

Henry Hanken Gives The Finger

David R. Beatty

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While the places and events described in this novella are based upon real ones, the characters are entirely fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or deceased, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Chapter 1: Nigger Point

"Holly Molly, there's something big on the end of this line," exclaims Henry Hanken to his night fishing buddy and secret best friend Molly LaFollette as his cane pole pulls into an inverted J.

"It's probably just a snag, Hank," she calls from the darkness of the muddy river bank a few feet away, hiking her gabardine hobble skirt as she slides over in bare feet and grabs the rod. "Let me feel!"

With arms entwined, they lean slowly back and hear the horsehair line tighten with a *ping* on the moonless night at the confluence of north and south branches of the Raritan River.

"Hold it right there!" he commands, savoring the tingling from fine hairs standing erect on smooth forearms, brunette waves tickling his neck, the small bulge of a deltoid pushing into his chest, his own bulge straining into wool knickers. "Something's going to give if we pull any harder."

Molly and Hank were a secret because it was a forbidden friendship. Mary Preston LaFollette was the heiress to three wealthy Virginia families whose antebellum stash escaped to central New Jersey as the War of Northern Aggression succumbed to that perceived northern aggression. The Preston, Kern, and Thweatt families had dabbled in tobacco and wheat before that uncivil war, but the real source of their prosperity was an escalating trade in African slaves.

As the south succumbed and their estates were being plundered by Union forces, their croplands dispersed to tenant farmers, the eldest daughter was making her way north in a wagon train driven by her Yankee headmaster husband and containing their young son, their heirloom furniture, select household human property, and a trunk stuffed with cash and gold built into each of the twin seats of five spring wagons. Flash forward fifty years and Molly is the fifteen-year-old child of that young son, and she was forbidden from playing with the riffraff of the mill town that the Evergreens mansion presided over from a hilltop perch.

"What could it be?" Molly gasps as their backward lean slowly gives way to straining legs.

"Probably a log," Hank blurts, holding back the scream bursting to escape from his taugth body as the warmth from her contact spreads up his belly and into his chest.

"Logs don't tug," she cries, glancing at him wide-eyed as a strong yank tugs on the line.

"Dad gum, a sturgeon?" he exclaims, redoubling his pull as they stumble back.
"Granddad said they used to run the Middlebrook."

"Yikes!" she screams and they both leap back as a dark thing splashes onto the mud.

"Ah-ha," he laughs, regaining his wits and reaching for the line. "It's just the monster of Nigger Point."

"Don't call it that!" she blurts, coming to her senses while brushing the sandy clay off her new skirt. "Our servants hate that word and so do I."

"Huh?" he squeaks, still holding onto the twine with his left hand while turning toward her.

"Look out!" she screams, but the snapper is already wobbling away trailing a bloody line that terminates in a single stub poking out of a huge beak.

Chapter 2: Conscription

"Jeez Hank, I'd cut off my finger too if Molly LaFollette would be my nurse," exclaims Thomas Biondi as they make their way along the train tracks to the Somerset County Courthouse five miles away.

"Hush Mr. Biondi," whispers Henry glancing around to see if anyone had heard. "She's just my fishing friend."

"That's what they all say, cuz," quips the twenty-five-year-old bricklayer from the tough West End. "I'd still like a naval engagement with her."

"I'll take navy, army, or air force," deflects Henry while snapping his head to fling mahogany locks out of his eyes. "So long as they send me somewhere over there."

"Fat chance with a hand like that, little buddy," begins the squat Italian man, but he's interrupted by shouting from a group of people carrying signs outside the gate of the Cott-A-Lap Company.

Henry and Tom Biondi cross the creek and are nearly out of sight of the chemical plant when Henry looks back over the shorter man's head.

"Hey, did you see those signs that said 'No Dyes in Somerville'? They don't even know how to spell, and why do they think they'd die, anyway?"

"Might be you who's the stunad, stunad. What say we forget about those colors and figure out how to get that red bandage past the physical."

