

Doctor Goodfoot

—
by G. P. Lathrop

THE main street of Ridgeway had, as it were, instinctively widened itself in front of the post-office, out of respect for that governmental centre, which, it may be said, was also the chief literary institution of the village, and, in fact, of the entire township. Nor was the broader space ill advised at this point. Crowds were apt at various times and seasons to collect spontaneously in front of the post-office, and, though their masses never became very dense, they found the wide road a relief. Farmers, too, driving in from the surrounding country, must call here for their letters and their copy of the *Orthodox Observer* (or whatever other similar thin-leaved and well-linked weekly product of the press awaited them), and must then use a becoming deliberateness of loafing before returning to their muddy wagons for the homeward drive; so that they also profited by the outspreading of the highway. But at last there had come a man who was incensed by the width of the street. Mr. Jergram, who had only a given time in which to accomplish his errand at Ridgeway, having walked all the way from the nearest railroad-station, distant a mile, and, being very dry and irritated from his tramp in the sun, was in no humor to appreciate the splendid expanse of sleeping dust which lay before him on his arrival opposite to the post-office. In fact, he gave utterance to some ungentle exclamation, expressive of his disgust at the spectacle. But just at that moment an unrefreshing gust of wind swept down the street, and Jergram was obliged to promptly close both mouth and eyes, merely gasping for a final breath, before he was enveloped in a persistent whirl of gritty particles. When he unclosed them again he plunged at once into the highway and floundered across.

All along the little terrace which served for a sidewalk, on the other side, stood wagons, some of which had scattered voluminous dust upon him during his walk from the station, so that he felt a certain acquaintance with them. But the post-office, with its honey-combed window on one side of the door, full of little boxes, in some of which blinked lazy letters waiting to be taken, and, on the other side, its mixed stock of the illustrated weeklies, light groceries, and candies and lemons, which looked so new as almost to throw a doubt on their own reality – all this was quite new to him.

He passed the idlers at the door, though not so brusquely as to attract observation, and approached the little aperture made to facilitate communication with the postmaster. Jergram was in a great hurry. But he was now met by a fresh annoyance and cause of delay. The space in front of the official orifice was occupied by a woman, who seemed in no haste to leave the spot. She was talking with the postmaster, whom Jergram could not see. He heard an affable and leisurely voice, however, issuing now and then from behind the loop-hole in answer to the black-clad lady in front of it. Presently he perceived that the lady was presenting some small grievance of her own in connection with the postal-service—some complaint as to prepayment. He began walking

up and down the passage-way between the letter-boxes and the news-and-grocery counter. The little speckled-faced boy, posted behind this counter, seeing a dusty and hurried-looking man walking up and down, and looking earnestly into the postal department from time to time, asked him if he would like to see anybody. Jergram turned toward him, with a worn and shabby moustache protruding in front of a hardly-used face, but still a face of considerable vigor in the concentrated eyebrows and the clearly-pointed nose.

“I want to see Mr. Penniborn,” answered Jergram.

The boy (who was much less fresh and more shop-worn than his lemons and candy) noticed some kind of gilded pin gleaming mysteriously on the stranger’s waistcoat in the fluctuating shadow of his coat-lappel, and concluded that he must be there in some detective capacity which commanded unquestioning obedience.

“I’d tell him,” he said, “only I can’t get behind till that lady’s gone.”

Jergram, learning his impotence, paid no further heed to him; but the little boy, notwithstanding, walked around from behind his breastwork and approached the stamp-window, following Jergram, who had already done so.

“Well, but I’ve just paid seventeen cents,” said the lady in black, rather pettishly; “and now there’s more wanting.”

“Then, I suppose, that’ll do until the next October,” answered the bland voice of Mr. Penniborn from within. “It’s all right, in that case.”

At this the old lady—who wore an antiquated bonnet of black mohair, pinched up a trifle pugnaciously behind, and ornamented with dusky trimmings—drew back her head, throwing her nose somewhat higher than before, and said “Oh!” At the same time her black parasol, which she held open over her shoulder, was brought so close to Jergram’s face that he recoiled a step, coming into contact, in his turn, with the little speckled boy. But the feminine contestant was apparently not satisfied, and renewed her attack, perhaps encouraged by her success thus far to hope that the sum in dispute might even be recovered, now that it had served its purpose of prepayment.

Jergram stared at the ceiling and cast a weary eye upon the newspapers; drummed testily with his fingers on the shelf which projected at a convenient height in front of the boxes, and finally relieved himself by establishing a silent understanding with the boy. He looked at him with a highly-significant expression of amused weariness, which the diminutive man with a preternatural acuteness understood to apply to the lady in black. Having found him worthy of this silent confidence, Jergram lapsed into a mellower mood, and casually inquired: “How long is she going to keep it up, Tommy?”

