

Now Is the Time for All Good Men...

A Story of Gus Elker's Political Revenge

By August W. Derleth

My Great-Uncle Joe Stoll used to say that Gus Elker was a little touched in the head, but after the last election he came to hesitate about speaking that way of his crony and neighbor, he would put up a fat hand, push back his hat, and say, "Well, now, I be dog if I didn' used t' think Gus was just a ornery damn' fool, but I ain't straight yet on what happened t' Web Hunter last election. . . ."

The trouble about Web Hunter started in July, at a district school meeting to which I went with my great-uncle, though there had been some trouble between Gus Elker and Web Hunter for years. I was sitting next to my great-uncle in the small, old-fashioned country schoolhouse waiting for the meeting to begin. My great-uncle's neighbors were all there, almost all the farmers in the district around Grell's mill were there, but Gus Elker had not yet come. My great-uncle was talking casually with Ed Burke, whose land on the east made a triangle of good proportions with Gus Elker's on the northwest and my great-uncle's on the southwest, when Gus came in.

Gus stood for a moment on the threshold, a strange figure. He was wearing a straw hat pushed far back on his head, baggy overalls rolled above

his ankles, and a blue shirt open at the neck. His usually lugubrious face was irate, and the odd yellowish moustache that curved around the corners of his mouth was more straggly than ever. He soon saw my great-uncle and came over, hailing Ed Burke casually as Ed turned away.

"You comin' t' school meetin'!" said my great-uncle jokingly. "I like t' die, I didn' know you paid taxes."

Gus was in no mood for joking. "Say, Joe," he said, "you remember that ol' buzzard who had that wooded piece, that northeast twenty off me 'bout five years back? Moved t' Spring Green right after, with me holdin' the bag, no rent, no nothing."

"Oh, Web Hunter, you mean," said my great-uncle after an interval of thought. "Sure I remember him. You ain't aimin' t' tell me he paid you?"

"Ain't had no pay from him, nor aim t' have, I reckon. But, look here what he sent me, the skunk. He's aimin' t' run for representative t' the assembly in Madison."

He pulled a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket and gave it to my great-uncle, who spread it out and peered at it. It was a circular of a fairly common type, the kind headed by a large black line of print reading, "Now is the time

for all good men to come to the aid of the party." It solicited the help of the reader, and was doubtless one of thousands sent out through the mails. This one had a pencilled line at the bottom reading, "Hello, Gus. Don't forget to vote—if you know how. Web."

My great-uncle made a funny noise in his throat that sounded like a strangled laugh. "Nothin' t' this," he said presently. "Had one myself this mornin' mail."

"Hoh! nothin' to it, hey? If I know how t' vote! I say that Web Hunter's a-goin' too far, that's what I say." He snatched the circular from my great-uncle and stuffed it back into the pocket he had taken it from.

My great-uncle smiled, pulled a straw from his jacket and stuck it between his teeth. "Ain't nothin' you c'n do about it," he said. "Ain't no use t' get het up like that, either. Maybe Web Hunter ain't the right kind a man t' represent us in Madison, but you and I ain't a-goin' t' change that any. What ticket's he runnin' on?"

"Republican," said Gus, scornfully.

"Well, with the Democrats and the Progressives lined up against each other, I reckon he's got a good chance a winnin' out," said my great-uncle judiciously.

Gus Elker sat down and pulled his straw hat off his head, transferring it to one knee. "I can't figger out how any man in his right mind 'd vote for that skunk," he said, faintly indignant at the thought.

"Ain't ever'body knows 's much 's you, Gus," said my great-uncle.

Gus grunted eloquently, my great-uncle's satire having gone completely over his head. Great-uncle sighed.

The school meeting was presently called to a semblance of order and, after a while, business of an indefinite nature was concluded despite a constant talking among the farmers, and the meeting was adjourned. Throughout the short meeting, Gus Elker sat brooding darkly to himself, his chin cupped in his hand, his eyes fixed doggedly on the floor, with no attention for the proceedings.

"Hoh!" snorted my great-uncle, turning to him after adjournment, "don't go t' sleep, Gus. Ain't still thinkin' about Web Hunter, are you?"

"I'm thinkin'," said Gus.

"Likely the first time such a thing happened t' you," said my great-uncle, rising. "If you're on your way home, come along. If you aim t' set there thinkin' about Web Hunter, you set. I got work t' do."

Gus grinned half-heartedly. "Ain't no time I ever seen you not takin' first chance t' get outa work, you old pot-belly," he said.

