

THE SWITCHTENDER.

A little white house seemed asleep among the blossoming apple trees. It was early morning, and all was light and freshness. The door opened; a man appeared at the threshold, a smile on his face and an expectant look in his eyes. There was a movement behind the trunk of an apple tree. The man's smile grew broader, and from the tree, like a dryad, rushed a charming little flaxen haired girl, who threw herself with a burst of laughter into his arms.

"May I take the little one, Celine?" said the father.

"Again!" she said, with a shade of annoyance.

"Oh, we share her very fairly," said the man, with the kindest and most paternal smile. "If you knew," he resumed, "how quickly the hours pass when she is down there with me."

"Don't you think I know, when I find them so long in her absence?"

It was embarrassing. Aimee herself began to be troubled by this conversation, and feeling that she could not please both these beings that she loved so much, she was ready to cry. Celine saw it at once and yielded.

"Take her, Laurence; I would rather have her go than feel badly about it."

"No," said he in his turn, "keep her—you deserve it; you love her best."

The discussion began again, but it was this time a struggle of generosity. At last the husband took his darling in his arms, and a smile reappeared on the child's lips.

One morning, without saying anything to Celine, Laurence took the little girl's hand to lead her away, when her mother suddenly appeared.

"What!" she said. "You would take her without telling me?"

"Don't think that," said Laurence, in some confusion. "We were in fun—we were going to hide behind the trees and see you look for us."

"Listen, Laurence," she continued. "Aimee grows more restless and troublesome every day. It is dangerous to let her go with you."

"What do you mean?" said the man, turning pale.

"I mean that I am afraid of your railroad, with its trains and locomotives."

"You are very foolish."

"Leave her here. I can hardly breathe while my little girl is down there. It is frightful to think of it, but she might get away and be killed."

"Don't talk so, Celine."

"She might run away while you are at the switch, and if you left it to look after her, you would fail in your duty, and might be the cause of a dreadful disaster."

The young woman did not insist. The switchtender gradually recovered himself.

Celine smiled, and the conversation ended as usual with these words from Laurence:

"You will come for her at noon."

Little by little their terrors faded away. Laurence reasoned with himself.

"The child," he said, "is familiar with the passage of trains, it is true, but she is old enough to comprehend the danger. And his apprehension vanished."

One evening, however, when he went home he found he had been preceded by the rumor of an accident which had occurred at a neighboring station. A brakeman had been crushed by an express train. Celine questioned her husband while they were at supper.

"Is it true that Simon is killed?" she asked.

"No," replied Laurence, "he was in great danger, but he escaped, thanks to his wonderful coolness."

"Then he is not dead?" said Celine.

"No; and yet the whole train went over him. When Simon saw it was too late to save himself, he laid flat down in the middle of the track, and when the train passed by he got up again safe and sound. I saw him. I asked him how it made him feel. At first, he said, when the engine went over him, he was very warm; after that, he time seemed long. That was all. You know Simon is not easily frightened. He is ready to go to work again," added Laurence tranquilly.

Some time after that the hours of service were changed and Laurence took the night section. He could no longer think of taking Aimee with him.

One evening, however, a poor woman in the village was taken very ill. The doctor who came wrote a prescription and said to the neighbors he found there:

"These medicines can only be had in the town and you must not wait for them. Let one of you go to the railway station, where there is a portable pharmacy, and ask the station master on my account for a little laudanum. That will quiet the pains till you can have the prescription. Which of you will go?"

"Celine! Celine!" said several voices. It was certain that the station master would not hesitate to give her the medicine.

The young woman thought of leaving Aimee, but, as she had been particularly restless all day, Celine concluded to take her. They had to pass Laurence's post to go to the station. He saw them coming, and as soon as they were within hearing, began to question them.

"Old Gertrude is very ill, and I am going to the station for medicine."

"That's right. But let me have Aimee; I will keep her till you come back."

Celine lifted the little girl over the fence to her father, who took the precious burden in his arms and returned with her to his box, before which a lamp was burning. Darkness covered the tracks, which crossed in every direction.

It would not take Celine more than 20 minutes to get to the station and back. The child was in one of her most frolicsome moods; and she ran suddenly into the garden; Laurence ran laughing after her.

"You can't catch me," said she.

"Yes, I can."

But the little witch evaded Laurence's pursuit, leaving laughter behind her.

"Here, here!" she said, and rushing to the track began to cross it.

"Don't go there, darling," said her father.

It was very dark—the switchtender could hardly see his daughter.

"You can't catch me," repeated the child.

"Come, come here," said her father.

