

Old Gentleman Named Swayne.

[N. Y. TIMES.]

John Kent came weary by enough down the main street of the city. In truth, the rattle of the elevated trains and the buzz of the trolleys affected his strength far more than did his walk from the country since day-break; for he was a sturdy young fellow, well set up and supple. At the corner he rested his bundle against the decayed palings and looked over the enclosure. The grounds were neglected, the fruit trees thick with vines, the shrubbery a thicket, the beds overwhelmed with weeds in the centre, on a little stood the old colonial man and demoted, like a wren, here by the surges of time, blinds creaked and flapped through the windows the winds played the streaming wallpaper of the rooms. The casements of the veranda at its base and the blinds on its roof were alike dilapidated. Only the front door presented an appearance, as if suggesting the supremacy of seclusion over hospitality.

An old man came out from the cookhouse, in the rear and gazed curiously at the way-farer.

"Good morning," said John, civilly. "Do you need any help?"

"I don't know but I do," replied the other. "There is need of a caretaker to sleep in the place. Everything is going to rack and ruin."

"Gone," suggested John, laconically. "Pretty much so, for a fact," rejoined the other. "I'm the agent, and there's not enough in it for me to bother. I did think I might come across some one who would do all I require for his keep, but—"

"I'm your man; indeed, I'm looking for some such job. I'm a bit of a carpenter, and I can repair these rails and sills and cornices. I'm something of a gardener; there's no reason why in a month's time there shouldn't be quite a parterre here with a vegetable patch in the rear."

"There's some furniture in the corner room, and I could send you meals from the house. My name is MacComber. But—"

"But me no buts, I accept." "You don't offer any recommendations," rejoined the agent dubiously. "Though I don't know that any are required for such a place. There's nothing you could steal, even if you were so inclined, and you do seem respectable. But—but—well, to speak plainly, you look more like a schoolmaster than a hired man."

"I have taught school; but never fear. A little learning is a dangerous thing only to the one that acquires it. If I don't serve you faithfully you can discharge me, you know," and, without further parley, the two agreed, and that night John Kent sat in the second-story corner room of the old Colonial mansion, reading the odes of Horace by flickering candlelight.

Mr. MacComber's criticism of the young man's appearance seemed even more apt in the silence and gloom. There were the severely classical features, the scholastic intensity and composure of surroundings, and above all that pervasive calm which merely a trifling authority may engender, but which remains prepared to say to any emergency, "Lo, here am I!"

The house was silent, though more from the hush than from the absence of sounds. To one prone to be fanciful, there arose from the floors and emerged from the walls a sense of stealthy footsteps, and of sighs and moans. For such a one the atmosphere of the old house thrilled with vague apprehensions. But Kent read on, as if in the study of long-continued habit, surrounded by the books of years. The conscience of the true student is tranquil. With increasing knowledge comes an increasing conception of the dignity and reliance of individuality.

About 9 o'clock there was a rap on the lower door, and Kent let in his employer.

"Well, it looks cozy in here, after all," said Mr. MacComber, as he ascended the stairs and seated himself in one of cavernous armchairs. "There's nothing like this old-style furniture to give an air of home, and every stick in the house has been crowded in here. Kind of lonely though isn't it? I thought I'd run over and chat with you for awhile, for I've taken a liking to you, odd as you are."

"When any one accuses me of oddity, I always try to make amends," replied John smiling. "For most human enigmas are not worth the solving. I am naturally reticent, but not obdurately so, I trust. You wonder why a schoolmaster should be willing to be a hired man? It's only a whim. I was educated in Germany, and over there, when the opportunity afforded, a student straps his knapsack on his back and steps out into the world in search of beautiful adventures. Such an opportunity came to me a month since, and I've been wandering hither and thither over this particular section of earth's face. Now, I'm glad to rest for awhile, to indulge in such pleasant adventures, and to have this romantic old spot in which to play the role of hermit."

