Oh, Money! Money!

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Title: Oh, Money! Money!

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Release Date: June, 2004 [EBook #5962]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on October 1, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, OH, MONEY! MONEY! *****

Charles Franks, Charles Aldarondo, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

[Illustration by Helen Mason Grose with caption: "I was thinking--of Mr. Stanley G. Fulton"]

OH, MONEY! MONEY!

A NOVEL

BY

ELEANOR H. PORTER

Author of

The Road to Understanding,
Just David, Etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
HELEN MASON GROSE

To

My Friend

EVA BAKER

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ILLUSTRATIONS

From drawings by Mrs. Howard B. Grose, Jr.

CHAPTER I

EXIT MR. STANLEY G. FULTON

There was a thoughtful frown on the face of the man who was the possessor of twenty million dollars. He was a tall, spare man, with a fringe of reddish-brown hair encircling a bald spot. His blue eyes, fixed just now in a steady gaze upon a row of ponderous law books across the room, were friendly and benevolent in direct contradiction to the bulldog, never-let-go fighting qualities of the square jaw below the firm, rather thin lips.

The lawyer, a youthfully alert man of sixty years, trimly gray as to

garb, hair, and mustache, sat idly watching him, yet with eyes that looked so intently that they seemed to listen.

For fully five minutes the two men had been pulling at their cigars in silence when the millionaire spoke.

"Ned, what am I going to do with my money?"

Into the lawyer's listening eyes flashed, for a moment, the keenly scrutinizing glance usually reserved for the witness on the other side. Then quietly came the answer.

"Spend it yourself, I hope--for some years to come, Stanley."

Mr. Stanley G. Fulton was guilty of a shrug and an uplifted eyebrow.

"Thanks. Very pretty, and I appreciate it, of course. But I can't wear but one suit of clothes at a time, nor eat but one dinner--which, by the way, just now consists of somebody's health biscuit and hot water. Twenty millions don't really what you might call melt away at that rate."

The lawyer frowned.

"Shucks, Fulton!" he expostulated, with an irritable twist of his hand. "I thought better of you than that. This poor rich man's 'one-suit, one-dinner, one-bed-at-a-time' hard-luck story doesn't suit your style. Better cut it out!"

"All right. Cut it is." The man smiled good-humoredly. "But you see I was nettled. You didn't get me at all. I asked you what was to become of my money after I'd done spending it myself--the little that is left, of course."

Once more from the lawyer's eyes flashed that keenly scrutinizing glance.

"What was it, Fulton? A midnight rabbit, or a wedge of mince pie NOT like mother used to make? Why, man alive, you're barely over fifty, yet. Cheer up! It's only a little matter of indigestion. There are a lot of good days and good dinners coming to you, yet."

The millionaire made a wry face.

"Very likely--if I survive the biscuits. But, seriously, Ned, I'm in earnest. No, I don't think I'm going to die--yet awhile. But I ran across young Bixby last night--got him home, in fact. Delivered him to his white-faced little wife. Talk about your maudlin idiots!"

"Yes, I know. Too bad, too bad!"

"Hm-m; well, that's what one million did--inherited. It set me to thinking--of mine, when I get through with them."

"I see." The lawyer's lips came together a little grimly. "You've not made your will, I believe."

"No. Dreaded it, somehow. Funny how a man'll fight shy of a little thing like that, isn't it? And when we're so mighty particular where

it goes while we're living!"

"Yes, I know; you're not the only one. You have relatives--somewhere, I surmise."

"Nothing nearer than cousins, third or fourth, back East. They'd get it, I suppose--without a will."

"Why don't you marry?"

The millionaire repeated the wry face of a moment before.

"I'm not a marrying man. I never did care much for women; and--I'm not fool enough to think that a woman would be apt to fall in love with my bald head. Nor am I obliging enough to care to hand the millions over to the woman that falls in love with THEM, taking me along as the necessary sack that holds the gold. If it comes to that, I'd rather risk the cousins. They, at least, are of my own blood, and they didn't angle to get the money."

"You know them?"

"Never saw 'em."

"Why not pick out a bunch of colleges and endow them?"

The millionaire shook his head.

"Doesn't appeal to me, somehow. Oh, of course it ought to, but--it just doesn't. That's all. Maybe if I was a college man myself; but--well, I had to dig for what education I got."

"Very well--charities, then. There are numberless organizations that--"He stopped abruptly at the other's uplifted hand.

"Organizations! Good Heavens, I should think there were! I tried 'em once. I got that philanthropic bee in my bonnet, and I gave thousands, tens of thousands to 'em. Then I got to wondering where the money went."

Unexpectedly the lawyer chuckled.

"You never did like to invest without investigating, Fulton," he observed.

With only a shrug for an answer the other plunged on.

"Now, understand. I'm not saying that organized charity isn't all right, and doesn't do good, of course. Neither am I prepared to propose anything to take its place. And maybe the two or three I dealt with were particularly addicted to the sort of thing I objected to. But, honestly, Ned, if you'd lost heart and friends and money, and were just ready to chuck the whole shooting-match, how would you like to become a 'Case,' say, number twenty-three thousand seven hundred and forty-one, ticketed and docketed, and duly apportioned off to a six-by-nine rule of 'do this' and 'do that,' while a dozen spectacled eyes watched you being cleaned up and regulated and wound up with a key made of just so much and no more pats and preachments carefully weighed and labeled? How WOULD you like it?"

The lawyer laughed.

"I know; but, my dear fellow, what would you have? Surely, UNorganized charity and promiscuous giving is worse--"

"Oh, yes, I've tried that way, too," shrugged the other. "There was a time when every Tom, Dick, and Harry, with a run-down shoe and a ragged coat, could count on me for a ten-spot by just holding out his hand, no questions asked. Then a serious-eyed little woman sternly told me one day that the indiscriminate charity of a millionaire was not only a curse to any community, but a corruption to the whole state. I believe she kindly included the nation, as well, bless her! And I thought I was doing good!" "What a blow--to you!" There was a whimsical smile in the lawyer's eyes.

"It was." The millionaire was not smiling. "But she was right. It set me to thinking, and I began to follow up those ten-spots--the ones that I could trace. Jove! what a mess I'd made of it! Oh, some of them were all right, of course, and I made THOSE fifties on the spot. But the others--! I tell you, Ned, money that isn't earned is the most risky thing in the world. If I'd left half those wretches alone, they'd have braced up and helped themselves and made men of themselves, maybe. As it was--Well, you never can tell as to the results of a so-called 'good' action. From my experience I should say they are every whit as dangerous as the bad ones."

The lawyer laughed outright.

"But, my dear fellow, that's just where the organized charity comes in. Don't you see?"

"Oh, yes, I know--Case number twenty-three thousand seven hundred and forty-one! And that's all right, of course. Relief of some sort is absolutely necessary. But I'd like to see a little warm sympathy injected into it, some way. Give the machine a heart, say, as well as hands and a head."

"Then why don't you try it yourself?"

"Not I!" His gesture of dissent was emphatic. "I have tried it, in a way, and failed. That's why I'd like some one else to tackle the job. And that brings me right back to my original question. I'm wondering what my money will do, when I'm done with it. I'd like to have one of my own kin have it--if I was sure of him. Money is a queer proposition, Ned, and it's capable of--'most anything."

"It is. You're right."

"What I can do with it, and what some one else can do with it, are two quite different matters. I don't consider my efforts to circulate it wisely, or even harmlessly, exactly what you'd call a howling success. Whatever I've done, I've always been criticized for not doing something else. If I gave a costly entertainment, I was accused of showy ostentation. If I didn't give it, I was accused of not putting money into honest circulation. If I donated to a church, it was called conscience money; and if I didn't donate to it, they said I was mean and miserly. So much for what I've done. I was just wondering--what

the other fellow'd do with it."

"Why worry? 'T won't be your fault."

"But it will--if I give it to him. Great Scott, Ned! what money does for folks, sometimes--folks that aren't used to it! Look at Bixby; and look at that poor little Marston girl, throwing herself away on that worthless scamp of a Gowing who's only after her money, as everybody (but herself) knows! And if it doesn't make knaves and martyrs of them, ten to one it does make fools of 'em. They're worse than a kid with a dollar on circus day; and they use just about as much sense spending their pile, too. You should have heard dad tell about his pals in the eighties that struck it rich in the gold mines. One bought up every grocery store in town and instituted a huge free grab-bag for the populace; and another dropped his hundred thousand in the dice box before it was a week old. I wonder what those cousins of mine back East are like!"

"If you're fearful, better take Case number twenty-three thousand seven hundred and forty-one," smiled the lawyer.

"Hm-m; I suppose so," ejaculated the other grimly, getting to his feet. "Well, I must be off. It's biscuit time, I see."

A moment later the door of the lawyer's sumptuously appointed office closed behind him. Not twenty-four hours afterward, however, it opened to admit him again. He was alert, eager-eyed, and smiling. He looked ten years younger. Even the office boy who ushered him in cocked a curious eye at him.

The man at the great flat-topped desk gave a surprised ejaculation.

"Hullo, Fulton! Those biscuits must be agreeing with you," he laughed. "Mind telling me their name?"

"Ned, I've got a scheme. I think I can carry it out." Mr. Stanley G. Fulton strode across the room and dropped himself into the waiting chair. "Remember those cousins back East? Well, I'm going to find out which of 'em I want for my heir."

"Another case of investigating before investing, eh?"

"Exactly."

"Well, that's like you. What is it, a little detective work? Going to get acquainted with them, I suppose, and see how they treat you. Then you can size them up as to hearts and habits, and drop the golden plum into the lap of the worthy man, eh?"

"Yes, and no. But not the way you say. I'm going to give 'em say fifty or a hundred thousand apiece, and--"

"GIVE it to them--NOW?"

"Sure! How'm I going to know how they'll spend money till they have it to spend?"

"I know; but--"

"Oh, I've planned all that. Don't worry. Of course you'll have to fix it up for me. I shall leave instructions with you, and when the time

comes all you have to do is to carry them out."

The lawyer came erect in his chair.

"LEAVE instructions! But you, yourself--?"

"Oh, I'm going to be there, in Hillerton."

"There? Hillerton?"

"Yes, where the cousins live, you know. Of course I want to see how it works."

"Humph! I suppose you think you'll find out--with you watching their every move!" The lawyer had settled back in his chair, an ironical smile on his lips.

"Oh, they won't know me, of course, except as John Smith."

"John Smith!" The lawyer was sitting erect again.

"Yes. I'm going to take that name--for a time."

"Nonsense, Fulton! Have you lost your senses?"

"No." The millionaire still smiled imperturbably. "Really, my dear Ned, I'm disappointed in you. You don't seem to realize the possibilities of this thing."

"Oh, yes, I do--perhaps better than you, old man," retorted the other with an expressive glance.

"Oh, come, Ned, listen! I've got three cousins in Hillerton. I never saw them, and they never saw me. I'm going to give them a tidy little sum of money apiece, and then have the fun of watching them spend it. Any harm in that, especially as it's no one's business what I do with my money?"

"N--no, I suppose not--if you can carry such a wild scheme through."

"I can, I think. I'm going to be John Smith."

"Nice distinctive name!"

"I chose a colorless one on purpose. I'm going to be a colorless person, you see."

"Oh! And--er--do you think Mr. Stanley G. Fulton, multi-millionaire, with his pictured face in half the papers and magazines from the Atlantic to the Pacific, CAN hide that face behind a colorless John Smith?"

"Maybe not. But he can hide it behind a nice little close-cropped beard." The millionaire stroked his smooth chin reflectively.

"Humph! How large is Hillerton?"

"Eight or ten thousand. Nice little New England town, I'm told."

"Hm-m. And your--er--business in Hillerton, that will enable you to be the observing fly on your cousins' walls?"

"Yes, I've thought that all out, too; and that's another brilliant stroke. I'm going to be a genealogist. I'm going to be at work tracing the Blaisdell family--their name is Blaisdell. I'm writing a book which necessitates the collection of an endless amount of data. Now how about that fly's chances of observation. Eh?"

"Mighty poor, if he's swatted--and that's what he will be! New England housewives are death on flies, I understand."

"Well, I'll risk this one."

"You poor fellow!" There were exasperation and amusement in the lawyer's eyes, but there was only mock sympathy in his voice. "And to think I've known you all these years, and never, suspected it, Fulton!"

The man who owned twenty millions still smiled imperturbably.

