The Old Man of the Peepul-Tree

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I.

At the office in Cortlandt street they had told Sieglinda Von Eichen that they had no further use for her services. She had been "cheeky," it seemed, to Mr. Grossmann. So she stood in Lower Broadway at eleven o'clock in the morning with exactly fifteen dollars in the world, and about as much prospect of a future as has the shell of a peanut. She was certainly not going to spend a nickel on the subway. It was not so very many miles to 108th street, and the day was a glory of May.

But when she reached Park Place she changed her mind. It would be no use returning to the tiny flat where she lived with her twin brother Siegmund; she would only disturb him, very likely at the critical moment of the last act of his great opera, the one that was really going to be accepted, and make them rich and famous.

She believed absolutely in her brother's genius; the sympathy between them was immense, even for twins. But Siegmund was incapable of any kind of work but the one. He had tried, when the necessity arose. Their father had died in their infancy; their mother had been induced to speculate by a rascally cousin, and in the crash of 1907 she had lost every penny. Siegmund had had to come back from Heidelberg, and Sieglinda from the family in Paris who were "finishing" her; their mother's brother, in New York, had offered them a home. They crossed the ocean. But their ill luck pursued them; a month or two later the uncle died intestate, and his son, who had always hated the twins as likely to come between him and his inheritance, lost no time in driving

them from the house with insult. Between them they had had a few hundred dollars, enough to keep from starvation while they found something to do. Sieglinda did not know a note of music technically; though she had a fine ear and finer enthusiasm, all capacity in that line was concentrated in her brother; so she learnt stenography, and gave German lessons in the evening when she could get pupils.

Siegmund had enthusiastically decided to be a chauffeur; but his teacher had dissuaded him from proceeding. "I've a hunch," said he, "that there'll be trouble sooner or later; going off in them trances like a guy what's doped is hell when you're pushing a fast car — no, sir!" The same amiable impediment pursued him in every employment; his first morning as a clerk in a German Bank had been his last; for, having been entrusted with copying a list of figures into a ledger, he had broken off after about six lines, and filled five scrawling pages with the opening passages of a sonata which meant nothing to the bank.

Sieglinda quickly recognized that it was useless to try to alter this disposition; besides, she rather admired it. She cheerfully shouldered the whole responsibility of the finance of the family, telling him that it was really the best policy in the long run. Why waste a genius, capable of earning millions, for the sake of ten dollars a week? So she slaved on in various offices, never getting a good position; wherever she had happened to be, her aristocratic manner was one drawback, and her unapproachability another. Her "cheeking" of Mr. Grossmann had been, at bottom, a refusal to join him at supper.

So, after all, she would not go home. She would take the elevated and spend the day in Bronx Park. She would economize the nickel at lunch; a delicatessen picnic in the park would certainly be better than the flesh-pots of Childs'; yes, she would actually save money.

This calculation was, however, in error; her proposed squandering of the nickel was as fatal as Eve's first bite at the apple; and in the delicatessen store her lunch made a decidedly large hole in one of her dollars.

In another half-hour or so she was in the park; she wandered for awhile among the animals, then sought a remote corner for her picnic. She found a patch of green by the bank of the stream, shaded by a great peepul-tree, the sacred fig of India; and, having been born and bread to politeness, she apologized to the tree before taking her seat in its shadow. "Uncle Tree," so she began her prattle, "I hope you won't think it rude of me to introduce myself. But I am really a relative; my mother always said my father was the Old Man of the great oak in the courtyard; indeed, he was a very great elf, one of Wotan's own children, or so he always boasted. So I hope you'll let me eat my lunch under your branches. I'll pay rent, you know; I'll sing you the May-Song." Then she sang Heine's master-lyric:

"In the marvellous month of May
With all its buds in blossom,
Love made his holiday
Prankt out within my bosom.
In the marvellous month of May
With all its birds in choir,
I caught her heart away
With the song of my desire."

So, without further ceremony, she lay down and rested her back against the trunk of the peepul-tree, opened her package, and began her lunch.

When she had finished, and quenched her thirst in the stream, she returned to the tree and lit a cigarette.

Now then the point is — exactly when did Sieglinda doze off that afternoon? Even she admits that she was asleep part of the time; but she holds out stoutly that she was perfectly awake all the while that her cigarette

lasted, for she remembers throwing the end away into the stream. And it was certainly while she was smoking that she began her conversation with the old man of the tree. "Uncle," she said, "you are much older than I am; I do wish you would give me some advice. I won't ask you hard things, for instance, what sin I committed in a previous life; for I must have, don't you think, to be out here in a country where they feed snakes and hyenas, and leave men and women to starve. No; but I do wish you could tell me where to look for a new job — and oh! I should like a decent one, somewhere where they had good manners, and didn't leer all the time, even if there was very little money in it!"