He rose and came with us. My great-uncle and Gus stood for a while outside the building talking crops, weather and government with other farmers from the vicinity, but in a little while they were ready to leave for home. We had come in a hay-rack, though the distance from my great-uncle's home to the schoolhouse was easily walkable. Gus had walked.

"Ride along," said my great-uncle. "You ain't fit company for man nor beast if you're a-thinkin'. I know, but I guess 'twon't do me much harm. Come on."

Gus swung himself up and stood beside my great-uncle, who whipped up the horses and started us on our way. Gus Elker's sandy moustache blew outward in the wind, and, when he took his straw hat off, the straggly hair on his head fluffed up. The wind got into his overalls and billowed them out so that for the first time it was apparent

how large they were; Gus Elker is a fairly small man, about five feet two, and my great-uncle is a tall, fat man, but the overalls Gus had on would have been large for my great-uncle. There was silence between the two men for a considerable distance, until finally my great-uncle spoke.

"I tell you what, Gus," he shouted into the wind, "you oughta support Web Hunter if you feel that way. Bes' thing in the world t' do t' get over it."

Gus looked at him curiously, smiled feebly, and cocked his head to one side while he stroked his ineffectual chin. "You know, Joe," he said presently, "that's the first time I ever heard you say anythin' worth listenin' to. I reckon that's jest what I'll do. I guess I'll get me one a those cards they send out where it says when and where the man's gonna speak. And I'll listen t' Web talk hisself out."

My great-uncle looked at him with amused tolerance, but said nothing, thinking this not worthy of a reply, and after a while began to hum in an off-key.

On Gus Elker's face grew an ever-widening grin.

When we swung into my great-uncle's farmyard, Gus clapped him on the back, and jumped from the hay-rack, saying, "By God, I don't even know whether taxes is any higher or not, but I don't care. That give me a idea, Joe, I be dog if it didn'."

"What idea?" asked my great-uncle mildly surprised, he having already forgotten.

"What you said about supportin' Web," replied Gus. "That's jest what I'm aimin' t' do. And somebody's gonna like it."

He scuttled across the barnyard, scattering a group of dust-bathing chickens with loud cries of terror in all directions, and bringing my Great-Aunt Lou to the door of the kitchen, drying her thin hands on an apron and eyeing us over the spectacles slid down her nose. My great-uncle looked after Gus in astonishment and mumbled, "That damn' fool!"

"Oh, it's you," said my great-aunt. "Don't go a-scarin' my chickens. How was the meetin'? Are taxes any higher?"

"Ain't no change," replied my great-uncle.

She looked past us then to where Gus Elker was just disappearing over the ridge toward Stone's Pocket. "What's eatin' off him?" she asked. "Ain't never seen him move so fast before."

"He's got ideas," said my great-uncle, laughing.

"Hoh!" snorted my great-aunt, turning to go back into the house. "All I hope 's you didn't put 'em there, Joe Stoll! I remember the last time you two had ideas."

II

By evening my great-uncle had forgotten all about Web Hunter's affront to Gus Elker, and on the next day, my grandfather Grendon drove out to take me back with him to Sac Prairie. It was late August before anybody remembered Gus Elker's determination to support Web Hunter. On the twenty-seventh, the Sunday school held its annual picnic, and my great-uncle and -aunt came in from the farm for it. They tied up at our place, since the park where the picnic was in progress was just a block away.

In those days a picnic was a social event of the first magnitude, embracing through the devious channels of churchly connections not only the village but the entire countryside and all the neighboring churches, of no matter what denomination. It could safely be estimated that a Sunday school picnic would draw over two thousand people. My mother and grandmother and I went with the Stolls into the park. Almost the first person we met was Gus Elker in a sober black suit so unlike him that Great-Uncle Joe actually failed at first to recognize him.

"My soul and body!" exclaimed my great-aunt, clutching my great-uncle's arm, "if there ain't Gus Elker dressed up fit t' kill!"

My great-uncle, taking him in, said incredulously, "Gut mus' be sick. Ain't never seen him dressed up before. Ain't never knew he had a good piece a clothes."

Gus Elker saw us and came shambling over.

"Hello, all," he said, grinning self-consciously.

My great-uncle grunted and said, "You been to a funeral, Gus? Whose clothes you wearin'?"

"Hoh! my own, you damn' fool! Whose else? I bought 'em up in Baraboo a while back."

"You don't look comfortable," observed my great-aunt thoughtfully.

