

The Rainy-day Fellow.

At last my neighbour has again been anywhere. He appeared like a straggler, a nomadic one, in my life's course, and has been again bound for a fresher voyage, a more curious journey methinks, into the solitary vague mystery of the land beyond the cremation dust. And I am essentially here in charge of his wife and issue—a charge, where my option had little to do. It is not because I have means enough to spare for others. It is not because I am very charitable to let another's family partake of my income. But I had to do it, as the alternative was that I should hold comfortably my morsel, and several should stand by, and starve out. There is another reason also, and that is the main, and it will come when the full story will come.

It was a drowsy faint-coloured rainy day. Rains had been contemporary with the very dawn, but its fury was not less in the least even when it was no more day-light. The job I had in the market was finished, and I was waiting for a bus faring in the neighbourhood. A man suddenly intruded into the shade of my umbrella. I had marked him already; he was leaning against a wall with the stout bare inclemency overhead.

"O sir, I beg your pardon, sir. I find you have an umbrella, and it is big, and it is stretched, and I thought—"

"What!"—I said. He had been perfectly drenched,—all his dress accurately spotted by the sprinkles of mud-water. And with such dashing hurry he ran for my umbrella that his body clashed with mine, and my clothes soon had the same fate as his. This put me in a temper, for all my precaution thus amounted to taking no caution. If the gentleman, I thought, would be in any earnest to save another's dress, as he was in every earnest to save his own person from the soaking, there could be no room for any undesirable motion whatsoever.

But, he bent down, and in an instant, actually sat down at my feet. "Pardon me, sir, I have been very impertinent. Your umbrella was too much craved for by a diseased man as myself, on such a rainy day. For, the malaria will not fail again to take vengeance for my drenching. I have had to-day, of enough soaking and starving. I beseech you, sir, I should not have more."

I was immensely impressed. His words were ordinary. There was no hard earned style of an actor, any romantic scent was not there coated in fine diction, no extraordinary episode they contained. No man could have said it would be very cruel of me not to be impressed by them. But there come moments in our lives, when we take things to heart or appreciate them, not simply from their inward capacity, but by the very peculiar reflection that the unique moment presents on the unique occasion. It was such a one indeed. The words sounded so wet with tears, and heavy with sighs, and such a feeling of relief and entire dependence was there in them that my passion was before long replaced by a sympathetic curiosity.

A bus came on, I rode in it, and he with me. He did not object, nor seemed abashed—even for formality's sake—when I paid the pice for his ticket,—I was astonished. In answer to my question, he told his story.

"You may call me as you like, sir."—He stopped a little, looked beyond through the window, and then began again. "Parentless from childhood, I was reared up to twelve by an affectionate widow, who has been dead these eighteen years. I got some education, and found a job in a Zemindary Seresta. Then I married. The old Zemindar dying, when his young son inherited, I was dismissed. For, I was not to his liking, as I could not attend him in his dissolute pleasures. Since then two years have passed, and my wife and little child go without sustenance on all alternative days, and sometimes days on end. I am fed with the tears of my dear ones. As for myself,

what should I tell you, sir, whom the world has given the part of all-round disappointment, and to whom life is a bewilderment? I think I would now go back to that zeminder if he would take me, even at the supreme cost of sacrificing my early days' ideal for the latter days' material maintenance."

This discourse ended here, as I said nothing, nor asked anything more. One question only he put during the whole bus-journey. "Shall I now go back to my shed?" "No, follow me", I replied briefly.

The bus stopped near the crossing, not far from my 60A..... Street. The belly-reduced emaciated fellow ate so urgently that day as if 'Hunger' incarnated himself in my dining room. Then he took his night's sleep in my house.

When the morning was advanced next day, he was found missing. I was disappointed,—not because he had chosen to depart, but that he had chosen to go away without a single word of thanks. However, I thanked Providence that the possibility of my drying out, if this parasite would entwine me with its unpaying arms, was no more.

Now, my generous rainy-day companion returned very soon—as early as the day following his sudden departure, with a woman and a child as if to try the strength of my goodnature.

"I have brought them, sir. I thought you would not think anything if I were so bold, sir."

I frowned. Once I felt the temptation of bidding them adieu with my severest judgment. This tragic act would have taken place but for the single consideration that I might rather see deep into the man, who seemed somewhat novel in my thirty-eight years' experience. And so they got in.

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In a day or two it was discovered that the new batch of people were quite bare-facedly skilled in making relations with new acquaintances,—a point which did not agree with his

past life. I was his uncle, and my wife, his revered aunt. They were allowed a portion of my dwelling, for using, and making it nasty, as it were, with various rubbish. Every morning he got out to seek for an employment, and almost every evening returned with a dark grave care-worn face, and rarely with a day's maintenance. Consequently his wife was the most frequent attendant in my kitchen. For, she was always in want of something,—and that was not very important, only what they daily required!—now a seer of rice, then a cupful of oil,—then a pot of salt, now some vegetable pieces; but my wife was like the jolly lifeless fountain, who more enjoyed, than was tired of these.

My tea was prepared; it was break-fast time. My neighbour appeared.

“What do you think of tea, sir? There are some to regard it bad for the system, but I am never of them. It is so delicious! Many days ago, when I had the means, I would drink even eight cups at one sitting, and biscuits and cakes too, a pretty lot.” He looked praisingly at the dishes. I understood. He was told to have a break-fast out of mine.

“Oh Sir! how kind indeed you are to feed me out of your dishes. Oh! many days, many days, past, and I taste such things again.” Afterwards he was ever energetic in attending me at every breakfast, and, now at dinner, and then at supper,—while on my part there was no invitation, and forbidding as well there was neither.

When any fruit would come to my house, or there was the proposal of any feasting, it was the time for the young boy to play most attentively at toys before my door, until my wife saw him in such difficulty, and saved him by giving him out of the stock. One day I lost a rupee, as I left the money-bag carelessly on the table, and that very day the boy was found to bring a lot of sweets. On enquiry the rest of the rupee was detected in his little wicked store. The fact remains that such conduct from all of them was unbearable. I stood him even

when mine was the loss's side, all for a curiosity of being more familiar with the strange way of life of a nomadic-natured man, to study the peculiar mind, in all its peculiarities yet to come. And it was my wish not to pull down the scene by force, but wait until the screen should fall in the natural process. It fell very soon.

He had been absent at my break-fast hour for the last two days, and his wife, in my kitchen. The third day I walked to his room. The son cried, "Oh grandpa, don't you know father has caught what? Pneumonia has been on him, and no doctor has come. Father will not live, sir, Oh!" I called in a doctor, but he did not live indeed. The day of his final departing was a rainy day like the first day of his joining in. I was at his death-bed, and when the storm outside reached its highest violence, and the insiders had the deepest feelings, his breath was laid on eternal repose.

Now he has passed away, to end his story, but that only to add cumber to mine. The sun-shine had its very limited share in his life. But it would be better if it would not fall at all; for, then he could be accustomed to bear his gloomy days (—which filled the cup almost to the brim—), and no reminiscences of better days would stand to poke at the sore. True that I enjoyed his humble ways at times unfeelingly, but now as I consider deep, my aching goes for him. The desires of the flesh suppressed by poverty sometimes found expression even with utter shamelessness. His once-a-day meal was an Alps-crossing task with him to earn, so all his past education and culture at last gave way to the gross necessities of the stomach, and yet he could not draw back from the failure in life. So much lay behind what I saw from outside, so much in shadowed depth. Therefore I feel him really missing to-day, when he is no more.

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