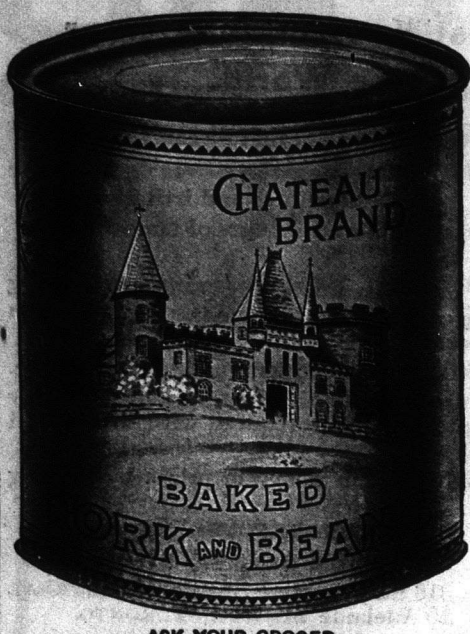


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—and fine. There never was another woman like Nellie, you know, Tom."

Mr. Douglas cleared his throat.

"No," he said softly, gazing off into nothingness, as if he were seeing pictures of the long ago, of the might-have-been. "No," he added, still more softly, "not like Nellie."

"Couldn't you come out and see us some time? On certain days it is permitted."

"Permitted—" Mr. Douglas checked the rise in his voice—the idea of the mere superintendent of a poor-house permitting him. He cleared his throat again. "Yes," he said, "I'll do that; I'll come and see you—and Nellie." He paused for a moment dreamily, and then brought himself back with a jerk. "And now about these things that you want. You'd better leave the list with me, and let me attend to it. I've got a pull—that is, I know a man in that business, and I believe I can get you a little better bargain than you could make dealing with a stranger. There's nothing like a pull, you know."

"Well," said Mr. Braden, diffidently, "if it wouldn't be too much trouble for you, it would help me. You know I was never very good at making a trade. But I'll give you my note for the money now, of course, as this is strictly business."

"Of course," agreed Mr. Douglas; and taking a blank from a drawer, he drew up the document, by signing which Wallace Braden agreed to pay Thomas J. Douglas, in six months, two and 85/100 dollars with interest at five per cent. for value received.

The next afternoon there were delivered to Mr. Wallace Braden at the County Asylum, one wheel plow, one garden spade, one digging fork, one shovel, one steel rake, three different kinds of hoes, two garden trowels, three dibbles, one large and one small sprinkling can, one garden wheelbarrow, one ordinary thermometer and hotbed thermometer, five hundred pounds of fertilizer, and a varied assortment of garden seeds sufficient to start a truck farm—all of which represented the dealer's idea of "the things a man needed to start a small garden." And besides receiving these things, Mr. Braden also received a little more respect and consideration from the superintendent when that official learned where the supplies had come from. And yet Mr. Braden was distressed. He was sure some mistake had been made, because it seemed impossible that even Tom Douglas, with his pull and personal acquaintance, could have got all these things for \$2.85. But time was ripe for horticultural action, and he started in the next day to make his garden, using only a small portion of his supplies, and putting the rest carefully away to be returned when the dealer had discovered his mistake.

Half a dozen different times Mr. Douglas had told himself he would make a visit to the County Asylum the next day, and half a dozen times his courage failed him, until four months had passed, and it was August. Then came another note, also marked "Personal," which read:

Dear Tom:—

Wallace's garden, which has been growing splendidly, is now at its best, and if you can find the time we should be very glad to have you see it.

Sincerely yours,

Nellie Braden.

In the privacy of his own office Mr. Douglas read this note several times, and studied it long and thoughtfully. Then he drew a pocketbook from his inside pocket, and, taking out the liberal supply of bills that was in it, placed the note there alone, and returned it to its place.

The early hour at which Mr. Douglas rang his bell the next morning came with something of a shock to his man, and that affable and patient individual received still further shocks when Mr. Douglas began to dress.

"Haven't I any old shoes?" he demanded, eyeing with a frown the polished pair that was ready for him.

"Yes, sir; but they are very dusty, sir, and will have to be cleaned and—"

"Never mind; bring them."

Not before had the man been so shaken to the foundation of his being. It was the same with his clothes. Garments that had long ago been discarded, and had not, by some oversight of the man, been removed from the

premises, were brought forth, wrinkled and unbrushed. The man suppressed his surprise, for Mr. Douglas not only did not answer questions, but did not even tolerate a hint of them.

"Go tell Jules to bring the auto around," he commanded.

When he was alone in the room he viewed himself critically in the glass. No longer did he appear the immaculate, well-cared-for millionaire. He might have been a small storekeeper, or even a respectable clerk on a moderate salary. There was grim approval in the look he gave his mirrored image. Odious as comparisons were, he did not believe his appearance would be offensive.

Mr. Douglas arrived at the County Asylum on foot, and so dusty was he that he actually felt proud of himself. He was received with some surprise and much consideration by the superintendent, but he had scant time to give to that official. He wanted to see Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Braden.

Not in thirty years, at least, had Tom Douglas felt as he did when little gray-haired Nellie Braden put her hand in his, and told him she was glad to see him. He pressed the faded hand gently, and did not answer; he was afraid, just then, to try.

"And, Tom," exclaimed Wallace, enthusiastically, when the garden in all its glory had been viewed, "there never was such a season for growing things! I'm almost sure now that I can pay the whole note this year."

"Well, Wallace, I'm glad of that, because that's strictly business, you know."

"Yes, indeed; and next year all I make will be clear. Then Nellie and I are going to have a—a time, a regular time! But meanwhile I can't neglect the garden. I've got some plants out of the ground now that ought to go right back in—transplanting, you know. So if you'll stay just here and talk to Nellie till I come back." Then he went out.

And Tom Douglas and Nellie Braden were alone—alone for the first time in thirty-five years—alone with thoughts that went back into that far distant past. Her face was serene; but not his during the long pause that followed.

"And you never regretted, Nellie?" he asked finally.

"Never, Tom."

He drew a long breath.

"I'm glad of that, anyhow," he said.

"It was the only way," she went on simply; "and we have been happy, even if we have not prospered. We are happy now, with the garden you helped us to make. We both work in it, Wallace and I, and it's good for us. And Wallace is just as dear and gentle with me as he was thirty-five years ago." Her face shone with quiet happiness.

"You had a son?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "He was killed in the Philippines," she said simply.

"Surely, then, a pension—"

"We couldn't take a pension, Tom."

He walked to the window, fumbling nervously at his pocket, and drew out a cigar. Then he glanced at her and back at the cigar, and threw it out of the window. The moments slipped away until they heard Wallace coming back from the garden.

"All fixed for the day," he said, as he came in. "And now let's sit down and have a good long talk about old times."

Mr. Douglas shrank a little. He had been thinking about old times, and hardly felt equal to talking about them. He took a new grip on himself, and straightened up as if he suddenly had a new idea.

"The fact is, Wallace," he said, "I came out to-day for two reasons. First, of course, to see your garden, and then to see if I couldn't get you to help me out of a little difficulty I've got into."

"Help you out, Tom? Why, of course—if I can." And Wallace Braden smiled a little. He appreciated his own ineffective struggle.

"Well, you see, it's this way." Mr. Douglas seemed to brace himself for an effort—he was not fluently imaginative. "I've got a little place out north of town—er—a—I think it's north—I really never saw it, you know, and don't know just how much there is of it—several acres, I think—that I took on a—er—a kind of trade. The property's just going to rack and ruin for lack of care. I can get a man to work on it, of course, but they're unreliable.