

THE NEWAGENT.

"Susan, I tell you, I can't live so much longer. I'm workin' the flesh off my bones; I'm starvin' myself; you are starvin' and the Lord knows our children are poorly enough off. I tell you 'tain't no use. I can't live so. Sometimes, when I git to thinkin' of it right up an' down—in earnest—I feel as though I'd rather go to the workhouse and have done with it."

"I know it's hard, Malcolm; but, really, couldn't it be harder?"

"Harder. Be harder? What can you imagine harder'n what we have to endure now?"

"I was thinking of the health of our little ones, Malcolm, and of our own health, too."

"Aye," exclaimed the weary man, with a twist in his face that was a comical idea had struck him, "and jest see what the health and robustness of them youngkets is costin' me. I some times think they'll eat us all up before they get their growth."

Susan laughed, for she knew how fondly and tenderly her husband loved those same "youngkets," and how much he would sacrifice for their sakes. She was afraid he would be finally giving up the farm.

She was born on it, and she loved it dearly, and it would pull terribly upon her heartstrings to leave it.

Her six children had been born beneath that same sheltering roof, and, altogether, her life had been a very pleasant and happy one.

Yet she knew that they were paying an exorbitant rent—altogether too much—more by far than the farm was worth. But others did the same, and he and she must bear with them.

All this she said to her husband as he sat by the fire filling his pipe. She spoke modestly, and kindly, and persuasively.

Malcolm lighted his pipe and smoked for a time in silence. At length he brought his foot down with a crash and burst.

"Dang it all! I didn't mean to tell you, Susan, but I can't keep it no longer. Carter says that squire's goin' to make another rise on the rent."

"No, no, Malcolm. You do not mean it?"

"It's just as true as gospel. Five shillin's a month. That's three pounds a year."

"Oh, Malcolm, I don't believe that the squire's got any hand in the business. It's Carter's own doin', now you depend upon it."

"I've thought o' that myself, Susan; but look: The young blood is away on the Continent—in Paris, I believe, where he's been ever since he came from Cambridge, and he's spendin' money fast. I tell you I look to see the whole grand estate, hall, abbey and all, put up to the highest bidder one o' these days. Ah, taint as 'twas when young Philip's father was livin'. We weren't ground down then. He lived on his place and looked out for himself, and now you see where the money's goin' at he laid up—thousands upon thousands of pounds!"

A further smoke in silence, and he added:

If anything should happen 'till at Master Philip should be obliged to begin to sell, this farm would be the very first bit o' property to go. It's the farthest outlyin' farm of the estate. Just think of it! We're nigh on to five miles away from the Hall, and yet he owns all the land between here and there—every rood of it. What a shame it is 't a young man without any family, only his mother and two sisters, should eat into such a grand old heritage so outrageously! Hallo! I declare it's rainin'."

"Why, it's been raining this half hour, Malcolm."

"Well, I never noticed it until now. Eh! who's that, I wonder!"

It was a rap upon the outer door. Malcolm got up and took a candle and went to answer the summons.

He found on a broad door stone a young man, tall and strong, clad in rough forest garb such as gamekeepers and foresters were wont to wear, leather breeches and leather jacket, with strong leather gaiters, and upon his head a Highland bonnet. He carried in his hand a fowling piece, with shot pouch and powder horn at his sides.

Malcolm Wansley was not the man to keep a wayfarer at his door to tell his story when the whole story could be read at a glance.

"An stranger! got caught in a shower eh? Come right in. We've room, sir, and a bit o' fire to boot," a fine-looking man, nearly a head taller than his host, and well-proportioned; his skin tanned by exposure to the weather, his blue eyes bright and clear, his face handsome, with a look of keen intelligence upon it.

The stranger spoke pleasantly and cheerfully, and in a laughing way described his mishap.

He said the gamekeeper of an adjoining estate was a friend of his, who had given him permission to run down a deer if he could, but he hadn't done it

though he had found a good wetting which would help to fill out the story of the day.

After he had partially dried his garments, the good wife asked him if he would take a sup and a bite, if she would set it before him.

With a genial smile, he answered that he was hungry. He would not put her to trouble, but if—

Malcolm stopped him abruptly. "Don't talk of putting us to troubled sir. What are we good for, if we can't help one another in times of trouble and want? We hain't got much, and what we have got's plain and homely, but it's good, and it's honestly come by."

And thereupon Susan set out a small table, and prepared a substantial meal.

Her three elder children come in from the little kitchen, where they had been parching corn, and seated themselves modestly by the fire with a dish of the snowy corn before him.

The stranger begged a few kernels, and the eldest, a girl of twelve years, at once offered him half of all they had; but he only thanked her and accepted a small quantity; and as he ate he told the little ones how he had loved popped corn when he was a child like themselves.

When the meal was ready the stranger ate and drank with relish, and when he had concluded he gladly accepted a pipe, and as he smoked he began to question the host about himself and his affairs. He said he was almost a stranger in that region, and he knew but little of it.