The boy, who had never seen Jergram before, was somewhat surprised at being addressed by a name which happened to be his own. His mind at once connected this remarkable insight of Jergram's with the potent badge visible upon the stranger's waistcoat.

"I don't know," he answered, recovering himself. "She lives up at Nine-Acre Lot, though, and I guess the old man won't wait much longer."

"I wouldn't if *I* was inside there," said Jergram, still speaking in a guarded undertone.

But he had mistaken Tommy's meaning, and the boy, much relieved at this flaw in Jergram's omniscience, indicated the old man to whom he alluded. This was the husband of the woman in black, and a certain farmer Bedford, who stood waiting among the few lingerers at the door-step. Jergram's interest in his colloquy with the boy declined, and he once more turned toward the stamp-window. By this time the belligerent lady—in whose face, nevertheless, Jergram had caught sight of a singularly bland and wistful gentleness under the more superficial aspect of hardness—had again arrived at a climax; and Jergram was once more beaten back by the rearward movement of the ancient bonnet. But it was the last repulse from that source. The complainant shortly afterward went away, and Jergram entered the inclosure by a door at the back, which Mr. Penniborn opened.

He took off his hat, sat down, with every appearance of luxury, on the ragged stool to which he had been invited, and said, "I have come from the office at Sleeperstown."

"No trouble, I hope," said Mr. Penniborn, immediately, somewhat startled by the other's manner. "Any irregularity anywhere?" he went on to ask, catching the gleam of the half-hidden gilded badge.

Jergram smiled quietly, and with a sense of superior power.

"Oh no," he said, "nothing of that kind, Mr. Penniborn." Seeing the postmaster's slightly disconcerted air, he could not but picture to himself the ease with which a person, commissioned for that purpose, could handle Mr. Penniborn, were he perchance the culprit in any such irregularity as he himself had suggested.

"Let me see," said Penniborn, fumbling over a publication he had taken up while Jergram spoke; "this is Mr.——."

"No, you won't find my name there," said Jergram. "I am employed by the office at Sleeperstown, though. My name is Jergram. But I came down here on a special errand, Penniborn."

The Ridgeway postmaster immediately resumed rather more of his official dignity than he had up to this point maintained.

"Well, Mr. Jergram," he said, "what do you want of me?"

“There’s a mysterious affair going on in the way of letters,” said the envoy from Sleeperstown. “For some time past we have been getting letters from some person here in Ridgeway to a gentleman whose name I won’t mention at present. Now, these letters don’t give any clue to the real name or character of the writer,” continued Jergram, with an increasingly statistical manner. “And it is desirable that I should, if possible, unravel these from the web of mystery in which they are entangled.”

At this point Mr. Penniborn was forcibly reminded of the newspaper accounts of crime and intrigue which he had read with a certain aching of the bones.

“Any thing more?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Jergram. “The writer is a lady, apparently, and signs her letters with a romantic name; and the person they are written to is a gentleman.” Jergram’s roughly-used face flushed a little as he spoke.

“Well, and what have I to do with it?” Penniborn asked, feeling that it was impossible he should be connected with any thing which began so unpleasantly.

“That’s what I’m coming to,” said the other. “I want you, now, to observe the letters that pass through your hands, and see if you can’t make out who sends these particular ones.”

“I can’t do anything of the sort, Mr. Jergram. I am not put here to spy upon people that send their letters through this office.”

“But this is an extraordinary case,” urged the stranger. “I have a copy of the handwriting, and will furnish the name of the person addressed if you are prepared to lend your assistance. One of the most curious things about this, Mr. Penniborn, is, that that letters come with perfect regularity—once a month.”

The matter interested Mr. Penniborn, notwithstanding his reluctance to further Jergram’s purpose in the way proposed.

“*You* don’t happen to be the gentleman yourself, do you?” he asked, with a smile in which lurked a cynical astuteness quite unusual on his face.

“As to the gentleman,” said Jergram, at once withdrawing, as it were, behind his battered countenance, “I do not propose to make any disclosure until I have enlisted your services in the search for this young lady. I may, and I may not, be the man!”

“Well,” said the postmaster, trying to shake off the fascination which the singular statements of his visitor exercised upon him, “well, Mr. Jergram, as to that, you have had my answer. I can do nothing for you.”

“Mr. Penniborn,” said Jergram, again, “I appeal to you as a man—”

But here, to the placid Mr. Penniborn's great relief, a head appeared at the stamp-window. It was only that of a heavy-looking youth, however, who wished to purchase a three-cent stamp. In a moment Mr. Penniborn was free, and Jergram promptly renewed his exhortation.