The unlikely pair were reporting to the draft board for the newly minted Selective Service. Two previous rounds had only taken unemployed men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one, but the coming fall offensive against the Kaiser's troops entrenched along the Forest of the Argonne called for a more massive mobilization. All bachelors between eighteen and forty-five were required to report on September 12, 1918, which happened to be Henry's eighteenth birthday.

One consequence of the recent British naval blockade of German ports was a shortage of European dyes in North America. Clothing mills were clamoring for colors, and Cott-A-Lap was well positioned chemically to convert oil byproducts from the

booming new automobile industry to aniline-based dyes. Not so ideally placed was the location of the plant along Peter Brook and beside a growing residential neighborhood.

"Donato Biondi of Bound Brook," growls a stern man in a crisp uniform dangling an empty pant leg behind the registration desk in the courthouse lobby.

"Good luck Tommy!" Henry whispers, giving him a vigorous shake with his right hand while keeping the left tucked deep into his pants pocket.

"That's the ticket," winks Tom before striding over to the desk and launching a salute that brings on a deeper scowl.

"You missed a checkbox," grunts the military man stuck behind a desk with a disability. "Native born, naturalized, of father's naturalization?"

"I wasn't there," quips Tom scratching his head and screwing his eyes, "but my guess is mom and pop did it naturally."

"Listen here, you dirty guinea," spits the now irate man leaping across the desk with his good leg, "it's no skin off my back to toss you in jail for draft dodging."

"All right, all right, sorry sarge. My parents came through Ellis Island when I was two."

"Army," he grunts, waving Tom past the desk to the physical examination line, "and good thing I won't be your drill sergeant."

"Henry Hanken of Bound Brook," he continues, shaking his head and hiding a slight smile, "and you'd better not be another wiseguy."

"N-no sir," Hank stutters, standing at attention with his body turned slightly to the left hiding his now unbandaged hand behind his hip.

"At ease soldier!" commands the sergeant, pushing up on the desk with both hands to stand up and scan him from head to toe. "Any physical problems we should know about?"

"N-not that I can s-see," Henry smiles, jamming both hands into his pockets before turning in a circle.

Halfway around his loop the draft official grabs a glass of water, downs it in one gulp, and tosses. Henry manages to grab the glass before it shatters onto his head or the floor.

"Sorry son, you'd need all ten fingers over there."

Henry's shoulders droop as he slowly shuffles toward the courthouse door.

"Hey Hank, I'll throw you a bone," calls Tom Biondi leaning out bare-chested from behind a screen where he's being examined. "I'll put in a good word for you at the new work site behind the Evergreens."

Chapter 3: Catching A Bone

"Ouch!" Henry hisses, trying to stifle a cry after stubbing his finger stub into something hard in the hillside he's digging into.

"You okay over there?" calls the foreman from the next lot where he's checking the foundation measurements of a new home construction on Ware Court.

"F-fine," Henry calls back, shaking out his left hand as he grabs a mattock with his right.

Henry's hand was anything but fine. The snapping turtle had taken the second and third phalanges of his left ring finger, leaving the bare bone of the fourth metacarpal that was still oozing two weeks after that fun-filled night at the point. It was a minor miracle that it was a clean amputation right at the joint line. Less serendipitous was the microbiome of a snapping turtle's mouth. The white tip of the bone peaked out of a tent of blackening skin exuding foul-smelling pus. The doctor at the Bound Brook Hospital had said to keep it dry and clean if he wanted to save the hand, but the bandage was turning yellow from within and reddish-brown on the outside from the hard clay of the only hill in the little town tucked up against First Watchung Mountain.

The construction site was beside the Evergreens, the old LaFollette mansion built onto the top of an earthen mound overlooking the floodplain of the Raritan River to the south. The family has just moved to their new Piedmont Farms estate on the Watchung slope north of town and had started developing the land surrounding the old place.