"My dear," replied the funny little old voice which she was sure came from the elf, "you couldn't have come to a better person. I'm not only a sacred kind of tree, you know; I come of a very special family. My own grandfather is the famous Bo-Tree at Anuradhapura, with a big platform round him and gifts and pilgrims every day from every airt of the four winds; and his father, as you know, was the great tree of Buddha-Gaya, under which the Buddha sat when he attained emancipation. So you being connected with Wotan, my dear, I'm quite glad to think I have such a pretty little niece." (It must have been the tree talking; Sieglinda wouldn't have made up a thing like that about herself, would she?) "I must say," the voice went on, "I don't at all like the idea of one of us working; our business has always seemed to me to be beautiful, and enjoy life, and praise God. I think the best way will be for you to forget your troubles for a little while; I feel a breeze in my hair, and perhaps I will be able to sing you to sleep. Then I'll have a talk with the wind; perhaps between us we may be able to do something." So Sieglinda settled herself more comfortably, and in a little while was fast asleep. When she woke up the sun was already low over the Hudson; so she picked herself up and went home. She had forgotten all about the old man, and

only remembered that she must buy an "Evening Telegram" and hunt through the advertisements for another job.

II.

Things went from bad to worse with the twins. No one seemed to want a typist. Sieglinda was pretty and clever enough for the chorus; but she read the American Sunday papers, and knew that as a merely modest girl, she had no chance of an engagement. New York managers, it appeared, insisted on a type of Virtue so rigorous that it left Lucrece, Penelope, and the mother of the Gracchi among the also rans. She had seen chorus-girls, too, and even heard them discuss Virtue; anyhow, for one reason or another, she did not apply for an engagement.

Siegmund's inspirations, too, failed him even as her purse shrank; he spoilt paper at an alarming rate. One day when she came in from a vain search for work she caught him in the very act of dashing another failure to the floor. "Oh tosh! infernal beastly tosh!" he yelled; "really, Sieglinda, you must learn to keep your mouth shut!" "What have I done now?" she laughed. "It's that ghastly tune you've been humming for a month; "Broadway Bliss" it comes from, I suppose, by the sound of it; I wrote it down to feast my eyes upon the ghastly spectacle; and upon my soul and conscience, I think it's too bad even for Broadway." "I'm sorry, boy; I didn't know I was annoying you. I don't usually hum, do I?" "Never heard you before; it's that eternal search for work. Oh my God! I wish I could have learnt to push a car. The music I'm writing now-adays sounds rather like one, too; a Ford, on a country road, with a tyre gone. Lord! I think I'll send it round as a Futurist Opera!"

Nearly a month later, Sieglinda declared that she had found a job. It was not regular work, apparently; she was in and out at all hours, sometimes extremely tired. It went

on for nearly six months before Siegmund noticed anything wrong. Then he asked her what her work was. She told him that she had turned her good taste to account, and had been employed to decorate and furnish a house on East 63rd street for a very rich man. She deserved more pay than she was getting; perhaps he might do more for her later on. "Do you see him often?" "Every day." "Ever make love to you?" "Oh no! He takes no more notice of me than if I were a piece of wood. And he never spends a penny except on this fad of having a fine house. I go shopping for him in a seven thousand dollar car; and I hate to take the subway home. He's musical, by the way; I've done him the finest music-room in America; perhaps I'll be able to interest him in your work, one day." "I don't work. I can't work. A chunk of cheese has more ideas than I've had for the best part of a year!" "Oh well, inspiration will come. If we could only get out of this horrible struggle to live from day to day! If that house were only mine instead of his! It ought to be. I made it. I took a common mass of brick and stone, and turned it into Paradise. And all I've got out of it — six months and more living like a slave — has been about four hundred dollars! And the house will be ready in three weeks or so — and then what shall I do?"

Ten days later she came to him in tears. "Siegmund," she cried, "the man wants me to live in his house." "Don't do it, girl!" said her brother; "don't forget the oak, and the three greyhounds, and the bend or!"

It was another month before the house was finished. On the day, she came home at noon, jubilant, "What do you think," she said, "I've got a whole hundred dollars extra as a bonus, and the promise of another job; and we're going to have a Day in Fairyland. Come along; we're going to lunch downtown, and then I'll take you to see the house, and then we'll come home and dress for dinner for the first time in a year, and I've got seats for Die Walküre tonight, and then we'll go on to supper at a cabaret! There!"

Two hours later they had finished a lunch at the Knickerbocker which was a landmark in the life of the head waiter. Sieglinda was not going to spoil a Day in Fairyland for ten dollars one way or the other.

So, with very threadbare cloaks tight over poor worn clothing, these waifs of fortune faced the ice and snow of Manhattan's coldest February, and made their way to East 63rd street, the good wine tingling in them till they laughed merrily at the bitter wind of winter, as it cut into their young faces.

