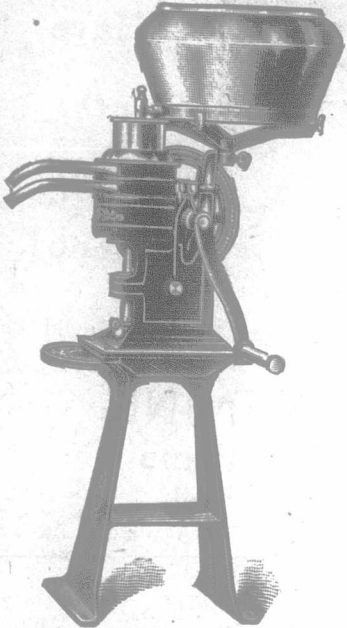


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had whetted his appetite for dishes more nourishing and more toothsome. But no one of them took account of the quality of the blood that ran in the young man's veins.

It was scheming Peter who saved the day.

"Put that young fellow to work, Henry," he had said to MacFarlane the morning after the three had met at the Century Club.

"What does he know, Peter?"

"Nothing, except to speak the truth."

And thus it had come to pass that within twenty-four hours thereafter the boy had shaken the dust of New York from his feet—even to resigning from the Magnolia, and a day later was found bending over a pine desk knocked together by a hammer and some ten-penny nails in a six-by-nine shanty, the whole situated at the mouth of a tunnel half a mile from Corkleesville, where he was at work on the pay-roll of the preceding week.

Many things had helped in deciding him to take the proffered place. First, Peter had wanted it; second, his uncle did not want it, Corinne and his aunt being furious that he should go to work like a common laborer, or—as Garry had put it—"a shover-spanked dago." Third, Ruth was within calling distance, and that in itself meant Heaven. Once installed, however, he had risen steadily, both in MacFarlane's estimation and in the estimation of his fellow-workers; especially the young engineers who were helping his Chief in the difficult task before him. Other important changes had also taken place in the two years: his body had strengthened, his face had grown graver, his views of life had broadened and, best of all, his mind was at rest. Of one thing he was sure—no confiding young Gilberts would be fleeced in his present occupation—not if he knew anything about it.

Moreover, the outdoor life which he had so longed for was his again. On Saturday afternoons and Sundays he tramped the hills, or spent hours rowing on the river. His employer's villa was always open to him—a privilege not granted to the others in the working force. The old tie of family was the sesame. Judge Breen's son was, both by blood and training, the social equal of any man, and although the distinguished engineer, being well born himself, seldom set store on such things, he recognized his obligation in Jack's case and sought the first opportunity to tell him so.

"You will find a great change in your surroundings, Mr. Breen," he had said. "The little hotel where you will have to put up is rather rough and uncomfortable, but you are always welcome at my home, and this I mean, and I hope you will understand it that way without my mentioning it again."

The boy's heart leaped to his throat as he listened, and a dozen additional times that day his eyes had rested on the clump of trees which shaded the roof sheltering Ruth.

That the exclusive Miss Grayson should now have invited him to pass some days at her home had brought with it a thrill of greater delight. Her opinion of the boy had changed somewhat. His willingness to put up with the discomforts of the village inn—"a truly dreadful place," to quote one of Miss Felicia's own letters—and to continue to put up with them for more than two years, while losing nothing of his good-humor and good manners, had shaken her belief in the troubadour and tin-armor theory, although nothing in Jack's surroundings or in his prospects for the future fitted him, so far as she could see, to life companionship with so dear a girl as her beloved Ruth—a view which, of course, she kept strictly to herself.

But she still continued to criticize him, at which Peter would rub his hands and break out with:

"Fine fellow!—square peg in a square hole this time. Fine fellow, I tell you, Felicia!"

He receiving in reply some such answer as:

"Yes, quite lovely in fairy tales, Peter, and when you have taught him—for you did it, remember—how to shovel and clean up underbrush and split rocks—and that is just what Ruth told me he was doing when she took a telegram to her father which had come to the house

—and he in a pair of overalls, like any common workman—what, may I ask, will you have him doing next? Is he to be an engineer or a clerk all his life? He might have had a share in his uncle's business by this time if he had had any common-sense," Peter retorting often with but a broad smile and that little gulp of satisfaction—something between a chuckle and a sigh—which always escaped him when some one of his proteges was living up to his pet theories.

And yet it was Miss Felicia herself who was the first to welcome the reprobate, even going to the front door and standing in the icy draught, with the snowflakes whirling about her powdered head, until Jack had alighted from the tail-end of Moggins's 'bus and, with his satchel in his hand, had cleared the sidewalk with a bound and stood beside her.

"Oh, I'm so glad to be here," Jack had begun, "and it was so good of you to want me," when a voice rang clear from the top of the stairs:

"And where's daddy—isn't he coming?"

"Oh!—how do you do, Miss Ruth? No; I am sorry to say he could not leave—that is, we could not persuade him to leave. He sent you all manner of messages, and you, too, Miss—"

"He isn't coming? Oh, I am so disappointed! What the matter, is he ill?" She was half-way down the staircase now, her face showing how keen was her disappointment.

"No—nothing's the matter—only we are arranging for an important blast in a day or two, and he felt he couldn't be away. I can only stay the night." Jack had his overcoat stripped from his broad shoulders now and the two had reached each other's hands.

Miss Felicia watched them narrowly out of her sharp, kindly eyes. This love-affair—if it were a love-affair—had been going on for years now and she was still in the dark as to the outcome. There was no question that the boy was head over heels in love with the girl—she could see that from the way the color mounted to his cheeks when Ruth's voice rang out, and the joy in his eyes when they looked into hers. How Ruth felt toward her new guest was what she wanted to know. This was, perhaps, the only reason why she had invited him—another thing she kept strictly to herself.

But the two understood it—if Miss Felicia did not. There may be shrewd old ladies who can read minds at a glance, and fussy old men who can see through blind millstones, and who know it all, but give me two lovers to fool them both to the top of their bent, be they so minded.

"And now, dear, let Mr. Breen go to his room, for we dine in an hour, and Holker will be cross as two sticks if we keep it waiting a minute."

But Holker was not cross—not when dinner was served; nobody was grumpy certainly not Peter, who was in his gayest mood; and certainly not Ruth or Jack, who bubbled away next to each other. Peter's heart swelled with pride and satisfaction as he saw the change which two years of hard work had made in Jack—not only in his bearing and in a certain fearless independence which had become a part of his personality, but in the unmistakable note of joyousness which flowed out of him, so marked in contrast to the depression which used to haunt him like a spectre. Stories of his life at his boarding-house—vaguely christened a hotel by its landlady, Mrs. Hicks—bubbled out of the boy as well as accounts of various escapades among the men he worked with—especially the younger engineers and one of the foremen who had rooms next his own—all told with a gusto and ring that kept the table in shouts of merriment—Morris laughing loudest and longest, Peter whispering behind his hand to Miss Felicia:

"Charming, isn't he?—and please note, my dear, that none of the dirt from his shovel seems to have clogged his wit!" at which there was another merry laugh—Peter's, this time, his being the only voice in evidence.

"And she is such fun, Miss Felicia" (Mrs. Hicks was under discussion), called out Jack, realizing that he had, perhaps—although unconsciously—failed to include his hostess in his coterie of listeners. "You should see her caps,

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