"Aw, did nancy hurt her little finger?" chides another mason assistant sent over to help at the stubborn bank.

"You try digging with one hand," scowls Henry.

"My pleasure," responds the wiry sixteen-year-old swinging his pick one-handed into the packed earth of the bank. "I'll use the other to dig into some rich girl."

"The knuckles of my right hand are just fine," Henry shoots back. "Besides, what chance does the crippled son of an orchardist have with the daughter of a big shot banker?"

"Aw Hank, I was just joshing," sighs the teenager with a two-handed heave of a pick down into the hard hillside. "My grandparents came here to escape a vineyard in Bordeaux."

"The LaFollette orchard is no vineyard," Henry counters while using his bandaged hand to help shovel up the fallen dirt into a wheelbarrow. "We grow six different apples, Bartlett and Bosc pears, even freestone peaches."

"Speaking of jobs, I'm applying at the new chemical plant," the young digger pivots, reaching up to pull out a clump of purple-flowered plants growing just above their pit. "You should too, and, while your at it, try this on that stump. Grand-mere always used a Prunella poultice on cuts."

"Woa!" exclaims Henry, leaping in and catching a long bone that tumbles out of the bank along with the clod of roots. "What do we have here?"

Chapter 4: Longwood

"That bone of yours," plots Henry's father, taking a gulp of fried apples cooked with onions and fatback, "it's just the ammunition we need to keep the old man from selling off the orchard."

"What's an old femur got to do with the LaFollette developments?" Henry asks, ladling a dollop of brown gravy over the steaming biscuits on his plate.

"He'll want to keep it quiet that there's a cemetery under his hill, son," the leather-skinned farmer explains, digging into the green beans and bacon.

"I'm more worried about my job," Henry replies. "The foreman caught me favoring the bad hand this morning and had to send extra help."

"You keeping that job and me getting first rights on the lots around Longwood ought to be worth burying that bone before some reporter from the Chronicle finds out."

A nationwide craze for the new science of anthropology was underway in early twentieth century America. Just forty miles from Bound Brook, at the American Museum of Natural History, a curator named Franz Boas was demonstrating that culture was more significant than genetics for determining the physical characteristics of racial groups. All over the country excavations for new construction were being halted by amateur scientists exclaiming over old bones.

The LaFollette wealth from antebellum slave-based businesses had been slowly diminishing as they sent cash back to struggling family members in reconstructionist Virginia. For just that purpose, George the elder had invented a form of paper for checks that was invisible through envelopes and turned white when altered. His company, National Safety Paper, would grow to be the largest manufacturer of banking papers in the world under the tutelage of George the younger, but labor was expensive in the north. The family was systematically selling off lots around the old mansion to build a new and electrified estate house as well as to fund George junior's race for a U.S. senate seat.

One such property was Longwood, a one-hundred-sixty acre orchard with bottomland groves along the Middlebrook and a tender's cottage on a little rise beside a spring. The Hanken family had lived there and operated the orchard ever since Henry was born in 1900.

"Just listen to you two," scoffs Henry's mother delivering another bowl of gravy from the cookstove. "Fretting over work and land when you should be trying to save that hand."

"I stuck some heal-all in there this morning," Henry reports, holding up his hand to reveal the plant material poking out of the bandage.

"Give it here," she commands, pouring a cloudy reddish-yellow liquid into a large glass bowl. "We'll soak it in my cider vinegar three times a day."

Chapter 5: Hoodoo

"Psst, Henry," hisses Molly, her luminous face glowing from out of the darkness up above the building site as he's finishing up the day's excavating.

"Be right up," he whispers back, loading tools into a barrow and wheeling it over to the batch mixer before heading down the street. "Night boss," he waves back, tossing his hair out of his eyes as he turns the corner toward the back of the Evergreens.

"I've only got a minute," she gushes, emerging from a carriage bay carrying a derby jacket and riding gloves. "We're driving to Trenton in Dad's new Nash."