"Oh, yes, I know what you mean, but I'm not crazy. And really I'm interested in genealogy, too, and I've been thinking for some time I'd go digging about the roots of my ancestral tree. I have dug a little, in years gone. My mother was a Blaisdell, you know. Her grandfather was brother to some ancestor of these Hillerton Blaisdells; and I really am interested in collecting Blaisdell data. So that's all straight. I shall be telling no fibs. And think of the opportunity it gives me! Besides, I shall try to board with one of them. I've decided that."

"Upon my word, a pretty little scheme!"

"Yes, I knew you'd appreciate it, the more you thought about it." Mr. Stanley G. Fulton's blue eyes twinkled a little.

With a disdainful gesture the lawyer brushed this aside.

"Do you mind telling me how you happened to think of it, yourself?"

"Not a bit. 'Twas a little booklet got out by a Trust Company."

"It sounds like it!"

"Oh, they didn't suggest exactly this, I'll admit; but they did suggest that, if you were fearful as to the way your heirs would handle their inheritance, you could create a trust fund for their benefit while you were living, and then watch the way the beneficiaries spent the income, as well as the way the trust fund itself was managed. In this way you could observe the effects of your gifts, and at the same time be able to change them if you didn't like results. That gave me an idea. I've just developed it. That's all. I'm going to make my cousins a little rich, and see which, if any of them, can stand being very rich."

"But the money, man! How are you going to drop a hundred thousand

dollars into three men's laps, and expect to get away without an investigation as to the why and wherefore of such a singular proceeding?"

"That's where your part comes in," smiled the millionaire blandly. "Besides, to be accurate, one of the laps is--er--a petticoat one."

"Oh, indeed! So much the worse, maybe. But--And so this is where I come in, is it? Well, and suppose I refuse to come in?"

"Regretfully I shall have to employ another attorney."

"Humph! Well?"

"But you won't refuse." The blue eyes opposite were still twinkling. "In the first place, you're my good friend--my best friend. You wouldn't be seen letting me start off on a wild-goose chase like this without your guiding hand at the helm to see that I didn't come a cropper."

"Aren't you getting your metaphors a trifle mixed?" This time the lawyer's eyes were twinkling.

"Eh? What? Well, maybe. But I reckon you get my meaning. Besides, what I want you to do is a mere routine of regular business, with you."

"It sounds like it. Routine, indeed!"

"But it is--your part. Listen. I'm off for South America, say, on an exploring tour. In your charge I leave certain papers with instructions that on the first day of the sixth month of my absence (I being unheard from), you are to open a certain envelope and act according to instructions within. Simplest thing in the world, man. Now isn't it?"

"Oh, very simple--as you put it."

"Well, meanwhile I'll start for South America--alone, of course; and, so far as you're concerned, that ends it. If on the way, somewhere, I determine suddenly on a change of destination, that is none of your affair. If, say in a month or two, a quiet, inoffensive gentleman by the name of Smith arrives in Hillerton on the legitimate and perfectly respectable business of looking up a family pedigree, that also is none of your concern." With a sudden laugh the lawyer fell back in his chair.

"By Jove, Fulton, if I don't believe you'll pull this absurd thing off!"

"There! Now you're talking like a sensible man, and we can get somewhere. Of course I'll pull it off! Now here's my plan. In order best to judge how my esteemed relatives conduct themselves under the sudden accession of wealth, I must see them first without it, of course. Hence, I plan to be in Hillerton some months before your letter and the money arrive. I intend, indeed, to be on the friendliest terms with every Blaisdell in Hillerton before that times comes."

"But can you? Will they accept you without references or

introduction?"

"Oh, I shall have the best of references and introductions. Bob Chalmers is the president of a bank there. Remember Bob? Well, I shall take John Smith in and introduce him to Bob some day. After that, Bob'll introduce John Smith? See? All I need is a letter as to my integrity and respectability, I reckon, so my kinsmen won't suspect me of designs on their spoons when I ask to board with them. You see, I'm a quiet, retiring gentleman, and I don't like noisy hotels."

With an explosive chuckle the lawyer clapped his knee. "Fulton, this is absolutely the richest thing I ever heard of! I'd give a farm to be a fly on YOUR wall and see you do it. I'm blest if I don't think I'll go to Hillerton myself--to see Bob. By George, I will go and see Bob!"

"Of course," agreed the other serenely. "Why not? Besides, it will be the most natural thing in the world--business, you know. In fact, I should think you really ought to go, in connection with the bequests."

"Why, to be sure." The lawyer frowned thoughtfully. "How much are you going to give them?"

"Oh, a hundred thousand apiece, I reckon."

"That ought to do--for pin money."

"Oh, well, I want them to have enough, you know, for it to be a real test of what they would do with wealth. And it must be cash--no securities. I want them to do their own investing."

"But how are you going to fix it? What excuse are you going to give for dropping a hundred thousand into their laps like that? You can't tell your real purpose, naturally! You'd defeat your own ends."

"That part we'll have to fix up in the letter of instructions. I think we can. I've got a scheme."

"I'll warrant you have! I'll believe anything of you now. But what are you going to do afterward--when you've found out what you want to know, I mean? Won't it be something of a shock, when John Smith turns into Mr. Stanley G. Fulton? Have you thought of that?"

"Y-yes, I've thought of that, and I will confess my ideas are a little hazy, in spots. But I'm not worrying. Time enough to think of that part. Roughly, my plan is this now. There'll be two letters of instructions: one to open in six months, the other to be opened in, say, a couple of years, or so. (I want to give myself plenty of time for my observations, you see.) The second letter will really give you final instructions as to the settling of my estate--my will. I'll have to make some sort of one, I suppose."

"But, good Heavens, Stanley, you--you--" the lawyer came to a helpless pause. His eyes were startled.

"Oh, that's just for emergency, of course, in case anything--er--happened. What I really intend is that long before the second letter of instructions is due to be opened, Mr. Stanley G. Fulton will come back from his South American explorations. He'll then be in a position to settle his affairs to suit himself, and--er--make a new will.

Understand?"

"Oh, I see. But--there's John Smith? How about Smith?"

The millionaire smiled musingly, and stroked his chin again.

"Smith? Oh! Well, Smith will have finished collecting Blaisdell data, of course, and will be off to parts unknown. We don't have to trouble ourselves with Smith any longer."

"Fulton, you're a wizard," laughed the lawyer. "But now about the cousins. Who are they? You know their names, of course."

"Oh, yes. You see I've done a little digging already--some years ago--looking up the Blaisdell family. (By the way, that'll come in fine now, won't it?) And an occasional letter from Bob has kept me posted as to deaths and births in the Hillerton Blaisdells. I always meant to hunt them up some time, they being my nearest kith and kin. Well, with what I already had, and with what Bob has written me, I know these facts."

He paused, pulled a small notebook from his pocket, and consulted it.

"There are two sons and a daughter, children of Rufus Blaisdell. Rufus died years ago, and his widow married a man by the name of Duff. But she's dead now. The elder son is Frank Blaisdell. He keeps a grocery store. The other is James Blaisdell. He works in a real estate office. The daughter, Flora, never married. She's about forty-two or three, I believe, and does dressmaking. James Blaisdell has a son, Fred, seventeen, and two younger children. Frank Blaisdell has one daughter, Mellicent. That's the extent of my knowledge, at present. But it's enough for our purpose."

"Oh, anything's enough--for your purpose! What are you going to do first?"

"I've done it. You'll soon be reading in your morning paper that Mr. Stanley G. Fulton, the somewhat eccentric multi-millionaire, is about to start for South America, and that it is hinted he is planning to finance a gigantic exploring expedition. The accounts of what he's going to explore will vary all the way from Inca antiquities to the source of the Amazon. I've done a lot of talking to-day, and a good deal of cautioning as to secrecy, etc. It ought to bear fruit by to-morrow, or the day after, at the latest. I'm going to start next week, and I'm really going EXPLORING, too--though not exactly as they think. I came in to-day to make a business appointment for to-morrow, please. A man starting on such a hazardous journey must be prepared, you understand. I want to leave my affairs in such shape that you will know exactly what to do--in emergency. I may come to-morrow?"

The lawyer hesitated, his face an odd mixture of determination and irresolution.

"Oh, hang it all--yes. Of course you may come. To-morrow at ten--if they don't shut you up before."

With a boyish laugh Mr. Stanley G. Fulton leaped to his feet.

"Thanks. To-morrow at ten, then." At the door he turned back jauntily.

"And, say, Ned, what'll you bet I don't grow fat and young over this thing? What'll you bet I don't get so I can eat real meat and 'taters again?"

CHAPTER II

ENTER MR. JOHN SMITH

It was on the first warm evening in early June that Miss Flora Blaisdell crossed the common and turned down the street that led to her brother James's home.

The common marked the center of Hillerton. Its spacious green lawns and elm-shaded walks were the pride of the town. There was a trellised band-stand for summer concerts, and a tiny pond that accommodated a few boats in summer and a limited number of skaters in winter. Perhaps, most important of all, the common divided the plebeian East Side from the more pretentious West. James Blaisdell lived on the West Side. His wife said that everybody did who WAS anybody. They had lately moved there, and were, indeed, barely settled.

Miss Blaisdell did dressmaking. Her home was a shabby little rented cottage on the East Side. She was a thin-faced little woman with an anxious frown and near-sighted, peering eyes that seemed always to be looking for wrinkles. She peered now at the houses as she passed slowly down the street. She had been only twice to her brother's new home, and she was not sure that she would recognize it, in spite of the fact that the street was still alight with the last rays of the setting sun. Suddenly across her worried face flashed a relieved smile.

"Well, if you ain't all here out on the piazza!" she exclaimed, turning, in at the walk leading up to one of the ornate little houses. "My, ain't this grand!"

"Oh, yes, it's grand, all right," nodded the tired-looking man in the big chair, removing his feet from the railing. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and was smoking a pipe. The droop of his thin mustache matched the droop of his thin shoulders--and both indefinably but unmistakably spelled disillusion and discouragement. "It's grand, but I think it's too grand--for us. However, daughter says the best is none too good--in Hillerton. Eh, Bess?"

Bessie, the pretty, sixteen-year-old daughter of the family, only shrugged her shoulders a little petulantly. It was Harriet, the wife, who spoke--a large, florid woman with a short upper lip, and a bewilderment of bepuffed light hair. She was already on her feet, pushing a chair toward her sister-in-law.

"Of course it isn't too grand, Jim, and you know it. There aren't any really nice houses in Hillerton except the Pennocks' and the old Gaylord place. There, sit here, Flora. You look tired."

"Thanks. I be--turrible tired. Warm, too, ain't it?" The little dressmaker began to fan herself with the hat she had taken off. "My,

'tis fur over here, ain't it? Not much like 'twas when you lived right 'round the corner from me! And I had to put on a hat and gloves, too. Someway, I thought I ought to--over here."

Condescendingly the bepuffed head threw an approving nod in her direction.

"Quite right, Flora. The East Side is different from the West Side, and no mistake. And what will do there won't do here at all, of course."

"How about father's shirt-sleeves?" It was a scornful gibe from Bessie in the hammock. "I don't notice any of the rest of the men around here sitting out like that."

"Bessie!" chided her mother wearily. "You know very well I'm not to blame for what your father wears. I've tried hard enough, I'm sure!"

"Well, well, Hattie," sighed the man, with a gesture of abandonment. "I supposed I still had the rights of a freeborn American citizen in my own home; but it seems I haven't." Resignedly he got to his feet and went into the house. When he returned a moment later he was wearing his coat.

Benny, perched precariously on the veranda railing, gave a sudden indignant snort. Benny was eight, the youngest of the family.

"Well, I don't think I like it here, anyhow," he chafed. "I'd rather go back an' live where we did. A feller can have some fun there. It hasn't been anything but 'Here, Benny, you mustn't do that over here, you mustn't do that over here!' ever since we came. I'm going home an' live with Aunt Flora. Say, can't I, Aunt Flo?"

"Bless the child! Of course you can," beamed his aunt. "But you won't want to, I'm sure. Why, Benny, I think it's perfectly lovely here."

"Pa don't."

"Indeed I do, Benny," corrected his father hastily. "It's very nice indeed here, of course. But I don't think we can afford it. We had to squeeze every penny before, and how we're going to meet this rent I don't know." He drew a profound sigh.

"You'll earn it, just being here--more business," asserted his wife firmly. "Anyhow, we've just got to be here, Jim! We owe it to ourselves and our family. Look at Fred to-night!"

