his slingshot in the driveway. When the two men came closer, Marco turned around, adjusted his aim and fired a pellet that smashed one of the remaining panes of glass.

"Helluva shot, kid!" the man said. "Helluva shot! I used to be able to do that. You use pebbles or what?"

Marco smiled, slipped the slingshot into his back pocket after looking at the last pane of glass sitting in the middle of the old chicken coop like the last target on Earth. "I get my ammunition out back." He motioned up the small rise and mound behind the house and the quick burst of brush growing there. "It's kinda secret." He walked back to check out the chicken coop.

Lowell said to Staff and Mathis just coming onto the porch, "This here's Abbot Gruden, folks. He's from Alberton and one of those new millionaires we hear talk about. He's pushed me pretty hard on this and since he's such a good customer now at the bank, I am compelled to bring him here. Has a sincere interest in this property and would like to make you an outstanding offer." Lowell's face, long and angular, seemed longer than usual, and redder.

Abbot Gruden jumped right in, even as he stood at the foot of the porch steps. "I gather this is or could be a might uncomfortable, folks. I don't want it to be that way. This is a very

attractive spot, I think, not for development but for good living. A lot of things that I once couldn't afford I can now afford. I've been passing by this place for years and always had a dream about it." His glance went back down the driveway and then across the fields that dropped down toward the lake, the arms of the evening sun clasping the whole lake top. He smiled easily at Marco coming back from the chicken coop. His voice was partly an aside when he said, "Like Tom and Huck, I swear."

Staff said, "Come up on the porch, you two, and have some iced coffee. The scene won't change for about another forty minutes, then you'll get another picture." Opening the screen door, he put his hand out and said, "Case Lowell forgot, this is my wife Mathy and I am Staff Bickerston who is, apparently, deeper in trouble with Lowell and the bank than I would have imagined. I always figured I'd pass back into the land right around here."

A slight but warm smile cut the corners of Abbot Gruden's mouth. "I'll make it quick, Staff. No folderol and clumsy stuff and no feints and quick moves. I'll buy this place from you, let you stay here a couple of years, on me, on the house." His second option at a smile was a bit clumsy. "Did that sound funny?"

"Think nothing of it, Abbot," Staff said. "The point you're making, other than being extremely generous, is you want to become owner of record sooner than later. Is that right? Is that to secure a better buying price?"

"Well, Staff, I didn't make my money by throwing it away." His shoulders were squared away as if he were a military man. His jaw was square too, and his haircut, clean above the ears, was brand new. Staff noticed that Abbot Gruden did not talk with his hands, like so many men did. Abbot Gruden's deep voice carried all his messages, and he continued. "This site represents a good investment for me. The value is never going to go down. Land is just not in production any more. Hasn't been since the Big Bang, far as I can see." His gaze went back across the field where both sun and breeze played in the tops of the high grass, at times looking like combers coming at a shoreline. When a small cloud passed over, the grass changed color and Staff and Abbot Gruden both saw and sensed the iridescence change.

Mathis meanwhile was looking for something in Lowell's eyes. She took it to be pain. Her hand touched the sleeve of his suit coat.

Lowell said, "That'd be two years of free rent, folks. That's a generosity I never heard about. That's something I could never handle at the bank. Getting tough enough to do things the

way they have to be done now.” Mathis knew he could still feel the gentle touch at his sleeve. His eyes showed it. The face of Lila Theis came at the back of her head. She shivered with a momentary chill.

Staff walked down to the end of the porch and motioned Abbot Gruden to follow him. The two men saw Marco standing in the driveway and looking back at the coop. There was a single pane of glass in the coop and the sun was a slash against that pane. It almost came straight back at the two men. Staff said, “He loves it here. He’s just like me coming back again even before I go under the grass. I’d love to keep the place for him, but I know I don’t have a shot at it much longer. Not now, not tonight, but we might have to talk again about this. You and I, on the side someplace. Fair enough? You’ve made a decent and generous proposal. I just might have to do what would drive my soul outward.” He leaned to look back at the coop and the slash of sunlight falling off the last pane of glass, shifting positions and brightness. “That’s the last one, Marco. Make it a good shot.”

The born-again Staff Bickerston, in the guise of his son Marco, measuring all the things that had come at him in this short life, looked up at the two men and said, “Let him try. Said he used to do it when he was a kid.” He held out the crude slingshot. The initial touch of warm air Abbot Gruden had known coming on the property, came back over him. He was obviously pleased when he said, “Why not. It’s been a long time.” Then the exuberance rang in his voice. “It’s been too damn long!”

Staff and Abbot Gruden stepped down from the porch as Mathis and Lowell Stratton stood aside at the screen door. Marco handed Abbot Gruden the slingshot. Gruden hefted it in his hand, closed his fist tightly about the crude handle, closed one eye and looked through the Y of the tines at the pane of glass. “Ammunition, please, Ammo Bearer,” he said, the voice resonant, in charge, deeper than before, an infantry officer at command. Marco dug into his leather ammo pouch and handed Abbot Gruden a small round pellet, about half an inch in rough diameter. The new shooter placed it into the leather seat of the slingshot and looked down as he gripped it firmly.

In later weeks Staff would tell the story over and over again. “This kind man, this man who had made such a generous offer, looked down at the pellet, then took it out of the leather saddle and held it aloft. He did it just like I had done before, stupid me. There he was, this stranger Lowell brought over, peering at one of Marco’s pellets, shining it up on his pants,

holding it up at the perfect angle to catch the sunlight glint of its polish. Wondering, I bet, just like I did, where was it from? What did it have to tell us? ‘My god, he says, where did you get this?’ Marco near jumped out of his skin. ‘Out back,’ he says, ‘in my cave, My Columbus Place.’ ‘You have any more?’ the big fellow says. ‘I got a whole bunch, some of them bigger than that but they’re too big for the slingshot.’ The big fellow looks me right in the eyes and says, ‘Staff Bickerston, you might not have to sell this place after all. You got placer gold here, my man, right in your own back yard.’”

“And we rush off to Marco’s hideaway and Marco crawls inside his cave and comes out with his storage box and there’s a couple of dozen pieces there, some of them big as golf balls. A couple even bigger. And then all hell breaks loose, and Abbot Gruden, millionaire in general, geologist by avocation, pronounces us probably quite comfortably rich and the mortgage a thing of the past. He’s almighty excited and almost out of breath and we have to listen to him. He tells us all that here, as the ice retreated, the Connecticut Valley was filled with a marvelous great glacial lake, Glacial Lake Hitchcock, which extended from where Middletown, Connecticut is now, to just north of where St. Johnsbury, Vermont is. There was a smaller glacial lake in the Ashuelot Valley, too, that eventually drained into Hitchcock. The Ice Sheet rumbled through here, he told us, grinding strong deep grooves, long linear striations, and cone-shaped rat tails into the rock pointing the way, and now he was using his hands to talk, believe it or not, waving them all over heck.”

“‘Eventually,’ he said, ‘those ice sleds went on a more southwestward flow. They had Keene and Spofford in mind I’ll bet, as the big ice melted and thinned and began to be controlled by the local topography of the mountains over past Keene on the west and the newer mountains on the east.’ He said they were pushing stuff out in front all the time, all kinds of stuff. Even while the huge glacial lake in the Ashuelot River Valley pulled and drew down the buoyant glacier front to a new position, ever sliding forward and calving itself into the lake. Ain’t that some beautiful, calving itself into the lake. My, oh my, I can see it now.”

On more than one summation Staff ended by saying, “Beauty of it all is Lowell was about as tickled as we were. It was the only time I ever saw him kiss Mathy, that’s for sure.”

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