"Tastes differ; now, I would prefer a more modern style of vacation. However, if you seek the romantic, this is the place to find it. This house is the oldest, as it was once the most elegant in the State. It is said that Washington on his way to his first inaugural, slept in that very bed. Nathan Swayne, the proprietor at that time, was considered to be the richest man in the country and yet, a few months later, when he was murdered, not a trace of his accumulation could be discovered."

"Murdered!" exclaimed Kent. "Aye, likely enough. Few houses have attained the age of this without having witnessed, and fruitlessly witnessed, some awful crime. If inanimate objects could only testify, there would be less perjury in our courts."

"I might your, and probably in this very case. Nathan Swayne was found murdered in his bed. The only people in the house who could have had access to his room were his only son, Rupert, and his secretary. Each one accused the other, but the charge against the latter was not only more natural, but far more readily sustained by circumstances. The secretary was convicted and executed. He died protesting his innocence, and exulting that the object of the crime would not be attained. Now, mark the sequel. Rupert nearly tore this house apart in seeking for his father's savings. He was compelled to sell acre after acre of his possessions, until naught remained save the adjacent grounds, as at present. He died a miserable death, and left an inheritance of poverty to all his descendants. It gradually became known that Rupert had quarreled violently with his father on the subject of money, and that he was overwhelmed with debt at the time of the murder. Some say that he tried to make the secretary his accomplice, at least to reveal the hiding place of the treasure, and that failing, out of revenge and protection, falsely accused him. Others maintain that old Nathan himself was a ruined man, and committed suicide from shame. At all events, the Swaynes ever since have barely had enough to enable them to retain the old homestead, as they feel their honor bound to do. It won't be long, though, before it will have to go; the only ones left are a widow and daughter, who live with me, and stint as they may their income becomes less and less."

"It all sounds like a case of poetical justice," mused Kent, "that being a popular phrase for the punishment of the innocent. I suppose even this house has shared in the lot, and has an evil name, to the detriment of its commercial value."

"Yes," assented Mr. MacComber, rather reluctantly; "they say the house is haunted; that the old gentleman walks. I don't believe in ghosts, and yet I wouldn't care to stay here alone like you."

"I don't believe in ghosts, either; I wish I did, for then I would surely be awake and watch instead of going to sleep. You may be sure that should a mortal spirit return to earth it would be for some motive more substantial than the attempting to scare with pointing finger and hobgoblin eyes. I, for one, would give his ghostship a most respectful and attentive audience."

"So would I—with my head under the bed clothes."

"Man deals with all such questions in a childish way," reflected Kent. "He disembodies, but he never really spiritualizes. The average ghost is a cross creature that has retained its mortal dotage. One would expect that a being that can thus prove its supremacy over our conceptions of nature would also be exalted in intellect. But, no, if a ghost can only tell the date of the discovery of America, or when the Dutch captured Holland, say, he's as complacent as a clerk who has passed a civil service examination."

"All the same," replied Mr. MacComber, rising and gazing around nervously. "I prefer more substantial stupidity. It's more congenial, you know. And now you are sure you have everything you need, Mr.—"

"Mr.— Ah, I believe you didn't tell me your name."

"My name is John Kent, and I'm extremely comfortable, thank you."

"That's odd," ejaculated Mr. MacComber, peering on the landing; "the secretary's name was John Kent."

"Which only goes to prove what a meagre vocabulary our ancestors must have had. I suppose that a thousand different Johns came hither from Kent. Well, good night, sir," and carefully barring the door, Kent returned to his reading.

The clock of a true student ticks the hours like minutes, when Kent suddenly raised his eyes from his book and listened. He was surprised to hear the bell from an adjacent steeples striking 2. It was not that sound, however, which had aroused him, but a faint yet distinct, trip, trip, as if some one was walking in slippers overhead. This similitude became more evident as it descended the stairs, and passed along the corridor, and as Kent, somewhat bewildered, but in no wise alarmed, sprang to his feet, a little old man glided into the room, removing his slippers with antique grace. A courteous-looking old gentleman he was, surely—so weaned, so serene, that his frame seemed

scarcely able to sustain the long, heavy night robe of some dark material, which trailed around him. As he advanced his legs showed against the folds as white and thin as pipe-stems. And from his flapping half slippers, the sinews and bones of his feet stood out as if through parchment.

