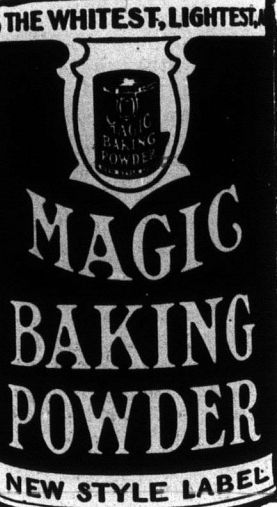


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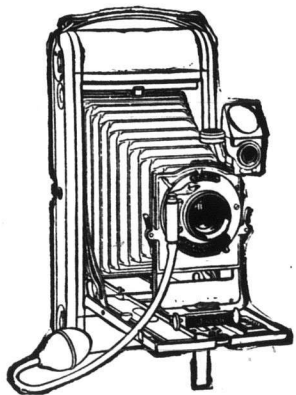
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Both Sides

Specially written for The Western Home Monthly by Elizabeth Forman.

I MIGHT never have noticed the old house at all, as I passed it going to and from my school, had it not been that one evening, as I was on my way home, an old woman who was standing at the gate, spoke to me.

"Are you needing someone to do your washing, miss?" was what she said, "I wash for the two other young ladies who board at Miss Brown's."

I was astonished by the unexpected question, for, while the neighborhood is not by any means a wealthy one, most of the residents consider themselves quite elite. The woman who was soliciting my laundry must have been between sixty and seventy years of age. She was wrinkled, shabby and very grey; yet she spoke with an accent of refinement. Of course, I promised to bring her my washing, and on the following Monday evening, as soon as I could dismiss my pupils and reach my boarding house, the promise was fulfilled.

I did not mind carrying the washing to her, for she lived only a few doors from my boarding house, and besides, I felt a kindly interest in the poor old soul, who was forced, so late in life, to earn her own bread by such hard labor.

I stepped in and chatted with her for a few moments, for she was the kind of old lady from whom one does not easily escape. Not that her conversation bored me in the least; I really found her rather interesting.

She talked a great deal of her son Charles—Charlie, she called him,—of whom she appeared to be very fond and proud.

The house was rather large and seemed about empty. A half-worn carpet covered the front room in which we sat, a single faded picture adorned the dreary walls. Three rickety chairs and a sofa, in more or less advanced stages of decay, completed the furnishings. On one chair I noticed a pile of old, dog-eared music, as though at some time a piano might have graced the now vacant corner of the room.

I couldn't help wondering what manner of man this son Charlie might be. Was he an indolent, lazy ne'er-do-well, or a cripple or an invalid, that he allowed his poor, aged mother to live amidst such surroundings—and wash? My second visit to the place answered my questions. A stale, disgusting odor of liquor hung in the atmosphere. Charlie was a brutal drunkard who allowed his mother to support him by the hardest and most menial labor.

And yet he was the one bright spot in her hard life. She would sound his praises as long as she could induce anyone to stay and listen to her. Whatever his sins and shortcomings, he was her all, whom she loved with a fervor amounting almost to idolatry.

"I wish you could know him," she said to me once, after I had been taking her my washing for some time. "The poor boy never goes out among young people, like he ought to. I wish he knew you."

I could scarcely keep my face from showing the scorn that I felt. "No wonder that he does not dare to show his face among other people," I thought to myself, but I would not have hurt his poor mother's feelings for the world, so I hurried away as soon as possible.

I had often wondered if I could not help her to obtain work more suited to her age and strength. We paid her as liberally as we could afford for our washing, but the other two girls at Miss Brown's, like myself, had their own living to earn, and our generosity was necessarily tempered with economy. Besides, we reasoned, doubtless she only gave most of our extra money to Charlie with which to buy liquor. It was the old case of the just and the unjust. My plan was to find her a place where her duties would be that of a companion or nurse, and let Charlie shift for himself.

I stopped one afternoon, on my way home from school, to ask her if she would like such a place. Under my

arm I carried a treasured copy of Longfellow's poems, which my old friend espied almost before I had seated myself.

"Charlie has one just like it," she said, taking it from me and looking into it almost hungrily. "He is very fond of his books."

For a moment she turned page after page of the book in her hands, then suddenly she looked up and said, "Don't you want to see Charlie's room?"

I certainly did not want to see Charlie's room, but she was instantly on her feet in the door-way, with a pleased, expectant light in her eyes.

"It's the only redeeming thing about the whole house, I want to show it to you," she said, with a trace of pleading in her tone.

I followed her up the dusty, uncarpeted stairs into her son's room, very reluctantly.

The floor was covered by a cheap carpet, a plain bed stood in one corner, but the other entire side of the wall was taken up by an immense cabinet, which contained row after row of books, many of them in costly leather bindings.

There were other articles besides books, too; one was a costly meerschau pipe. There were even some pieces of silver and some rare old china. I could have spent hours looking at his treasures. He was surely a drunkard of unquestionable taste. But his mother plucked disappointedly at several of the glass doors, only to find every one locked.

"He always keeps them locked," she explained.

From the cabinet I turned to the two pictures which alone adorned the walls.

"That's me, when I was younger," Charlie's mother explained as I looked at a painting of a handsome woman, dressed in silks and adorned with jewels. "The other is his father."

When I looked at the other picture I almost gasped. I had seen it before in more than one magazine and newspaper. Then I saw the whole situation in an instant.

To hide her son's disgrace, this woman had dropped her husband's honored name, and buried herself in this remote, quiet neighborhood.

Doubtless the barren appearance of the house was due to the fact that, in the struggle with poverty, everything movable or saleable had been sacrificed.

Every article of value in Charlie's room was under lock and key.

"Of course, he didn't believe in his things being sold—as long as his mother was able to wash," I thought, as I walked home after that memorable visit. My errand had been quite forgotten in my inspection of Charlie's room, nor was it ever mentioned at any other time.

On my next visit to the house I met Charlie—quite accidentally. He came home from work—he really did some kind of work, it seemed—earlier than usual that day.

His mother presented him to me with great pride. I bowed very stiffly, but Charlie was not a person, after all, to escape one's notice. He was very tall and well built, plainly a son of the good old name that he was disgracing.

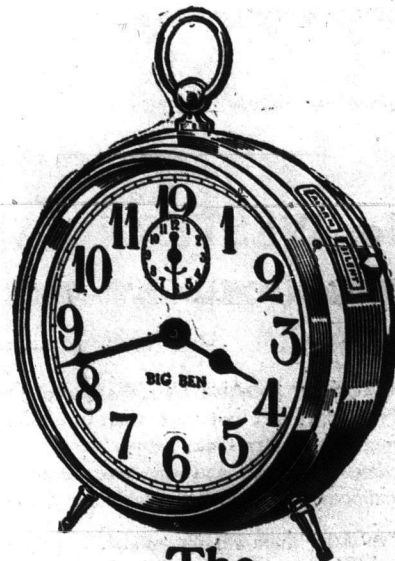
His clothes, though common and plain, were worn with grace, and despite the life of drunkenness, that I knew (by the oft-repeated odor of liquor that I had noticed in the house) he must live, he had a clean, healthy complexion.

I picked up my package of washing, for which I had called, and hurried out of his despised presence as soon as possible.

I noticed that he glanced curiously at the package, but supposed that he was wondering if I had paid his mother, and how much.

My heart burned, as I walked home, with the injustice of the thing.

What right had he to be straight, and healthy and handsome, while his poor old mother lived in poverty and broke her back over a wash tub!



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