

THE LAST NAIL

Once upon a time, in the far reaches of the Wild West, there was a lovely little town called Status Quo. Nestled in a sunny valley surrounded by high rolling hills, it was an idyllic place in which to live – or at least that is what the locals believed. The truth is, however, that the hills tended to restrict any refreshing breezes, making for a rather stifling and dusty environment. Most of the folks also found the climb out of the valley too difficult and tiring, so they preferred to stay at home and let others visit them. Still, the inhabitants of Status Quo were convinced that their town was the envy of neighbouring communities. Now on almost any given day the valley was peaceful and quiet and comfortably settled in its routine. But not today! At the moment there was a great ripple of excitement and quite a buzz of conversation because of the very startling news that had just reached the community: Change was coming to Status Quo!

“It’s true I tell yuh! I see’d him myself!” said Mr. Rumors. “Headin’ right this way! He oughta’ be here any time now!”

“Sure, sure,” responded Mr. Skeptic. “We’ve heard your stories before. Last time you told us he was coming it turned out to be one of the Superficial brothers on the way to Whitewash.”

The crowd that had gathered outside the general store laughed heartily at the memory of that false alarm.

“Well laugh if yuh want, but he ain’t goin’ to miss us this time! I heerd he was aimin’ to visit every single town in these parts, an’ today’s our day!”

“Then I say he’s up to no good!” squawked Mr. Suspensions. “He’s got something up his sleeve, and that’s for sure!”

“Look!” someone in the crowd gasped. “There he is now!”

Sure enough, riding slowly through the tall grass that crowned a wind-swept hill was the striking figure of Change. Instantly the emotion-charged group began scurrying and bustling around, trying to find the best vantage point from which to view this unusual visitor.

“Oh Marshall,” pleaded one Insecurity, “please don’t let him into the town. You know how I am with strangers. They unsettle me so, and this man positively frightens me!”

“Now there’s no need to be fearful, Miss Insecurity,” drawled Marshall Controlling. “If he intends to abide by our rules and regulations, well then this here Change is welcome. But if he don’t...” The Marshall’s eyes narrowed and he spat by way of conclusion.

As Change eventually rode into town he generated quite a range of reaction. Some of the folks seemed very eager to welcome him, while others were just as eager to see him ride right back out. But the majority of Status Quo weren’t exactly sure what to make of him. His youthful appearance was unique, though it did resemble that of others who had passed through on their travels. However, in his bearing he had such a quiet confidence and

determination of purpose, even to the point of seeming a little aggressive, that people couldn't decide if his intentions were really for good or evil. Yet, through all these cross-winds of reaction, Change rode calmly on in the direction of the hotel.

Now Novelty was a terrible flirt. She was constantly taking up with every stranger who came through Status Quo, though never with any serious intent. When she saw where Change was headed, she wasted no time in making her way down the boardwalk toward the hotel. As it happened, at that very moment, Predictable was looking out the window of her general store and spotted Novelty hurrying by. She rolled her eyes knowingly.

"What did I tell you, Ma?" she said with a frown. "Didn't I tell you she'd be after him? That girl oughta' be ashamed of herself!"

"Now, now, dear," soothed Familiar, as she gazed out the window from her rocker. "Don't get yourself in a fret. We're all aware of what Novelty is like to do. But at least she's a part of us. Not like this Change fellow. What the wind blows in, the wind blows out is what I always say."

"Now **there's** a truth spoken!" affirmed Predictable. "And good riddance too! Why who knows what a drifter like Change is apt to do?"

"Grandma," asked Tranquility, who had been curled up in her grandmother's lap, "is Change a bad man?"

Familiar looked down at the contented child and lovingly stroked her golden hair. "Well darling," she mused, "I couldn't really say he's a bad man, just yet. It's only that..." she paused for a moment to clarify her thoughts "...it's only that we're not so sure he's a good man. And that's what has folks so bothered."

Suddenly the twins Boredom and Contempt burst through the door of the general store. These also were the children of Predictable. The twins were guffawing and hooting and almost dancing with glee.

"Oh, Ma!" roared Boredom, as tears of laughter streamed down his face. "Ma, you should've been there! It's the best thing I've seen in years!"

Contempt snorted his agreement. "Yeah, and it serves him right! I can't stand him anyway!"

Predictable gave a fierce frown as she faced the boys, hands squarely on her hips. "Come on now; out with it! You two boys been makin' trouble again?"

"No, no, Ma," replied Boredom, wiping his eyes. "Not this time. It was farmer Mackintosh."

"Well what about him?" demanded Predictable. "We all know that he..."

