

The other man shook his head.

'Sorry for you,' he said. 'If my people were home, I'd be only too glad to invite you up to dinner. We manage to have a pretty jolly time at Christmas. But, there, I want to get a letter off. See you this evening.'

The man at the window stared after him as he moved away. Then he turned and looked at the darkened street, and, as he looked, the scene seemed to slowly change. The tall buildings faded away, and in their places arose hilly slopes with clumps of trees and zigzag fences, and a village of white houses, with the steeple of a church, and with a playground along the bank of a brawling creek. And as he listened he could hear the laugh of the children at play, and a little later the bell in the distant steeple rang out in a most familiar way.

Suddenly he straightened up and rubbed his eyes. 'Asleep and dreaming,' he muttered, as he rose. 'Must go and order my dinner. Asleep and dreaming.'

That night George Minturn sat on the edge of his bed for some time. The little village nestling among the hills was before him again. This time his thoughts went back to a certain old-fashioned house, the house he had called home so long ago.

How familiar it looked! There was the very window above the porch—the window of his room—through which he had climbed when he ran away that June night so long ago.

He wondered now why he had never wanted to go back. His father had been hard and unsympathetic. He was a narrow man, with strong prejudices. But there was his mother. He drew his breath sharply.

There were few passengers on the single coach of the morning train that stopped at Ellsworth. One of these passengers was George Minturn. He looked about him curiously as he stepped from the car. A neat little station had taken the place of the ramshackle building he remembered so well. How changed everything seemed as he slowly strolled up the main street.

Presently he reached the venerable Green Tree Inn. A stout man greeted him.

'You're pretty well acquainted here, I fancy?' George inquired.

'Bout as well as anybody, I reckon,' the stout man replied. 'I grew up here.'

'Then you may know a family by the name of Minturn?'

'Tain't much of a family,' the stout man replied. 'Just Uncle Simeon and Aunt Emily. That's what the neighbors call 'em. They've got a son knockin' round somewhere, but he ain't likely to turn up.' He gave a little start.

'Mebby you come from him?'

'Maybe I do,' replied the stranger.

'Not dead, is he?'

'He wasn't when I saw him last.'

'Well, you tell him when you see him again that his folks ain't prosperin' as well as he'd like to have 'em, meebby.'

'Why, what's wrong?'

'Pinched for money—that's the main thing. The old man's gettin' pretty blind, too.'

'But why should they be pinched for money?'

'Old man had a younger brother who wasn't much good, an' he had a son that got into trouble, and the old man helped him out of it an' helped his family—and it took quite a chunk of money. There's somethin' owin' on the old home, too, an' I heard they was pressin' the old man for it.'

'Who knows about this indebtedness?'

'Jim Luck, up at the First National. He's the cashier and he knows 'bout pretty much everything.'

George Minturn was detained in the bank for nearly an hour. There was a telegram to send to his own bank in the city, and there were other details to arrange.

'By the way, Mr. Luck,' he said, as he turned to leave, 'can you tell me where I can get an old suit of clothes? I've an idea that I'd like to do a little masquerading.'

The cashier stared at him a moment. Then he smiled.

'Nothing quite so tattered as the prodigal's outfit?' he asked.

The stranger shook his head.

'Not as bad as that,' he answered. 'Something suggestive of a wanderer whose appearance might arouse a little sympathy.'

'I have an old hunting suit hanging up in my private room here,' said the cashier. 'Perhaps that will do.'

A half-hour later a shabby man of middle age tapped lightly on the door of a modest home. A gentle faced old lady looked at the stranger with a kindly smile.

'Madam,' said the shabby man as he quickly pulled off his soft hat. 'I'm a little down on my luck and a little blue, and to-morrow's Christmas, and I thought maybe you could let me stay here all night. I've got enough left to

pay you for it, but I don't want to go to a hotel—I want to be somewhere that's more like home.'

'Come in,' said the old lady.

An old man was sitting by the window with a book on his knees. He looked around as the newcomer entered.

'Father,' said the old lady, 'here's a stranger who says he's homesick and wants to know if we'll let him stay here to-night and Christmas.'

'It's just as you say, Emily,' responded the old man.

He took the seat she pointed out, and did his best to interest them. He told of the places he had visited, of his ocean voyage, of life in the mines and on the plains.

The old lady looked at him beamingly. 'It's like opening the door to the great outside world,' she said. 'We are quite dull here, and our Christmas would have been a lonely one. And it's really a double holiday with us. It's our golden wedding anniversary. We were married very young. He was twenty and I was seventeen.'

'Madam,' said the stranger, suddenly, 'would it cloud my welcome if I told you I was a showman—a juggler?'

She looked at him earnestly. Then she turned to the old man.

'He has an honest face,' she said. 'It will make no difference what his calling is, will it, father?'

'Not at Christmas time,' repeated the old man in a tremulous voice.

'Thank you,' said the stranger. 'And now you must let me stand my share of the Christmas feast. I told you that I had a little something left. I was wise enough to save a trifle, so that when the company broke up I wasn't stranded with the others.'

'We would rather consider you as our guest,' said the old lady with a gentle dignity. 'We are plain people, and our means are quite limited, but you are welcome to the best we have.'

'You will let me have my way,' said the stranger. 'Otherwise I should feel like an intruder. I think I know what will be wanted. Leave that to me. I must not forget that Christmas is not only Christmas, but your golden wedding day as well.'

The old lady's face brightened.

'Yes,' she said, 'Simeon brought me here fifty years ago. Here our son was born.'

The stranger arose.

'If I am to do any Christmas buying I'd better do it now,' he said in his cheeriest way. 'The afternoon is almost gone.'

When he returned he brought with him a heavily-laden basket, and in one pocket of his overcoat a chamois skin bag held something that tinkled musically.

'I knew you'd come back,' said the old lady. 'Father had his doubts.'

'Why, of course, I intended to come back,' said the stranger; 'I wouldn't miss this treat for—for a good deal.'

That night George Minturn slept in the room that was his when he was a boy. Next morning he awoke early and surprised himself anew by the zeal with which he entered into preparations for the feast. He split wood, he went for the milk, he chopped cabbage, he ground coffee. And just before the dinner was ready to serve he retreated to his room and changed his clothes and came down looking so trim and neat that the old lady's eyes opened very wide.

'And now,' he cried, 'I want to prove to you that my claim to being a juggler has some foundation. Will you both kindly leave the room for a moment and let me add the finishing touches to the table.'

Wonderingly, they left him alone, but it was only a few moments.

'Quite ready,' he cried. 'Come in.'

'Now,' he added, 'I pass my invisible wand above the table thus to ask the spirit of this blessed day to descend upon it.'

They bowed their heads as if this were a grace, and then the old man suddenly started.

'Why, what is this?' he cried in his tremulous voice. 'It was beneath my plate. Why, they are gold coins! Look, mother!'

'Why not?' cried the stranger. 'I told you I was a juggler. It's your golden wedding, remember.'

There were gold coins everywhere. Beneath the saucers, under the cream jug, they glistened and clinked and rolled.

And the fading eyes of the old man as he stooped above this shining treasure caught sight of a folded paper beneath the biggest platter. He drew it forth and held it close to his eyes.

'Why, mother,' he cried again, 'this is the discharge of our indebtedness—the old home is ours again.'

The eyes of the gentle old lady turned toward the smiling stranger, and her gaze was a troubled one.

'Once more,' he cried, but now his voice shook a little, 'I move the invisible wand above my head, and, behold! the juggler disappears, and this is your son George come home again!'