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The Queer Old Man.

WE kept a little variety shop, sister Margie and I, the profit of which was quite as small as the wares we sold. But, then, we had no rent to pay; owning the small, brown, old-fashioned house in which we lived, and which looked strangely out of place among the stately-looking modern dwellings that crowded up against it on either side, quite putting it out of countenance by their superior height and appearance.

Grandfather built it when the place was new, and he a young man, and when all that brick and mortar were verdant fields and well-kept gardens, dotted here and there by houses as low and modest as his own. He owned a large farm, and was considered a wealthy man for those days; but acre after acre had been sold until nothing was left except the house in which my father had been born, and which was the only inheritance of his children. But we made the most of it, Margie and I, as you will see.

I hardly think we should have dared to do such a thing while father lived, who would have considered it a sort of sacrilege; but soon after his death we turned the front part of the house into a shop, with show-windows which opened out upon the street, in which to display the articles we kept for sale.

This was a matter of necessity rather than choice, it being all that I could do at home; and I could not leave Margie. Poor Margie was a cripple; she had received a fall when only four years old, and had never walked since. She had been a great care to me for many a year, but never a burden. She was so thoughtful, patient and cheerful, that in the event of our separation I think I should have missed her quite as much as she would me. She was very useful, too; lying all day on the lounge in her little sitting-room, her hands were never idle, crocheting tidies, mats, mittens and edging, and, doing various kinds of fancy-work, for which I found sale in the shop, and though the price asked was only moderately in excess of the cost of material, it helped us not a little.

Margie kept all the accounts, too; having a clearer head than I, and a knowledge, or rather intuition, of character that was wonderful, considering how secluded her life had of necessity been. I never thought of taking any step without consulting Margie.

We two lived very quietly, having few acquaintances, and no near relative or friend—except John. John was my lover, and no girl ever had one more kind and true. He was poor in worldly goods, but oh! so rich in goodness and manly worth. He might have seemed plain to those who knew him not—I cannot tell how he looked to other eyes—but there was more than beauty, to me, in that frank, honest face, and in the big, brown hands that were so strong and helpful.

We had been engaged ever since I was 18—I was 23 now—and no nearer to being married, as I could see, than we were five years before. But still we loved on and hoped on. John had a widowed and infirm mother, and I Margie, and, though she was anything but burdensome to me, I could not think of adding any further weight to the hands that were full enough already.

Trade not being very brisk during the summer, Margie and I decided to eke out our slender income by renting the room over the shop. It was low, and the slant of the roof on one side and big chimney made it full of nooks and corners. The furniture was old, being some that grandfather had when he was married, but with the help of John, who could spare me an hour or two evenings, I furnished it up so that it looked very well. By dint of piecing and contriving, I covered the floor with a neat carpet, the bed and windows were draped with white, some pretty prints hung upon the wall, and on the whole I was very well satisfied with the result of our labor.

When all was done, John wrote a notice: "Room to let. Inquire within." But though I placed it in the shop window, where it could be plainly seen from the street, nearly three weeks passed and we had only two applications for the room, and from persons who only looked at it, and then went away.

One morning, as I was dusting the counter and putting the shop to rights, I saw a queer-looking, oddly-dressed old man standing in front of the window, his eyes fixed upon the notice in it, and his moving lips slowly syllabifying each word. He wore shoes with big buckles on them, and a snuff-colored coat, with short waist and long skirts, and which looked as if it might have been his grandfather's. But the oddest thing about him was the long white hair which fell upon his shoulders, and the heavy beard of the same color which touched his breast. A broad-brimmed hat completed his quaint, Quaker-like appearance.

The door being ajar, before I had time to lay aside my duster he was at the counter.

He stared at me for some moments without speaking, and then pointing to the notice with his cane, said:

"Will thee let me look at it?"

Inwardly hoping that this application would not share the fate of those that had preceeded it, I led the way up stairs. To my great relief, our prospective lodger, far from objecting to the sloping roof and old-fashioned furniture, seemed to regard them with feelings of positive interest and admiration.

"It is like the chamber that I used to sleep in when I was a boy," he said, as he looked around, and speaking more to himself than me.

As I wanted Margie to see him before I decided, I took him down through the sitting-room where she lay.

"This gentleman thinks of taking our room, sister," I said, as she glanced up at us.

"If within my means," interposed the stranger. "I am a poor man."

Margie's clear, soft, penetrating eyes were quietly reading the face of the speaker. What she saw seemed satisfactory, for she nodded in reply to my questioning look.

In spite of his threadbare apparel, he looked so thoroughly respectable that I was half ashamed of the question that I felt compelled to put:

"I suppose you have references, sir?"

"No; all are dead who might speak for me if they could. You will have to take me on trust."

I looked at Margie again, who, giving me another nod, said:

"Perhaps the gentleman will mention what he fells able to pay?"

The stranger did so, adding:

"I am poor and cannot pay one penny more."

The sum named, though not large, was more than we were intending to ask, as I told him.

The old man frowned and shook his head.

"Thee shouldn't have told me that. I've half a mind to give thee no more."