"Oh, Ma," interrupted Boredom, trying hard to contain his laughter, "Ma, just listen to this! Now here's old farmer Mack a-trottin' into Status like he always does... you know, half asleep and all droopy with his load of apples rockin' behind him..."

Contempt cut in with a sneer. "Yeah, that old Mack hasn't woke up in the last twenty years!"

"Anyway," continued Boredom, "he's a-comin' down the East-quarter line and cuts hard onto Main Street when he runs smack-dab into Mr. Change!"

"Oh, my!" gasped Predictable, her eyes wide with astonishment. "I hope nobody was hurt."

"Hurt?!" Boredom exploded in another cackling fit of hilarity. "No, no, Ma, no one was hurt. But old Mack there, now he jumps up like a scared rabbit and jerks the reins so hard he spooks his horse. Then she swerves off to the side, but the wheels are stuck!" Here he roared again, bringing another flood of tears. "Ma, the wheels are stuck so deep in the ruts that the rear axle breaks! So - smack! - down goes the back end, the horse takes off like a shot down the Main with apples a-flyin' left and right, and old Mack is just a-hangin' on for dear life!" He whacked his knee and doubled over in laughter.

Contempt looked at Predictable with a smug, satisfied smile. "Yesiree, Ma, old Mack got what was a-comin' to him. And I hope Mr. Change wakes up a few more folks around here too! Come on, Boredom, let's go get us a' apple!"

With that the two of them went hooting and snorting back out into the street.

"Well I never!" responded Predictable, as peace descended once again on her store.

Tranquility had remained in her grandmother's lap while the boys were telling their tale. Now she looked up with concern at Familiar. "Grandma," she said, "I like farmer Mackintosh. I think Mr. Change must be a bad man."

By this time, Novelty had made her way down to the hotel. However, she found herself unable to engage Change in conversation because of the large crowd that had gathered. Mayor Domineering was one of the first to greet Change, with the usual hearty welcome and an "all the best" in his future travels. Marshall Controlling was there also, making his presence known and ensuring that the newcomer was aware of some of the long-standing and inviolable rules of the community. Then too, it wasn't long before a none too happy farmer Mackintosh appeared. Unfortunately, he was made none the happier when he could elicit only a cordial apology from Change, instead of the penitential plea which he seemed to feel the situation demanded. With backward glances and many a "we'll see", the red-faced farmer grudgingly departed to attend to his broken wagon.

Finally the crowd thinned out enough such that Novelty was able to make herself known. She fluttered her eye lashes and giggled and flattered, but Change was not at all taken in by her shallow charm. He chose instead to share with her some of his convictions about what the region needed and the benefits that would follow from his proposals. When Novelty realized that he was not the fun-loving and carefree character she had pictured, she wanted nothing more to do with him and quickly retreated from the scene. So, though it took some

little time, eventually Change managed to stable his horse, register at the hotel and get settled for the night.

Now initially it appeared that the town was going to be able to carry on quite nicely with Change in its midst. People were friendly and welcoming, and tried to help him adjust to the new community. But by the end of the week it became apparent that Status Quo and Change could never co-exist. For one thing, Change dressed differently, and always seemed to be out of place, creating a visual distraction which amused some and irritated others. Then too he spoke differently from the folks in Status. His strong accent made him difficult to understand at times, and people became tired of asking him to repeat himself. But by far the most unsettling practice of Change was his habit of asking questions, especially the question "Why?" He seemed to be constantly inquiring into reasons and results and relevance. This was very upsetting to some folks because they found that they didn't have any convincing answers. Others discovered that the directives of the founding fathers suddenly seemed dated or inadequate in the presence of Change. This, however, only served to ignite their sense of loyalty to the gloriously great heritage of Status Quo. Well now, as you can see, it wasn't long before tensions were building and accusations flying and something needed to be done in a desperate hurry in order to preserve the town's dignity. As a result, Mayor Domineering announced that the next evening a town hall meeting would be held to decide the future of Change.

On the afternoon of that fateful assembly, an earnest discussion was in progress at the mansion of Mayor Domineering.

"...and I say we lynch him!"

Rolling his eyes, the Mayor exhaled loudly in exasperation. "Now Marshall, that'll be enough of that kind of talk! We don't need to lynch him. We just need to get rid of him!"

"You're absolutely right, dear," agreed his sensible wife Prominent. "Why if he's allowed to stay goodness knows what will become of our town."