"Now I appeal to you as a man," he said, "to help me in this affair." And, while the besieged postmaster of Ridgeway wiped his mystified brow with a colored cotton handkerchief, he continued: "You will allow that it's not quite proper for a young woman to be writing to a gentleman who don't know anything about her—and an unmarried gentleman, too, I may say, without betraying confidence. Now this is what *she's* doing. Of course, she does it quietly, without letting her folks know about it; and there comes in our duty to her family. Think what might have been the consequences if her correspondent hadn't been the man he is, sir! That young girl needs looking after. It would be the greatest benefit we could confer upon her, Mr. Penniborn, to ferret her out, and charge her folly home upon her. I, for one, am determined to do my part toward that end. And, if you don't see your duty clear in this, you are not the man I take you for, Mr. Penniborn."

The postmaster was shaken. The case certainly seemed to require special consideration.

"If you will give me sufficient authority, Mr. Jergram," he said, reluctantly, "either a note from the Sleeperstown postmaster—I think that might do—or a distinct application from the gentleman to whom the letters are addressed, why, I—"

Mr. Jergram interrupted him, rising from his seat for a final effort.

"Mr. Penniborn," he said, "I have advanced an ample array of argument. You are not satisfied; very well. I do not propose to put this matter exclusively under your direction. *I* have undertaken it, and I mean to carry it through. I had counted upon your assistance, because I counted upon your feelings as a responsible member of society. (For all I know, you may have a daughter of your own.) Think of that young woman, Mr. Penniborn. She hadn't ought to, you know!"

Jergram, as he reached this climax, seemed to shoot an overwhelming emphasis at the postmaster from the converging lines of his energetic eyebrows. But he accomplished nothing by it.

"I am sorry, Mr. Jergram," said Mr. Penniborn, in his suavest tones, but in reality giving the throttling touch to the temptation within him, "but I've got to attend to the mails."

"Then I'll bid you a good-afternoon," said Jergram, with subdued disdain. And he immediately quitted the office.

Secretly, however, he was much chagrined at the result of the interview. It was not at all what he had expected. He had been brooding over this matter for many months, and had intended that his visit to Ridgeway should set in motion a delicate machinery of discovery, for having contrived which he gave himself great credit.

Jergram, it must be said, was the prey of a private ambition for distinction as a detective. This was not his profession; but his mind had formed the habit of executing every variety of gratuitous service in the unearthing of mystery, and he concluded, therefore, that he had peculiar gifts in this direction. He was seldom without a theory—which he, at least, deemed satisfactory—for the explanation of any notable robbery, murder, or suspicious train of incident which might happen to be brought before his own or the public mind. He would even go out of his way to find new and especially difficult problems with which to tax his ingenuity. His favorite reading consisted of such accounts of real or fictitious discovery of crime as he had access to; and he even went so far as to join a secret society, for the sake of the added power of mystery with which it seemed to invest him, and the cryptographic badge it entitled him to wear. But he took a pleasure in doing all this aside from his regular occupation. He looked upon his facility in these matters as in the nature of exceptional genius, and would have received with lofty scorn any suggestion that he should trade upon his cleverness. He therefore continued to fulfill his duties as a subordinate in the Sleeperstown post-office, without availing himself of his unusual abilities. His powers, however, were not unknown to the postmaster, who regarded them with considerable awe. At last, Mr. Jergram had suddenly become conscious that a work lay ready to his hand which demanded the application of precisely such endowments as those he himself possessed, and that circumstances pointed to him as the only person able to accomplish it. It was a task of an unusual nature; but in that there was all the more distinction.

For three years past, letters had arrived, at intervals of a month, addressed to one Doctor Goodfoot, who was a person unknown at the Sleeperstown post-office. At first, but little attention was paid to them. After a due interval of advertising, they were dispatched to the Dead-Letter Office, and dismissed from the minds of the local functionaries. Subsequently, their interest having been excited by the steady continuance of his missives, the postmaster and his subordinate made inquiries in all practicable directions for the apathetic Goodfoot, who still made no effort to claim his letters; but without success. The letters themselves, when opened at Washington, were found to contain no clew to the identity of the sender; and when, in the course of an effort which was made to obtain some further information, the fact was transmitted to the Sleeperstown office that the signature was that of a woman, the interest in Jergram's mind at once became intense. Having constructed his theory of the case, with all the care an astrologer might have used in the casting of a horoscope, he gradually infected the mind of his admiring superior with the same ambition he had himself become fired with. In this way had it come about that, partly with the connivance of the Sleeperstown postmaster, partly under favor of a winking at the proceeding on his part, the amateur detective had taken the matter in hand, and made his journey to Ridgeway.

