

before, everyone must have a hobby, and ancestors are not expensive, all things considered."

As she spoke, she took from off the table the miniature of a young boy, and slipped it into her lap, thinking that she had been unobserved.

"What are you hiding from me?" he asked. "I do not want to rob you of your family treasures, and it is not kind of you to mistrust me."

"It never entered my head, Thomas," she said eagerly, "and I only wished to spare you pain. If you must see, look!"

And she put the picture gently in his hands, and bent over him without speaking a word.

"We had not many reasons to be proud of our descendant, Volumnia," he said bitterly. "He promised well in the picture, did he not? But he did not make a very great thing of life. He had fine notions, derived from your ancestors, Volumnia. But it was not a very aristocratic ending to die in a drunken brawl. Here, take your picture. Your love for that boy was so great that you shut me out in the cold. All your thoughts were for him."

"Ah, you were always so hard," said the little old lady passionately.

"Well, leave that matter alone now," rejoined the old clockmaker, banging on the table with his fist.

All at once there came a low knock at the shop-door, and Volumnia said:

"I think I heard a knock at the shop-door."

"Nonsense," returned her husband. "Your ears are too sharp."

"And I have always thought yours were too dull, Thomas," the little lady replied. "Well, as you do not stir, I will go to the shop-door."

When she opened it, she found a man sitting on the doorstep. "Did you knock?" she asked, as he rose and stood before her.

"Yes, he answered; "I took that liberty. Yours was the only light I saw in the village. I have been walking many miles, and it is such a fearful night. I rested on your doorstep, and I could not resist the temptation of knocking."

She beckoned him into the shop.

"You are drenched with rain," she said kindly. "Come into the kitchen, and you shall warm yourself, and be made welcome."

As he leaned against the counter, the rain trickled down his face, and down his torn coat, and from off his fair mustache. He was probably a strolling player, for he carried under his arm a fiddle and a bow wrapped in a green bag, and this was the only part of him that was not drenched with rain. He was tall, and of slight build; a man of forty years, perhaps. His face was that of a sufferer; but there was some kind of humor about his mouth, and a certain style about his whole bearing of which poverty had not been able to rob him.

The little old lady eyed him curiously, though kindly.

"You are in a sorry plight, stranger," she said as she took his fiddle and laid it gently on the counter. "Ah, do not be afraid! this is not the first time I have handled a fiddle. I am very glad that you called here for shelter. One would not wish to turn anyone away on such a night as this."

"I looked in at your window," he said half-dreamily. "I saw you bending over something, and just for the moment I almost felt as if I were coming to someone I knew. That made it easy for me to knock."

She led the way to the kitchen, and, turning to her husband, she said:

"Thomas, here is a stranger who seeks our hospitality."

"You are welcome," said the clockmaker, who came towards the stranger. "You are welcome, whoever you are. But what the devil are you doing out on such a night as this?"

"Some people have not any home," replied the fiddler, smiling. "I happen to be one of those unlucky individuals."

The clockmaker laughed.

"Rest in the settle yonder and warm yourself," he said, "and my wife will prepare our supper. For my part, I am hungry, and you will excuse me being personal, but you look starving."

"That's just what I am, replied the fiddler, sinking back into the settle.

"But, upon my word, we homeless, supperless creatures become accustomed to

the negative state. We even learn to be merry over our misfortunes. Now, I ask you to look at my coat. Is there not humor in it?"

"There are a good many holes in it," said Volumnia Webster, laughing. "And it is as damp as it can be. Take it off and let me dry it."

"It is not much of a coat," said the stranger, brightly. "Now you would not believe it—would you—but it was a dandy once! I used to pride myself on being well dressed; and my shirt-fronts were something to behold and wonder at! My boots were of the newest fashion, and the cut of my coat was absolutely faultless. However, that is all of the past."

"Precisely," remarked the clockmaker, who had put on his spectacles to examine the new comer.

Then he added:

"Have you come a long way tonight?"

"Yes," replied the stranger, frankly, "and I have completely lost my bearings. Not that it particularly matters where I do go, for times are bad everywhere for us strolling fiddlers. People like to listen, but they do not like to pay! Well, I can partly sympathize: I myself never cared about paying for anything! It is a habit some people have."