A wizened councilor Ego looked with wide-eyed concern through his over-sized spectacles. "Well I don't know about this town," he responded, his rusty voice quavering with anxiety, "but I know what will happen to us! We'll all be turfed out! That's right, every last one of us! Come the next election, if Change has his way, we'll all be turfed out!"

Beginning to feel light-headed, Prominent sank back into her chair. "Oh dear, oh my," she murmured. "What would we do? Where would we go?"

As the group silently pondered these questions, Mr. Stickler rose to his feet and began to pace with slow and deliberate steps around the room. Hands clasped behind his back, he cleared his throat and addressed the gathering.

"Friends, we need to rise above such petty and selfish considerations. What we are facing today is a battle for the very survival of Status Quo itself. Our founding fathers

established this town upon good, solid, sensible principles. As a result, we have prospered and flourished, enjoying a tranquility seldom found in other communities. If we allow Change to disrupt the established order of our town and alter our cherished practices, the end will be only chaos and catastrophe. I, for one, am not prepared to give an inch of ground to Mr. Change. But I intend to see, as one duty bound to uphold our illustrious legacy, that every article of our constitution, every regulation of the law, every tradition that guides our great community remains fixed as in stone!”

“And that goes for me too!” shouted Marshall Controlling, leaping to his feet. He drew his revolver and shook it menacingly above his head. “Why if that Change fellow steps one inch out of line, I’ll... I’ll...” He narrowed his eyes and looked for an appropriate place to spit in the Mayor’s parlor. Seeing none he felt obliged to finish his tirade. “I’ll run him out of town so fast it’ll... it’ll make your head spin!”

Then, as an added flourish, he twirled his revolver a few times and jammed it back into its holster. Unfortunately, at that moment his finger slipped and the gun discharged, sending a bullet flying into the floor only inches from the foot of Mayor Domineering. It took several minutes before order could be restored from the ensuing pandemonium, but eventually the group was again seated in relative safety, though keeping a wary eye on the Marshall. After further discussion, it was concluded that Mr. Stickler should lead the way at the town hall meeting, and that the others would support his position as necessary.

When the appointed hour arrived, the hall was packed floor to ceiling with people and emotion. Some were strongly in favour of Change, while others, of course, were dead set against him. But most of the inhabitants of Status Quo really didn’t know what to think of him. For, while he tended to make folks uncomfortable in one way or another, there was also something refreshing about him. In fact, many people found that for the first time in their lives, their minds had been opened to consider new possibilities for the community. The assembly was duly called to order with the explanation that, at its conclusion, a vote would be taken to determine if Change should be allowed to remain in Status Quo.

One of the first on his feet was farmer Mackintosh. His tone of voice complementing his beet-red face, the good farmer went on at great length about the inexcusable indignity his business, his reputation and even his family name had been made to suffer at the hands of the notorious Mr. Change. It took some time, but finally he was persuaded to resume his seat and the meeting was allowed to continue. As the evening wore on, a variety of different opinions were expressed. A well-respected Miss Thoughtful presented her reflections on the situation, concluding that some of what Mr. Change had been suggesting was certainly valid, and cautioning the people not to be too hasty in reacting to his ideas. This gave Miss Sheeplly the courage to stammer out her tentative approval of his position as well. However, a withering

glare from the Mayor's wife sent her scrambling for cover behind what she "really" meant to say. To the surprise of many, Contempt and Boredom also spoke positively in favour of Change.

Recognizing that public opinion was beginning to swing in the wrong direction, Mayor Domineering motioned for Mr. Stickler to take the floor. As he had done that afternoon, Mr. Stickler paced the platform with emotion-laden appeals for loyalty to the resplendent heritage of the past. His oration produced a tremendous flood of deep feeling, which quickly swept the majority to his side. Then, when Mr. Traditions arose to speak, it appeared that the fate of Change was settled. Mr. Traditions was a venerable old gentleman, whose wisdom and sound judgment were recognized by all. Here was one who would stand immovable against the wiles of Change.

"My dear friends and fellow citizens," he began in his usual warm and weighty manner, "this evening we truly are being asked to consider the survival of Status Quo. We have been given a rich legacy, and it is my conviction that in order to ensure a prosperous future we must apply the wisdom of our fathers."

The crowd nodded and murmured its assent.

"Now if I were to take a trip over to our neighbours at Pine Hill, I could travel on foot or in the saddle or by wagon. But I would simply be wasting my time if I didn't know why I was going there. It seems to me we can debate all night about **how** things are going to be done here in Status Quo, but if we don't know **why** we're doing them we might just as well ask a fox to guard the chickens! Friends, our town fathers knew where they were going and why, and they chose the best means of their day to get there. But many of us have forgotten the destination, and most of us can't remember the reason for going there! Instead we're all running up and down the road making the ruts deeper and deeper. Now I believe that Mr. Change here is exactly what we've needed to make us rethink what we're about. I'm all for loyalty, friends, but we can still be loyal to the ideals, convictions and goals of our forefathers without having to ride in their wagon!"