Meantime, poor Penniborn found his mind in an extraordinary state of excitement. He rejected with superior calm Tommy's hazarded speculations as to the constabular character of his visitor; but, inwardly, he was unpleasantly stimulated to a curiosity which he could not but feel to be reprehensible. As he made up the slender afternoon's mail he could not but think of

Sleeperstown, and the foolish woman who might perhaps have committed to his care, that very day, one of her epistles to the gentleman in whose interest Jergram had represented himself as acting. It was no unusual thing for a letter to Sleeperstown to pass through his hands; and on this occasion there were three destined for that place. But, as he came across the first one of them, he could hardly avoid an internal shock of surprise, which was quite unusual in his life of petty routine. When he took up the second he had absolutely to resort to his colored handkerchief again, for a fine dew had distilled itself from his forehead, and lay moist upon it. The letter was directed in a feminine hand! Penniborn's momentary consternation, however, was quite preposterous, as he said to himself the next moment; for he happened to know the writing, and it was that of a person quite out of the list of possible participators in Jergram's mystery. And yet it was a curious coincidence, too, that the letter was addressed to a gentleman. He had some vague remembrance of having seen the name before, and it threatened, now, to linger in his memory with annoying persistence. But he had so far succeeded in dismissing the whole subject from his mind that, by the time he fingered the third Sleeperstown letter, he was in no whit affected by the purport of its superscription. The third letter was addressed to Doctor Goodfoot; but he did not even notice the name.

A year passed, and Jergram had lapsed into a disconsolate state. His principal had begun to look with skepticism on the would-be detective's boasted abilities, though he was not without an odd kind feeling, also, that Jergram was a man of unknown calibre, to whom circumstances had in the present instance done injustice, and who was very probably laboring under a misconception that time might clear up. This impression Jergram had, in fact, industriously sought to produce in the mind of the postmaster, while in secret he grew more and more dolorous over the ill-success of his effort at discovery. The letters continued to come, and were forwarded to Washington, as before. Still no Doctor Goodfoot made his appearance. And Jergram fell to looking upon these constant epistles as so many tablets of fate—Sibylline leaves on which was recorded that destiny of failure in his most cherished undertaking which seemed to have been imposed upon him. But there came an eventful day when the tide turned, and Jergram's outlook brightened. A letter came from the Dead-Letter Office inclosing the last-received communication to Goodfoot from the unknown correspondent, in which had been found a bit of costly lace, that the department was anxious to have returned to the sender, if it were in any way to be effected. Jergram at once rose to the height of his former confidence.

"Give me the letter and the inclosure, Mr. Russ!" he exclaimed, with energy. "I'll fix it, now."

"But how do you account, Jergram, for this Goodfoot holding back as he does?" asked Russ, once more feeling that he was appealing to an authority.

"There are several possible explanations of that point," returned Jergram, with encouraging certainty. "It may be that he has wronged her in some way, and, though suspecting her attempts to address him through the post, naturally makes no effort to get her communications. At first sight," Jergram continued, growing fluent, "this might seem a perfectly satisfactory theory. But

the character of the letters, so far as may be judged by report, and the signatures, without date or address, put a different face on the affair. The most probable supposition seems to me to be, that the young woman has at some time had more or less acquaintance with the doctor, unknown to her family and relatives, and that she is now attempting to renew or continue that acquaintance; but she has made some mistake as to Goodfoot's whereabouts."

"Evidently," said Russ.

"Time will show," said Jergram, "whether I am anywhere near the truth. I make no pretenses."

This gentleness in Jergram smote Mr. Russ with a sense of his own injustice toward the amateur detective for some time past.

"Only give me the letter as an authority with that old stiff-neck," resumed Jergram, "and I'll fix it, as I said. I feel a duty toward that young creature, Russ, and it has weighed heavy on me that I couldn't carry it out before. Besides, there's the doctor. I am not inclined to think badly of him; of course, there's more in this than you and I can guess off-hand; and I believe he would be really grateful if he knew how we had stopped off this business. It's not improbable that either he or the young lady's folks would be only too glad to reward us handsomely for attending to the matter with what is more than common care—it ain't any boast to say. Now, it wouldn't be more than fair if the government would put what letters of the series and they happen to have kept into my hands, and leave the disposal at my discretion. But I don't want any thing of that sort," he concluded, hastily; "that's not the game I'm playing. I should lay myself open to misconstruction by availing myself of that advantage."

"But you don't know yet whether Goodfoot is to be found," suggested Mr. Russ, respectfully.

Mr. Jergram hardly repressed a smile. Something of his previous humility vanished as he replied: "Goodfoot will be found easy enough, trust me for that, when I get hold of his fair correspondent."

This final touch of newspaper-paragraph reassured Mr. Russ. In truth, he was glad to see his companion-in-office once more restored to good spirits and his former sanguine mood. He gave him the official letter, with its precious bit of lace, and Jergram received the latter as fondly as if it had been some magic web in which the clew to this whole complication was deftly knit up, only awaiting the raveling touch of his hand.