"Look for me," answered the child.

"Aimee, Aimee, don't play any more. I shall be angry. Come here."

"Oh, you say that because you can't catch me!"

"Yes, I don't want you to stay there. The express train is coming."

"Oh! I shan't let you catch me. The train has gone by."

"There is another."

"Instead of replying the child said: Run after me, papa, run."

Laurence saw there was nothing to be done but to run after her, and take her out of danger. He rushed toward the place where he heard her voice. It was dark, and Aimee escaped him still. His alarm increased. At any instant the whistle of the oncoming train might be heard, and Laurence redoubled his appeals. His voice was hoarse with fright; the fatal moment approached, and still the child laughed and repeated:

"You can't catch me."

Now the whistle sounded. The lugubrious call paralyzed the poor man, and he lost his head completely. The train would have two victims if he did not regain his composure. Two victims! It would be a catastrophe with incalculable consequences: for a train was stopping at the station a little way ahead, and if the express was not switched off there must inevitably be a collision. Laurence shook off his torpor.

"Aimee!" he cried in thundering tones.

"Here, papa." And the child continued to give sharp little calls, which mingled in the roar of the approaching engine.

The instinct of duty rather than will urged Laurence toward the switch. He seized the instrument which ought to turn the train.

"No," he exclaimed, "I must save her. Aimee, Aimee! where are you?" and his eyes sought to pierce the darkness.

The switchtender, with hair on end, thought of throwing himself before the iron monster. But one chance remained—that Aimee was not on the track over which the train must pass. He looked again. He saw her—she saw her. She was there, standing on the very track the train must take if he altered the switch. If the iron tempest did not take its true course the child was saved. The train would go on to crash against the one at the station. What matter? Aimee would be alive! All this went through his mind like lightning. They would be killed and wounded—twenty families in despair, but Aimee would be safe and sound. There would be an inquest; he would be condemned to prison, dishonored, ruined! But his daughter, his little Aimee, would live and be happy. Ah! how quickly one can think in such terrible moments!

The train came thundering on, but it could not be seen on account of a sharp curve in the road. There was still time to save Aimee, but the child would not stir. It seemed to her father that she waited for the train with an air of defiance.

"Aimee," he repeated, in a voice strangled by fear, "Aimee, come here!"

Suddenly the advancing lights of the engine appeared. The train was upon him; it was here. The man felt his whole being shake. He was bewildered—could see nothing; thought did not stop, however, but traveled faster than the train. He recalled in a second his honorable soldier's life, when he had sacrificed everything to duty. He saw in the station the frightful accident he would have caused, and heard the cries of the wounded, the last gasps of the dying. The problem was before him—his daughter or others? There was no alternative without a miracle.

With astonishing promptitude the sentiment of duty became most powerful, and he seized mechanically the handle of the iron bar. The stoical soldier at this moment was uppermost, and effaced the father. He pushed, hardly knowing what he did, and the express train crossed the switch.

On, on it went, and he could see it passing before the station, going by as if it were happy to escape a danger, and disappearing in the darkness. Duty had been strongest. Stupefied, staggered, speechless, Laurence was rooted to the spot, holding still the cursed handle which had helped him to kill his child.

"No," he said, "it is my turn to die."

The other train was about to pass. He stepped forward, crossed his arms, and awaited it. The whistle sounded, the leaving engine puffed.

Bewildered, thinking of nothing, there he stood.

But that instant a burst of laughter sounded behind him. He turned, wild with hope.

"Oh, naughty papa! he won't play with Aimee," said the most beloved of voices.

The child was clinging to him. Laurence did not seek to know how the child came there alive. He seized her and fled with his treasure into his little cabin. Then he put her on the ground before the lamp and looked at her. He could not bear so much joy, and fell fainting beside his daughter, who, in her turn, screamed with terror.

At this moment Celine arrived. She heard her child's voice, and hastened her steps. Then, becoming impatient, she called:

"Aimee!"

The child ran to meet her, crying:

"Mamma, mamma, I am frightened!"

"What is the matter?"

"Papa has fallen down."

Celine rushed toward the sentry box and found her husband completely insensible, stretched on the ground. She sent for help, and the doctor, who had not left the village, came and restored the poor man to consciousness. The next day when Laurence rose his wife looked at him with terror. Instead of his former bright color he exhibited a corpse like pallor, which never left him to the end of his days. Laurence was forced to tell his wife all. When he had finished, the poor father turned to Aimee, and said:

"But, darling, why weren't you killed?"

"Why," said the child, "I did what Simon did."

TO PENSION OLD AGE.