Then counting out upon the table the amount he had stated, he pushed it toward me adding:

"My name is Thomas. I'll be here to-morrow morning with all my traps."

The traps mentioned consisted of an old-fashioned hair-trunk and a large chest, the latter being mainly filled with books. We were not long in finding out that our lodger was very odd, though his oddities were of the most innocent and harmless nature. He asked me to substitute a patchwork quilt for the white counterpane on his bed, and spent a whole day rummaging auction rooms to find some old-fashioned chintz to take the place of the pretty muslin curtains on which I had spent so much time and labor. I had taken a rocker for him from the sitting-room, but, spying, one day, an old, leather-bottomed chair that had belonged to my grandfather, he asked me to exchange with him, which I was very glad to do. Not long after, a chest of drawers, that was my grandfather's, found its way back to the old place, together with the quaint, brass-mounted mirror that always hung over it; so that, at last, the room looked very much as it did before we re-arranged it with so much care and labor.

John and I had quite a laugh over it, but, so long as it suited the present occupant, we did not mind, and it seemed to suit him completely. He spent much of his time reading. No one called to see him, or wrote to him, though he received quantities of papers and magazines.

It was Margie that first suggested that we invite him to take tea with us one day when we had some unusual delicacy—early strawberries, I think.

"He must be very lonely, poor man!" said my gentle-hearted sister. "Perhaps he doesn't have enough to eat. He spoke about being poor you know."

After this he dropped in occasionally, bringing some new magazine or paper, and reading to us as we sat at work.—Finally, it became an established custom with him to take tea with us twice, and sometimes three times a week; frequently inviting himself though we always knew when he was coming by the advent of the market boy with a liberal supply of provisions, all of the best quality.

This troubled Margie's tender conscience, and she remonstrated with him one day.

"It is wrong," he said, with a grave shake of the head. "I'm a poor man, and ought to be more prudent."

But he continued on the same way, and we finally got so used to his oddities of speech and action as to think little of them.

He and John were apparently on the best of terms, and yet he was always finding fault with him to me.

"To think of his taking entire charge of his mother, when she has other children, and sending money to his brother's widow beside!" he said to me one day.

"He is a poor man, and always will be!"

Now, I never could endure the slightest reflection upon John, and I defended him with a spirit and indignation that seemed to please Mr. Thomas not a little.

"With thy pretty face and ways, thee ought to do better, Ruth," he resumed, when I paused for want of breath.—"Not but what John is good, but he is poor. I've heard that thee refused Mr. Hart, who is worth $1,000,000. What made thee do such a foolish thing as that, child?"

"Because I didn't love Mr. Hart; and I do love John."

The silence that followed made me glance up at my companion, who had turned toward the door. It was growing dusk, and the face was partly averted, but I was almost sure that the eyes were full of tears.

Mr. Thomas generally used the plain language, almost invariably so when speaking to me or Margie, and, until I saw that he was a regular attendant at St. Luke's, I supposed him to be a Quaker. When I alluded to this impression, he said:

"I was brought up to that faith; and it comes back to me now that I am growing old, and the end is near."

It was nearer than I thought. He had been feeble all winter, though it seemed more like the gradual loss of strength than actual disease. In the early spring he was knocked down by a runaway horse, sustaining some internal injury from which he never recovered. John and I took turns in nursing him; it was pleasant, afterward, to remember that he wanted for nothing.

John, Margie and I were there. He had been lying in a stupor for some hours; now he roused himself and began to talk, startling us not a little by his strange expressions and allusions.

"I was born in this room," he said, glancing around; "and I shall die here!"

Thinking his mind was wandering, I laid my hand gently on his.

He smiled as he looked at me.

"Thee hast thy mother's name, Ruth, and her kind heart as well, but thy eyes are like thy father's. He has been here thanking me for providing for his orphan girls. This was our room when we were boys, thee knows. Dear old Joe! before the dawning of another day we shall meet."

John and I looked at each other in wondering awe. Two years before I stood at my father's dying bed; was it the same mysterious shadow that made their faces look so strangely a alike?

The dying man continued:

"Thy father and I were brothers.—Did he ever speak to thee of his brother Tom, who forsook home and country because a girl, false as fair, broke her troth to wed a richer suitor? You have been kind to the poor old man who came to you as a stranger. I have not forgotten it as the papers in my desk will show."

An examination of the papers alluded to not only proved that my poor uncle spoke truly, but that he died in the possession of bonds and stock to the amount of $20,000; "to be divided equally—so—between his two nieces, Ruth and Margaret Gray."

Of course, John and I married. His mother and Margie live with us, and a happier home it would be hard to find.

A Joke on the Wrong Chap.