"Fancy meeting you here," he smiles, his face lighting up in the growing glow of the harvest moon. "What's cracking?"

"You have to take these to the point tonight," she gushes, handing him a small wing bone, shiny black feather, and smooth white stone. "My old nanny says your finger will heal if you leave them for the snapper under a full moon."

Molly was passing on the objects given to her by an aging African-American housekeeper who had stayed with the family after the fall of the south. She'd explained that the chicken bone represented Henry's hand, the hen feather it's cleansing, and the gemstone an altar to call on his ancestors. This particular stone was an analcine crystal from nearby First Watchung Mountain.

The Watchungs are an upstart volcanic triumvirate extending from the more staid Appalachians in northwest New Jersey. The southernmost ridge, First Watchung, cuts across the waist of the state's figure-eight figure to the palisades of the Hudson River valley, demarcating the north's ridge and valley woodlands from the South Jersey pinelands. In 1918, quarrying of the Watchung's predominant stone for gravel was becoming the basis for the paving of the garden state, but periodic finds of rare minerals protruding from the basalt attracted rock hunters of all stripes, including the LaFollette's elderly ex-slave housekeeper.

George junior was in the thick of an intense race for the New Jersey seat to the U.S. Senate. He'd been hand-picked for the Democratic nomination by a friend of his Virginia family, President Woodrow Wilson. At stake in the race was the senate majority, held by a slim margin by the President's progressive party favoring international engagement.

"Everybody and their mammy has got a bone to pick for the cure of my hand," Henry groans, slipping the three objects into the baggy back pocket of his dusty knickers. "I just want to know why there are bones under your old house."

"Maybe that's why this place always seemed haunted," Molly counters, stepping closer to lean into her friend. "My sister once woke in the night and thought she saw a soldier with a bloody sword down in the ballroom."

"What was here before this place?" he wonders, feeling her heat on his chest as he wraps his long arms around her narrow back, hands resisting settling on her newly bulging hips.

"I certainly don't know, but Daddy tells everyone who'll listen that there was a Revolutionary war battle in Bound Brook. I'll mention it to him on the long drive tonight."

"No, don't!" he blurts. "I'll go back to the Point if you won't tell anyone about the bones."

"If you'll leave those three things beside the hole, I promise I won't tell Daddy," she bargains, looking up into Henry's hazel eyes, "but I am going to ask the school librarian about this hill."

Chapter 6: Caught

"Get away from there!" commands a man catching Henry in his flashlight beam beside a cyan pool glowing in the full moon peeking over the still-leafed-out trees to the east. "This is Calco property now."

"Just saving this," Henry blurts, his two hands holding up a big flapping bird dripping bluish-green slime.

"You can walk along the river path," the guard relents, "but the next time you trespass by the dye pools I'll have you arrested."

Henry had set out from Longwood at dusk like he usually did for night fishing at the point. Crossing westward over the Middlebrook bridge at Talmadge Avenue, he started hearing a cacophany of caws from the sycamores lining the Raritan. When he finally remembered that crows were usually tucked into First Watchung roosts by that time of the night, the hairs had risen into piloerection at the back of his neck. The calls led him to a little rise of newly banked earth just beyond the high water line. Moonbeams broke the tree line as he peered over the hummock, illuminating a downed bird flopping around in a colorful pool.

Since Henry's fateful previous fishing trip to the point, the Cott-A-Lap Company had started nighttime shunting of waste from their contested Somerville plant to this new site on the uninhabited outskirts of the floodplain. They were hoping that reopening five miles downstream with a portmanteau name would be enough to quell protests at the former location. They were right, and the Calco Chemical Company was digging drainage pools and raising buildings at breakneck pace with hardly a peep from the nearby neighborhoods of the west end of Bound Brook.

"Here you go, beautiful," Henry whispers, gently holding both sides of the colored bird and dipping it into the deep pool of the river as it's compadres silently alight onto the overhanging sycamore. "This ought to clean those flight feathers."