"Oh, yes, where is Fred?" queried Miss Flora.

"He's over to Gussie Pennock's, playing tennis," interposed Bessie, with a pout. "The mean old thing wouldn't ask me!"

"But you ain't old enough, my dear," soothed her aunt. "Wait; your turn will come by and by."

"Yes, that's exactly it," triumphed the mother. "Her turn WILL come--if we live here. Do you suppose Fred would have got an invitation to Gussie Pennock's if we'd still been living on the East Side? Not much he would! Why, Mr. Pennock's worth fifty thousand, if he's worth a

dollar! They are some of our very first people."

"But, Hattie, money isn't everything, dear," remonstrated her husband gently. "We had friends, and good friends, before."

"Yes; but you wait and see what kind of friends we have now!"

"But we can't keep up with such people, dear, on our income; and--"

"Ma, here's a man. I guess he wants--somebody." It was a husky whisper from Benny.

James Blaisdell stopped abruptly. Bessie Blaisdell and the little dressmaker cocked their heads interestedly. Mrs. Blaisdell rose to her feet and advanced toward the steps to meet the man coming up the walk.

He was a tall, rather slender man, with a close-cropped, sandy beard, and an air of diffidence and apology. As he took off his hat and came nearer, it was seen that his eyes were blue and friendly, and that his hair was reddish-brown, and rather scanty on top of his head.

"I am looking for Mr. Blaisdell--Mr. James Blaisdell," he murmured hesitatingly.

Something in the stranger's deferential manner sent a warm glow of importance to the woman's heart. Mrs. Blaisdell was suddenly reminded that she was Mrs. James D. Blaisdell of the West Side.

"I am Mrs. Blaisdell," she replied a bit pompously. "What can we do for you, my good man?" She swelled again, half unconsciously. She had never called a person "my good man" before. She rather liked the experience.

The man on the steps coughed slightly behind his hand--a sudden spasmodic little cough. Then very gravely he reached into his pocket and produced a letter.

"From Mr. Robert Chalmers--a note to your husband," he bowed, presenting the letter.

A look of gratified surprise came into the woman's face.

"Mr. Robert Chalmers, of the First National? Jim!" She turned to her husband joyously. "Here's a note from Mr. Chalmers. Quick--read it!"

Her husband, already on his feet, whisked the sheet of paper from the unsealed envelope, and adjusted his glasses. A moment later he held out a cordial hand to the stranger.

"Ah, Mr. Smith, I'm glad to see you. I'm glad to see any friend of Bob Chalmers'. Come up and sit down. My wife and children, and my sister, Miss Blaisdell. Mr. Smith, ladies--Mr. John Smith." (Glancing at the open note in his hand.) "He is sent to us by Mr. Chalmers, of the First National."

"Yes, thank you. Mr. Chalmers was so kind." Still with that deference so delightfully heart-warming, the newcomer bowed low to the ladies, and made his way to the offered chair. "I will explain at once my business," he said then. "I am a genealogist."

"What's that?" It was an eager question from Benny on the veranda railing. "Pa isn't anything, but ma's a Congregationalist."

"Hush, child!" protested a duet of feminine voices softly; but the stranger, apparently ignoring the interruption, continued speaking.

"I am gathering material for a book on the Blaisdell family."

"The Blaisdell family!" repeated Mr. James Blaisdell, with cordial interest.

"Yes," bowed the other. "It is my purpose to remain some time in your town. I am told there are valuable records here, and an old burying-ground of particular interest in this connection. The neighboring towns, too, have much Blaisdell data, I understand. As I said, I am intending to make this place my headquarters, and I am looking for an attractive boarding-place. Mr. Chalmers was good enough to refer me to you."

"To us--for a BOARDING-place!" There was an unmistakable frown on Mrs. James D. Blaisdell's countenance as she said the words. "Well, I'm sure I don't see why he should. WE don't keep boarders!"

"But, Hattie, we could," interposed her husband eagerly. "There's that big front room that we don't need a bit. And it would help a lot if--" At the wrathful warning in his wife's eyes he fell back silenced.

"I said that we didn't keep boarders," reiterated the lady distinctly. "Furthermore, we do need the room ourselves."

"Yes, yes, of course; I understand," broke in Mr. Smith, as if in hasty conciliation. "I think Mr. Chalmers meant that perhaps one of you"--he glanced uncertainly at the anxious-eyed little woman at his left--"might--er--accommodate me. Perhaps you, now--" He turned his eyes full upon Miss Flora Blaisdell, and waited.

The little dressmaker blushed painfully.

"Me? Oh, mercy, no! Why, I live all alone--that is, I mean, I couldn't, you know," she stammered confusedly. "I dressmake, and I don't get any sort of meals--not fit for a man, I mean. Just women's things--tea, toast, and riz biscuit. I'm so fond of riz biscuit! But, of course, you--" She came to an expressive pause.

"Oh, I could stand the biscuit, so long as they're not health biscuit," laughed Mr. Smith genially. "You see, I've been living on those and hot water quite long enough as it is."

"Oh, ain't your health good, sir?" The little dressmaker's face wore the deepest concern.

"Well, it's better than it was, thank you. I think I can promise to be a good boarder, all right."

"Why don't you go to a hotel?" Mrs. James D. Blaisdell still spoke with a slightly injured air.

Mr. Smith lifted a deprecatory hand.

"Oh, indeed, that would not do at all--for my purpose," he murmured. "I wish to be very quiet. I fear I should find it quite disturbing-- the noise and confusion of a public place like that. Besides, for my work, it seemed eminently fitting, as well as remarkably convenient, if I could make my home with one of the Blaisdell family."

With a sudden exclamation the little dressmaker sat erect.

"Say, Harriet, how funny we never thought! He's just the one for poor Maggie! Why not send him there?"

"Poor Maggie?" It was the mild voice of Mr. Smith.

"Our sister--yes. She lives--"

"Your SISTER!" Into Mr. Smith's face had come a look of startled surprise--a look almost of terror. "But there weren't but three--that is, I thought--I understood from Mr. Chalmers that there were but three Blaisdells, two brothers, and one sister--you, yourself."

"Oh, poor Maggie ain't a Blaisdell," explained the little dressmaker, with a smile. "She's just Maggie Duff, father Duff's daughter by his first wife, you know. He married our mother years ago, when we children were little, so we were brought up with Maggie, and always called her sister; though, of course, she really ain't any relation to us at all."

"Oh, I see. Yes, to be sure. Of course!" Mr. Smith seemed oddly thoughtful. He appeared to be settling something in his mind. "She isn't a Blaisdell, then."

"No, but she's so near like one, and she's a splendid cook, and---"

"Well, I shan't send him to Maggie," cut in Mrs. James D. Blaisdell with emphasis. "Poor Maggie's got quite enough on her hands, as it is, with that father of hers. Besides, she isn't a Blaisdell at all."

"And she couldn't come and cook and take care of us near so much, either, could she," plunged in Benny, "if she took this man ter feed?"

"That will do, Benny," admonished his mother, with nettled dignity. "You forget that children should be seen and not heard."

"Yes'm. But, please, can't I be heard just a minute for this? Why don't ye send the man ter Uncle Frank an' Aunt Jane? Maybe they'd take him."

"The very thing!" cried Miss Flora Blaisdell. "I wouldn't wonder a mite if they did."

"Yes, I was thinking of them," nodded her sister-in-law. "And they're always glad of a little help,--especially Jane."

"Anybody should be," observed Mr. James Blaisdell quietly.

Only the heightened color in his wife's cheeks showed that she had heard--and understood.

"Here, Benny," she directed, "go and show the gentleman where Uncle Frank lives."

"All right!" With a spring the boy leaped to the lawn and pranced to the sidewalk, dancing there on his toes. "I'll show ye, Mr. Smith."

The gentleman addressed rose to his feet.

"I thank you, Mr. Blaisdell," he said, "and you, ladies. I shall hope to see you again soon. I am sure you can help me, if you will, in my work. I shall want to ask--some questions."

"Certainly, sir, certainly! We shall be glad to see you," promised his host. "Come any time, and ask all the questions you want to."

"And we shall be so interested," fluttered Miss Flora. "I've always wanted to know about father's folks. And are you a Blaisdell, too?"

There was the briefest of pauses. Mr. Smith coughed again twice behind his hand.

"Er--ah--oh, yes, I may say that I am. Through my mother I am descended from the original immigrant, Ebenezer Blaisdell."

"Immigrant!" exclaimed Miss Flora.

"An IMMIGRANT!" Mrs. James Blaisdell spoke the word as if her tongue were a pair of tongs that had picked up a noxious viper.

"Yes, but not exactly as we commonly regard the term nowadays," smiled Mr. Smith. "Mr. Ebenezer Blaisdell was a man of means and distinction. He was the founder of the family in this country. He came over in 1647."

"My, how interesting!" murmured the little dressmaker, as the visitor descended the steps.

"Good-night--good-night! And thank you again," bowed Mr. John Smith to the assembled group on the veranda. "And now, young man, I'm at your service," he smiled, as he joined Benny, still prancing on the sidewalk.

"Now he's what I call a real nice pleasant-spoken gentleman," avowed Miss Flora, when she thought speech was safe. "I do hope Jane'll take him."

"Oh, yes, he's well enough," condescended Mrs. Hattie Blaisdell, with a yawn.

"Hattie, why wouldn't you take him in?" reproached her husband. "Just think how the pay would help! And it wouldn't be a bit of work, hardly, for you. Certainly it would be a lot easier than the way we are doing."

The woman frowned impatiently.

"Jim, don't, please! Do you suppose I got over here on the West Side to open a boarding-house? I guess not--yet!"

"But what shall we do?"

"Oh, we'll get along somehow. Don't worry!"

"Perhaps if you'd worry a little more, I wouldn't worry so much," sighed the man deeply.

"Well, mercy me, I must be going," interposed the little dressmaker, springing to her feet with a nervous glance at her brother and his wife. "I'm forgetting it ain't so near as it used to be. Good-night!"

"Good-night, good-night! Come again," called the three on the veranda. Then the door closed behind them, as they entered the house.

Meanwhile, walking across the common, Benny was entertaining Mr. Smith.

"Yep, they'll take ye, I bet ye--Aunt Jane an' Uncle Frank will!"

"Well, that's good, I'm sure."

"Yep. An' it'll be easy, too. Why, Aunt Jane'll just tumble over herself ter get ye, if ye just mention first what yer'll PAY. She'll begin ter reckon up right away then what she'll save. An' in a minute she'll say, 'Yes, I'll take ye.'"

"Indeed!"

The uncertainty in Mr. Smith's voice was palpable even to eight-year-old Benny.

"Oh, you don't need ter worry," he hastened to explain. "She won't starve ye; only she won't let ye waste anythin'. You'll have ter eat all the crusts to yer pie, and finish 'taters before you can get any puddin', an' all that, ye know. Ye see, she's great on savin'--Aunt Jane is. She says waste is a sinful extravagance before the Lord."

"Indeed!" Mr. Smith laughed outright this time. "But are you sure, my boy, that you ought to talk--just like this, about your aunt?"

Benny's eyes widened.

"Why, that's all right, Mr. Smith. Ev'rybody in town knows Aunt Jane. Why, Ma says folks say she'd save ter-day for ter-morrer, if she could. But she couldn't do that, could she? So that's just silly talk. But you wait till you see Aunt Jane."

"All right. I'll wait, Benny."

"Well, ye won't have ter wait long, Mr. Smith, 'cause here's her house. She lives over the groc'ry store, ter save rent, ye know. It's Uncle Frank's store. An' here we are," he finished, banging open a door and leading the way up a flight of ill-lighted stairs.

CHAPTER III

THE SMALL BOY AT THE KEYHOLE

At the top of the stairs Benny tried to open the door, but as it did not give at his pressure, he knocked lustily, and called "Aunt Jane, Aunt Jane!"

"Isn't this the bell?" hazarded Mr. Smith, his finger almost on a small push-button near him.

"Yep, but it don't go now. Uncle Frank wanted it fixed, but Aunt Jane said no; knockin' was just as good, an' 'twas lots cheaper, 'cause 'twould save mendin', and didn't use any 'lectricity. But Uncle Frank says---"

The door opened abruptly, and Benny interrupted himself to give eager greeting.

"Hullo, Aunt Jane! I've brought you somebody. He's Mr. Smith. An' you'll be glad. You see if yer ain't!"

