



C H A P T E R 11

AN EXCITING EVENT IN OUR VILLAGE WAS THE ARRIVAL OF THE **mesmerizer**. I think the year was 1850 when one named Simmons was there. He made public announcement of his show and promised wonders. It cost twenty-five cents to get in, children and Negroes half price. The village had heard of mesmerism in a general way but had not seen it yet. Not many people went the first night but next day they had so many wonders to tell that for a couple of weeks the mesmerizer was making money. I was fourteen or fifteen years old, the age at which a boy will do anything to attract attention to himself. When I saw the “subjects” perform foolishly on the platform and make the people laugh and shout and admire I had a burning desire to be a subject myself.

Every night I sat in the row of candidates on the platform and held the magic **disk** in my hand and looked at it and tried to get sleepy, but it was a failure; I remained wide awake. On the fourth night I could resist no longer. When I had stared at the disk a while I pretended to be sleepy and began to nod. Straightway came the mesmerizer and made signs with his hands over my head. He took the disk in his fingers and told me that I could not take my eyes off of it, try as I might. I rose slowly and followed that disk all over the place, just as I had seen the others do. Then he put me through some other tricks. Upon suggestion

I ran from snakes, passed pails at a fire, made love to imaginary girls, fished from the platform, and so on. I was careful at first and watchful, being afraid the mesmerizer would discover I was just acting and drive me from the platform in shame; but as soon as I realized that I was not in danger I saw more than was to be seen and added details of my own.

“That you may know how wonderfully developed a subject we have in this boy,” the mesmerizer said, “I assure you that without a single spoken word to guide him he has carried out what I mentally commanded him to do, to the smallest detail.”

I was a hero, and happier than I have ever been in this world since. As regards mental suggestion, my fears of it were gone. I judged that in case I failed to do what the mesmerizer might be willing me to do, I could count on doing something that would answer just as well. I was right, and the mesmerizer, not being a fool, always pretended I was acting out his commands.

After the fourth night I was the only subject. Simmons invited no more candidates to the platform. I performed alone every night for two weeks. When the mesmerizer’s engagement closed there was but one person in the village who did not believe in mesmerism and I was the one, and I remained a disbeliever for close upon fifty years. The truth is I did not have to wait long to get tired of my triumphs. Not thirty days, I think. The glory that is built upon a lie becomes nothing but trouble. How easy it is to make people believe a lie and how hard it is to undo that work again! Thirty-five years after my performance I visited my mother, whom I had not seen for ten years. I thought I would confess to her my old dishonesty. It cost me a great effort to make up my mind, but I told her the truth.

She simply did not believe me and said so! I was unhappy not to have my costly truthfulness believed. I kept repeating my statement that every single thing I had done on those long ago nights was a lie. She shook her head calmly and said she knew better. And so the lie which I played upon her in my youth remained with her an absolute truth to the day of her death. Carlyle said “a lie cannot live.” It shows that he did not know how to tell them.