"I crave your pardon," began the visitor, with a formal bow. "But I'm apt to be restless at night, and then I find repose in wandering through the old house. When the wind is in the east my room gets just a trifle stuffy. If you are not about retiring, I will, sit with you for a while, under your favor, of course."

"That's right," replied Kent, heartily. "Sit down I sit down! I always smoke two pipes before I go to bed, and I haven't begun yet. Won't you join me? No? Then I trust the odor of the weed is not offensive. No, again. Ah, then, we are as cozy as possible. May I ask whom I have the honor to address? My employer, Mr. MacComber, told me there was no one else in the house."

"It's out of sight, out of mind, with MacComber," rejoined the old gentleman, irritably. "My name is Swayne, and I have a life interest in this estate, but because I don't choose to associate with him, he thinks to retaliate by ignoring me. But I have no time to waste over such canaille. I see that your taste in reading is classical. Sir, I had a very pretty Latinity myself when I was a lad; that is, for construing, I never did care much about the sonnet."

"I think myself that the schools pay too much attention to what, at best, is only a theory. In my humble opinion, the immortal thought is the kernel; and all else, the husk."

"Aye, remember that any thought that was worth the thinking immortal. I respect your sentiments, and I admire the way you express them, young man. May I ask your name?"

"My name is John Kent," said John, puffing vigorously on his pipe. The cloud of smoke was a huge one, and, for some reason, probably because of the dampness accruing from the east wind, hung low and fairly obscured the candle's glimmer. When at length it raised the old gentleman's chair was empty, and on the floor above sounded the trip, trip of his slippers.

"Hello!" soliloquized John. "I must have smoked the old fellow out. If he returns to-morrow night I'll try to be more considerate, for I want to ask him whether he has ever seen anything of MacComber's ghost."

The next morning John Kent was up bright and early and at work in the garden. He had said truly that such employment would be pleasant avocation, for he was country-bred, and hence could never forget nor cease to regret the sweet scents of the earth. There were reminiscences, too, which the trimming and spading awakened—reminiscences sad, yet cherished, like the memories of the dead. When last he had been wont to work in a garden he had not worked alone. There had been charming companionship; there had been delicious bits of conversation across a hedge, and tender lingerings as he had trained vines over a wall. There had been hopes brighter than the flowers he had nurtured; there had been a shadow heavier than the transient veiling of a fluffy cloud at high noon. Alas! and alas! Why had Edith been so practical; or rather, why, had not he himself been more determined? It was natural that the poor child should be governed by her mother's warnings. Already she had seen too much of narrow means not to dread possible privation. What, indeed, had he to offer; vague ambitions, but present penury; a broad education and a clear, resolute mind; but only a village schoolmaster's calling. What difference did it make that people prophesied future fortune; what difference that some of his chemical investigations had received respectful consideration from the savants? He was said to be queer; he was known to be poor. Would any widow of ordinary prudence choose a poor, queer pedagogue as a husband for her only child? Certainly not; and so Mrs. Ives had made haste to leave a Summer retreat so fraught with peril; and, on the eve of their departure, Edith, with tear-stained face, had announced her mother's stern prohibition of all association.

And yet let him not forget that Edith's dear face had been stained. Let him not forget that if he had refused, she had suffered, too. There had been no idle chatter in her regard. She had loved him as he loved her, and that which had been both his torment and his consolation; which had driven him forth to wander when a chance vacation occurred, yet which kept poisoning his localities with fancies as precious as they were unfounded. He knew that she loved him as well as if she stood beside him telling him so with the earnest gaze of his grave, grey eyes. In the absorption of this thought John Kent looked up. There by his side Edith Ives was standing, with an expression of reproachful tenderness, but with hands all a-tremble to be out-stretched!

