

Three Years After

"Co-boss! co-boss! co! co!" Old Eben Bates stood by the pasture bars, his voice echoing up and down the verdant valley.

"Come here, you Brindle! come Spot, come Bonnie," he repeated, letting down the rails one by one so that the three sleek animals might pass through into the main traveled road.

"Well, I never, if there ain't one o' them tramps coming up the road." The old man stood gazing at the approaching individual, a wretched looking man with a small pack slung over his shoulder.

As the tramp neared the spot he threw down his bundle and looked at the farmer for a moment in silence, as if waiting for him to speak. Eben returned the gaze until finally the tramp asked in a weary voice:

"Can I get a drink anywhere about here? I mean a drink of water, old man."

"Where you from?" asked Eben, without noticing the request.

"Where am I from?"

"Yes."

"The last place of any size I was in, was Toronto."

"Toronto!" Eben exclaimed, "Toronto, Toronto, let's see," and here the old man seemed lost in deep thought for a moment. "Yes, that's the city, that's the place he went to," still talking to himself. "What did you say you wanted, stranger?"

"Water."

"You kin have it. Just come along with me," and the vagrant was led hurriedly up the lane behind the cattle.

Soon they came to the house and Eben led the way inside. When his guest had been seated, Eben disappeared only to re-appear the next moment leading his wife by the hand. He exclaimed as they entered:

"Ann, this here man is from Toronto—from Toronto, Ann, where James is!"

The old woman looked at the miserably clad man for a moment very thoughtfully.

"Do you know Jim Bates? No, no, I don't guess ye do. He was a proud one, Jim was, and wouldn't be knowing to folks like you."

The tramp did not speak and seemed deeply troubled. He put his hand to his face, as if ashamed to have the simple old couple look at him.

"How long is it, Eben, since James left us?" asked the old lady.

"Nigh on to fifteen years, Ann, and not a word have we heard from him since."

"James was a fine looking boy and so good and kind 'till he got an idea into his head that he could make a fortune in Toronto. One of our city boarders told him all about it when we lived down in Gill-town."

Here Ann raised her apron to her eyes and sobbed gently for a few moments.

"I hope some day he will come home to his poor old mother and father," she said. "He is still loved, the Lord knows how much.

I suppose those city folks are so smart and rich he kinder feels ashamed to come to this plain old home. I know he's a good man, but careless of father and me. I am sure he's rich too, and proud and citified. How glad I should be if I could only have him for a few days! We would go to meetin' Sunday; how the neighbors would look at us, an' how proud I would be with him by my side. My boy! my only child!" Here the poor old lady retreated into the ample folds of the apron again.

Another long silence followed, until finally the wanderer arose and told the old couple that he was going back to Toronto soon and he would try to find their James.

"It will take time," he said, "it may take years, but don't lose hope."

With this the vagrant passed out of the house and was soon lost to sight behind the bend in the road.

Three years passed, as many years before had passed—quiet, uneventful and forgotten in the township of—, till one morning a letter came to the postoffice, addressed to Mrs. Eben Bates.

"Well, I declare," remarked the postmaster. "That must be from that lost son," and he laid the letter to one side as if it were something of special importance.

The letter was put into Eben's trembling hand that morning, before a large audience of neighbors, who had gathered in the store to discuss the topics of general interest. All eyes were on Eben as he held the letter before his astonished gaze.

"My gum! what writin'," said one, who had caught a glimpse of the business-like address.

"You're in a hurry, Eb," said one of the curious neighbors, following the old man to his wagon.

"Yes, I be, John, I be. I'll tell you the news some other day. Ann first, ye know."

Before reaching the door of his humble home he saw his wife at the window and waved the letter frantically in the air. Ann took it from his hand, and followed hastily by Eben, entered the house. She broke the seal with trembling fingers, while her husband hovered over her expectantly. It was a brief letter from the long-lost son and read as follows:

DEAR MOTHER:
I am coming home on the Thursday morning train from Toronto.
Affectionately,
JAMES.

A few words, but what a world of joy they gave those simple country folk, as they read them.

The letter was received on Tuesday, and the news quickly spread for miles around that Eben Bates' long absent son was coming home Thursday morning. On Wednesday, while Ann was rushing about with joyful face preparing the only spare room in the house, she heard a knock at the kitchen door and a man's footstep on the sill.

She surveyed herself hurriedly in the great oval mirror she had just hung in the room and throwing off

her turban, went down stairs. As she entered the hall she saw a tall, manly figure, dressed in extreme gentility, standing in the doorway.

"Good-morning, madam," he answered with a twinkle in his eye, and then they gazed at each other in silence, till finally he exclaimed: "Why, mother! don't you know me?"

One moment of surprise and doubt and the next the old mother was locked in the strong arms of her son, sobbing and laughing for joy. Eben was called in from the potato patch, where he had been hoeing. Both mother and father clung to their son for some time, crying and laughing like children, and thanking the Lord for his safe return.

"Where have you been all these years, James?" asked his mother. "You forgot you had an old father and mother who still loved you?"

"No, mother, I did not forget you," he replied. "I have a long story to tell, I am going to surprise you—perhaps pain you both; but it has all passed now, mother, so don't be troubled. Sit down in the old rocker and father you take your old favorite in the corner and I will sit by mother, here at her feet, just as I used to do years ago.

"How quiet and beautiful it is," he continued. "What a relief it is to be away from the turmoil of the wicked cities."

"Why! are the cities wicked?"

The old couple listened with wonder and astonishment to their son's past history and seemed so surprised to think he had been led away by evil that he could hardly go on and tell the worst.

"Don't you remember a tramp who came here some three years ago? He stopped here for a drink of water, and you asked him where he hailed from? Well, mother, that tramp was your own son."

"What!" gasped both the old people, in a breath.

"Yes, that was I. I did not know you at first. You see you had moved up from the old home at Gill-town without my knowledge. When I recognized poor father I felt terribly sorry and it awoke me to a sense of what I might have been. When you, mother, spoke so hopefully of me, I could hardly keep back the tears.

I resolved then and there to begin a new life and determined to become successful before making myself known to you. It has been three long years of struggle against a terrible temptation. The harder I fought the stronger I grew and now I feel as if I had won dear mother."

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"Gwandma," said Mollie, looking at the wrinkled forehead of the dear old lady. "I finks you ought to go to the laundry and det your head ironed."