

It's not worth my while to take a lodger for less nor ten shillin' a week. My Cousin Ben has comforts here he wouldn't have in no other place."

"Comforts!" ejaculated Cousin Ben contemptuously. "A lot o' squallin' children makin' more noise trampin' up an' down the stairs nor all the clogs in Preston. The smell o' the pig-mate worse nor all the smoke nor all the mills in Lancashire. A cock crowin' when a man's nobbut just got into bed, carts lumberin' out o' the yard afore its leet."

"Folks mun live," said Margaret with tearful wrath. "The waggoo had to start early to be in time for the Liverpool market."

"Well, give me Preston," exclaimed Cousin Ben, thumping the table, "that's all I says—give me Preston!"

"There's quieter places i' the country nor a farm like this," said Mrs. Waring in her most dulcet tone, the outraged Margaret being absolutely voiceless with indignation. "Poor Mrs. Norris does her best, but she has a long family, poor soul, an' I doubt it's as much as she can do to manage anyway. Now there's my little cote nobbut a step fro' here as 'ud happen suit ye better Mr. Wright. I'm used to takin' lodgers an' my front room's empty now. I knows the value of a quiet life. My poor gaffer—my word a quieter man never stepped—if I was to keep up any clack-clackin' i' the house, my word I'd have had his boots at my 'ead. My children is all up-grown an' settled an' there's no owick things at my place. I make my livin' so well as I can by takin' in washin' an' I'd make ye as comfortable as ye could wish for eight shillin' a week, Mester Wright."

"Well of all the howld-faced bussies," exclaimed Margaret, "to coom into me own place an' try an' get the better of me! If ye're put in it for a couple o' shillin' Cousin Ben, there I'll—I'll tak' that much less."

"Thank ye, Cousin Margaret," said Ben with an affable grin, "but ye see it isn't so much the brass; it's the n'ise an' the children an' that."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't get rid o' my childer to oblige ye," said Margaret with a snort.

"Nay, nay, of course ye couldn't," agreed Benjamin blandly. "I wouldn't

be for axin' ye to do sich a thing, so I think it'll be better if I do step down to Mrs. Waring's."

He carried out his resolve that same day, to the intense wrath of the Norrises and the sympathetic disapproval of their friends.

Ann, however, was triumphant. Not only had she secured a most desirable lodger, but she cherished secret hopes of altering her condition at no distant date. Never was a man surely so well taken care of as Uncle Ben; he was coaxed and flattered and made up to from morning till night. Owing to his dislike for noise Mrs. Waring disposed of her laying hens, and in compliment to his dislike of the turnip-headed folk of the vicinity all visitors were discouraged. Ann alone talked to him, ministered to him, washed and mended for him and submitted to all his changes of humour with a meekness that was almost cringing. So a week passed and on Saturday Mr. Wright wrote a letter which in spite of Ann's good-natured proffer to perform the errand, he carried to the post office himself. As he was smoking his pipe that evening he startled her by the query:

"Hav' ye got plenty to eat i' the house?"

"Well, there's a nice bit o' beef," said Mrs. Waring, flattered, "more nor enough to last ye an' me the week."

"I'm expectin' a visitor to-morrow," volunteered Benjamin.

"Oh," said Ann, a trifle frostily, "an' what time met the gentleman be comin'?"

Ben eyed her rather queerly as he responded he didn't know the exact hour, but it would be in good time for dinner.

Next morning he came down to breakfast in his best clothes, and appeared oddly elated and excited. He took up his position in the porch, but frequently rose from his seat and walked impatiently to the gate, on the look out for his expected guest. At length he remarked that he thought he would go a little way along the road, and setting on his hat at a jaunty angle, strolled forth. Ann looked after him with pinched lips.

"He mun be in an awful hurry to see this chap," she said to herself, and

thought that if he had had the feelings of a man, he would have shown a little more anxiety for her company.

Though Ben had said that his friend would arrive in good time for dinner it was passed the hour and the beef was getting unduly brown, when he burst into the house leading not a male guest as Ann had anticipated, but a little elderly woman—a little woman very poorly dressed in rusty, threadbare black, with a figure bowed by work and a face seamed by a very network of lines.

"This here's Mrs. Judson," he remarked, "an' owd friend—an uncommon owd friend."

"Sit ye down," said Mrs. Waring with freezing politeness. "I were lookin' for ye to come in afore this, Mester Wright. It's close upon one—an' I'm sure I hope the beef'll howd out," she added meaningly.

"Ye towed me there was plenty," retorted Ben; don't take that cheer. Jane, coom round here, out o' the draught. Coom that's better. Now let's have a gradely crack. Coom, how's dear owd Preston?"

Positively they seemed to have forgotten Ann's existence, a mode of procedure which, though perfectly right when Margaret Norris was in question, now appeared absolutely insulting.

Once again the merits of town were upheld in contrast to the back-sliding of the country, but this time it was not the noise and racket of the latter that called forth Mr. Wright's objections but the exceeding dullness and lack of variety of his surroundings.

"Never a sound fro' morn till neet if ye'll believe me," he exclaimed, "never a soul to speak to without it's Mrs. Waring there. My word I tell 'ee I was forced to go an' sit over yonder alongside of a thrashing machine to try if the din wouldn't heaten me up some road. If it had lasted much longer I reckon I'd ha' gone silly."

"Well then I'm sure I done all I could for ye," exclaimed Ann almost tearfully, "ye'd best go back to Margaret if ye can't live wiout noise and racket."

"Nay, Mrs. Waring," responded Ben with an unctuous smile, "I don't think

I'll go back to my Cousin Margaret's thank ye. Me and Mrs. Judson have made it up between us jest now, on our road fro' the station, as we'll be choused next week, an' as soon as we're tied together I'll go back to live wi' her in Preston."

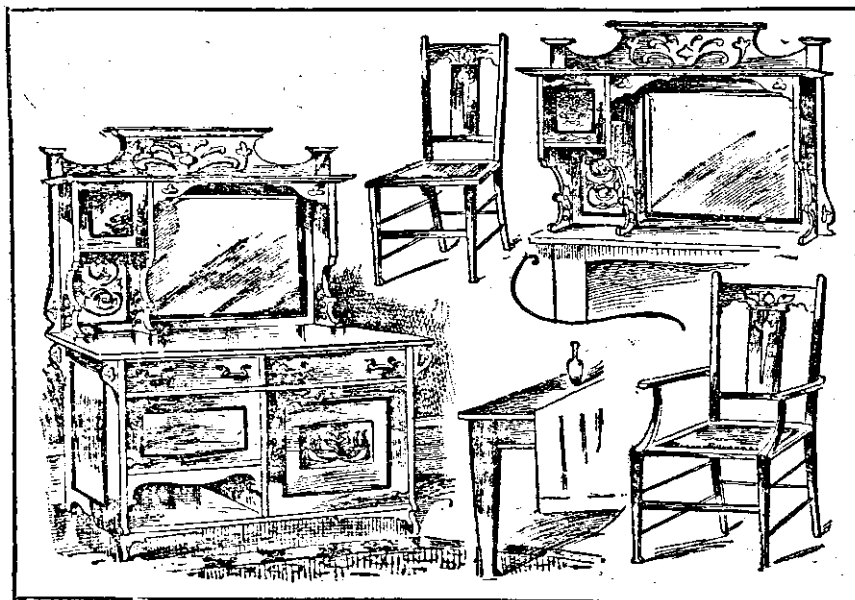
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