The next day he reappeared at Ridgeway. It was a chilly afternoon of latter spring, and the lemons and candy were quite subdued and sad in color; but little speckled Tommy looked much as before, and Penniborn's voice was as genial and leisurely as ever. To begin with, Mr. Jergram merely handed him the letter of instructions from the Dead-Letter Office. Its effect on Penniborn was immediate and powerful.

“It’s rather curious,” said Jergram, giving him time to recover, “that one of those letters came the very day after I saw you before. Some one must have dropped it into the box that same afternoon—perhaps while you and I were talking here together.”

“Great Heavens!” exclaimed Mr. Penniborn. And he looked around toward the thin slit of the letter-drop, as if he expected at that moment to see a ghostly document gliding through, propelled by some invisible power without. “I can’t see my way through this, Mr. Jergram,” he went on, more calmly. “I can’t see my way through at all” (the volunteer detective still smiled cheerfully at the postmaster); “for I know the handwriting, as it is here.”

Jergram at once flashed into a state of keen concentration.

“Whose is it?” he asked.

“One thing I want to know first,” said Mr. Penniborn, delaying. “What is this gentleman’s name?”

“Doctor Goodfoot!” cried Jergram, without a shadow of reserve.

“Hm—hm,” muttered Penniborn. “Yes, I think I *have* seen it one or twice, though I don’t just remember it in this handwriting. [“]Oh!” he cried. “Was the hand on the envelope different—disguised, may be?”

“Yes—yes!”

“Ah, well, it must be she, then. It must be; and yet—”

“Come, come, my friend, we’re losing time,” said Jergram, who could not help associating his present position, despite his inadequate behavior, with that of eminent detectives on the eve of tracing to the root some enormous misdemeanor. “What is the lady’s name, if you know her?”

“Why, she signs herself Emmeline, here,” returned Penniborn, thumbing the manuscript; “but that’s not *her* name.”

“Whose? What do you mean?” demanded Jergram, losing his patience.

“Why, as near as I can make out,” pursued the postmaster, “this letter was written by Sairy Bedford, the farmer’s wife, up at—”

“That sounds likely!” exclaimed the detective, overcome with contemptuous disgust. “Farmer’s wife, eh?”

“That’s just what it is,” retorted Penniborn, “likely or not—Sairy Bedford, up at Nine Acre.—Tommy!” he suddenly called to the dreary little boy. Tommy immediately left his intrenchment.

Something in the “Nine Acre” struck Jergram as familiar. It carried his mind back to the former interview with Penniborn. In an instant he had recalled the old lady, with the quaint black bonnet, who had haggled so persistently about her seventeen cents, and of whom he had not

thought again since. He had burst into a laugh—a short, experienced, and guarded laugh. But, all at once, the idea of this antique female having any thing to do with the affair he had in hand became so horribly grotesque that he caught his breath with something like a gasp, and became silent.

“Tommy,” continued Mr. Penniborn, as he admitted the boy within his hive-like retreat, “I suppose you know Mrs. Bedford’s handwriting?”

The little man’s eyes twinkled with a sagacity so very full of fun that it was almost sad, and nodded.

“What should you say to this?” asked the official, again holding before the sagacious eyes the disputed manuscript. “Does it look like hers?”

“Of course it’s hers,” said Tommy, reluctantly committing himself. Mr. Penniborn ushered him out of the inclosure, and then turned to Jergram, with a face of expectant triumph.

The emissary from Sleeperstown had watched the transaction with a certain fading look in his face; but he met Penniborn’s glance with obstinacy.

“That’s a pretty way to use a witness,” he said.

He sat down, wearily. Mr. Penniborn also drew a chair near, and seated himself. The postmaster explained that Tommy had long been in the habit of lodging with the Bedfords, and that there could be no kind of doubt as to his ability to judge of the writing.

“I remember, now, how old woman Bedford was here that day,” he said, “talking and talking about something or other before you came. You see, I can recall that day pretty well.”

Jergram now saw again every thing as it had been on that occasion, with even the lingering figures at the door, and Mr. Bedford among them. He remembered him as a tall, massive man, with black, thick whiskers, the upper lip shaven, and the cheeks also, down to a point on each side a little lower than the corners of the mouth. He had small, black eyes, too, under dark brows, which looked out suddenly, with an expression not altogether agreeable to encounter.

“He isn’t the man to be over-well pleased with this,” he muttered to himself, half admitting, by so doing, that the wife, after all, was the perpetrator of these epistolary imprudences. He had read the letter from Emmeline, and it was apparently a frank outpouring from the writer’s heart, a letter such as could be written only to a lover, he thought, and the most sympathetic of lovers at that. Nevertheless, he refused to yield at once to Penniborn’s hypothesis. He demanded that some further step should be taken, some additional proof secured.

“Let me have the piece of lace overnight,” said Penniborn, “and I’ll see to that.—Though,” he added, reflectively, “she [hasn’t] been very spruce lately, and it *is* ticklish. Still, I’ll try it.”