In the dim hallway Mr. Smith saw a tall, angular woman with graying dark hair and high cheek bones. Her eyes were keen and just now somewhat sternly inquiring, as they were bent upon himself.

Perceiving that Benny considered his mission as master of ceremonies at an end, Mr. Smith hastened to explain.

"I came from your husband's brother, madam. He--er--sent me. He thought perhaps you had a room that I could have."

"A room?" Her eyes grew still more coldly disapproving.

"Yes, and board. He thought--that is, THEY thought that perhaps--you would be so kind."

"Oh, a boarder! You mean for pay, of course?"

"Most certainly!"

"Oh!" She softened visibly, and stepped back. "Well, I don't know. I never have--but that isn't saying I couldn't, of course. Come in. We can talk it over. THAT doesn't cost anything. Come in; this way, please." As she finished speaking she stepped to the low-burning gas jet and turned it carefully to give a little more light down the narrow hallway.

"Thank you," murmured Mr. Smith, stepping across the threshold.

Benny had already reached the door at the end of the hall. The woman began to tug at her apron strings.

"I hope you'll excuse my gingham apron, Mr.--er--Smith. Wasn't that the name?"

"Yes." The man bowed with a smile.

"I thought that was what Benny said. Well, as I was saying, I hope you'll excuse this apron." Her fingers were fumbling with the knot at

the back. "I take it off, mostly, when the bell rings, evenings or afternoons; but I heard Benny, and I didn't suppose 't was anybody but him. There, that's better!" With a jerk she switched off the dark blue apron, hung it over her arm, and smoothed down the spotless white apron which had been beneath the blue. The next instant she hurried after Benny with a warning cry. "Careful, child, careful! Oh, Benny, you're always in such a hurry!"

Benny, with a cheery "Come on!" had already banged open the door before him, and was reaching for the gas burner.

A moment later the feeble spark above had become a flaring sputter of flame.

"There, child, what did I tell you?" With a frown Mrs. Blaisdell reduced the flaring light to a moderate flame, and motioned Mr. Smith to a chair. Before she seated herself, however, she went back into the hall to lower the gas there.

During her momentary absence the man, Smith, looked about him, and as he looked he pulled at his collar. He felt suddenly a choking, suffocating sensation. He still had the curious feeling of trying to catch his breath when the woman came back and took the chair facing him. In a moment he knew why he felt so suffocated--it was because that nowhere could he see an object that was not wholly or partially covered with some other object, or that was not serving as a cover itself.

The floor bore innumerable small rugs, one before each chair, each door, and the fireplace. The chairs themselves, and the sofa, were covered with gray linen slips, which, in turn, were protected by numerous squares of lace and worsted of generous size. The green silk spread on the piano was nearly hidden beneath a linen cover, and the table showed a succession of layers of silk, worsted, and linen, topped by crocheted mats, on which rested several books with paper-enveloped covers. The chandelier, mirror, and picture frames gleamed dully from behind the mesh of pink mosquito netting. Even through the doorway into the hall might be seen the long, red-bordered white linen path that carried protection to the carpet beneath.

"I don't like gas myself." (With a start the man pulled himself together to listen to what the woman was saying.) "I think it's a foolish extravagance, when kerosene is so good and so cheap; but my husband will have it, and Mellicent, too, in spite of anything I say--Mellicent's my daughter. I tell 'em if we were rich, it would be different, of course. But this is neither here nor there, nor what you came to talk about! Now just what is it that you want, sir?"

"I want to board here, if I may."

"How long?"

"A year--two years, perhaps, if we are mutually satisfied."

"What do you do for a living?"

Smith coughed suddenly. Before he could catch his breath to answer Benny had jumped into the breach.

"He sounds something like a Congregationalist, only he ain't that, Aunt Jane, and he ain't after money for missionaries, either."

Jane Blaisdell smiled at Benny indulgently. Then she sighed and shook her head.

"You know, Benny, very well, that nothing would suit Aunt Jane better than to give money to all the missionaries in the world, if she only had it to give!" She sighed again as she turned to Mr. Smith. "You're working for some church, then, I take it."

Mr. Smith gave a quick gesture of dissent.

"I am a genealogist, madam, in a small way. I am collecting data for a book on the Blaisdell family."

"Oh!" Mrs. Blaisdell frowned slightly. The look of cold disapproval came back to her eyes. "But who pays you? WE couldn't take the book, I'm sure. We couldn't afford it."

"That would not be necessary, madam, I assure you," murmured Mr. Smith gravely.

"But how do you get money to live on? I mean, how am I to know that I'll get my pay?" she persisted. "Excuse me, but that kind of business doesn't sound very good-paying; and, you see, I don't know you. And in these days--" An expressive pause finished her sentence.

Mr. Smith smiled.

"Quite right, madam. You are wise to be cautious. I had a letter of introduction to your brother from Mr. Robert Chalmers. I think he will vouch for me. Will that do?"

"Oh, that's all right, then. But that isn't saying how MUCH you'll pay. Now, I think--"

There came a sharp knock at the outer door. The eager Benny jumped to his feet, but his aunt shook her head and went to the door herself. There was a murmur of voices, then a young man entered the hall and sat down in the chair near the hatrack. When Mrs. Blaisdell returned her eyes were very bright. Her cheeks showed two little red spots. She carried herself with manifest importance.

"If you'll just excuse me a minute," she apologized to Mr. Smith, as she swept by him and opened a door across the room, nearly closing it behind her.

Distinctly then, from beyond the imperfectly closed door, came to the ears of Benny and Mr. Smith these words, in Mrs. Blaisdell's most excited accents:--"Mellicent, it's Carl Pennock. He wants you to go auto-riding with him down to the Lake with Katie Moore and that crowd."

"Mother!" breathed an ecstatic voice.

What followed Mr. Smith did not hear, for a nearer, yet more excited, voice demanded attention.

"Gee! Carl Pennock!" whispered Benny hoarsely. "Whew! Won't my sister Bess be mad? She thinks Carl Pennock's the cutest thing going. All the girls do!"

With a warning "Sh-h!" and an expressive glance toward the hall, Mr. Smith tried to stop further revelations; but Benny was not to be silenced.

"They're rich--awful rich--the Pennocks are," he confided still more huskily. "An' there's a girl--Gussie. She's gone on Fred. He's my brother, ye know. He's seventeen; an' Bess is mad 'cause she isn't seventeen, too, so she can go an' play tennis same as Fred does. She'll be madder 'n ever now, if Mell goes auto-riding with Carl, an'--"

"Sh-h!" So imperative were Mr. Smith's voice and gesture this time that Benny fell back subdued.

At once then became distinctly audible again the voices from the other room. Mr. Smith, forced to hear in spite of himself, had the air of one who finds he has abandoned the frying pan for the fire.

"No, dear, it's quite out of the question," came from beyond the door, in Mrs. Blaisdell's voice. "I can't let you wear your pink. You will wear the blue or stay at home. Just as you choose."

"But, mother, dear, it's all out of date," wailed a young girl's voice.

"I can't help that. It's perfectly whole and neat, and you must save the pink for best."

"But I'm always saving things for best, mother, and I never wear my best. I never wear a thing when it's in style! By the time you let me wear the pink I shan't want to wear it. Sleeves'll be small then--you see if they aren't--I shall be wearing big ones. I want to wear big ones now, when other girls do. Please, mother!"

"Mellicent, why will you tease me like this, when you know it will do no good?--when you know I can't let you do it? Don't you think I want you to be as well-dressed as anybody, if we could afford it? Come, I'm waiting. You must wear the blue or stay at home. What shall I tell him?"

There was a pause, then there came an inarticulate word and a choking half-sob. The next moment the door opened and Mrs. Blaisdell appeared. The pink spots in her cheeks had deepened. She shut the door firmly, then hurried through the room to the hall beyond. Another minute and she was back in her chair.

"There," she smiled pleasantly. "I'm ready now to talk business, Mr. Smith."

And she talked business. She stated plainly what she expected to do for her boarder, and what she expected her boarder would do for her. She enlarged upon the advantages and minimized the discomforts, with the aid of a word now and then from the eager and interested Benny.

Mr. Smith, on his part, had little to say. That that little was most

satisfactory, however, was very evident; for Mrs. Blaisdell was soon quite glowing with pride and pleasure, Mr. Smith was not glowing. He was plainly ill at ease, and, at times, slightly abstracted. His eyes frequently sought the door which Mrs. Blaisdell had closed so firmly a short time before. They were still turned in that direction when suddenly the door opened and a young girl appeared.

She was a slim little girl with long-lashed, starlike eyes and a wild-rose flush in her cheeks. Beneath her trim hat her light brown hair waved softly over her ears, glinting into gold where the light struck it. She looked excited and pleased, yet not quite happy. She wore a blue dress, plainly made.

"Don't stay late. Be in before ten, dear," cautioned Mrs. Blaisdell. "And Mellicent, just a minute, dear. This is Mr. Smith. You might as well meet him now. He's coming here to live--to board, you know. My daughter, Mr. Smith."

Mr. Smith, already on his feet, bowed and murmured a conventional something. From the starlike eyes he received a fleeting glance that made him suddenly conscious of his fifty years and the bald spot on the top of his head. Then the girl was gone, and her mother was speaking again.

"She's going auto-riding--Mellicent is--with a young man, Carl Pennock--one of the nicest in town. There are four others in the party. They're going down to the Lake for cake and ice cream, and they're all nice young people, else I shouldn't let her go, of course. She's eighteen, for all she's so small. She favors my mother in looks, but she's got the Blaisdell nose, though. Oh, and 'twas the Blaisdells you said you were writing a book about, wasn't it? You don't mean OUR Blaisdells, right here in Hillerton?"

"I mean all Blaisdells, wherever I find them," smiled Mr. Smith.

"Dear me! What, US? You mean WE'll be in the book?" Now that the matter of board had been satisfactorily settled, Mrs. Blaisdell apparently dared to show some interest in the book.

"Certainly."

"You don't say! My, how pleased Hattie'll be--my sister-in-law, Jim's wife. She just loves to see her name in print--parties, and club banquets, and where she pours, you know. But maybe you don't take women, too."

"Oh, yes, if they are Blaisdells, or have married Blaisdells."

"Oh! That's where we'd come in, then, isn't it? Mellicent and I? And Frank, my husband, he'll like it, too,--if you tell about the grocery store. And of course you would, if you told about him. You'd have to--'cause that's all there is to tell. He thinks that's about all there is in the world, anyway,--that grocery store. And 'tis a good store, if I do say it. And there's his sister, Flora; and Maggie--But, there! Poor Maggie! She won't be in it, will she, after all? She isn't a Blaisdell, and she didn't marry one. Now that's too bad!"

"Ho! She won't mind." Benny spoke with conviction. "She'll just laugh and say it doesn't matter; and then Grandpa Duff'll ask for his drops

or his glasses, or something, and she'll forget all about it. She won't care."

"Yes, I know; but--Poor Maggie! Always just her luck." Mrs. Blaisdell sighed and looked thoughtful. "But Maggie KNOWS a lot about the Blaisdells," she added, brightening; "so she could tell you lots of things--about when they were little, and all that."

"Yes. But--that isn't--er--" Mr. Smith hesitated doubtfully, and Mrs. Blaisdell jumped into the pause.

"And, really, for that matter, she knows about us NOW, too, better than 'most anybody else. Hattie's always sending for her, and Flora, too, if they're sick, or anything. Poor Maggie! Sometimes I think they actually impose upon her. And she's such a good soul, too! I declare, I never see her but I wish I could do something for her. But, of course, with my means--But, there! Here I am, running on as usual. Frank says I never do know when to stop, when I get started on something; and of course you didn't come here to talk about poor Maggie. Now I'll go back to business. When is it you want to start in--to board, I mean?"

"To-morrow, if I may." With some alacrity Mr. Smith got to his feet. "And now we must be going--Benny and I. I'm at the Holland House. With your permission, then, Mrs. Blaisdell, I'll send up my trunks to-morrow morning. And now good-night--and thank you."

"Why--but, Mr. Smith!" The woman, too, came to her feet, but her face was surprised. "Why, you haven't even seen your room yet! How do you know you'll like it?"

"Eh? What? Oh!" Mr. Smith laughed. There was a quizzical lift to his eyebrows. "So I haven't, have I? And people usually do, don't they? Well--er--perhaps I will just take a look at--the room, though I'm not worrying any, I assure you. I've no doubt it will be quite right, quite right," he finished, as he followed Mrs. Blaisdell to a door halfway down the narrow hall.

