



Jeff's Permanent Blue Paint.

(W. J. Lacey, in the 'Christian Age'.)

The railway into Sandcomb runs high up amongst the chimney-pots of the Daneland, which is the old town and the home of the poor. It was in passing and re-passing that Mr. Bonfellow began to notice the changes in the look of a big window flower-box fixed up out side one house. From noticing he drifted into interest, and interest heightened into curiosity, and then curiosity led to knowledge, and on the heels of that came sympathy, and sympathy saved a man.

How the thing was done is just the story of 'Jeff's Permanent Blue Paint.'

Mr. Bonfellow came to Sandcombe three times a year. In the spring he wanted to blow what might linger of the winter fogs out of his lungs; in the autumn he obeyed fashion and pleased himself by coming to the sea at his favorite point; and at Christmas he had, as he put it, nowhere else to go. He was a bachelor, and the niece who had kept house for him within sound of St. Paul's now kept house for a clever young doctor who made the merchant welcome.

This explains how there were such long intervals between the various sets of observations which Mr. Bonfellow took of the big window-box. But it does not account for the marked differences he discovered from time to time. It was these that puzzled him. He had a taste for flowers. Bessie Andrews knew that, and still, as when she was Bessie Bonfellow, she had always a blossom for his coat. His love for everything green made him watch the stand of plants that were only a stone's throw from the carriage window. The case that held them was very large. It extended to the side of the house and must have descended to the level of the first floor. It was a miniature conservatory.

The great feature, so far as externals were concerned, was its coat of bright blue. This invariably caught the traveller's eye, especially if it was spick and span, as happened when Mr. Bonfellow first saw it on a windy April day, and as was again a fact at Christmas in the same year.

But on his September journey, and again in the next spring, the blue was sadly tarnished, the glass was broken, dust had settled everywhere, and, in short, there were numerous signs that care had ceased.

On the earliest occasion when this alteration for the worst was noticed with regret, Mr. Bonfellow set it down that the dwelling beyond had a new tenant, and one who lacked either time or inclination to cultivate the beautiful. This one cottage had been happily distinguished amongst grimy companions. Now it was fast returning into the dismal ranks.

However, there was a surprise in store. Convinced that his theory was the right one, Mr. Bonfellow thought no more of the circumstance. He did not even glance at the house as he went back to London a fortnight later. His face was buried in his newspaper. But at Christmas the window-box was brighter and better than ever. In spite of winter frosts it was gay within and without. That meant that thought and affection were lavished upon it. The inference was that a second change of occupancy had occurred, and that the stranger was after the pattern of the original friend of flowers. But there was the element of doubt in this solution, likely as it seemed, and Mr. Bonfellow was conscious of the question.

He looked out eagerly next time. His face fell as the train came to the spot. There, in the soft spring sunshine, was begrimed glass and chipped and faded paint, and a woeful array inside. It was a disappointment. Though he had no real concern with this part of Sandcombe, he then

and there resolved to ascertain the meaning of these changes. He spoke of his purpose at Leslie Lodge after breakfast next day.

'There's a puzzle I want to solve down in the Marsh,' he said. 'I can't undersand the ruin of a pretty flower-box there. It has happened twice. At other times it has been quite different. The blue and green and the buds and blossoms have brightened up the whole row of cottages.'

'That would be Kent Street, at the back,' said his niece.

'At the back—yes; it is all you can see from the railway line. I did not know the name of the thoroughfare.'

'I expect you refer to No. 10. John Jeffs lives there. Have you been called to Jeffs' lately, Cyril?'

The wife had turned to her husband. He looked up from his letters.

'No, I haven't,' he replied; 'but I quite expect a summons. It will come to that. It always does. I pity the man's wife and children. They always know which way he is steering. I don't wonder that his window-box does the same.'

Mr. Bonfellow first frowned and then smiled.

'You forget that instead of clearing things up you are talking riddles, the pair of you,' he said. 'Never mind; I've made a guess. Leave it to me to discover if I am far astray. If I'm right it had better come out at the cottage. It is sure to do that.'

And he went off for his tramp into the Marsh.

Kent Street was not inviting from the front. The people who lived there seemed to recognize the fact, for only in one window was there a card up in the common style of Sandcombe—'Furnished Apartments.' Yet Whitsuntide was approaching. The solitary bid for lodgers was No. 10, and with a business man's trained keenness Mr. Bonfellow saw the door of introduction standing ajar. As he came through the town he had wondered how he should open his enquiry. What was it to him how much or how little color was inside or outside of that window-box? Was not his errand an impertinence? But now he could at least ask about the rooms as a beginning, and so take stock and be ready for the grand assault.

He was not compelled to use subterfuge. A child, whose face was frightened and sad, answered his knock. Before he could frame a question she had judged him. She ran into a room behind and he heard her say:

'A gentleman to see the apartments, mamma.'