Jergram consented, and went back to Sleeperstown.

“It isn’t the sort of thing in which I can be of any service,” he remarked, languidly, to Russ. And again his principal saw that Jergram was the victim of unfavorable circumstances.

On the following day there was a claimant for the letter accompanying the lace, whose sufficiency could not be questioned.

Returning to Nine-Acre Lot after Jergram’s departure, little Tommy presented the lace to Sairy. She had changed much in the past year. Something of its former petty determination had vanished from her face; but the softer look which had revealed itself to Jergram had now cast off, as it were, a thickness of the veil which had before concealed it. But also the whole aspect of the woman was feeble and sunken. She had long been declining in energy and hope, though without suffering the symptoms of any acute disease. On this evening she sat alone, in a room lighted only by the fire, listless in her armchair.

“It’s come back from the Dead-Letter Office,” said Tommy.

“From the dead—” gasped the farmer’s wife, with a sudden contraction in the muscles of her mouth and cheeks. “Oh, no, it can’t be, Tommy! He can’t be dead.”

She looked strangely weak and sad as she spoke. Tommy had never yet beheld her so, and something akin to alarm fell upon him. In the flickering light from the hearth, Sairy looked as if a single puff of darkness might extinguish her forever.

“No, nobody’s dead that I know of,” said the boy. But Sairy scarcely heard him, and seemed to have fallen into communion with herself, and to have become, on the instant, more completely incorporated than before with the grotesque shadows and wavering firelight of the room.

The young messenger of the ills stole silently away to his own dark little chamber, on the other side of a passage into which the larger room opened. But it was not long before his attention was aroused by a sound of voices coming from the apartment he had left. He distinguished first the tones of Bedford himself, who had but just come in.

“It was the dead-*letter*, he said, most probably,” the farmer was saying. “That means that the person you sent this to—in a letter, I suppose—never got it, and so it was sent back from Washington.”

A pause ensued, during which Tommy could make out nothing definite. Then the dark and unpleasant voice of Bedford rose again:

“Who is it you sent it to,” he asked, “that you make such a mumbling and fuss about her not being dead?”

Tommy crept to his door, and put his hearing to its utmost stretch.

“Yes, yes, it was in a letter I sent it. Oh, now you must know—I must tell you. O Cyrus, be kind to me; don’t be angry.”

“What! at your keeping all this to yourself? What difference does it make to me, I wonder, whether I knew you had this trumpery about you, and was sending it away somewhere?”

“Ah, no, no,” returned Sairy, in a groaning voice. “But it was main wrong, I see, though not altogether wrong. I see it clearer now, Cyrus.—I haven’t long to live, dear, and it’s better I should get it off my mind.”

“What—what do you mean?” asked her husband, in a voice suddenly subdued, though still harsh. Apparently he had forgotten, until then, his wife’s precarious state.

Then the woman spoke with an effort:

“It was not a woman at all, Cyrus.”

Bedford did not fully understand at once.

“Not a woman at all,” he said, mechanically. Then an inarticulate ejaculation escaped him—a sound between a savage growl and a groan. “Who was it, then?” he demanded, with a husky vibration of the voice.

“Oh,” began Sairy again, “what a sad, sad story! But I was always true to you, Cyrus. Rest easy—rest easy. Oh, how sad—sad!”

“Who was it I asked?” reiterated Bedford; and the words rose and flew forth in a strange, uncontrollable way.

“It was at Sleeperstown, Cyrus. Doctor Goodfoot,” murmured the woman. Her head drooped; her voice was as if she were almost choking.

“I never heard of him. Doctor Goodfoot? When did you know him?” And then, more as if he were recalling the locality of a dream than speaking of realities, Cyrus unconsciously repeated, “Sleeperstown—Good—”

A slow, melancholy wail sank upon the air from Sairy’s high-backed chair.

“Oh, oh, if we’d been happier! If you’d been kinder, Cyrus!”

Then it seemed as if the old woman would have wept, but she could not; and instead, there was only a sort of click and rush as of long-disused machinery. Cyrus heaved a deep and heavy sigh. Once more his voice took on a broken shade of gentleness.

“Where did you see him first, Sairy?” he asked.

“I never have seen him,” she answered. Then, after a pause, she went on: “Often before, though, I longed to know him. But I didn’t even know his name then. Those long years, Cyrus, when we went on, each one alone so unhappy, I got so I thought I should die for sorrow and lonesomeness. And you never were any kinder. Oh, dear,” cried Sairy, breaking into a momentary gasping sob, “I thought then of what I hoped you were before we were married. And

all at once it came into my mind that, some day, I should find it in some one else—all I hoped in you. So, after that, things seemed a little easier to bear; and I went on thinking more and more about him. But I don't think it would have been so if I'd had my mother alive still."