The house in 63rd street stood well away from either avenue. It was taller than its immediate neighbors, and the woodwork was of the same dull red as the granite of which it was built. Sieglinda produced a key, and they entered.

The hall was remarkable for the waved stripes of tawny yellow and black, the tiger-heads that lined the walls, and the tiger skins that covered the floor.

Sieglinda led the way into the room on the left, which extended the whole depth of the house. One could hardly give a name to such a room. Walls and ceiling were covered with a Japanese paper of old gold; the floor was of mahogany, and the only furniture in the room was dull red lacquer, cabinets and trays and little tables. In the centre of the floor was a great rug of blue without a pattern, raised from the floor by mattresses to the height of about a foot. At the far end of the room stood a great golden figure of Buddha, between two monstrous vases of porcelain, of the same deep thrilling blue as the rug. Siegmund gasped his glory. "I thought this would inspire you," said Sieglinda. They went into the opposite room. Here all was in perfect contrast. The whole room was panelled in ebony; in the centre stood an oblong table of the same wood, with ancient tall-backed chairs, evidently of the same craftsman's handiwork. Against the walls stood oaken chests, black with age; and on each of them a single silver statue. At the upper end of the room hung a crucifix of ivory, with three tall silver candlesticks on each

side of it. The candles were of yellow wax. Facing this was a single picture, a group of dancers by Monticelli.

Sieglinda led the way upstairs. Here was a modern sitting room, evidently designed for a woman. The main motive was steel-blue, harmonized with ruddy amber. Everything in this room was soft; it was, as it were, an archetype of cushions! The pictures were all landscapes by Morrice. The room opposite was as typically a man's. Great leather arm chairs and settees stood on every side. A huge cigar cabinet of cedar was opposite the open fireplace, with a long narrow table between them which divided the room into two halves. One half contained a billiard table, and its walls were covered with sporting prints; the other had a card table and a chess table, but no other furniture except chairs. On the walls were nudes by the best masters, Manet and John, and O'Conor, and Van Gogh, and Gauguin, culminating in a daring freak by Cadell, and a solemn and passionless eccentricity by Barne.

The third floor was guarded by a single door. It was all one room, a bedroom lined in rose marble, with a vast antique basin of the same material, in which a fountain, a reduced copy of the "Universe" of the Avenue de l'Observatoire, played. Around the room stood many a masterpiece of marble and of bronze, the Drunken Satyr and the Dancing Faun, Diana of the Ephesians and the terminal Hermes of the Aristophanes of sculpture, Marsyas and Olympas, the goat-piece of the unknown master of Herculaneum, the Femmes Damnées of Pradier, the Bouches d'Enfer of Rodin and his Epervier et Colombe. All these were grouped about the great bed, which rose from the floor like a snowy plateau lit with Alpenblühn. There were no pillars, nothing but a table-land of ease, swelling like a maid's bosom from the marble. One could hardly say where floor left off and bed began, save that around the rising curves of rosy purity stood eight Cupids wreathed in flowers.

Light, in this room came pale and timid, like a girl's first love, through trellises of ground glass. But the room was not dark, for there was no color in it deeper than the bronzes; and they like islands in the rose-white loveliness that girt them like a sea. The ceiling was a single sheet of polished silver.

From this room brother and sister mounted to the highest floor. Here was the music room, a chapel of carved walnut, lofty and Gothic, endowed with a great organ; its choir ready to become vocal at the waving of the wand of a magician, for every kind of musical instrument was in its place.

Siegmund for the first time exhibited manly firmness. "I am going straight out of this house," he cried angrily, "and my permanent address will be the Hudson River!"

III.

In the matter of the seven thousand-dollar motorcar Sieglinda, although German by birth, had taken French leave. Without asking the proprietor, she had ordered it to be at the door; it was the last day. "Pretty mean, I think," she said, as they drove up town. "I do him a house like that, and all I get is a measly eight hundred and fifty-six dollars. I know now that I could have got a commission on everything I bought." "I'm glad you didn't," said her brother; "I never liked tradesman's ways, and I never will."

When they were dressed for dinner they drove to the McAlpin, told the chauffeur to call for them at the Opera at eleven, and after one more Banquet of Jupiter, walked up through the snow to the Metropolitan. The wine and the music made them mad; starved of every pleasure as they had been for months, the lure of the old life took hold of them, and they abandoned themselves wildly to the intoxication of the moment. The future? Bah!

Sieglinda had stuck at nothing in her daring; she had borrowed her rich man's box. Siegmund noticed that she had bowed very sweetly to a dapper little gentleman opposite, before the curtain rose, and he would probably have asked a question, had not the first bars of the overture rapt him away into the world of that other Siegmund and Sieglinda after whom he and his sister had been called.