Five minutes later, once more on the street, he was walking home with Benny. It was Benny who broke the long silence that had immediately fallen between them.

"Say, Mr. Smith, I'll bet ye YOU'll never be rich!"

Mr. Smith turned with a visible start.

"Eh? What? I'll never be--What do you mean, boy?"

Benny giggled cheerfully.

"'Cause you paid Aunt Jane what she asked the very first time. Why, Aunt Jane never expects ter get what she asks, pa says. She sells him groceries in the store, sometimes, when Uncle Frank's away, ye know. Pa says what she asks first is for practice--just ter get her hand in; an' she expects ter get beat down. But you paid it, right off the bat. Didn't ye see how tickled Aunt Jane was, after she'd got over bein' surprised?"

"Why--er--really, Benny," murmured Mr. Smith.

But Benny had yet more to say.

"Oh, yes, sir, you could have saved a lot every week, if ye hadn't bit so quick. An' that's why I say you won't ever get rich. Savin' 's what does it, ye know--gets folks rich. Aunt Jane says so. She says a penny saved 's good as two earned, an' better than four spent."

"Well, really, indeed!" Mr. Smith laughed lightly. "That does look as if there wasn't much chance for me, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Benny spoke soberly, and with evident sympathy. He spoke again, after a moment, but Mr. Smith did not seem to hear at once. Mr. Smith was, indeed, not a little abstracted all the way to Benny's home, though his good-night was very cheerful at parting. Benny would have been surprised, indeed, had he known that Mr. Smith was thinking, not about his foolishly extravagant agreement for board, but about a pair of starry eyes with wistful lights in them, and a blue dress, plainly made.

In the hotel that night, Mr. John Smith wrote the following letter to Edward D. Norton, Esq., Chicago:

MY DEAR NED,--Well, I'm here. I've been here exactly six hours, and already I'm in possession of not a little Blaisdell data for my--er--book. I've seen Mr. and Mrs. James, their daughter, Bessie, and their son, Benny. Benny, by the way, is a gushing geyser of current Blaisdell data which, I foresee, I shall find interesting, but embarrassing, perhaps, at times. I've also seen Miss Flora, and Mrs. Jane Blaisdell and her daughter, Mellicent.

There's a "Poor Maggie" whom I haven't seen. But she isn't a Blaisdell. She's a Duff, daughter of the man who married Rufus Blaisdell's widow, some thirty years or more ago. As I said, I haven't seen her yet, but she, too, according to Mrs. Frank Blaisdell, must be a gushing geyser of Blaisdell data, so I probably soon shall see her. Why she's "poor" I don't know.

As for the Blaisdell data already in my possession--I've no comment to make. Really, Ned, to tell the truth, I'm not sure I'm going to relish this job, after all. In spite of a perfectly clear conscience, and the virtuous realization that I'm here to bring nothing worse than a hundred thousand dollars apiece with the possible addition of a few millions on their devoted heads--in spite of all this, I yet have an uncomfortable feeling that I'm a small boy listening at the keyhole.

However, I'm committed to the thing now, so I'll stuff it out, I suppose,--though I'm not sure, after all, that I wouldn't chuck the whole thing if it wasn't that I wanted to see how Mellicent will enjoy her pink dresses. How many pink dresses will a hundred thousand dollars buy, anyway,--I mean PRETTY pink dresses, all fixed up with frills and furbelows?

As ever yours,

STAN--er--JOHN SMITH.

CHAPTER IV

IN SEARCH OF SOME DATES

Very promptly the next morning Mr. John Smith and his two trunks appeared at the door of his new boarding-place. Mrs. Jane Blaisdell welcomed him cordially. She wore a high-necked, long-sleeved gingham apron this time, which she neither removed nor apologized for--unless her cheerful "You see, mornings you'll find me in working trim, Mr. Smith," might be taken as an apology.

Mellicent, her slender young self enveloped in a similar apron, was dusting his room as he entered it. She nodded absently, with a casual "Good-morning, Mr. Smith," as she continued at her work. Even the placing of the two big trunks, which the shuffling men brought in, won from her only a listless glance or two. Then, without speaking again, she left the room, as her mother entered it.

"There!" Mrs. Blaisdell looked about her complacently. "With this couch-bed with its red cover and cushions, and all the dressing things moved to the little room in there, it looks like a real sitting-room in here, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does, Mrs. Blaisdell."

'And you had 'em take the trunks in there, too. That's good," she nodded, crossing to the door of the small dressing-room beyond. "I thought you would. Well, I hope you'll be real happy with us, Mr. Smith, and I guess you will. And you needn't be a mite afraid of hurting anything. I've covered everything with mats and tidies and spreads."

"Yes, I see." A keen listener would have noticed an odd something in Mr. Smith's voice; but Mrs. Blaisdell apparently noticed nothing.

"Yes, I always do--to save wearing and soiling, you know. Of course, if we had money to buy new all the time, it would be different. But we haven't. And that's what I tell Mellicent when she complains of so many things to dust and brush. Now make yourself right at home, Mr. Smith. Dinner's at twelve o'clock, and supper is at six--except in the winter. We have it earlier then, so's we can go to bed earlier. Saves gas, you know. But it's at six now. I do like the long days, don't you? Well, I'll be off now, and let you unpack. As I said before, make yourself perfectly at home, perfectly at home."

Left alone, Mr. Smith drew a long breath and looked about him. It was a pleasant room, in spite of its cluttered appearance. There was an old-fashioned desk for his papers, and the chairs looked roomy and comfortable. The little dressing-room carried many conveniences, and the windows of both rooms looked out upon the green of the common.

"Oh, well, I don't know. This might be lots worse--in spite of the tidies!" chuckled Mr. John Smith, as he singled out the keys of his trunks.

At the noon dinner-table Mr. Smith met Mr. Frank Blaisdell. He was a portly man with rather thick gray hair and "mutton-chop" gray

whiskers. He ate very fast, and a great deal, yet he still found time to talk interestedly with his new boarder.

He was plainly a man of decided opinions--opinions which he did not hesitate to express, and which he emphasized with resounding thumps of his fists on the table. The first time he did this, Mr. Smith, taken utterly by surprise, was guilty of a visible start. After that he learned to accept them with the serenity evinced by the rest of the family.

When the dinner was over, Mr. Smith knew (if he could remember them) the current market prices of beans, corn, potatoes, sugar, and flour; and he knew (again if he could remember) why some of these commodities were higher, and some lower, than they had been the week before. In a way, Mr. John Smith was interested. That stocks and bonds fluctuated, he was well aware. That "wheat" could be cornered, he realized. But of the ups and downs of corn and beans as seen by the retail grocer he knew very little. That is, he had known very little until after that dinner with Mr. Frank Blaisdell.

It was that afternoon that Mr. Smith began systematically to gather material for his Blaisdell book. He would first visit by turns all the Hillerton Blaisdells, he decided; then, when he had exhausted their resources, he would, of course, turn to the town records and cemeteries of Hillerton and the neighboring villages.

Armed with a pencil and a very businesslike looking notebook, therefore, he started at two o'clock for the home of James Blaisdell. Remembering Mr. Blaisdell's kind permission to come and ask all the questions he liked, he deemed it fitting to begin there.

He had no trouble in finding the house, but there was no one in sight this time, as he ascended the steps. The house, indeed, seemed strangely quiet. He was just about to ring the bell when around the corner of the veranda came a hurried step and a warning voice.

"Oh, please, don't ring the bell! What is it? Isn't it something that I can do for you?"

Mr. Smith turned sharply. He thought at first, from the trim, slender figure, and the waving hair above the gracefully poised head, that he was confronting a young woman. Then he saw the silver threads at the temples, and the fine lines about the eyes.

"I am looking for Mrs. Blaisdell--Mrs. James Blaisdell," he answered, lifting his hat.

"Oh, you're Mr. Smith. Aren't you Mr. Smith?" She smiled brightly, then went on before he could reply. "You see, Benny told me. He described you perfectly."

The man's eyebrows went up.

"Oh, did he? The young rascal! I fancy I should be edified to hear it--that description."

The other laughed. Then, a bit roguishly, she demanded:--"Should you like to hear it--really?"

"I certainly should. I've already collected a few samples of Benny's descriptive powers."

"Then you shall have this one. Sit down, Mr. Smith." She motioned him to a chair, and dropped easily into one herself. "Benny said you were tall and not fat; that you had a wreath of light hair 'round a bald spot, and whiskers that were clipped as even as Mr. Pennock's hedge; and that your lips, without speaking, said, 'Run away, little boy,' but that your eyes said, 'Come here.' Now I think Benny did pretty well." "So I judge, since you recognized me without any difficulty," rejoined Mr. Smith, a bit dryly. "But--YOU--? You see you have the advantage of me. Benny hasn't described you to me." He paused significantly.

"Oh, I'm just here to help out. Mrs. Blaisdell is ill upstairs--one of her headaches. That is why I asked you not to ring. She gets so nervous when the bell rings. She thinks it's callers, and that she won't be ready to receive them; and she hurries up and begins to dress. So I asked you not to ring."

"But she isn't seriously ill?"

"Oh, no, just a headache. She has them often. You wanted to see her?"

"Yes. But it's not important at all. Another time, just as well. Some questions--that is all."

"Oh, for the book, of course. Oh, yes, I have heard about that, too." She smiled again brightly. "But can't you wait? Mr. Blaisdell will soon be here. He's coming early so I can go home. I HAVE to go home."

"And you are--"

"Miss Duff. My name is Duff."

"You don't mean--'Poor Maggie'!" (Not until the words were out did Mr. Smith realize quite how they would sound.) "Er--ah--that is--" He stumbled miserably, and she came to his rescue.

"Oh, yes, I'm--'Poor Maggie.'" There was an odd something in her expressive face that Mr. Smith could not fathom. He was groping for something--anything to say, when suddenly there was a sound behind them, and the little woman at his side sprang to her feet.

"Oh, Hattie, you came down!" she exclaimed as Mrs. James Blaisdell opened the screen door and stepped out on to the veranda. "Here's Mrs. Blaisdell now, Mr. Smith."

"Oh, it's only Mr. Smith!" With a look very like annoyance Mrs. Blaisdell advanced and held out her hand. She looked pale, and her hair hung a bit untidily about one ear below a somewhat twisted pyramid of puffs. Her dress, though manifestly an expensive one, showed haste in its fastenings. "Yes, I heard voices, and I thought some one had come--a caller. So I came down."

"I'm glad--if you're better," smiled Miss Maggie. "Then I'll go, if you don't mind. Mr. Smith has come to ask you some questions, Hattie. Good-bye!" With another cheery smile and a nod to Mr. Smith, she disappeared into the house. A minute later Mr. Smith saw her hurrying

down a side path to the street.

"You called to ask some questions?" Mrs. Blaisdell sank languidly into a chair.

"About the Blaisdell family--yes. But perhaps another day, when you are feeling better, Mrs. Blaisdell."

"Oh, no." She smiled a little more cordially. "I can answer to-day as well as any time--though I'm not sure I can tell you very much, ever. I think it's fine you are making the book, though. Some way it gives a family such a standing, to be written up like that. Don't you think so? And the Blaisdells are really a very nice family--one of the oldest in Hillerton, though, of course, they haven't much money."

"I ought to find a good deal of material here, then, if they have lived here so long."

"Yes, I suppose so. Now, what can I tell you? Of course I can tell you about my own family. My husband is in the real estate business. You knew that, didn't you? Perhaps you see 'The Real Estate Journal.' His picture was in it a year ago last June. There was a write-up on Hillerton. I was in it, too, though there wasn't much about me. But I've got other clippings with more, if you'd like to see them--where I've poured, and been hostess, and all that, you know."

Mr. Smith took out his notebook and pencil.

"Let me see, Mrs. Blaisdell, your husband's father's name was Rufus, I believe. What was his mother's maiden name, please?"

"His mother's maiden name? Oh, 'Elizabeth.' Our little girl is named for her--Bessie, you know--you saw her last night. Jim wanted to, so I let him. It's a pretty name--Elizabeth--still, it sounds a little old-fashioned now, don't you think? Of course we are anxious to have everything just right for our daughter. A young lady soon coming out, so,--you can't be too particular. That's one reason why I wanted to get over here--on the West Side, I mean. Everybody who is anybody lives on the West Side in Hillerton. You'll soon find that out."