MR. WAGON was the victim. His son Johnny is a mischievous lad, and the other day resolved to play a trick on his brother. He arranged certain attachments to that brother's bed, worked by cords running to his own room, and then went off fishing. While he was gone his brother was sent away to be absent over night, and a lot of company arriving at the house Mr. Wagon gave up his own room to them and occupied the absent son's bed.—Johnny got home late at night, and wholly ignorant of this change of arrangements, went to his room, which was next to his mother's, and prepared to perpetrate his designs upon his brother. The first proceeding was to haul on a cord which ran between the blankets and spread on his brother's bed, and, being fastened at the top would pull the clothes off the bed. Mr. Wagon was comfortably tucked in, when suddenly the clothes began to slip and he found himself uncovered. He thought he might have kicked them off, and sat up and took hold of the clothes to pull them back. Meanwhile Johnny had yanked another cord which pulled the pillow off the bed. Mr. Wagon discovered his loss and reached for the pillow, and when he got it the clothes went off again. He was much excited at that and again went after the clothes and again lost his pillow. That time the pillow went under the bed and Mr. Wagon went under after it, and immediately came out again and swore prodigiously, for the floor was strewn with chestnut burrs, and he had gotten into them. He resolved to scold the chambermaid for leaving so many pins on the floor. Once more he made an attempt to get the pillow, and, as it was way under, he made a frantic dive for it, and just then Johnny, who was shaking with laughter, pulled the last cord and the whole bed came down upon Mr. Wagon and jammed him upon the burrs. His frantic howls brought his wife and friends to the rescue, and he was fished out. And then the gas was lighted and somebody discovered the cords running to Johnny's room. Mr. Wagon at once hastened there. The lad explained that he thought his brother was in the bed, but it didn't make any difference. His yells were mistaken by a man sleeping half a mile away for a cry of fire, and he jumped out of bed so hard he sprained a toe. And the next day when Johnny went to school he got spanked again because he wouldn't sit down, and is now resolved to run away from home, the first chance he can get, as this part of the county is a mighty discouraging region for a boy.

In Self-Defense.

A Galveston German was very much annoyed by a neighbor's dog that jumped over into his garden and scratched up things generally. The aggrieved party swore he would shoot the dog. Next day the dog came into the garden as usual. The German rushed for his gun. The dog saw what was coming and jumped back over the fence, but not in time to avoid a load of shot. The owner of the dog brought suit, and the German became scared and consulted a friend as to what he should say when brought up in court.

"You must say," said the friend, "that you shot the dog in self-defense."

"I must say I shoot him in his self-defense. Den de tog's self-defense ish on de same end vere his tail vash—don't it?"

Soldier Birds.

THESE are the storks of India, where they are much valued, and in some parts of that country they are kept in large flocks like the ostrich in South Africa, for the sake of their beautiful feathers.

During the wet season, or in times of inundation, these birds do good service to the natives and owners of property; for they consume vast numbers of reptiles, which are driven from their haunts by the rising water. Rats, toads, lizards, snakes, all disappear down their immense beaks at a surprising rate.

In some towns it is unlawful to hurt them, as they consume the refuse which is thrown into the streets, which in such a hot country might produce disease.

They will sometimes hurry in through an open window, and swallow a slice or two of bread and butter, or anything else that may happen to be left unguarded on a table; while even a puppy or kitten playing by the wayside, has, ere now furnished them with a dainty lunch.

One traveler lamented the loss of his milk-white Persian kitten, which was seized by one of these feathered warriors as it lay basking on the sunny veranda of his house, and swallowed in an instant.

They are commonly known by the name of "Adjutant birds," because they are mostly found near the barracks or an encampment of soldiers, where they go in search of refuse and waste pieces of food.

Many a furious battle has taken place in front of the regimental cook's quarters for the possesion of the bones and other spoils throw out; and while the Adjutants have fought, the nimble crows have rushed in and carried off the prize.

An Adjutant which had been set upon by a flock of crows, for a long time bore their tormenting without much disturbing himself. At last his patience gave way, he made a sudden dash, caught one of the impertinent fellows in his huge beak, and in an instant swallowed him whole, while all his brother crows set up a tremendous cawing, as if to express their horror at his fate.

A Wife Worth Having.

She was a plucky woman, the wife of a Bradford oil speculator, who saw her husband's fortune pass away almost in the twinkle of an eye by a sudden and heavy fall in the price of illuminating fluid. Walking into a store she took off her sealskin saque and sold it. From that place she went to the jeweler's and disposed of her diamonds and all her silver. When her husband returned home, disconsolate and downcast, she met him in the door dressed in a neat calico wrapper. He had been a clerk before fortune smiled upon him, and she a modest school teacher. She informed him that she had discharged all the servants, and they would live as formerly, she doing the work. She handed him $5,000 as the result of selling her jewelry, and told him to use it. Joy and hope beamed in his eyes, and found a place in his heart again. He went again to his business. In one month he had regained his former position.

☞ George Arnold, a Texas farmer, believing he would go mad from the bite of a dog, bought a twelve foot trace chain and strong lock and went into the woods. After writing a letter to his wife, in which he told her what he felt would happen; and giving directions as to certain things he wished her to do after his death, he ran the chain round a tree, drew it through the large ring at the end, and then wound the other end around his ankle so tight that it would not slip the foot, locked it securely, and threw the key far beyond his reach. Two days after his dead body was found chained to the tree, and there was evidence that he had died of hydrophobia.