There was silence for a space, and then the farmer muttered, tenderly, "Poor girl! She don't know what she's said.—Sairy," he said, aloud, with an unwonted gentleness, but hardly addressing her directly, "you've got a hallucination, poor girl."

Sairy caught the word.

"Oh, no," she cried, appealingly, "not that, Cyrus. I might have thought so if I hadn't found out all about him afterward." Then, catching sight of the trifle in her hand, she collected herself anew. "It was my mother this belonged to, Cyrus. She was rich when she was young, as you know. How often I've thought what a beautiful bride she must have made! It was part of the trimmings of her bridal-dress, Cyrus." And here the old woman held up the cherished relic, and waited for a gleam of firelight to illumine it to her loving regard. "I used to think," she resumed, "if ever I was married I would wear that about me somewhere. But I didn't, I don't know why, when the time came. We wasn't going to be such fine folks as my mother in her youth, and my father. 'Twas partly that and partly strange feelings about it—I don't know what—that made me leave it off when the hour was at hand. And then, when it all turned out so badly between us, Cyrus, I felt as if maybe the lace, if I'd only worn it, might have left a blessing on our lives. But I kep' it to myself—and I never showed it to you." (Here Sairy made a sound more like a simple sigh than any thing which had yet escaped her.) "So once, when I was a-sitting in this very room, four years ago, and looking at the lace all alone, and thinking about it that way, all at once his name popped into my head; and I saw that he lived at Sleeperstown, and was waiting to hear from me."

"Goodfoot?" inquired Bedford, in a low voice.

"Yes," said Sairy. "And then I began to write. And I signed mother's name, because, you see, it was her lace, and that was what made me think of him. I was a good deal happier after I'd written the first time; and I didn't care to go again for a month. But, after that, I found I had to write as often as once a month to keep my courage up. And so it went on, Cyrus, year by year. I never wrote but once a month. And I could always pour my heart out to him like as if he were my father or brother; but he was dearer to me than that, too. Oh, dear," she exclaimed, as if seized by a sudden terror, "you don't seem angry, Cyrus! What have I been telling you? Oh, sometimes I've thought if you knew it you would kill me."

A brief sound, resembling a struggling sob, issued from the space of shadow where Cyrus stood. The next moment, the farmer appeared at Tommy's door.

"Tommy!" said he, in a loud, searching whisper. "Come boy," he added, as the lad appeared before him in the dark, "the old woman ain't well. She's wanderin' in her mind."

Soon they were standing together in the firelit room. Sairy in her chair was crooning in a pathetic tone to herself. Presently she observed her husband again.

“Cyrus,” she cried, looking earnestly toward him, “you wasn’t feeling bad, was you? I thought you sounded as if you were crying-like.”

“No, Sairy,” responded the farmer, “I’m not feeling bad. But, Sairy, seems to me it might”—he drew nearer, and looked at her anxiously before he finished—“it might be a kind of hallucination, don’t you think it might be?”

“Don’t say it,” cried his wife, stretching her wasted hands before her eyes. “I know it seems strange. I can’t prove it. But I’m as certain-sure as—How could I have gone on writing letters for four years if it wasn’t so?” she asked.

“But you never saw him,” suggested Cyrus, still speaking low.

“No, I never saw him,” she answered; “but I know just how he looks: his white hair, and clear brown eyes! He’s a large man, too. O Cyrus, if you could see him!”

“How could you get his letters, Sairy, without my knowing?” asked the farmer, with almost an awe-stricken manner.

“I never got any, Cyrus,” she said. “But that never made any difference. We are one in our thoughts, so long as one writes to the other.” Here a smile that was almost infantine passed over her face. “And then,” she proceeded, “he’s too busy to write to me, though he loves me dearly, too. But he has a great deal to do. Oh my, how much!”

The farmer turned to Tommy. “There isn’t any Doctor Goodfoot up at Sleeperstown, is there?” he asked. There were but four doctors, in face, and Tommy, though he knew the names of all of them, declared that the man in question was not generally known there. “Tommy says he don’t practise there,” said the farmer, again addressing himself to his wife, but speaking now more as if he were interpreting something which he did not understand than as if it were a matter of personal interest to him.

“No, not for a great many years,” she answered. “He’s written books, that’s what he’s been doing. He tells people how to be happy. And then he takes young men, and helps them along in the world. I have spoken about Tommy to him very often; and I hope some day he’ll be able to give him a start, which he does deserve. But the doctor has so much on his mind already! More books to write, and so many people to search out and make happy. Think of that! If he wants to comfort all the sorrowful people in the world, he’ll have enough to do. *We* know that, Cyrus, don’t we?” and the poor woman broke into a laugh that was half hysterical.