"No doubt, no doubt! And your mother Blaisdell's surname?" Mr. Smith's pencil was poised over the open notebook.

"Surname? Mother Blaisdell's? Oh, before she was married. I see. But, dear me, I don't know. I suppose Jim will, or Flora, or maybe Frank--though I don't believe HE will, unless her folks kept groceries. Did you ever see anybody that didn't know anything but groceries like Frank Blaisdell?" The lady sighed and shrugged her somewhat heavy shoulders with an expressive glance.

Mr. Smith smiled understandingly.

"Oh, well, it's good--to be interested in one's business, you know."

"But such a business!" murmured the lady, with another shrug.

"Then you can't tell me Mrs. Rufus Blaisdell's surname?"

"No. But Jim--Oh, I'll tell you who will know," she broke off

interestedly; "and that's Maggie Duff. You saw her here a few minutes ago, you know. Father Duff's got all of Mother Blaisdell's papers and diaries. Oh, Maggie can tell you a lot of things. Poor Maggie! Benny says if we want ANYTHING we ask Aunt Maggie, and I don't know but he's right. And here I am, sending you to her, so soon!"

"Very well, then," smiled Mr. Smith. "I don't see but what I shall have to interview Miss Maggie, and Miss Flora. Is there nothing more, then, that you can tell me?"

"Well, there's Fred, my son. You haven't seen him yet. We're very proud of Fred. He's at the head of his class, and he's going to college and be a lawyer. And that's another reason why I wanted to come over to this side--on Fred's account. I want him to meet the right sort of people. You know it helps so much! We think we're going to have Fred a big man some day."

"And he was born, when?" Mr. Smith's pencil still poised above an almost entirely blank page.

"He's seventeen. He'll be eighteen the tenth of next month."

"And Miss Bessie, and Benny?"

"Oh, she's sixteen. She'll be seventeen next winter. She wants to come out then, but I think I shall wait--a little, she's so very young; though Gussie Pennock's out, and she's only seventeen, and the Pennocks are some of our very best people. They're the richest folks in town, you know."

"And Benny was born--when?"

"He's eight--or rather nine, next Tuesday. Dear me, Mr. Smith, don't you want ANYTHING but dates? They're tiresome things, I think,--make one feel so old, you know, and it shows up how many years you've been married. Don't you think so? But maybe you're a bachelor."

"Yes, I'm a bachelor."

"Are you, indeed? Well, you miss a lot, of course,--home and wife and children. Still, you gain some things. You aren't tied down, and you don't have so much to worry about. Is your mother living, or your father?"

"No. I have no--near relatives." Mr. Smith stirred a little uneasily, and adjusted his book. "Perhaps, now, Mrs. Blaisdell, you can give me your own maiden name."

"Oh, yes, I can give you that!" She laughed and bridled self-consciously. "But you needn't ask when I was born, for I shan't tell you, if you do. My name was Hattie Snow."

"'Harriet,' I presume." Mr. Smith's pencil was busily at work.

"Yes--Harriet Snow. And the Snows were just as good as the Blaisdells, if I do say it. There were a lot that wanted me--oh, I was pretty THEN, Mr. Smith." She laughed, and bridled again self-consciously. "But I took Jim. He was handsome then, very--big dark eyes and dark hair, and so dreamy and poetical-looking; and there wasn't a girl that

hadn't set her cap for him. And he's been a good husband to me. To be sure, he isn't quite so ambitious as he might be, perhaps. _I_ always did believe in being somebody, and getting somewhere. Don't you? But Jim--he's always for hanging back and saying how much it'll cost. Ten to one he doesn't end up by saying we can't afford it. He's like Jane,--Frank's wife, where you board, you know,--only Jane's worse than Jim ever thought of being. She won't spend even what she's got. If she's got ten dollars, she won't spend but five cents, if she can help it. Now, I believe in taking some comfort as you go along. But Jane--greatest saver I ever did see. Better look out, Mr. Smith, that she doesn't try to save feeding you at all!" she finished merrily.

"I'm not worrying!" Mr. Smith smiled cheerily, snapped his book shut and got to his feet.

"Oh, won't you wait for Mr. Blaisdell? He can tell you more, I'm sure."

"Not to-day, thank you. At his office, some time, I'll see Mr. Blaisdell," murmured Mr. Smith, with an odd haste. "But I thank you very much, Mrs. Blaisdell," he bowed in farewell.

CHAPTER V

IN MISS FLORA'S ALBUM

It was the next afternoon that Mr. Smith inquired his way to the home of Miss Flora Blaisdell. He found it to be a shabby little cottage on a side street. Miss Flora herself answered his knock, peering at him anxiously with her near-sighted eyes.

Mr. Smith lifted his hat.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Blaisdell," he began with a deferential bow. "I am wondering if you could tell me something of your father's family." Miss Flora, plainly pleased, but flustered, stepped back for him to enter.

"Oh, Mr. Smith, come in, come in! I'm sure I'm glad to tell you anything I know," she beamed, ushering him into the unmistakably little-used "front room." "But you really ought to go to Maggie. I can tell you some things, but Maggie's got the Bible. Mother had it, you know, and it's all among her things. And of course we had to let it stay, as long as Father Duff lives. He doesn't want anything touched. Poor Maggie--she tried to get 'em for us; but, mercy! she never tried but once. But I've got some things. I've got pictures of a lot of them, and most of them I know quite a lot about."

As she spoke she nicked up from the table a big red plush photograph album. Seating herself at his side she opened it, and began to tell him of the pictures, one by one.

She did, indeed, know "quite a lot" of most of them. Tintypes, portraying stiffly held hands and staring eyes, ghostly reproductions of daguerreotypes of stern-lipped men and women, in old-time stock and

kerchief; photographs of stilted family groups after the "he-is-mine-and-I-am-his" variety; snap-shots of adorable babies with blurred thumbs and noses--never had Mr. John Smith seen their like before.

Politely he listened. Busily, from time to time, he jotted down a name or date. Then, suddenly, as she turned a page, he gave an involuntary start. He was looking at a pictured face, evidently cut from a magazine.

"Why, what--who--" he stammered.

"That? Oh, that's Mr. Fulton, the millionaire, you know." Miss Flora's hands fluttered over the page a little importantly, adjusting a corner of the print. "You must have seen his picture. It's been everywhere. He's our cousin, too."

"Oh, is he?"

"Yes, 'way back somewhere. I can't tell you just how, only I know he is. His mother was a Blaisdell. That's why I've always been so interested in him, and read everything I could--in the papers and magazines, you know."

"Oh, I see." Mr. John Smith's voice had become a little uncertain.

Yes. He ain't very handsome, is he?" Miss Flora's eyes were musingly fixed on the picture before her--which was well, perhaps: Mr. John Smith's face was a study just then.

"Er--n-no, he isn't."

"But he's turribly rich, I s'pose. I wonder how it feels to have so much money."

There being no reply to this, Miss Flora went on after a moment.

"It must be awful nice--to buy what you want, I mean, without fretting about how much it costs. I never did. But I'd like to."

"What would you do--if you could--if you had the money, I mean?" queried Mr. Smith, almost eagerly.

Miss Flora laughed.

"Well, there's three things I know I'd do. They're silly, of course, but they're what I WANT. It's a phonygraph, and to see Niagara Falls, and to go into Noell's restaurant and order what I want without even looking at the prices after 'em. Now you're laughing at me!"

"Laughing? Not a bit of it!" There was a curious elation in Mr. Smith's voice. "What's more, I hope you'll get them--some time."

Miss Flora sighed. Her face looked suddenly pinched and old.

"I shan't. I couldn't, you know. Why, if I had the money, I shouldn't spend it--not for them things. I'd be needing shoes or a new dress. And I COULDN'T be so rich I wouldn't notice what the prices was--of what I ate. But, then, I don't believe anybody's that, not even him." She pointed to the picture still open before them.

"No?" Mr. Smith, his eyes bent upon the picture, was looking thoughtful. He had the air of a man to whom has come a brand-new, somewhat disconcerting idea.

Miss Flora, glancing from the man to the picture, and back again, gave a sudden exclamation.

"There, now I know who it is that you remind me of, Mr. Smith. It's him--Mr. Fulton, there."

"Eh? What?" Mr. Smith looked not a little startled.

"Something about the eyes and nose." Miss Flora was still interestedly comparing the man and the picture, "But, then, that ain't so strange. You're a Blaisdell yourself. Didn't you say you was a Blaisdell?"

"Er--y-yes, oh, yes. I'm a Blaisdell," nodded Mr. Smith hastily. "Very likely I've got the--er--Blaisdell nose. Eh?" Then he turned a leaf of the album abruptly, decidedly. "And who may this be?" he demanded, pointing to the tintype of a bright-faced young girl.

"That? Oh, that's my cousin Grace when she was sixteen. She died; but she was a wonderful girl. I'll tell you about her."

"Yes, do," urged Mr. Smith; and even the closest observer, watching his face, could not have said that he was not absorbedly interested in Miss Flora's story of "my cousin Grace."

It was not until the last leaf of the album was reached that they came upon the picture of a small girl, with big, hungry eyes looking out from beneath long lashes.

"That's Mellicent--where you're boarding, you know--when she was little." Miss Flora frowned disapprovingly. "But it's horrid, poor child!"

"But she looks so--so sad," murmured Mr. Smith.

"Yes, I know. She always did." Miss Flora sighed and frowned again. She hesitated, then burst out, as if irresistibly impelled from within. "It's only just another case of never having what you want WHEN you want it, Mr. Smith. And it ain't 'cause they're poor, either. They AIN'T poor--not like me, I mean. Frank's always done well, and he's been a good provider; but it's my sister-in-law--her way, I mean. Not that I'm saying anything against Jane. I ain't. She's a good woman, and she's very kind to me. She's always saying what she'd do for me if she only had the money. She's a good housekeeper, too, and her house is as neat as wax. But it's just that she never thinks she can USE anything she's got till it's so out of date she don't want it. I dressmake for her, you see, so I know--about her sleeves and skirts, you know. And if she ever does wear a decent thing she's so afraid it will rain she never takes any comfort in it!"

"Well, that is--unfortunate."

"Yes, ain't it? And she's brought up that poor child the same way. Why, from babyhood, Mellicent never had her rattles till she wanted blocks, nor her blocks till she wanted dolls, nor her dolls till she

was big enough for beaus! And that's what made the poor child always look so wall-eyed and hungry. She was hungry--even if she did get enough to eat."

"Mrs. Blaisdell probably believed in--er--economy," hazarded Mr. Smith.

"Economy! My stars, I should think she did! But, there, I ought not to have said anything, of course. It's a good trait. I only wish some other folks I could mention had more of it. There's Jim's wife, for instance. Now, if she's got ten cents, she'll spend fifteen--and five more to show HOW she spent it. She and Jane ought to be shaken up in a bag together. Why, Mr. Smith, Jane doesn't let herself enjoy anything. She's always keeping it for a better time. Though sometimes I think she DOES enjoy just seeing how far she can make a dollar go. But Mellicent don't, nor Frank; and it's hard on them."

"I should say it might be." Mr. Smith was looking at the wistful eyes under the long lashes.

"'T is; and 't ain't right, I believe. There IS such a thing as being too economical. I tell Jane she'll be like a story I read once about a man who pinched and saved all his life, not even buying peanuts, though he just doted on 'em. And when he did get rich, so he could buy the peanuts, he bought a big bag the first thing. But he didn't eat 'em. He hadn't got any teeth left to chew 'em with."

"Well, that was a catastrophe!" laughed Mr. Smith, as he pocketed his notebook and rose to his feet. "And now I thank you very much, Miss Blaisdell, for the help you've been to me."

"Oh, you're quite welcome, indeed you are, Mr. Smith," beamed Miss Blaisdell. "It's done me good, just to talk to you about all these folks and pictures. I we enjoyed it. I do get lonesome sometimes, all alone, so! and I ain't so busy as I wish I was, always. But I'm afraid I haven't helped you much--just this."

"Oh, yes, you have--perhaps more than think," smiled the man, with an odd look in his eyes.

"Have I? Well, I'm glad, I'm sure. And don't forget to go to Maggie's, now. She'll have a lot to tell you. Poor Maggie! And she'll be so glad to show you!"

"All right, thank you; I'll surely interview--Miss Maggie," smiled the man in good-bye.