"John, John," said the girl, softly, "was it well for you to follow? Did we not agree, if we could not forget, that at least we would avoid such inevitable pain? Oh, John! I'm so sorry you are here, but I'm delighted to see you," and the trembling hands clung to his arm like homing doves.

"I don't understand," said John a moment later; "I haven't followed you; how could I? I know not whether you had gone. I simply resumed my old vagabond habits, that's all, and after walking until I'm foot-sore, accepted this quiet place. But I could have no possible hope of meeting you at this old, deserted house—"

"It belongs to us. My mother was a Swayne, didn't you know? And you, why you must be the mysterious hired man Mr. MacComber has been talking about."

"And must I go away to wander like another Cain? May I not feel for a few days that I breathe the same air as those old-fashioned flowers, which I shall delight to rear may be plucked and preserved by you? There are weeds about my heart also, and they are choking all the desires of life. If I may linger here, your hands will encourage and bless, even as they now do, dear."

"We are in great trouble, John. The little money which we possess is so tied up that there is no longer any income from it. Mr. MacComber says that the only thing for us to do is to sell the old house if we can. In one breath he claims that no one would give anything for it, and in the next he offers to buy it himself. Mother is so perplexed she doesn't know which way to turn. She suspects that he is responsible for our need, and yet he is our only adviser. And now for you—"

"Of course, I will go," interrupted John gloomily. "I am not so selfish as to add annoyance to great trouble. I will go at once."

"Not before to-morrow, to-morrow afternoon," faltered the girl; "I should like you to try to fathom Mr. MacComber's motives; and, I must see you again, you know I must see you again, John."

"He looks like a designing, avaricious man; but yet I shouldn't consider this property desirable. Why don't you advise with your uncle, he seems to be a long-headed old fellow."

"My uncle, John? I haven't any uncle. Why whom do you mean?"

"I supposed he must be some such connection; that old gentleman, I mean, named Swayne, who lives upstairs in the mansion."

Edith Swayne was a fine healthy girl with a glow of her cheeks which responded to the sparkle of her eyes; but now she listened to her lover's words, an ashen shade crept over her face as if mortality had passed by and had touched her. "John, John," she cried, "there is no old gentleman who lives in the upper story of the mansion. It has been deserted for years. Oh, tell me where did you ever get such an idea?"

John Kent's experience in teaching had taught him quickness in deduction and in subsequent action. If a mere allusion so alarmed Edith, how much more would a true explanation? Evidently, for some unknown reason, the girl's peace of mind demanded the banishment of that old gentleman. Very well, then, he should be as dead as a doornail for all of him. "Oh," he replied indifferently, "I must have been listening to some gossip down street."

"Ah, that's it," reflected Edith, bitterly. "There's a persistent story current that the mansion is haunted. No wonder there is no demand for its purchase. Of course, the tale is as absurd as it is malicious; and yet it is so commonly credited that even I, for the moment, thought that perhaps you—but no matter. Here comes Mr. MacComber down the street, and he mustn't see me talking with you. Try to read him, John. You are acute and wise, and we are so helpless. To-morrow I will see you, never fail! and so, good-by."

In the interval before his employer joined him, John Kent had a spare chance for thought. Such hurried snatches are precious to the student; sometimes his powers, concentrated through the emergency, will attain in a bound what otherwise would have been a tedious and uncertain plod. "An unassuming hypothesis when reasonable, is unnatural only on account of ignorance," he mused, as he turned and bowed respectfully to the newcomer.

"Well, Kent," began Mr. MacComber, cheerily. "You are so prompt and active this morning that you must have had a good night's rest. Not a pointing finger nor a hobgoblin eye, hey?"

"Not a sign of one, sir."