“There, there, Sairy,” said the farmer, coming to her chair, and taking her hand; “don’t rouse up any more about it. Wouldn’t you like to sleep a little now?”

A heap of dying embers only lay upon the hearth; but Tommy could distinguish, through the mixed gloom and fading glow of the room, the figure of the tall man bending over, with the head so low that he must have rested one knee on the ground. The old wife leaned heavily forward upon him.

“Oh, I *should* like to sleep,” she said, with a returning weariness. “Only, Cyrus, the lace. You wouldn’t take it away if I should go to sleep?” Then, seeming to forget this momentary mistrust, she resumed: “It was a pity it came back. Maybe he thought I would want it again. But I didn’t, and I told him he was worthy to keep it, and I wanted him to. But, if I shouldn’t write again, you’ll take it to him, won’t you, Cyrus? Yes, I should like to leave it with him, if I was to die.” She drew a long, long breath, murmuring, “It is so good only to have written to him,” and drooped, sleeping, upon her husband’s shoulder.

The next day she passed quietly out of the world, as they watched at her side.

Penniborn immediately gave notice of the circumstances to Jergram, who succeeded in obtaining from the Dead-Letter Office two or three of the Emmeline letters which had been kept, owing to their singular nature. These he sent to Bedford, and his reputation rose considerably among his friends. The history of the case, so far as he knew it, became one of the most impressive stories in his subsequent life.

A change occurred soon after in the ownership of the farm at Nine-Acre Lot. It was sold to the highest bidder; and Cyrus Bedford bade farewell to the neighborhood forever, as he said to Tommy. The history of the letters, despite the precautions of Penniborn, who could not help feeling incriminated in a dark misdeed, by knowing any thing about it, got abroad in various versions. But, though the retailers differed about it in particulars, it seemed to be clear that Tommy had received half of the proceeds of the auction at the farm. At all events, immediately on Bedford’s departure, he contracted a purchase of the news-stand he had so long presided over in Penniborn’s interest. Under his rule, it took on new splendors, and in time he became a rising merchant of the village.

Bedford was seen lingering in Sleeperstown for some time, and was known by the Ridgeway gossip-vendors to have made inquiries about a supposed Doctor Gifford, or Gophet, or something of that kind—the former correspondent of his wife. In fact, Jergram encountered him there. What passed between them was never very clearly made known. But, as the gloomy-looking pilgrim descended the steps of the Sleeperstown post-office, after their interview, Jergram turned to Mr. Russ, and said emphatically, “Depend upon it, Russ, we shall hear of the man’s finding Goodfoot yet?”

As for Tommy, he remained cold to all inquiries and reconnoissances of his acquaintance in regard to the curious affair in which he had become so importantly involved. Years passed; and Doctor Goodfoot stalked less frequently now through the ghostly air of local traditions. Bedford was forgotten. The aged Tommy himself came to a period of life when he conclusively

demonstrated his ability to grow older by undergoing a general but slight change, which left upon him the stamp of actual manhood.

One day, there came a very old man into the village of Ridgeway, who was more remarkable, perhaps, for the soft light of his deep-set eyes than for any other feature. Otherwise, he was feeble in gait, and wrinkled and brown in the face as any other old man might be; and had, moreover, a careless array of grey beard on his cheeks, and thin, long hair. It was the wanderer, Bedford. He appeared on the street but once, and no one recognized him. After that, he remained secluded at Tommy's cottage, whither the successful young man conveyed him, before the community were aware of his presence. Within a few days he died, worn out by the disorder and privation of his latter years. He was for some time unconscious, and, while in that state, made the first allusions to the past which Tommy had heard from him. He spoke frequently of Doctor Goodfoot; at times throwing doubt on the very existence of that mysterious personage. But, at other moments, he alluded to Goodfoot as being none other than himself. So that Tom, taking these utterances, might well have been in doubt as to whether this name were really that of some one who had existed, or was then still living. He might safely conclude, however, that to him, whether vision or reality, he owed his own prosperity—the fulfillment of Sairy's wish. But, whatever his solution of the mystery of Goodfoot may have been, it is certain that he received from the dying man the same old letters with which Bedford had gone forth, together with an ancient collar of yellow lace, that seemed to glimmer on the young man's sight in a dim glow of waning firelight.

Somewhere about the time of the wanderer's death, if not precisely at the moment when it took place, Jergram was enjoying a conversation with a party of especially appreciative friends. From the postal service he had passed into other government employment, and had come into a great plenteousness of lucrative leisure.

"You remember," he was saying, with gusto, "how I tracked out that mysterious Goodfoot long ago!"

"I thought he was only a myth, after all," said one of the company, withdrawing a pipe from his lips, and looking serious and interested.

"Myth! No more a myth than I am," returned Jergram. "I never saw him, to be sure, as you say. But there can't be a doubt that my efforts led to his discovery in the end."

7, 867 words.

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