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN'S PLAN POPULAR IN ENGLAND.

A Movement to Benefit the Great Working Classes—Chamberlain the Counting House Radical Politician—The Leader of the New Democracy.

The most bitter reviled man in British politics is Joseph Chamberlain, writes a correspondent. Denounced as a renegade from his party by the official Liberals, as a traitor to his principles by the Radicals, who had looked to him to lead the new democracy, he is pursued in platform and press with reproaches of scorn and acrimony, and his 60 or more Liberal-Unionist followers in parliament are made to feel an animosity such as even the most blatant Tories seldom arouse.

Mr. Chamberlain's programme, or, more exactly, the programme of the Liberal-Unionist party, which he practically formulates, seems, aside from land purchase and allotments, to indicate an effort to meet the democratic spirit. The two chief features are, first, the extension of local government by the creation throughout the kingdom of district and parish councils, and secondly, the enactment of some plan for State assistance through old age pensions and life insurance. It is needless to say that the Radicals are at once and emphatically opposed to any plan of government land purchase or allotment, but the idea of the extension of municipal powers is very popular with them. There is a general feeling in favor of the idea of old age pensions, but none of the plans which have been brought forward elicit any general support.

Mr. Chamberlain's plan concerning the latter is that any man or woman shall be able to go to the postoffice and open an account either by a small payment or by a large payment. This may be added to as convenient, and remaining at five per cent compound interest—double the amount which the Government now allows on ordinary savings bank deposits—shall, when the contributor reaches the age of 65, and then only, be withdrawn, in the shape of a fixed annuity for the rest of life.

But Joseph Chamberlain does not move without an army behind him. I witnessed one of his methods at getting at popular feeling. He had a friend very quietly call together a number of representative men who might be supposed to take interest in the question of old age pensions, and, while carefully refraining from setting forth his own views, he asked for theirs. It was a curious picture—the careful, impassive politician sitting in the center—a clean shaven, sharp featured man of 55, with a spare, erect figure, faultlessly clothed in gray, and wearing a gold rimmed monocle in his right eye—and before him, in a semi circle, types of blunt and outspoken men from the rough and tumble of life.

Mr. Chamberlain said the necessity for doing something was pressing; that none of the present means, whether those offered by the government postal savings or those offered by friendly societies, were for some reason or other able to do anything worth talking about. The first to respond were several representatives of benevolent organizations having insurance features, such as the Odd Fellows, the Manchester Union, the Heart of Oak, which in general conversation are grouped under the head of "Friendly Societies." These representatives manifested a strong antagonism to the proposed competition of the government and what they conceived to be an interference with their vested interests, going so far as to say that if subsidies were to come out of common taxation for the support of a government insurance bureau the Friendly Societies should have the right to demand the same subsidies, too.

Mr. Chamberlain showed that he was prepared for such opposition, but he was evidently not prepared for the views expressed by the purely trade union representatives—views which are significant of the education which is going on beneath the surface. First, Ben Tillett, secretary of the London Dock Laborers' Union, arose and said: "I don't see what interest there is in any such proposal for men who have a hard struggle to get the barest subsistence; men who can not possibly save anything. And yet this is the almost universal condition of the unskilled laborers of this country, men more than any others subject to the pauper's lot and the pauper's grave. The difficulty I see is to get these people to live until they are 65, or even 60."

Frank Smith, of the Omnibus Union: "I am in favor of an old age pension by the State, and I believe it should be general and compulsory. But I believe it will be impossible to do anything effective without first giving all men a chance to make a comfortable living. This can be done only by first opening the land of England to the workers; by taxing the dogs in the manger who are holding it idle and speculating in it. By this means the revenue will at the same time be raised out of which to give every man and woman in the realm a pension after they come of a certain age; not a charity fee, which, under whatever name, can be little better than is afforded by the present poor law, or pauper law, but a pension that shall go to every man and woman, rich or poor, without distinction, after they have passed a certain age."

Mr. Chamberlain in response said substantially: "None better than I can appreciate the extent of want and misery. I have found from unquestionable official reports that a seventh of the population reaching the age of 65 are receiving poor law assistance, and when the independent upper and middle classes are deducted the percentage of poor people who must come to ask for public assistance must be very large. Indeed, I know of whole districts, whole counties—Dorsetshire, for instance—where a very large majority of the farm laborers, industrious, sober, thrifty men and women, have nothing to look forward to but the workhouse in their old age. But I am here as a politician and a practical man. I hold that it is impossible to change conditions in a day, and in carrying forward a measure which may only deal with the fringe of the great army of labor we do a great deal."

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