He had almost said "poor" Maggie himself, though why she should be POOR Maggie had come to be an all-absorbing question with him. He had been tempted once to ask Miss Flora, but something had held him back. That evening at the supper table, however, in talking with Mrs. Jane Blaisdell, the question came again to his lips; and this time it found utterance.

Mrs. Jane herself had introduced Miss Maggie's name, and had said an inconsequential something about her when Mr. Smith asked:--

"Mrs. Blaisdell, please,--may I ask? I must confess to a great curiosity as to why Miss Duff is always 'poor Maggie.'"

Mrs. Blaisdell laughed pleasantly.

"Why, really, I don't know," she answered, "only it just comes natural, that's all. Poor Maggie's been so unfortunate. There! I did it again, didn't I? That only goes to show how we all do it, unconsciously."

Frank Blaisdell, across the table, gave a sudden emphatic sniff.

"Humph! Well, I guess if you had to live with Father Duff, Jane, it would be 'poor Jane' with you, all right!"

"Yes, I know." His wife sighed complacently.

"Father Duff's a trial, and no mistake. But Maggie doesn't seem to mind."

"Mind! Aunt Maggie's a saint--that's what she is!" It was Mellicent who spoke, her young voice vibrant with suppressed feeling. "She's the dearest thing ever! There COULDN'T be anybody better than Aunt Maggie!"

Nothing more was said just then, but in the evening, later, after Mellicent had gone to walk with young Pennock, and her father had gone back down to the store, Mrs. Blaisdell took up the matter of "Poor Maggie" again.

"I've been thinking what you said," she began, "about our calling her 'poor Maggie,' and I've made up my mind it's because we're all so sorry for her. You see, she's been so unfortunate, as I said. Poor Maggie! I've so often wished there was something I could do for her. Of course, if we only had money--but we haven't; so I can't. And even money wouldn't take away her father, either. Oh, mercy! I didn't mean that, really,--not the way it sounded," broke off Mrs. Blaisdell, in shocked apology. "I only meant that she'd have her father to care for, just the same."

"He's something of a trial, I take it, eh?" smiled Mr. Smith.

"Trial! I should say he was. Poor Maggie! How ever she endures it, I can't imagine. Of course, we call him Father Duff, but he's really not any relation to us--I mean to Frank and the rest. But their mother married him when they were children, and they never knew their own father much, so he's the father they know. When their mother died, Maggie bad just entered college. She was eighteen, and such a pretty girl! I knew the family even then. Frank was just beginning to court me.

"Well, of course Maggie had to come home right away. None of the rest wanted to take care of him and Maggie had to. There was another Duff sister then--a married sister (she's died since), but SHE wouldn't take him, so Maggie had to. Of course, none of the Blaisdells wanted the care of him--and he wasn't their father, anyway. Frank was wanting to marry me, and Jim and Flora were in school and wanted to stay there, of course. So Maggie came. Poor girl! It was real hard for her. She was so ambitious, and so fond of books. But she came, and went right into the home and kept it so Frank and Jim and Flora could live there just the same as when their mother was alive. And she had to do

all the work, too. They were too poor to keep a girl. Kind of hard, wasn't it?--and Maggie only eighteen!"

"It was, indeed!" Mr. Smith's lips came together a bit grimly.

"Well, after a time Frank and Jim married, and there was only Flora and Father Duff at home. Poor Maggie tried then to go to college again. She was over twenty-one, and supposed to be her own mistress, of course. She found a place where she could work and pay her way through college, and Flora said she'd keep the house and take care of Father Duff. But, dear me; it wasn't a month before that ended, and Maggie had to come home again. Flora wasn't strong, and the work fretted her. Besides, she never could get along with Father Duff, and she was trying to learn dressmaking, too. She stuck it out till she got sick, though, then of course Maggie had to come back."

"Well, by Jove!" ejaculated Mr. Smith.

"Yes, wasn't it too bad? Poor Maggie, she tried it twice again. She persuaded her father to get a girl. But that didn't work, either. The first girl and her father fought like cats and dogs, and the last time she got one her father was taken sick, and again she had to come home. Some way, it's always been that way with poor Maggie. No sooner does she reach out to take something than it's snatched away, just as she thinks she's got it. Why, there was her father's cousin George--he was going to help her once. But a streak of bad luck hit him at just that minute, and he gave out."

"And he never tried--again?"

"No. He went to Alaska then. Hasn't ever been back since. He's done well, too, they say, and I always thought he'd send back something; but he never has. There was some trouble, I believe, between him and Father Duff at the time he went to Alaska, so that explains it, probably. Anyway, he's never done anything for them. Well, when he gave out, Maggie just gave up college then, and settled down to take care of her father, though I guess she's always studied some at home; and I know that for years she didn't give up hope but that she could go some time. But I guess she has now. Poor Maggie!"

"How old is she?"

Why, let me see--forty-three, forty-four--yes, she's forty-five. She had her forty-third birthday here--I remember I gave her a handkerchief for a birthday present--when she was helping me take care of Mellicent through the pneumonia; and that was two years ago. She used to come here and to Jim's and Flora's days at a time; but she isn't quite so free as she was--Father Duff's worse now, and she don't like to leave him nights, much, so she can't come to us so often. See?"

"Yes, I--see." There was a queer something in Mr. Smith's voice. "And just what is the matter with Mr. Duff?"

"Matter!" Mrs. Jane Blaisdell gave a short laugh and shrugged her shoulders. "Everything's the matter--with Father Duff! Oh, it's nerves, mostly, the doctor says, and there are some other things--long names that I can't remember. But, as I said, everything's the matter

with Father Duff. He's one of those men where there isn't anything quite right. Frank says he's got so he just objects to everything--on general principles. If it's blue, he says it ought to be black, you know. And, really, I don't know but Frank's right. How Maggie stands him I don't see; but she's devotion itself. Why, she even gave up her lover years ago, for him. She wouldn't leave her father, and, of course, nobody would think of taking HIM into the family, when he wasn't BORN into it, so the affair was broken off. I don't know, really, as Maggie cared much. Still, you can't tell. She never was one to carry her heart on her sleeve. Poor Maggie! I've always so wished I could do something for her!

"There, how I have run on! But, then, you asked, and you're interested, I know, and that's what you're here for--to find out about the Blaisdells."

"To--to--f-find out--" stammered Mr. Smith, grown suddenly very red.

"Yes, for your book, I mean."

"Oh, yes--of course; for my book," agreed Mr. Smith, a bit hastily. He had the guilty air of a small boy who has almost been caught in a raid on the cooky jar.

"And although poor Maggie isn't really a Blaisdell herself, she's nearly one; and they've got lots of Blaisdell records down there--among Mother Blaisdell's things, you know. You'll want to see those."

"Yes; yes, indeed. I'll want to see those, of course," declared Mr. Smith, rising to his feet, preparatory to going to his own room.

CHAPTER VI

POOR MAGGIE

It was some days later that Mr. Smith asked Benny one afternoon to show him the way to Miss Maggie Duff's home.

"Sure I will," agreed Benny with alacrity. "You don't ever have ter do any teasin' ter get me ter go ter Aunt Maggie's."

"You're fond of Aunt Maggie, then, I take it."

Benny's eyes widened a little.

"Why, of course! Everybody's fond of Aunt Maggie. Why, I don't know anybody that don't like Aunt Maggie."

"I'm sure that speaks well--for Aunt Maggie," smiled Mr. Smith.

"Yep! A feller can take some comfort at Aunt Maggie's," continued Benny, trudging along at Mr. Smith's side. "She don't have anythin' just for show, that you can't touch, like 'tis at my house, and there ain't anythin' but what you can use without gettin' snarled up in a mess of covers an' tidies, like 'tis at Aunt Jane's. But Aunt Maggie

don't save anythin', Aunt Jane says, an' she'll die some day in the poor-house, bein' so extravagant. But I don't believe she will. Do you, Mr. Smith?"

"Well, really, Benny, I--er--" hesitated the man.

"Well, I don't believe she will," repeated Benny. I hope she won't, anyhow. Poorhouses ain't very nice, are they?"

"I--I don't think I know very much about them, Benny."

"Well, I don't believe they are, from what Aunt Jane says. And if they ain't, I don't want Aunt Maggie ter go. She hadn't ought ter have anythin'--but Heaven--after Grandpa Duff. Do you know Grandpa Duff?"

"No, my b-boy." Mr. Smith was choking over a cough.

"He's sick. He's got a chronic grouch, ma says. Do you know what that is?"

"I--I have heard of them."

"What are they? Anything like chronic rheumatism? I know what chronic means. It means it keeps goin' without stoppin'--the rheumatism, I mean, not the folks that's got it. THEY don't go at all, sometimes. Old Dr. Cole don't, and that's what he's got. But when I asked ma what a grouch was, she said little boys should be seen and not heard. Ma always says that when she don't want to answer my questions. Do you? Have you got any little boys, Mr. Smith?"

"No, Benny. I'm a poor old bachelor."

"Oh, are you POOR, too? That's too bad."

Well, that is, I--I--"

"Ma was wonderin' yesterday what you lived on. Haven't you got any money, Mr. Smith?"

'Oh, yes, Benny, I've got money enough--to live on." Mr. Smith spoke promptly, and with confidence this time.

"Oh, that's nice. You're glad, then, ain't you? Ma says we haven't--got enough ter live on, I mean; but pa says we have, if we didn't try ter live like everybody else lives what's got more."

Mr. Smith bit his lip, and looked down a little apprehensively at the small boy at his side.

"I--I'm not sure, Benny, but _I_ shall have to say little boys should be seen and not--" He stopped abruptly. Benny, with a stentorian shout, had run ahead to a gate before a small white cottage. On the cozy, vine-shaded porch sat a white-haired old man leaning forward on his cane.

"Hi, there, Grandpa Duff, I've brought somebody ter see ye!" The gate was open now, and Benny was halfway up the short walk. "It's Mr. Smith. Come in, Mr. Smith. Here's grandpa right here."

With a pleasant smile Mr. Smith doffed his hat and came forward.

"Thank you, Benny. How do you do, Mr. Duff?"

The man on the porch looked up sharply from beneath heavy brows.

"Humph! Your name's Smith, is it?"

"That's what they call me." The corners of Mr. Smith's mouth twitched a little.

"Humph! Yes, I've heard of you."

"You flatter me!" Mr. Smith, on the topmost step, hesitated. "Is your--er--daughter in, Mr. Duff?" He was still smiling cheerfully.

Mr. Duff was not smiling. His somewhat unfriendly gaze was still bent upon the newcomer.

"Just what do you want of my daughter?"

"Why, I--I--" Plainly nonplused, the man paused uncertainly. Then, with a resumption of his jaunty cheerfulness, he smiled straight into the unfriendly eyes. "I'm after some records, Mr. Duff,--records of the Blaisdell family. I'm compiling a book on--

"Humph! I thought as much," interrupted Mr. Duff curtly, settling back in his chair. "As I said, I've heard of you. But you needn't come here asking your silly questions. I shan't tell you a thing, anyway, if you do. It's none of your business who lived and died and what they did before you were born. If the Lord had wanted you to know he'd 'a' put you here then instead of now!"

Looking very much as if he had received a blow in the face, Mr. Smith fell back.

"Aw, grandpa"--began Benny, in grieved expostulation. But a cheery voice interrupted, and Mr. Smith turned to see Miss Maggie Duff emerging from the doorway.

"Oh, Mr. Smith, how do you do?" she greeted him, extending a cordial hand. "Come up and sit down."

For only the briefest of minutes he hesitated. Had she heard? Could she have heard, and yet speak so unconcernedly? It seemed impossible. And yet--He took the chair she offered--but with a furtive glance toward the old man. He had only a moment to wait.

Sharply Mr. Duff turned to his daughter.

"This Mr. Smith tells me he has come to see those records. Now, I'm--"

"Oh, father, dear, you couldn't!" interrupted his daughter with admonishing earnestness. "You mustn't go and get all those down!" (Mr. Smith almost gasped aloud in his amazement, but Miss Maggie did not seem to notice him at all.) "Why, father, you couldn't--they're too heavy for you! There are the Bible, and all those papers. They're too heavy father. I couldn't let you. Besides, I shouldn't think you'd want to get them!"

If Mr. Smith, hearing this, almost gasped aloud in his amazement, he quite did so at what happened next. His mouth actually fell open as he saw the old man rise to his feet with stern dignity.

"That will do, Maggie. I'm not quite in my dotage yet. I guess I'm still able to fetch downstairs a book and a bundle of papers." With his thumping cane a resolute emphasis to every other step, the old man hobbled into the house.