As Mr. Traditions finished speaking, a great silence of thought descended on the meeting. Unfortunately this did not include the Mayor who sat glass-eyed in shock, stunned by this apparent betrayal. For most people, however, the clouds of confusion had finally blown away and they began to realize how serious the situation really was. If a vote had been taken at that moment of clarity, Change would have easily won a majority. But before a motion could be made, one of the Traditionalist brothers was on his feet, arguing with salesman-like proficiency.

"Friends, I agree wholeheartedly with what has just been said, yessir I do. Couldn't have said it better myself," he twanged. "Only trouble is there warn't enough said! Why our forefathers not only did the right thing, they did it the right way!"

As he warmed to his speech, Traditionalist began gesturing pointedly.

“Now if they’d tried to get to the wrong town in the wrong wagon, where’d we be today? Any fool can see they must’ve had the right wagon, else we wouldn’t be here! And I, for one, plan to stay in their wagon so that I get to the right town the right way! You get my meanin’? Now as for this Change fellow, if he wants to ride along with us, I say he’s welcome. But I ain’t about to give him the reins! And if he don’t like our company he can hop down and travel however suits him best!”

This line of thinking was immediately followed-up by Mr. Skeptic who snorted out his doubts that Change would be able to drive even if he had the reins. Then Mr. Suspicious voiced the insinuation that this mysterious stranger must surely have some secret, dark motive for wanting everyone to get out of the wagon. Well by the time Insecurity told of her fears and Predictable spoke of her vexations, the whole gathering was thrown back into a fog of confusion. At this critical juncture Marshall Controlling moved that the meeting conclude, and a vote was speedily taken. Soon a smug and sorrowful Mayor Domineering appeared, announcing, with regret, that unfortunately Change would have to leave Status Quo, and expressing his sincere desire that in the future, as the young man matured in his outlook, there would be a welcomed happy reunion.

For some reason, at this very moment, it began to dawn on the crowd that Change had not said a single word through the entire meeting. As a matter of fact he had sat quite calmly and unperturbed while the storm of controversy raged around him. Now, as he arose to leave, it was hesitatingly suggested that perhaps he would like to address the good citizens of Status Quo. There was a strange grief in his eyes and a sadness in his voice that reached out and subdued the assembly.

“Friends, I like your little town here very much; I really do. And I can assure you that I only ever had your best interests at heart. The fact of the matter is that I was sent here by the Governor of Society himself, to explore some of the outlying localities of this region. Unbeknownst to you, there is a great new wave of settlers headed in this direction who are looking for a place to call home. The suggestions I have proposed to you are the Governor’s own. In rejecting them, you have closed the doors of this community to the benefits of new life. Now you may yet have another opportunity to respond, but I will definitely assure you of this: if you persist in your determination to perpetuate the past, the very future you desire will elude you.”

With grief still written on his face, Change quietly left the hall.

The next day broke fair and blue, with even a faint stir of a breeze. As Change secured his saddle bags, old Mr. Traditions came by to wish him well.

“I want you to know that I’ll be leaving soon too,” he confided.

“Oh?” responded Change, though not with surprise.

“Yes, I believe I’ve done all that I can for this town. I’m hoping that maybe my experience will be of benefit to another group of folks somewhere down the road.

“My friend,” said Change with heartfelt earnestness, “why don’t you come with me? My work in this region is almost completed now and I would welcome a companion of your years and wisdom. Then, when the Governor selects a location for the new settlers, we could move there and both help to build up the community. Won’t you come with me? I know that our thinking has much in common, but I need the balance your experience would provide.”

After further discussion it was agreed that the two of them would set out together. And so, when all the necessary arrangements had been made, the travelling companions rode their horses out of town, climbed the high rolling hills and left the valley far behind. Now it also happened that Mr. Traditions was not the only citizen to leave the town. Before long Miss Thoughtful departed, followed by both Boredom and Contempt, and a number of others. But when the exodus ended and the dust from the last stagecoach finally settled, Status Quo returned to its quiet, comfortable routine and was never heard from again. However, Change and his friend Mr. Traditions were eventually appointed to a long and useful service in the town of Vision, where, in fact, Mr. Change became the Mayor and Mr. Traditions his trusted advisor.