"What," said he, in surprise, after Malcolm had told him who was his landlord, "does this farm belong to the Maxwell estate! I had no idea that the territory extended so far."

"Yes, sir," responded the farmer. "Young Philip Maxwell owns a big estate, and it's a pity he don't take care of it. If all I hear is true he's runnin' through it pretty fast."

"Is that so? What makes you think it?" asked the stranger.

"What makes me think it!" echoed Malcolm, elevating his brow and blowing out an extra cloud of smoke. "Would a young man like him, without a family—leastwise I never heard of his bein' married—would he, own such a grand estate as this, crowd down on a poor man like me till he'd got almost his last shillin' and then, on top o' that jam and crowd harder still, if he wasn't goin' it pretty fast?"

Malcolm was becoming excited and the thought of the last rise in his rent which had been made known to him on that very day, filled his cup of indignation to overflow.

"Yes, sir," he went on, "I've been payin' a rent for this farm that no man ever ought to pay—a rent that has robbed me and my good wife and the little ones of things that we really needed, and now it's to be raised again. Susan—that's my wife, sir—her father rented this farm and she was born here, which you will understand, kind o' teaches her to the place. Well, her father paid \$10 a year and paid once in six months. My first year's rent was \$12, then it went up, and up, and up, and for three years at last past I've paid \$2 a month and now, sir, I've got notice that I'm to pay an advance of five shillin's a month. That's \$3 more a year. Not much, you may say, but it's the last ounce that breaks the camel's back. When a man's payin' all he can pay, how can he pay more?"

"But," said the wayfarer, shaking the ashes from his pipe, "why don't you speak with the squire himself?"

"What! and he away in Paris?"

"Then why not write to him!"

"Ah, sir, there you've hit it! When young Master Philip came into possession he made it a law that the man who complained to him should be turned off at once. He's kind o' ticklish, I should judge, about bein' bothered, and he don't like to have his feelin's stirred up so when he took possession he was determined that he wouldn't have no complaints nor faultfindin'. He planned that he would enjoy all of life that could be enjoyed, and if his tenants had troubles they shouldn't saddle 'em off on to him. So, d'see, he just made that rule—and he made it strong the man that opened his head to him about his rent or about any short comin' what ever, or that dared to write to him, should be turned off, neck and heels, without further warnin'."

"But dear man, do you really think Master Philip Maxwell would do that thing?" the guests asked the considerable interest.

"Would he?" cried Malcolm, explosively. "Go and ask poor old Dan Simpson what he thinks. Old Dan had the Goodspeed farm one of the best on the estate—as large as six of this. He dared to post a letter to the squire, and he got his discharge off hand. Yes, sir, he was turned away and the farm let to another within a week after the letter had been put in to the post. Silas Carter must have the postmaster under his thumb. In fact the squire owns the line of buildin's where his store is and

where the postoffice is. Ah, it was different when the old squire was livin'. He never turned a deaf ear to an honest tenant not he!"

"Why look, Susan an' me—we'd kind o' promised ourselves that we'd give our second child—little George—he's ten years old now, sir that we'd give to him a leetle better education than boys of his rank generally get, but we can't do it now. This last rise in our rent has took the last penny and more, too. Really and truly, I don't think I can pay it. I hate to give up the dear old place, where Susan was born and reared but it must come. I can have a farm of Sir Oliver Thorndike for one half what I've got to pay another year of this."

"But pardon me, good sir. This is no business of yours; but you asked me a question, and I got a goin' and didn't know how to stop, seein' that the rise in my rent had just been made. But, believe me, good sir, I ain't in the habit of tellin' this stuff out o' school. You're the first man not one of us that I ever opened my head to on the subject. I wouldn't like that Silas Carter should hear what I've been tellin', cause if you see, such things sound so different when they're told second-hand."

"Have no fear of me, my good man," returned the stranger, heartily. "My name is Sidney—George Sidney. I have met young Maxwell, and should I chance to meet him again you may be sure I shall give him a gentle hint of how things are going on here. Is there anyone on the estate who, you think, would be entirely fit and competent in every way for an agent in Carter's place?"

"Yes, sir," answered Malcolm, promptly and heartily; "I know just the man, savin' my wife's presence. It's her brother—John Gullford. He used to rent a farm here, but he got disgusted with Carter's suppiness and left. He's now with Sir Oliver—a sort of useful man about the old castle, but not engaged permanently."

"Did you ever write to your young master?"

"No, sir—never."

"I suppose you can write?"

The honest, hard-handed farmer colored up to the eyes; and, before he could speak, his wife answered for him:

"Good sir, Malcolm's got into a sort of careless way of speakin', but I do assure you he has a good education. As for writin' he's done that ever since he was a child; and Mr. Carter'll tell you if he'll tell the truth—that my husband has straightened out his accounts and written important letters for him, more than once. Malcolm won't speak for himself, but I'll speak for him."

Mr. Sidney nodded and smiled and changed the subject. He asked Malcolm about his land, about his crops, and about the best methods of treating land for different kinds of seed. And then he asked about the quality of the land of the various large farms of the estate, and sought to know how they were carried on.