With each dip, the bird flaps its wings and more of the dye drips down over Henry's hands. After a half dozen dunkings, a big black bird emerges from the slime and leaps into flight as he raises his arms into the glorious harvest moon.

"Free at last," he calls into the orange night, citing a song he'd previously heard wafting across this wide hole from a Negro camp on a moonless night.

He's starting toward town along the fishermen's path when the chorus strikes up behind him.

"Oh yeah, Molly's magic," he recalls, striding back to the point and placing the bone, feather, and crystal on the hump of a stone at the edge of the lapping water as the murder alights from the tree, flies across the face of the full moon, and disappears into the eastern darkness.

Chapter 7: Council Oak

"Hank!" hisses Molly from her perch up on a large branch of an old oak tree before breaking out laughing at his startled look.

"Geez Molly, if you were a snake you would have bit me," he smiles, reaching up to clench her trim hips as she slips down into his arms, his sudden hardness gliding up her belly as her feet reach for the ground. "I found more bones in that hillside we're digging into."

"It's not a Revolutionary War graveyard," she blurts, leaning into him and straining to rub her chest against the ridges of his abdomen. "The school librarian told me that the fighting happened by the Queen's Bridge. The thirty dead soldiers were buried at the main camp at Morristown."

"Who then?" he groans, lifting her to place the middle seam of her jodhpurs against him and hardly noticing his infected hand as she clasps her riding boots around his hips.

"She sent me to the Memorial Library," she exclaims, catching sight of the red leaves glinting in the sun as she leans back to push into him just right. "You won't believe what I found out about my old house."

Molly's family had a hand in opening both the town's libraries. The private high school where she went had been christened the Washington School at the urging of the primary benefactor and fellow Virginian to the father of the country, her own father George Preston LaFollette. The town's library was raised on land donated by the family, and both buildings, school and library, were built by renowned New York architect and LaFollette hiree Alexander Morecraft. A new donation accompanied each new development, and the largest land sale, the orchard where Henry's family lived and worked, was going to fund LaFollette's contentious senate race.

"Tell me!" Henry blurts as nuts crunch under his rocking boots, acorns from the very tree under which the land was purchased from a Lenape delegation in 1681.

"The old..." Molly gasps with each forward rock, "mansion...was built...on an...Indian...MOUND."

"Wow," he shouts, matching her final exclamation as her boots slide down to the ground. "That dig might end up being a real Indian giver."

"Don't be glib," she chides, pushing away as he tries to hold onto her hips. "The hill is a sacred site for those who came before us."

"Hallelujah to that," he concedes, right arm dropping to his side as he holds up the left to show her a drying stub. "And to your voodoo cure."

Chapter 8: Apple Butter

"Well Mr. Hanken," begins a reporter for the Bound Brook Chronicle in the shade of a turning sycamore at the edge of the Longwood spring, "how is the 1918 apple harvest?"

"You see me stirring this here kettle," grunts the crusty farmer thrusting a long-handled paddle dripping with russet goo into a dented copper pot, "you know it's a bumper year."

"Any new fruits for next year?" queries the young writer, using his pencil hand to slide wire-rimmed glasses back onto his nose.

"You'll have to ask the big boss," squints the old man, realizing his opportunity as he levers the paddle to scrape the bottom, "if you can catch him from behind the bumper of that new Nash while he's running between land sales."

September of 1918 hadn't been such a bumper month for the Kaiser. Forced back to the Hindenberg line in the mountains of eastern France by a series of allied attacks, the Boche were on the defensive for the first time in the war. With a poor harvest and rumors of a possible armistice, resistance to the war was growing in many German cities.

Meanwhile back in the states, increasing American casualties had accompanied what would become known as the Hundred Days Offensive that had driven Germany nearly back to its own borders. Opposition to Democratic President Woodrow Wilson's new policy of world engagement was growing among the electorate and their representatives. George LaFollette, a staunch Wilson ally and family friend, was facing stiff opposition for the New Jersey Senate seat from Republican Walter Edge. The wily ex-Virginian couldn't afford to break another cog in his financial wheel.