Just as the last curtain fell, the door of the box opened, and the little gentleman walked in. "Mr. Damff; this is Graf von Eichen." They shook hands, exchanged a few general remarks; the trio went off to Noel's, where Sieglinda, determined to get the last minute out of her Day of Fairyland, ordered a splendid supper. But even as the clams arrived the day was spoilt for Siegmund. The band struck up. "Oh God!" he cried, rising from his seat, "there's that nightmare again!" "I can understand," said Mr. Damff, smiling, "that it must get a good deal on your nerves. Every rose has its thorn." "I don't see any rose about it," snapped Siegmund. Mr. Damff was embarrassed. "I'm sorry," he said, turning deferentially to Sieglinda. "I seem to have said the wrong thing. But I certainly understood from you ——" Sieglinda interrupted him. "The boy doesn't know," said she; "I'll break it to him gently. It's degrading and horrible, I know, dear," she went on, putting a slim hand on her brother's, "but the fact is that you're my rich man. That house is yours; it all came out of the profits of that song you threw on the floor eight months ago!"

"Good God, Sieglinda!" cried the boy, "you sold that muck! I'll never look myself in the face again. But —" he caught his breath. "That was a tune you hummed; I thought you had picked it up on Broadway!"

"And I didn't know I was humming it! Ach, du lieber Gott!" she cried, lapsing into German, as a great light broke in upon her, "so that was what the wind said to the Old Man of the Peepul-Tree!"

Of course her hearers did not understand her. Over

yet another bottle of champagne — Sieglinda had now drunk merely six during the day — she told the story of her picnic in the park. "So," she concluded, "while I slept the wind spoke with the old man, and they put the song into my brain, and I got the habit of humming it — and oh! Siegmund darling, you're rich, and we'll never have any more trouble in the world again!"

"If your conscience troubles you," said Mr. Damff, "about the quality of the music you are inflicting on humanity, let me reassure you. The Gräfin did not mention it, but I have the honor to be a director of the Metropolitan Opera House, and the purpose of our meeting tonight was that I might tell you that we had decided to produce your 'Heine's Tod,' and to discuss the preliminaries. I hope you will allow me to order another magnum of this very delightful champagne."

It was ordered; but the error was fatal; from that moment the proceedings became so far from lucid as to baffle the historian. Presently, however, Damff rose (as best he could) and took his leave. The twins insisted on driving him home to his apartment on Riverside Drive. When they had said good night for the twentieth time, always with increasing etiquette, the champagne continued its conversation; it was impossible, absurd, and immoral to go home; there was only one thing to be done, and that was to do what politeness urged, to pay a visit of thanks to the Old Man of the Peepul-Tree.

The blizzard of the earlier day had died down to utter stillness; the full moon westering slowly, the twins huddled together in the automobile, babbling a thousand phrases of delight over and over. When they came to the Park, they thought it better to walk; Sieglinda knew the way. So they left the chauffeur, and ran hand in hand over the snow, the champagne and the success fighting in their young blood for mastery in the sublime art of being mad. Soon they came to the stream, its current frozen, its banks aflower with wind-blown blossoms of snow. They came to the Peepul-Tree. "Oh you dear

darling Uncle Tree," shouted Sieglinda, "how happy you have made us! And I've brought your nephew to see you!" She clasped the trunk, and kissed it madly in sheer delirium of pleasure. Siegmund followed her example, and broke into a flood of song from his last opera.

At that moment they realized that they were very drunk. Sieglinda slid to the snow, swooning; her brother bent above her to revive her. He must have lost his senses at the same moment; for what followed is neither reasonable nor natural. They could both hear (or so they always swear) the chuckling of the sacred tree.

Bye-and-bye the chuckling became articulate. "Very pretty and very thoughtful of you!" said the little cracked old voice; "this has been a very pleasant visit; I haven't enjoyed myself so much for years. Still, it's very cold for humans; I think you'd better be running off to the car. But come and see me often. Good-bye, my dear children, for the present; and remember, Sieglinda, your first son must be called Gautama as well as Siegfried, in honor of the man who attained emancipation under the boughs of my great-grandfather." So they must have been unwise in the matter of champagne; for the most garrulous old trees never talk like that to people who are sober. Sieglinda was indeed what philosophers have called "suspiciously sober" when they reached the car; her "Back to 63d street!" was portentously precise.

But they never forgot the peepul-tree; and they planted shoots from him in the courtyard of the old Schloss, which they bought back from the new-comers on the proceeds of Siegmund's first opera, so that the Oak of the von Eichens might have worthy company. It is, however, a shocking circumstance that the younger generations of the peepul-tree, like those of the great apes, have a deplorable tendency to small talk, and even to scandal.