"Oh, ma'am, I'm damn' uncomfortable. This here collar's a-pressin' into my neck 's if it was aimin' t' choke me any minute, and them pants feel 's if they was aimin' t' split up and down and sideways, and this coat's so hot I like t' die if I ain't lost five pounds off me by sundown."

"Seems you could have got along without the vest," said my grandmother.

"Goes with the coat and pants," said Gus. "Ain't likely I'll be wearin' this combination again soon."

"You ain't gone churchy, have you, Gus?" asked my great-uncle anxiously.

"Hoh! me, no. Ain't you heard? Where you livin', anyway—in the back woods?" He grinned, spat, awkwardly on account of his collar, and explained. "I been sittin' on the platform waitin' t' support Web Hunter."

"Go on," said my great-uncle scornfully. "This ain't a time for bedtime stories."

"Sure," insisted Gus. "I like t' die if I ain't been sittin' with him. But this here's the firs' good-sized crowd we been up against. Up t' now it's been jest a coupla hunderd here and there, but there's over a thousan' here today. I guess I'm gonna get me my chance t' do some real supportin' today. If it turns out the way I aim it t' turn out, you'll be missin' somethin' you oughtn't to if you don't hear me."

"You gonna speak?" asked my great-uncle incredulously.

"You bet I'm gonna talk," said Gus.

"Hoh! I be dog if this ain't gonna be funny," said my great-uncle, guffawing at the thought.

"It sure is," said Gus, joining in the laughter.

My great-aunt looked at him from the corners of her eyes, her lips pursed in disapproval, and said aside, "Acts like he been drinkin'. Tain't likely Gus got into town without makin' a saloon or two."

"Web's gonna talk in 'bout half an hour," said Gus. "I better be headin' for that platform."

He left us then, and my great-aunt followed him a moment with her eyes before turning to my great-uncle.

"He ain't supportin' Web Hunter?" she demanded.

"Sure looks that way," said my great-uncle. "I can't figger it out a-tall."

My great-aunt looked at him shrewdly. "Sure you ain't had something t' do with this, Joe Stoll?"

"I? No, sure not," said my great-uncle, and then abruptly he remembered. "Why, I be dog if I didn' sorta say somethin' about it, jist in fun, and that damn' fool up and took it serious."

My great-aunt nodded. "I thought so. Tain't likely Gus Elker got such 'n idea by himself."

My great-uncle began to look rather ill at ease, but mother saved him from what might have been his wife's anger by suggesting that we venture on into the park and look for some of our neighbors and friends. I sidled away to find my friends and make the rounds of the refreshment stands until the playing of the band announced the time of Web Hunter's political speech. Then I found my way back to my great-uncle's side. He had been joined by my grandfather Adams, and the two of them were looking above the crowd toward the platform.

Sure enough, on the platform sat Gus Elker, together with one of the local bankers, two other village politicians, and Web Hunter, a fat, lard-faced man with a brushlike moustache and an affected grin of confidence. The candidate was dressed with a certain amount of elegance, and had done his best to conceal the bald spot on his head. He sat in the center of the platform, one leg carelessly across the other, looking out upon the crowd with an air of what he doubtless imagined to be comradeship but which was astonishingly arrogant. Gus sat demurely next to him. Behind the platform, in the circular bandstand, the band played "The Stars and Stripes Forever," and when it had finished, the local banker, a hook-nosed individual with beady eyes and a come-on grin, got up and spoke briefly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "voters of this county, you all know me. I am proud and happy to tell you that we are going to hear today from one who has been raised among you, one who, I trust, will represent us in Madison after the next election. But it is not my honor to introduce Web Hunter. That honor goes to one among you who will have a special appeal for those of

you who come from farming centers—and I see a lot of you here—I refer, ladies and gentlemen, to Gus Elker."

He stepped aside and clapped, and the audience clapped, whistled and cheered. The band blared briefly, and Gus Elker got up and came to the front of the platform.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Gus, "you all know me, Gus Elker. I'm standin' up here today—and I ain't used t' it, and I don't like it, but I know my duty—t' tell you t' vote for Web Hunter come next election. You all don't know how it hurts me t' tell you t' do that, but I ain't got much choice."

Beside me, my great-uncle stirred abruptly, and my grandfather Adams looked quizzically at Gus. On the platform, the smile on Web Hunter's fat face wavered uncertainly and began to fade.

"You see, my friends, I myself aim t' vote the Progressive ticket come election, but I ain't never had much sense anyhow. But I got a good reason for wantin' you t' vote for Web Hunter here. He's gonna get a good salary over there in Madison if you folks let him have it. And a coupla years ago Web here rented a piece a land from me he ain't ne' paid for, and now he wants t' pay for it. You all know how that fat skunk run out on his debts, and now I'm askin' you, if you c'n stand his smell, t' elect him t' the Assembly, so he c'n pay his debts 'stead a runnin' around here like a turkey cock."