"And yet there is no harm in telling you now that not a man in this neighborhood would have taken your place last night. Old wives tales assume a most serious aspect when one is alone at midnight. But I am convinced that the old house has been abandoned; so convinced that some night I will come and stay there with you. I could knock up a bedstead in one of the upper rooms, and it would be quite a novel experience. Old as I am, Kent, I have a romantic strain in my blood; how happy I would be to lie and watch the marvelous framework of the moonlight on those old walls, copying, yet transforming, the foliage without! The more I think of it, the more I am fascinated with the idea. It would be a nice little adventure, wouldn't it? The pleasure, too, because no one else would be any the wiser?"

"Then why not come to-night, sir," suggested Kent. "The moon is in the full, and, besides, I think I must leave by day after to-morrow."

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"Leave, when you just came; that's singular. Why must you leave?"

"The vagabond habit that started me on my travels urges me on."

"And I suppose you may never come this way again, nor hear nor think of the old house? Well, well, your young men would be old if you governed your steps with judgment. Even we seniors, you see, have our whims. Perhaps to-night would be a good time for me to indulge my folly. Of course, you won't speak of it; I might be held up to ridicule, you know."

"To whom could I speak of it, sir?" asked John; and with this unanswerable question Mr. MacComber went on his way, satisfied.

And throughout that day John Kent watched sharply and pondered vigorously as he worked. He saw his employer furtively bring bedding from his home and the pieces of an old bedstead from the cookhouse. Was not this a great deal of trouble for an avaricious man to take for the accomplishment of a silly, empty vagary? How absorbed must have been his mind not to have invented a better excuse on the spur of the moment! And what else was that which he was doing at the very moment when John was concealed by the shrubbery, and might well be supposed to be off the grounds? A carpenter's kit; there was no mistaking the saw and augers, and picks. Well, then, did he intend to assist the "marvelous framework of the moonlight on the wall"? How foolish not to realize that greed is only self-deceptive!

Mr. MacComber was in a nervous, flurried condition, for a lover of nature that night, when John Kent admitted him into the old house. One would think that he were about to die in wait instead of in watching the transformation of the foliage. His one topic of conversation was John's experience, or rather, lack of experience, on the previous night. Was he quite sure that he hadn't heard some unusual sounds? Then, likely, he was a heavy sleeper? No, the slightest tread would awaken him? That, then, was proof of the scandalous treatment the old house had received from the public; now, wasn't it? He rejoiced that he had determined on making this practical test, especially since, if there were any cause for alarm, John would speedily come to his aid. "I shall be in the room directly overhead," Mr. MacComber continued. "The moonlight doesn't strike in there till late, and it will be pleasant to see its gradual approach."

"I think, though," suggested John, "that the moonbeams are responsible for many a ghost. Their cold, green light plays fantastic tricks with the imagination."

"Of course, of course," assented Mr. MacComber, taking a black bottle from his pocket. "May see shadows and give them the substance of their fears. We don't believe, because we're not afraid, that's all. Won't you try a drop against the night air?"

"I don't drink, but I think you are wise to do so. You are not used to exposure, and you're apt to find your room draughty. As for my unbelief, it arises purely from lack of data; just as no reasonable man a century ago would have believed in the utility of electricity. On the other hand, I am open to conviction, just as such a one would have been. The inadequacy of motive is the principal cause of my ridicule of popular superstition. I am frank to admit that it seems likely that the powers of the dead are far superior to our own. Should I ever have the good fortune to meet a ghost, I would most respectfully crave his assistance. I am interested in chemistry, for instance; just think what points I might gain!"

"Don't!" entreated Mr. MacComber, hastily helping himself to the liquor; "it seems foolishly to talk that way. And yet, I think that your words are additional proof of the freedom of this house from any thing supernatural. A ghost who was clever enough to overcome the impossibility of existence would be able to read your mind, and hence, would have put your boasts to a test last night. A ghost? Pook! nonsense! There is no such thing; if there were, I would ask him to join me in one more. Spirits to spirits, I say," and he responded to the toast and looked round about with an air of pot valiancy.

