

"I've not lived sixty years" he murmured to his pillow, "without learning that much wisdom, I do hope. I'll be very careful who gets it—why, of course, I will. It shan't go into any house where there's drunken parents, and—"

In the morning Eneas went down to his breakfast with a feeling of exhilaration. There lay the doll where he had left it fully clothed for the night, its nose pointed plaintively at the dusky, fly-blown ceiling. He made his coffee and boiled an egg. Then he opened the door to Miss Judith Hankinson, the rather mellow and colourless spinster who helped him in the shop and at this season of the year began the day with much snuffling and a broom. And the memory of the doll, and the blessing it was going to be to someone, was in him all the while like a beam of sunshine.

Outside the fog had partly given way before an attack of snow. It was a change from bad to worse, for the snow was not exactly white snow, and it turned to black slush as soon as

it touched ground. Yet there was a radiance behind Eneas's spectacles when he said "Good morning" to Miss Hankinson, and afterwards, which made that lady marvel faintly.

Not more than faintly. She was too colourless and methodical to wonder much or long about anything, and even when Eneas brought the doll into the shop in its white box, and made a formal speech about it, she merely said, "Very well, Mr. Riddle," in reply, and blew her nose.

"This article, Miss Hankinson," Eneas said, "is a special. I am putting it on the shelf here so that you mayn't sell it with the others. It's a two-eleven-and-a-half doll, but I've taken the ticket off on purpose that you mayn't sell it to anybody. I'll dispose of it!"

He felt so much obliged to her for her lack of common curiosity that he could have shaken hands with her as a thanksgiving. Instead of that he asked cordially after her mother's bronchitis.

"The weather tries her, Mr. Riddle," said Miss Hankinson.

"It's enough to try anyone. I'm sure it is; and I'm sorry to hear she's no more better."

This said, Eneas moved the doll to a higher shelf. He stood on a stool to do it.

"I think perhaps, it will be safer here!" he murmured, almost tremulously.

Christmas Eve at the corner shop opened in this matter-of-fact way. There was seldom a bustle of business at any time in the morning, and the continuing snow seemed to keep even casual customers aloof to day—until about one o'clock, that is. Then a number of "young madams" from the jam factory at the back introduced a succession of draughts into the shop. In a sportive moment Miss Hankinson had given them the name of "young madams." Three small dolls were sold to these young ladies, for still younger folks at home.

Eneas in his back parlour heard requests for dolls, but was not tempted to move. He had retired at the first influx of the jam girls, whose ways were not to his liking. They sometimes made personal remarks about him. Even at sixty years Eneas was not inured to the world's shocks to that extent. And so he sat and read the paper and gave only his left ear to the shop and its concerns.

But at two o'clock he was in sole charge. Miss Hankinson went off to dine with her old mother; Eneas, spectacles on nose, took her place.

Now that he was alone he saw no harm in gloating gently over that illusive lady in the box. He brought it down removed its lid and smoothed its crimson frock with quite affectionate tenderness. And that smile returned to him as he surmised about its fate.

It should find a home that evening somewhere. So much was certain. Eneas went so far as to lift the doll and hold it in his arms as if it were a baby.

"I don't know," he said, as he contemplated its blue eyes, "if it isn't a mistake to have dressed it so fine. She'll be afraid to touch it, perhaps, at first."

Then he replaced it and brewed more visions about it. He knew hardly any of his customers by name. Boys he addressed as "my lad," and small girls as "my dear." That was his way.

But he had a gallery of little faces in his memory, and he reviewed several of them as he sat on Miss Hankinson's stool and smiled dreamily at the doll.

At this stage Eneas no longer smiled. "Perhaps, after all," he said, seriously, "it would be fairer and more sensible to take it out and break it up among several. Mr. Rushton, of the chapel, could tell me of many poor creatures to whom a few shillings would be a real blessing at this inclement season. Then, again, there's the risk. Suppose it should be set fire to. Children will play with fire, and in cold weather like this they're bound to nestle up to the coals, let their mothers beat them ever so."

He was still in this quite exasperating new train of thought, with his hand on the doll, when the door opened and that notorious young hooligan, Josh Bell, came in impudently, with the question:—

"Got any flags?"

Eneas had not seen this boy before. He had keen, black eyes, like a bird of prey, and wisps of wet, black hair stuck out sideways from under his cap, as well as the more conventional curl or cat-lick to his forehead.

"What did you say?" asked Eneas. The boy had run his words together like the strands of a rope.

"Got any flags; little 'uns—for a party?"

"Oh, flags! Yes; I keep flags, my lad. Are you giving a party?"

Josh Bell stared as if he resented the inquiry. His eyes said unmistakably: "What's that to do with you?" But he kept his tongue in check.

"How many'll I get for thrip-pence?" he continued.

Now, Eneas liked masterfulness in the young, when there was not an embarrassing amount of it nor too many of its demonstrators in the shop at the same time. This was a truculent specimen, but he liked him, too, at first sight.

"The flags are one penny each," he said, pleasantly; "can you do the sum for yourself?"

Hearing this academic challenge, Josh Bell viewed Eneas as an eagle after a surfeit on young pigeons might be supposed to view a centenarian owl. Just for a moment or two he looked at him quite like that, if you can imagine it. Then he allowed his eyes to range elsewhere.

"Let's see 'em, will you?" he said, imperiously. "I'm in a bloomin' hurry."

"Certainly, certainly," said Eneas. "If you're in a hurry, there's nothing more to be said."

He chuckled to himself. The manners of the rising generation really were amusing taken in small doses. Removing his hand from the doll, he turned towards his shelves, which had a multitude of trivial goods on them, flags included. He could not locate the flags all at once. His

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fingers wandered from package to package. "Flags!" he murmured. "Let me see! Where are those flags?"

He was still in doubt when Josh Bell shot forth his hand and annexed the doll, lifted it from its bed of soft paper, and slipped it under his jacket. This done, it was as easy as whistling to get out of the shop and speed a score of yards up the street before Eneas understood fully what had happened.

Eneas took off his spectacles and gazed at the empty cardboard box.

"The young villain," he cried. "A little lad like that!"

The shock stunned the common-sense in him for nearly a minute—a minute of extreme utility for Josh Bell.

Then Miss Hankinson's expressionless face glimmered through the glass of the shop door and restored Eneas to the control of his faculties. He shuffled in search of his hat.

"I've been robbed," he exclaimed; "robbed shamefully. I'm not going to put up with it, and—"

(To be continued.)

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