But Mr. Bonfellow had another impulse. Poverty was here. He would not deceive even for a few moments. He had not come to bring any such help and relief as the little maid's words might have suggested to her mother. He would be candid and acknowledge the truth.

There were several minutes of unexplained waiting, and he fancied he heard sounds of suppressed strife and pleading. Was there a drama in the background? But at last a wan woman crossed the passage. She was still fair and she was very ladylike. It was easy to see where the child got her good-breeding. Mr. Bonfellow's self-imposed task seemed to grow harder. Surely his haste and his intrusive curiosity were recoiling on his own head. These were not the stamp of people he had expected to interview.

'You wish for rooms, sir?'

'No,' he said with a positive gruffness due to his sense of a false position; 'I am sorry I don't require any apartments, madam. But you are Mrs. Jeffs, I think?'

'Yes, that is my name.'

It was spoken wearily. Hope had ebbed once more. She half turned round. There was a clattering noise in the rear, like uncertain fingers fumbling with a latch. It increased the anxiety on the woman's countenance. Her manner was restless and uneasy.

'What I do want is to know if I could pay for repainting the flower case at the back of your house,' said Mr. Bonfellow, in his sudden desperation. 'It used to look so nice from the railway, and I have an eye for that sort of thing, and I'm often running down to Sandcombe. I liked to see it. I delight in flowers. Once be-

fore it was out of repair, I thought then that you must have removed, but afterwards it was all right again, until this journey. Will you let me apologise, and— and pay for putting it in order?'

He had gone on with his torrent of short sentences and puffs and comical stammerings, and finally repeated his proposition, and did not notice the haggard, unshorn man's face that was in the shadows beyond. Mrs. Jeffs knew that her husband was there, and she was quivering at that, and not at the words of this odd type of visitor. She dreaded more disgrace; she did not divine that a wonderful rescue was near.

Before she knew what to answer the initiative was taken out of her hands; John Jeffs had been drinking heavily, but he was not at the stage when reason is wholly drowned; contrition was moving within his breast, and this had made him cross and quarrelsome with the woman who sought to hide his shame, and Mr. Bonfellow's offer administered a sharp and salutary shock. As he listened the tides of a great repentance swept in upon his soul. It is often so; a word or a look, some foolish trifle, unseals the deep waters, and the grateful heart can only how in praise to God and thank Him for His mysteries of Providence.

There was a heavy step at Mrs. Jeffs' side. Mr. Bonfellow's started.

'You love flowers; so do I; but I've been a fool. I don't know who you are, but I'll tell you my story—it's short, simple, dark. I'm a builder, and could do middling well; sometimes I do. Then the wife's glad, and the children get new clothes, and I doctor up the bit of a conservatory out there; that's when I leave the public-houses alone. But I'm a doughty man, and now and then I don't do well, I have a bad break, and I get as you see me to-day, and the wife's glum. Bess and Tom have short commons and everything goes to rack and ruin. I'm too ill to finish it, and Dr. Andrews up at Leslie Lodge comes to say I must stop. Somehow I manage to pull up, until the next turn; but no, sir, I'll paint my own window-box, please, and pay for it, too; and I'll knock the drink off again, and you shall see.'

A half smile flickered over Mr. Bonfellow's countenance. His surmise had proved true, but it soon faded. He was sorry for this household.

'That is a manly speech,' he said; 'I hope you will make a long stand, Mr. Jeffs. I was in danger from the same cause once; I found it out in time, and I "knocked it off," as you say. I never touch intoxicating liquors now; that is my way of being safe. You will paint the window-box, then? May I drop in and look at your plants when it's done? I am staying with Dr. Andrews.'

The leave was given and used, and the merchant and the builder became fast friends. A brother's sympathy offered in a strange way and in the nick of time was precious in its results. Joy came back to John Jeffs' home, the wife found her long-lost happiness anew. Bess and Tom find the world a fairer place, and the window-box is always gay; and has a framed pledge card cunningly let into the dividing screen, if you go close; a hand points thereto, and over the hand a peculiar legend which is the builder's humorous conceit:—

'Jeff's Permanent Blue Paint.'

One of the most conclusive signs, says the 'Ram's Horn,' of the rapidly increasing power of the temperance force in the United States is the unparalleled fear manifested in the ranks of the forces of intemperance in different quarters of the country. 'Truth,' the leading liquor organ, of Michigan, says: 'The men engaged in the manufacture and sale of liquor in Michigan, who conduct the business along lawful and legitimate lines, are viewing with more or less alarm the growth of public disfavor toward the business and seeking for means to combat it. Never before in the history of the state has there been so much agitation against the business, not only by the everpresent temperance agitator, but by men high in public and professional life, who are known to be men with liberal ideas.'