"By the way," said the little old lady, as she cut up the bacon and put it into the frying pan, "I left your fiddle lying on the counter; it must be damp. Perhaps you will fetch it, Thomas, and I will give it a good toasting—not to scorch it, but just to prevent all chances of rheumatism. That is what my father, the naval captain, used to do."

"Confound the naval captain!" growled the clockmaker half to himself, as he rose to fetch the fiddle.

"My father, the naval captain," continued the little old lady, "was fond of music, and he played a little on the fiddle yonder, that dirty old thing hanging against the wall. I shall show it to you later on."

"I should like to play on it," said the stranger eagerly.

"And so you shall," she answered kindly. "Thank you, Thomas; give the stranger's fiddle to me."

She took it from his bag, and warmed it at a discreet distance from the fire; she turned it over, and examining it, smiling half mournfully, as though sad memories were forcing themselves upon her mind.

"It is quite a common instrument," said the stranger, who had been watching her with interest; "but I used to have a beautiful one in the days when I was prosperous. That was a long time ago now. I did not then think that I should become a strolling player, making music for children and maidens to dance to and men to drink to. I had ambitions then."

"And have you no ambition now?" asked Volumnia Webster, taking down the toasting fork from the right hand side of the fire place.

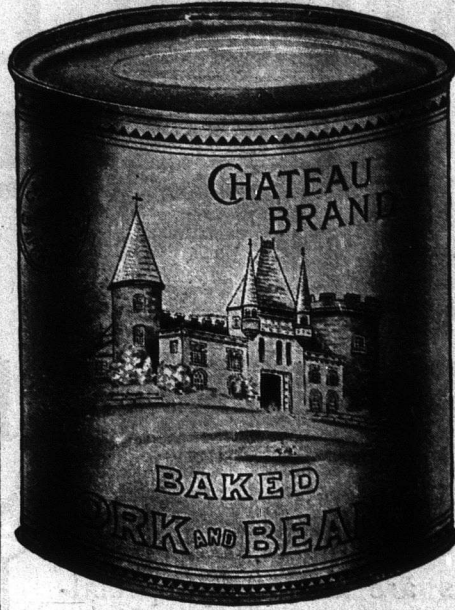
"Yes," he laughed, jumping up from the settle, "my ambition is to help you toast those slices of bread. I am a famous toaster."

She put the fork into his hand, resigning to him without hesitation the office of toaster. There was something cheery about his manner which communicated itself even to the clockmaker and his wife, and found response in them. It was impossible not to feel drawn towards him, for he had that in him which claimed and secured a sympathetic welcome. The little old lady saw that it gave him pleasure to help her, she asked him to place the chairs to the supper table, and fetch the dish from off the dresser.

"You cannot think what a comfort it is to be in this cheerful kitchen," he said, as he held out the dish for the little old lady to put the bacon into. "Only those who have been out into the darkness of the night can appreciate the warmth and glow of a red fire, and the kindness of those who welcome wanderers to that red fire. It is ever so long since I have been into a home. I had almost forgotten what a fireside looked like; and it is quite a luxury to be treated as one still having some hold on humanity. That alone is almost as good as the supper which you are preparing. I do not say that it precisely drives away hunger, but it does drive away the blues."

In a few minutes the three were seated

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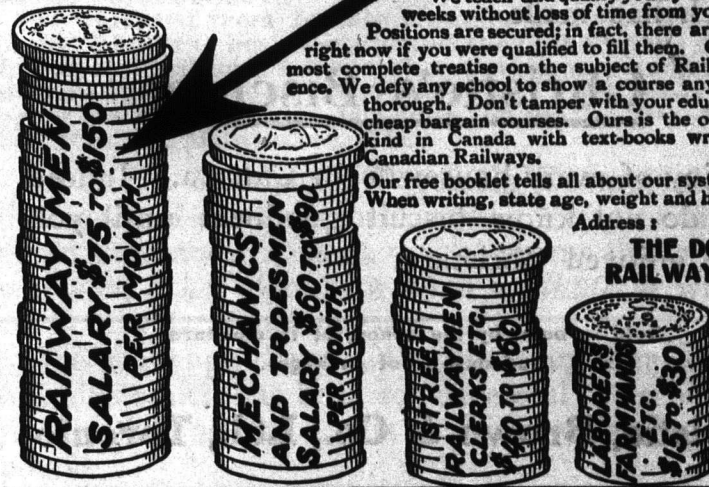
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