

The Mysterious Boarder

His name was Naboth Jannock. So much information he volunteered the day he engaged board and a hall-bedroom of Mrs. Skurry, a lady reduced from heaven knows what social pinnacle to the necessity of keeping a second-class boarding-house.

Mr. Jannock gave no references. Indeed, it was not Mrs. Skurry's habit to ask for any. "Weekly in advance" were her invariable terms, and so long as these were complied with she was not at all inquisitive.

At the end of six months not a soul in the house knew more of Mr. Jannock than was known when he first took his seat at the dinner-table, and Mrs. Skurry, with a wave of her soup-ladle, introduced him to his fellow-boarders.

Not that he was in the least reserved or unsociable. He conversed freely and well on a general topics, but you might have talked with him a year without finding out his opinion on any one in particular. And never, by any chance, did he let fall a word which shed the faintest light on his past career, or his present associations and pursuits. In short, he was as great a mystery as the author of Junius or the individual who assaulted Mr. Patterson.

That he was a single gentleman, Miss Drusilla Pritchard set down as a fact indisputable. That was a point on which her experience was not to be deceived, but, beyond this, not even *her* penetration had been able to reach.

Such a state of things was not to be endured. Miss Pritchard had never before been known to fail in worming out of a new boarder a complete autobiography before the end of his first week. And now it was too provoking to think she had had Mr. Jannock half-a-year under cross-examination with no other effect than that of whetting to a keener edge her own curiosity.

She practiced her most persuasive arts on the wary boarder. She monopolized him in the evenings, plied him with poetry and sentiment, and banged for his entertainment, to the accompaniment of her own voice, jangles of discord out of the most unmelodious of boarding-house pianos.

In the poetic and sentimental field, Mr. Jannock proved himself at home. He answered quotation with quotation, and rhapsody with rhapsody; and the ecstasies he went into over Miss Pritchard's excruciating musical attempts flattered her vanity to the top of its bent.

"Drat the man! I'll find him out if I have to marry him to do it!" vowed the fair Drusilla; and, from that hour, the incomprehensible Jannock, in military phase, was invested in due form.

Whether or not he would have succumbed at last can never now be known. It is certain, however, that he testified the liveliest pleasure in Miss Drusilla's society. His attentions, too, were quite marked, and the other boarders were beginning to wink and whisper:

"It's only a question of time."

But Drusilla grew too impatient to wait longer. Curiosity was killing her by inches. She must and would unravel the tormenting secret without delay and at any cost.

Mr. Jannock was very regular in his habits. He went out every morning after breakfast, and returned punctually at a certain hour in the evening. As to where and how he spent the day, he never dropped a hint which might afford ground even for conjecture.

“I’ll find him out,” said Miss Drusilla, in the retirement of her chamber; and with *her*, once to be resolved was immediately to act.

Next morning, when Naboth Jannock left the house, he was followed, at a cautious distance, by a lady closely veiled. After going a few blocks, he turned into a by-street, and then into another, and another—each more squalid than the last—till finally he stopped before a miserable hovel, which he entered.

Drusilla Pritchard—for the veiled lady was none other—posted herself at a secure watching-place, determined to await the progress of events.

At the end of half-an-hour Mr. Jannock had not reappeared; but instead, a bowed and decrepit old man, his white locks and long flowing beard fluttering in the wind, and his tattered garments betokening the extreme of poverty, hobbled out, feeling his way with two battered sticks. A rough wooden box hung suspended from his neck, while a dingy piece of tin, fastened to his breast, displayed the words: “HELP THE BLIND.”

Altogether the tottering medicant was a pitiable object. Through his nearly-closed eyelids, which appeared red and inflamed, a glimpse might be caught of two white, repulsive-looking orbs, whose fixity proved their insensibility to surrounding objects.

“Ah!” murmured Miss Drusilla, “I have solved the mystery! Mr. Jannock is evidently a devotee to works of charity, who shrinks from letting his good deeds be seen of men. I will question this poor creature, to the wants of whose helpless family our good Samaritan is doubtless at this moment ministering.”

Advancing briskly, she laid her hand on the blind man’s arm. He turned quickly, but before her words could shape themselves, he wheeled and fled with a rapidity which rendered pursuit hopeless.

Under the first impulse Drusilla followed a few steps, when a policeman, supposing that the lady’s pocket had been picked, gave chase to the fugitive, whom he overhauled after a short race, and led back by the collar.

In the captive’s struggles to get free his snowy hair and beard dropped off, and to Miss Drusilla’s astonished gaze no less a person than Naboth Jannock stood revealed!

The policeman’s amazement was equal to Drusilla’s own.

“I’d no notion,” he exclaimed, “that ‘Old Blinkey,’ whom I’ve seen around so many years, and who, they say, has begged himself into a fortune on the strength of his infirmities, was a spry, active fellow like that! Have you lost anything, ma’am?”

“No,” Drusilla answered, with a victorious look at the man whose secret she had fathomed.

“Then I supposed I may let him go,” said the policeman.

Mr. Jannock, whose eyes looked bright enough now that they were turned right side foremost, stood not upon the order of his going, while Miss Drusilla hastened home, panting to proclaim her triumph.

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