

THE OLD BOOKKEEPER

With a frown on his face, Mr. Sheldon paced restlessly back and forth before the closed door of Mr. Whitmore's private office. A man of boundless wealth and world-wide interests, he was unaccustomed to waiting in anyone's anteroom, and grew more and more impatient as the minutes passed. When at last the door was opened, and he turned quickly toward it, he saw that it was an old man who had been closeted with Mr. Whitmore, and now stood with his hand on the knob,—a tall, thin man, with drooping shoulders, a grave, kindly face, and of princely bearing that accorded ill with the general shabbiness of his carefully brushed clothes. Instantly Mr. Sheldon realised that he had seen him somewhere, but before he had time to wonder where he overheard Mr. Whitmore say crisply, by way of dismissal:

'I am very sorry, Mr. O'Keefe; but business is business. As I explained, it is young men we need these days,—men who are quick and active and up-to-date.'

Without a word, the old gentleman softly closed the door. He passed through the anteroom and into the main office. His head was bowed; perhaps there were tears in his eyes: at any rate, he did not see Mr. Sheldon, who, after a moment's hesitation, followed him. With hands that trembled, Mr. O'Keefe sorted the papers that lay in a neat stack on his desk before he gave them to the man nearest him. At first this bookkeeper did not seem to understand; but when he did grasp the meaning of Mr. O'Keefe's incoherent explanation, he slid down from his stool, and, seizing the two thin, wrinkled hands, shook them with a merciless fervor that made them ache. Mr. O'Keefe broke away from him and hurried into the adjoining room, where a number of hats and overcoats were hanging. He stayed there longer than seemed necessary, and came out, more tremulous than he went in, wearing a threadbare spring ulster and carrying a hat of a style forgotten.

By this time a clerk had recognised Mr. Sheldon, and came forward, smiling and obsequious, to ask what he could do for him; but Mr. Sheldon answered brusquely that he would return later in the day, and then he passed out to the street after Mr. O'Keefe.

For a quarter of an hour the old man wandered about slowly and aimlessly, Mr. Sheldon at his heels. He went into St. Patrick's Church, and Mr. Sheldon followed him; and followed him still when he left it, walked a square further, and entered a public garden. Though it was early in April and still chilly, the old man sank down on the first bench he found, buttoning his coat about his throat as a protection against the wind. A minute afterward—quite inadvertently, of course—Mr. Sheldon took the seat beside his, and began to glance through a number of letters which he drew from an inner pocket. But all the while it was of Mr. O'Keefe he was thinking—Mr. O'Keefe whom he saw rather than his mail.

The old man unfolded the newspaper which he had crammed into his pocket and stared vacantly at it. He felt no interest in the news, and could not have read it if he had; but the big sheet served as a screen for the tears that, try as he would, he could not control. They filled his eyes, and flowed down over his thin cheeks; and when he had brushed them away—unseen, he thought,—more came, and more and more. After a time, however, he let the paper fall to his knee and gazed thoughtfully at the gravel path at his feet. He had not been sitting so very long before Mr. Sheldon spoke to him in a crisp, business-like way:

'A nice morning, isn't it?—though a little too chilly for us to be quite comfortable sitting here out of doors.'

'A beautiful morning,' the old man agreed courteously. The fact had not occurred to him before.

Mr. Sheldon was shrewd enough to see that Mr. O'Keefe shrank from further conversation, but he was pitiless.

'A quiet spot like this is a good place to come to think,—just the place for the solving of difficulties,' he said next; and, not seeming to see that Mr. O'Keefe winced, he went on: 'Now, I have an office full of feather-brained young fellows. They are quick and eager but unreliable, and for some months I have been wondering how I could improve the state of affairs. I could not imagine an hour ago, but in the restful silence of this garden a plan has suggested itself to me. I am going to try to get an elderly man, quiet and gentlemanly, and accustomed to office work, who will oversee those boys. Such a one may not be easy to find; but I should be glad to pay him well, and his work would not be exacting. It is his influence I want most. Do you happen to know any one fitted for such a position and free to take it?'

Mr. O'Keefe was an unsophisticated and as unsuspicious as a child. It did not for an instant occur to him that there was anything strange or flimsy about Mr. Sheldon's story. He looked up at the keen face beside him, his own brightening with great joy.

'Would—would I do?' he asked timidly.

'Are you, then, without a position?'

'Yes,' Mr. O'Keefe faltered.

'And accustomed to office work?'

'I've done nothing else for fifty years,' was the reply; and for some minutes the two men discussed qualifications and terms and reference: Mr. Sheldon making it sound as if an elderly man in his office were his greatest need, and Mr. O'Keefe's smile broadening every second as his tired old heart grew light and lighter. But after every detail had been satisfactorily arranged, a troubled expression suddenly came over his gentle, worn face, and settled there. He said nothing for a few moments; and when he did speak his voice was tremulous once more, though he looked at Mr. Sheldon with eyes that did not flinch.

'I feel that it's only fair to tell you that—that I was discharged from Whitmore and Cole's this morning. I had been employed there for twenty years and

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