That was as far as Gus got. By that time the crowd was wild with laughter, and several of Gus Elker's neighbors were calling out to remind Web of old debts, and one of them, calling, "What about them hogs you bought from me and never paid for?" was unquestionably my great-aunt's voice. The local banker had risen and had come forward to stop Gus, and the two politicians were goggling at each other not knowing what to do. Web Hunter had gone a brick red with embarrassment and fury, and suddenly launched himself forward, cursing loudly, to kick Gus off the platform. But Gus jumped before Web Hunter's foot met his posterior, with the result that the candidate went ignobly down, completing havoc. The crowd roared laughter throughout the park, and when at last Web Hunter made an attempt to speak, he was hoot-

ed from the platform by the few people who remained to see what he might have to say.

Gus turned up presently at my grandfather Adams's house looking none the worse for his burrowing escape through the crowd around the platform. "I come inta town with Web Hunter," he said, "but I reckon I better go home with you, Joe."

"You're welcome," said my great-aunt with relish. "That was a mighty fine speech you made. I don't guess but what Web Hunter might be out our way a-lookin' t' put some lead in you."

Gus laughed feebly, his one essay now over. "I reckon I clipped that bandy rooster's wings some," he said. "I guess it was worth wearin' clothes like these."

He reached up and tore open his collar. "My, that sure feels good," he said.

III

My grandfather Adams followed Web Hunter's disastrous progress in the newspapers with much interest after that, and often read aloud to us at table. Gus Elker had not only clipped the candidate's wings, but he had some-

how imparted his idea to voters throughout the county. Wherever Web Hunter went, hecklers were on hand to ask him about his debts. In his concluding and climaxing Baraboo speech, Web Hunter found himself confronted by half a dozen farmers from near Sac Prairie who called out various items he owed from time to time throughout his speech. His defeat at the polls was a foregone conclusion.

Two days after election I went out to my great-uncle's farm with him to spend the night. We drove into the farmyard just as Gus Elker came over the ridge.

"Hello, Joe," called Gus, waving carelessly.

"'Lo Gus," replied my great-uncle. "Where you been these last three days? Ain't seen you since before election."

Gus came up, grinning. "That was some election. What I tell you? Web Hunter got beat five t' one."

"No surprise t' me," said my great-uncle urbanely.

My great-aunt appeared in the doorway of the kitchen and called, "Hello, all. How's Web Hunter a-comin'?"

"He ain't comin', ma'am," said Gus Elker. "He's been and gone."

My great-aunt laughed.

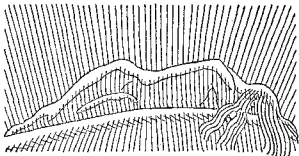
"And the bes' part of it ain't Web Hunter's gettin' beat," said Gus. "No, sir. I got a letter week ago from the Republican Committee up 'n Baraboo with a check for that back rent in it. And they had the guts t' ask me t' make a public speech sayin' it'd been paid. I figgered up whether they had time t' get that check and make a picture of it with my John Henry on it, and I figger they didn't; so I kep' mum."

"Wish he'd paid me for my hogs," said my great-aunt speculatively. "Don't reckon he ever will now."

"Well, it ain't quite the same thing, ma'am," said Gus. "It ain't as if he sent you such a letter. 'Don't forget t' vote—if you know how.' Ain't enough he cheated me outa that rent, but he's gotta get smart besides." Gus shook his head in vigorous disapproval.

My great-uncle looked at him with sudden interest. "Say, come t' think of it, Gus," he said, "I didn't see you at the polls las' Tuesday."

Gus looked at him sadly, his watery eyes expressing mild astonishment. "Me, vote?" he said incredulously. "Why, Joe, I ain't never voted in my life!"



SCATTER IN DEATH

By Lenore G. Marshall

WHEN I had died I was a waterfall
Flying my flag over the jagged wall,
Unfurled I ran to meet
The precipice
With spangled waters
Silvering the abyss,
Across my plumage
Colored sunlight blew
And burred mist clung to me,
But I broke through.

I plunged forever through the waiting air,
Jettied in showers of spray love and despair,
Cascaded the passions
Pent in the skull,
Dissonant company
Channelled too full,
Scattered in death
All fury and suspense.
Fling out, bright drops,
Into inconsequence!