After there had been a sufficient storage of bibulous bravado, Mr. MacComber announced his intention of retiring. "If you should hear any hammering," he added, in parting, "don't let that disturb you. There is a nail in my shoe which I must remove. But if, for any reason, I should call out, 'Kent, and here the purple of his cheeks whitened dimly, 'why, come at once. Of course, that is

highly improbable—absurd, I should say—but come at once."

With half tipsy gravity the employer took a lamp and withdrew. John Kent listened to his heavy tread up the stairs and on the floor overhead, and then there was silence. John went to the window and looked out on the night. It was cloudless; the full moon was high in the heavens, but as yet that side of the house was still in the shade. The lofty branches of the elm and the maple, two fine old trees diagonally stationed near by, as yet were black and obscure. "MacComber was right," he mused. "It will be midnight before he can watch that fretwork, whatever it may accomplish." And, resuming his seat, he picked up his beloved Horace and soon was oblivious to aught else.

It was the striking of midnight which first diverted Kent's attention, and then he heard a heavy tread overhead. "MacComber comes down pretty solidly on that nail," he reflected, and a few moments later it seemed as if his employer must have reached a similar conclusion, for there was vigorous pounding. "He'll be through the side of the house directly," continued John, and then sprang to his feet and up the stairs, for during the very utterance the hammering had abruptly ceased, and a shrill, awesome scream had reverberated through the house.

The upper room was aglow with mellow light as John Kent dashed in. Its walls were fantastically festooned with interlacing shadows, and where the boughs of the elm and the maple formed a cross there was a break which explained what the hammering had accomplished. Crouching directly underneath it, Mr. MacComber, trembling so unreservedly that his window shades were all of a rattle, while near by stood the old gentleman named Swayne, with whom Kent had conversed on the previous night. The latter bowed with studied courtesy and said:

"I must crave your pardon, Mr. Kent, for my abrupt departure last evening; but I was anxious to verify your ancestry, and I had but little time at my disposal."

"Little time," shrieked Mr. MacComber. "Why he's got all eternity! Don't go near him, Kent."

"I can see right through you, you scoundrel," retorted old Mr. Swayne with a certain deadly incisiveness. "Where is the memorandum I made over a hundred years ago which you lately found in some rubbish in the cook house? Ah, here! It is fallen from your cowardly hand! Let me read it to you, Mr. Kent, that you may understand what he attempted to do to-night and why he hadn't attempted to do it before. There is only a fragment, but it sufficed for his need. Listen: 'When the boughs of the elm and the maple at midnight send their shadows under the full moon on to the walls of the upper chamber in the form of a cross; search! Not very definite, is it, John Kent? Yet this man's accused ravine sharpened his powers to judge correctly that it referred to the treasure which I concealed, to the cost of my life and of my poor son's salvation. Of course, fear has hitherto prevented him from seeking. Now he has sought and found, and just in time, too, to enable me to deliver a fortune to its lawful owner. For know that my son Rupert Swayne, in his evil latter days, anxious to make some reparation, however futile, excocted a conveyance of his interest in this treasure to the heir of John Kent, my falsely accused and condemned secretary. A futile reparation indeed, for he had utterly failed in discovering a trace of it. I find no investigation that your father, James Kent, who was the only son of Timothy Kent, who was the only son of this legally murdered man. He is the deed of assignment which I give over to you with the hope that the sins and agonies of the past generations may be recompensed by the united felicity of the present. I have had a long, long wait, and I am very, very tired.'"

"I deeply appreciate your kindness," rejoined John Kent. "And I'm sure that Edith and I can put these talents to a wise use than being hid in a hole in the wall. No doubt you have dragged with you, especially since you have been so restless at night, and yet if you would enlighten me on some such subjects as the penetrability of matter, and the liquefaction of gases, it would add to the very pleasant memory which I shall in any event retain of my wife's great-great-grandfather." "No," said the old gentleman named Swayne.

There were the faint trip, trip of the half slippers on the stairs; and then their echoes died away, never again to be heard within the old Colonial mansion.