To all his questions the farmer not only gave intelligent answers, but he offered many thoughts and suggestions that might have been of real value to the owner of the land.

At 9 o'clock Malcolm suggested that as it was late and very dark, with rain still falling, Sidney had better spend the night with them, if he could put up with their homely accommodation. He accepted the offer gratefully.

The good wife provided him with a clean, comfortable sleeping room, and gave him a comfortable bed in which to sleep, and on the following morning after a good breakfast, the weather being clear and bright, he bade his entertainers a kindly adieu, promising them that if he should ever be in that region again, he would not fail to call.

Both Malcolm and Susan thought it rather strange that the man had made them no offer of return for his entertainment; and yet they were glad that he had not, for they would only refused it, and thus, perhaps, have hurt his feelings. They remembered that he had worn no jewelry nor no ornament of any kind.

That afternoon Malcolm harnessed his horse and rode to the village, where he found great commotion. The squire—young Mr. Philip—had arrived at the Hall, and it was believed that he was going to spend the summer on his estate. Who seen him? Nobody. But they knew he had come, because his luggage had come.

"I went up to the Hall last evening," said the keeper of the village inn, "but he was not there. They told me he had been there, but he had gone out."

Just then a servant from the Hall arrived on the spot—the largest village store, where the post office was. In a moment he was plied with questions.

"Where did the squire go to last night?" the land lord of the inn asked him.

"I don't know," the servant answered. "He took his gun the middle of the afternoon, yesterday, and went off

into the woods he said to start up a deer, and if you'll believe it, he didn't get back till this morning. I don't know where he stopped. I can't imagine."

Malcolm Wansley felt dizzy. His head seemed to whirl and his throat to fill up.

Without a word to anybody, he got back into his wagon and drove home—drove up to his door just as a light chaise from the Hall pulled up, in which was one of the squire's grooms.

Malcolm was wanted at the Hall at once. He was to ride with the messenger.

The startled man dared not tell his wife of the wonderful thing that had happened.

He unharnessed his own horse and put him back into his stable, and then simply saying to Susan that he was going up to the Hall, he got into the chaise and was driven away.

Arrived at the great mansion—Maxwell Hall—Malcolm was conducted at once into the main vestibule, thence into the great hall, and so on to the sumptuously furnished library, where sat his guest of the previous evening, who arose at once, advancing with a genial, kindly smile and an extend hand.

"Well, well, Malcolm, we are met again. Stop stammering man. There has been no deception. Didn't you know my baptismal name? George Philip Sidney Maxwell."

Malcolm might have remembered, if he had thought, but he had no thought.

Maxwell pointed the farmer to a seat and then opened conversation; but there is no need that we should follow all that was said.

The squire spoke of his old agent, Silas Carter, closing his remarks on that subject thus:

"I should serve him but justly if I should consign him to the county jail; but I have stripped him of his ill-gotten gains, most of which I shall restore to the tenants whom he has robbed in my name; and I have cast him out from our midst, warning him that if I see him here again I may proceed against him legally."

And then, after a few remarks on other objects he said:

"And now Malcolm, a word regarding yourself. The pretty stone cottage in the park is empty since Carter left it, and I am without an agent and superintendent. They are open to you—the cottage and the office—if you will accept them, and I will only add that by accepting you will confer a favor upon me which will command my deepest and warmest gratitude. I think I shall not be disappointed. Ah, none of that! My eyes are open; I know what I am doing. Not only will I take your wife's word, but I have spoken with others, and I hear but one report. All speak in your favor. Come say the word, and I will go to the superintendent's office, and place the books and papers in your hands at once."

It was in the dusk of the evening when Malcolm Wansley was set down at his own door.

"Malcolm where have you been?"

"Where I told you I was going—to the Hall."

"For what?"

"The squire sent for me."

"The squire! Is he at home?"

"Yes, and intends to remain at home."

"Oh, I am glad! But what in the world did he want of you?"

"Oh, nothing particular. He only wants us to live in the stone cottage in the park, and he has made me his agent and superintendent."

"Malcolm Wansley! Oh, how can you?"

"But it is true—every word of it."

"Made—you—his—agent! And who in the world ever put that idea in his head?"

"You did, my darling."

"I? Oh, what a—"

"Hold on! The squire ate supper here last evening and spent the night with us."

Oh, Oh, Was it—"

"Yes, dear wife: it is all as I tell you. Does it please you?"

Oh Malcolm, how can we ever be thankful enough?"

Simply by doing the very best we can for Philip Maxwell."

"You are right, my husband, and we will do it."

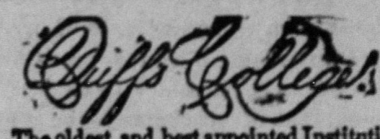
And they kept their word, both of them, and before another year had passed away not only did the young squire bless the storm that drove him into the shelter of Malcolm Wansley's humble cot, but his tenants of every class had cause to turn their blessings in the same direction.

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