"Speaking of Mr. LaFollette," continues the intrepid reporter sensing a story, "do you agree with his support of increased engagement in the European theater?"

"The only theater I support," the orchardman laughs, leaning on the paddle handle to rest from stirring, "is me keeping these orchards and Henry keeping his hand."

"Sorry about your son, Mr. Hanken. How is his finger?"

"Better for a few days, now oozing again," offers the farmer, jamming the paddle back into the thickening apple butter. "Seems bad bones are turning up everywhere."

"May he get the care he needs. And the fruit trees? Any reason why you might not keep them?"

"Like I said," Henry's father smiles with another hard scrape of the kettle bottom, "ask the big boss where else you might find bad bones."

Chapter 9: Tropical Storm

"It's going to be a big one, Hank," exclaims his father as the wind picks up, whisking early October's browning leaves from the branches of the pear trees they're pruning. "See those big white birds?"

"Oh dad," Henry groans, dismissing the admonition even as he sees dark clouds gathering in the east, "it's black birds that bring trouble, remember?"

"Nothing superstitious about gulls coming up the Raritan when a storm's brewing in the bay," Henry's father patiently explains, laying down the ladder and gathering up his saws. "Let's pack it up and call it a day."

Mr. Hanken was right. A hurricane that devastated Bermuda a week before had deflected up the mid-Atlantic before tracking back toward the east coast. Although these tropical storms didn't receive official names from the U.S. Weather Bureau until 1953, people in central New Jersey knew that one would whip up the Raritan Bay every ten years or so. Henry had been a three-year-old and had no memory of the last one that had stripped the orchard on September 16, 1903, destroying the harvest and flooding downtown Bound Brook with torrential rains.

Since then the population of the heretofore sleepy village had more than doubled as bottomland and marshes were filled in by mostly Italian and Polish families with the ways and means to settle there. Their ways were work at the woolen mill and temporary housing at an Immigration House built by the LaFollettes. Their means was a new trolley line from New Brunswick to the Somerset County seat at Somerville. By 1918, nearly six thousand men, women, and children were packed into the square mile of tenable land, and nearly all of their houses were adjacent to one brook or another.

"Lord have mercy, what's that roaring sound?" Molly shouts over the howling wind early the next morning, leaning into Henry as they trudge down the trolley tracks toward the Talmadge Avenue bridge.

"It's just the Middlebrook running down the mountain," he soothes, switching sides to place his good hand around the shoulder of her long Macintosh, his worn wool aquascutum barely repelling the rain beating at their backs. "We'll make it to the point and back before it gets up to the bridge."

"Hurry!" she urges, shaking loose and running across the bridge while trying not to look at the muddy torrent. "We've got to get there before they're washed away."

"Holy Joe, it's about to overflow," he exclaims as they reach the Calco dye pool. "You go on, I'll shore it up."

She splashes down the path beside the rushing Raritan as he starts plopping mud onto the leaking dam, leaning over to rinse his hands in the cyan water after each scoop.

"That should do it," he smiles as the rain slows, hands on hips surveying the patched dam as Molly hurries back to join him. "Did you get my lucky things?"

"Dagonnit!" she curses, her normally ruddy complexion gone white. "The river's done washed away your cure."

Their trudge home is accompanied by a single *caw* repeated every half minute as a solitary big black bird glistening in the breakthrough rays of the eye of the storm flaps from sycamore to sycamore all the way back to Bound Brook.

Chapter 10: Lover's Leap

"He'll never let me marry you," Molly cries as she hitches her horse to the post in front of the Haelig quarry in the Chimney Rock gap.

"Never you mind, Miss Molly," Henry soothes, taking her right arm in his left hand and leading her up the path in the orange glow of an October evening. "The threat of those old bones scuttling the Evergreens development ought to go a long way toward saving the orchard and settling your parents minds."