"There, grandpa, that's the talk!" crowed Benny. "But you said--"

"Er--Benny, dear," interposed Miss Maggie, in a haste so precipitate that it looked almost like alarm, "run into the pantry and see what you can find in the cooky jar." The last of her sentence was addressed to Benny's flying heels as they disappeared through the doorway.

Left together, Mr. Smith searched the woman's face for some hint, some sign that this extraordinary shift-about was recognized and understood; but Miss Maggie, with a countenance serenely expressing only cheerful interest, was over by the little stand, rearranging the pile of books and newspapers on it.

"I think, after all," she began thoughtfully, pausing in her work, "that it will be better indoors. It blows so out here that you'll be bothered in your copying, I am afraid."

She was still standing at the table, chatting about the papers, however, when at the door, a few minutes later, appeared her father, in his arms a big Bible, and a sizable pasteboard box.

"Right here, father, please," she said then, to Mr. Smith's dumfounded amazement. "Just set them down right here."

The old man frowned and cast disapproving eyes on his daughter and the table.

"There isn't room. I don't want them there," he observed coldly. "I shall put them in here." With the words he turned back into the house.

Once again Mr. Smith's bewildered eyes searched Miss Maggie's face and once again they found nothing but serene unconcern. She was already at the door.

"This way, please," she directed cheerily. And, still marveling, he followed her into the house.

Mr. Smith thought he had never seen so charming a living-room. A comfortable chair invited him, and he sat down. He felt suddenly rested and at home, and at peace with the world. Realizing that, in some way, the room had produced this effect, he looked curiously about him, trying to solve the secret of it.

Reluctantly to himself he confessed that it was a very ordinary room. The carpet was poor, and was badly worn. The chairs, while comfortable looking, were manifestly not expensive, and had seen long service. Simple curtains were at the windows, and a few fair prints were on the walls. Two or three vases, of good lines but cheap materials, held flowers, and there was a plain but roomy set of shelves filled with

books--not immaculate, leather-backed, gilt-lettered "sets" but rows of dingy, worn volumes, whose very shabbiness was at once an invitation and a promise. Nowhere, however, could Mr. Smith see protecting cover mat, or tidy. He decided then that this must be why he felt suddenly so rested and at peace with all mankind. Even as the conviction came to him, however he was suddenly aware that everything was not, after all, peaceful or harmonious.

At the table Mr. Duff and his daughter were arranging the Bible and the papers. Miss Maggie suggested piles in a certain order: her father promptly objected, and arranged them otherwise. Miss Maggie placed the papers first for perusal: her father said "Absurd!" and substituted the Bible. Miss Maggie started to draw up a chair to the table: her father derisively asked her if she expected a man to sit in that--and drew up a different one. Yet Mr. Smith, when he was finally invited to take a seat at the table, found everything quite the most convenient and comfortable possible.

Once more into Miss Maggie's face he sent a sharply inquiring glance, and once more he encountered nothing but unruffled cheerfulness.

With a really genuine interest in the records before him, Mr. Smith fell to work then. The Bible had been in the Blaisdell family for generations, and it was full of valuable names and dates. He began at once to copy them.

Mr. Duff, on the other side of the table, was arranging into piles the papers before him. He complained Of the draft, and Miss Maggie shut the window. He said then that he didn't mean he wanted to suffocate, and she opened the one on the other side. The clock had hardly struck three when he accused her of having forgotten his medicine. Yet when she brought it he refused to take it. She had not brought the right kind of spoon, he said, and she knew perfectly well he never took it out of that narrow-bowl kind. He complained of the light, and she lowered the curtain; but he told her that he didn't mean he didn't want to see at all, so she put it up halfway. He said his coat was too warm, and she brought another one. He put it on grudgingly, but he declared that it was as much too thin as the other was too thick.

Mr. Smith, in spite of his efforts to be politely deaf and blind, found himself unable to confine his attention to birth, death, and marriage notices. Once he almost uttered an explosive "Good Heavens, how do you stand it?" to his hostess. But he stopped himself just in time, and fiercely wrote with a very black mark that Submit Blaisdell was born in eighteen hundred and one. A little later he became aware that Mr. Duff's attention was frowningly turned across the table toward himself.

"If you will spend your time over such silly stuff, why don't you use a bigger book?" demanded the old man at last.

"Because it wouldn't fit my pocket," smiled Mr. Smith.

Just what business of yours is it, anyhow, when these people lived and died?"

"None, perhaps," still smiled Mr. Smith good humoredly.

"Why don't you let them alone, then? What do you expect to find?"'

"Why, I--I--" Mr. Smith was plainly non-plused.

"Well, I can tell you it's a silly business, whatever you find. If you find your grandfather's a bigger man than you are, you'll be proud of it, but you ought to be ashamed of it--'cause you aren't bigger yourself! On the other hand, if you find he ISN'T as big as you are, you'll be ashamed of that, when you ought to be proud of it--'cause you've gone him one better. But you won't. I know your kind. I've seen you before. But can't you do any work, real work?"

"He is doing work, real work, now, father," interposed Miss Maggie quickly. "He's having a woeful time, too. If you'd only help him, now, and show him those papers."

A real terror came into Mr. Smith's eyes, but Mr. Duff was already on his feet.

"Well, I shan't," he observed tartly. "I'M not a fool, if he is. I'm going out to the porch where I can get some air."

"There, work as long as you like, Mr. Smith. I knew you'd rather work by yourself," nodded Miss Maggie, moving the piles of papers nearer him.

"But, good Heavens, how do you stand--" exploded Mr. Smith before he realized that this time he had really said the words aloud. He blushed a painful red.

Miss Maggie, too, colored. Then, abruptly, she laughed. "After all, it doesn't matter. Why shouldn't I be frank with you? You couldn't help seeing--how things were, of course, and I forgot, for a moment, that you were a stranger. Everybody in Hillerton understands. You see, father is nervous, and not at all well. We have to humor him."

"But do you mean that you always have to tell him to do what you don't want, in order to--well--that is--" Mr. Smith, finding himself in very deep water, blushed again painfully.

Miss Maggie met his dismayed gaze with cheerful candor.

"Tell him to do what I DON'T want in order to get him to do what I do want him to? Yes, oh, yes. But I don't mind; really I don't. I'm used to it now. And when you know how, what does it matter? After all, where is the difference? To most of the world we say, 'Please do,' when we want a thing, while to him we have to say, 'Please don't.' That's all. You see, it's really very simple--when you know how."

"Simple! Great Scott!" muttered Mr. Smith. He wanted to say more; but Miss Maggie, with a smiling nod, turned away, so he went back to his work.

Benny, wandering in from the kitchen, with both hands full of cookies, plumped himself down on the cushioned window-seat, and drew a sigh of content.

"Say, Aunt Maggie."

"Yes, dear."

"Can I come ter live with you?"

"Certainly not!" The blithe voice and pleasant smile took all the sting from the prompt refusal.

What would father and mother do?"

"Oh, they wouldn't mind."

"Benny!"

"They wouldn't. Maybe pa would--a little; but Bess and ma wouldn't. And I'D like it."

"Nonsense, Benny!" Miss Maggie crossed to a little stand and picked up a small box. "Here's a new picture puzzle. See if you can do it."

Benny shifted his now depleted stock of cookies to one hand, dropped to his knees on the floor, and dumped the contents of the box upon the seat before him.

"They won't let me eat cookies any more at home--in the house, I mean. Too many crumbs."

"But you know you have to pick up your crumbs here, dear."

"Yep. But I don't mind--after I've had the fun of eatin' first. But they won't let me drop 'em ter begin with, there, nor take any of the boys inter the house. Honest, Aunt Maggie, there ain't anything a feller can do, 'seems so, if ye live on the West Side," he persisted soberly.

Mr. Smith, copying dates at the table, was conscious of a slightly apprehensive glance in his direction from Miss Maggie's eyes, as she murmured:--

"But you're forgetting your puzzle, Benny. You've put only five pieces together."

"I can't do puzzles. there, either." Benny's voice was still mournful.

"All the more reason, then, why you should like to do them here. See, where does this dog's head go?"

Listlessly Benny took the bit of pictured wood in his fingers and began to fit it into the pattern before him.

"I used ter do 'em an' leave 'em 'round, but ma says I can't now. Callers might come and find 'em, an' what would they say--on the West Side! An' that's the way 'tis with everything. Ma an' Bess are always doin' things, or not doin' 'em, for those callers. An' I don't see why. They never come--not new ones.'

"Yes, yes, dear, but they will, when they get acquainted. You haven't found where the dog's head goes yet."

"Pa says he don't want ter get acquainted. He'd rather have the old friends, what don't mind baked beans, an' shirt-sleeves, an' doin' yer

own work, an' what thinks more of yer heart than they do of yer pocketbook. But ma wants a hired girl. An' say, we have ter wash our hands every meal now--on the table, I mean--in those little glass wash-dishes. Ma went down an' bought some, an' she's usin' 'em every day, so's ter get used to 'em. She says everybody that is anybody has 'em nowadays. Bess thinks they're great, but I don't. I don't like 'em a mite."

"Oh, come, come, Benny! It doesn't matter--it doesn't really matter, does it, if you do have to use the little dishes? Come, you're not half doing the puzzle."

"I know it." Benny shifted his position, and picked up a three-cornered bit of wood carrying the picture of a dog's paw. "But I was just thinkin'. You see, things are so different--on the West Side. Why even pa--he's different. He isn't there hardly any now. He's got a new job."

"What?" Miss Maggie turned from the puzzle with a start.

"Oh, just for evenin's. It's keepin' books for a man. It brings in quite a lot extry, ma says; but she wouldn't let me have some new roller skates when mine broke. She's savin' up for a chafin' dish. What's a chafin' dish? Do you know? You eat out of it, some way--I mean, it cooks things ter eat; an' Bess wants one. Gussie Pennock's got one. ALL our eatin's different, 'seems so, on the West Side. Ma has dinners nights now, instead of noons. She says the Pennocks do, an' everybody does who is anybody. But I don't like it. Pa don't, either, an' half the time he can't get home in time for it, anyhow, on account of gettin' back to his new job, ye know, an'--"

"Oh, I've found where the dog's head goes," cried Miss Maggie, There was a hint of desperation in her voice. "I shall have your puzzle all done for you myself, if you don't look out, Benny. I don't believe you can do it, anyhow."

"I can, too. You just see if I can't!" retorted Benny, with sudden spirit, falling to work in earnest. "I never saw a puzzle yet I couldn't do!"

Mr. Smith, bending assiduously over his work at the table, heard Miss Maggie's sigh of relief--and echoed it, from sympathy.

CHAPTER VII

POOR MAGGIE AND SOME OTHERS

It was half an hour later, when Mr. Smith and Benny were walking across the common together, that Benny asked an abrupt question.

"Is Aunt Maggie goin' ter be put in your book, Mr. Smith?"

"Why--er--yes; her name will be entered as the daughter of the man who married the Widow Blaisdell, probably. Why?"

"Nothin'. I was only thinkin'. I hoped she was. Aunt Maggie don't have nothin' much, yer know, except her father an' housework--housework either for him or some of us. An' I guess she's had quite a lot of things ter bother her, an' make her feel bad, so I hoped she'd be in the book. Though if she wasn't, she'd just laugh an' say it doesn't matter, of course. That's what she always says."

"Always says?" Mr. Smith's voice was mildly puzzled.

"Yes, when things plague, an' somethin' don't go right. She says it helps a lot ter just remember that it doesn't matter. See?"

"Well, no,--I don't think I do see," frowned Mr. Smith.

"Oh, yes," plunged in Benny; "'cause, you see, if yer stop ter think about it--this thing that's plaguin' ye--you'll see how really small an' no-account it is, an' how, when you put it beside really big things it doesn't matter at all--it doesn't REALLY matter, ye know. Aunt Maggie says she's done it years an' years, ever since she was just a girl, an' somethin' bothered her; an' it's helped a lot."

"But there are lots of things that DO matter," persisted Mr. Smith, still frowning.

"Oh, yes!" Benny swelled a bit importantly, "I know what you mean. Aunt Maggie says that, too; an' she says we must be very careful an' not get it wrong. It's only the little things that bother us, an' that we wish were different, that we must say 'It doesn't matter' about. It DOES matter whether we're good an' kind an' tell the truth an' shame the devil; but it DOESN'T matter whether we have ter live on the West S

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