"They're from the old South," she groans, grabbing his hand in hers and pulling him up the rocky trail through the red and yellow leaves of the oak and poplar forest covering the south slope of First Watchung. "You just couldn't wed below station."

"We'll see about that," he laughs as they emerge from the woods to an expansive view of the Raritan Valley and he pulls himself up to the jutting rock. "Notice anything different about my arms?"

"Hank, hold on tight," she screams, a shiver running through her as she scrambles after him and straddles the basalt outcropping. "The librarian said this is where Winona and her lover leapt to their deaths."

The Lenape tale of a chief's daughter falling in love with a Dutch miner had moved west to the Delaware Water Gap along with her people when they were displaced by the settlement of New Holland. The beautiful and spurned Winona had leapt to her death, soon to be followed by the older Netherlander who had reconsidered too late. The oldest versions of this seventeenth century legend are instead placed at the Chimney Rock above the Middlebrook.

Meanwhile, across the ocean and the centuries, the allied armies had broken through the Hindenburg Line at the second battle of Cambrai. The end of the Great War was in sight, though it would take another month of British and U.S. ground forces rooting out entrenched German troops to finish it. The largest number of American casualties for the entire war occurred in this one last push.

"Look at me!" Henry commands, holding Molly's arms around the rock, his arresting chestnut eyes catching her blue-turned-violet ones in the setting sun. "Tell your dad the Calco dye pool cured my stump infection."

"You can hold me without pain!" she marvels, breaking into a wide smile for the first time that day even as she's shaken by a trembling ache all over her body. "How will that change his mind?"

"He'll see dollars when he hears a daily soaking in dye for a week cured a rotten finger better than the doctor's bandages, Frenchie's prunella, mom's cider vinegar, or your old nanny's voodoo."

Chapter 11: Wheatland

Eh-ehm coughs Mr. LaFollette from the stone porch to get the attention of everyone gathered in the slanting November sun on the front lawn of the historic family manor in Clarke County, Virginia. "Finally - the south and the north come together in love."

"I have the distinct honor," he continues with a nod to the Hankens as the laughter dies back, "to welcome the son of our beloved orchardist and his ale-making wife into our esteemed family."

This rather humble toast from the heir to an antebellum fortune was the result of his recent loss in the New Jersey senate race to Republican Walter Edge, a blow that helped to flip both chambers away from President Woodrow Wilson's policy of world engagement. Meanwhile, back in the old country, the allied October offensive had forced a German retreat culminating in a ceasefire to the bloody conflict and general armistice on November 11. Despite Wilson's pleas to the contrary, the U.S. would fail to sign the subsequent treaty of Versailles or to participate in the newly formed League of Nations, helping to set the stage for a German resurgence and the second world war.

This return to populism was a reaction in part to a devastating flu epidemic that year. Nearly 700,000 Americans had died from respiratory failure before it was through, including the LaFollette's elderly African American nanny. Molly had barely survived her grippe and her grief on a liquid diet of cider and a daily dose of apple cider vinegar.

"I'm not m-much of a t-talker," Henry stutters, reaching down with his left hand to pull Molly up onto a round stone dais, the former auction block for the Preston family business.

"F-first I just want to," he proceeds, pausing while pulling off his herringbone scally, "to remember my f-friend Donato Biondi. Tom set me on this path, and then he died chasing the Krauts out of F-France."

"I want to thank Mr. LaFollette," he forges on, glancing down at Molly and warming up to his spellbound audience, "for the manager job at Calco. We make the best dyes from oil, and our chemists are also brewing fertilizers and medicines."

"Finally," he concludes with a wink toward his willful 17-year-old bride while holding up his left hand with a gold band on the stump of a ring finger, "I'd like to dedicate this new life to Mrs. Mary Preston Kern Thweatt LaFollette Hanken. That's a m-mouthful, she's a handful, and I'm thankful."